

*Female Sexuality in Willa Cather's
"O Pioneers!" and the Era of Scientific
Sexology: A Dialogue Between Frontiers*

C. SUSAN WIESENTHAL

PERHAPS THE MOST critical issue which immediately confronts any discussion of Willa Cather's fictional portrayal of sexuality is the nature of the relationship between the author's life and her work, between biography and art. For it is primarily on biographical bases such as Cather's adolescent rejection of femininity — her masquerade as the short-haired, boyishly-dressed 'William Cather Jr.' — and her adult relationships with women such as Louise Pound, Isabelle McClung, and Edith Lewis, that an increasing number of critics have been led to consider her as a 'lesbian writer.' Although no evidence exists to indicate that any of Cather's relationships with women involved an erotic dimension, many scholars agree that, at the very least, her life may be regarded as 'lesbian' in the sense of Adrienne Rich's extensive definition of the term. Briefly, Rich conceives of a broad "lesbian continuum" which "includes a range . . . of woman-identified experience," embracing any extra-sexual or emotional form of "primary intensity between women," and "not simply the fact that a woman has had or [has] consciously desired genital experience with another woman" (648).

Almost invariably, however, when critics turn to Cather's novels, it is precisely the absence of any 'lesbian' sensibility which they emphasize. Thus, Jane Rule, the first writer to situate Cather specifically within a lesbian literary tradition along with Radclyffe Hall, Gertrude Stein, and others, sharply reproves readers who attempt to find a homoerotic sensibility in Cather's art, claiming that if the author's private "sexual tastes" manifest themselves in

the fiction at all, it is only in her "capacity to transcend the conventions of what is masculine and feminine" (87, 80). More recently, Phyllis Robinson has flatly asserted that "the loving relationships with women that were so important in [Cather's] personal life are no where reflected in her fiction" (158). In *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, Sharon O'Brien concurs, stating that "[c]ertainly the most prominent absence and the most unspoken love in her work are the emotional bonds between women that were central to her life" (127). O'Brien does not insist on wholly divorcing author and text, however, and argues instead that Cather's fiction works to both disclose and conceal a lesbian psyche. Nevertheless, in "The Thing Not Named": Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer," she concentrates on the latter aspect of her thesis — on those "literary strategies" whereby Cather is able to "disguise" or "camouflage" the "emotional source of her fiction." For O'Brien, Cather's 'lesbian' sensibility represents "the unwritten text" of the novels ("The Thing Not Named" 577, 593-94, 577).

The object of this essay is not to determine whether the authorial sensibility manifest in Cather's fiction is or is not a specifically 'lesbian' one. Rather, it is to reverse the prevailing critical preoccupation with the "absent" and "unwritten," and to explore the possible ways in which an authorial attitude towards a broader concept of 'deviant' female sexuality, in general, does disclose itself in the written text. In the written text of *O Pioneers!*, in particular, this authorial attitude may be perceived to inhere implicitly in the hermaphroditic, heterosexual, and same-sex relationships Cather does portray. In this novel, for example, the heroine, Alexandra Bergson, is depicted as a character who embodies a seemingly hermaphroditic sexual nature which is viewed positively, as a potentially self-fulfilling value, while the more unambiguously heterosexual natures of other characters, on the contrary, are seen to result exclusively in unhappy and debilitating 'love' relationships. This dichotomous portrayal seems to suggest an authorial sensibility, which, while it is not specifically sympathetic to a homosexual nature, is certainly sensitive to the potential gratification which unconventional forms of sexuality may yield.

In order to grasp the full significance of Cather's portrayal of sexuality in *O Pioneers!* it is necessary to consider not only the

dialectic between life and art, but the dynamic relationship between text and context as well. For as the "golden age of scientific determinism, Social Darwinism, and eugenics" (Smith-Rosenberg 267), Cather's contemporary milieu represented, in fact, a stridently heterosexual era especially obsessed with what it perceived as the 'unnatural' or 'inverted' (that is, lesbian) nature of virtually all manifestations of female sexuality or eroticism beyond heterosexual marriage (Smith-Rosenberg 53-76, 245-96; Faderman 147-277). The extent to which *O Pioneers!* courageously challenges dominant medical and cultural assumptions about female sexuality can be gauged only when the text is considered in a dialogic relation to this larger historic discourse. For indeed, Cather's positive delineation of the sexually unorthodox Alexandra, and, conversely, her negative or critical depiction of conventional heterosexuality, actually work together to controvert systematically a number of contemporary tenets about the nature of the sexually 'inverted' woman. In this way, Cather's novel of pioneer life indirectly addresses the issues of the "New Scientific Discourse" (Smith-Rosenberg 265) being promulgated by such influential and widely popularized theorists as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis. And in so far as these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century 'sexologists' also self-consciously beheld themselves as "pioneers" in a hitherto unexplored psychosexual "borderland" (Ellis 2:219), the subtle interplay between text and context may be regarded as a form of dialogue between two disparate sorts of frontiers.¹

Ultimately, however, the crucial limits of the challenge implicit in Cather's treatment of sexuality in *O Pioneers!* must be also firmly acknowledged. For although she repeatedly re-inverts, as it were, contemporary convictions about the perversity of female 'inversion,' her novel also reflects an element of self-conscious restraint which expresses itself most clearly in her highly circumspect handling of close female friendship — an integral thematic and structural component of the novel, which is deftly and gingerly developed by Cather, only to be rather abruptly abandoned when she is brought to deploy a somewhat disappointing, conventional romance closure, an ending both marked and marred, as one critic suggests, by the purely "token marriage" of the heroine

(Bailey 396).² Whether this novelistic outcome may be ultimately ascribed, as critics such as Sharon O'Brien would contend, to "the lesbian writer's need to conceal the socially unacceptable" ("The Thing Not Named" 592) must remain, perhaps, a moot point. A close reading of *O Pioneers!*, however, does, at least, appear to substantiate the more general claim that internalized cultural strictures governing the 'socially unacceptable' in the realm of sexuality do indeed exert a profound force upon Cather's artistic impulse, and, consequently, upon the shape of this novel as a whole.

Through a comprehensive examination of contemporary women's diaries and letters, as well as medical literature and fiction, feminist historians such as Lillian Faderman and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg have been able to trace the critical late nineteenth-century shifts in the theoretic conceptualization and social experience of female homosexuality throughout the Western world. Unlike male homosexuality, that is, which had long been perceived as a punishable offence against scriptural and secular order, lesbianism had not only been "generally ignored by the law" until this point, but did not even constitute a conceptual category of deviance until the 1880s and 1890s (Faderman, "The Morbidification of Love" 77, 75; Smith-Rosenberg 266). Indeed, in the earlier decades of the Victorian century, passionate homosocial bonds between women — physically uninhibited as well as emotionally intense relationships — were "casually accepted in American society" as forms of romantic love "both socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage" (Smith-Rosenberg 53, 50).³ Such 'legitimate' romantic friendships between women, however, came to be stigmatized by medical authorities and educators as 'morbid' and 'unnatural' during the final decades of the century, because it was at this point that such alliances first became an economically feasible alternative to heterosexual marriage for a small, but growing, group of autonomous, college-educated New Women. "For the first time," as Lillian Faderman remarks, "love between women became threatening to the social structure," posing truly portentous consequences, not only for the institutional nucleus of the social fabric, the family, but — as eugenicists and imperialists alike pointed out — for the already "dan-

gerously low" birth-rate of the American Republic as well (Faderman 238).⁴

As steadily increasing numbers of New Women, like Willa Cather herself, began to eschew marriage and motherhood for higher education and professional livelihoods, one form which the simultaneously escalating anti-feminist reaction took was in the widespread expression of fear and repugnance of an 'intermediate sex': an appalling type of "semi-woman" whose behaviour and physical appearance "violated normal gender categories" (Smith-Rosenberg 265, 271). To accommodate such freaks of nature, the leading European neurologist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, promptly created in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) the new "medico-sexual category" of the "Mannish Lesbian": a nosological classification in which, as Smith-Rosenberg observes, "women's rejection of traditional gender roles and their demands for social and economic equality" were linked directly to "cross-dressing, sexual perversion, and borderline hermaphroditism" (272). More influential yet in Britain and America, however, were the theories of Havelock Ellis. It was his 1901 work, *Sexual Inversion*, which most powerfully contributed to the "morbidification" of the formerly innocent "female world of love and intimacy," because in it, Ellis re-defined the close friendships of college-aged and adult New Women "as both actively sexual and as actively perverted" (Smith-Rosenberg 269, 275).⁵ Thus, forms of affection between women which had long been regarded with equanimity or indifference suddenly came to be viewed with suspicion and alarm as subversive and abnormal affairs.

If the theories and beliefs of Krafft-Ebing, Ellis, and others were a matter of "common knowledge" by the turn-of-the-century, as Faderman contends (*Surpassing the Love of Men* 238), then by 1910-1920, the decade during which *O Pioneers!* was written, medical tropes of the "Mannish Lesbian" or the 'unsexed' woman had been so pervasively disseminated throughout the cultural imagination — via newspaper caricatures, anti-feminist tracts, and sensational as well as 'high' literature — that they had begun to have a substantial impact upon the marital and educational standards of young women, as statistical evidence of the period clearly shows (Smith-Rosenberg 281).

That Cather herself would have been fully conscious of the contemporary medico-cultural discourse of deviant female sexuality, then, seems almost inevitable on historical bases alone. More specifically, however, biographical details further support this assumption. Cather's work as an editor for *McClure's Magazine*, for example, led her to regularly read the columns of the rival *Ladies' Home Journal*, in which articles admonishing women "against forming exclusive romantic bonds with women" often appeared (O'Brien, *Willa Cather* 133). More importantly, despite the fact that Cather and Edith Lewis destroyed the vast majority of Cather's personal correspondence, some of the letters she wrote during her two-year obsession with Louise Pound — "the most serious romantic attachment of [her] college life" — have indeed survived. Unfortunately, testamentary restrictions prevent scholars and biographers with access to these letters from quoting them directly (Robinson 58).⁶ According to Sharon O'Brien, however, Cather states in one of these epistles that "it is so unfair that female friendships should be unnatural," before she goes on to accede that, nevertheless, "they are." As O'Brien suggests, Cather's self-conscious, if grudging, awareness of the fact that female friendships are "unnatural," reflects the extent to which she internalized the sexual norms of her age, and recognized the nature of her intense attachment to Louise as a "special category not sanctioned by the dominant culture" (O'Brien, *Willa Cather* 131-32).⁷

If critics' descriptions of Cather's "turbulent" and "passionate" "love letters" (O'Brien, "The Thing Not Named" 583) are accurate, her college 'crush' on Louise Pound represents precisely the sort of "flame," "rave," or "spoon" relationship which so gravely concerned sexologists and educators of the period. Ellis, for instance, devotes a lengthy appendix in his book to documenting such unsavoury "School-Friendships of Girls," in which he cites the cautionary words of one "American correspondent": "Love of the same sex . . . though [it] is not generally known, is very common; it is not mere friendship; the love is strong, real, and passionate" — sometimes, indeed, as he has been informed, it is "insane, intense love."⁸ Speculating on the explosive end of the Cather-Pound alliance, one biographer has even suggested that Pound's older

brother may have intervened because he interpreted their relationship apprehensively in this current context:

Perhaps he called the friendship unnatural and his sister's friend perverse. He may have even used the term 'lesbian' to describe her. We do not know. We do know, however, that losing Louise caused Willa the most intense suffering she had ever known.

(Robinson 60-61)⁹

In any case, whether or not the widespread cultural anxieties of deviant female sexuality, fanned by the 'New Scientific Discourse' of the sexologists, actually affected Cather's personal life with such painful immediacy, it remains plausible to assume, at the very least, that a sharp awareness of such medico-cultural censures must have impinged uncomfortably upon her conscious mind at one time or another.

It is with such biographical and contextual background in mind that one may, perhaps, most fruitfully approach the question of sexuality in *O Pioneers!* For as Annette Kolodny has argued, whether one speaks of critics "reading" texts or writers "reading" the world, one "call[s] attention to interpretive strategies that are learned, historically determined, and thereby necessarily gender-inflected" (47). In this sense, Cather's fictional portrayal of sexuality represents a cultural construct shaped largely by the lived experiences of her gender. And because she experienced and observed, or 'read,' female sexuality in an age in which traditional sexual roles and distinctions were being rapidly erased and eroded, sparking feelings of confusion, fear, and guilt, it is relatively unsurprising that her fictional treatment of the subject should embody an element of the conflict which marked both her life and her times.

Set on a wild, windswept prairie frontier, *O Pioneers!* initially appears far removed indeed from Cather's controversial modern era. And yet the profound extent to which her novel is informed by the milieu in which it was produced is apparent even in the central character of Alexandra Bergson: a heroine who incorporates many definitive features of the New Woman upon whom the contemporary debate of the 'intermediate sex' centred. In so far as the New Woman of the age "constituted a revolutionary demographic and political phenomenon" (Smith-Rosenberg 245), of

course, Alexandra eludes the historical paradigm: unlike Cather herself, she is neither part of a novel, homogeneous group of college-educated women, nor does she self-consciously resist traditional gender roles on intellectual or ideological grounds. Practical circumstances, as she angrily informs her brothers, have dictated the nature of her pioneering career: "Maybe I would never have been very soft, anyhow; but I certainly didn't choose to be the kind of girl I was" (Cather, *O Pioneers!* 171). On the other hand, there are also strong suggestions in the text that the intellectually gifted Alexandra would have made a fine student, and that had she in fact had a choice in the matter, she would not have remained on the outside of the State University's "long iron fence" curiously "looking through," and observing campus life from a distance (287).

At any rate, beyond these few fundamental differences, Cather's heroine embodies the majority of qualities typical of the late nineteenth-century New Woman: she is single, economically autonomous, and quite ready to assert her legal and social equality, defiantly maintaining her right to "do exactly as [she] please[s] with her land" (167). Moreover, with her innovative silos and pig-breeding schemes, Alexandra is the owner of "one of the richest farms on the Divide" (83), and as such, assumes the position of a community leader. In these respects, she corresponds closely to Smith-Rosenberg's description of the quintessential New Woman:

Eschewing marriage, she fought for professional visibility, espoused innovative, often radical, economic and social reforms, and wielded real political power. At the same time, as a member of the affluent new bourgeoisie, most frequently a child of small-town America, she felt herself part of the grass roots of her country. (245)

It is also interesting to note that although Alexandra presents a new type of heroine in the tradition of American frontier fiction, she is by no means an anomaly in a historical context; indeed, by the late nineteenth century, many women had begun to take advantage of the Homestead Act to acquire property in the West — some of them single, adventurous New Women who "exploited their claims to earn money for other ventures" like college tuition (Myers 258-59). The conceptual distance between the modern era of the New Woman and that of Cather's farming pioneer, then, is not so great as it may first appear to be.

The affinities between the New Woman of Cather's period and the heroine of *O Pioneers!* extend to the portrayal of Alexandra as a representative of a type of 'intermediate sex': a vaguely intimidating sort of 'mannish' woman who appears to combine certain traditional aspects of masculinity and femininity in one. This trait is immediately apparent in Cather's initial description of Alexandra as "a tall, strong girl" who

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 veil. She had a serious, thoughtful face, and her clear, deep blue eyes were fixed intently on the distance. (6)

Krafft-Ebing, who believed, as Smith-Rosenberg states, that "only the abnormal woman would challenge gender distinctions — and by her dress you would know her" (272) — would have likely recognized his 'Mannish Lesbian' here, on the basis of Alexandra's manly ulster alone. Ellis, too, would have detected an element of perversity in the "comfortable" confidence with which Alexandra "carries" her masculine garb, since he maintained that the "very pronounced tendency among sexually inverted women to adopt male attire when practicable" could be "chiefly" accounted for by the fact that "the wearer feels more at home in them" (245). Moreover, the heroine's rapid and resolute gait and the "Amazonian fierceness" with which she cows the "little drummer" who dares ogle her (8) also reflect the sort of "brusque, energetic movements" and "masculine straightforwardness and sense of honour . . . free from any suggestion of either shyness or audacity," which, according to a "keen observer" like Ellis, betrayed an "underlying psychic abnormality" (250). As a heroine of epic proportions, in fact, Alexandra corresponds strikingly to one sexologist's profile of the typical female 'invert,' whom he held to be

more full of life, of enterprise, of practical energy, more aggressive, more heroic, more apt for adventure, than either the heterosexual woman or the homosexual man.

(Magnus Hirschfeld, qtd. in Ellis 251)

Endowed with a greatness of stature which dwarfs the "little men" who surround her (181), as well as a "direct[ness]" of manner which often makes men "wince" (121), Alexandra is indeed the most enterprising, energetic, and heroic character in Cather's novel.

Importantly, however, this positive vision of the heroic 'manly woman' appears to constitute the exception rather than the rule in medical literature of the period. For while early nineteenth-century commentators could still gloat contemptuously that "Amazonian" types were "their own executioners" and presented no danger of "perpetuating their race," since they had "unsexed themselves in public estimation,"¹⁰ most of the sexologists of Cather's era were much less confident — for by then it was clear that the ranks of the 'intermediate sex' were indeed continuing to swell. Such women were thus viewed collectively with a good deal of trepidation as the "ultimate symbol of social disorder" (Smith-Rosenberg 181).

This understandable though fallacious perception of the 'deviant' woman as an emblem of social disruption emerges as the first issue implicitly addressed and refuted by Cather in *O Pioneers!* For having once established her heroine as an 'Amazonian' or 'manly woman,' Cather proceeds to depict her not as a harbinger of chaos, but as precisely the opposite: as a pre-eminent symbol of order and a bedrock of stability. Under Alexandra's creative and loving will, for example, the natural world is gradually though steadily transformed from a hostile "wild land" to a productive and geometrically neat farm, noteworthy for its "most unusual trimness and care for detail" (83). Hence, there is an

order and fine arrangement manifest all over [Alexandra's] great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, [and] in the symmetrical pasture ponds. (84)

"Not unlike a tiny village" (83), Alexandra's farming homestead also represents a contained microcosm of fair but efficient social and domestic order. When she has no "visitors" and dines with "her men," for instance, Cather's heroine sits "at the head of the long table," and the place to her left is routinely reserved for old Ivar, her trusted advisor (85-86). With a democratic spirit, Alex-

andra "encourage[s] her men to talk" during these meals, to voice their opinions and concerns over the business affairs of the farm, but throughout the novel there is never a doubt that she retains an absolutely firm control over the hierarchical structure she has created. "As long as there is one house there must be one head," John Bergson declares before his death, and it is a maxim by which his "dotter" unswervingly abides (25-26).

Cather's affirmative portrayal of the 'manly woman' also works in a similar fashion to subvert or re-invent the prevailing medical and cultural conception of the sexually inverted woman as a physiologically 'morbid' or diseased, mutant being. For not only were such women of 'intermediate sex' judged to be 'unnatural' in the sense of being quirkily unconventional in dress and behaviour, but, as the "visible symptom[s] of a diseased society," they were also held to be innately sick — organically degenerative and neurotic as well as morally contaminating. Because contemporary authorities habitually transposed social and political evils into physiological terms, medical discourses of the sexually deviant woman abound in metaphors of morbidity and pathology (Smith-Rosenberg 245, 261-62). Krafft-Ebing, for example, believed that lesbianism was the sign of "an inherited diseased condition of the central nervous system," which he referred to as a form of "taint."¹¹ Similarly, Ellis, although ostensibly aware that "the study of the abnormal is perfectly distinct from the study of the morbid," still claimed that female sexual inversion was a type of "germ" fostered by the feminist movement (319, 262).¹²

The Amazonian Alexandra may assume manly attire, but she is not, as the narrator notes, in any sense "afflicted" by it; quite the contrary, in fact, she is depicted by Cather as the epitome of health and wholesomeness. Her body, so "tall and strong" that "no man on the Divide could have carried it very far," is also a "gleaming white body" (206), consistently associated with images of both vigour and purity. While Cather thus likens her heroine's sun-kissed face to "one of the big double sunflowers" in the garden, she also emphasizes the contrasting "smoothness and whiteness" of the delicate skin beneath her shirt collar and sleeves: it is skin which "none but Swedish women ever possess; skin with the freshness of the snow itself" (88). Just as Jim Burden, in *My Antonia*, thinks

"with pride that *Ántonia*, like Snow White in the fairy tale, is still the fairest of them all" (215), so in this novel does Carl Lindstrum remember admiringly how the fair Alexandra used to appear at dawn with her milking pails, "looking as if she had walked straight out" of the "milky light" "of the morning itself" (126). Even as an older, successfully established farming businesswoman, the pristine aura of the dairymaid still suffuses Alexandra, who blandly admits that people find her "clean and healthy-looking" appearance pleasant (132).

At once robust and delicate, fusing conventional attributes of male and female within herself, the heroine's healthy, hermaphroditic nature also facilitates a vital, erotically fulfilling relationship with the land — virtually the only salutary relationship offered by Cather in *O Pioneers!* Indeed, the Nebraskan prairie is charged with "the same tonic, puissant quality" characteristic of Alexandra herself (77). Like her tanned face and white body, "the brown earth" is yet so clean and pure that it rolls from the shear of the plow without "even dimming the brightness of the metal" (76). And like Alexandra, too, the land is presented as a hermaphroditic entity. Thus, it both "yield[s] itself eagerly" to her active and yearning "human will" (76, 65), and "stir[s]" beneath her like a giant leviathan, eliciting, in turn, a sensual responsiveness or 'yielding' in the heroine herself:

Alexandra remembered . . . 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. (204)

As a sexually animated presence within the text, however, the land may constitute not so much an autonomous entity in its own right as it does a specular reflection of the heroine's own hermaphroditic nature. For it is, in fact, Alexandra who sublimates her sexual energies into the land — who sets her face "toward it with love and yearning" (65) — and it is also her perception and sense of it that are invariably conveyed to the reader, who sees only the way the land "seem[s]" to her or the way she "remember[s]" it (65, 204).

What Cather actually appears to present, then, is a type of auto-erotic, onanistic relationship of the heroine with a part of her

hermaphroditic sexual self which has been displaced onto the "Other" of the land. In this respect, her portrayal of sexuality in *O Pioneers!* is comparable to that of Martha Ostenso's in the Canadian prairie novel *Wild Geese* (1925), in which the heroine, Judith, lies upon the "damp ground" nude and feels that "here was something forbiddenly beautiful;" something as "secret as one's own body" (67). Seemingly complete in herself, Cather's heroine may be perhaps best likened, though, to the "single wild duck" she so fondly recalls in her memory: the "solitary bird" which "take[s] its pleasure" quite alone, and which strikes Alexandra as more "beautiful" than any "living thing had ever seemed to [her]" (204-05). A subtle celebration of the hermaphroditic and perhaps even bisexual sensibility, the portrayal of Alexandra's fulfilling erotic life suggests that she may not be as lonely in her unmarried state as the narrator would sometimes have us believe.

By presenting her 'manly woman' as a fresh and vital human being whose hermaphroditic attributes constitute the source of positive erotic gratification, Cather's novel works to break down the contemporary myth of the diseased and degenerative woman of 'intermediate sex.' Significantly, however, her artistic response to the large, pseudo-scientific discourse of sexuality does not end at this point, for Cather also proceeds to challenge her culture's yet more fundamental assumption of the intrinsic desirability and 'normalcy' of heterosexuality itself. In *O Pioneers!*, indeed, it is not the seemingly 'deviant' but the socially acceptable heterosexual impulse which is portrayed as 'morbid' and unhealthy. Thus, when Alexandra does indulge in one of her rare heterosexual fantasies, she is apt to experience it as a form of profoundly sordid "reverie": literally, an unclean impulse which she immediately attempts to wash away, via a penitential ritual of Spartan ablution, with "buckets of cold well-water" (206). And the one and only time that Alexandra does envisage a heterosexual embrace as a positive desire to be unresisted, it is rather alarmingly associated with the hooded figure of Death, "the mightiest of all lovers" (283).

Similarly, Cather also consistently links the major heterosexual relationship within her novel — the love of Emil and Marie — to images of decay, sickness, and pain. Emil's passion, for example, is compared to a defective grain of corn which will never shoot up

"joyfully into the light" but is destined instead to rot and fester in the dark, damp earth (164). The essential morbidity of his relationship with Marie is further conveyed by the nature of the three gifts he drops into the lap of his beloved over the course of the novel: the uncut turquoises are pretty, but must, like the grain of corn, remain concealed in dark secrecy (224-25); the branch full of "sweet, insipid fruit" is already overripe and on the verge of decay (153); and, in stark contrast to Alexandra's sportive and contented solitary duck, the birds associated with the two young lovers are dead and dripping with blood (127-28). Gone for both Emil and Marie are those "germless days" of childhood (216), for their experience of adult heterosexuality is indeed like a type of "affliction," a perverse sort of malaise in the grip of which they "cannot feel that the heart lives at all" unless "its strings can scream to the touch of pain" (226).

Neatly reversing her society's binary equation of deviant sexuality with disease and heterosexuality with health, Cather also continues to turn contemporary medical theory upon its head by attributing to the nature of heterosexuality a number of other specific aberrations which sexologists typically ascribed to the sexual 'invert.' By the early twentieth century, for instance, the notion of 'sexual inversion' was commonly associated not only with physical disease, but with all manner of tragedy, insanity, and criminality as well. "Inverted women," as Ellis asserts in his work, "present a favourable soil for the seeds of passional crime," and to illustrate his point, he promptly proceeds to recount, in gruesome detail, several cases of lesbian homicides and suicides, deeming one particularly sensational 1892 murder of a young Memphis woman by her female lover as quite "typical" (201). The sexual nature of the 'inverted' person, moreover, was thought to "constitute as well a specific atavistic response, a sudden throwback to a primitive bisexuality, a tragic freak of nature" (Smith-Rosenberg 269). "[F]rom a eugenic standpoint" such as Ellis's, therefore, "the tendency to sexual inversion" could be regarded as "merely . . . nature's merciful method of winding up a concern which, from her point of view, has ceased to be profitable" (335).

In Cather's novel, conversely, it is heterosexuality which is presented as the direct cause of such grievous afflictions and processes.

While the component of tragedy is, of course, most dramatically evident in the violent and premature deaths of Marie and Emil, almost all of the heterosexual alliances in the text are presented as unhappy or pathetic. Hence, John Bergson is "warped" by his marriage, which is described as a mere "infatuation" on his part: "the despairing folly of a powerful man who [could] not bear to grow old" (23). Similarly, the snug security of Angélique's happy little family is blighted by the sudden death of Amédée; the confused young Signa is afraid of her bullish husband even before he forces her to plod home with the cows on their wedding day; and "young farmers" like Lou betray a measure of embarrassed discomfort in their spousal relations in that they can seldom bring themselves to address their wives by name (111). And, unlike Alexandra's orderly household, the Shabata home is frequently the scene of domestic crises and violence, for Frank is a rash and volatile man whose unleashed temper has "more than once" compelled Marie to struggle with him over a loaded gun (265-66). Uniting themselves in relationships which all too often result in animosity, violence, divorce (148), or death, the majority of heterosexual characters in this novel are to some degree culpable, like Marie, of "spread[ing] ruin around" (304), and as such, they are viewed collectively by the author not only as a tragic lot but, indeed, as the 'ultimate symbol' of what the sexual invert was supposed to represent: utter social and domestic chaos.

It is also Frank Shabata, the most aggressively heterosexual character in the novel, who emerges from Cather's perspective as the "most favourable soil for the seeds of passionate crime," as well as madness and degeneration. After his passionate jealousy has resulted in the murders of Emil and Marie, he regresses in prison to an atavistic creature, a grey, unshaven, and stooped figure who appears "not altogether human." Left to ponder his guilt in a wretched cell, the now pathetic Frank depicts a dismal future for himself; as he confesses to Alexandra when she visits him, "I guess I go crazy sure 'nough" (294). The implicit but clear message in Cather's text, then, is that the heterosexual nature, far from embodying an unambiguously 'normal' or healthy appetite, may manifest itself as 'unnatural' and 'morbid' in precisely the same ways as those of 'inverted' or 'deviant' sexual tendencies were

thought to. Or, considered from an obverse angle, Cather's novel is one whose sexually unorthodox but sane, vigorous, and prosperous heroine serves as a timely reminder to those, who, like Ellis, tended to forget that what may be perceived as 'abnormal' need not necessarily be 'morbid.'

Through her own process of conceptual 'inversion,' then, Cather may be seen to respond in a creative and challenging way to dominant contemporary theories of sexuality, quietly establishing, in *O Pioneers!*, her own alternate paradigms of human sexuality. And yet it is, perhaps, an authorial consciousness of implicitly engaging — and controverting — this larger medico-cultural ethos which may also be seen to constitute the source of an inhibiting force in Cather's art. In *O Pioneers!*, this aspect of the narrative is best illustrated by Cather's treatment of the relations between women. For indeed, contrary to the pervasive critical over-generalization that Cather "never" deals in her fiction with the homosocial emotions and bonds which filled and fuelled her own life, a very complex and subtle relationship does unfold in this novel between Alexandra and Marie, which, to the best extent of my knowledge, has not been extensively or adequately examined. And it is important that it should be, for it suggests that within this novel of pioneer life, Cather begins to explore a second sort of 'frontier': not a historical and geographical one, but a psychic "frontier between friendship and love" (M. Tarde, qtd. in Ellis 75). This is not to argue that Cather depicts the friendship between her heroine and Marie as one which moves toward incipient lesbianism. Rather, it is to suggest that, along with its nostalgia for the heroic cultural and geographical Nebraskan frontier of the past, Cather's text also quietly but perceptibly mourns the passing of that older world of passionate yet innocent female love, so well documented by Smith-Rosenberg, into a modern era of 'morbidified' relations.

Perhaps because of the disparity of their respective ages, the affection Alexandra feels for Marie clearly manifests itself on one level as a type of maternal love. "Sit down like a good girl, Marie," Alexandra says in her best matronly manner, for example, "and I'll tell you a story" (137). Marie, that "crazy child" who married at eighteen (119), seems in this respect to present a surrogate daughter-figure for Alexandra, just as she thinks of her younger

brother, Emil, as her "boy." On the other hand, however, the friendship between the two women is marked by both a degree of intensity and a dimension of sensuality which makes it a far more "romantic" relationship than, in fact, Alexandra's ostensibly 'real' romance with Carl Lindstrum. Indeed, when Cather's heroine reflects on the "pretty lonely life" she has led, the primacy of her bond with the young Bohemian girl is indicated by the order in which she names her two closest companions: "Besides Marie, Carl is the only friend I have ever had" (177). Unlike Carl, who drifts in and out of Alexandra's life between long intervals, Marie is woven closely into the fabric of her daily existence. "It is not often," therefore, that Alexandra "let[s] three days go by without seeing Marie" — and when Carl does reappear at one point, and Alexandra postpones her regular visit, she frets guiltily that her younger friend will think she has "forsaken her" (130). Later, of course, it is Alexandra herself who feels woefully "forsaken" when she learns of Marie's affair with Emil:

Could you believe that of Marie Tovesky? I would have been cut to pieces, little by little, before I would have betrayed her trust in me! (303)

Not only is it revealing that Alexandra apparently does not recognize Marie "Tovesky" as Frank Shabata's wife, but her emphatic language and words of "betrayal" and "forsaken" anguish also clearly echo the "romantic rhetoric" of "emotional intensity" which Smith-Rosenberg notes as characteristic of close female friendships before the late nineteenth century (59).

Furthermore, while Alexandra's relationship with Carl remains a fairly dispassionate affair throughout — arrested, in fact, at the stage of hand-holding until a light kiss at the very end of the novel is offered as a prelude to a marriage of "friends" (308-09) — her relationship with Marie allows for a great measure of uninhibited physical contact. At one point, for example, Marie runs up to her friend "panting," throws "her arms about Alexandra," and then gives her arm an affectionate "little squeeze" as they begin to walk together (134). And Alexandra similarly expresses her sentiments by "pinch[ing] Marie's cheek playfully" when they meet (192). The two women have an acute and joyful sense of each other's

physical proximity as well; hence, Alexandra confides that she is "glad" to have Marie living "so near" her, while Marie delights in the delicate scent of rosemary on Alexandra's dress (119, 134).

Like Cather herself, who so ardently admired female beauty that she sometimes strapped herself financially by loaning money to attractive actresses whose plays she reviewed (Woodress 105; O'Brien, *Willa Cather* 134), Alexandra responds to Marie with pleasure and admiration on an aesthetic level. Of course, almost every character in the novel does, for Marie's spectacular "tiger eyes" (11) are irresistibly captivating. Indeed, at the risk of pressing a fine (but in this context, relevant) point too closely, Marie's striking eyes may reflect a subtle authorial allusion to Balzac's sensational lesbian novel, *The Girl With the Golden Eyes* — particularly since that novel is believed to have been inspired by the real-life relationship of George Sand (Cather's avowed role-model) and a woman named Marie Dorval.¹⁸ At any rate, Alexandra is especially drawn by the unique blend of exoticism and innocence in Marie, comparing her to both a "queer foreign kind of doll" and a "little brown rabbit" (192, 133). Carl's observation of Marie's sensuously "full" and "parted" lips, and of the "points of yellow light dancing in her eyes" (135) reinforces Alexandra's perception of her friend as an attractively animated yet vulnerable young woman who is "too young and pretty for this sort of life" (121).

With Marie, Alexandra thus enjoys an emotional and physical intimacy which is a source of innocent pleasure to them both. The crucial point, however, is how others perceive their relationship. Through the perspective of Carl Lindstrum, Cather subtly but deftly probes the perverse interpretations apt to be construed from such close homosocial bonds in the new era of 'scientific' sexology. When Alexandra explains to Carl how "nice" it has felt for her to have "a friend" at "the other end" of the path between the Bergson-Shabata homesteads since he has lived there, for instance, Carl responds with a rueful "smile": "All the same, I hope it has n't [*sic*] been *quite* the same" (130). It is an odd remark, laden with an innuendo that makes Alexandra look at Carl "with surprise," and respond defensively:

Why no, of course not. Not the same. She could not very well take your place, if that's what you mean. I'm friendly with all my neighbors, I hope. But Marie is really a companion, someone I can talk to quite frankly. You would n't want me to be more lonely than I have been would you? (130)

To this, Carl laughs nervously, fusses with his hair, and replies uncertainly:

Of course I don't. I ought to be thankful that this path has n't been worn by — well, by friends with more pressing errands than your little Bohemian is likely to have. (131)

Carl realizes that he "ought" to be thankful that Alexandra's female "friend" is not "likely" to pose a serious rival for her affections, but his hesitant manner and doubtful language suggest that his suspicions are obviously not allayed. When he does, therefore, have an opportunity to scrutinize the type of relationship the two women share, he carefully "watch[es]" them from "a little distance" (135). That they make a "pretty picture" together is his first thought, but after observing Marie's intense and delighted absorption in Alexandra for a time, Carl goes on to reflect: "What a waste . . . she ought to be doing all that for a sweetheart. How awkwardly things come about!" (136).

Significantly, it is not long after Carl's reappearance on the Divide that the pleasant state of affairs between Cather's heroine and the attractive young immigrant girl begin to alter. Indeed, the shift in Alexandra and Marie's friendship, the point at which each woman first begins to distance herself warily from the other, occurs as issues of their respective heterosexual relationships begin to impinge upon their lives. When it comes to the subject of Carl and her differences with her brothers over him, for example, Alexandra "instinctive[ly]" feels that "about such things she and Marie would not understand one another" (188). Suddenly, when the topic is Alexandra's relationship with a male, Marie no longer appears to represent the "real" "companion" she "can talk to quite frankly" (130). It is a blind "instinct" which Alexandra follows without testing when she has the opportunity. For when during one of their last intimate moments together, Marie begins to speak "frankly" about her own unhappy union with Frank, Alexandra withdraws guardedly from the conversation, abruptly recalling Marie to the

"crochet patterns" for which they have been searching: "no good," she rationalizes, can ever come "from talking about such things" (198).

Immediately after this incident, a reciprocal process of withdrawal takes place on Marie's part. As the narrator observes:

After that day the younger woman seemed to shrink more and more into herself. When she was with Alexandra she was not spontaneous and frank as she used to be. She seemed to be brooding over something, and holding something back. (200-01)

The pain, confusion, or guilt which each woman experiences over her respective relationship — or relationships — with men is the one thing they cannot share with each other directly, and it is as a stove which wedges them further and further apart. Finally, when Alexandra places her hand tenderly on the arm of a pale and tired-looking Marie, just after Emil has drained the blood from her cheeks with an electrifying kiss, she can feel her young friend "shiver": "Marie stiffened under that kind, calm hand. Alexandra drew back, perplexed and hurt" (226).

Cather's novel thus clearly traces the steady disintegration of a formerly intimate female friendship to the point of physical recoil and abiding resentment. But what happened? Certainly, in so far that the "pretty picture" which consists of Alexandra and Marie becomes "awkward" only when men enter into it, it may be argued that Cather's depiction of a loving female relationship is intended as an illustration of the sad consequences of social pressures which compel women (and men) to erect psychic barriers between one another in an obsessively heterocentric culture — lest their affection, that is, be construed by the Carls of the world as suspiciously 'unnatural.' If this is what Cather attempted, however, she does not wholly accomplish her goal. For although she does begin to critique the contemporary attitude toward, and perception of, innocently romantic female friendships, she eventually abandons this daring impulse in what seems a silent submission to the established sexual prejudices and stereotypes of her day, a submission which sharply reinforces O'Brien's contention that Cather never fully "freed herself from male constructs of femininity" ("The Thing Not Named" 596; *Willa Cather* 124-25). Because indeed, the whole tragic point of the devolution of Alexandra and Marie's

relationship is undermined by Cather's ultimate reliance upon the archetypal paradigm of the fallen Eve for Marie, and by her apparently unqualified endorsement of a conventional marriage for Alexandra — an authorial enthusiasm which is nevertheless unconvincing because it purports to applaud a heterosexual alliance which has been portrayed from the beginning as tepid and watery, at best.

Ultimately, then, Cather's careful dissolution and final destruction of the poignant bond first established between her women represent an authorial retreat into literary convention and rather insipid romanticism. It is a retreat which is in itself tragic. For as the character of Carl suggests, Cather was at some point while writing her novel obviously aware of just how "awkwardly" her portrayal of an artless and genuine female friendship might appear to her modern audience. Whether unconsciously or with a painful memory of her own past friendship with Louise Pound, Cather therefore defuses the potentially scandalous subject she has begun to probe, before it becomes too overt an issue within the text. The simple beauty of a loving friendship between women was the one central aspect of the contemporary discourse of sexuality which Cather could not fully address, because it involved not merely an indirect, artistic inversion of her culture's metaphors, myths, and theories, but entailed, rather, a direct and necessarily polemical authorial entry into the heartland of the sexologists' "frontier" territory, that twilight and controversial no-woman's land separating socially acceptable female companionship from illicit same-sex love. And for all the dramatic adolescent rejection of frocks and frills and curls; for all the aggressively outspoken, critical target-shooting of youth; for all the steadfast, personal commitments to other women in her maturity, this was something the adult 'Billy Cather, Jr' was not rebel enough to risk.

NOTES

- ¹ Ellis uses terms such as "frontier," "pioneer," and "borderland" quite extensively throughout.
- ² For a differing interpretation of the marriage of Carl and Alexandra, see O'Brien, *Willa Cather* 444-46.
- ³ This chapter of Smith-Rosenberg's book, entitled "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth Century America," appeared originally in the first issue of *Signs* (1975).

- ⁴ Smith-Rosenberg also explores the potentially revolutionary social implications which a strong network of homosocial female bonds posed in the context of the feminist movement, and makes a similar point; see *Disorderly Conduct* 277-82.
- ⁵ The term 'morbidity,' however, is taken from Faderman.
- ⁶ On Cather's destruction of her letters and the legal provisions of her will, see Robinson 33-34 and 274; Brown xxiii; Woodress xiii-xiv.
- ⁷ See 127-37 for the most compelling and comprehensive account, to date, of Cather's complex and contradictory sense of lesbian self-identity.
- ⁸ E. G. Lancaster, qtd. in Ellis, *Sexual Inversion* 382. The colloquial terms "flame," "rave," and "spoon" also appear in Ellis's appendix, 368-84 *passim*.
- ⁹ It should be noted, however, that subsequent biographers have dismissed Robinson's suggestion as "pure speculation" (Woodress 87).
- ¹⁰ Anon., "Female Orators," *The Mother's Magazine*, VI (1838): 27, qtd. in Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* 235.
- ¹¹ Krafft-Ebing, qtd. in Faderman, "The Morbidity of Love" 77. Faderman points out that Krafft-Ebing later changed his stance on homosexuality as a disease, but that this was announced only shortly before his death in 1902 and had "minimal" impact "on popular notions regarding homosexuals" (77-78, n. 6).
- ¹² In fairness, it must be noted that Ellis also uses the word "germ" elsewhere in *Sexual Inversion* in a purely organic sense. In language very appropriate to the context of Cather's novel, in fact, he describes human sexuality in terms of a "soil" which at conception is "sown" with an equal amount of masculine and feminine "seeds" or "germs." In bisexuals and homosexuals, he maintains, the "normal" process whereby the "seeds" of one sex come to "kill off" most of those of the other sex has somehow dysfunctioned, a phenomenon, he says, that can only be attributed to an inherent abnormality "in the soil" (309-11).
- ¹³ On the relevance of Balzac's novel in the context of late nineteenth-century French aesthetic-decadent literature, see Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* 254, 267. Cather was known to be a fan of such literature, which strengthens the possibility that she had indeed come across Balzac's book; see O'Brien, *Willa Cather* 134-35; Woodress 119; and Brown 98, 103.

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