



Willa Cather

Photo courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society

PLAINS GODDESSES: HEROINES IN WILLA CATHER'S PRAIRIE NOVELS

by

Marilyn A. Carlson Aronson

According to Willa Cather scholar, Helen Fiddymont Levy, "Willa Cather . . . creates the heroic celibate female individual, . . . celebrates the female maternal source of the homeplace as the matrix of civilization, . . . and replicates in many respects the heroic male individuals" who comprise much American literary history.¹ Willa Cather's heroic female heroines do appear as a revision of American literary history. Her themes provide neither the struggle of the pioneer nor the conflict between generations, but the development and self-discovery of the novel's heroine.

The three prairie novels, *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Antonia* (1918), and *The Song of the Lark* (1915) portray strong heroines or earth-goddesses, who are vibrant pioneers, adept and capable of survival on the tough, Nebraska prairie. Each heroine—Alexandra Bergson, Antonia Shimerda and Thea Kronborg represent the American pioneer woman as a person whose physical and cultural contributions helped to civilize the West.

In *O Pioneers!* Alexandra Bergson could be called the epic heroine because her character never changes. Her strength of purpose, her dependability, and her kindness are constant throughout the novel. Moreover, she appears capable of controlling her emotions and proceeding with the business of everyday life. Although Alexandra is a fully-developed character, she does not express her emotions freely. For this reason, some critics view her as a flat one-dimensional figure. Helen W. Stauffer writes, "Although Alexandra does develop personal dimension through her relationship with Carl and her suffering after the deaths of Marie and Emil, she remains sexually reticent, mistrusts passion, and favors safe love between friends."²

In *O Pioneers!* the history of the Nebraska prairie begins in the heart of Alexandra Bergson, who sacrifices her personal life to cultivate the land. Almost

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an androgynous character, Alexandra is tall, strong, serious, thoughtful and dresses like a young soldier. Cather writes, "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)."³ Cather even uses a plot circumstance in which the European father through death and incompetence cedes the responsibility for the renewal of the family to his American-born daughter. When Alexandra's father, John Bergson, dies at forty-six, he is "tired of making mistakes."⁴ On his death bed, he calls his heiress to his side. He knows that Alexandra is the only one of his children who "reads the papers, follows the markets, and learns from neighbors' mistakes."⁵ She is the "one among his children to whom he could entrust the future of his family and the possibilities of his hard-won land."⁶ He instructs his two sons to follow the direction of their sister: "I want you to keep the land together and be guided by your sister. . . . [Alexandra] knows my wishes. . . . and will manage the best she can."⁷ At age nineteen, Alexandra Bergson becomes homesteader, preserver, and savior for her Nebraska prairie family.

In *O Pioneers!*, Cather gives the classic struggle of mankind versus nature a new twist by pitting a woman against nature. Alexandra seeks wholeness, self-identity, and purpose. Her major goal is to preserve the family's heritage: the land. Cather's love for the land manifests itself in her description of Alexandra Bergson's success story. Cather writes:

The Divide is now thickly populated. The rich soil yields heavy harvests; the dry, bracing climate and the smoothness of the land make labor easy for men and beasts. . . . The old wild country, the struggle in which [Alexandra] was destined to succeed while so many men broke their hearts and died, [was but a memory]. . . . [Now], a big white house stood on a hill. . . . There were so many sheds and outbuildings grouped about it that the place looked like a tiny village. . . . Any one thereabouts would have told you that this was one of the richest farms on the Divide, and that the farmer was a woman, Alexandra Bergson.⁸

Truly, Cather portrays Alexandra as an earth goddess, adept and resourceful in conquering the prairie. Like Walt Whitman's hero in the poem "Pioneers! O Pioneers," Alexandra replicates the heroic male individuality needed on the frontier. Like a true heroine, Alexandra applies her knowledge to everyday problems. Her resourcefulness includes six major decisions: (1) She pays passage for other Swedes to come to America. This act contributes to her labor supply; (2) she experiments with new farming methods such as planting alfalfa as a green

legume crop; (3) she befriends new immigrants who come to the Nebraska soil; (4) she sends her brother, Emil, to the university because she senses that his artistic drive would wither on the harsh prairie; (5) she expands the farm that she inherits to neighboring fields and becomes as rich as the robber barons; (6) she embraces new ideas from state agricultural schools and land-grant colleges, and implements them successfully. For an 1883 heroine, Alexandra is amazing by all standards. However, she succeeds because of her love for the land.

Alexandra's love for the land correctly places this novel in western regional literature, a genre that expresses the pioneer love affair with the land. In fact, Cather writes that the land "was the mightiest of all lovers."⁹ It had become Alexandra's first love. Wearing by her vast responsibilities as landowner, manager, and estate builder, Alexandra dreams the old illusion she has seen since her childhood. By now, Alexandra at forty is a mature female who is perhaps "actually tired of life."¹⁰ In this dream, she sees her lover clearly for the first time, "dark and gleaming, like bronze and she knew at once that he was the . . . mightiest of all lovers."¹¹ In her dream, the land carries her, and it is the land she loves. Even when Carl Linstrum asks her to marry him and go to Alaska, Alexandra asks, "You would never ask me to go away for good would you?"¹² His knowing reply is, "Of course not, my dearest. I think I know how you feel about this country as well as you know yourself."¹³ Although she also cares for Carl Linstrum, the land is Alexandra's husband.

What is amazing about Willa Cather's infatuation with the Nebraska prairie is that she only lived there for thirteen years, and after 1896 she never returned permanently to the setting of six of her twelve novels. Perhaps, to love the land so passionately reveals that Cather herself was emotionally starved as a child of nine, when her family moved from Virginia. The vastness and beauty of the Nebraska prairie served as a way for her to communicate with her starved inner self.

Cather portrays her heroines realistically, complete with a "blind side." Alexandra's "blind side" causes her to fail to see her brother, Emil, and Marie Shabata's sexual attraction for one another. Cather insightfully recognizes that the intuitive nature of a woman is often sublimated when she becomes a managerial landowner. Alexandra, characterized by a nearly androgynous nature, represses her femininity. In fact, Alexandra says that she doesn't "choose to be like she is . . . she didn't choose her qualities, she was born with them."¹⁴ In *A Literary History of the West*, Helen W. Stauffer discusses this phenomenon:

[Alexandra] put so much of herself into her farming that 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 under her own fields," . . . The responsibilities thrust upon her early and the lack of friends her own age in this sparsely settled area contribute to her delayed sexual awakening and sublimation of sexual vitality

Cather's heroine loves the land most, and like all true pioneers, Alexandra realizes that she owns the land, temporarily. Pioneers are people who see something within the land that dreamers like Carl Linstrum will never see. As an estate builder, Alexandra says, "We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while."¹⁶ While Cather makes room for the dreamer and artist within her novel, her heroine remains an earth goddess.

In *My Antonia*, Willa Cather uses Jim Burden as her alter ego and a parallel to the heroine, Antonia Shimerda. Burden is also an orphan, transplanted and groping for an identity and affiliation. In his process of understanding Antonia, Jim Burden comes to know himself. In this prairie novel, Cather creates a mother goddess—Antonia becomes a symbol of a new race of individuals carved from hardship and hope. Although Jim Burden appears to have succeeded in the American dream, its material fulfillment has not brought him happiness. Despite this fact, Jim Burden does reconcile his two halves: the educated self and the prairie self. His self-realization parallels Antonia's: an immigrant who marries a poor immigrant like herself to give birth to a large family of new Americans. According to Helen W. Stauffer, "This novel represents Cather's attempt, through Jim Burden, to make an immigrant girl with an illegitimate baby into a symbol of the pioneer West, an alternative to the typical Western's celebration of mountain man, cowboy, and gunfighter."¹⁷ Thus, Cather entwines the three themes which create the matrix of this paper: heroic female individual, female maternal source of the homeplace, and female replica of the heroic male. Antonia Shimerda acts as an heroic female character in childhood, adolescence, young womanhood, and middle age.

In childhood as her father's favorite, Antonia learns English from Jim Burden's grandmother. The scene from the novel is touching:

We went with Mr. Shimerda back to the dugout [their home], where grandmother was waiting for me. Before I [Jim Burden] got into the wagon, he took a book out of his pocket, opened it, and showed me a page with two alphabets, one English and the other Bohemian. He placed this book in my grandmother's hands,

looked at her entreatingly, and said, with an earnestness which I shall never forget, “Te-e-ach, te-e-ach my An-tonia!”¹⁸



Annie Sadilek Pavelka
 prototype for Antonia Shimerda
Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society

Antonia was the only Shimerda family member to master English. Soon, Antonia could translate effectively for her family. One such example occurred within the first winter that the Shimerdas lived on the Nebraska prairie. Jim Burden’s grandmother brought provisions to the immigrants who she feared were starving. They were destitute in their cave home, but Mr. Shimerda, an educated man told their story as Antonia translated:

They were not beggars in the old country; he made good wages and his family was respected there. He left Bohemia with more than a thousand dollars in savings, after their passage was paid. He had . . . lost on exchange in New York, . . . the railway fare to Nebraska was more than they expected. By the time they paid Krajiek [the man who sold them the homestead] . . . they had very

little money left. . . . The snow and bitter winter had disheartened them.¹⁹

When Mr. Shimerda commits suicide due to homesickness and despair, Antonia rejects her chance to attend the prairie sod school-house because she feels responsible for her family. As a young heroine she says, "I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now, . . . School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm."²⁰ Despite the fact that her father was educated, Antonia chooses a practical, business solution to her family's problem.

In adolescence, Antonia toils like a man for her brother Ambrosch. Ambitious to improve the family materially, Ambrosch works Antonia brutally in the fields. To save Antonia from the toilsome prairie, Grandmother Burden and Mrs. Harling move Antonia to the town of Black Hawk. According to Helen Stauffer, "At the Harlings' Antonia excels in the maternal and domestic activities that eventually delineate her mythic stature."²¹



Miner home in Red Cloud, Nebraska, setting for much of *My Antonia*
Photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society

Antonia must withstand a severe test of her character. She becomes involved with the conceited womanizer, Larry Donovan, an employee of the

railroad company, and meets him in Denver with plans of marriage. Donovan jilts Antonia after she becomes pregnant with his out-of-wedlock child. However, Antonia works in the wheat fields until the very day that she gives birth to her daughter. The narrator, Jim Burden tells the story:

I could see that her steps were getting heavier. One day in December, the snow began to fall. Late in the afternoon I saw Antonia driving her cattle homeward across the hill. The snow was flying round her and she bent to face it. . . .

That very night, it happened. She got her cattle home, turned them into the corral, and went into the house, into her room, behind the kitchen, and shut the door. There, without calling to anybody, without a groan, she lay down on the bed and bore her child."²²

Antonia, at twenty-four, gains a new sense of purpose. Before Jim Burden returns to law school, Antonia tells him, "Father Kelly says everybody's put into this world for something, and I know what I've got to do. I'm going to see that my little girl has a better chance than ever I had. I'm going to take care of that girl, Jim."²³

Twenty years later Jim Burden sees a middle-aged Antonia. By this time the once beautiful Antonia stands before him "flat-chested and missing her teeth."²⁴ She has married a poor immigrant man and given birth to many children. But, Antonia has become a "manifestation of the earth itself . . ."²⁵ Jim Burden describes her poignantly:

She was there in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not diminished. . . . Whatever else was gone, Antonia had not lost the fire of life. Her skin, so brown and hardened, had not that look of flabbiness, as if the sap beneath it had been secretly drawn away. . . . She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. . . . She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something that fires the imagination . . . She was a rich mind of life, like founders of early races.²⁶

According to Helen Stauffer, "The character Jim [Burden] creates in Antonia is the maternal counterpart of Alexandra and Thea, complementing their . . . achievements on the archetypal level; taken together these three fulfill Cather's early dictum on woman's fulfillment."²⁷

In contrast to Alexandra's love of the land and Antonia's nurturing character, Cather portrays the story of a young woman's awakening as an artist in *The Song of the Lark*. In *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, Cather shows that prairie cultures cannot understand the artistic person, an individual who must leave the prairie to be nourished and appreciated. In *O Pioneers!*, Frank Shabata, the jealous husband, kills Emil, the artist. In *My Antonia*, disillusionment and homesickness drive Mr. Shimerda, the artist, to commit suicide. Yet, in *The Song of the Lark* Thea Kronborg, who renounces marriage until late in life and refuses biological maternity, discovers her talent—the gift of song. The novel centers on Thea's coming of age as a singer and her entrance into the international stage as an artist. According to Helen Fiddymment Levy, earlier maternal figures like "Mrs. Lee (*O Pioneers!*), Mrs. Harling (*My Antonia*), and Mrs. Kronborg (*The Song of the Lark*) fill woman's traditional homemaking roles and create a setting that makes possible the emergence of . . . creativity."²⁸ This same critic explains why artistic characters like Thea Kronborg become immortalized. She argues:

Women like Thea who renounce their personal lives to the discipline of art achieve an immortality that parallels the continuity of the family . . . To Cather, the sacrifice of the individual life represents the central paradox of her art and perhaps her life—that the artist woman must consecrate her female identity, body and spirit, to the creation of a community of art and thereby to gain immortality.²⁹ (Levy 81)

While it is true that Thea Kronborg, the singer, is drawn from the Wagnerian Swedish soprano Olive Fremstad, Thea Kronborg, the artist, gains her creativity from Cather's own dedication to the arts and literature. In fact, Thea Kronborg probably serves as Willa Cather's alter ego in *The Song of the Lark* in the same way that Jim Burden becomes Cather's alter ego in *My Antonia*. However, in *The Song of the Lark*, Cather no longer views her creative side as male but accepts her creativity as a feminine attribute. According to Helen Levy in *Fiction of the Home Place*, "Cather felt that America neglected the creativity of the immigrant woman's heritage. As a contrast, she shows the type of women produced by the popular culture of market capitalism."³⁰ This literary critic argues that Cather pictures Lily Fisher as a foil to the formidably sexually powerful Thea:

Thea's musical rival, Lily Fisher, also shows the emptiness of the American girl and her "art" as opposed to the woman-child Thea. All pink and white, Lily with her blond curls looks "exactly like

the beautiful children on the soap calendars." . . . Soap calendars, sentimental songs, and romantic novels form the American town's notions of art and beauty, in which women as children or mannequins move gingerly, safely asexual representations of womanhood . . . The diminished child-woman of the Baptist Choir represents the feminine ideal, because she poses none of the threat and power of the formidable female sexual potential already apparent in Thea. In contrast to safe, male-controlled femininity, Cather creates the vital womanliness of Mrs. Kronborg and Thea.³¹

Nonetheless, Mrs. Kronborg, Thea's prolific mother must die before Thea, the singer, becomes Kronborg, the international artist. These two women are connected from the opening pages of the novel. Helen Levy shows that Linda Pannill insightfully observes this tie:³²

[The] child Thea struggles for breath as Mrs. Kronborg struggles to give birth; the two physical births, the womb and the throat, are thus linked from the novel's first scene. Thea and her mother show the calm, stubborn, culturally conservative personality of the female creator of the homeland. . . . Mrs. Kronborg gives birth to her daughter's physical and cultural self, but Thea herself must take the received female heritage and go beyond to her second birth': the artist³³

It is this birth of Thea's artistic self that creates her heroine image and links her eternally to the community of art. According to Helen F. Levy, "With the birth of [Thea's] soul . . . in the artistic voice that is Kronborg, . . . the personal Thea falls away, leaving the imperishable daughter of music. . . . In sum, the woman artist drains passion, personal life, birthing labor, all creative manifestations of her female personality into an artistic discipline."³⁴

The title and motif for *The Song of the Lark* connects Thea to ancient Indian women, Native-American mothers who served as maternal cultural links to the modern American-born Thea. James Woodress says that their message to Thea revolutionizes her as she bathes in the bottom of Panther Canyon in the Southwest, an area of ancient cliff dwellings. Thea reflects:

Why had the Indian women lavished such loving care on the pottery they made for the mere purpose of carrying water? . . .

Then it came to her. The world of the mesa Indians centered on water, the life-giving liquid that she was then pouring over herself. "The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheaf, a mold in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself."³⁵

The meaning of this message startles Thea as she sees a soaring eagle, a creature that represents the triumph of art broken free. Thea breaks from her prairie past to rise to international fame. Like the "second-rate French painting . . . in which a peasant girl, on her way to work in the fields at early morning, stops and looks up to listen to a lark . . . and awakens to something beautiful," so Thea awakens to her artistic soul and is satisfied.³⁶

Willa Cather seems to tell readers that the heroes and heroines of the prairie are those men and women who can retain their past, while adapting to their present and future. According to David Daiches, Willa Cather is unique among novelists of the prairie:

Other American novelists have written about the pioneers and have gloried in their heroic qualities. But for Miss Cather heroism was not enough, and her accounts of pioneers do not simply glorify their courage and strength of purpose. She was interested in the quality of their imagination, in the passion and brilliance of their ideal, and in their discriminating acceptance of a vision.³⁷

The true pattern of American achievement involves vision. Willa Cather's heroines embody the earth-goddess, earth-mother, and artist-woman as the creative sources for this vision. Cather's alter ego emerges in these three novels. In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather says "Artistic growth is, more than it is anything else, a refining of the sense of truthfulness. . . . only the artist, the great artist, knows how difficult it is A voice has even a wider appeal than a fortune."³⁸ It is Cather's voice that makes her heroines immortal.

NOTES

1. Helen Fiddymont Levy, *Fiction of the Home Place: Jewett, Cather, Glasgow, Porter, Welty, Naylor* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 64.

2. Helen W. Stauffer, "Willa Cather," *A Literary History of the American West*, J. Golden Taylor et al., eds. (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1987), 688.

3. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, Introduction Elizabeth Janeway (New York: Signet Classic, New American Library, 1988), 5.

4. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 19.

5. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 18.
6. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 19.
7. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 21.
8. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 57-63.
9. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 210.
10. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 210.
11. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 210.
12. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 210.
13. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 228.
14. Cather, *O Pioneers!*.
15. Stauffer, 688.
16. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 229.
17. Stauffer, 692.
18. Willa Cather, *My Antonia*. Foreword Doris Grumbach. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), 20.
19. Cather, *My Antonia*, 50-51.
20. Cather, *My Antonia*, 20.
21. Stauffer, 693.
22. Cather, *My Antonia*, 203.
23. Cather, *My Antonia*, 206.
24. Cather, *My Antonia*, 213-216.
25. Stauffer, 695.
26. Cather, *My Antonia*, 214-227.
27. Stauffer, 694.
28. Levy, 80.
29. Levy, 81.
30. Levy, 79.
31. Levy, 80.
32. Levy, 85.
33. Linda Pannill, "Willa Cather's Artist-heroine," *Women's Studies* 11 (1984), 223-32.
34. Levy, 84.
35. James Woodress, "Willa Cather," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Vol. 9, James J. Martine, ed. (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1981), 145.
36. Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, Foreword Doris Grumbach, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), xxxi.
37. David Daiches. *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1951), 187-88.
38. Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, 409-417.

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