

O PIONEERS! : A CANVAS ON WHICH THE PORTRAIT OF CATHER'S UNCONSCIOUS SELF IS DRAWN

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Abstract:

Willa Sibert Cather, one of the most eminent writers of American literature expresses through her fictions the dialectic between one's conscious socio-cultural identity and his or her unconscious self: a self that remains unexpressed due to the suppression of social norms. Cather herself always remained outside the prescribed stereotypes assigned to women. She portrays her characters through her own hidden sensibility and make them the messenger of what she cannot publicly articulate.

*I have based my thesis on one of Willa Cather's frontier novels *O Pioneers!* and investigated the portrait of Alexandra in the light of Cather's own life to bring into focus the dilemma of Cather's own self to remain within the social structure by abiding by the assigned gender role suppressing her unconscious desire with the help of the book *Cather, Canon and the Politics of Reading* by Deborah Carlin and the famous critic Sharon O'Brien. While dealing with *O Pioneers!* I have found similarities between Alexandra's attitude towards life, her own sexual orientation with that of Willa Cather. Willa Cather who is regarded a lesbian¹ writer in late twentieth century expresses her latent desires and identity crisis at the advent of the new pseudo sciences. Persons like Cather who felt and desired outside convention, encountered social criticism. Cather as a public figure could not articulate her homosexual orientation due to the social stigma associated with female friendship. Therefore she conditions her heroine Alexandra in such a way that she [Alexandra] becomes an embodiment of Cather's unarticulated passions and emotional intensity. Thus through *O Pioneers!* Cather also takes up a critical stance against Victorian bourgeois ethics that snatches individual autonomy to maintain the power equation proper. Therefore, my reading and analysis of *O Pioneers!* will also include a socio-cultural criticism of nineteenth century ritual of heteronormativity² along with the biographical elements we find in the novel.*

Key Words: *Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, heteronormativity, homosexuality, female-friendship, identity crisis.*

Introduction:

Willa Cather in her novel *O Pioneers!* quite subtly critiques the naturalization of one's society given identity. Society tells us what we are - a woman or a man. Before we come to understand what manhood and womanhood imply, we are given a tag and handed over some pre-decided conventions which we are bound to go by. As Judith Butler rightly points out in her famous book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* that "...gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself". We learn and then we imitate others.

Willa Cather very consciously tried to remain outside the tradition of 'femininity'. She never acted or behaved typically like a culturally constructed woman. She always dressed like a man and often signed As 'William Cather Jr.'. Her adult relationship with Louise Pound³, Isabella McClung⁴ and Edith Lewis⁵ have led many readers to consider her as a 'lesbian' writer. Sharon O'Brien in 1984's essay "The Thing not named': Willa Cather a Lesbian Writer" directly comes to the conclusion that Cather is a lesbian writer through a biographical sketch of Cather. But there are no such evidences to prove or directly term her a

lesbian. A lesbian relationship includes erotic feeling but Cather never expressed any erotic desire for any of her friends. In my point of view Cather's work and her sexual preference should be seen not in the light of her unstated homosexual feeling but rather it should be seen as a result of her confusion created by the stigmatized and critical outlook of society upon homosexual relationships. The naturalized heterosexuality plagued Cather and her time. Through her early letters to Louise Pound during her college life she expresses her malady to conform to the heterosexual ideology but she also expresses that the prohibition of her natural desire is a social injustice.

In *O Pioneers!* Cather presents various normative aspects related to the standardized notions of gender, heteronormativity and the myth of identity. Cather employs and constructs her heroine Alexandra Bergson in such a way that she one by one subverts and questions the validity of those notions. While exploring the whole trajectory of the novel, fissures and fractures are found in the traditional image of 'femininity' and in the belief that heterosexuality is the bed-rock of ordered society.

I have tried to approach the text with the social context of Cather's time that smothered the intrinsic desires of individuals with a close psychological analysis of gender construct and the effect of the pseudo-scientific discourses. I have tried to make my dissertation on the basis of the above points to find out the causes behind Willa Cather's dilemma to articulate herself properly. A critical reading and analysis of the problematic circumstances of the novel and paralleling them with Cather's own biographical nuances enabled me to find out the answers of my questions.

Socio-cultural and Scientific Discourses Shaping Cather's Artistic Impulse:

"We demand that sex speaks the truth...and we demand that it tells us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness"

--Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction*

Often the actual sexual orientation of a person is this 'buried truth' that is over-shadowed behind the 'truth' we culturally and socially possess. Even sex that is biologically destined cannot always bring into focus one's own sexual inclination. Culture and society provide each individual a gender role by assigning certain stereotypical attributes to him or her. A man is made virile and a woman is conditioned to be docile. Simone de Beauvoir suggests in *The Second Sex*⁶ that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one"⁷. The sense of identity is also constructed by the pre-dominant notions and protocols assigned to certain gender. Gender cannot be seen as entirely culturally, socially or politically constructed, all these paraphernalia that make one's sense of identity effects psychologically also. The traits of masculinity and femininity are internalized by individuals and they behave and think accordingly. Each person's sense of gender is a melding of personally and emotionally gathered experiences and cultural meaning.

In the formation of one's gendered identity the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan in his theory "the mirror stage"⁸ becomes relevant. Lacan denotes three stages in the development of "I"-that is one's sense of self. In the infancy a child's self-perception is chaotic and opaque. But it acquires a notion of its bodily integrity when it perceives its reflection in the mirror. It gains a sense of its bodily contours and understands its physical difference from others. Its image discloses a "libidinal dynamism"⁹. This transition can also be seen as a shift from the 'semiotic to the symbolic'¹⁰ stage. Through this shift the construction of gender takes place. Along with the regimentation of gendered identity, heteronormativity was rendered normal, natural and therefore compulsory. Heteronormativity demands that people fall into distinct category with particular and complementary gender roles. With the coming of bourgeoisie¹¹, heteronormativity became a tool to perpetuate patriarchal values and protocols to maintain the power equation proper and a subsequent suppression of natural sexual instinct. Foucault's "repressive hypothesis"¹² deals with the idea that history of sexuality has been the history of repression, limitation and regulation. But repression also gives way to resistance. As Foucault's writes in his *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*: "Resistance do not derive from a few heterogenous principles; but neither are they a lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed. They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the

latter as an irreducible opposite”.

Such repression and counter resistance created trauma and identity crisis in them who felt inclination towards same sex. While dealing with Willa Cather and especially with *O Pioneers!*, the dilemma of choosing and understanding her natural sexual preference becomes evident. Cather's contemporary milieu which was strictly heterosexual was obsessed with 'unnatural' and 'inverted' sexuality. Cather's novel addresses the issue of the “New scientific Discourse”¹³ propagated by popular theorists like Richard Von Kraft- Ebing and Havelock Ellis. In the early Victorian era the passionate and emotionally intense relationship between women was generally accepted in American culture. The romantic relationship was “both socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage”¹⁴ But what was earlier 'legitimized' came under the scanner and was termed 'morbid' and 'unnatural' in the later decades. Homosexual relationships were seen as alternatives to heterosexual marriage and the college going New Women¹⁵ were seen as potent threats to the patriarchal, hierarchical paradigm.

Havelock Ellis in his book *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion* terms homosexuality as “congenital inversion”¹⁶-an inverted sexuality by birth. In France the famous book *Archives de Neurologie*¹⁷ defined sexual inversion “as an episode in a more fundamental process of hereditary degeneration, and compared it with such morbid obsessions as dipsomania and kleptomania.” The most renowned figure in this context, Kraft Ebing, in his *Psychopathia Sexualis*¹⁸ devises four stages of congenital form:

Psychosexual hermaphroditism, in which, while the homosexual instinct predominates, there are traces of the normal heterosexual instinct. **Homosexuality**, in which the instinct goes out only towards the same sex. **Effeminate and virginity**, in which the whole psychic disposition corresponds to the abnormal instinct. **Androgynia and gynandria**, in which the general bodily form corresponds in some degree to the abnormal sexual instinct and psychic disposition.¹⁹

In a close and meticulous observation of Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*, the protagonist Alexandra Bergson seems to fit in the first category-Psychosexual hermaphroditism. But here a question arises. Is Alexandra biologically so? A close analysis of the events of the novel and Alexandra's attitude and feeling towards Carl Linstrum brings into focus the fact that there is no trace of heterosexuality in Alexandra's approach to Carl. Yes, at many junctures of her life she expresses her desire to be with Carl, but it seems a kind of compromise, a kind of conformity to the set pattern due to the imposition of her conscious identity. The novel represents a “dialectic between life and art”²⁰. Through her novel Cather poses a challenge to the medical and cultural stigma about female sexuality. Cather's creation of a sexually unorthodox heroine and her indirect critique of the conventional heterosexual relation creates a controversy with the accepted notions of “inverted sexuality” Judith Butler rightly notices and understands Cather's intension as she states that “the love that dare not speak its name becomes for Cather a love that proliferates names at the site of that non-speaking; establishing a possibility for fiction as this displacement, reiterating that prohibition for the possibilities of its repetition and subversion”²¹

Sharon O'Brien in her essay “‘The Thing Not Named’: Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer” writes that “the lesbian writers need to conceal the socially unacceptable”. Cather very smartly and consciously devises Alexandra by dwarfing her identity as a woman and presents her quite 'manly' to convey the intensity of her real passion. Such complicated characterization devoid of direct assertion substantiates Cather's internalization of social stigma and fear that leaves a profound impact on her artistic impulse and consequently shape the content and message of the novel. Critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick rightly points out that “what becomes visible in this double refraction are the shadows of the brutal suppressions by which a lesbian love did not in Willa Cather's time and culture freely become visible as itself”²²

'The Thing Not Named': Is Cather's Masculinity an Evidence of her Homosexuality? :

“Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named therethat, one might say, is created. It is

the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as topoetry”

--Willa Cather, “The Novel Demeuble”

Sharon O'Brien took her cue from this statement of Cather and came to the conclusion that Cather is a lesbian writer. Traces of homosexuality is found here and there implicitly but they are not evidences potent enough to directly term her a 'lesbian'. Deborah Lambert's observation here is apt that Cather “could not, or did not, acknowledge her homosexuality”²³. There is lack of evidences except her letters to Louise Pound. Louise Pound was emblematic of the nineteenth century concept of the New Woman, when women stepped out of the private sphere and took part in so called manly sphere of educational institutes, sports and leadership. This new aspect of womanhood paved the way for women's emancipation. Louise Pound, a professor of English encouraged other women to free themselves from the shackles of domesticity. Willa Cather, when arrived Lincoln with the name “William Cather Jr.” and with short hair and boyish dress up, she was looked upon as a “semi-woman” whose behavior and physical appearance “violated normal gender categories”²⁴ Kraft-Ebing in his *Psychopathia Sexualis*(1886) devised a new category called “mannish-lesbian”, as Smith-Rosenberg observes “women's rejection of traditional gender roles and their demands for social and economic equality”²⁵ Cather's rejection of the womanly appearance can be seen as her rejection of the stereotypes assigned to a woman. She is unconsciously blurring the dichotomy between man and woman in terms of their external look. On the other hand Cather's female interest Louise Pound never rejected the 'femininity' attached to women by society. The disparity between their approach to life and their agreement and disagreement with the social norms cast a shadow of doubt upon their alleged lesbian intimacy. According to O' Brien, in one of Cather's letters to Louise Pound she stated that “it is so unfair that female friendship should be unnatural”. O'Brien looks into their intimacy and recognizes the nature of their relationship as a “special category not sanctioned by the dominant culture”. But is Cather's statement strong enough to conclude that she is a lesbian? It may not be chiefly an expression of her homosexuality, rather an expression that makes the readers understand the latent insecurity, anxiety and paranoia of a female friendship at the advent of The “New Scientific Discourse”. The statement reveals the extent to which Cather has conditioned to internalize the gender role she is given by the society. She feels differently from the compulsory heterosexual ties but she swings in between her conscious and unconscious identity.

Cather's mental tug of war becomes explicit in her portrait of Alexandra, a character who embodies hermaphroditic nature. Alexandra embodies certain traits of the New Woman of late nineteenth century. She is single, economically independent. She is competent enough to do “exactly as she pleases with her land” (27). She achieves a pioneering career with the least contribution of her brothers. Her practical life is also a reason for her indifference to 'feminine' traits. Alexandra is well aware of the fact that she is not like any conventional woman and never deliberately tries to do so: “maybe I would never have been very soft, anyhow; but I certainly did not choose to be the kind of girl I was” (68)..This becomes clear as Cather describes her as a “tall, strong girl...she walked rapidly and resolutely, as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next. She wore a man's long ulster (not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her; carried it like a young soldier), 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”(2).Cather's heroine can be established as an Amazonian²⁶ woman, but according to tradition the Amazonian woman is thought to be a threat to the status quo of society, but Cather's pioneering Alexandra is portrayed as a harbinger of order and coherence. The natural world, the newly acquired land which men are unable to cultivate, becomes productive and burgeoning in Alexandra's hand. Thus Cather poses a challenge to the accepted notion of 'morbidity' and 'sickness' of sexually inverted women.

As opposed to Alexandra's firmness and patience, Carl and Emil are 'effeminate' in their indefinite mind and infirmity of character. Carl is described as 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." Where Alexandra is one who exactly knows what to do with the land, Carl thinks the land is beyond human control. This contrast of characters can be variously interpreted. Firstly it manifests Cather's preference for virility within woman rather than submissiveness. Such contrast also caters to subvert the accepted patriarchal set up where women are associated only with domestic chores. Secondly, it is perhaps Cather's strategy to establish that deviant sexuality is somewhere more potent both physically and psychologically than a heterosexual man. Lou and Oscar, the patriarchal male figures seems dwarfed by the heroic stature of Alexandra, as her "directness of manner often makes man wince". Cather juxtaposes Alexandra with a typical conventional female figure Marie, embodying shyness, coyness "for she was not a woman who could live without loving"(87). From the very first chapter a clear distinction between these two female figures is visible. Alexandra in the medical shop retorts non-verbally to the flattering comment of a man: "My God, girl, what a head of hair!" he exclaimed, quite innocently and foolishly. She stabbed him with a glance of Amazonian fierceness and drew in her lower lip most unnecessary severity."(3) this gesture at once establishes Alexandra's choice to remain radically outside the conventional heterosexual rituals. Simultaneously, Marie is introduced as a young and attractive girl surrounded by her male admirers and she is drawing delight from their attention. She represents herself as an object of male desire. Marie is nurtured chiefly on traditional feminine values. She is socialized to behave in such way. This playfully juxtaposed picture of the two girls becomes a central motif of the novel later on. This difference of approach between Alexandra and Marie reflects Cather's own difference from other woman of her contemporary time. It is also responsible for the inner turmoil of Cather who feels outside norms. Cather as a public figure could not articulate her real desires and passions. Therefore Alexandra emerges as an quintessence of Cather's unconscious identity that remains opaque behind her cultural identity.

Blossoming and Burgeoning Homosexual Bond as Opposed to Diseased and Death-stricken Heterosexuality:

"In more complex works like *O Pioneers!* the relationship between heterosexual cover story, lesbian subtext becomes more complicated. In the lover's subplot, for instance, it is possible that Cather was writing two stories simultaneously---a heterosexual and a homosexual story---just as she projected herself into both male and female characters. The heterosexual cover story is not then invariably the false one, the lesbian subtext the real; rather authorial intention and meaning may oscillate between the two and thus be indeterminate"

--Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*

Beneath the heterosexual love-story, runs an undercurrent of homosexual emotion. While the relationship of Emil and Marie has an erotic and sensuous touch, Alexandra and Marie shares an chiefly emotional and interdependent bond. Their relationship can be interpreted with the help of Adrienne Rich's "lesbian continuum"²⁷ that "includes a range-through each woman's life and throughout history-of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital experience with another woman". Alexandra remains energetic, vibrant in the presence of Marie. Alexandra shares everything with Carl but never becomes comfortable as Carl once states: "Alexandra; I find it easy to be frank with you about everything under the sun except-yourself"(51). Carl moves in and out in Alexandra's life but Marie remains static in the matrix of Alexandra's daily existence. Marie's beauty attracts Alexandra just like Willa Cather admired Louise Pound in a party: "how beautiful she looked in her new gown"²⁸. Here and there some unconscious sexuality is also visible in their behaviour. Marie gives "Alexandra's arm a little squeeze as she walked beside her. "how nice your dress smells, Alexandra; you put rosemary leaves in your chest, like I told you""(52)

The happy realm of their love begins to complicate itself while heterosexual relationships begin to impinge upon their lives. Alexandra and Marie's relationship with Carl and Emil respectively creates a distance between the two 'sweethearts'. While they both share everything with them, Alexandra and Marie becomes uncomfortable discussing their heterosexual ties with Carl and Emil. Alexandra feels that in such things she and Marie would not understand one another. Marie also feels the same and "always wonders whether she [Alexandra] wasn't a little in love with him [Carl]"(59). When Marie tries to share the unhappiness of her relationship with Frank, Alexandra quickly changes the topic. When it comes to Alexandra's bond with Carl, Marie no longer remains the "real companion" to which she can talk candidly. They both are inflicted with a sense of guilt for neglecting each other by giving priority to their heterosexual associations. They started to drift away from each other; after Emil imprinted a kiss on Marie's cheek, Marie is completely distanced from Alexandra. When Alexandra places her "hand on Marie's arm and felt her shiver. Marie stiffened under that kind, calm hand. Alexandra drew back, perplexed and hurt" (89). Before "they made a pretty picture in the strong sun light" (52) but now the picture is torn apart. Marie with her relationships with Frank Shabata and Emil has come to terms with the symbolic order of society but Alexandra is still to come. Their mental separation highlights the social compulsion that creates a psychological barrier between two soul-mates as they both are females, not a male and a female according to the norms. Cather was well aware of the situation of women like her; at times she begins to critique compulsory patriarchal set up but quickly restrains herself by her silent submission to the accepted conventions of her day. It establishes O'Brien's contention that Cather never fully "freed herself from male constructs of femininity". The novel presents a panoramic view of Cather's shuttling between her 'real' and constructed self.

In spite of the repression of the homosexual passion, the heterosexual cover story also remains completely unfruitful and ungratifying throughout the novel. Cather associates the love of Emil and Marie with sickness, destruction and ultimately death. The purity of their childhood love takes up an erotic form in their adolescence. As an opposition to the notion of homosexuality as morbid and hereditary degeneration Cather presents heterosexuality as diseased and decomposed. Emil and Marie's relation lacks wisdom and reason, therefore, they only bring destruction. Their love is symbolized by erotic passion. Emil watches Marie sleeping beneath the mulberry tree "Her breast rose and fell faintly, as if she were asleep. Emil threw himself down beside her and took her in his arms. The blood came back to her cheeks"(102). The image reminds the reader of the idyllic set up of Adam and Eve lying together "Imparadised in one another's arm"²⁹. But unlike Adam and Eve's prelapsarian and innocent eroticism Emil and Marie's love is contaminated as according to Cather their relationship is based on "betrayal". So the apparently idyllic landscape soon turns into a death-stricken horrific scene. The sexual proximity of the two lovers causes their death. Cather describes how gruesome the end of a heterosexual relationship can be! The scene is enough to give sleepless nights to those who indulge in such affairs.

For Emil the chapter had been short. He was shot in the heart, and had rolled over on his back and died. His face was turned up to the sky and his brows were drawn in a frown, as if he had realized that something had befallen him. But for Marie Shabata it had not been so easy. One ball had torn through her right lung, another had shattered the carotid artery. She must have started up and gone toward the hedge, leaving a trail of blood. There she had fallen and bled. From that spot there was another trail, heavier than the first, where she must have dragged herself back to Emil's body. Once there, she seemed not to have struggled any more. She had lifted her head to her lover's breast, taken his hand in both her own, and bled quietly to death.(106)

This description of death and immense suffering can be looked upon as Cather's latent abhorrence for heterosexuality. The novel bears a hidden desire of Cather to eliminate heterosexuality at all. Heterosexuality for her receives an apocalyptic death. Cather expresses her own reaction through the

statement of Ivar: "It has fallen! Sin and death for the young ones! God have mercy upon us"(107). Cather recurrently uses the image of blood while depicting Emil and Marie's love. Marie's cheek becomes blood red when Emil first kisses her. When Emil embraces her beneath the mulberry tree "the blood came back to her cheeks"(102). The blood image becomes a premonition of their bloodied end.

It seems very awkward that Alexandra feels sympathetic for Frank Shabata-the murderer of her son-like brother and her best friend. She never tries to understand Emil and Marie's emotional intensity for each other: "I understand how you did it. I don't feel hard toward you. They were more to blame than you" (116) but Frank himself feels guilty for his impulsive act. Alexandra cannot feel for the love of Emil and Marie as she is an embodiment of Cather's unconscious self that is bereft of any heterosexual erotic feeling. Alexandra blames Marie bitterly for bringing destruction to the "gay young fellow"(117), Frank Shabata. Alexandra could "understand his [Frank] behavior more easily than she could understand Marie's" (113). Alexandra feels "betrayed" and "forsaken" by Marie. She can forgive Frank but not Marie for breaking her trust. She expresses her wonder at Marie's behavior to Carl: "Could you have believed that of Marie Tovesky? I would have been cut to pieces, little by little; before I would have betrayed her trust in me!"(120). Perhaps for this betrayal Cather makes Marie suffer more in her death agony!

Alexandra's Dream along with her Relationship with Carl as Key Elements to Unlock Cather's Unconscious self:

The tension between the cultural identity and the unconscious desire of Cather is best expressed through Alexandra's reverie: "Sometimes, as she lay thus luxuriously idle, her eyes closed, she used to have an illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by someone very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but he was like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat...there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him. She could feel him approach, bend over her and lift her, and then she could feel herself being carried swiftly, across the fields" (80-81). For Freud, dreams³⁰ serve as an entrance to understand unconscious desires. Alexandra's dream and her vision of a manly structure complicate the context of the discussion and needs psychoanalytic explanations. Her dream can be variously interpreted. First the dream is an extension of Alexandra's understanding of her unconscious self, it is an embodiment of her latent desires that is unacceptable for society.

In one of his lectures Freud defines the dream element: "...it is not in itself a primary and essential things a 'thought proper', but a substitute for something else unknown to the person concerned ...a substitute for something the knowledge of which is indeed possessed by the dreamer but is inaccessible to him".³¹ But it is important to notice that she does not dream a feminine figure but a masculine figure which represents patriarchy and heterosexuality. Here the conflict of Alexandra's mind and Cather's as well becomes clear. Alexandra's unconscious psyche is also conditioned by the conventions of her contemporary world. In her dream she sees a masculine figure who carries her away from the weariness of mundane life. In reality she never depends upon any man but her unconscious self-desires one, not to have a genital intimacy but one who embodies paternal love. When Alexandra sees her dream in girlhood the image of the unknown man remains shadowy, but when she encounters the dream in her matured age, after the death of Emil, the masculine figure becomes clear: "She saw him, saw him clearly, though the room was dark, and his face was covered. He was standing in the doorway of her room...His shoulders seemed as strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm, bared from the elbow, was dark and gleaming like bronze, and she knew at once that it was the arm of the mightiest of all lovers".(112).

It is significant that in her womanhood the hazy image of the man of her girlhood becomes clear. Through her maturing that can also be seen as her journey from the semiotic state to the symbolic state, Alexander's cultural and conscious identity consolidated and put her unconscious desire to slumber. Her coming to terms with the set pattern of the society makes her overhear the voice of her latent desires: "Her personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence; like an underground

river that came to the surface only here and there, at intervals months apart, and then sank again to flow on under her own fields.”(79)

Alexandra sees a man, but a man bearing the “smell of ripe cornfields”(80). Alexander, from her very young age has devoted herself to her land. Alexandra remembers the happy days when “She was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination in the soil”(80). Alexandra feels the land within herself, she identifies best with the land. She sublimates her energy and passion into the land and therefore the land becomes a symbol of her hermaphroditic nature. She shares an erotic fulfilled relationship only with the land. The land is like her human spouse. When she dreams of a manly image, with a smell of cornfield it seems to be an incarnation of the land to which Alexandra envisions him “as strong as the foundations of the world...The mightiest of all lovers” (112); perhaps through Alexandra, Cather is prioritizing the masculine power which acted as a force and laid the basis of creation.

Cather's Disgust at the constructed gender identity of masculinity as virile has been manifested through her depiction of meek and effeminate male figures. Emil and Carl both are psychologically impotent to provide solace to Alexander's soul as they are socially constructed 'man'. But the land, symbolizes the true masculine force of creation that does not need to have a phallus to prove its masculinity. Therefore the land is, for Alexandra's the “mightiest of all lovers”.

Alexandra's preference for Marie's friendship and her physical identification with the soil have left no place for Carl. Alexander depends upon Carl but she could not love him: “She had never been in love, she had never indulged in sentimental reveries.”(80). She discusses her work life, her problem with her brothers with Carl but she never gives vent to Carl's emotional approach to her, rather she is not able to react to any heterosexual proximity, “it is in the soil that she expresses herself best” (32) Carl also recognized the fact at last and says to Alexander that “you belong to the land”(122.). The intensity of Emil & Marie's relationship as juxtaposed with Carl & Alexandra's completely asexual and compromising relationship once again harps on the fact that Cather could not help being conformed. Cather as a public figure could not express herself as “deviant” from norms. She had to cover her feeling for Lousie Pound, her later relationship with Isabelle McClung and Edith Lewis as her fame increased.

Cather makes Alexandra marry Carl, but without any hope for futurism. Alexandra conforms but deviates in the nature of their union. Their union is asexual, bereft of any erotic feeling, in Alexandra's part at least. Carl is necessary for Alexandra to move on, to fill the vacuum created in her soul after the death of Emil & Marie. A presence of a true friend now seems more important to her than the inanimate existence of the land. Alexandra now washes the memory of her dream and realizes that “it will never come true”(122). But within Alexandra's compromise with the symbolic order of things Cather upholds the ambivalent future of their marriage. Cather ends her novel with Alexandra's speech “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”. (122). This speech establishes that their marriage is an emotional and asexual bond and thus will remain outside the prescribed heterosexual norms of society and will ultimately be successful. Simultaneously through the speech Cather takes up an indirect critical stance against erotic heterosexual passion that leads only to death.

Conclusion:

Through the previous chapters I tried to trace Alexandra's trajectory to understand the discrepancy between one's internal self and the social identity one possess. Cather develops her heroines' inner life with deep psychological understanding and presents Alexandra's struggle to come to terms with and recognize the mandatory social values. Cather deserves a bow for her subtlety in dealing with such a complicated and controversial issue of her time. The characterization, symbols and the events make it clear to the reader that the compulsion and normativity of society stifle individual autonomy. *O Pioneers!* in its final analysis seems to me more an expression of Cather's own identity crisis than her homosexual desires. Whether

Cather was a lesbian or not, is a matter of contemplation. But what comes through the character of Alexandra Bergson is Cather's latent anxiety caused by the two opposing force of contemporary society: one is the imposed gendered identity and the other the "New Scientific Discourse" that contaminated pure female friendships. Cather's admiration for Louise Pound stems from Pound's indomitable courage, it is devoid of any erotic sensation. Just as Alexandra gets attracted by Marie's vivaciousness and prettiness. Both Alexandra and Cather were aware that they cannot remain outside society so they had to suppress their unconscious desires. *O Pioneers!* as one of Cather's earlier novels captures Cather's own psychological dilemma. Before Cather became aware of her real self, her own genital desires, she encountered contempt for female sexuality termed as abnormal and deviant. Cather becomes conscious, alert and confused as well.

Thus *O Pioneers!* becomes for Cather a literary device to critique the normal heterosexual relationship through the depiction of the chaotic household of Frank and Marie, the uncomfortable relationships between Lou, Oscar and their wives and the catastrophic end of Emil and Marie. The homosexual relationship of Alexandra could not blossom due to the suppression of hostile social forces. In this sense, Cather's heroine represents a cultural construct shaped by Cather's own lived experiences as a woman. Cather read and understood the norms of female sexuality in an age when conventional sexual roles were shattered by sparkling feelings of guilt, anxiety, confusion and paranoia. Therefore, it is not surprising that Alexandra is an embodiment of the element of conflict that characterizes both Cather's life and her own age.

End Notes:

- 1) *Lesbian*: a female who harbours romantic and erotic feelings for another woman, derived from Greek island Lesbos, home of 6th Century BCE poet Sappho, in mid nineteenth century German Sexologist Magnus termed "lesbianism" as "inversion".
- 2) *Heteronormativity*: a term first popularized by Michael Warner in 1991, See. Adrinne Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality in her essay "Compulsive Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", 130-31
- 3) *Louise Pound*: a professor in Nebraska University and a famous folklorist.
- 4) *Isabella McClung*: daughter of a wealthy Pittsburgh family, Cather and she remained close friends from 1899-1938
- 5) *Edith Lewis*: a professional colleague of Cather, Cather and Lewis were both editorial staff of McClure's Magazine.
- 6) *The Second Sex*: book by existentialist Simone de Beauvoir, 1949, published at the advent of Second Wave Feminism.
- 7) See. *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, book II
- 8) *The Mirror Stage*: a psychoanalytic theory that captures the psychological development of a child from the real to the symbolic and then to the imaginary. See. Jacques Lananc's *Return to Freud* by Philippe Julien, 1994, 185-89.
- 9) *libidinal dynamism*: See. Lacan and the Matter of Origins by Shuli Barzilai, 1999, 106-7
- 10) *Semiotic to Symbolic*: See. Julia Kristeva: *Psychoanalysis and Modernity* by Sara Beradsworth, 2004, 40-51
- 11) *bourgeoisie*: derived from French burgeois (walled city), denotes the emerging middle class in Middle Age who occupied the means of production in a society.
- 12) *repressive hypothesis*: See. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* by Ann Laura Stoler, 1995. 165-67
- 13) *New Scientific Discourse*: See. "Female Sexuality in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and the Era of Scientific Sexology: A Dialogue Between Frontiers" by C. Susan Wiesenthal, January 1990, 43

- 14) See. "Female Sexuality in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and the Era of Scientific Sexology: A Dialogue Between Frontiers" by C. Susan Wiesenthal, January 1990,44
- 15) *The New Woman*: a 19th Century feminist ideal used to describe the educated, independent career women, popularized by Henry James
- 16) *Congenital inversion*: See. *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion* by Havelock Ellis, 1906, rpt.2001,32-33
- 17) *Archives de Neurologie*: a book by Charcot and Magnun, 1882, See. *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion* by Havelock Ellis,1906, rpt.2001,35
- 18) *Psychopathia Sexualis*: book by Kraft-Ebing,190126) *Amazonian Woman*: Amazon was a group of tribal women in classical Greek legends, they used to take charge over men.
- 27) *lesbian continuum*: See. *Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Re-visions, 1951-81*, edited by Jane Roberta Cooper, 321-25
- 28) See. "'The Thing Not Named': Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer" by Sharon O'Brien, 1984,578
- 29) See. *Paradise Lost* BK-IV, 506
- 30) See. *Sigmund Freud's the Interpretation of Dreams: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, Ed. by Laura Marcus, 1999,3-9
- 31) See. "Illuminating the Queer Subtext: the Unmentioned Affairs in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* Nora Neill",2008,50.

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