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"That Damned Morality": Willa Cather's Reaction against Victorian Female Roles in *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*

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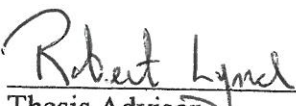
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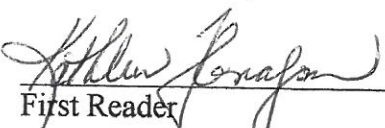
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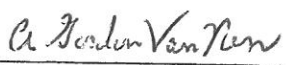
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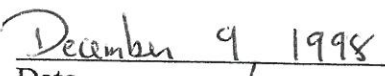
"That Damned Morality":
Willa Cather's Reaction against Victorian Female Roles in
O Pioneers! and *The Song of the Lark*

Sarah Elizabeth Moore Horne


Thesis Advisor


First Reader


Second Reader


Date

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"That Damned Morality":

Willa Cather's Reaction against Victorian Female Roles in

O Pioneers! and *The Song of the Lark*

Introduction

Decades of critical study have focused on Willa Cather's works in terms of her strong, independent heroines. Most critics agree that the female characters that Cather creates represent the ideal of womanhood, an ideal which Cather herself strove to achieve. Cather scholarship has neglected, however, to give serious consideration to the male characters in these works. Studying these men in contrast to their larger-than-life female counterparts does provide significant information concerning both the male and female characters through Cather's reversals of sexual roles. For example, Cather's men consistently fail in a male-dominated society because they insist on adhering to social norms and constructs, and rarely deviate from socially acceptable standards. By allowing society to dictate every aspect of their lives, these men do not develop any form of imagination and foresight. At the same time, we see independent women rebelling against social expectations and ignoring social criticism. While most of Cather's works present gender reversals, two of them go to greater depth in examining them. Throughout *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, Cather creates numerous examples of gender reversals by allowing the women to achieve greatness while the men settle for mediocrity.

In their neglect of the male characters found in these works, Cather scholars have idealized these women. Although Cather's heroines do indeed find success in predominantly male territory, they nevertheless lack what several of the men have—love and friendship. *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* present two such women,

Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronborg, whose chances of finding love diminish as they pursue their careers. In contrast, Cather introduces us to Emil and Ivar, two male characters who do find emotional gratification in their lives, in *O Pioneers!*. This gender reversal appears again in *The Song of the Lark* when we encounter Andor Harsanyi, a music teacher approaching the middle years of his life, who has not attained immense fame and fortune as a musician, but who finds happiness with his wife and small children. The absence of love in Alexandra and Thea's lives leaves Cather's fiction even more ironic. Not only do the women gain what has been claimed socially by men for centuries, the men gain what has been claimed by women for centuries.

Stereotypes regarding gender roles that governed Cather's society played a major role in her fiction. Having emerged from late Victorian society, Cather refutes many assumptions regarding men and women that were traditionally accepted during this time. Differences between men and women became the subject matter for much of Cather's fiction as she successfully dispels many of the myths concerning gender by taking Victorian stereotypes of male and female and shattering them through ironic reversals. Cather's early political philosophies bore great significance for her works, as she dedicated herself to lifting the female sex to a higher level of importance in society. According to Guy Reynolds, author of *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire*, Cather maintained an idealistic prospective on life. As a member of the rising middle class, Cather became affiliated with progressivism, a political movement founded on Utopian philosophies similar to those of the Great Awakening (Reynolds 11-13). Through this movement, Cather recognized the subordinate condition of women and immigrants in America and devoted herself to uplifting them to a higher position in her fiction. Coming out of the late Victorian Era in which men controlled women as well as the world in general, Cather creates societies throughout her works in which women enjoy the same opportunities as their male counterparts. By addressing certain stereotypes

involving women, such as their inability to reason and think rationally, Cather contradicts these assumptions and proves that women can in fact engage in such rational thought. By neglecting the traditional stereotypes of men and women, Cather creates works in which the characters resemble reality. Although society may have considered women the inferior gender during the Victorian Era, the fact remains that women remained as capable as men in succeeding in their endeavors. Social conditions, however, prohibited the majority of women from finding such successes. By including a more realistic portrayal of women's strengths and men's weaknesses, Cather creates a world in which women can rely upon their abilities and succeed in a male dominated world.

The first aspect of traditional gender roles that Cather contradicts in her novels involves intellectual capacity. According to Victorian society, men and women differed significantly in their thought processes. In *Victorian Women*, Joan Burstyn describes the disparities between male and female thought processes which late nineteenth century society attached to men and women. Victorian society placed many expectations upon the sexes, which resulted in many stereotypes. Victorian stereotypes indicated that women, relying heavily on intuition and their keen senses, lacked the ability to concentrate on difficult subject matter. In contrast, men possessed excellent reasoning abilities, could contemplate those difficult situations that faced them, and ultimately reason them out until they arrived at an acceptable solution (Burstyn 112). Because of this discrepancy between males and females, women could not be trusted to make major decisions. Therefore, a woman's responses to more challenging situations would have required a re-examination by her husband. Mental weakness becomes the first ironic gender reversal that Cather attacks in *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* as she equips both Alexandra and Thea with ample amounts of intellect. According to Victorian society's structure, the men in these novels should be able to rationalize situations in order to make the right decision. However, Cather re-establishes the criteria for success

in these novels, as she requires the feminine traits of intuition and imagination for such success. Although capable of reasoning and objectively considering situations, the men in these two novels fail to rise to the standards sought by their female counterparts because of their masculine tendencies. The role reversal occurs through the re-establishment of the criteria for success; ultimately, the men fail because of the traditional masculine traits they exhibit. We cannot, however, attribute the men's failures solely to their masculinity; ironically, Cather's male characters exhibit female qualities as well. The characteristics of flightiness and irrationality, traditionally considered feminine by Victorian society, lead to the man's inability to develop his inherent talent into a profitable career. One such man is Carl Linstrum in *O Pioneers!*. Possessing no talent for rational thinking, Carl fails to turn his artistic talents into profit and thus never finds financial success. By instilling this feminine trait upon men, Cather sets them up for failure.

These differences between the masculine and feminine thought processes led Victorian society to make assumptions concerning woman's right to vocation. In *Victorian Working Women*, Wanda Neff outlines certain occupations that Victorian culture deemed acceptable for young ladies. At an early age, adolescent girls embarked on an education that would help them achieve their highest goal—procuring a husband. This education proved difficult at times. A young girl was forced learn enough Latin and literature to carry on an adequately intelligent conversation at social functions; however, the young wife must be careful not to exhibit too much knowledge for fear of threatening her husband, as well as other men. Rather than becoming engrossed in a lengthy discussion of Greek, a truly successful woman would entertain others by playing a pleasant song on the piano. Since marriage was to be every female's primary vocation, Victorian society would have viewed an unmarried woman as the ultimate failure. Viewed by society as morally superior to men, each woman was to uphold the moral and

ethical values in her family, teaching certain principles to her children while forgiving her husband if he failed in his ethical responsibilities. We see few social standards that ultimately govern women's occupations throughout Cather's works as she allows Alexandra and Thea to pursue their dreams and does not limit them to the roles of wife and mother.

Another significant component of Victorian culture that Cather reacts against throughout her fiction involves the sexual code of men and women. In *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Relegation of Sexuality Since 1800*, Jeffry Weeks identifies many principles designed to govern a woman's sexual nature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Weeks identifies the importance of sexuality in relation to the moral codes governing the lives of Victorians. Although the male gender maintained a great amount of sexual freedom during this era, women were granted little. Thus, determining appropriate sexual traits for the Victorian woman proved to be much more problematic than doing so for the Victorian male (Weeks 38-9). According to Weeks, virility in men was of utmost importance in Victorian society. A man must, at all costs, project a strong aura of masculinity. Victorians considered this so significant that they even developed handbooks designed to teach men such virility and self-sufficiency. Weeks cites Victorian moralist William Acton in expressing the importance of such a display of masculinity:

[Virility is] much more developed in man than maternity in women. Its existence, indeed, seems necessary to give a man that consciousness of his dignity, of his character as head and ruler, and of his importance, which is absolutely essential to the well being of the family, and through it, of society itself. (39)

The demonstration of such masculinity was so vital to a man's character in Victorian society, many men created a virile public image, while their anxiety of appearing weak

and effeminate grew. While this recognition of male sexuality proved to be an easy topic for Victorian debate, the subject of female sexuality was much more critical (Weeks 40). Because of their inhibitions of acknowledging female sexual pleasures, Victorian moralists preferred to regard women's sexual behaviors as mere duty. The recognition of female sexual activity as being purely conjugal in nature proved to be the safest manner in which to study such behavior. Therefore, while male sexuality was defined as being masculine and virile, female sexuality was defined as being domestic and maternal. Although society granted men the opportunities of sexual experience in which they could derive pleasure and joy, this same society denied these pleasures to women, bestowing the rewards of maternity and marital duties upon them (Weeks 38-41). This denial of sexual pleasures to women becomes an important aspect of Cather's fiction. Through their pursuits of careers and success, Cather's leading female characters refuse to accept the roles of wives and mothers which Victorian society places upon them. Cather goes on to contradict the assumption that men could enjoy sexual fantasies by creating such fantasies for her heroines. Although these dreams never come to pass for Alexandra, she nevertheless experiences a sexual fantasy in which she is carried across a field by a man. By allowing her females to enjoy such a fantasy, Cather enters an area that proved to be very uncomfortable for most Victorians. The thought of women, who were designated moral examples for their families, actually enjoying sexual pleasures contradicts Victorian stereotypes involving women. Ironically, Cather fails to provide such opportunities for fantasy to her male characters; instead, they appear weak and effeminate, two qualities that are the opposite of the Victorian male perception.

Such distinctions made between female and male sexual practices resulted from the studies of men who proved to be inept at understanding women's sexual experiences. According to Michael Mason in *The Making of Victorian Sexuality*, Victorian society assumed that women gained no pleasures at all from sexual relations. Considering the

woman's sexual encounters as duty to her husband and to God, Victorians reduced the nature of women's sexual practices to laborious tasks:

This dispersal of a woman's sexuality can, on the face of it, be readily interpreted as the result of an emphasis on woman as a childbearer. Her sexuality is understood in terms of her capacity to reproduce, and therefore associated with her uterus. Then, by the workings of the doctrine of "uterine physiology," her sexuality is dispersed even more broadly into her physical being. (Mason 198)

By creating characters such as Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronborg, who consciously deny motherhood, Cather contradicts these strict moral codes governing a woman's sexual responses.

Cather completely and consciously reversed these Victorian distinctions between male and female not only in her fiction, but in her own life as well. Several vital experiences in Cather's own life introduced her to the gender reversals which she later would recapture in *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*. These instances which contributed to Cather's persona as an artist began early in her life. Born December 7, 1873 and christened with the name Willela, Cather insisted on being called "Willie" and opted to dress in masculine clothing. Cather first refused to conform to society's expectations of her at this point and continued to do so throughout her life. This preoccupation with appearances becomes apparent throughout her fiction, as her female heroines rarely appear feminine and docile. Cather came to realize the distinctions which Victorian society created between male and female at a young age. Later, in a letter to a friend, Cather commented how pleasant she had found childhood because "young children were neither very male or female" (O'Brien 97). During such a time in a child's life when the child can experiment with various roles, and Cather took the opportunity to do so. As a child, Cather noticed these distinctions that society created between male and

female and sought the liberty of displaying masculine traits. Although she was granted more freedom to experiment with such roles, Cather nevertheless saw the ways in which society limited women. She would later grant to her female characters that same liberty that she so often was denied.

Fortunately, Cather was surrounded by females who contradicted certain Victorian expectations, including submission and domesticity. These women played a vital role in Cather's childhood, and they would later serve as models for the female heroines in her fiction. One such woman was Cather's great-aunt Sydney Gore, who, after becoming a widow, turned her family's farm into a health resort. Gore, whose business savvy defied sexual stereotypes, resembles Alexandra, who becomes more financially successful than most men. Like Alexandra, Gore exhibited that ability to reason and rationalize situations that was supposed to be uncharacteristic for women according to Victorian standards. Another woman who proved influential in Cather's life and later in her works was her mother, Virginia. O'Brien acknowledges that their relationship, while strained at times, helped to define Cather as a person and led her to examine social expectation (55). Virginia, who also questioned sexual boundaries, did little to show her independence from social constraints. Instead, she chose the more traditional roles of wife and mother. Virginia's dominance over her children was not unusual for Victorian society; mothers routinely took up the task of disciplining the children. However, through observations of her mother and father, Cather was introduced to social rebellion, as Virginia was not an ideal wife according to Victorian standards. By dominating her docile husband, Virginia contradicted certain expectations that her daughter later would contradict to an even greater extent.

Sharon O'Brien, author of *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, explains Cather's rebellion against sexual roles, a rebellion which would later emerge throughout the author's fiction:

Cather's male impersonation was an imaginative, daring means of resolving the social and psychological conflicts that adolescence posed. By naming the desires she then believed were male, she preserved them. Yet this was only a partial baptism. In accepting the prevailing definition of male and female identity, Cather was also accepting the culture's polarization of "masculine" and "feminine." The girl became William not because she thought she was male but because she did not want to be female, and that choice suggests a self-contempt as well as self-expression, a potentially debilitating self-denial. (110)

Thus, Cather's disregard for social norms became a much sought-after freedom, while simultaneously inhibiting her by denying what she really was—a woman. Like Cather herself, both Alexandra and Thea relinquish vital parts of themselves, such as the ability to express their feelings, while striving to transcend those sexual boundaries.

After having created this new identity for herself during her adolescence, Cather left the small town of Red Cloud for the University of Nebraska. While a student there, Cather experienced feelings of intellectual inferiority, a complex that was often mistaken for arrogance by other students. Having few friends, Cather met Louise Pound, a talented, athletic, and ultimately feminine student. O'Brien tells us that, although Cather did not find femininity appropriate for herself, Cather did find it appealing in other women (132). Cather's relationship with Pound reveals the irony of Cather's preference for a more feminine appearance. She goes on to describe such female relationships in *O Pioneers!* as she creates a similar friendship between the stoic, resolute Alexandra and the beautiful, exuberant Marie Shabata.

Both Cather and her heroines express an unparalleled individuality in a society which required women to be domestic and submissive. In an interview with Eleanor Hinman, Cather explains her philosophies concerning the individuality displayed

throughout her fiction. Declaring that females must express this inner strength, Cather states:

At present in the west there seems to be an idea that we all must be like somebody else, as much as if we had all been cast in the same mold. We wear exactly similar clothes, drive the same make of car, live in the same part of town, in the same style of house. It's deadly! (46)

This defiance of social expectations appears throughout Cather's fiction, as she takes memories of her past and weaves them into her writings. Experiencing numerous instances of gender reversals throughout her life, Cather draws information from these experiences and illustrates them in her novels. She reacts against the prudent and strict moral code of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as she denies her male characters the sexual traits of masculinity and virility so vital to them in this era. In the same manner, she also removes the constraints of maternity and domestic duty placed upon women during this time by granting her female characters opportunities to refuse the subservient roles of wife and mother.

In reaction against these strict moral codes, Cather demonstrates numerous important instances of gender reversals in both *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*. Critics traditionally have chosen to study the monumental lives of Cather's heroines who, prevailing against all hardships which threaten to block their paths, go on to become immense success stories. While looking at these women in terms of their achievements may prove to be a compelling study of Cather's fiction, readers have ignored a very important, albeit less than spectacular, component of these novels—Cather's men. Throughout *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, Cather creates numerous ironic role reversals. Not only do her heroines rebel against society and achieve great gains for the female sex, but Cather's men also merit the attention of readers through their failures. By looking at the shortcomings of the men, we see what the women gain. But perhaps even

more importantly, we can also look at these men in terms of their successes and by doing so, we see what the women lack. Through these examples of gender confusion, Cather floods her novels with irony. The women lack what society has traditionally considered "female" traits—love, friendships, emotional fulfillment—while several of the men are quite strong in these areas. On the other hand, the men lack what society has traditionally considered "masculine" traits—business savvy, financial success, strong work ethics—while the women show strength in these areas. Cather demonstrates such gender reversals in the following manner: by creating marriages which do not conform to Victorian ideals; by establishing a new criteria for success in a male-dominated world which results in male failures contrasted by female successes; by juxtaposing men and women closely while emphasizing the ironies of their characteristics; and finally, by instilling too much emotion in some men while instilling too little emotion in some women. Through these five techniques, Cather reacts against Victorian ideals and progresses toward a Modern Age perception of male and female.

Chapter One:

"It is in the soil that she expresses herself best":

Ironic Gender Reversals in O Pioneers!

Throughout *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather contradicts many Victorian myths concerning gender and refutes them through her characters. According to Victorian standards, marriage was an institution in which the wife's duty included subservience to her husband. Cather's fiction, however, rarely includes such a marriage. Another specific gender reversal which exists in Cather's fiction involves the failures which her male characters experience in a society predominantly controlled by men. Several reasons exist for the men's failures. By allowing society to control their ways of thinking, Cather's male characters become small-minded and ineffective. In *O Pioneers!*, Cather demonstrates the importance of having both imagination and vision. Historically imagination and vision have been referred to as a feminine attributes—woman's intuition. According to Wanda Neff, men remained level-headed and rational, two traits that ensured them of sound decision-making skills (63). By recognizing the significance of intuition in terms of one's financial success, Cather redefines the criteria for such success, as she moves away from the rational, more objective definition to an intuitive, more subjective definition. The reasons for such a change in definition resulted from her father's own failures in establishing a successful farm for his family in Nebraska. Incapable of handling the rough conditions of day-to-day life on the frontier, Charles Cather moved his family to the town of Red Cloud. It is in this criteria for success that Cather creates her first gender reversal. Although, according to Victorian rationale, men have traditionally found success through being rational and objective, they no longer do so in *O Pioneers!*, for Cather has now re-established the prerequisites for success. By traditional Victorian standards, men should exhibit strength, courage, and determination.

They fail to do so in *O Pioneers!*, however, as Cather characterizes the men as weak, brooding, and delicate. Through the juxtaposition of male and female, Cather establishes the gender reversals that will appear throughout the novel. These passages often reveal ironies between men and women, ironies that contradict Victorian expectations. In addition to non-traditional marriages, newly established criteria for success, and closely detailed comparisons of men and women, Cather also demonstrates gender reversals through the lack of and surplus of emotion. According to Neff, Victorian standards equated women with characteristics of flightiness and emotionalism, while perceiving men as rational and sound-minded (56). Because of their rational behavior, men were thought to be the sex in which irrational, emotional outbursts would not occur. Cather, however, fails to characterize her men and women in such terms, as she provides some male characters with too great a capacity for feeling while she denies those same feelings in some of her female characters.

In addition to the ironies presented through the failures of the male characters, Cather also demonstrates gender ironies through comparisons of men and women that emphasize untraditional characteristics. The first one that appears includes the description of Alexandra upon the death of her father. Unlike her father, Alexandra possesses a keen insight into the future. Cather reveals these special qualities through the thoughts of John Bergson, as he acknowledges Alexandra's capabilities on his deathbed:

Alexandra, her father often said to himself, was like her grandfather, which was his way of saying that she was intelligent. 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. He would much rather, of course, have seen this likeness in one of his sons, but it was not a question of choice. (16)

Here John Bergson realizes the fact that his daughter is the most capable of his three

children, two of whom are males. In *Willa Cather*, Phillip Gerber quotes Cather from "On the Divide," printed in the 1896 edition of *Overland Monthly*: "After a man has passed his fortieth birthday it is not easy for him to change the habits and conditions of his life" (78). Here Cather emphasizes the importance of having the ability to adapt to surroundings and situations. Like her own father who ultimately failed in establishing a productive tract of prairie, John Bergson fails in that manner. Because he refuses to relinquish his Old World beliefs and incorporate new, innovative ideas into practice, Bergson fails in his attempts. Implying that John Bergson is simply too old to possess the imagination and foresight for a hard life on the Divide, Cather goes on to create a daughter who is young enough to acquire the necessary qualities for success. Such a qualification does not come without conditions, however. According to critic John Murphy, editor of *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*, John Bergson's distinction of Alexandra as the head of the family will create numerous problems for her in the future: "[Bergson] sees [Alexandra] outlined in the light of a lamp behind her and has her pledge to keep her brothers on the land—a pledge that will determine and limit her life" (Murphy 115). By emphasizing Alexandra's talents and selecting her above her brothers as the decision-maker for her family's affairs, Bergson places his daughter in a position that contradicts social expectations. One redeeming quality about John Bergson is the fact that, although he does not possess the imagination and vision to succeed on the frontier, he does have enough insight to recognize the fact that his daughter is the only one of his children that may have the skills necessary to succeed upon the Divide. The gender reversal emerges as we realize that Cather could have given these necessary qualities to Bergson's male children. The fact that she does not reaffirms her newly established criteria for success. These men simply do not possess the traditionally feminine traits of imagination and vision necessary for success on the Divide. Through the failures of these men living in a male-dominated world, Cather creates these gender

reversals. Their lack of an appropriate mix of the feminine qualities of vision, imagination, and emotion causes them to become preoccupied with society's opinions; thus, they never gain the freedom of making their own decisions.

In addition to these reversals found in the failures of the men, Cather also creates ironic gender situations in *O Pioneers!* through her detailed descriptions of men and women. In the first portrayal of Alexandra, the gender reversals become apparent as Cather sets her up as an ideal from the opening scene:

His sister was a tall, strong girl, and she waled [sic] 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), and a round plush cap, tied down with a thick veil. She had a serious, thoughtful face, and her clear, deep blue eyes were fixed intently on the distance, without seeming to see anything, as if she were in trouble.

(12-3)

Through this stoic representation of Alexandra, Cather prepares the reader for a novel in which a female will be the strongest character. By using descriptive words such as "strong," "resolutely," "serious," "thoughtful," and "clear," Cather indicates that Alexandra will appear as the dominant figure. This first glimpse of Alexandra, coupled by our first encounter with Carl Linstrum, emphasizes her strengths, while the description of Carl says much of his weaknesses:

Carl did not say anything, but she felt his sympathy. He, too, was lonely. He was a thin, frail boy, with brooding dark eyes, very quiet in all his movements. There was a delicate pallor in his thin face, and his mouth was too sensitive for a boy's. The lips had already a little curl of bitterness and skepticism. (17)

Cather's choice of words here to describe Carl reveals much concerning the gender issues that will surface throughout this novel. The man, who by traditional standards should be strong, resolute, serious, thoughtful, and clear, is completely the opposite in *O Pioneers!*. According to Cather, he is, by contrast, "lonely," "thin," "frail," "brooding," "quiet," "delicate," and "sensitive." By structuring these two characterizations at the beginning of the novel's first section, Cather establishes the gender reversals which will appear throughout the novel.

This same characterization is carried throughout the first section, "The Wild Land," as we see Alexandra confronted with a traveling man making roguish comments about her hair:

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 that he actually let his cigar fall to the sidewalk and went off weakly in the teeth of the wind to the saloon. His hand was still unsteady when he took his glass from the bartender. His feeble flirtatious instincts had been crushed before, but never so mercilessly. He felt cheap and ill-used, as if someone had taken advantage of him. (15)

With this description of Alexandra's encounter with the traveling man, we see Cather's first juxtaposition between male and female. As with the remainder of the novel, the positions are reversed. The woman takes the dominant role over the man. Philip Gerber acknowledges Alexandra's strength and notes that, while far from perfect, Alexandra "shines brightly amongst her brothers' weaknesses" (77). By granting Alexandra such opportunities for success that she denies male counterparts, Cather places several limitations upon Alexandra.

One manner in which Cather contradicts social expectation of gender involves the institution of marriage. According to Michael Mason in *The Making of Victorian*

Sexuality, wives in the Victorian era lost many freedoms when they chose to marry. Mason acknowledges that "[t]here was a consensus that wives were much subordinated; according to some without coldness in the relationship, but, according to others, to an extent that made the wife a stranger and slave" (116). Mason goes on to quote French feminist Flora Tristan who claims that, in addition to the Victorian husband's tyranny over his wife, the average Victorian husband engaged in "rampant infidelity" (Mason 116). The marriages that Cather presents in her fiction, however, are quite different from this Victorian model. For example, the marriages of Alexandra's brothers, Lou and Oscar, do not conform to the Victorian ideal. We learn of Annie's, the wife of Lou, appearance during a family gathering:

Lou's wife, formerly Annie Lee, has grown to look curiously like her husband. Her face has become longer, sharper, more aggressive. She wears her yellow hair in a high pompadour, and is bedecked with rings and chains and "beauty pins." Her tight, high-heeled shoes give her an awkward walk, and she is always more or less preoccupied with her clothes. (67)

This description of Annie, which characterizes her as sharp and aggressive, contradicts the Victorian ideal of a wife, who, according to Neff, is epitomized by her delicacy and fragility (85). Annie not only possesses these masculine traits in her appearance, but she also exhibits her control over the family by telling her husband, as well as her children, what to do. While it was primarily the wife's position to give orders to her children, it was not her position to give orders to her husband. Annie, however, does just that when she gestures a command of silence to her husband when he begins to contradict Alexandra: "'Pass the preserves, Lou,' said Annie in a warning tone. She had reasons for not wishing her husband to cross Alexandra too openly" (68). Because Alexandra is considering the purchase of a piano for Annie and Lou's daughter Millie, Annie does not

wish to anger her sister-in-law. By taking the commanding role of her family at this dinner, Annie exhibits controlling characteristics different from the ideal Victorian wife.

Another marriage in which we see an ironic reversal includes the union of Frank and Marie Shabata. Although Frank does take a traditional, tyrannical role as the leader of the household, there is nevertheless a contradiction of Victorian expectations within the marriage. Historical accounts surrounding the Victorian era tell us that husbands, during this time often engaged in many extra-marital affairs. Contrasted by their husband's infidelity, Victorian wives were expected to uphold the ideals of virtue and morality. Michael Mason reports that Victorian wives had earned a reputation for being the most chaste group of women anywhere in society. This is not the case, however, in the Shabata household. Frank, although often wild with anger and never showing affection toward Marie, loves his wife immensely. In fact, he possesses such a deep love for her that he simply cannot express his feelings adequately. According to Victorian society, however, Frank should be the spouse to have an extra-marital affair. Ironically this affair involves Marie, who is supposed to uphold the ideals of virtue and morality. ✓

Another manner in which Cather creates gender reversals is through the failures experienced by male characters. Redefining the criteria for success, Cather incorporates the feminine attributes of imagination and vision. With the death of the Bergson patriarch, we see the first instance in *O Pioneers!* in which a male character fails in a society predominantly controlled by men. Having immigrated from Sweden to the American western frontier, John Bergson endures the last years of his life working his land with minimal results:

In eleven long years John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame. It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods; and no one knew when they were likely to come, or why. Mischance hung over it. Its Genius was unfriendly to man. (13-4)

Like most men in Cather's fiction, Bergson lacks the imagination and vision for success which Cather deems a prerequisite when converting wild prairie into productive farmland. Rather than progressing into the new frontier of the American West with innovative ideas and techniques, John Bergson clings to the Old World and all that it encompasses. The narrator tells us that "John Bergson had the Old-World belief that land, in itself, is desirable. But this land was an enigma. It was like a horse that no one knows how to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces" (14). Bergson's death symbolizes the victory of the New World over the Old World. One cannot survive life on the American frontier without first relinquishing old habits and then developing new strategies for survival.

The two Bergson brothers, Lou and Oscar, fail to gain what Alexandra achieves because of Cather's reversal of gender roles. Similar to their father in that they cannot achieve a balance of feminine and masculine qualities in their lives, Lou and Oscar refuse to acknowledge some innovative farming possibilities. In other instances their lack of intuition and imagination may not have hindered their success; whereas in Cather's fiction, this lack of feminine traits totally debilitates them. Because they are so inherently male and cannot rely upon any qualities traditionally considered feminine, they never find success. The male traits of level-headedness and rationality, which may prove to be helpful in some cases, prove to be totally debilitating for Lou and Oscar. Because they insist on rationalizing each situation when faced with a decision about new equipment or techniques, Lou and Oscar become unable to imagine the new equipment or technique working. Instead, they look to those around them in order to see what practices they are incorporating into their farming and never attempt anything new. Our first glimpse into the true characters of Lou and Oscar comes with their trip to the home of their eccentric neighbor, Ivar. As a man ostracized from society, Ivar has freedoms that the other male characters do not enjoy. Because of his isolation, Ivar does not develop the male trait of

closed-mindedness which cause the Bergson men to fail. Instead, he, like Alexandra, possesses a keen insight that Cather has previously deemed necessary for success. On their visit to Ivar's desolate home, Alexandra, experiencing difficulties in raising her family's herd of pigs, asks him for advice. After hearing Ivar's instructions to Alexandra, both Lou and Oscar quickly tell their sister to forget the old man's foolish ramblings. The narrator describes the boys' inhibitions:

They did not mind hard work, but they hated experiments and could never see the use of taking pains. Even Lou, who was more elastic than his older brother, disliked to do anything different from their neighbors. He felt that it made them conspicuous and gave people a chance to talk about them. (47)

Ivar's advice, which involved improving the pigs' living conditions, goes unnoticed by Lou and Oscar because it contradicts society's accepted way of raising pigs. Because of their fear of being considered different from the norm, Lou and Oscar refuse to experiment with any new method of farming. They lack both the imagination and the perseverance required for success in this rough terrain. Alexandra, on the other hand, embraces possible diversions from accepted routines and is willing to try them, even though doing so may result in failure. After her visit to Ivar, she considers his plan: "Alexandra watched the shimmering pool dreamily, but eventually her eyes went back to the sorghum patch south of the barn, where she was planning to make her new pig corral" (48). By allowing herself the freedom to make her own decisions, Alexandra empowers herself while her brothers do little but limit their opportunities for success.

Just like their father, Oscar and Lou simply are not equipped to handle life in Nebraska. They are unable to make decisions concerning their own farms and instead look to their neighbors in order to imitate what they are doing. Neither Lou nor Oscar can reason and make sound decisions concerning certain situations because they refuse to

even consider doing anything that may divert their paths from the mainstream. Ironically, Lou and Oscar lack the inherently male reasoning and decision-making abilities because they lack the feminine traits of imagination and vision. They are unable to consider the usefulness of a new piece of equipment or a new farming technique because they are unable to imagine the equipment or technique actually being put into practice. We soon realize that Lou and Oscar simply are not capable of life on the Divide; rather, they are more equipped to handle a less rigorous, less exciting lifestyle:

The Bergson boys, certainly, would have been happier with their Uncle Otto, in the bakery shop in Chicago. Like most of their neighbors, they were meant to follow in paths already marked out for them, not to break trails in a new country. . . . It was no fault of theirs that they had been dragged into the wilderness when they were little boys. A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves. (49-50)

Here we learn that neither Lou nor Oscar are capable of assuming leadership roles or taking risks, two characteristics that were traditionally considered masculine, which Cather has deemed essential for success. Because they lack the combination of masculine and feminine qualities, Lou and Oscar are unable to reason, traditionally considered a masculine attribute, and thus make sound decisions. Although most pioneers were men, Cather shows us that even men must possess the feminine traits of imagination and intuition in order to succeed. Lou and Oscar are two characters who do not possess such traits, and therefore fail. Neither Lou nor Oscar can ever be prosperous in this area of the country because of their fear of being labeled as different by their community. Lacking the imagination that Cather deemed necessary for success on the Divide, Lou and Oscar simply plod along in their everyday routines, never achieving anything outside of the mundane. Ironically, however, Alexandra does possess this

imagination and is willing to experiment with progressive ideas, such as Ivar's theory of raising pigs.

Cather again reveals both Lou and Oscar's adherence to routine in "Neighboring Fields," the second section of the novel. Sixteen years have elapsed since we have seen Lou and Oscar. Ignoring her brothers' instructions to sell their land sixteen years before, Alexandra has become a huge success as a landowner. Lou and Oscar, however, have done little but physical work to make their lives better; rather, they have gained their possessions because of Alexandra. Although they do carry out Alexandra's wishes throughout the sixteen years omitted from the novel, they simply do not develop the instincts to make decisions on their own. One evening around the dinner table, questions arise concerning Alexandra's use of a new silo: "It happened to be the first silo on the Divide, and Alexandra's neighbors and her men were skeptical about it" (85). Just as they doubted Ivar's theory of raising pigs, Lou and Oscar refuse to experiment with this new piece of farm equipment simply because it is not an accepted method of feeding animals. Nelse Jensen, one of Alexandra's dinner guests, tells her what her brothers have been saying about her new silo: "'Lou, he says he wouldn't have no silo on his place if you'd give it to him. He says to feed outen it gives the stock the bloat. He heard somebody lost four head of horses, feedin' 'em that stuff'" (85). After having heard a neighbor's complaints about the silo, Lou refuses to consider any of its merits. He allows others, especially Alexandra, to dictate his opinions and thoughts for him. Alexandra, however, ignores social criticism and will give new techniques the opportunity to succeed, as we see in her rebuttal to the arguments placed against her: "Well, the only way we can find out is to try. Lou and I have different notions about feeding stock, and that's a good thing. It's bad if all the members of a family think alike. They never get anywhere. Lou can learn by my mistakes and I can learn by his" (85). Alexandra, emphasizing the importance of reasoning and thinking, possesses that combination of

traits that is so vital for success in Cather's works. By admitting that she can learn from Lou's mistakes, Alexandra proves how open-minded she can be. Lou, on the other hand, consistently resists anything new and subject to public scrutiny and will never progress in this untamed territory, where one's imagination and will to succeed are so vital for survival.

Having such disdain for innovative techniques and products, Lou again exhibits his limited vision at a dinner party held by Alexandra. Sitting around the dinner table with his family, Lou turns the conversation's subject to Ivar, their eccentric neighbor who, sixteen years prior, counseled Alexandra on the subject of pigs. Having lost his home through his careless management of finances, Ivar comes to live with Alexandra and her farm laborers. Ivar, a practitioner of habits which seem odd to the rest of the community, lives in the barn next to the animals, where he is "further from temptations" (84). Because of Ivar's unorthodox habits, the rumor has spread throughout the town that he would be better served in an asylum designated for the insane. Taking from this rumor his own opportunity to criticize and control his sister, Lou consults a psychiatrist on the subject of Ivar: "When I was in Hastings to attend the convention," he was saying, "I saw the superintendent of the asylum, and I was telling him about Ivar's symptoms. He says Ivar's case is one of the most dangerous kind, and it's a wonder he hasn't done something violent before this" (94). Lou, having spent many years jealous of Alexandra's successes, relishes any opportunity to criticize his sister, and in this instance he has found a credible source to back him up on his accusations. Alexandra, however, being the self-assured woman that she is, simply laughs at Lou's assertions and ignores his, along with her community's, scorn. In one last effort to convince his sister of Ivar's potential dangers, Lou continues, "All the same, the neighbors will be having a say about it before long" (95). Just as with the new silo, Lou does not want any controversy associated with the Bergson name. For him, such social questioning is a disgrace. Rather

than assuming a leadership role in his town and having the status to change social constructs, Lou would much prefer following a socially dictated code of ethics that will govern his entire life.

Differing significantly from his two older brothers, Emil Bergson also fails to find contentment upon the Divide. Sheltered his entire life by Alexandra's watchful eye, Emil has enjoyed opportunities that his brothers have not. Alexandra, having no children, directs all her maternal tendencies toward Emil and provides him with opportunities that she herself has been denied. Although Emil is not obsessed with public opinion as his brothers are, he nevertheless possesses characteristics that inhibit him from achieving success in his own life. Alexandra has worked hard to provide her younger brother with opportunities for success, and she feels pride as she thinks of Emil:

Alexandra was well satisfied with her brother. As they drove through the rolling French country toward the westering sun and the stalwart church, she was thinking of that time long ago when she and Emil drove back from the river valley to the still unconquered Divide. Yes, she told herself, it had been worth while; both Emil and the country had become what she had hoped. Out of her father's children there was one 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. (142)

Having placed all her energies into cultivating both Emil and the land, Alexandra feels that she has been successful in both endeavors. Ironically, Alexandra can never simultaneously enjoy the two loves of her life, the land and Emil, for Emil and the land can never coexist.

Alexandra obtains her goal of ensuring Emil's independence from the land and thus creates a dilemma for her beloved brother. Emil's best moments, the moments

which Alexandra takes the most pride in him, are those spent far from the Divide. Finding success while at college and exhibiting his worldliness while traveling to Mexico, Emil does not possess the necessary traits to survive on the Divide. Like his brothers, he lacks the balance of feminine and masculine traits that would ensure him of success. Unlike Lou and Oscar, however, Emil possesses too much imagination and emotion, which results in his inability to reason. Already emphasizing the importance of obtaining such balance in one's life, Cather debilitates Emil by denying him the reasoning and rationalizing abilities that would aid him in making wiser decisions. Known for his frivolity and travels, Emil loses his place in Nebraska society and continues to wander in hopes of discovering happiness. In *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration*, Joseph Urgo acknowledges Emil's wanderings: "The fact that Emil's story ends abruptly when he is murdered does not diminish Alexandra's success but underscores it. Emil's future was tied to migration, and he was killed, literally, because he stayed home too long" (47). Having maintained coquettish contact with Marie throughout the years, Emil usually leaves Nebraska before an affair erupts. However, when he remains in Nebraska too long, he succumbs to the desires he feels for Marie, and the two engage in a dangerous love affair. Cather incorporates into Emil's character all the passion absent in Alexandra. Too full of emotions and desires for Marie, Emil can do little but act upon them. The love affair between him and Marie provides Alexandra with her only revelation of true passion. This fatal experience between the two fervent lovers is the only passionate relationship that Alexandra will encounter. The narrator describes the intensity of the lovers' last meeting: "They couldn't meet any more. There was nothing for them to say. They had spent the last penny of their small change; there was nothing left but gold. The day of love-tokens was past. They had not only their hearts to give to each other" (167). Too intense in their longings for each other, Emil and Marie share a desire that Alexandra shall never experience. .

Similar to Emil in his wanderings, Carl Linstrum, Alexandra's childhood friend and confidante, comes back to reaffirm old acquaintances after having been absent for a number of years. A man with little knowledge of finances, whose talents lie in the area of the arts, Carl continues to seek his fortune in his late thirties. Upon his arrival, we are quickly introduced to Carl's failures:

Carl had changed very little. His cheeks were browner and fuller. He looked less like a scholar than when he went away a year ago, but no one, even now, would have taken him for a man of business. His soft, lustrous black eyes, his whimsical smile, would be less against him in the Klondike than on the Divide. There are always dreamers on the frontier. (267)

To the opposite extreme of Lou and Oscar, who lack any sort of imagination, Carl, like Emil, has too much. This excess prohibits him from having a concrete understanding of reality. He cannot survive in a world that requires strength as well as imagination. Just as she does with Emil, Cather denies Carl the ability to think and reason, two masculine qualities that are essential in acquiring the balance which she has already determined necessary for success. Like Emil, Carl possesses the vision of his dreams; he simply does not possess the necessary skills to achieve them.

Lou and Oscar are quick to warn their sister when they think that Carl's visit has outlasted its welcome. Once again they lack any vision that would allow them to imagine their sister's happiness. Their rationalization of the situation, disbelieving that Alexandra could find love so late in her life, prompts their concern over what their neighbors will think of the relationship developing between Carl and Alexandra; thus, the two brothers attempt to persuade her to ask Carl to leave. Lou begins the episode that will completely destroy the bond between the sister and her brothers when he asks Alexandra how long she thinks Carl will be staying. Oscar then contributes to the discussion when he offers, "We thought we ought to tell you that people have begun to talk" (150). Alexandra,

dumbfounded, questions the subject of her neighbors' gossip when Oscar goes on to clarify, "About you, keeping him here so long. It looks bad for him to be hanging on to a woman this way. People think you're being taken in" (150). Disgusted with Alexandra for not caring what the townspeople are whispering behind her back, Lou exclaims, "You ought to think a little about your family. You're making us all ridiculous" (150). Oscar continues his brother's insults, "Yes, everybody's laughing to see you get took in; at your age, too. Everybody knows he's nearly five years younger than you, and is after your money. Why, Alexandra, you are forty years old!" (155). So overwhelmed by what their neighbors are saying about their family, neither Lou nor Oscar care about the fact that Alexandra has led an immensely lonely life for nearly forty years. As far as they are concerned, she may spend the remainder of her life alone, her only companions being her hired help. Because of their obsessions over public disgrace, this prospect of an isolated sister dying alone would be much preferred over a contented sister who was once the subject of town gossip.

Ironically, Carl Linstrum bears some similarity to Lou and Oscar in that he is essentially ineffective due to his allowing others to dictate his life for him. He recognizes that his life has not been a financial success, especially when compared to the strides Alexandra has made. Similar to Lou and Oscar in that he lacks leadership ability, Carl succumbs to mediocrity. Describing his passion for wood engraving, Carl honestly reveals to Alexandra how hopeless his life has become:

Alexandra, all the way out from New York I've been planning how I could deceive you and make you think me a very enviable fellow, and here I am telling you the truth the first night. I waste a lot of time pretending to people, and the joke of it is, I don't think I ever deceive anyone. There are too many of my kind; people know us on sight. . . . You see, measured by your standards here, I'm a failure. I couldn't even buy one of your

cornfields. (83)

Carl, having spent his life in a profession that he admits has no future for success, returns to Nebraska with no money and little hopes for making any. Embarrassed by his lack of financial success, Carl puts on a facade, hoping to impress the people he meets. Here in Nebraska, however, the townspeople know Carl's story and are not deceived by him. Thus, the rumors flourish.

After hearing Carl's confession concerning his own failures, Alexandra considers the limitations that her responsibilities have placed upon her. She longs for the freedom that Carl possesses and declares that she would gladly sacrifice her land in turn for a small portion of his freedom. Carl, knowing what true freedom entails, openly tells Alexandra the truth about his own life. Again we see Carl confessing his own shortcomings to Alexandra:

Freedom so often means that one isn't needed anywhere. Here you are an individual, you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody, we own nothing. When one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him. Our landlady and the delicatessen man are our mourners, and we leave nothing behind us but a frock-coat and a fiddle, or an easel, or a typewriter, or what ever tool we got our living by. All we have ever managed to do is to pay our rent. . . . We have no house, no place, no people of our own. We live in the streets, in the parks, in the theatres. We sit in restaurants and concert halls and look about at the hundreds of our own kind and shudder. (83)

Here we see the complete hopelessness of Carl's situation. He feels as if no one in the world would notice his absence at his death. Not only does he see himself as a financial failure, but as a social failure as well. Measuring himself against society's definition of

success, Carl recognizes no value in himself at all. Completely frustrated with his incompetence as an artist, he finally concludes that his life is meaningless and holds little value when compared to Alexandra's position in her community. Just as Lou and Oscar do, Carl realizes Alexandra's strengths when compared to his own weaknesses. Rather than displaying these feelings of inadequacy in a volatile manner, as Lou does, Carl chooses to quietly direct his reproaches inward against himself.

Carl, allowing social pressures to dictate his life, sacrifices Alexandra's company and leaves her home. After their discussion with their sister concerning Carl's presence, Lou and Oscar visit Carl and ask him to leave. Had Carl possessed the ability to stand up to pressures and make his own decisions, he might have stayed with Alexandra, enjoying the companionship of a good friend. However, because he lacks the combination of masculine and feminine traits, Carl is inept at confrontation. As he is leaving, Carl apologizes to Alexandra, offering little in his defense:

"What a hopeless position you are in, Alexandra!" he exclaimed feverishly. "It is your fate to be always surrounded by little men. And I am no better than the rest. I am too little to face the criticism of even such men as Lou and Oscar. Yes, I am going away; tomorrow. I cannot even ask you to give me a promise until I have something to offer you. I thought, perhaps, I could do that; but I find I can't." (163)

This passage offers us one redeeming quality about Carl. He realizes his weaknesses and does not attempt to hide them. Just as she does with the other male characters, Cather presents Carl as a weak man who is unable to withstand social criticism. Unlike Lou and Oscar, who refuse to acknowledge any criticism targeted at their characters, though, Carl understands his limitations even though he doesn't set out to change them. However, he too gives into the criticism of others. At last motivated by the prospects of leading a totally isolated existence, Carl does return to Alexandra, as they create a safe, Platonic

marriage in which they will provide each other with companionship rather than passionate love. In this relationship, as Patrick Shaw points out, "Though Alexandra never humiliates Carl, she does dominate him (and other males), and we thus witness Cather's calculated reversal of character alignment" (34). Having discovered himself passionless and alone in his middle years, Carl finally ignores social scrutiny as he returns to Alexandra. Here Cather allows Carl some of the rewards of achieving this balance of gender qualities; however, this success has come too late for Carl and Alexandra, as they both appear passionless toward each other.

The final male figure that we encounter and may view as a failure is Frank Shabata, Alexandra's neighbor. Alexandra has developed one close friendship in the course of her life to Marie Shabata, Frank's young and pretty wife. Having a quick and often violent temper, Frank develops a negative reputation for himself within the community. His tirades against his young wife strain his marriage as well as enrage his neighbors. Like other men in Cather's works, Frank possesses too much emotion and cannot control his rage. Remembering her husband when they first met, Marie tells Alexandra that "he used to be gay like that when he was a young man" (131). Marie, a cheerful young woman whom everyone likes, considers what her husband would have been like if he had not married her:

Frank might still be free like that, and having a good time making people admire him. Poor Frank, getting married wasn't very good for him either. I'm afraid I do set people against him, as he says. I seem, somehow, to give him away all the time. Perhaps he would try to be agreeable to people again, if I were not around. It seems as if I always make him just as bad as he can be (133).

Frank, coming from the Old Country, will not allow himself to show the true affections he feels for his wife. Like the other men in Cather's fiction, Frank is too concerned with

what others may think of him if he would give himself up emotionally to his wife. Rather than allow society to see himself as a man who loves his wife from the depths of his soul, Frank takes on a machismo attitude, thus never relinquishing himself to his relationship with Marie. Cather presents us with this role reversal as she illustrates Frank's unhappiness. If he could only confide in his wife and express his emotions, his situation might never have become so miserable.

Frank's unwillingness to show Marie his true feelings results in Marie's unhappiness. The narrator explains Frank's internal struggles that he must confront:

Frank's case was all the more painful because he had no one in particular who would bring him evidence against his wife. . . . At the bottom of his heart Frank knew whom to fix his jealousy upon. Sometimes he could have thanked the man who knew well enough that if he could once give up his grudge, his wife would come back to him. But he could never in the world do that. The grudge was fundamental. Perhaps he could not have given it up if he had tried. Perhaps he got more satisfaction out of feeling himself abused than he would have got out of being loved. (147)

Allowing himself to feel pity for his lot in life, Frank assumes the position of jealous tyrant who can never see past his own selfish desires. Instead of facing the hardships of life in partnership with Marie, Frank would prefer to face them alone, all the while considering himself victim to society's scorn. Such a degree of emotion coming from Frank signifies the gender reversal that Cather creates here. Neff indicates that men, who were considered to be more "ponderous, measured, and careful" than their female counterparts, traditionally did not exhibit such passionate emotions (70). In his rage, however, Frank allows his jealousy to take control of his actions.

Just like Cather's other men, Frank's opportunities for satisfaction are limited by his lack of vision and foresight. He simply cannot enjoy and appreciate Marie as his wife

because of his jealousy. The narrator describes this lack of vision best when Frank and his wife are attending a wedding reception. Frank, watching Marie take notice of Alexandra's younger brother Emil, fails to comprehend the feelings that are arising between the young couple:

Only Marie, in her little tent of shawls, was pale and quiet. Under her yellow turban the red coral pendants swung against white cheeks. Frank was still staring at her, but he seemed to see nothing. Years ago, he himself had had the power to take the blood from her cheeks like that.

Perhaps he did not remember—perhaps he had never known! (150)

Frank, so consumed by bitterness and contempt, cannot even see the love affair that is developing between Marie and Emil. He places all of his energies into being angry at his neighbors for liking Marie better than they like him and at Marie for making his neighbors feel this way, that he never notices the important things in life.

The culmination of Frank's rage occurs in the chapter "The White Mulberry Tree," and it is here that Frank becomes the epitome of a desperate man. Returning home from a long day of drinking, Frank notices Emil's horse in his own stable. Acting out of crazed fury and jealousy, Frank loses all control of his emotions as he kills both Marie and Emil. Frank's inability to express his love for his wife as well as his inability to control his anger causes him to be a social outcast for the remainder of his sad, isolated life. Reflecting on the events that led to his tragedy, Frank realizes several mistakes he has made throughout the years:

There was a wrench in Frank's mind. . . . He knew he was doing her wrong. He knew that he was to blame. For three years he had been trying to break her spirit. She had a way of making the best of things that seemed to him a sentimental affectation. He wanted his wife to resent that he was wasting his best years among these stupid and unappreciative

people; but she had seemed to find the people quite good enough. . . . He had tried to make her life ugly. (179)

Although Frank does begin to make progress in acknowledging these facts about himself, he nevertheless reverts back to his old self when he silently cries, "Why had Marie made him do this thing; why had she brought this upon him?" (179). Believing that the whole episode is Marie's fault, Frank refuses to take responsibility for his own actions and feelings. Because of his neglect of his own emotions, Frank isolates himself from everyone. Through the character of Frank, Cather demonstrates the manner in which one man can live at two extremes. Failing to show enough emotion to his wife throughout the years of their marriage, Frank eventually allows for the explosion of these emotions into rage as he murders Marie and Emil.

Ironically, the male possessing a healthy emotional balance is the social outcast Ivar. Considered crazy and eccentric by the entire community, Ivar demonstrates an understanding of both nature and human nature unparalleled to that of any other character. By juxtaposing Alexandra's ineffectiveness at human relations and Ivar's thoughtful philosophies, Cather creates a complete reversal of gender roles. We first learn of Ivar's intuitive nature early in the novel, as Alexandra and her brothers travel to Ivar's home to purchase a hammock. Disgusted with her brothers' rude comments concerning Ivar, Alexandra declares, "Some days his mind is cloudy, like. But if you can get him on a clear day, you can learn a great deal from him. He understands animals" (23). Although isolated from society because of his unusual mannerisms, Ivar is one man in Cather's fiction who ignores social criticism and lives from day to day according to his own, albeit unique, principles. The narrator provides us with several interesting facts concerning Ivar:

Ivar found contentment in the solitude he had sought for himself. He disliked the litter of human dwellings. . . . He preferred the cleanness and

tidiness of the wild sod. . . . He best expressed his preference for his wild homestead by saying that his Bible seemed truer to him there. (25)

Ivar develops a strong personality that is incomparable to that of any other man in *O Pioneers!*. By conducting his life according to his own principles rather than by society's principles, Ivar makes his own choices. While he does not gain the riches of the land nor anything of monetary value, Ivar does possess a serenity of life that comes from his communion with nature. It is through Ivar's intuition that Cather creates an ironic reversal of gender roles. While Alexandra, the woman, lacks this quality that society has traditionally defined as being feminine, Ivar, the man, possesses it.

Although Alexandra does succeed where the men fail, she nevertheless fails in some areas of her life as well. It is through these failures that Cather again creates gender reversals. The woman gains what has traditionally been claimed by men for centuries—financial and social power—while she remains unable to achieve what has traditionally been claimed by women for centuries—love and friendship. Alexandra commits her soul to her passion—the land. By doing so, she becomes unable to perceive what true love is. Never developing a sexual relationship with a man, Alexandra remains childless in her middle years; as a result, she becomes a surrogate mother to her youngest brother, Emil. Pouring out all of her maternal instincts on Emil, Alexandra provides him with all the opportunities that she would a son. After the tragic deaths of Emil and his lover Marie, we learn just how unequipped Alexandra is to understand such desires of the flesh:

If Alexandra had had much imagination she might have guessed what was going on in Marie's mind, and she would have seen long before what was going on in Emil's. But that . . . was Alexandra's blind side, and her life had not been of the kind to sharpen her vision. Her training had been toward the end of making her proficient in what she had undertaken to do. Her personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a

subconscious existence. (183)

After the deaths of Emil and Marie, Alexandra is alone in the torment of self-reproach. She painstakingly attempts to review what signals she has missed in the months preceding their deaths. If the situation had dealt with matters of the land, rather than matters of the heart, Alexandra would have had no problems whatsoever in deciphering the cause and the cure. Unfortunately for everyone involved, Alexandra's emotional capabilities were rendered inadequate long before.

We first become aware of Alexandra's shortcomings when the narrator describes the kitchen maids that Alexandra has hired. The three pretty girls spend their days cooking, laughing, and talking about feminine interests. Acknowledging the lack of human contact in her own life, Alexandra admits that her primary reason for employing the three girls is to hear them giggle and gossip about their own love affairs. Alexandra, having no love affair to speak of, lives vicariously through these three young Swedish girls as she listens to their stories. By doing so, Alexandra deprives herself of the reality of such experiences. She is left isolated from other women because she cannot comprehend the things in life that interest them. The approaching middle years of Alexandra's life, appearing bleak and isolated, cause her to wish for companionship that the land has not provided. Cather herself experienced such solitude, as do heroines, as opera diva Olive Fremstad points out to her, "We are born alone, we make our way alone, we die alone" (Gerber 79). Such commentary on the life of the artist also applies to Alexandra, as she is the artist of the land.

Having so much ability in the masculine world of farming, Alexandra lacks certain qualities that society has historically defined as feminine. One such quality involves decorative style. Before hosting a dinner for several guests, Alexandra takes a final glance at her dining room. The narrator explains the circumstances behind Alexandra's fashions:

Alexandra had put herself into the hands of the Hanover furniture dealer, and he had conscientiously done his best to make her dining room look like his display window. She said frankly that she knew nothing about such things, and she was willing to be governed by the general conviction that the more useless and utterly unusable objects were, the greater their virtue as ornament. (66)

While this lack of feminine taste may first seem irrelevant, it actually gives us a greater insight into Alexandra's character. Possessing the masculine qualities required to successfully manage a large farm situated on rough terrain, Alexandra lacks the feminine traits that could lead to personal satisfaction in her relationships with others.

This void of womanly attributes causes Alexandra to lead a life full of solitude and loneliness. She simply cannot understand the feelings that arise between her brother Emil and her best friend Marie. Admitting the loneliness that she sometimes experiences, Alexandra attempts to explain to Emil her need of having Carl around her: "Alexandra sighed. 'I had hoped you might understand, a little, why I do want to. But I suppose it's too much to expect. I've had a pretty lonely life, Emil. Besides Marie, Carl is the only friend I have ever had'" (118). Having only two friends in the course of her life, Alexandra feels like she needs them near her as she enters her middle years. Her relationship with Carl, while not romantic, does offer her some comfort because of the companionship that it provides.

Her friendship with Marie also highlights Alexandra's failures in life. Lacking the experiences with other women, Alexandra fails to develop certain supposedly feminine qualities required to sustain close female friendships. One such quality is the ability to listen with a compassionate ear and openly discuss problems with intuitive responses. When faced with Marie's complaints concerning her relationship with her husband Frank, Alexandra offers little consolation for her friend, as she refuses to listen to Marie's

problems. After the first moment of hearing Marie talk freely of her difficulties with Frank, Alexandra quickly changes the subject of the conversation to a more comfortable topic: "Alexandra had never heard Marie speak so frankly about her husband before, and she felt that it was wiser not to encourage her. No good, she reasoned, ever came from talking about such things . . ." (132). Unresponsive to Marie's attempts to confide in her friend, Alexandra becomes uncomfortable discussing matters of the heart. Because of her inexperience with female relationships, Alexandra fails Marie both as friend and as confidante.

The final instance in which we observe Alexandra failing in her role as friend to Marie occurs after Marie and Emil's deaths. Oblivious to the emotions that cause the love affair between Marie and Emil, Alexandra develops a hostile attitude toward her closest female friend:

She blamed Marie bitterly. And why, with her happy, affectionate nature, should she have brought destruction and sorrow to all who had loved her, even to poor old Joe Tovesky, the uncle who used to carry her about so proudly when she was a little girl? That was the strangest thing of all. Was there, then, something wrong in being warm-hearted and impulsive like that? (201)

Having no past experiences with love, Alexandra is unable to identify with the passion that consumes both her brother and her best friend. From the beginning of *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra is blind to the possibilities that may occur between two young, passionate individuals who are each searching to fill voids in their lives. Because of her inability to recognize the signals that have been appearing between Emil and Marie, Alexandra becomes ineffective in preventing the slayings of the two people closest to her.

Lacking any concept of the passion that consumes the lives of Emil and Marie, Alexandra settles for a marriage of convenience in which she will never experience such

intense emotions. Her position as head of her family has resulted in Alexandra's inability to feel true passion, and she acknowledges as much to Carl as they discuss their relationship:

How many times we have walked this path together, Carl. How many times we will walk it again! Does it seem to you like coming back to your won place? Do you feel at peace with the world here? I think we shall be very happy. I haven't any fears. I think when friends marry, they are safe. We don't suffer like—those young ones. (209)

By agreeing to marry Carl and consenting to the Platonic relationship which they share, Alexandra, having developed no skills for expressing her emotions, chooses the safety of their companionship. Only in her dreams does she learn what true sexual desires are, as she is lifted and carried across the land by a virile, masculine man. Never in Carl will she find such traits, however, and she becomes destined to live a life of sexual mediocrity. Cather floods her fiction with irony by depriving her female heroines of certain qualities which society has traditionally defined as being feminine. Here we see that Alexandra does not possess an intuitive nature common to the female gender. Because of her inability to open up and express her feelings, Alexandra fails to develop close, personal friendships that would provide vital companionship in her later years.

While traditionally focusing on the larger-than-life heroines in these novels, critics have failed to see the importance of studying the men in comparison to these females. Only by doing so do we develop a keen sense of the women's' strengths and weaknesses. *O Pioneers!*, while relatively short in length, accomplishes much by revealing the importance of these gender issues that Cather found to be so important throughout her own life. At a first glance, *O Pioneers!* may appear as the epitome of a novel celebrating woman's accomplishments throughout time. After all, Alexandra does complete what the men around her cannot—she succeeds in taming wild country and

restructuring it into a producing farm. However, after carefully looking at the men's weaknesses, we begin to see that Alexandra has several weaknesses of her own. Cather presents numerous gender reversals throughout *O Pioneers!* By granting Alexandra financial successes while denying the same to the men, Cather creates a world in which feminine attributes—imagination and vision—are of greater value than the male qualities that society has traditionally deemed necessary for success—reasoning and decision-making abilities. Alexandra's world is one in which the criteria for success have been completely re-established. Not only do the men fail in this male-dominated society, they do so because they are male. Only Alexandra possesses the ability to ignore social criticism and look beyond what is socially accepted. Cather continues gender reversals throughout the novel as she presents several descriptions of men and women. Invariably, the men's weaknesses and failures are enhanced, while Alexandra's strength and victories are recognized. Ironically, Alexandra is not without fault, however, as she does fail in securing positive emotional ties to friends and loved ones. *O Pioneers!* remains a powerful novel in which Cather makes strong statements concerning life for women in Victorian society. By contrasting male and female characters, Cather establishes numerous gender reversals in which the female characters enjoy many more freedoms than in Cather's own society.

Chapter Two:

“What was it about this child that one believed in?” :

Female Success and Male Loss in

The Song of the Lark

While differing significantly in both style and subject matter from *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* contains many similarities involving gender issues. Like *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark* depicts the life of another Cather heroine, Thea Kronborg, focusing on her triumphs over gender constraints. Critics of *The Song of the Lark* have previously studied the successes of Thea, who overcomes many obstacles to achieve her dream of becoming a famous opera singer. We may compare Thea's musical career to Alexandra's farming career since both women defy social boundaries placed upon them by a male-dominated society in order to accomplish their goals. Just as with *O Pioneers!*, however, little attention has been given to the male characters in *The Song of the Lark*. Here again Cather floods her novel with the irony of gender as her male subjects lack several inherent masculine qualities while displaying certain feminine traits.

Certain gender reversals appearing in *The Song of the Lark* include the male characters' failures in their male-dominated society, characterizations of men displaying feminine tendencies and women displaying masculine tendencies, and finally, the failures of women caused by their own lack of balance between masculinity and femininity. By including supposedly feminine attributes such as intuition and imagination as prerequisites for success, Cather establishes a new criterion that significantly differs from traditional Victorian standards. Just as in *O Pioneers!*, the men in *The Song of the Lark*, so consumed by their reputations and fear of public disgrace, never rise above mediocrity. Those who do find contentment in their careers and relationships never achieve financial success, while those who do attain financial security never find

satisfaction in their works. For example, although he does earn a living at practicing medicine, Doctor Archie never finds contentment in his position as a family practitioner in a small town. Doctor Archie's conception of success involves a large practice in a major city, where he may be on the cutting edge of medical discoveries. Dr. Archie, like most men in *The Song of the Lark*, allows social pressures to dictate his decisions; thus, he never develops the feminine qualities of intuition and imagination necessary for success. Through these male failures, Cather is emphasizing the importance of achieving a balance of masculine and feminine traits in one's life. Like those men in *O Pioneers!*, Doctor Archie and his fellow male characters fail to achieve balance in their lives.

Revealing the importance of achieving a balance of masculine and feminine qualities throughout *The Song of the Lark*, Cather presents various characters who fail to achieve such a balance. Some may have vision and imagination, yet lack decision making skills and reasoning skills; yet, others may remain competent in rational thinking while possessing no imagination and vision. One manner in which Cather sets up these different personalities is through the institution of marriage. Throughout *The Song of the Lark*, Cather incorporates examples of non-traditional Victorian marriages in which the wife takes control away from her husband. The first of these marriages that we encounter involves the union of Thea's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Kronborg. Thea's success in the opera world can be largely contributed to the influence of her mother, who assumes total control of her household, as well as her husband. While it was not uncommon for Victorian women to make household decisions, it was uncommon for them to make the family's financial decisions as well, since they were considered to be too irresponsible and flighty for such a task (Neff 182). In the Kronborg household, however, the woman stands out as the ultimate decision-maker. Cather's first description of Mrs. Kronborg reveals her importance: "She was a short, stalwart woman, with a short neck and a

determined-looking head. . . . She was a woman whom Doctor Archie respected; active, practical, unruffled; good-humoured, but determined. Exactly the sort of woman to take care of a flighty preacher" (10). With this opening comparison of Mr. and Mrs. Kronborg, Cather foreshadows the many gender ironies that she will include in the remainder of the novel. Unlike traditional nineteenth century marriages in which the husbands were to take control of their wives' flightiness, this marriage contradicts such standards as the wife must take charge because of her husband's flightiness.

Mr. Kronborg's deficiencies go beyond financial and household matters. His inability to reason and solve problems is ironic to the traditional Victorian standard. Mr. Kronborg does maintain an area of inadequacy that was considered common to males of the time, however. While the traditional stereotypical view of males does include a strong reasoning ability, it nevertheless includes a problem with communication as well. When compared to women, men have been considered inadequate at expressing their feelings (Neff 56). Such is the case for Mr. Kronborg. Although he has established a career in preaching, he remains unable to communicate effectively: "The poor man had no natural, spontaneous human speech. If he had his sincere moments, they were perforce inarticulate. Probably a good deal of his pretentiousness was due to the fact that he habitually expressed himself in a book-learned language, wholly remote from anything personal, native, or homely" (14). Because of Mr. Kronborg's inability to communicate, he must rely on his wife. We learn early in the novel that Mrs. Kronborg, while having deep admiration for her husband's position as a man of God, has little belief in his abilities as a self-sufficient man:

But for all this, she had no confidence in his administration of worldly affairs. She looked to him for morning prayers and grace at table; she expected him to name the babies and to supply whatever parental sentiment there was in the house, to remember birthdays and

anniversaries, to point the children to moral and patriotic ideals. (10-11)

By restricting Mr. Kronborg's responsibilities to those being ceremonial by nature, Cather reserves the important tasks for Mrs. Kronborg, who is more than capable to handle them. Thus, Mr. Kronborg's position in his own home is one of ceremony, not of actual importance.

While such a nontraditional arrangement may have caused turbulence in most Victorian homes, this is not the case in the Kronborg household. To the contrary, Mr. Kronborg is happy to perform his ceremonial tasks and leave the real work to his wife:

With all his flightiness, Peter Kronborg appreciated the matter-of-fact, punctual way in which his wife got her children into the world and along in it. He believed, and he was right in believing, that the sovereign State of Colorado was much indebted to Mrs. Kronborg and women like her.

(11)

Willing to settle for the less important position in his own home, Peter Kronborg happily allows his wife to assume the leadership position that traditionally would have been held by the man of the house. Not only does Cather present Peter Kronborg as a weak character in comparison to his wife, she also stresses the weaknesses of his ancestors: "Mr. Kronborg came of a poorer stock than his wife; from a lowly, ignorant family that had lived in a poor part of Sweden" (17). Thus, Mr. Kronborg's shortcomings are deep rooted in his family heritage. Assuming the position as man of the home, Mr. Kronborg should not feel unworthy of his station in life. Coming from a lower social status than his wife, however, Mr. Kronborg does experience such feelings of inadequacy. In Victorian society, such a union would have been humiliating for the husband, as it was the man's position to uplift the social status of his wife (Burstyn 85). In the Kronborg home, however, Mr. Kronborg does not enjoy such a position, as he is the spouse whose position in society must be uplifted by his wife.

In contrast to the gender reversals which occur in the Kronborg home, the gender reversals which occur within Doctor Archie's home produce negative consequences. Not quite so willing to relinquish his role as man of the house as Mr. Kronborg has done, Doctor Archie finds himself in constant strife with his strong-willed wife. Failing to achieve the balance of feminine and masculine attributes that Cather has required for success, Doctor Archie finds contentment in neither his career nor his marriage. Mrs. Archie's failures as a wife become apparent early in her marriage. Victorian society placed great importance on the maternal role in a family, and each young girl was urged to marry and produce several children. Belle Archie, however, has no interest in domesticity. In fact, she prefers not to be at her home, a Victorian woman's domain, at all:

It was his wife's custom, as soon as Doctor Archie left the house in the morning, to shut all the doors and windows to keep the dust out, and to pull down the shades to keep the sun from fading the carpets. She thought, too, that neighbours were less likely to drop in if the house was all closed up. . . . She liked to have her house clean, empty, dark, locked, and to be out of it—anywhere. (29-30)

Mrs. Archie's disregard for her home is a complete reversal from Victorian standards, in which a woman took pride in maintaining a warm, welcoming atmosphere. Not only does Mrs. Archie keep a cold, impersonal home, she does not even wish to stay in it. Whatever the occasion, Mrs. Archie spends as little time as possible performing domestic duties that accompany her role as wife.

The gender reversals portrayed in Mrs. Archie's character go beyond her disdain for housework. As a Victorian woman, one should welcome the possibility of having children, and a large family was encouraged (Neff 230). As the teacher of morality within her own home, a Victorian woman held the responsibility of instilling virtuous

ideals to her children. Belle Archie, however, has few ideals that Victorian society would consider virtuous. A cold, mean-spirited woman, Mrs. Archie does not wish to be a wife and certainly not a mother:

[Mrs. Archie] used to tell her neighbours that if there were no men, there would be no housework. When Mrs. Archie was first married, she had been always in a panic for fear she would have children. Now that her apprehensions on that score had grown paler, she was almost as much afraid of having dust in the house as she had once been of having children in it. (30)

By not wishing to fulfill the role of wife and mother, Mrs. Archie contradicts Victorian ideals. Through such nontraditional marriages, Cather creates gender reversals in which the women either take on all of the family's responsibilities or take on none at all.

In addition to gender ironies surrounding Mrs. Archie, certain gender reversals occur in Doctor Archie's character as well. At first glimpse, Doctor Archie appears to be a man of dignity—well dressed, masculine, professional. However, Cather reveals several imperfections found in Doctor Archie during one of his many visits to Thea:

He was quite as shy as his patient, especially when a third person overheard his conversation. . . . There was a contraction of embarrassment and self-consciousness all over his big body, which made him awkward - likely to stumble, to kick up rugs, or to knock over chairs. If anyone was very sick, he forgot himself, but he had a clumsy touch in convalescent gossip. (12)

This passage shatters our first assumptions concerning Doctor Archie. By choosing such descriptive phrases such as "contraction of embarrassment and self-consciousness; awkward -- likely to stumble; and clumsy touch," Cather reveals to us that Doctor Archie will not be an ideal figure in this novel. Not a native of the small town of Moonstone,

Doctor Archie finds himself wondering how he settled his practice in such a small place. He realizes that, had he been successful, he would be practicing medicine in a large city. Questioning why both he and Professor Wunsch, a drunken music teacher, are in Moonstone, Doctor Archie reflects during a conversation with Thea:

Why are we in Moonstone? It isn't as if we'd been born here. You were, but Wunsch wasn't and I wasn't. I suppose I'm here because I married as soon as I got out of medical school and had to get a practice quick. If you hurry things, you always get left in the end. . . . Some day I'll get up and find my hair turning grey, and I'll have nothing to show for it. (72)

According to Doctor Archie, both he and Professor Wunsch have allowed themselves to become trapped in Moonstone, thus extinguishing any possibilities for successful careers. By establishing his medical practice in such a small, primitive town, Doctor Archie has lost any chances of being a successful, innovative doctor. Although one can find success as a small town physician, Doctor Archie believes that he has missed his opportunity to be successful.

Not only has Doctor Archie failed in his professional career, he has also failed in his marriage as well. Similar to Carl Linstrum in *O Pioneers!*, Doctor Archie is a romantic character and is often unable to make objective decisions because of this. Regarding his unhappy marriage, we learn that Doctor Archie has made a hasty decision in marrying his wife and in other situations as well. Because of his inability to rationalize situations and wait for the greatest opportunities, Doctor Archie finds himself in a small, western town practicing medicine rather than in a large, urban area where more challenging procedures may await him. Here Cather creates another gender reversal. Not only has Doctor Archie remained unsuccessful professionally, he has also made rash, subjective judgments that were considered uncharacteristic for men in Victorian society. Such unwise decisions are not uncommon in Cather's fiction, however, as we see men

who do not take the time to carefully consider the consequence of their rash behavior. In traditional Victorian society, however, women were the individuals accused of such mistakes because of their lack of decision-making skills (Neff 242). Again contradicting social expectation, Cather creates male characters who do behave rashly and we frequently see the men making such errors:

The determining factor about Doctor Archie was that he was romantic. He had married Belle White because he was romantic--too romantic to know anything about women, except what he wished them to be, or to repulse a pretty girl who had set her cap for him. At medical school, though he was a rather wild boy in behaviour, he had always disliked coarse jokes and vulgar stories. . . . After so much and such disillusioning experience with it, he still had a romantic feeling about the human body. (76)

Victorian society considered women to be the gender prone to such romantic illusions. For this purpose, a woman would need a man in order to use his superior skills and make decisions that required objectivity, as she would be unable to do so (Neff 82). Here we have the complete opposite, however. Doctor Archie, considered by all to be a highly respected citizen of Moonstone, reacts to situations more like a woman than a man, according to Victorian standards. He is unable to wait patiently to begin a potentially thriving practice in a major city, where he could have been involved in medical research and more interesting and challenging medical procedures. Instead, he married too quickly and accepted the first position that was offered—a country family practitioner.

Doctor Archie's inability to make sound decisions causes him great turmoil in his marriage. By marrying Belle White so quickly, he fails to discover her true character. As a result, Doctor Archie becomes trapped in an unhappy marriage with a crude and hateful woman. Thinking about the numerous times Belle has embarrassed him in the

community, Doctor Archie considers his own bad judgment: "All this hurt the doctor's pride. But if there was one thing he had learned, it was that there was no changing Belle's nature. He had married a mean woman; and he must accept the consequences" (75). By accepting the consequences of his bad decision making, Doctor Archie exhibits parallels with Alexandra Bergson's brothers in *O Pioneers!*. He will not even consider the possibility of divorce because of what society may think of him. Just as Lou and Oscar repeatedly do in *O Pioneers!*, Doctor Archie allows society to dictate his actions:

Even in Colorado he would have had no pretext for divorce, and to do him justice, he had never thought of such a thing. . . . To him there was something vulgar about divorce. A divorced man was a disgraced man; at least, he had exhibited his hurt, and made it a matter for common gossip. Respectability was so necessary to Archie that he was willing to pay a high price for it. As long as he could keep up a decent exterior, he could manage to get on; and if he could have concealed his wife's littleness from all his friends, he would scarcely have complained. (75)

Rather than admit to the error in judgment he made in marrying Belle White, Doctor Archie creates a facade in the community. Concerned that the townspeople will think ill of him for seeking a divorce, Doctor Archie remains in a miserable marriage, thus eliminating the possibilities of finding happiness with someone he truly loves. Doctor Archie does prove to be the most successful male character in *The Song of the Lark*, however, as his perseverance and dedication often shine. Such dedication to medicine has earned him a degree and a successful profession, even though he would prefer to have practiced in a larger area. Similar to his pursuance of medical success, Doctor Archie also appears dedicated to assisting Thea financially as well as through his friendship with her. Such dedication to her remains a large factor contributing to her success as a singer. Although he is the most admirable of Cather's men, Doctor Archie nevertheless fails to

find happiness and contentment in his life. The sole importance of his character in *The Song of the Lark* involves the assistance he provides to Thea in the struggles of her career. Assuming his role as *deus ex machina* (Daiches 32), Doctor Archie reappears in Thea's life at the moments of her greatest need.

Doctor Archie is not alone in making rash, unwise decisions concerning marriage. Cather sets up Fred Ottenburg as juxtaposition to Doctor Archie, as they share certain similarities while maintaining certain differences. While both men prove to play significant roles in Thea's life, neither succeeds in establishing content marriages. Like Doctor Archie, Fred Ottenburg hastily responds to the prospect of marriage and eventually comes to hate his wife. These two men, while appearing to be intelligent, lack the reasoning ability traditionally considered a male characteristic according to Victorian standards. By marrying these women, both Archie and Ottenburg set themselves up for failure. Becoming engaged to Edith Beers after only three days of knowing her, Ottenburg takes little time to consider the consequences of such a union. As a result of his irrational thinking, discontentment between them grows:

At the end of a year [of marriage], Fred was mutely appealing to his mother for sympathy. At the end of two, he was drinking and in open rebellion. He had learned to detest his wife. Her wastefulness and cruelty revolted him. The ignorance and the fatuous conceit which lay behind her grimacing mask of slang and ridicule humiliated him so deeply that he became absolutely reckless. Her grace was only an uneasy wriggle, her audacity was the result of insolence and envy, and her wit was restless spite. (291)

Not investing enough time in getting to know Edith Beers before offering her a proposal of marriage, Ottenburg creates a miserable relationship. He demonstrates his impulsive and rash nature, uncharacteristic for men by Victorian standards, by choosing to marry

someone that he has known for only three days.

As a result of his imprudence, Ottenburg, like Doctor Archie, acquires a cruel, mean-spirited wife:

Miss Beers was the sort of girl with whom a young man liked to seem experienced. She was dark and slender and fiery. She was witty and slangy; said daring things and carried them off with nonchalance. Her childish extravagance and contempt for all the serious facts of life could be charged to her father's generosity. . . . Freaks that would have been vulgar and ostentatious in a more simple-minded girl, in Miss Beers seemed whimsical and picturesque. (288)

Miss Beers herself presents a derivation from the ideal Victorian woman, since a Victorian wife was to instill virtuous morals and character into the members of her household. Edith Beers, however, possesses few moral traits to pass along to anyone. Like Belle Archie, Beers remains too self-centered and malevolent to be considered virtuous by Victorian society. Thus, these two households present interesting ironies between the husbands and their wives. By acting rashly and without prudence, both Doctor Archie and Ottenburg contradict Victorian standards for men. As a result of their lack of pragmatism, each makes terrible choices for wives. In contrast with the men's poor judgment, both Belle Archie and Edith Beers do not measure up to the high moral standards that Victorian society placed upon wives and mothers.

Fred Ottenburg's hasty response to marriage is not the only area in which he fails. Like most men in Cather's fiction, Ottenburg lacks the ability to make sound decisions, a task that Victorian men were expected to perform. Ottenburg's financial security is not a result of his business savvy. Rather, he enjoys a prosperous lifestyle because of his family's wealth. Curious to learn more about Ottenburg after their first meeting, Thea discovers a great deal about him from her music instructor, Bowers:

[Ottenburg] sings rather well. He's at the head of the Chicago branch of the Ottenburg business, but he can't stick to work and is always running away. He has great ideas in beer, people tell me. He's what they call an imaginative business man; goes over to Bayreuth and seems to do nothing but give parties and spend money, and brings back more good notions for the brewery than the fellows who sit tight dig out in five years. (232)

Although Ottenburg possesses the imagination to develop innovative ideas for his family's brewery, he lacks the work ethic and prudence to make reliable decisions. Thus, he remains dependent upon his family's wealth to maintain his current lifestyle. Like Carl in *O Pioneers!*, Ottenburg maintains the female qualities of vision and imagination, yet fails to balance these traits with the male characteristics of rationality and sound decision making. Unlike Thea and Alexandra, Ottenburg cannot go out and find his own successes; he must only enjoy those achieved by his family.

Cather also creates a gender reversal between husband and wife in Andor Harsanyi's household. Harsanyi, Thea's piano teacher, is too passionate to worry about mundane subjects such as money and relies on his wife to deal with such matters. In traditional Victorian society, women could not be trusted to handle major financial decisions. In this household, however, these traditional roles are reversed:

The Harsanyis were poor, and it was due to Mrs. Harsanyi's good management that their lives, even in hard times, moved along with dignity and order. She had long ago found out that bills or debts of any kind frightened her husband and crippled his working power. He said they were like bars on the windows, and shut out the future; they meant that just so many hundred dollars' worth of his life was debilitated and exhausted before he got to it. So Mrs. Harsanyi saw to it that they never owed anything. Harsanyi was not extravagant, although he was

sometimes careless about money. (161-2)

According to Victorian standards, Andor should be in control of his family's financial situation. This is not the case in the Harsanyi household, however. Not only does the female handle the expenses, the man is not even aware of them. Cather goes on to make the woman successful at her endeavors. Although the family remains poor, Mrs. Harsanyi successfully manages what little money they have. Just as Alexandra in *O Pioneers!*, Mrs. Harsanyi exhibits a talent for financial matters.

Like the other male characters in *The Song of the Lark*, Harsanyi lacks the balance of masculine traits of reason and rationalization and feminine traits of intuition and imagination necessary for success; thus, his success in his profession is delayed to a later time in his life. His imbalance of these traits does differ from that of the other male characters, however. Harsanyi, focusing on the artistic nature of his talents, lacks the practicality necessary to achieve success in the world of music. While his musical ability proves to be good enough, he lacks the pragmatism to develop his career. Having moved from the small community of Moonstone to the metropolis of Chicago, Thea begins her sessions with Harsanyi, who is to mold her into a concert pianist. A very talented musician himself, Harsanyi has become ineffective in his career, trading the prospects fame of being a concert pianist to the stability of teaching the piano to young women: "Harsanyi was then a man of thirty-two. He was to have a very brilliant career, but he did not know it then. Theodore Thomas was perhaps the only man in Chicago who felt that Harsanyi might have a great future" (159). Having given up hope on his own career too early in his life, Harsanyi cannot foresee any successes in his future; thus, he lacks the balance of imagination and vision. Rather than focusing on promoting his own career, he neglects it and focuses on Thea's.

Harsanyi's inability to develop his music career has resulted in an impoverished lifestyle for himself and his family. Like many of Cather's male characters, Harsanyi is

too creative and lacks sound judgment. Although he can create a myriad of beautiful musical compositions, Harsanyi, like Professor Wunsch, is unable to manage his career successfully, lacking the objectivity to make sound financial decisions. Having accepted the present condition of his career, Harsanyi places all his energy into teaching. Fortunately for Harsanyi, however, he has a wife who is both objective and intuitive. Mrs. Harsanyi realizes the limitations that her husband places on himself: "Mrs. Harsanyi looked at her husband's fine head against the grey window. She had never felt deeper tenderness for him than she did at that moment. Her heart ached for him. 'You will never get on, Andor,' she said mournfully. Harsanyi sat motionless. 'No, I shall ever get on,' he repeated quietly" (186). Mrs. Harsanyi is a rare character who appears to have found a balance between masculinity and femininity. While she shows deep tenderness and concern for her husband, she can also manage the family's financial matters, a task that should be her husband's. This conversation between Mr. Harsanyi and his wife also reflects his incompetence at furthering his career. Although he possesses the talent to become a musical success, he does not know how to promote such a career. The man, who by traditional Victorian standards should possess business savvy and the ability to make sound decisions, does not. Instead, we see one of Harsanyi's female pupils, Thea, finding enormous fame and success in this area.

Harsanyi again fails to develop the balance of masculine and feminine characteristics through his emotions as he goes on to reveal his frustrations and disappointments at the failures of his life. Although he does possess imagination and a significant artistic ability, he nevertheless fails to incorporate the inherently male business skills into his life. Experiencing a moment in which he faces the harsh realities of his life, Harsanyi acknowledges his disappointments:

His tone was angry and injured. Mrs. Harsanyi understood that this was one of the times when his wife was a part of the drudgery, of the

"common, common world." He had let something he cared for go, and he felt bitterly about whatever was left. The mood would pass, and he would be sorry. She knew him. It wounded her, of course, but that hurt was not new. It was as old as her love for him. She went out and left him alone.

(186)

Here we see Harsanyi displaying emotions that would have been considered feminine in Victorian society. Women were thought to be prone to such bouts of melancholy and depression, while they relied on their stronger male counterparts to handle financial and social obligations. Again Cather creates a reversal. Strong and confident in her own right, Mrs. Harsanyi is never portrayed as a weak, emotional woman; rather, she remains steadfast in making provisions for her family. By contrast, her husband does not possess the traditional masculine traits that would have given him success in his music career. Cather does ultimately redeem Harsanyi, however, as she alludes to the fact that he does establish a successful music career later on in his life.

In the midst of these nontraditional marriages, one marriage meets Victorian standards in which the wife, accepting her domestic role in the home, virtuously upholds society's morals as an example to her family. The marriage between Spanish Johnny and Mrs. Tellamantez is such a marriage. Cather's inclusion of this marriage further demonstrates her contradiction to Victorian principles, since this one traditional marriage remains the one marriage that society fiercely denounces. Prone to bouts of mental illness, Spanish Johnny shows no responsibility at all for his actions. Strangely, he is liked by the citizens of Moonstone: "Nobody knew exactly what was the matter with Johnny, and everybody liked him. . . . Periodically he went crazy. There was no other way to explain his behaviour" (38). Spanish Johnny, while sometimes a faithful workman, often spends his nights in saloons, singing until dawn then stowing away in freight trains traveling to nearby cities. These episodes which Spanish Johnny enjoys

take him away from his home for days each time. With each of her husband's returns, Mrs. Tellamantez, acting as a supportive and dutiful wife, takes Spanish Johnny in and assumes care for him. Ironically, the citizens of Moonstone do not appreciate Mrs. Tellamantez's role as wife in the one household that contains a traditional marriage. Although they love Spanish Johnny, these citizens do not like Mrs. Tellamantez at all:

Public sentiment was lenient toward Johnny, but everybody was disgusted with Mrs. Tellamantez for putting up with him. She ought to discipline him, people said; she ought to leave him; she had no self-respect. In short, Mrs. Tellamantez got all the blame. Even Thea thought she was much too humble. (38)

Johnny, completely irresponsible to family duty, becomes a favorite with the community, while his wife, completing all that is expected of her, is not favored at all.

Although Mrs. Tellamantez appears as a weak woman who is willing to accept the wanderings of her husband, she is actually very wise about the situation. While most people believe that she is simply too humble to assert herself and demand a change in Spanish Johnny's behavior, they do not realize that she possesses an understanding concerning her husband that the citizens of Moonstone apparently lack. Having been summoned to the Tellamantez home after one of Spanish Johnny's episodes, Doctor Archie expresses his concern and confusion at his patient's behavior and states that he simply does not know what course of action to take. Revealing keen insight into her husband's character, Mrs. Tellamantez states:

[Spanish Johnny] is always fooled. . . . He is good at heart, but he has no head. He fools himself. You do not understand in this country, you are progressive. But he has no judgment, and he is fooled. Listen, doctor. You hear something in there? You hear the sea, and yet the sea is very far from here. You have judgment, and you know that. But he

is fooled. To him, it is the sea itself. A little thing is big to him. (41)

Acknowledging Spanish Johnny's shortcomings, Mrs. Tellamantez identifies them as being the result of too much imagination. Spanish Johnny lacks the sensibility to differentiate between fantasy and reality, which results in his erratic behavior. Like the other male characters throughout Cather's works, Spanish Johnny does not establish a balance in his life. While he does possess imagination and passion, he cannot cultivate his talents because he lacks responsibility and work ethic. Ironically, Mrs. Tellamantez, this uneducated, poor Mexican woman, is attaining careful insight and arriving at intelligent conclusions concerning her husband's condition and providing it to the doctor of the community. According to Moonstone's citizens, however, Mrs. Tellamantez is simply an ignorant, common woman who is unable to control her husband.

In addition to the reversals that appear in these marriages, Cather establishes even more gender reversals through her detailed descriptions of men and women. Professor Wunsch, a German music instructor who has spent his life traveling from town to town, teaches Thea to play the piano. Professor Wunsch, too, fails to achieve this balance, which results in his failure as a musician. As a line from the music sparks his own memories from his youth, Professor Wunsch reflects on his childhood dreams:

He was thinking of his youth; of his own, so long gone by, and of his pupil's just beginning. He would even have cherished hopes for her, except that he had become superstitious. He believed that whatever he hoped for was destined not to be; that his affection brought ill fortune, especially to the young; that if he held anything in his thoughts, he harmed it. (26)

This passage reveals Wunsch's own self-loathing. Not only has he failed to find success as a musician, he will not even allow himself to feel hope for one of his students for fear of destroying her chances at success. Professor Wunsch has spent his life struggling to

find financial stability as a musician. He has roamed from one city to another, from one failing orchestra to the next and lacks the imagination and vision that Cather has required for attaining success. Like Spanish Johnny, Professor Wunsch is unable to cope with the harsh realities of life, rendering himself useless when considering practical situations such as the handling of money.

Professor Wunsch's lack of pragmatism leads him to a life of drunkenness and despair. Having lost the respect of most adults in Moonstone, Professor Wunsch appears as a man of little value. We witness the effects of his alcoholism throughout the novel's first section. During one of Thea's lessons, Professor Wunsch appears totally ill prepared to teach music:

Wunsch came down wearing an old wadded jacket, with a velvet collar. The brown silk was so worn that the white wadding stuck out almost everywhere. He avoided Thea's eyes when he came in, nodded without speaking, and pointed directly to the piano-stool. He was not so insistent upon the scales as usual. . . and he remained languid and absent-minded. His eyes looked very heavy, and he kept wiping them. . . . When the lesson was over, he did not seem inclined to talk. (62)

This passage foreshadows the rapid demise of Professor Wunsch as he allows the alcohol to totally consume his life. His musical talents are no longer of importance, as he loses the respect of his students as well as their parents.

Similar to Alexandra in *O Pioneers!*, Thea, too, becomes the strongest character in comparison to her male counterparts. Cather sets up Thea Kronborg as a woman bound for success early in the novel. In "Friends of Childhood," the opening section of *The Song of the Lark*, we first meet Thea, a child of eleven years, who develops pneumonia during the harsh winter of Colorado. We discover that Thea is a special child ✓ as we see the extent of care that the neighboring doctor gives to her. Coming to the

house to care for Thea's mother who has just given birth, Doctor Archie notices Thea's condition in the midst of the crazed atmosphere in the house. Diverting his attention from Mrs. Kronborg and her new son, Doctor Archie soon becomes engulfed with concern for Thea. During Thea's recovery from pneumonia, Dr. Archie thoughtfully considers her talents:

What was it about the child that one believed in? Was it her dogged industry, so unusual in this free-and-easy country? Was it her imagination? More likely it was because she had both imagination and a stubborn will, curiously balancing and interpenetrating each other. There was something unconscious and unawakened about her, that tempted curiosity. (85)

Doctor Archie notices something unique about Thea, even as a little girl. Through this ✓ thoughtful representation of Thea, Cather again prepares us for a novel in which a woman will be the strongest character. Doctor Archie's consuming concern for this child implies that Thea has potential unparalleled to that of anyone else in the novel. Like Alexandra in *O Pioneers!*, Thea possesses the combination of masculine and feminine traits that ✓ Cather has deemed necessary for success, including vision, imagination, reason, and rationale. These characteristics assist Thea in making the sound decisions necessary to succeed in the business realm of the music industry, while still giving her the artistic abilities to produce beautiful music. Realizing early in her life that she must leave her home of Moonstone in order to achieve a musical career, Thea ventures to the large city of Chicago as a young woman. While in Chicago, Thea not only develops her musical talents, but develops her self-reliant nature as well.

Contrasted early in the novel with Professor Wunsch's weaknesses, Thea shines as his brightest pupil. As Thea regains her physical strength after having been infected with pneumonia, she resumes her piano lessons with Professor Wunsch and her other strengths

emerge:

[Thea] hated difficult things, and yet she could never pass one by. They seemed to challenge her; she had no peace until she had mastered them. She had the power to make a great effort, to lift a weight heavier than herself. Wunsch hoped he would always remember her as she stood by the track, looking up at him; her broad eager face, so fair in colour, with its high cheek-bones, its yellow eyebrows and greenish-hazel eyes. (85)

By characterizing Thea in this manner, Cather again prepares the reader for a novel in which the female will succeed. Attributes such as dogged industry and stubborn will contrast greatly with the characterizations of male characters who cannot find success in the male-dominated society in which they live. This early description of Thea, coupled by an early encounter with Doctor Archie, emphasizes her strengths, while the portrait of Doctor Archie reveals his weaknesses:

Big and handsome and superior to his fellow townsmen as Doctor Archie was, he was seldom at his ease, and like Peter Kronborg he often dodged behind a professional manner. There was sometimes a contraction of embarrassment and self-consciousness all over his big body, which made him awkward--likely to stumble, to kick up rugs, or to knock over chairs. (12)

Although Doctor Archie appears to be the most admirable male figure that the town of Moonstone has to offer, he nonetheless falls short when compared to Thea. Cather's diction in this passage introduces the gender issues that we will encounter throughout *The Song of the Lark*. According to traditional Victorian standards, the man should possess Thea's dogged determination and stubborn will, qualities which, according to Victorian standards, would promote his successes in society (Millet 129). Unfortunately for Doctor Archie and the other men in Moonstone, Cather characterizes the man as being

self-conscious and embarrassed. Just as she does with Alexandra and Carl in *O Pioneers!*, Cather structures the two descriptions of Thea and Doctor Archie in the opening section of the novel to establish the numerous gender reversals which will appear.

Similar to Alexandra, who "shines brightly against her brothers" (Gerber 77), so too does Thea when compared to the men with whom she comes into contact. By juxtaposing the heroines of these works with the weaker male characters, Cather sets up a vivid contradiction of Victorian stereotypes and thus presents numerous gender reversals. These contrasting descriptions of male and female emphasize the strengths of the female character, a characterization that had previously been denied by Victorian society. *The Song of the Lark* significantly differs with *O Pioneers!*, however, in their portrayals of both Alexandra and Thea. For example, in *O Pioneers!*, Cather essentially skips sixteen years of Alexandra's life, these years epitomizing the toils and struggles she overcomes during the birth of the land. In *The Song of the Lark*, however, Cather allows her readers to experience the hardships that Thea must endure in order to reach her goals. We see the internal conflict that arises within Thea as she discovers that her talents lie not in her ability as a pianist, but rather in her voice. It is through this rational thought that Thea realizes her capabilities as well as her shortcomings and enters a new arena where fame will more readily await her. Thea's combination of masculine and feminine qualities support her in finding musical stardom. By witnessing Thea's psychological growth as well as her growth as a singer, we appreciate her achievements, relishing her successes perhaps even more so than those of Alexandra.

One critical experience that we share with Thea occurs at her time of self-doubt and self-reproach concerning her musical career. Thea's time at Panther Canon symbolizes her transition from small-town girl to world-renowned opera sensation as she embarks on a journey of self-examination and a renewal of her soul. While there, she

makes some important self-discoveries as her emotions sink to great depths while she recounts her failures. This important balance of gender qualities assists her in her rationalization of her career as she comes to realize that she has few opportunities as a pianist, while she may have many as a singer. If she did not possess such a combination of masculine and feminine traits, Thea would not have been able to make such a decision because she would have lacked two opposing perspectives. By achieving such a balance of imagination and rationality within the character of Thea, Cather enables her to study situations from a variety of viewpoints. Thea's journey self-realization at Panther Canon is a time when she reflects upon her own life rationally, while still having the vision needed to imagine herself in another career. While at Panther Canon, Thea considers her life and its significance:

So far she had failed. Her two years in Chicago had not resulted in anything. She had failed with Harsanyi, and she made no great progress with her voice. She had come to believe that whatever Bowers had taught her was of secondary importance, and that in the essential things she had made no advance. Her student life closed behind her, like the forest, and she doubted whether she could go back to it if she tried. (256)

Here Thea struggles with the failures she has experienced while a student in Chicago and wonders if she has enough talent to pursue her career. By demonstrating Thea in such a state of ambiguity, Cather creates a much more realistic character than she does in Alexandra, who never possesses such a moment of epiphany. Thea does not succumb to such self-doubt, however, and she soon concludes that she must proceed with her career in Germany: "It was while she was in this abstracted state, waiting for the clock to strike, that Thea at last made up her mind what she was going to try to do in the world, and that she was going to Germany to study without further loss of time" (265-6). Just as Thea's self-image plummets to its lowest point, the therapeutic nature of Panther Canon emerges

and cleanses Thea's mind, thus enabling her to make a commitment that will change her entire life. Through the realization of her limitations, Thea acknowledges the fact that she cannot succeed as a pianist and sets her goals on becoming an accomplished singer.

Although Thea does make a huge success for herself through her musical career, she also suffers defeat in some aspects of her life as well. Just as in *O Pioneers!*, it is through these failures that Cather again creates gender reversals. Both Thea and Alexandra, while achieving success in a male-dominated world, nevertheless lack certain characteristics traditionally considered to be feminine. It is through these gender reversals that Cather creates realistic individuals rather than the stereotypical views common to the Victorian Era. Like Alexandra, who does not even notice the mounting love between her brother and her best friend, Thea too fails to acknowledge certain situations. Ironically, Thea possesses a healthy combination of gender qualities to ensure her of musical success; however, she does not incorporate such thinking into her personal relationships, and she becomes isolated because of it. We learn that "the faculty of observation was never highly developed in Thea Kronborg. A great deal escaped her eye as she passed through the world" (260). Thea commits herself to her music, while relinquishing the possibility of love and friendship. Having devoted her life to furthering her career, Thea finds herself alone in her middle years. Spending her adult years traveling from city to city, Thea has created an isolated life, detached from family and friends of Moonstone. Thea realizes the emptiness of her life early in her career and expresses her loneliness to Mrs. Harsanyi:

Thea was sitting with her chin lowered. Without moving her head she looked up at Mrs. Harsanyi and smiled; a smile much too cold and desperate to be seen on a young face, Mrs. Harsanyi felt. "Mrs. Harsanyi, it seems to me that what I learn is just to dislike. I dislike so much and so hard that it tires me out. I've got no heart for anything." (224)

Through this passage we learn that Thea too has experienced failure in her life. Not only do the men fail to achieve the balance between masculine and feminine traits, but Thea fails to achieve this balance as well. Like Alexandra, Thea has relinquished a great part of herself to accomplish so much in her life. Devoting themselves entirely to their work, they both deprive themselves of relationships, thus inhibiting their emotional growth.

Having devoted her entire life to pursuing fame in the world of music, Thea suddenly discovers herself alone. To compensate for this solitude and the lack of love in her life, Thea weds Fred Ottenburg as her last attempt of achieving happiness. Thea's marriage, however, is little more than companionship. Like Alexandra, Thea commits too big a part of her life to obtaining success and has little left for relationships. Again reacting against the Victorian tradition of marriage, Cather creates a nontraditional marriage for Thea. Through this example, Cather shows us the consequence of such a marriage and declares it a mistake. As a result of her tremendous efforts at furthering her music career, Thea becomes incompetent at relationships. Cather, realizing that this marriage between Thea and Fred Ottenburg is an enormous mistake, includes it to illustrate the destruction of conforming to society's expectations. Since Victorian society expected women to marry, Cather obliges by depicting such a union. We soon learn, however, that neither Thea nor Alexandra is meant for marriage, and we realize that Victorian expectations were not in the best interests of everyone. Cather herself held similar views of marriage. Significantly changing the ending of *The Song of the Lark* from the earlier edition, Cather herself implies that marriage is most likely a mistake for Thea as she de-emphasizes the union in later editions. In *Willa Cather and the Art of Conflict*, Patrick Shaw notes the revisions. According to Shaw, in the first edition of *The Song of the Lark*, Cather's reference to Thea's marriage to Ottenburg is quite clear ". . . Denver papers announced that Thea Kronborg had married Frederick Ottenburg, the head of the Brewers' Trust" (41). In Cather's 1937 revision, however, she replaces this direct

statement with a more ambiguous reference: "When Thea dined in her own room, her husband went down to dinner with Tillie . . ." (41). This marriage contradicts reason as it appears completely out of character for Thea to marry Fred. According to Shaw, Cather too believed the marriage to be an implausible event:

. . . in the 1937 revisions, Cather seemed to want the marriage annulled. She had no doubt sensed that such union was a contradiction - even a betrayal - of Thea's and her own artistic/feminine selves as well as a serious compromise of narrative integrity. (41)

By creating such a marriage for Thea, Cather allows society to tighten the grip it possesses upon women. Neither Thea nor Alexandra, two well-respected individuals who contradict society's expectations for women, enjoys the fruits of their efforts. Thus, they must settle for marriages of convenience in which they are not required to feel such intense emotions. Such marriages could never conform to Victorian standards that Cather consistently contradicts because Thea could never devote herself to such duties as was expected of wives.

Just as she does in *O Pioneers!*, Cather provides numerous gender reversals throughout *The Song of the Lark*. By creating marriages that do not meet Victorian standards, Cather reveals many variances between her own reality and the Victorian ideal. Emerging from the Victorian era and producing literature as a modern writer, Cather denounces Victorian ideals such as female subordination and incompetence as she produces female characters who refuse to submit to their husbands and who appear entirely competent to handle life's situations. By granting Thea the opportunity to enjoy her childhood in such a nontraditional home, Cather provides her with the necessary qualities for achievement, just as she herself gained from her childhood. Showing strength and intelligence throughout the novel, Mrs. Kronborg equips her daughter with

skills that will ensure her success far away from Moonstone. Like Alexandra and Cather herself, however, Thea must sacrifice for such success through solitude.

Conclusion

Reacting against Victorian ideals that influenced her childhood, Cather creates numerous gender reversals throughout her fiction. After reading these works and noting the gender ironies contained within them, one may conclude that Cather was herself a liberal, demanding that society's status quo be eliminated. While America's political climate did affect Cather's work, her political ideologies remain difficult to interpret when contrasted with her fiction. In *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire*, Guy Reynolds concludes that Cather's involvement with progressivism played a great part in her fiction. Through this movement, Cather saw the need to uplift certain facets of society, particularly women and immigrants. Coming out of the late Victorian Era in which men controlled women as well as the world in general, Cather creates societies throughout her fiction in which women enjoy the same opportunities as their male counterparts. Although the women's successes do not come easily, they do come nonetheless. Alexandra and Thea must endure significant obstacles and struggle to overcome them. In their quest for success, they do sacrifice certain parts of themselves. Throughout *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, both Alexandra and Thea contradict Victorian tradition as they pursue and attain their goals. Alexandra, much to the dismay of her brothers and male neighbors, succeeds in cultivating the wild prairie of Nebraska into productive farmland. Her achievements in the male-dominated area of farming contradict social expectations. Likewise, Thea too achieves fame and fortune as well. Although the musical world remained an area in which Victorian women could succeed, very few women actually did so, and Thea herself meets several of these down trodden women.

Cather's need to raise the status of women in society resulted in the numerous

gender reversals she creates throughout her fiction. Using the five techniques outlined in the previous chapters, Cather, writing on the threshold of the Modern Age, reacts against the strict Victorian code governing women. In both *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, Cather creates women who rebel against social expectation and strive to achieve greatness. Through their pursuits of such accomplishments, however, both Alexandra and Thea relinquish an important part of themselves and become unable to express their emotions. Like Cather herself, they devote too much of themselves to their endeavors and fail to establish meaningful relationships with others. Ironically, Cather deprives her heroines of the skills necessary to develop such relationships. These skills, traditionally regarded as feminine in nature, are void in both Alexandra and Thea. Neither woman possesses the ability to express her emotions and thus alienates herself from society. While Alexandra and Thea fail to maintain satisfying relationships because of their lack of self-expression, some men in Cather's fiction do possess such qualities. Men such as Ivar in *O Pioneers!* and Harsanyi in *The Song of the Lark* do maintain a sensitive, feminine side to their personalities while Alexandra and Thea do not.

After having studied a number of Cather's works in relationship to one another, we recognize marriage as being very problematic for Cather. Rarely does she incorporate into these works a marriage that could be considered happy and successful; instead, she creates marriages in which the partners show no real passion or sexual attraction for one another. One explanation for the absence of such marriages in her works involves the position of women within the social contract of marriage. In *Willa Cather: Double Lives*, Hermoine Lee acknowledges the fact that Cather strove to allow women more freedom and opportunities through her fiction and stresses the importance of her childhood:

Above all, her childhood gave her a sense of possibilities for women. As she was witness to the negotiation, for all her mothers', between

fulfilling conventional female roles and assertion 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. (29)

Seeing women's position in society as being solely subordinate to men, Cather establishes an entirely different social structure in her works, one in which women enjoy more freedoms. Cather expressed her intolerance of the old social structure in which women took a sedentary position during an interview with the *Nebraska State Journal*, December 27, 1897 edition. In it, she attempts to justify the role of women throughout her works:

O yes; of course it's unwomanly to do anything well, and it's shockingly unwomanly to be great. But it would be a dull old world if a few women were not unwomanly to that degree. And while these strong women, these Brunhildes, go out and fight with fate, and with art that is so much more relentless than fate, their amiable sisters sit back behind a fortification of cradles and tea-towels and carp at them ! (Lee 29)

Here Cather shows her disdain and impatience for women who appear satisfied with the traditional social order. As a result, Cather creates societies within her works in which women are free to assume the positions as the Brunhildes mentioned above. Within these societies, contented marriages are not feasible for Cather's heroines. Having devoted her life to her passion of writing, Cather repeatedly declared that artists should not marry. In *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art*, James Woodress acknowledges Cather's disdain for the institution of marriage and concludes that she simply did not have enough time to devote to such a relationship: "It seems perfectly clear that she simply had no need for heterosexual relationships; she was married to her art. . . her literary offspring served adequately as surrogates for children of her own" (86). Cather bestows such a rationale

upon her heroines, as they place all their energies into their work.

Because of her need to elevate women's position in society, Cather incorporates such Brunhilde figures throughout her fiction. *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* are not the only two novels in which Cather presents larger than life heroines who overcome insurmountable odds in order to achieve success. For example, in *My Antonia*, Antonia Shimerda succeeds in one area of her life in which no other of Cather's women does. Antonia's triumphant success in life involves her happy marriage and family life. The fact that Cather chooses this domestic realm for Antonia's success is ironic when considering Cather's other works. However, the marriage of Antonia does not place her at the sedentary station in life for which Cather shows such intolerance. Instead, Antonia remains as the heroine of her own family. Even though she may not attain great fortune or fame, she nevertheless achieves such a status in the eyes of her family as well as in the eyes of Jim Bergson.

O Pioneers! and *The Song of the Lark* are not the only two novels in which Cather presents gender reversals. One manner in which she incorporates them is through the depiction of non-traditional marriages. According to historians, Victorian marriages proved to be stifling acts of submission for women; acts in which the husband enjoyed many freedoms while the wife upheld many moral principals and duties. This is not the case in Cather's fiction, however, as she rarely creates marriages which would be considered traditional according to Victorian standards. One work in which she creates such a marriage is *A Lost Lady*, in which Marian Forrester fails to uphold the family's moral principles by engaging in a sexual affair with Ivy Peters, a man well below her in social status. Having married a man well beyond her in years, Marian Forrester grows accustomed to being doted upon and treated extravagantly by her husband. Marian's dependence upon her husband is the one aspect of their marriage that upholds traditional standards. When Captain Forrester is no longer around to care for his wife, however,

Marian begins to decline and seeks solace in the figure of Ivy Peters. Such an act completely discredits her as a virtuous woman, the ideal of the Victorian Era.

Another work in which Cather depicts an untraditional marriage is *One of Ours*. The male protagonist, Claude Wheeler, finds himself in a loveless marriage to Enid Royce, a woman totally devoted to the Christian ministry. Viewing marriage as one responsibility of Christianity, Enid marries Claude although she has no intentions of establishing a traditional home with him. Like many wives in Cather's works, Enid is away from home more than she is in it and permanently leaves it when faced with an Asian missions opportunity. Remaining in Asia, Enid fails to maintain a comfortable household, a duty expected of Victorian wives. Similar to the indifference between Claude and Enid, Clement Sebastian shares such a feeling with his wife in *Lucy Gayheart*. Looking upon his life as empty, Sebastian, a musician nearing the age of fifty, strives desperately to regain hold of his youth. By developing a relationship with the novel's young protagonist, Lucy Gayheart, Sebastian attempts to add meaning to his shallow life. Like so many other marriages in Cather's works, Sebastian's is one of coldness and solitude. An acclaimed singer, Sebastian spends most of his time traveling abroad. Rather than join her husband on his journeys, however, Mrs. Sebastian remains at her home in England, and the distance between husband and wife increases with each passing musical tour. Having spent so much time apart from one another, Sebastian and his wife allow a gulf to develop in their marriage and are left with little more than tolerance for one another.

Marriage is not the only area in which Cather contradicts Victorian ideals. Throughout her works, Cather creates male characters who fail to achieve the balance between feminine and masculine traits and thus fail to find success. Cather's men fall into two categories in this respect. Characters such as Lou and Oscar Bergson, for example, lack the feminine traits of intuition and vision, whereas artistic men such as

Carl Linstrum and Andor Harsanyi possess an adequate amount of imagination and vision but lack in the male areas of rationality and sound-mindedness. In addition to *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, several other Cather works contain similar male characters who fail to achieve a balance between masculinity and femininity and thus never find success in their male-dominated worlds. *One of Ours* is one such novel. In it, Claude Wheeler, the novel's protagonist, never rises above mediocrity in both his personal and professional life. Instead, he remains an idealist who searches for a noble cause for which to fight. Finally, enlisting in World War I, Claude finds that noble cause but still fails to achieve glory even in his death. To the opposite extreme of Claude, Lou, and Oscar appear the artistic type characters, Carl, Andor, and Clement Sebastian, three men who also fail to find success in all aspects of their lives. Although these male characters do incorporate feminine traits into their personas, they fail to balance those traits out with sound thinking. For example, in *Lucy Gayheart*, Clement Sebastian does achieve success in his musical career; however, because of his poor decision-making, he, like many of Cather's male characters, finds himself in a miserable marriage. Through the numerous examples of men who fail to achieve financial success and personal happiness, Cather demonstrates gender reversals. Although historical studies may lead us to expect a man to behave in one manner, Cather eradicates such stereotypes throughout her fiction, as she often creates men who do not act in the traditional manner.

Both *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* present intriguing views of men and women. By studying the men and women side by side in these two works, we recognize the fact that Cather presents us with numerous gender reversals in which she contradicts society's expectations. Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronborg, while not achieving perfection in any manner, nevertheless rise above their male counterparts' mediocrity and enjoy success in male-dominated worlds. Their accomplishments do not come without a heavy price, however, as each woman remains inept at achieving satisfactory

relationships. Through their pursuance of high goals and feats, they lose a part of themselves in the process. Throughout much of her fiction, Cather, attempting to raise the social status of certain facets of society, dispels many myths concerning gender. By establishing a new criterion for success that must now include a balance between male and female characteristics, Cather asserts the importance of women and their contributions to society. Those male characters who never achieve that balance and thus lack imagination, vision, and intuition, fail to find success in their lives. On the other hand, those artistic men who fail to access their ability to reason and rationalize also fail to find success. It is through these failures that Cather emphasizes the need for such a balance. Although Alexandra and Thea do find such a balance and achieve greatness in their careers, they lose a part of themselves in the process, and thus become unable to express and even recognize certain emotions. Through these failures and achievements, Cather emphasizes the importance of achieving such a balance.

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