

The Feminization of Nature

O’Pioneers by Willa Cather follows the life of the Bergson family on the Nebraska frontier. Since the land is not always prosperous, the pioneers have to decide whether to maintain hope in the fertility of the land or move on to other forms of income. In particular, the only daughter of the family, Alexandra, shows great persistence and dedication to stay on the land and preserve its fruitfulness. Despite having three brothers, she has an appreciation and tact for working with the untamed land that no one else in the family can compare to. Willa Cather grants Alexandra stereotypical male features in order to further illuminate the feminization of nature.

While Alexandra is the only girl of the Bergson siblings, she possesses more masculine features than anyone else. The Swedish immigrant daughter quickly emerges as the courageous protagonist of the novel. Right at the beginning of the novel, the young girl is introduced in a situation where a man compliments her hair and she looks at him with a “glance of Amazonian fierceness” and makes him feel “cheap and ill-used” (Cather 3). Despite Alexandra being so young and knowing so little about her, this already establishes the way she defies traditional gender roles. As Alexandra goes on to be described further in the novel, she continuously is depicted as a strong and resourceful character. Her father, John Bergson, also recognizes these traits in her, which can be seen when Cather writes:

Before Alexandra was twelve years old she had begun to be a help to him, and as she grew older he had come to depend more and more upon her resourcefulness and good judgment. His boys were willing enough to work, but when he talked with them they usually irritated him. It was Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors. (Cather 9) .

It is clear that even as a child Alexandra possesses more agricultural wit than the men in her family. Therefore, Mr. Bergson passes off responsibility of the farm to her before he passes away. Typically, agriculture is perceived as a man's job due to all the manual labor, especially during the late 1800s, so Alexandra gaining this responsibility is a major deviation of societal norms. Women's only affiliation with the farm during that time was to be farmer's wives and take care of their men, such as Mrs. Bergson or Marie Shabata. Responsibility and decisiveness in general are often regarded as male traits, but Alexandra takes on her leadership role with ease. She feels comfortable "assigning her brothers' daily work", such as when Lou and Oscar are sent to go cut wood (Werden). It could even be suggested that Alexandra's name was chosen after Alexander the Great. Just like the iconic ruler, she rules her own personal empire on the landscape and creates prosperity in an unknown environment (Xi 960). As an adult, she continues to possess these traditionally masculine roles, such as an innovator and breadwinner. For example, Alexandra is the first farmer to put up a silo on the Divide and goes to speak to nearby farmers about crops they have been experimenting with, showing her sense of innovation and leadership on the frontier. Just like the land she works with, Alexandra is tough and persistent. While typically men are thought to be more career-oriented than women, Alexandra values her farm more than she values traditional milestones, such as getting married or having children. Throughout the novel, Alexandra is habitually described as having masculine characteristics and not following the stereotypical life path of a woman in the 1800s.

Despite Alexandra having a relationship with Carl, it never seems to be as intimate as her relationship with nature. While she does often portray male features, her marriage is an inconsistency from this portrayal, because she shows consistent interest in Carl. Alexandra and Carl have been friends since they were neighbors on the Divide, but when Carl returns as an

adult is when their relationship begins to blossom. Alexandra is also hesitant to commit to marriage unlike other women in the book, such as Marie in her young marriage to Frank. She embraces her role as a leader and is hesitant to be bound in marriage and cast into the role of a farmer's wife because she highly values her work and takes pride in her achievements with the land more than her romantic relationship. It makes sense why she marries Carl since he is described as having more feminine and softer features to compliment Alexandra's masculine nature. Cather describes him as "frail" and having a "delicate pallor in his thin face" (Cather 4). By choosing a more fragile man not involved in agriculture, Alexandra balances her own personality and it is an amicable marriage that makes sense. However, it lacks the excitement present in a typical relationship. After Carl leaves the Divide, Alexandra remarks that Carl sent her a box of orange flowers, but they withered quickly, which I would argue represents the lack of vitality in their relationship. When speaking to Carl at the end of the novel, Alexandra states "when friends marry they are safe" (Cather 122). Even right before they get married, she is still referring to her future husband as nothing more than a friend. Other relationships in the novel, such as Marie and Emil's, are relayed as passionate and emotional, but Alexandra does not seem to have this element of intensity with Carl. The marriage is practical and planned out. Alexandra has no desire to have children with him and the greatest form of intimacy mentioned is a kiss on the forehead from Carl.

In contrast to the practical relationship with Carl, the true passionate connection in Alexandra's life is her relationship with the land. She is clearly a strong character with desire and enthusiasm, but unlike other women in the novel, this passion is not directed toward men, but toward nature. She "perceives the land in intimate" ways and draws stability from it (Laird 244). In return for the emotional aid the land is to her, she puts all her effort and creativity to

improving it. While others leave the land to go pursue other lifestyles, Alexandra is loyal to this relationship in her life. Her relationship to the land is evident at the end of “Winter Memories” when Cather states:

Most of Alexandra’s happy memories were as impersonal as this one; yet to her they were very personal. Her mind was a white book, with clear writing about weather and beasts and growing things. Not many people would have cared to read it; only a happy few. She had never been in love, she had never indulged in sentimental reveries. Even as a girl she had looked upon men as work fellows. She had grown up in serious times.
(Cather 80)

This passage confirms that her happiness is found in nature, not in other humans. She is passionate about the “weather and beasts and growing things” (Cather 80). Despite her relationship with Carl, Cather makes the assertion that Alexandra has never loved or had an emotional commitment to a man. Men are only people she works with to her, meaning the true intimacy and connection in her life is to the land. Cather acknowledges that not everyone understands her mind, but to Alexandra her fulfillment comes through engaging with the land.

The masculinization of Alexandra and her close relationship with nature helps show the feminization of nature. Rather than having intimate relationships with men, Alexandra is devoted to her connection with the land. If she did not possess her masculine features, her connection with nature may just seem like an appreciation. However, her masculinity creates the striking resemblance between other relationships in the novel to her relationship with nature. By constructing this relationship, it elucidates how feminized nature is, because it shows that nature is the other half of Alexandra’s true relationship in her life.

The feminization of nature is not a new concept and it continues to be embedded in modern culture. The most common connection between nature and women is their fertility and rebirthing qualities. Nature has a continuous cycle of birth and death every season, just like women are able to reproduce and traditionally are expected to be part of the life cycle. When Romantic writing first began, authors would often compare nature and women by depicting them both as domestic, pure, peaceful and fertile. Men were represented instead as being assertive and boastful, which does not have the same connection with nature. In Romantic literature, muses were very important to these male authors and these muses were often either women or nature. Especially when men traveled, they used poetry to create a connection to females in their mind and through their writing. Therefore, women and nature are intertwined in their characteristics as well as their ability to inspire (Fay 11). Women and nature are also often both utilized as symbols of innocence. In *Naturalized Woman and Feminized Nature*, Kate Soper writes that from a colonizer's perspective, the land is "'virgin' terrain ripe for penetration" (Soper 142). In this sense, women and nature are both connected through a perceived purity and untouched nature. Women can nourish men and take care of men, while land can nourish men by providing food and financial opportunity. On the other hand, there is also a parallel between women and natural disasters. From biblical times, Eve was the original cause for sin, which she caused by disrespecting God's wish regarding nature. In modern times still, natural disasters like earthquakes or tsunamis are blamed on "Mother Nature" and hurricanes are consistently named after women. For these various reasons, nature has been feminized in the past and continues to be closely connected to women in modern times.

While nature has been feminized throughout time in many forms of literature, *O'Pioneers* serves as a distinguishing example of this feminization. Willa Cather presents the land in more

detail than most characters are even described. Alexandra's character is structured in a way that allows her to further the feminization of the land and show the way land has been closely connected to women throughout literature.

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