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Subjugated Bodies: Containing Female Sexuality in the Works of Willa Cather

by

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Writing in the early twentieth century, Willa Cather explored the situating of women into opposed, constructed categories within the disciplinary patriarchal heterosexist framework. During this time period the role of sexuality was questioned greatly, as citizens debated whether the individual or the state should have control over a person’s sexuality. While Cather avoided making public political statements, she recognized the limitations placed upon women living in this system.

In her novels *O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, and My Antonia*, Cather shows at once a keen awareness of the way female sexuality is regulated within this patriarchal system, as well as an attentiveness to the dangers of women’s free or unregulated expression of their sexualities. A tension exists within her work then, as she is clearly critical of the constraints placed upon women’s bodies and sexual passions, but is no less critical of any full expression of female sexuality outside of these restrictions. Thus, the author almost critiques a free expression of female sexuality, acknowledging that it often leads to destruction, devastation, and at times even death.

The tension that the novels acknowledge, is the contradiction which characterizes the whole patriarchal system that disciplines women’s bodies and minds through placement into a designated category. Cather’s work recognizes that these antithetical perspectives do not work independently, but as a single elaborated disciplinary framework. Thus, in *O Pioneers!*, Marie represents both roles of regulated wife and that of seductive whore, signifying both categorizations are needed for the regulation and discipline of women’s bodies, minds, and sexualities. The novels attempt to resolve this tension or problem by adopting an attitude of mistrust towards the unrestricted expression of feminine passions, upholding masculinized women as the type of female to emulate. Cather’s work acknowledges the realistic tragedy in an inevitable social containment of the free expression of female sexuality.
# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction ........................................... 1

Chapter 2: Noncompliant Bodies: Lamenting the Overtly Sexual in *O’ Pioneers!* .............. 17

Chapter 3: Channeled Bodies: Obtaining Divine Spirituality through the Erotic .............. 44

Chapter 4: Constructed Bodies: The Search for Identity in *My Ántonia* ......................... 76

Bibliography ...................................................... 109
Chapter 1: Introduction

Writing in the early 20th century, Willa Cather was famous for her powerful novels about life on the frontier. While readers might think of affirmative tales of agrarian women, they do not usually associate sex with Cather’s work, as her fiction excludes descriptive passages of the physical act of sex. Hence, Blanche Gelfant points out in her article, “The Forgotten Reaping Hook: Sex in My Ántonia,” “her characters avoid sexual union with significant and sometimes bizarre ingenuity, or achieve it only in dreams” (95). While Cather’s characters often skirt sex encounters, her work associates female sexuality and death. Focusing on Cather’s *O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark,* and *My Ántonia,* I argue that through the physical representations of the characters’ bodies, Cather’s novels acknowledge a tragic, inevitable containment of female sexuality. Cather’s work regrets this suppression of sexuality, wishing it could be freely expressed. But while her work identifies an inescapable containment of sexuality, the novels also critique female sexuality, as the women and their bodies are held responsible for the devastation which often occurs. For instance, in *My Ántonia,* Jim holds Ántonia responsible for his almost being raped. Rather than blame his attacker, he focuses the accountability on the female body and sexuality. Cather’s work insinuates that female sexuality leads to destruction, humiliation, and, at times, even death. This in demonstrated in *O Pioneers!,* where Emil and Marie die as a result of their adulterous sexual relationship.

Perhaps partially due to her own background, Cather realized the limitations placed upon women living this patriarchal heterosexist system. Recognized for her
prairie literature, Willa Cather was an influential and controversial female novelist of the early twentieth century. Born in 1873, she was raised on a sheep farm in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. In 1883, the young Cather and her parents relocated to the farming community around Red Cloud, Nebraska, upon the burning of their barn. Her grandparents had already settled in the Nebraska area (Acocella 4). Cather came from an average agrarian family. Her mother, Jennie, was a spirited woman who was not afraid of using the whip when her children misbehaved. Cather was closest to her father, Charles, whom she described as an unassertive and compassionate man. The Cather family only spent about a year and a half out on the prairie before moving into the town of Red Cloud, where her father established a small farm loans and insurance office. Cather made many adult friends, and even installed herself in some of those friends’ libraries, as she thirsted after knowledge. Upon reaching her teenage years, Cather was granted her own room, and there she pored over diverse texts without having to worry about disturbing her siblings her. In her work, *The Song of the Lark*, she recognizes the significance of acquiring one’s own room, as her character, Thea, develops a secret, more artistic self. Regarded as her most autobiographical piece, the work suggests the importance of Cather’s own room (Acocella 8).

While Willa Cather wrote about Nebraska and the prairie, she lived and worked in the East. Cather made her residence in New York City until her death in 1947. Living with her companion, Edith Lewis, Cather had intimate friendships with women throughout her life. She is thought to have had a romantic affair with Louise Pound and an “abiding passion” for Isabelle McClung (O’Brien 126). In today’s setting, I cannot address sexuality in Cather’s work without addressing the modern claim that Cather was,
indeed, a lesbian. If this claim were true, her lesbianism would have influenced her outlook on female sexuality and its place in society. Many modern critics maintain that Cather was a lesbian, and some believe that the novels she wrote should be read as lesbian love novels. While in past decades, Cather was praised for her Christian subjects and beliefs, the tides have changed as her private letters are read and reread. As an example of a current reading of Cather, Marilee Lindemann, in her work *Willa Cather: Queering America*, argues that Cather's fiction is essentially a “queer” work as she criticizes heterosexuality and offers the readers almost erotic portraits of feminine friendship.

Although no conclusions have been reached, recent scholarship has addressed the importance of defining Cather as a “lesbian” and as a “lesbian writer” (O'Brien 127). As Sharon O'Brien points out in her text, *Willa Cather: Emerging Voice*, defining lesbianism is a difficult task, as one must pose the question as to whether or not lesbianism requires “genital sexual experience” with other women. Some critics necessitate this discovery before labeling an author as a lesbian. Others believe that lesbianism exists as women who prefer to love other women, and thus, choose to live in a nurturing environment with other women (O'Brien 127). While lesbianism is a slippery term to apply to an author, for the purpose of this study, I will define lesbianism as requiring genital contact. I do not believe Cather would have desired to be situated in this or any category, as she ardently strove to avoid classification. As it has never been proven Cather had any genital contact with other women, I am hesitant to categorize her as a lesbian. However, she did prefer the company of other females and perhaps had lesbian leanings. She chose never to marry, deciding to spend her time in the company of other females. She also
went through an adolescent phase where she adopted masculine dress and called herself William. These preferences and lesbian tendencies most probably affected her view of sexuality. As a woman who preferred the companionship of other women, Cather was perhaps more inclined to censor female sexuality, as a tool for the patriarchy's control and pleasure. She might be more aware of the inevitable containment of noncompliant, sexual, female bodies. I will not categorize Cather as a lesbian, because she recognized how categorization is another means of controlling women. However, her tendencies towards this sexual orientation affected her thoughts and beliefs about female sexuality. Through the analysis of the characters' physical bodies, I argue that Cather's work acknowledges an inevitable containment of sexuality, while at the same time critiquing female sexuality. As sexuality becomes a means to produce subjected, docile bodies, Cather's work recognizes a need for the repression of female sexuality, as it often only leads to humiliation, degradation, and death.

The tension in Cather's work could exist because she was writing during a time when the role of sexuality was questioned, and citizens debated as to what sphere should have control over it. As John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman demonstrate in their work, *Intimate Matters*, questions about sexuality and its control abounded during this time period. In the early twentieth century, although birth-control literature was difficult to obtain due to the Comstock laws, women still managed to control their birth rates and hence, fertility rates continued to drop.\(^1\) As a result, women had more time to expend upon outside ventures, such as education or labor (189). Partially as a result of this

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\(^1\) The Comstock law, passed in 1873 and named for its supporter Anthony Comstock, forbade the "circulation of contraceptive information." The Comstock law was strengthened in the 1880's and 1890's as obscene material was prevented from being circulated (D'Emilio and Freedman 60).
movement, citizens became concerned over the increase of women in the public sphere. They questioned whether the individual or the state should have control over female sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Social Purity Movement arose as a result of the Second Great Awakening. These advocates theoretically resisted the movement of sexuality outside of the family and private sphere, as they believed that sexuality should be privately suppressed. They ultimately contributed to state control of sexuality. Hence, as they developed their arguments in public, they inadvertently advanced the discourse of sexuality in the public sphere (D’emilio and Freedman 150). Social Purity activists argued for a single sexual standard, accruing to which both men and women were to be held to the same guidelines of purity. The Social Purity Movement divided into different segments, as citizens wanted to focus on various problems. One of these groups, the Social Hygiene Reformers, sought to eliminate venereal diseases and prostitution and implement sex education programs within schools. During this time period, rampant prostitution existed in many cities. While prostitution was viewed as an acceptable outlet and necessary evil for men, women were forbidden from such sexual freedom. With the assistance of the YMCA and also the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), these reformers fought to end prostitution and attain a single sexual standard for both men and women (D’emilio and Freedman 205). Also part of the Social Purity Movement, the WCTU was founded in 1874 and originated among small-town Midwestern women, who desired to refine male sexuality and spiritualize marital

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2 Occurring in the late 1820’s and the 1830’s, the Second Great Awakening was a Protestant religious revival which encouraged men and women to strive for spiritual perfection. From this revival, women, who consisted of the majority of converts, believed that it was their “special mission” to uphold the moral standards of society (D’Emilio and Freedman 141).
relations. They called for voluntary motherhood, in which women consented to sex relations, rather than being forced to perform sex, and later motherhood, as a duty. They argued that women should be allowed to desire to procreate and make the choice to become mothers (D’emilio and Freedman 154). Yet, as these reformers sought state assistance to control prostitution and sexual deviance, they moved sexualities further from the home and family and into the public sphere.

However, while the WCTU, social purity advocates and social hygiene reformers attempted to control sexualities, the liberal free love movement stressed its belief that love should be the basis of sexual relations, not marriage. Although free lovers criticized prostitution, they also critiqued marriage, wanting to abolish it as an institution. These reformers imagined a society where all people would coexist equally (D’emilio and Freedman 161). They believed the individual should regulate sexuality. In relation to these different reformations, Cather labeled herself a conservative. Cather attempted to distance herself from political movements, refusing to make public, political statements (Reynolds 8). Yet, her writing abounds with references to sexuality and the human body. While Cather agreed with some of the Progressive politics, she ultimately detested the WCTU, believing they were small-minded, as she believed a woman could financially triumph of her own hard work and determination. Hence, she disliked the WCTU’s policy that women’s roles of caregiver and mother should be celebrated. Instead, Cather believed that a woman should earn her place within the public sphere, rather than being entitled to it because of a prescribed gender role (Kaye 23). Perhaps in response to these sentiments, within her *O Pioneers!*, Cather portrays the intelligent, determined Alexandra, who achieves financial success by her own strengths. While the novel
suggests free love doctrine, as Marie and Emil act upon their love for each other, this ideology is critiqued as the lovers are punished for their act of adultery. The novel appears to align itself more with the social purity movement and the WCTU’s beliefs as it upholds the institution of marriage and contains deviant sexual behavior. Yet, through the employment and execution of bodies, the novel realizes the tragedy of an inevitable containment of sexuality, despite Cather’s proclaimed conservatism.

Modern feminist theory argues women should reclaim and take pride in their bodies. Cather, like modern feminists, recognized the limitations placed on women in the early twentieth century. Although her novels do offer valid portraits of women escaping traditional gender roles, her female characters are still sexually contained within masculine discourse and society. Her work demonstrates the destruction and loss which results from the noncompliancy of the female body and the expression of feminine sexuality. For the purpose of this study, I will attempt to locate sexuality according to Michel Foucault’s definition in his work, *The History of Sexuality*, in which Foucault argues that people’s sexual lives are as disciplined as every other facet of their lives. Foucault addresses the relationship between sexuality and power, describing how sexuality is employed as a complex system, which not only subdues individuals, but also convinces them they are in control. He establishes that sexuality is the “stimulation of bodies” and the “intensification of pleasures” (106). Sexuality is the arousing and gratifying of the body. It is also an “incitement” or encouragement to discourse on the subject. As a great discourse arises over the subject, people take pleasure in talking, obsessing, and even prohibiting sex. Such discourse on sexuality also produces a specific
set of conditions or lists of deviant behaviors. The discursive power attempts to produce "normal" people, and in doing so it categorizes others as deviant (Brown 45). The noncompliant body is one which does not follow the regulations set forth by the dominant power or discourse. Interestingly enough, Foucault also believed that for the dominant power relations to survive, they necessitated resistance. Many of these resistances actually support the power by making it appear irresistible or perhaps less cruel than it really is (Brown 49).

While Cather joins the discourse on sexuality, her agrarian trilogy tends to portray sexuality as primarily a negative and destructive force. Writing during a time when the role of sexuality was greatly questioned, Cather critiques female sexuality, whilst authorizing women to evade traditional gender patterns. Thus, in *The Song of the Lark*, the primary character, Thea, unconventionally employs her body to gain fame, wealth, and limited independence. Yet, Cather's critique is not simply the result of a morally conservative woman's distrust of female sexuality. While her novels portray sexually deviant women as being punished, her representations are genuinely realist and tragic. In *O Pioneers!* Cather presents a tragic story, with which we are all too familiar, that of the unhappy wife who is crucified for her act of adultery. Her tragic realism implies if not a critique, a heightened awareness of the destructive, patriarchal system of imposed binaries. Thus, Cather's texts are fraught with tensions, as the text validates women employing their bodies to escape conventional gender roles, it also realizes an unalterable containment of the sexual female body. Hence, although Thea gains opportunities and power denied to other women, she is still sexually contained as she only channels her sexuality into her art.
The tension that appears in Cather’s work is the tension which characterizes the whole patriarchal and heterosexist structure that serves to discipline women’s bodies, sexualities, and essentially their minds. In this dominant system of power, men and women are organized into antithetical pairs. While man is seen as the subject or active agent, woman exists as the object. Man defines his sense of self by comparing himself to the other, woman. This patriarchal, heterosexist system classifies women into one of two categories: the idealized, chaste, regulated woman or the demonized, erotic, seductive, castrating woman. However, Cather recognizes that these two opposed perceptions do not exist independently, but rather as a single convoluted disciplinary framework. In other words, Cather acknowledges neither the regulation of women’s bodies through the heterosexist system of marriage or women’s entirely free, yet destructive, release of their desires outside of these accepted norms of behavior. In *O Pioneers!* she depicts Marie, who occupies both binary positions. Marie represents not only the highly regulated and controlled, virtuous wife, but also the reprehensible, sexual seductress who brings doom upon the man she loves. Her situation and outcome is tragic, as the novel recognizes Marie has no chance at happiness. Marie is continually situated into an either-or category. Through the depictions of Marie, the novel appears to reaffirm the role of wife and the values of the patriarchal system as a whole. Female sexuality appears negative and destructive as it is punished for its act of “free” expression. Cather’s awareness of this destructive system of organized binaries would explain her distinct tendency to idealize women who successfully repress their sexualities. Her female characters who successfully suppress their sexualities achieve independence, by evading sexual classification. Hence, she valorizes Alexandra who evades both the roles of docile,
subjugated wife and that of sexually expressive seductress. Her novels attempt to evade the whole destructive patriarchal, heterosexist system, which polices women’s sexualities, bodies, and desires for autonomy.

While Foucault does not concentrate primarily on women, his work, *Discipline and Punish*, analyzes how disciplinary measures are taken to control the body.

What was then [late eighteenth century onward] being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’, was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. (138)

In other words, the formation of “docile bodies” requires that a continuous coercion be focused upon the operations of bodily activity, including the separation and control of the body’s movements and timing. The “machinery of power” Foucault imagines the body entering is the historical moment when the body was not only directed at the growth of its skills, but also was focused on becoming more obedient and useful (137-138). For his arguments, Foucault employs Bentham’s Panopticon, an apparatus for observing prison inmates. In the Panoptic system, inmates would always see the prison tower before their eyes. However, they would not see the guards in the tower. The inmate would never know if he was being looked upon, but could be certain that he possibly might always be watched (201). Docility is achieved as the person comes to the sense that he or she is under constant observation. Foucault maintains that in the panoptic system bodies are exploited and controlled through a variety of mechanisms. Power was and is achieved
through the regulation and manipulation of bodies. The subject internalizes the observer’s view, becoming a docile body.

Sandra Lee Bartky, in her article “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” examines the ways in which the Panoptic system regulates and subjugates women.

The woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara run, who worries that the wind or rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle, or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy. It is also the reflection in woman’s consciousness of the fact that she is under surveillance in ways he is not, that whatever else she may become, she is importantly a body designed to please and excite” (80).

Women, unlike men, are expected to “make-up” and feminize themselves. Bartky argues that in doing so, they commit themselves to the Panoptic system, subjecting themselves to disciplines designed to control the individual. Women obey the patriarchy, as they internalize the sense that they are always being observed, like the prison inmate.

Women, specifically, lose their power as they become sexualized beings, concerned with the proper execution and deployment of their bodies. They become “docile” as they are subjugated to a certain space, actions, and essentially attempt to express their femininity and sexuality.

Bartky addresses how Foucault concentrates on man, but his principles especially apply to the subjection of the feminine body (65). She argues, “femininity is an artifice, an achievement” (65). Women are controlled, as they are led to believe they must discipline their bodies. The female body becomes a woman’s enemy, as she disciplines
her body through diets (66). Women are also more subjected than men in their “manner of movement and in their lived spatiality” (67). Thus, women are subjected as they restrict their movements and space, holding their arms close to their sides and crossing their legs when they sit (68). As Bartkly points out, “feminine movement, gesture, and posture must exhibit not only constriction, but grace as well, and a certain eroticism restrained by modesty” (68). Women are transformed into subjects and docile bodies, as they endeavor to conform to society’s definition of feminine, sexual woman. Women are sexually contained, as they discipline their bodies to comply with the ideas of “femininity.” They exist as noncompliant when they reject these traditional ideas of femininity or employ their bodies to gain sexual freedom.

Cather’s novels emphasize the inadequacies of this system of sexuality. In regulating the body in attempt to express their sexuality, women lose power and agency. As Cather works within this system of beliefs, her work critiques female sexuality, as she realizes that in expressing her sexuality a woman is controlled. Thus, her work valorizes more masculinized characters, such as Alexandra, for their ability to gain power in a patriarchal society. In her work, Cather presents a variety of noncompliant bodies, women who employ their bodies attempting to achieve happiness, love, or independence. Yet, while her work praises the nonsexual noncompliancy of Alexandra, it censors the erotic, noncompliant woman. I argue that through the bodily representations of Cather’s characters, her work critiques female sexuality and acknowledges an inescapable containment of sexuality.
For the initial chapter on *O Pioneers!*, I will examine the connection between sexuality and death, as seen in the physical deaths of Emil and Marie. While the novel insists that containment of female sexuality is tragic, her work also censures it, as Marie’s sexuality holds responsibility for the novel’s devastation. Portrayed as a deviant, sexual woman, Marie forsakes her marriage to Frank Shabata, loving Emil Bergson beneath a mulberry tree. As her husband happens upon the affair, he brutally guns the lovers down. The bodies are spectacularly displayed beneath the tree, signifying a gazed-upon quality and the inescapable social punishment, which results from deviant or over-exercised sexuality. Female sexuality is critiqued through the physical displacement and condemnation of Marie’s body. The characters’ bodies serve to not only reinforce their personality type, but also to emphasize the negative outcome of over-exercised sexuality. Yet, the novel validates women employing their bodies to escape traditional gender roles, as Emil’s sister, Alexandra, rejects her sexuality and femininity to become a land owner. She evades sexual categorization, refusing to comply with the role of regulated wife or erotic temptress. Recognizing that both sexuality and femininity could impede her from achieving agency, independence, and wealth, Alexandra adopts a masculine identity, as she labors outdoors. Alexandra’s suppression of her sexuality surfaces in her dreams, though, signifying the relationship between sexuality and death. While Alexandra does not experience a physical death, her dreams symbolize the outcome of death for sexuality. *O Pioneers!* maintains that a woman may employ her body to defy traditional codes of behavior, as long as she continues to repress her sexuality. The novel also sees this inevitable containment of sexuality as tragic, whilst critiquing deviant, female sexuality. The noncompliant, female sexual body results only in public humiliation and a
spectacularly monstrous punishment. Marie’s sexual resistance and resulting bodily punishment inadvertently supports the primary power relations, making it appear that resistance is futile.

For the following chapter on *The Song of the Lark*, I analyze how a Wagnerian opera singer, Thea, escapes traditional gender roles of domesticity to achieve financial independence, fame, and autonomy. Unlike *O Pioneers!*, where Cather acknowledges an unavoidable containment of sexuality through death, *The Song of the Lark* implies that art is an acceptable outlet for sexual expression. Employing her body to channel her sexual energy into her art, Thea appears to achieve sexual freedom, as she is free from the sexual obligations of marriage. Like Alexandra, Thea, too, represses her sexual desires and escapes traditional gender roles, in order to achieve independence. However, her sexual independence is an illusion, for Thea channels her sexuality into her art. In expending her sexual energy in art, she is not free to use it in other types of physical relationships. Also, the novel contains Thea, constructing her through the male view. Her male admirers project their desires upon her, and Thea internalizes these feelings, performing what they think and desire. Following Wagner’s philosophy, Thea enters the “priesthood of art,” only by embodying and internalizing the thoughts and desires of her (male) audience (Cather, Kingdom of Art 153). She internalizes the masculine gaze, and by focusing her sexuality into her work, she is contained, and the patriarchy is saved from her utilizing her sexual nature on more dangerous practices or challenging behaviors. Thea could threaten the patriarchy, as she is an extremely successful, financially independent woman. Also, by being unmarried for most of the text, Thea threatens the system as she maintains the sexual freedom to choose or reject the men she wants as her
lovers. However, Thea does not challenge the patriarchy, as she has internalized the masculine gaze and desires. Her body serves to reflect her channeling of her sexual energies into her art, as well as to reinforce her later sexual containment.

In the last chapter on *My Ántonia*, I argue that the correlation between sexuality and death still exists, although not as prevalent as was seen in *O Pioneers!*. The novel employs this correlation to suggest an unavoidable containment of female sexuality. Also, the gender confusion, either real or projected, in the novel is a means of sexually containing the female characters. While gender confusion is seen as a negative and detrimental force to Ántonia, Alexandra employs it to gain freedom from traditional gender roles. However, Alexandra is secure in her more “masculinized” identity, whereas Ántonia is less confident in her gender identity. Ántonia continually vacillates between a masculine and feminine identity, and thus, I would argue she is more gender confused than Alexandra. Gender confusion works as a means of sexual containment, as the woman does not feel secure in a gender category. Although the novel is based on Ántonia Shimerda, it revolves around Jim Burden, his construction of Ántonia, and his quest to locate his “precious, the incommunicable past” (289). As an unreliable narrator, Jim takes the reader through his and Ántonia’s friendship and consistently constructs her character as he desires. She becomes a figure or symbol, and eventually he attempts to place her into the role of triumphant mother. However, as Jim attempts to regain his past and reenter childhood as one of Ántonia’s children, her body reveals that she has lost her own identity. Like Marie, Ántonia refuses to be a compliant, “docile” body. As she sexually rebels, the system inevitably silences her, as she is broken and suffers from a lost sense of self. Consistently vacillating between a masculine and feminine identity,
Ántonia struggles to find her own identity. In the final section, Jim tries to situate her into the role of mother. Jim reinforces this reading as he calls her by the title “mother” instead of by her given name, demonstrating she is no longer Ántonia but exists as a construction. Yet, the text does not even allow her that role, as it emphasizes that the children are “Cuzak’s Boys.” Forced into the disciplined role of wife, Ántonia experiences gender confusion, as well as losing her identity, remaining sexually contained.

Yet, Ántonia is not the only character, who experiences gender confusion and is sexually contained. Lena, a profoundly sexual and independent woman is also sexually contained as Jim abandons her story in favor of Ántonia’s. Jim depicts Lena as a femme fatale. Dangerous, seductive, and castrating, Lena resists Jim’s efforts to contain her sexuality. Yet, Jim constructs her as experiencing gender confusion, and thus, contains her threatening sexuality, as she becomes simply another “docile” body. Lena, like Ántonia, lacks both the power and voice to change her own narrative. Thus, the physical depictions of the bodies reinforce this gender confusion and loss of identity. Hence, the novel realizes a social regulation and fashioning of female bodies and identities in masculine discourse, which frequently results in gender confusion and an inescapable containment of female sexuality. My Ántonia examines how these antithetical pairs are a means of controlling women’s sexualities, bodies, and minds, as the patriarchal system designs women to fit within a certain role or category.
Chapter 2: Noncompliant Bodies: Lamenting the Overtly Sexual in

*O Pioneers!*

In her work, *O Pioneers!*, Cather portrays sexuality as primarily a negative force, of which women should be wary and cautious. Cather wrote during a time period when the role of sexuality was questioned greatly, as people debated as to whether or not it should be contained and regulated. Hence, Cather addresses issues of bodily representation and sexuality. In her 1913 novel, Cather weaves the story of a pair of lovers, who are destined for death for their act of adultery. Acting upon their deviant sexual desires, Marie and Emil appear to commit the most punishable crime, as they bend their minds toward the carnal, forgetting their daily realities or obligations, such as Marie’s duty to her husband, Frank. In employing the term “deviant” I refer to Foucault’s definition of acts which do not correspond with those set up as “normal” by the primary power relations. For this paper, deviant sexual acts are those that do not comply with traditional codes of behavior. During this time period, conventional sexual behavior still held that sex without the final goal of procreation was considered deviant. Sex should only exist between heterosexual, married couples. Adultery, homosexuality, sodomy, etc. were all considered devious (D’emilio and Freedman 192-4). Cather’s novel reveals the illusory qualities of sexuality, demonstrating how people can be caught up in the promised delights of love and passion, only to be disappointed and fated to death for indulging in such bodily pleasures. *O Pioneers!* proposes that sexuality and death are inseparably connected to each other. Hence, the symbolization of death reinforces this conclusion. Yet, a tension exists, as Alexandra masculinizes herself and later unites with Death as he becomes her lover. *O Pioneers!* associates death with an
over-exercised or deviant sexuality as the novel views the result of sex as a loss of commonsense, often resulting in the expiration of the individual’s better judgment. The novel demonstrates this conclusion through the emphasis upon and death of the body, suggesting sexuality must be contained if one does not wish to experience great loss. By inevitable containment of sexuality, I refer to a containment which is almost natural, as forces outside or greater than our control produce it. However, this containment is far from natural in that, for Emil and Marie, sexual containment comes in the social form of a jealous husband. Hence, in referring to an inevitable containment of sexuality, I maintain that this containment most often results from the current social ideology.

Written in 1913, *O Pioneers!* maintains that the agent of death inevitably contains an over-exercised sexuality. Yet, the novel reveals an interesting tension. Whereas it acknowledges a tragic containment of female sexuality, the work also critiques sexuality. While other characters participate in sexual deviancy or an over-exercised sexuality, the novel portrays Marie as responsible for all of the devastation. Yet, Marie is also the most sympathetic character in the novel, signifying that the reader should sympathize with her plight and actions. The sympathetic character calls for readers’ understanding and empathy. Situating her in this role, the novel bemoans Marie’s fate, despite an acknowledgement that female sexuality shoulders the blame. While the novel realizes a containment of sexuality, a tension exists as it concedes that the patriarchal society often blames female sexuality for the destruction.

Set in the small, agrarian community of Hanover, Nebraska, *O Pioneers!* revolves around a strong, young female, Alexandra. Upon the death of her father, Alexandra becomes proprietor of the family farm. While she is co-owner with her brothers, they
look to her for advice in business matters, which was unheard of in this time period. The farm prospers, and later, the children divide the land. Her two older brothers marry but Alexandra remains content to run her own farm, surrounding herself with immigrant girls and the misfit, Ivar. Emil, Alexandra’s youngest brother, attends college and later travels to Mexico, but always returns out of his love for their neighbor, Marie. Yet, Marie is already married to Frank Shabata, and her love for Emil ultimately leads to their death at the conclusion of the novel, as her jealous husband guns the lovers down underneath the mulberry tree. Devastated by the loss of her brother and closest confidante, Alexandra turns to the comfort of her transient, childhood friend, Carl. Carl’s family left Nebraska when he was a young man, upon falling into financial ruin. Carl returns sixteen years later, and even then he deserts Alexandra again when pressured to do so by her brothers. Rather than accepting Alexandra’s love and generosity, Carl abandons her, feeling like he has nothing to offer her. Upon his return, he and Alexandra plan to wed, despite that marriage was unheard of at her age of forty years. At the conclusion of the novel, Alexandra bases her marriage not on passion, but upon a deep need for friendship and companionship.

*O Pioneers!* depicts a variety of sexualities, from Alexandra, who masculinizes herself, to Marie, who indulges her sexual nature. She also characterizes Alexandra’s brothers, Lou and Oscar, as asexual beings, who are dull, critical, and relatively unsympathetic. Through the depictions of these characters’ sexualities, as well as the outcomes of their sexual behavior, the novel maintains that an overemphasized sexuality leads to heartache and seemingly condemns female sexuality as the impetus for such devastation. By overemphasized or over-exercised sexuality, I refer to a sexuality or
passion which affects every area of the person’s life, resulting in an overflowing of spirit and happiness. Such sexuality pays no heed to behavior codes, gratifying its desires in any manner. While the novel does not define an acceptable form of sexuality, it does condemn deviant or over-exercised sexuality. No where does the novel offer the reader a viable marriage based upon any other feeling than companionship. Frances W. Kaye, in her work, *Isolation and Masquerade*, examines this theme of destructive sexuality as she argues that Cather employed masquerading narrators to critique heterosexuality and establish veiled homosexual relationships.

Heterosexual passion may be superficially appealing, but it brings at best death and at worst disgrace and degradation. To fall in love this way, Cather seems to believe, is to become obsessed by love, to fall out of a healthy relationship with reality into a solipsistic and self-destructive state that inevitably leads to disaster. (52)

Kaye describes the results “passion” typically brings to a heterosexual relationship in a Cather novel, as can be seen in Marie and Emil. Marie and Emil experience this passion, and are doomed to “disaster.” Alexandra does not become obsessed with love and passion, marrying instead for companionship. However, while she does not experience physical death and “degradation,” the novel employs her character to reinforce the idea between sexuality and death. While Alexandra does find contentment in the idea of death, her male-identified character isolates her from the companionship and community of other women, resulting in overwhelming feelings of loneliness. In valorizing Alexandra as a woman to emulate, the novel attempts to evade the patriarchal system that functions to label and control women’s sexualities.
Alexandra’s Masculinization and Rejection of Sexuality

The novel portrays Alexandra as an unemotional, powerful woman, who has no need or desire for a sexual relationship of any type. The text begins with a description of Alexandra’s body and carriage: “His sister was a tall, strong girl, and 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)” (2). Described as intelligent and determined, Alexandra has a purpose in life and knows exactly where she desires to go. She wears men’s clothing and carries it with the air of a “young soldier.” Cather’s description of Alexandra is almost masculine, as if she is like a soldier, who has a specific motivation and direction in her life. Comfortable with her identity, Alexandra does not question her identity. Yet, she employs her body in an unconventional manner via gestures, clothing, and carriage, utilizing it to gain the power, labor, and responsibility of a man.

As the scene progresses, a traveling man pins Alexandra with an admiring gaze. Alexandra responds to such a gaze with “Amazonian fierceness and drew in her lower lip – most unnecessary severity” (3). While the man leaves feeling abused, Alexandra obviously feels ill-used to be gazed upon in such a manner. The novel suggests her response should be applauded, in that she refuses to allow herself to be looked upon and objectified. Again, she exercises her body to take control of the situation and extinguish the offending man’s impudent gaze. As she draws in her lower lip and glares upon the man, one can almost see her straighten her body and raise her head, drawing strength and character from her physical form. Indeed, Alexandra completely rejects her sexuality
with such a response, squelching any qualities typically considered feminine such as humility and meekness. Normally “fierceness” is a male-attributed trait, but Alexandra employs it, spurning any man who attempts to look upon her as simply an object of beauty. Beth Newman addresses the subject of the male spectator and the female object in her article, “The Situation of the Looker-On.” Newman addresses Freud’s reading of the Medusa, suggesting that more important and unsettling than the Medusa turning men to stone is the fact that the Medusa defiantly looks back: “Such defiance is surely unsettling, disturbing the pleasure the male subject takes in gazing and the hierarchal relations by which he asserts his dominance” (451). Like the rebellious Medusa, Alexandra refuses to be objectified, and thus, disturbs not only the traveling man’s pleasure, but also the “hierarchal relations” of gender. Alexandra gains power by gazing back, and like Medusa’s on-lookers, the traveling man leaves feeling frightened and as if “some one had taken advantage of him” (3). Thus, through the employment of her body and its functions, Alexandra refuses to comply with the aspect of traditional Western thought that women should be passive and submissive, taking the position of the “looker-on.” Alexandra evades placement within the patriarchal heterosexist system of power. She cannot be classified as the chaste, discreet wife, as she assumes authority by gazing back. At the same time, she refuses the role of dangerous, seductive whore, by adopting a decidedly masculine attire and attitude. By employing her body to repress her femininity and sexuality, Alexandra escapes categorization into a sexual binary, gaining independence.

When the reader next sees Alexandra, she is a mature woman, still employing her body in unconventional behavior to achieve authority. Alexandra rejects her sexuality,
maintaining a more masculinized identity, as she runs her “own house” and rejects the idea of working in the kitchen (35). Alexandra’s behavior can be seen as masculine, as she is drawn against traditional gender norms. Traditionally, man is viewed as the active provider of the family, while females are supposed to be humble, submissive, and subservient individuals. Dorothy Dinnerstein, in her work, *The Rocking of the Cradle, and the Ruling of the World*, explains these conventional gender categories or behaviors. As her title suggests, Dinnerstein points out that while men are in charge of “ruling the world,” women are supposed to stay in the home tending the children and private affairs. A double sexual standard exists, as men are free to “come and go – geographically or psychologically – from the place where they are most intimate” (208). However, women must wait for the man to return, being “sexually available” for him upon his arrival (208). Implicit in this double sexual standard is the idea that while femininity implies a docile, mothering attitude, masculinity entails activity, independence, and dominance. Interestingly enough, although women are supposed to be submissive and meek, the gender norm of femininity often implies a gossiping nature and willingness to talk. Also, while men are thought to be industrious, decision makers, they are also silent creators or providers. The roles Dinnerstein describes are those adopted in the patriarchal system. Dinnerstein focuses on the role of woman as an idealized, submissive wife, while man is defined against this type of classification, as the active agent and subject. *O Pioneers!* depicts Alexandra refusing to comply with these traditional gender roles, as she defies both roles of prescribed sexuality, that of chaste wife or demonized woman. Alexandra adopts a more masculine identity, in working and managing the farm outside of the private sphere, and thus achieves existential independence. Cather herself might have
valorized Alexandra because she too attempted to find autonomy on the margins of the system, which closely regulates and disciplines women’s sexualities as a form of control.

Upon Carl’s return years later, the text describes Alexandra as a sensible, industrious woman: “she still has the same calmness and deliberation of manner, the same clear eyes, and she still wears her hair in two braids wound around her head” (34). The novel’s description of her corresponds with the classic mode in which Cather describes her heroines (Kaye 23). Cather usually describes her heroines as typically male-identified females, who employ reason, industriousness, and diligence, whereas her minor female characters are flighty, spontaneous, irrational beings. Thus, Alexandra, Thea, and Ántonia all reject traditional views of femininity, striving to gain more power or financial success. Alexandra suppresses her femininity that she may gain the power typically granted only to men. She assumes the character of being calm and deliberate in all her actions, as well as being a suntanned hard worker, who can adequately manage the farm. The novel describes Alexandra’s body to reinforce the type of character or personality she displays. The body acts as an agent responsible for the woman’s personality. Her “clear eyes” suggest that she focuses on and reasons through all of her actions, refusing to be blinded or distracted by life’s more insignificant matters or material goods. Alexandra’s hairstyle reinforces her ambivalence about appearances or frivolity. By wearing her hair in braids, she does not allow it to hinder her work, demonstrating her industriousness and determination. Hence, the physical body operates as a way to strengthen and accentuate a person’s character, as well as revealing Alexandra’s unconventional behavior.
As the scene continues, the narrator notes that Alexandra does not speak much at the dinner table, but always listens attentively when her male laborers talk, no matter how foolish the topics (34). The novel shows Alexandra gaining power and agency, as it portrays Alexandra replacing the stereotypical male figure as the head of the household. The text emphasizes that she does "not talk much at the table," signifying it wants to distance Alexandra from other women who might be thought to participate in idle chitchat. Rather, this scene inverts gender roles and traditional stereotypes as the men participate in idle chitchat. The female, Alexandra, represents the strong, silent male, who rules his homestead with a calm, quiet resolve.

However, Alexandra’s lack of femininity has certain negative results. While Alexandra almost single-handedly restores the farm to prosperity, in part due to her more traditionally thought “masculine” qualities, this determination to make the farm prosper brings repercussions. As she expresses to Carl on several occasions, Alexandra feels isolated and alone. When she expresses her wish to marry Carl, her brothers cannot fathom the idea, as they have never viewed her as a real, feminine woman. Emil reflects upon her decision, thinking he is “a little ashamed for his sister” as if “there was something indecorous in her proposal” (69). While part of his lack of understanding comes from Alexandra’s more advanced age, Emil cannot fully perceive her desire, as he has never viewed her as a sexual, feminine woman. Living an unconventional life of an agrarian owner, Alexandra employs her body to masculinize herself and completely rejects any type of a sexual persona. While I recognize that masculinity is as sexual as femininity, Alexandra chooses to suppress her sexual desires and femininity, both of which could hinder her achievement of a successful farm. In adopting a masculine
persona, Alexandra gains more power and agency. Yet, one of the disadvantages of
Alexandra’s masculinization is the restrictions set upon her behavior. While Alexandra
gains freedoms denied to other women, such as meaningful work and the respect of her
male companions, she is denied other desired opportunities like marriage and love.

Alexandra obtains freedom and the power to control her own life through the
noncompliancy of her body, though. While she does not openly rebel in a sexual manner,
she refuses to comply with traditional ideas of a woman’s role. A woman’s place was
thought to be in the private sphere of the home, taking care of the children and house.
Alexandra rejects these traditional ideas, taking her place in the public sphere by
managing the farm and working outside of her home. Although Alexandra is the heroine
of the novel and noteworthy in her personal victories and strengths, she is a difficult
character with which to relate, as she has little empathy for the plight of other females.
Thus, she bitterly blames Marie for the death of her most beloved brother. While the
novel extols Alexandra as a woman to emulate, as she is a female who encounters
dilemmas and overcomes them through her own genius and fortitude, it also sees the
tragedy of Marie’s inescapable death in that she is a sympathetic character. Through her
body’s noncompliancy, Alexandra gains freedoms typically denied to other women.
Cather’s work maintains that the rejection of sexuality is acceptable, as women can
escape the patriarchal system in this manner. Deviant or over-exercised sexuality results
only in the social punishment of bodily death.

**The Repercussions of Suppressed Sexuality**

While Alexandra does not experience bodily death like Emil and Marie, the
suppression of her sexuality causes her to encounter death in the unconscious form of
dreams. As a child and into adulthood, Alexandra dreams of a strong man who physically lifts her and carries her away: “he was like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat...she could feel that he was yellow like the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him” (80). Idle and daydreaming, Alexandra imagines a god “bodily” carries her away. She loses her sexuality, as she utilizes her body to gain power and adopt a more masculine identity. Yet, her desires ultimately surface as she dreams of a lover strong enough to carry her like a “sheaf of wheat” over the cornfields, suggesting her anxiety over the nonsexual, masculinized role she has assumed. While this God figure represents Alexandra’s desire for a strong, able lover, he also symbolizes death as he is like “no [physical] man she knew.” The figure in her dream is like no earthly man she knows, representing otherworldliness.

The novel demonstrates this symbolization in Alexandra’s final dream, which has changed after the deaths of Emil and Marie.

He was with her a long while this time, and carried her very far, and in his arms she felt free from pain. When he laid her down on her bed again, she opened her eyes, and, for the first time in her life, she saw him clearly, though the room was dark, and his face covered. He was standing in the doorway of her room. His white cloak was thrown over his face, and his head was bent a little forward. 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. She knew at last for whom it was she had waited, and where he would carry her. That, she told herself, was very well. (112)

This passage explains Alexandra’s lover more fully, as it describes him as bodily carrying her, as well as relieving her of pain. Upon viewing her lover, Alexandra feels secure and tells herself that his being there is “very well” before falling asleep. While the lover
provides a security and peace foreign to Alexandra, he represents death, as his face is cloaked. Also, her lover stands in the “doorway of her room,” indicating his other worldliness as Death might be thought of as standing in the doorway between this world and the next. Hence, he stands in her door, waiting to comfort and accompany her to a foreign realm.

This passage and its interpretation are widely debated by critics, as each interprets the lover differently. Kaye argues the lover represents Death, concluding that Alexandra changes from associating sexuality with rape to associating it with death (Kaye 63). On the other hand, Mary Ruth Ryder, in her text, Willa Cather and Classical Myth, argues that Cather employs various classical myths to further suggest Alexandra as an Earth mother and epic hero. Hence, Ryder claims that in the dream, Alexandra symbolizes Demeter and her lover signifies either Apollo or Adonis (Ryder 111). Ryder argues, Alexandra is sexually “awakened,” realizing she desires to start a sexual relationship with Carl (Ryder 127). I argue that while Alexandra experiences a realization in the dream, her awareness is that sexuality and death are innately conjoined. She is not awakened sexually. Alexandra holds no interest in embarking on a new sexual journey. Rather, she bases her relationship with Carl on companionship. Thus, in their last scene, Alexandra explains her loneliness to Carl, asking him to “talk” to her (O Pioneers! 120). While both critics acknowledge, albeit with different interpretations, Alexandra’s realization after her friends’ deaths, their conclusions leave space for questioning as Kaye focuses upon a rejection of heterosexuality.

As Ryder argues, Alexandra’s dream contains allusions to the Persephone myth, as Alexandra initially feels anxious about her dream. However, rather than symbolizing
Demeter, as Ryder interprets, Alexandra is more representative of Persephone. In this Homeric myth, Hades, Lord of the Dead abducts and rapes Persephone, daughter of Demeter. Demeter searches for her lost daughter, and is eventually allowed to have her daughter again, under the condition that Persephone spends four months of the year with Hades (Agha-Jaffar 7-8). As Kaye maintains, Alexandra, like Persephone, later unites with Death as he carries her away. After first having such a reverie, “she would stand in a tin tub and prosecute her bath with vigor, finishing it by pouring buckets of cold well-water over her gleaming white body” (81). While the lover has not raped her, he does carry her off, suggesting he might have such intentions. I differ with Kaye on this point, arguing that Alexandra has not been raped, as her body remains “gleaming white.” Such a description reveals her chasteness, as her body shows no negative effects of a supposed violent rape. However, she feels extremely anxious about her sexuality and the god in her dream; thus, she punishes herself for indulging in such daydreams.

Alexandra’s dream changes upon the deaths of Emil and Marie, revealing her realization concerning sexuality and its relationship to death. Previously Alexandra dreamt of a man carrying her away, feeling anxious about such dreams. However, after the tragedy, she no longer experiences anxiety over the dreams, seeing her lover more clearly and accepting his comfort. After the deaths, Alexandra refuses to participate in daily life, numbing herself to feelings. One day a rainstorm catches Alexandra at the lovers’ graves. When a servant girl worries about her, Ivar explains that Alexandra will experience peace after she has received a “message from those who are gone” (110). Immediately after this occurrence, Alexandra’s dream and attitude change, indicating that she has indeed received a word from beyond the grave. Ivar’s words reveal the changes
Alexandra experiences in her dreams and attitude are a result of otherworldliness. As the dream comes from the beyond, Death is quite feasibly her lover. Alexandra now sees her lover more clearly and allows him to comfort her, knowing “where he would carry her” (112). Upon comprehending that she has “waited” on Death and he will carry her away, Alexandra determines the validity in this action. She immediately sleeps after this insight, which further symbolizes her intimacy with Death and the peace that comes from knowing it is he for whom she waits. While Alexandra does not desire to die, she finds comfort in knowing she does not have to fear Death any longer.

While Alexandra suppresses her sexuality, her subconscious dreams demonstrate a desire for sexual intimacy. Death remains inseparable from sexuality as Alexandra finds contentment by entering into a symbolic, sexual relationship with Death. Yet, her sexuality is still inevitably contained, as she only expresses it in the private sphere of her home, (i.e. her unconscious/dreams). Alexandra is not punished with death because she successfully suppressed sexuality. Rather, her dream reinforces the relationship between sexuality and death, acknowledging that sexuality should be contained, in order to avoid heartache. Yet, the novel also shows how while women should restrain their sexualities to gain agency, they also long to have a place to express their desires and erotic feelings. Alexandra finds contentment in dreaming of Death as her lover. The novel validates the employment of noncompliant feminine bodies in order to gain agency, as long as that noncompliancy does not enter a sexual realm. Hence, the text authorizes Alexandra’s adoption of a more masculine identity, as she suppresses her sexuality and evades placement within patriarchal heterosexist gender roles.
Sexuality and the Body: A Source of Marie’s Identity

The novel contains Marie, like Alexandra, in her sexuality and describes her in bodily terminology. Unlike Alexandra, who experiences only a symbolic death due to her successful squelching of her sexual desires, the novel depicts Marie as responsible for the devastation that befalls her and Emil. As a foil for Alexandra, Marie is a sexual, loving woman, who delights in her surroundings. While Alexandra remains solemn and thoughtful, Marie maintains a spontaneous, cheerful, and outgoing attitude. Her body serves to reinforce this personality type. The text first introduces Marie when she is but a child.

She was a dark child, with brown curly hair, like a brunette doll’s, a coaxing little red mouth, and round, yellow-brown eyes. Everyone noticed her eyes; the brown iris had golden glints that made them look like gold-stone, or in softer lights, like the Colorado mineral called tiger-eye. (4)

This description of Marie emphasizes her body and femininity. While Alexandra’s body was accented, as her mental strengths and personality were also praised, Marie’s body is highlighted in a different manner, as her personality and nature appear as direct result of her bodily attributes. In having “brown curly hair” like that of a doll, Marie is shown similar to a plaything. Rather than taking life seriously, she exists as bubbly and vivacious as her springy, curly hair insinuates. Also, while Marie plays with a kitten in this scene, her eyes are likened to that of a cat’s, appearing like the mineral “tiger-eye.” This description reflects a certain “animal vitality,” through her lively, glimmering eyes (Ryder 117). Even Marie’s “coaxing little red mouth” appears indicative of her excessive femininity and erotic nature, as “red” represents the color of passion and suggests a heightened sexuality. The term “coaxing” alludes to a more pouting, desirable mouth,
and reinforces Marie’s magnetism and the ease with which characters come to love her. Marie’s sexuality appears as a major determining force of her identity. While she is yet a child, Marie’s bodily appearance is partially responsible for her outgoing nature, as well as her complete need and desire for a sexual relationship.

When the reader meets Marie again as an adult, she remains the charismatic, young woman she was before. However, she is now married to Frank Shabata, who is stingy in his love and appreciation of her. Unable to live life without loving, Marie embraces her sexuality and turns in search of love to the young Emil. Jealous of Marie’s loving nature, Frank believes that all of his wife’s thoughts, feelings, and desires should focus around himself. As Marie does not give her undivided attention, he desires to make her as miserable as he is on the farm. Yet, Marie still maintains her cheerfulness and sexual allure. When portrayed again, Marie has just met Emil as he finished mowing: “Her face, too, was rather like a poppy, round and brown, with rich color in her cheeks and lips, and her dancing yellow-brown eyes bubbled with gayety. The wind was flapping her big hat and teasing a curl of her chestnut-colored hair” (30). Wearing a shade hat trimmed with red poppies, Marie represents a natural creature, highlighting her more animalistic or earthly desires (30). Again, the color red is associated with her character, suggesting passion and love. Yet, the text likens Marie’s body to the poppy. Like a flower, Marie is delicate and feminine, and is not long for this earth. The “rich color in her cheeks and lips” further implies a desire to live life to the fullest as one can imagine Marie out of breath from laughing, loving, and simply living. Her body suggests an unrestrainable eroticism, as even the wind cannot resist the temptation of “teasing” her curls. Thus, the depictions of Marie’s body and sexuality serve to exemplify the type of
personality or identity she possesses. Through her bodily descriptions, Marie’s femininity and blatant sexuality are emphasized.

**Marie’s Bodily Resistance to Traditional Sexual Codes of Behavior**

Marie refuses to let Frank’s irrational, jealous behavior change her loving nature. Marie’s spirit needs someone for whom she can live. Unlike Alexandra, she cannot stand to live alone, unloved. Being a devoted Catholic, Marie yearns to remain faithful to Frank, despite her love and interest in Emil. Hence, when Emil begs her to run away with him, she exclaims, “I am not that kind of girl, and you know it” (91). In refuting Emil’s offer, Marie embraces the role of proper wife. Chaste and virtuous, Marie intends to remain faithful to her husband. Yet, this assumed role generates Marie’s unhappiness, as Frank does not express his love for her, and thus, she eventually adopts the role of seductive, sexual whore. The text describes her as “incapable of being lukewarm about anything that pleased her” (85). Marie lacks the restraint to control her sexual nature and desire to be loved. She sees the larger picture of the potential consequences in that she recognizes that after Emil leaves, she will not have to live in “perpetual fear” of exposing their relationship (98). Her fear demonstrates her recognition that her behavior is constructed as socially wrong. Like the Panoptic system, Marie knows not whether she is being watched. She lives in “perpetual fear,” as she has a sense that she is under constant observation. While the Panopticon most often produces docile bodies, Marie resists her fear and sense of observation to act out her more “devious” desires. Thus, she accepts Emil’s embrace when he comes to her, saying, “I was dreaming this, don’t take my dream away” (102). Thus, like a child, Marie knows the correct course or actions, but lacks the ability to monitor her behavior. Her sexual desires control her actions, and her body
reinforces this impetuousness and childlike behavior: “She simply did not know how to give a half-hearted response. When she was delighted, she was as likely as not to stand on her tip-toes and clap her hands” (85). Marie remains inept in controlling her bodily responses. Her body is to a degree responsible for her inability to control her larger conduct. Unable to follow traditional behavior patterns, Marie’s body refuses compliancy in containing its sexuality to her marriage, and thus serves to reinforce her greater sexual deviancy.

Marie’s nature ultimately overcomes her at the fair when the men play a trick and Emil kisses her: “And Emil, who had so often imagined the shock of this first kiss, was surprised at its gentleness and naturalness. It was like a sigh which they had breathed together, almost sorrowful, as if each were afraid of wakening something in the other” (88). Marie accepts his kiss and recognizes her love for Emil, although she does not plan on acting out her desires. Here sexuality and the couple’s attraction to each other appear to be almost expected, despite the greater looming consequences. Again, the text stresses Marie’s body as she uses it to demonstrate her thoughts and love of Emil: “Only Marie, in her little tent of shawls, was pale and quiet. Under her yellow turban the red coral pendants swung against her white cheeks” (88). After the kiss, Marie loses her breath, and she becomes “pale and quiet,” not knowing what to think. However, her paleness reflects her love for Emil as even her husband, Frank, thinks that at one time he had the “power to take the blood from her cheeks” (89). Her body betrays her thoughts, physically demonstrating her unspoken wish to be noncompliant with traditional values and love Emil.
While the couple’s sexuality is described as an expected behavior, the novel also demonstrates the inevitability of punishment when pursuing deviant sexual desires. The work acknowledges the tragedy that an unavoidable containment of sexuality exists, whilst revealing a tension as female sexuality is critiqued. Although the lovers enjoy the gentleness of this first kiss, it also insinuates the despair that will follow them. As they breathe together, Emil and Marie are “afraid of wakening something in the other.” While the couple fears Frank will discover their affair, the word choice suggests the couple appears subconsciously aware of the potential social disaster all-consuming passion and sexuality may cause. Marie, though, attempts to put her thoughts of the young man aside, focusing on her life with her husband. Emil also recognizes what is best for the pair, deciding to abide by society’s standards and attend law school in Michigan in order to escape the thoughts and presence of Marie. He agrees to go, after Marie has admitted she loves him. Yet, Emil cannot leave without saying goodbye to Marie one last time. On this occasion, their sexual natures best them and they make love beneath the mulberry tree. Marie accepts the second role of demonized adulteress, embodying both of the opposing constructions. The novel presents a single interwoven, complex disciplinary framework, as Marie represents both positions. Both characterizations (that of idealized proper wife and sexual, seductive whore) are needed for the patriarchal system to survive and thrive. The latter reifies the accepted behavior of women. Thus, the noncompliant, deviant woman is punished, as resistance to the dominant system is illustrated as futile. Thus, the novel quickly reminds the reader, that this act of sexuality produces certain consequences as Frank guns the lovers down, sending each to their demise.
The Squelching of Resistance and Punishment of Noncompliant, Erotic Bodies

The positioning of the lovers’ bodies beneath the tree further emphasizes the horrendousness of their act and the brutal outcome of an over-exercised sexuality.

The story of what had happened was written plainly on the orchard grass, and on the white mulberries that had fallen in the night and were covered with dark stain. 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 lifted her head to her lover’s breast, taken his hand in both her own, and bled quietly to death. She was lying on her right side in an easy and natural position, her cheek on Emil’s shoulder. On her face there was a look of ineffable content. Her lips were parted a little; her eyes were lightly closed, as if in a day-dream or a light slumber. After she lay down there, she seemed not to have moved an eyelash. The hand she held was covered with dark stains, where she had kissed it. (106)

In this most elaborate description, the bodies of the dead lovers are arranged to demonstrate a gazed-upon quality, as they are depicted in spectacular detail. Positioned outside, the bodies achieve a gazed-upon effect as they remain for all to see. This positioning emphasizes not only an inevitable containment of sexuality, but also a public display of their punishment. The deaths, at first, appear as the natural course of events, as Emil is “rolled over on his back” with his face to the sky, alluding to serene, pure setting. Marie looks “content,” and as if she is day-dreaming. Her death, too, appears natural, as if she were simply sleeping, referring to an expected conclusion for sexuality and deviancy.

However, the lovers’ deaths are quite different from one another. While for Emil, the “chapter” ends quickly, Marie suffers extensively for her transgressions and the
blame resides upon her even in death. In her text, *Willa Cather Queering America*, Marilee Lindemann points out, “Marie is figured as the chief author of the story” as it is her blood “which was written plainly on the orchard grass” (Lindemann 42). While the positions of the bodies at first glance appear “natural” and serene, as if they are simply stealing a moment under the mulberry tree, upon closer inspection the bloody spectacle of the punishment is viewed. Over-exercised sexuality is inevitably contained as the couple experiences social punishment through the vehicle of Frank. The spectacle of the bodies further emphasizes that sexual deviancy and noncompliant bodies results in a gruesome, physical death. While Marie still retains her femininity, the sexual description of her lips, “parted a little” as if for a kiss reinforces her responsibility for their doom. Rather than dispensing words of comfort to Emil, she bestows blood and kisses of death to him (Lindemann 42). Her overemphasized sexuality has become the cause of their deaths, and her body stresses this conclusion as blood spews from her mouth as she kisses Emil’s hand. Marie exists as anything but beautiful, instead being deformed and grotesque as the narrator proceeds to examine the path of the bullets. Her “right lung” has been torn and her “carotid artery” shattered. These physical descriptions of Marie’s demise serve to demonstrate the monstrous spectacle of the scene.

As Marie’s body has become more noncompliant, she is punished for her overt and deviant sexuality. As Foucault illustrated, the body serves as a mechanism of controlling the individual’s movements, desires, and actions. However, while Marie does comply with conventional gender norms of accepted femininity, her body refuses to comply with traditional sexual standards, refuting the role of “docile” body and obedient wife. She resists the dominant power relations, blatantly disregarding conventional
sexual roles. Because of her noncomplaincy and resistance, Marie must be punished for her disobedience. The novel punishes Marie physically, reinforcing the relationship between noncompliant, sexual bodies and death. Marie’s body bears such a sentence that the “truth” of the crime is written on her body. As Foucault argues, the dominant power structure requires resistance for its necessary continuation. Thus, the noncompliant bodies are presented as a spectacle and exhibit that others may be warned of such actions. Others become fearful of being observed in an act of disobedience, internalizing the gaze of the prominent power system. The dominant power relations are upheld, as they appear irresistible.

The Placement of Accountability on Female Sexuality

The text suggests the lovers are to blame rather than Frank, as their bodies bear the punishment of their crimes. Yet, the novel portrays Marie as mostly responsible for the disaster that she, Emil, and Frank experience. Rather than holding Frank or even Emil partially accountable for their actions and the pair’s death, the work depicts Marie as blameworthy, as she was too willing to love and express her sexuality. Thus, the work expresses that Frank was justified in his actions. Even Alexandra, Marie’s best friend and confidante, blames Marie for her own woes and the death of her brother.

She blamed Marie bitterly. And why, with her happy, affectionate nature, should she have brought destruction and sorrow to all who loved her, even to poor old Joe Tovesky, the uncle who used to carry her about so proudly when she was a little girl? That was the strangest thing of all. Was there then, something wrong with in being warm-hearted and impulsive like that? Alexandra hated to think so. (117)

Although Alexandra does not want to think that impulsiveness and a loving, sexual personality causes “destruction and sorrow,” she appears to believe this relationship holds true. Brokenhearted over the loss of her beloved brother, Alexandra refuses to believe ill
of Emil. She casts the responsibility upon Marie, blaming female sexuality as the cause of the sorrow and instigator of the affair. The novel recognizes the tragedy of an inescapable social containment of sexuality by making Marie the easiest character with which to relate and sympathize. The work depicts female blaming female, as Alexandra blames Marie as the stimulus for everyone’s grief and despair. The novel realizes that Alexandra gives Marie authority and autonomy she never really experiences. Not only is Marie to blame for her own and Emil’s demise, she brings destruction to “all who loved her,” even her old uncle, Joe Tovesky.

Marie and Emil are not the only characters punished for their sin of an overindulged sexuality, though. While they are the primary characters, Alexandra’s grandfather also experiences the same fate as he loses sight of reality, becoming obsessed by the passionate delights of love. The story of Alexandra’s grandfather is related to the reader at the beginning of the novel, as the text likens Alexandra to this strong man. He was a shipbuilder, who upon growing lonely as a widower, decided to marry again: “On the shipbuilder’s part, this marriage was an infatuation, the despairing folly of a powerful man who cannot bear to grow old. In a few years his unprincipled wife warped the probity of a lifetime” (9). While this man’s body is not emphasized within this short narrative, he does gratify his bodily desires. Lonely and infatuated with a younger woman, he allows his body to delude him into thinking marriage and the acquiescing to his wife’s financial demands will bring him satisfaction and peace. Caught in “infatuation,” Alexandra’s grandfather’s indulged sexual nature results in the loss of his commonsense. He is fated to die “disgraced” for his overindulgence of his sexuality (9). While his sexuality may appear neither over-exercised nor deviant, the text suggests that
he was foolish for allowing his body to delude him into thinking sex would make him happy.

Yet, only Marie is held responsible for her actions. The remainder of the characters, experiencing death and disgrace due to their over-exercised sexual natures, appear as fallen victims to female sexuality. The grotesque portrayal of her shattered body reinforces this conclusion. The text appears to agree with Carl’s words to Alexandra about the events and Marie.

There are women who spread ruin around them through no fault of theirs, just by being too beautiful, too full of life and love. They can’t help it. People come to them as people go to a warm fire in winter. I used to feel that in her when she was a little girl. Do you remember how all the Bohemians crowded round her in the store that day, when she gave Emil her candy? You remember those yellow sparks in her eyes? (121)

Carl argues that Marie and some women cannot control or contain their sexual natures. They “spread ruin” around wherever they go, as they are “too full of life and love.” Marie’s vivacious nature draws people to her, but like a child she remains unable to govern her desires and body. Her body refuses to comply with the conventional norms of marriage and docility, and she lives her life like a match that will inescapably burn and die. Even her eyes suggest this portrayal as they burn like “yellow sparks.” While this characterization appears true for the overtly sexual people in the novel, only Marie is blamed for the events and deaths. While Carl argues that Marie cannot help being this way, as people are inherently drawn to her, the text suggests female sexuality causes “ruin,” as deviant sexuality experiences an inevitable social punishment. Too full of “life and love,” these woman cannot help their sexual natures, and their sexuality causes their destruction. Thus, the novel valorizes strong, masculinized women like Alexandra, who successfully suppress their sexuality, evading the destructive positioning in this either-or
categorization. While Alexandra unites with death through a sexual encounter, Marie is the only female who experiences a bodily death. While the text acknowledges the tragedy of an unavoidable repression of sexuality, it critiques female sexuality, as it is aware of the potential dangers of expressing feminine eroticisms.

*O Pioneers!* communicates a heightened awareness of the patriarchal disciplinary framework. In acknowledging the potential devastation women face as they express their sexuality and fall into these categories of opposed opposites, the novel appears to critique female sexuality through its displacement and condemnation of Marie’s body. The novel contains several noncompliant bodies, ranging from the masculinized Alexandra, who suppresses her sexuality and is united with death as the result, to the vibrant, erotic Marie, reflect the relationship between sexuality and death. Each of these characters’ bodies is displayed to reinforce and illustrate their personality type. Refusing to comply with the traditional behavioral codes of the time, the characters are doomed for their overtly sexual behavior. As they refute the idea of “docile bodies,” the characters employ their bodies to gain more freedoms and experience more love. While Alexandra masculinizes her body to gain the power and control of an agrarian landowner, Marie sexualizes her body that she might be loved. Yet, because their bodies reject conformity, the novel realizes they must experience death as a social punishment. As their bodies were responsible for and reinforced their deviancy, the characters are fated to die a physical death. This death exemplifies the social punishment for deviant or overexercised sexuality. Thus, Marie bears her crime of an over-indulged sexuality and her sentence of death upon her body. Alexandra evades punishment and the entire patriarchal system
working to control women's bodies and minds, as she has successfully suppressed her sexuality.

The question must be posed then if *O' Pioneers* is a misogynistic text. If the novel only critiques Marie for her overtly sexual nature, is it misogynistic, blaming female sexuality for the death and degradation in the world? From a feminist standpoint, Cather's work appears misogynistic. Marie's sexuality is held responsible for the entire destruction within the novel. Although the work acknowledges the tragedy of this inevitable containment of sexuality by making a Marie a sympathetic character, it still situates all of the blame on female sexuality. While the work perhaps critiques female sexuality because Cather is aware of the potentially destructive system in which she lived, the novel's only solution is the masculinization of women. It critiques over-exercised or deviant female sexuality, recommending a woman adopt a nonsexual identity to avoid repression. While the novel upholds Alexandra as a woman to emulate, she is a carefully, constrained, masculine woman. She, too, is sexually contained, as her marriage is based upon friendship. The novel suggests that only nonsexual women are able to survive, and thus, resist containment.

Through the emphasis upon bodies, *O Pioneers!* acknowledges a social containment of the noncompliant, sexual female body. As Bartky argues, woman's body becomes a source of control, as she attempts to discipline her body into the ideals of femininity. Intrinsic in this idea of femininity is a "certain eroticism restrained by modesty" (Bartky 68). *O Pioneers!* resists this concept of femininity, setting up Alexandra as a character to emulate. The work identifies that a woman's placement into the patriarchal system of opposed opposites is a means of control. *O Pioneers!* realizes
that these two binaries do not work as separate opposed perspectives, but as a single complex system of discipline. The opposing pairs work together in difference to make resistance to the dominant system appear futile. Marie fights the concepts of accepted sexuality, employing her body as a source of resistance. She embraces her sexuality. Her sexuality, however, is not “restrained by modesty,” as she forsakes her husband in favor of Emil. She refutes the idea of “docile body,” determined to live for her self and her own happiness, embodying both antithetical pairs. Marie, though, inevitably experiences sexual containment, as Frank guns the lovers down beneath the mulberry tree. The novel brutally punishes Marie’s body, as it is the source of her sexuality and disobedience. As Foucault argues, sexuality becomes a technique to control the individual. While Marie is not controlled, but punished for her disobedience, the novel establishes a connection between sexuality and death. The novel argues that if a woman embraces her sexuality, she will either be controlled within the patriarchal society or physically punished for her refusal to comply with traditional sexual codes of behavior. *O Pioneers!* almost critiques female sexuality, as it recognizes it is a means of disciplining women, believing it leads only to devastation and despair. On the other hand, a woman who does not rebel sexually is not as dangerous to the existing power relations. Thus, Alexandra achieves financial success and independence. The novel reinforces the connection between female sexuality and death in having Alexandra unconsciously find comfort in uniting with Death as her lover. The noncompliant bodies reveal not only the relationship between female sexuality and death, but that the novel acknowledges the tragedy of a female sexuality which must be contained in order to avoid discipline, destruction, and possibly death.
Chapter 3: Channeled Bodies: Obtaining Divine Spirituality through the Erotic

In her third novel, *The Song of the Lark*, Cather explores the body as a medium to achieve divine spirituality through the application of art. In the 1915 work, Cather presents young Thea, a struggling singer determined to gain recognition and wealth as a successful Wagnerian soprano. The novel follows Thea as she discovers herself as an artist and as a successful female, as she gains independence, wealth, and agency. Like Alexandra, Thea avoids sexual categorization and the patriarchal disciplinary framework, as she escapes both the roles of regulated wife and dangerous femme fatale. Thea attains artistic recognition and financial independence by channeling her erotic energies and passions through her body and ultimately into her voice. The novel overflows with sensuality as Thea employs her body to reach the pinnacle of art and act as a priestess between humanity and art. Yet, such a feat does not come without repercussions, as Thea’s body suffers greatly upon the conclusion of a performance. Although the body serves as a medium for a greater understanding, it requires constant maintenance that it may continue to possess the strength needed for such an accomplishment. Drawing upon her sensuous and erotic nature, Thea refreshes not only her body, but also her spirit, and channels all of her passion into the idea of art as a means to divine spirituality. Rejecting all other passions, including romantic relationship commitments and her familial obligations, Thea utilizes her body to channel her sexuality into the divine form of art, and thus communicates great art to the masses.

Unlike *O Pioneers!*, which realizes the misfortune of a social containment of sexuality through death, *The Song of the Lark* suggests that art is an outlet for sexual expression and that a woman can achieve spirituality if she focuses her erotic nature into
her work. Thus, Sherrill Harbison, in her introduction to the novel, examines how Cather followed Wagnerian philosophy to suggest that Thea achieves a “sensuous spirituality” (xvii). Harbison argues that Thea “reaches the pinnacle of her powers as an artist who communicates the spiritual message of art through her very sensual human body” (xxiii-xxiv). Building on Harbison’s thesis, I will examine how the body becomes a means to achieve divine spirituality. Also, while the critic views Thea’s experience as primarily positive, I will examine how, perhaps despite the novel’s intention, Thea’s role as priestess is a means of containing her female sexuality. Thea’s freedom is an illusion, as she, like Alexandra and Marie, is still sexually contained. In expending her sexual energy in art, she is not free to use it in physical relationships. I question Thea’s agency and freedom of sexual expression, as the tales of her success and spiritual completeness are primarily related through the masculine gaze of her admirers. These men contain her potentially volatile sexuality by encouraging her towards art. They project their desires upon her, and instead of choosing to express her sexuality, she “chooses” to situate her sensuality into art, rejecting all romantic relationships. Following Wagnerian philosophy, the text depicts Thea as a priestess serving the god of art, through the internalization of her audience’s feelings. She is sexually contained and constructed as object as her audience is largely male. Although Thea appears to gain agency through the ability to sexually express her self through her body and art, gaining spiritual peace, she loses agency as she is consistently viewed through the masculine gaze. The novel distances Thea from her sexuality as her chorus of male supporters introduce and describe her.

*The Song of the Lark* tells the story of young Thea Kronborg as she develops as an artist from childhood to maturity. The novel is set in the dusty, rural town of Moonstone,
Colorado. Even at age eleven, Thea is already misunderstood and overlooked by most of her family. Her mother recognizes her potential, as does the faithful Dr. Archie, a family friend, who encourages her dreams. Ray Kennedy, a young man in love with Thea, leaves her six hundred dollars upon his death. This money enables her to continue her piano studies in Chicago, as was Ray’s dying wish. Thea develops on the piano, whereupon her instructor, Harsanyi discovers her voice. She is later introduced to Fred Ottenburg, a wealthy, young business man. Fred presents Thea to many important contacts, and assists in her artistic awakening as he allows her to spend the summer at his home in the impressive Panther Canyon. There Thea discovers the connection between the body and art, and renews her determination to succeed in gaining world renowned and artistic achievement. Thea and Fred become romantically involved, but she concludes the relationship upon learning of his current marriage and hence, she travels to Germany to study. When next viewed, Thea has aged ten years, and at twenty-nine, she obtains fame in New York City. A changed, more mature Thea reunites with her friends, Fred and Dr. Archie, and reaches the summit of her artistic success as she realizes fame, fortune, and divine spirituality in her role as Wagner’s Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*. After Fred’s divorce, Thea marries him at the conclusion, but the marriage takes place years after Thea’s success and is related in only a couple of sentences by her Aunt Tillie, illustrating how small the event is in comparison to her achievements as an artist.

Cather’s depiction of Thea as a Wagnerian soprano emphasizes the idea that a female artist can act as a priestess for art by channeling her sexuality into her work. As Cather worked as a drama and theatre critic, she was familiar with Wagner’s operas and beliefs. Widely considered sexually provocative, Wagner’s music experienced a boom
period at the end of the nineteenth century in America (Kennicott 191). Cather took many of his ideas to heart, associating art with a sacred discipline. Richard Wagner’s aesthetics are quite contradictory and complicated. In his text, *Opera and Drama*, Wagner expresses his belief that a singer should represent the idea of the music: “the glorious musician in whom Music was all that in a human being she ever can be, if in all the fullness of her essence she is to stay precisely music and nothing else but music” (115). Thus, the goal of the musician is to exist as “nothing else but music,” that she may express the very essence of the idea. In other words, the musician should represent the thought or idea of the music, such as rain, love, death, etc. In his work *The Artwork of the Future*, Wagner argues that the opera singer attains a divine spirituality by absorbing and reflecting the “spirit of that collectivity wanting in the public” (Wagner 1109). The singer recognizes that “nature’s state” is identical with her own, achieving art in developing this sense of self (Wagner 1097). In other words, the artist attains great art and spirituality by reflecting nature’s state as her own, as well as internalizing the spirit of desire in her collective public or audience.

Wagner also believed that in comprehending the true sense of self, one became an androgyne, “subjected to the generic conditionments of the manly and the womanly” (Original italics, *Opera and Drama* 107). He further expands upon this idea in *Opera and Drama*.

The new Form could only have a genuine art-form, provided it shewed itself as the explicit utterance of a specific musical Organism: *but every musical organism is by its nature—a womanly*; it is merely a bearing, and not a begetting factor; the begetting force lies clean outside it, and without fecundation by this force it positively cannot bear. (Original italics, 109)
Wagner believes that music by nature is “womanly,” existing as merely the vehicle to bear the idea. As he explains, the “begetting force” lies outside of music. Rather than the idea being intrinsic in the music, the poet must place the idea into it. Hence, Wagner interprets the poet as masculine and the music as feminine. In the same manner, the opera singer must correctly interpret the idea of the music, becoming an androgyne. The singer utilizes her feminine body to express the music and the idea it represents. The erotic inclination must be internalized, as masculine and feminine principles are amalgamated in the single person of creator (Harbison xx). Cather reflects many of these ideas in *The Song of the Lark*, as she demonstrates Thea becoming androgynous. By internalizing and absorbing the thoughts and “wanting[s]” of her male admirers, Thea enters into what Cather termed the “priesthood of art” (*Kingdom of Art* 153). The novel also depicts Thea as androgynous, in that the voice is depicted as the masculine phallus, being inserted into and drawn out of the feminine body. By employing her body as a channel, Thea situates her sexuality, the yearnings and feelings of supporters, into her art, reaching divine spirituality.

Thea’s role of Sieglinde appears in Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelungs*. In the opera, Sieglinde falls in love with her twin brother, Siegmund. In their text *Finding an Ending*, Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht explain the role of Sieglinde: “And she [Sieglinde] is no mere ordinary mortal, but rather the god’s human daughter, in whom a spark of the divine lives; when fanned it will burst into a flame, endowing her humanity with its own version of divinity” (141). Sieglinde acts as a priestess for the gods, “endowing” humanity with its own kind of “divinity.” Through her love and overwhelming sexual desire for Siegmund, Sieglinde inspires Brünnhilde’s transcendence, as well as
Siegmund’s heroism (143). While Sieglinde and Siegmund are not the most prominent characters in the piece, their love “herald[s] and catalyze[s]” the opera into a transcendent drama (Kitcher and Schacht 140). Thea’s role as Sieglinde reveals her own role as priestess to the god of art, as she allows her listeners to glimpse divinity.

In referring to a divine spirituality, I refer to the divinity Thea experiences as acting as the priestess to the god of art. Thea cannot convey a kind of divinity upon humanity, unless she, too, experiences a divine form of spirituality. Like Sieglinde, Thea exists as the human daughter to the god of art, bestowing divinity upon mankind through the transforming power of music. In this spirituality, Thea works as a priestess, utilizing her body to communicate the all-embracing, “glorification in art of mankind in general” (Wagner, The Artwork of the Future 1112). Thea’s divine spirituality is viewed during her performance of Sieglinde: “Her inhibitions chanced to be fewer than usual, and, within herself, she entered into the inheritance that she herself had laid up, into the fullness of the faith she had kept before she knew its name or its meaning” (395). Thea has a “fullness” of faith in the god of art. Before she knew she would be an opera singer, she had faith she would be a musician and whole-heartedly serve art. Thus, she enters into her “inheritance” and the “priesthood of art,” achieving divine spirituality.

The novel continually focuses upon Thea’s body, and Thea’s sensuality underlies the entire novel. Thea has a vast array of male admirers, each of whom views her in explicitly sexual terms. For example, when Harsanyi watches Thea at the piano, he sees that when she listens, she sometimes “would swallow hard,” nervously glancing from left to right (152). As Harsanyi views Thea’s bodily mannerisms, he interprets her gesture, “as if she were being watched, or as if she were naked and heard some one coming”
Harsanyi immediately imagines Thea’s bodily motions in an erotic manner, as he imagines her “naked.” These men construct her identity through their views of her body, and her sensuality appears irrevocably joined to her art. Thus, when Thea thinks about situating “fears and desires” into art, she thinks, “they [these feelings] were not expressible in words, but seemed rather to translate themselves into attitudes of body, into degrees of muscular tension or relaxation; the naked strength of youth” (253). While Thea reflects on this relationship, her thoughts illustrate the connection between sexuality and art. Thea believes that feelings are indescribable in words and must be played out in “degrees of muscular tension” or bodily expressions. Utilizing the “naked strength of youth,” a woman must express her sexuality in art. In the same manner, the men construct her identity as an erotic object, emphasizing her body as the vehicle for locating sexuality in art. Her sensuality prepares her for her growth as an artist, but also emphasizes that her divine spirituality is a direct result of her achievement in fully situating her body into art and giving herself up for its means. Her bodily descriptions serve to demonstrate the qualities she employs to gain spirituality, as well as reinforcing the idea that to act as priestess, a person must give one’s all, including her body. The novel displays the connection between sexuality and art, as each man sees her art in specific connection to her body. Only by having these male supporters, who replace the traditional role of lover, is Thea able to draw upon her sexuality without having to expend it upon a relationship. Hence, she is sexually contained, as she places all of her sexual energy into her art.
Constructing the Body through the Masculine Gaze

Most often the novel depicts Thea through the eyes of her male supporters. Dr. Archie, Harsanyi, and Fred consistently construct her as an erotic being, focusing upon her body. They attend her successful performance of Sieglinde and primarily relate her achievement. These men construct her identity by emphasizing her body, and see her as a sexual object throughout her existence. Among her most faithful admirers is Dr. Archie. When Thea returns to Moonstone after her first winter in Chicago, she is disenchanted with her life and seeks out Dr. Archie to discuss her problems.

Now her face was in the shadow and the line of the light fell below her bare throat, directly across her bosom. The shrunken white organdie rose and fell as if she were struggling to be free and to break out of it altogether. He felt that her heart must be laboring heavily in there, but he was afraid to touch her; he was; indeed. He had never seen her like this before. Her hair, piled high on her head, gave her a commanding look, and her eyes, that used to be inquisitive were stormy. (205-6)

Archie fails to recognize the seventeen-year-old Thea who stands before him. Standing in the varied light, Thea resides half in light and half in dark, unsure of which path to her career should take next. He fantasizes that her body literally plays out the emotions she feels. As Thea is confused about her career and exasperated with her family, Archie imagines her body representing those feelings through her "stormy" eyes. Archie views Thea as he sees her almost "struggling to be free and to break out" of her clothing altogether. This depiction is important for as Archie attempts to lend advice to Thea, he gazes upon her "bare throat" and "bosom," thinking of how her chest quickly rises and falls. Archie views Thea in an extremely sexual manner, as he unconsciously wishes she were free of her clothing and all restraints. He is "afraid to touch her" because Thea experiences "desires, ambitions, revulsions that were dark to him" (207). While Archie
feels “ambitions,” as he desires to become wealthy via his investments, he later risks all he has earned to help Thea. Thea, on the other hand, has a “determination” and “fierceness” to her nature with which Archie is utterly unfamiliar (207). Thus, he prefers to cling to the childhood image of Thea he maintains in his mind. Also, his vision implies that something in Thea attempts to break loose. As Thea’s “desires,” “ambitions,” and essentially her voice are trying to escape her body, Archie construes them in terms of sexuality, and the body is merely the vessel for those “desires.”

As Archie imagines Thea’s feelings are expressed on her body, he cannot help but be affected by them. Rather than seeing her as a child or adolescent, he projects his feelings on her and views her and her work in sexual terms. Marilyn Berg Callander agrees that Archie sees Thea in a sexual manner in her text Willa Cather and the Fairy Tale. She argues that Dr. Archie “represents Thea’s father/king and the subtle suggestions of erotic desire between them continue into her adulthood” (8). Callander is correct in her analysis, as Archie, and the remainder of her male friends, desire Thea and picture themselves in the role of her lover. Yet, not all critics agree that Thea’s supporters view her as an erotic object, replacing the traditional role of lover. For instance, Linda Huf claims that Thea’s male admirers are “more teachers and friends than suitors or lovers” and are “interested in Thea the artist more than in Thea the woman, and she, in turn, is interested in them as mentors more than as men” (84). Although Dr. Archie and the remainder of Thea’s male friends are indeed interested in helping her succeed and reach her full potential as an artist, as Callander illustrated, they also view her as a sexual object, fantasizing about her in erotic imagery, as seen in the instance of Dr. Archie. While they sexually desire her, the novel suggests that they also recognize
that Thea is a special young woman with great potential as an artist. For instance, in the
beginning of the novel, Archie declares that Thea is “worth the whole litter of her family”
and wonders from where she got her genius and giftedness (11). These men construct her
identity as they desire, situating their yearnings upon her.

Most of the male characters perceive Thea as a sexual object, envisioning her as
representative of their feelings, thus validating them. Another of Thea’s male friends
who is guilty of seeing her as sexual object is her Chicago piano teacher, Harsanyi.
When Thea first sings for him, Harsanyi imagines the experience in sexually explicit
terms.

He put his hand back to her throat and sat with his head bent, his one eye
closed. He loved to hear a big voice throb in a relaxed, natural throat, and
he was thinking that no one had ever felt this voice vibrate before. It was
like a wild bird... (160-1)

In this passage, Harsanyi fanaticizes Thea is like a virgin, experiencing sexual intercourse
for the first time. Like a lover, he samples her body and voice before any other man, as
he places his hand “back to her throat.” In this dream, Thea’s body is merely the vessel
or channel for her voice, which Harsanyi imagines as masculine, as it is representative of
the phallus. The throbbing voice is an external, masculine presence inserted into and then
pulled out of the “relaxed,” feminine body (i.e. her throat), which acts as the womb or
vessel to protect the voice. Thea embodies both male and female sexualities, as she has
the feminine body and the masculine, phallic voice. Hence, Harbison points out, “she is
a Wagnerian androgyne, containing all generativity in herself” (xxiii). Art, (or rather the
process of creating), has typically been viewed as a masculine discipline.³ The Song of

³ Carol J. Singley, in her article “Female Language, Body, and Self,” explains, “Following the ancients’
belief that the father supplied the seed and life of the new being but the mother only the vessel, male writers
The Lark suggests that Thea’s success as a Wagnerian soprano is not only a result of her ability to channel her sexuality into her art, but also due to her androgyny. Sexuality in art is expressed in that all of Thea’s male supporters construct her identity as an erotic object. Yet, Harsanyi goes beyond simply the requisite of sexuality expressed through the body, suggesting that both masculine and feminine sexualities are needed to achieve great art. Thea internalizes her male admirers’ erotic yearning into her own, thus, making their voices and desires her own, transforming into a true “Wagnerian androgyne,” as her body/sexuality is feminine and her voice/creativity is viewed as masculine.

The Internalization of the Masculine Gaze and Desires

While the text shows Thea, like her male admirers, sees herself an erotic being, it also demonstrates her internalization of these men’s desires. Bartky, in her work “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” discusses the phenomenon in which women internalize patriarchal standards into their sense of self: “the sense of oneself as a distinct and valuable individual is tied not only to the sense of how one is perceived, but also to what one knows, especially to what one knows how to do; this is the second sense of internalization” (77). In other words, Bartky explains how a woman internalizes or comes to identify herself in terms of not only how she is “perceived” or thought of, but also in what tasks or duties she “knows” how to perform. Thea internalizes the feelings of her male admirers, as she perceives herself as an erotic object. For instance, coming back on the train from Chicago, Thea reflects upon the differences between her own future and that of a dying girl.

often compare the writing process to male generativity or birth” (7). While Singley addresses strictly writing, this view was common for all art, in which a work was created.
She put her hand on her breast and felt how warm it was; and within it there was a full, powerful pulsation. She smiled — though she was ashamed of it — with the natural contempt of strength for weakness, with the sense of physical security which makes the savage merciless. Along with the yearning that came from some deep part of her, that was selfless and exalted, Thea had a hard kind of cockiness, a determination to get ahead. (185)

Thea credits her desire to “get ahead” in life to the “powerful pulsation” in her breast. She sees herself in decidedly masculine terms, as she has a “natural contempt” for weakness and a “hard kind of cockiness.” In seeing her self and sexuality as masculine, Thea becomes as an androgynous being. She has a female body, but a masculine viewpoint. While her “breast” could represent simply her chest and heartbeat beneath, the word also implies her sexuality. As she feels her heart beating beneath her breast, she is aware of the “warm,” pulsing feelings of her sexuality. She, too, sees herself in terms of her body. She realizes she possesses something beneath the physical surface, which provides her with strength, as well as a “hard kind of cockiness” and “determination,” Thea knows she can employ her body as an outlet or vessel. Her determination originates from the idea that she is alive and can always feel her own heart pulsing in her chest.

Yet, Thea is not only aware of her vitality, but also of her sexuality. Although she gives no name to the “sense of physical security” she maintains, this security represents her sexuality. Hence, she is “almost ashamed of it.” If this “powerful pulsation” stood only for her heartbeat, Thea would not be ashamed that she is alive and well. While Thea perhaps feels guilt over the dying girl’s situation, she realizes that her pulsation is something more, something traditionally critiqued and repressed. Thus, she is almost “ashamed” of her sexuality, as she draws upon it for strength. Thea relishes in the idea that she possesses the needed life and desire to do great things, as well as an awareness of
her sexual nature. Hence, Thea has internalized the masculine gaze, seeing herself as an erotic object and knowing that she can always rely on her body for strength.

Judith Fetterly, in her article “Willa Cather and the Fiction of Female Development,” supports this argument as she examines the works in which Cather felt “anxious” about her authorship and the traditional roles of womanhood. She claims *The Song of the Lark* is for the most part an exception to this anxiety, as Cather employs and empowers Thea’s and the feminine body as a “site of desire” (228). Hence, she claims “desire has shaped Thea from her earliest moments of self-consciousness” (228). Fetterly argues that Thea is aware of her voice and sexuality, and that since Thea’s voice “comes from her body, to deny her body would destroy her voice and thus her art” (228). The body is connected to art, as it becomes not only a “source for desire,” but also a vehicle through which to channel sexuality. Upon analyzing Harsanyi’s reflections about the “something” which makes Thea ambitious and successful, Fetterly concludes, “I would identify this ‘something’ as referring equally to Thea’s sexuality” (228). Fetterly recognizes that Harsanyi knows Thea’s sexuality makes her a great artist. In the same manner, Thea views herself in bodily terms and knows her sexuality is the source for her energy and strength. Thus, she gains strength from her baths and the viewing of her own body. Thea simply places her hand on her breast, drawing strength from the warmth and pulsation below.

Her male admirers also insist on her ability to become a great soprano and help train her in this desire or projection. Thus, Thea, too, constructs her identity as a sexual, successful opera singer. While Thea views her sexuality as a positive source of power, her “sense of self” as an erotic being is actually an internalization of the patriarchal
ideology and a way in which the dominant system contains her sexuality. Although Thea's male supporters view her in sexual terms, they all still encourage her to place her sexuality strictly in her art that she become a better artist as the result. While Thea believes her sexuality is a source of power that enables her to find liberation through financial independence, she still is structured and contained within in her discipline of art. However, while Thea's sexuality is contained, this internalization is necessary for her achievement of priestess to the god of art. Following Wagnerian philosophy, the text implies that Thea must internalize the feelings of her (masculine) audience and become a true androgyne.

**Channeling the Body: Thea's Sexual and Spiritual Awakening**

The novel again exhibits this connection between the body, sexuality, and art when Thea travels to Fred's family home in Panther Canyon, Arizona. She experiences a sexual and spiritual awakening. When I say Thea undergoes a spiritual awakening, I refer not only to her realization of the interconnectedness of all things, both living and inanimate, but also an understanding of her position and greater aim in life. Fred does not join Thea for several weeks, allowing her time to explore the cliff dwellings at her own leisure, and during this time, Thea's body and spirit awakes. She realizes and learns to love the power of music. Thea's initial revelation occurs upon her discovery of the bathing pool.

She was singing very little now, but a song would go through her head all morning, as a spring keeps welling up, and it was like a pleasant sensation indefinitely prolonged. It was much more like a sensation than like an idea, or an act of remembering. Music had never come to her in that sensuous form before... And now her power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation. She could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a color, like the bright lizards that darted about on the
hot stones outside her door; or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas. (251)

Although Thea no longer sings at this point, she conserves her energy, realizing the power gained by focusing her energy or sexuality into one single venue. Suddenly, Thea can see music as more of a “sensation” than an “idea.” Only by first understanding and experiencing the sensation does Thea grasp the idea. Following Wagner’s principles, Thea proceeds to later embody this concept for her listeners, becoming pure sensation on stage that they may understand the larger concept. Yet, before Thea can reach such success and divine spirituality, she must first understand the idea herself. While “sensation” is not synonymous with sexuality, the term and passage invoke erotic imagery. Thea must experience music through the “sustained” sensations of her body, becoming a “mere receptacle for heat.” Although the passage speaks of art, similarly Cather could as easily refer to a sexual encounter. Hence, Thea must channel her sexuality and sensuous expressions through her body into her music. Only by conserving and transforming this erotic energy can she become liquid “heat” or a “continuous repetition of sound,” embodying sensations and revealing the idea.

As Thea later bathes in the pool, the connection between sexuality and art becomes more prevalent.

One morning, as she was standing upright in the pool, splashing water between her should-blades with a big sponge, something flashed through her mind that made her draw herself up and stand still until the water had quite dried upon her flushed skin. The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself, life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose... In singing, one made a vessel of one’s throat and nostrils and held it on one’s breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals. (254-5)
While the passage is immersed in erotic imagery, Thea’s revelation during her bath symbolizes her baptism into the kingdom of art. The event signifies her second awakening, as she realizes the connection between life, art, and the body whilst naked and bathing. Richard Giannone writes that in order to transcend her “rainbow bridge,” Thea required a “second birth, and the artistic bringing forth of the deeper self is more difficult to undergo than the first, human birth” (129). Thea’s bath denotes her second birth and awakening to her and nature’s selves. Her bath has a “ceremonial gravity,” demonstrating how her sexuality and body are closely related to her awakening (254). The “something” that flashes “through her mind” is the awareness that art exists as merely an attempt to hang on to life. Hence, she realizes that everything in the world, “the stream and the broken pottery,” is an attempt to hold on to “life itself.” She understands that art subsists as an “effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself” (254). As Wagner insisted upon, Thea internalizes “nature’s state” as her own. Yet, the text demonstrates this insight’s significance, as Thea does not move until the water has “dried upon her flushed skin,” and again the sexual images serve to reinforce the necessity of the body. Like the sheath or mould, the body becomes the instrument in which to hold and channel life into art. While sexuality is not synonymous with life, the text implies that Thea should sublimate her sexuality in art, as sexuality is a basic life force. Thea is “flushed” and aroused thinking about her music and its larger connections to life. Upon the conclusion of the scene, Thea now views her “throat,” “nostrils,” and “breath,” essentially her body, as a vessel for her singing and art. While art is an attempt to capture the past and life itself, channeling one’s erotic energies and sensations into art seizes life.
To Thea, “becoming an artist means being able simultaneously to abandon her body to sensuous experience and to control that experience, keeping it from contamination” (Harbison xvi). Harbison argues that Thea must keep her body from the contamination of “human ties that threaten to compromise her” (xvi). Thus, Thea abandons all familial and romantic relationships as she struggles to become a great artist. As Harbison explains, the body acts as a vessel, abandoning itself to sensations, but also working to control and contain all of those erotic sensations in art. Thea realizes that her goal is a “sensuous spirituality,” where a woman employs the body as a vessel to place her sensuous energies into art, thus, achieving spirituality (Harbison xvii). Thea’s spiritual awakening comes as she indulges her body and sexual nature, and she becomes content in her newfound awareness of art.

Thea’s awakenings are not yet completed, though, as Fred Ottenburg has to meet Thea at the ranch. Fred, too, constructs Thea’s identity as an erotic object, viewing her art as closely tied to her body. Although Thea now understands the connection between the body and art, she has yet to fully experience those erotic sensations via a sexual encounter. Thea already desires Fred for her “sweetheart,” and upon his arrival, she takes him as her lover. While Thea contains the voice within her and has begun to internalize these male desires, she has yet to reach a full sexual awakening. Although Thea needs the sexual encounter with Fred to understand those sensations and produce great art, the act of sex is needed for her later sexual containment, in that she not only internalizes Fred’s projections, but also restricts and disciplines her body as the result. As Callander aptly points out, “she cannot take hold and unleash her power, however, without the aid of the symbolic prince, Fred...She cannot deliver art any more than a woman can give
birth to a child, without male insemination” (16). Callander correctly argues that Thea needs Fred to complete her sexual awakening. Although Thea’s understanding requires this sexual experience, Fred’s betrayal is also necessary; for had Fred not betrayed Thea, she would not have been able to concentrate on her art and instead would have expended her sexual energy on her relationship with Fred. Through Fred’s betrayal, Thea rejects romantic love and develops into a completely androgynous being, as she finds pleasure in her own body and develops more “masculine” traits.

After Fred’s arrival and their joining as lovers, he proposes marriage and a great adventure to her. Thea runs off to Mexico with him. Before Fred betrays her, Thea realizes that when she is with her lover, there is always, “life in the air, always something coming and going, a rhythm of feeling and action” (265). What Thea feels and interprets as “life” or a “rhythm of feeling” is her love and erotic desire for Fred. She has become sexually awakened to him, further realizing the importance of “sensations.” When in love with Fred and alive to her desires, Thea becomes “freer and stronger under impulses” (273). While she previously understood music as a sensation more than an idea, she had yet to fully experience those sexual sensations. Hence, Fred initiates Thea into sexual sensations, and she becomes able to express those sensations in her music, allowing her feelings and thoughts to play upon her body. Although Thea expresses her sexuality through art, she is still contained as she only expends her sexuality in her work.

But while Thea loves Fred and changes on account of her sexual experiences, Fred betrays her as she discovers his current marriage. She escapes the roles of regulated wife, as Fred is already married, and that of whore, as she rejects him in favor of her work. As Thea prepares to leave for Germany, she talks with Fred about her ability to
become a successful singer. Their conversation reveals the importance of sexuality and
erotic encounters, as Fred asserts Thea was not ready to leave America eight months
prior.

Anyhow, you couldn’t look as you do now, before you knew me. You
were clumsy. And whatever you do now, you do splendidly. And you
can’t cry enough to spoil your face for more than ten minutes. It comes
right back, in spite of you. It’s only since you’ve known me that you’ve
let yourself be beautiful. (297)

Fred recognizes the change Thea has undergone since first meeting him. Previously, she
was an awkward, “clumsy” girl, who had no sense of style or carriage. However, after
becoming intimate with Fred, she has let herself “be beautiful,” changing drastically in
appearance as she gains confidence in herself. Thea becomes confident, as she allows
herself freedom in her actions and behavior. While her relationship with Fred teaches her
confidence in her actions, she also becomes more sensual, relishing the sensations of her
bodily experiences. Again, she is constructed and identified by a male figure, who
attempts to validate his own feelings by thinking that despite his betrayal, he has helped
her to become a better artist.

Yet, Thea internalizes all these projections, as it is only upon knowing Fred that
she lets “herself be beautiful.” Thea’s sexuality acts as a tool for disciplining her body.
She internalizes Fred’s idea that she should be beautiful and erotic, subjecting her body to
exercises designed to make her beautiful. As Bartky argues, Thea has become a “self-
policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance” (80). She accepts
Fred’s projections that she is a sensual, erotic, confident being, and begins to beautify
herself in order to please her lover. Thus, she “couldn’t look” like she currently does
without meeting and loving Fred. Her sexual experience teaches her, as Bartky asserts,
that she is “importantly a body designed to please or to excite” (80). Thea internalizes this belief, as even after she leaves Fred she exists as a body intended to please and excite her audience. Her “self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy” (Bartky 80). Thea is sexually contained as a result of her internalization of the masculine gaze.

Fred’s love, though, awakens her to the necessary sensations and sexuality needed to accomplish great art, and his betrayal is also necessary, in that it frees her of romantic attachments, enabling her to become an androgyne. Harbison illustrates the concept of art as generativity, arguing that the “erotic impulse must be internalized – masculine and feminine principles must merge in the single person of the creator” (xx). Essentially, Thea accomplishes this birth of art and merging of principles through Fred’s betrayal. As previously explained, Thea already contains the feminine body and the “masculine” concept of creativity, signified by her voice. Through Fred, Thea is awakened to her sexuality and is able to further internalize the concept of masculine creativity, determination, and stoicism, achieving divine spirituality through her role as priestess.

Sacrificing to the God of Art

Before Thea reaches divine spirituality, though, she must marry herself to her art, expressing her sexuality and energy in art. She must relinquish all romantic and familial relationships, and Fred’s betrayal allows her to accomplish this severing of all alliances. Angry and hurt, Thea renews her determination to succeed, taking on more “masculine” traits, as she becomes unyielding, distant, and self-reliant. In order to perform great art and achieve spirituality, Thea sacrifices not only her body, but also her family and personal life. She explains this concept to Dr. Archie when he visits her after her return from Germany. Archie asserts that he does not think she has enough of a personal life
and questions if she has ever thought about marrying. Thea explains that a good artist has no time for extra relationships.

Your work becomes your personal life. You are not much good until it does. It’s like being woven into a big web. You cannot pull away, because all your little tendrils are woven into the picture. It takes you up, and uses you, and spins you out; and that is your life. Not much else can happen to you. (378)

Thea explains that her work or art is her personal life; she has no time to expend on romantic or familial relationships of any kind. She sacrifices everything in her life. Hence, she leaves Fred, upon his betrayal, determined to succeed. Thea also does not even take time to visit her dying mother. As Thea speaks of her life being “woven” into the picture of art, she demonstrates that everything she has is included and essential to achieving art. Thea cannot “pull away,” and she realizes she must forfeit not only her family, but also devote her self and body. In order to be a great artist, who reaches spirituality through her work, she must utilize her body as a vessel for this project.

Later in the conversation, Thea reveals how she manages to sublimate feelings, emotions, and sexuality in art. As she speaks with Dr. Archie, she admits she was “in love” with him when she was younger, and proceeds to explain that “there are a great many ways of caring for people” (378). Thea cares for her admirers by internalizing their desires and projecting their yearning and love into her art. Rather than continue to expend her love upon Archie, as she did as a child, Thea employs her body to express her love and erotic desire in her work. She no longer specifically loves him or anyone else, loving them only through her art. Thea shows she cares by projecting their feelings or desires into her art. She says that “Wagner says, in his most beautiful opera, that art is only a way of remembering youth. And the older we grow the more precious it
seems to us, and the more richly we can present that memory” (381). Thus, in every song
she sings, Thea remembers her “youth”, singing of old familiar “feeling[s]” and loving
her supporters (381). Thea relinquishes all relationships and the energy they would
consume, that she may concentrate those desires, energies, and eroticisms in her art.

Thea’s role as priestess can best be viewed in the final section of the novel, “Kronborg.”

Thea has returned from Germany, and works toward recognition as a great Wagnerian
soprano. Yet, despite that Thea is occasionally read as unfeeling and cold, the text still
implies Thea achieves divine spirituality by expressing her sexuality in art via the body.

This spiritual achievement is accomplished in her role of Wagner’s Sieglinde, and is
related not only by Thea’s male supporters, but also through Thea’s own eyes.

**Acting as Priestess between Humanity and Art**

Fred is one of the first to comment on Thea’s achievements, examining how she
has changed since her time in Germany. Although she has yet to perform the role of
Sieglinde, she has matured and is close to spiritual achievement. Upon Dr. Archie’s
arrival in New York, he and Fred discuss Thea’s voice and accomplishments. Fred
explains how Thea sang in the Rhine: “Every phrase she sang was basic. She simply
was the idea of the Rhine music” (330). Fred recognizes, Thea embodies the idea itself,
in that she can transform what something feels like into music or herself. To capture
“life” and reveal her spirituality, she becomes the idea, as she symbolizes what she is
singing. She enters into the “priesthood of art,” as she conveys the meaning of the music
to her listeners. As Thea realized in Panther Canyon, though, in order to become the
idea, she must transform herself into pure sensation on stage. Thus, she is “conscious” of
her every movement, which reflects the idea (395). As Fred relates, “the score pours her
into all those lovely postures, makes the light and shadow go over her face, lifts her and drops her” (351). In other words, the music “pours” or inspires her into different “postures” or movements. In viewing music as a sensation and by capturing those feelings, she transmits to her audience the greater idea that the music represents. She becomes the idea, conveying divinity through this metamorphosis.

Harsanyi also comprehends Thea’s ability to produce great art through the utilization of her body. After her performance of Wagner’s Sieglinde, Harsanyi exclaims, “At last, somebody with enough! Enough voice and talent and beauty, enough physical power. And such a noble, noble style” (394). What does Harsanyi mean in saying that Thea has “enough?” Harsanyi realizes Thea has the ability to capture those sensations and achieve great art. He knows she has “enough physical power” to achieve not only her dreams, but also to successfully convey the meaning of the music to the masses. I argue that by employing her body as a vessel for her sexuality and feelings, Thea maintains “enough” to achieve great art and divine spirituality. Harsanyi claims Thea’s secret is “passion,” and while Thea sustains a passion to succeed, she also embodies a sexual passion and energy that she relocates into her art. Thus, she keeps her body filled with “energy and fire” which she channels into her art (395). Yet, the novel reveals a tension, as while Thea acts as a vessel for the spiritual idea expressed in song, she also becomes a container for the masculine gaze, which fashions her as a performing object. The text implies, according to Wagnerian philosophy, that in order to become the spiritual idea, an artist must realize nature’s state as her own, as well as internalize the desires of the collective public. However, the novel depicts Thea’s collective public as entirely male, by showing only male audience members and refusing to give voice to
female members. The novel sees Thea's achievements as a heroic accomplishment, signifying one woman's determination to succeed and evade the patriarchal disciplinary structure. Yet, the text undermines its own arguments for as Thea becomes an androgyne, she is sexually contained and represents the masculine gaze on the patriarchal stage. While Thea succeeds as an individual woman, from a feminist standpoint, her ambitious quest is inevitably a failure, for she serves to represent and reify the patriarchal ideology.

The text relates and validates Thea's divine spirituality through her own sense of accomplishment; the Sieglinde performance truly exemplifies the connection between the body, sexuality, and art.

While she was on stage she was conscious that every movement was the right movement, that her body was absolutely the instrument of her idea. Not for nothing had she kept it so severely, kept it filled with such energy and fire. All that deep-rooted vitality flowered in her voice, her face, in her very finger-tips. She felt like a tree bursting into bloom. And her voice was as flexible as her body; equal to any demand, capable of every nuance. With the sense of its perfect companionship, its entire trustworthiness, she had been able to throw herself into the dramatic exigencies of the part, everything in her at its best and everything working together. (395)

In this passage, Thea's body becomes the "instrument" of the idea, as she employs it as a vessel for her sexuality and thus, exists as a heterogeneity of sensations. The terminology Cather employs suggests the sexual nature of Thea's performance and art, as her erotic charm literally "flower[s]" out through the expressions of her body, in her voice, her face, and even her fingertips. Thea's body lives and "bloom[s]" with her sexual "energy and fire." She is "flexible" and able to "throw herself" into the portrayal of the character, demonstrating the "passion" in which she lives her life (395). I maintain that her sexuality is vital to her art, as she channels it through her body and into her art, as
indicated through the language of the passage. The novel presents Thea’s channeling of her sexuality into her art as a form of resistance to the patriarchal system of containment. Thea depicts the “dramatic exigencies of the part,” and the word signifies a pressing need. The description alludes to a sexual need or yearning, as Thea throws herself into the part, needing to experience those sensations in order to find completeness and orgasmic satisfaction. Similarly, like Thea’s desire to fulfill the needs of her art, a lover might need to experience union with her partner. Thea achieves great art and spirituality by allowing herself to experience an aggregation of sensations, and thus, fully understand and embody the idea of what the music represents. Hence, the text expresses her determination to experience such sensations and “ecstasy”: “As long as she lived that ecstasy was going to be hers. She would live for it, work for it, die for it; but she was going to have it, time after time, height after height” (171).

This passage also reveals the manner in which Thea has become a “docile” body. While the novel applauds Thea for her achievements of divine spirituality and financial impendence, Thea’s sublimation of her sexuality in art is another means of control. Foucault argues that a “calculated manipulation” over the body’s “elements,” “gestures,” and “behaviour” was formed (Discipline and Punish 138). The body entered a “machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it,” in order that it might produce “subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (138). Thea is “conscious” of her every movement, and she throws her body into the part. She keeps her body “severely” that she may pour all of her “energy and fire,” all of her sexuality into her role (395). The text “breaks down” Thea’s bodily movements, as it describes in detail how Thea utilizes her body for her art. Her body is rearranged, as she pours her
sexual energy into her art instead of a personal relationship. The bodily discipline Thea "severely" inflicts upon herself produces her subjected and docile state.

The narrator, before describing Thea’s experience on stage, asserts that although Thea has fewer “inhibitions” and that she enters into the “inheritance that she herself had laid up,” she by no means achieves “enlightenment” or “inspiration” (395). In this statement, the narrator might desire to retain Thea as an average person to whom the reader can relate. Also, in asserting that Thea does not achieve enlightenment, the novel follows Wagner’s plot of the Sieglinde character. Sieglinde does not achieve enlightenment, but through her love and sexuality helps humanity discover divinity. In the same manner, Thea acts as the priestess of art, without realizing “enlightenment.” However, despite the narrator’s claims, the text suggests that Thea achieves a divine spirituality. Even the assertion that she enters into her “inheritance” implies spiritual achievement, as the wording is reminiscent of and common to the Christian doctrine.⁴

Also agreeing with this idea of spiritual achievement is Elsa Nettels, who examines how authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century employ language as an empowering force. In her work, Language and Gender in American Fiction, Nettels argues that in Cather’s novels “the ultimate expression of divine power” is the female voice “revealed in mortal art” (126). Nettels maintains Cather believes that in applying the female voice to art, a woman achieves “divine power” and hence, a “transcendent power” (126). Yet, while Thea realizes spirituality, the result is not without

⁴ Christianity often invokes the idea that the kingdom of heaven is like an inheritance of which one comes into possession. Ephesians 5:5 says, “For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure, or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” Other relevant examples include Ephesians 1:13-14, Hebrews 9:15, and 1 Peter 1:3-5.
repercussions, for in employing the body as a vessel to situate sexuality into art, the female body temporarily suffers greatly.

The Repercussions and Rejuvenations of the Body

Singing takes its toll on Thea, and this injury is best illustrated after Dr. Archie visits Thea after one of her performances: “She looked distinctly clipped and plucked. Her hair was parted in the middle and done very close to her head, as she had worn it under a wig. She looked like a fugitive, who had escaped from something in clothes caught up at hazard” (345). As Thea employs her body as a vessel and tries to situate all of her physical sensations into her work, she returns to her room, looking “clipped” and “plucked.” She is like a wounded bird, delicate, cautious, and wary. Looking “like a fugitive,” Thea demonstrates that art is a profession to which one must give her all. Thus, the novel continues to follow Wagner’s principles, in that he argues that a woman only gains her individuality upon the “moment of surrender” (Opera and Drama 111). Wagner’s words insinuate sexuality, as women are thought of as surrendering their virginity. Thea only achieves recognition and individuality in surrendering her entire being to her music. Having given her body, its sensations, and her sexuality to her lover and god, art, Thea has no feelings or passion remaining. She returns to her room, escaping like a “fugitive” for a few hours away from her art. However, although her profession injures her body, Thea draws upon her sexuality to refurbish her body with the necessary feelings and sensations to accomplish her work and ideals.

Like her ceremonious bathing in Panther Canyon, Thea’s baths remain sacred, as she employs them to gain energy and rejuvenate her body and spirit: “Her own body was always a cheering sight to her. When she was careworn, when her mind felt old and
tired, the freshness of her physical self, her long, firm lines, the smoothness of her skin, reassured her” (355). Thea’s body not only cheers her, but also refreshes her mind, as she looks upon her “physical self” and the “smoothness of her skin.” Again, Thea’s unclothed body and her sexuality lends Thea her inner and physical strength. Rather than staying a “plucked” and “clipped” being, she draws upon her eroticism to become “flushed and glowing” (355). Rejoicing in her nakedness and erotic nature, Thea rejuvenates her spirit, preparing to communicate her sexuality and sensations in her art once more.

Although Thea’s performances certainly harm and stress her body, she gains strength from her sexuality, as she rejuvenates her spirit during her bath time. The novel implies Thea acts as a priestess for art as she proceeds to sing Wagner’s Sieglinde, and furthermore advocates that while art may indeed be harmful to the body, the resulting success and spirituality is worth all the effort. Thus, the narrator concludes the “Kronborg” section by reflecting upon the growth of an artist.

Here we must leave Thea Kronborg. From this time on the story of her life is the story of her achievement. The growth of an artist is an intellectual and spiritual development which can scarcely be followed in a personal narrative... Any account of the loyalty of young hearts to some exalted ideal, and the passion with which they strive, will always in some of us, rekindle generous emotions. (397)

The novel’s concluding passage, in which the reader leaves Thea to her journey as an artist, demonstrates Thea’s spirituality as she applies herself to an “exalted ideal.” As the text admits Thea’s “story” is about “intellectual and spiritual” growth as an artist, so does the story reveal Thea’s spiritual and intellectual achievement, as she passionately strives towards that ideal. As the story is about “her achievement” and “spiritual development”,
the text implicitly purports that Thea achieves divine spirituality in acting as priestess between humanity and art.

Thea is similar to the eagle she sees soaring above in Panther Canyon. The text reveals her thoughts as she strains her eyes to watch the eagle’s flight.

O eagle of eagles! Endeavor, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art! From a cleft in the heart of the world she saluted it... It had come all the way; when men lived in caves, it was there. A vanished race; but along the trails, in the stream, under the spreading cactus, there still glittered in the sun the bits of their frail clay vessels, fragments of their desire. (269)

Thea is like the eagle in that she endeavors to soar above the mundane aspects of life, gloriously striving for human art. Thea “salutes” this bird, as she recognizes that it, like art, has the power to exist throughout ages. As Harsanyi realizes later, Thea possesses “enough,” enough ingenuity, desire, and determination to achieve the “glorious striving of human art.” She maintains the past through locating her desire into her art. Like that same eagle, Thea goes “all the way” achieving spirituality through her ability to channel her sexuality through her body and into her art.

Recent feminist critics relish Cather’s story of the female opera singer, Thea, who acts as priestess by expressing her sexuality in art via her body. These critics argue that Cather’s text is an example of one author’s determination to fight the patriarchal society, giving a voice and liberation to a woman artist and demonstrating how a woman may employ her body and sexuality to gain freedom. Sharon O’Brien’s text, Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice, is one example of such criticism.

Thea’s vessel is not a receptacle for male power, but a container and vehicle for female power. Combining nature with culture, biological with artistic gifts, unconscious, inborn endowment with technique and discipline, the woman singer’s voice/vessel/womb is Cather’s final rival to the male writer’s pen/sword/penis. (173)
While O'Brien recognizes Thea's employment of her body as a vessel, she believes the female singer's voice is a "container and vehicle for female power" and thus, operates as a "rival" to patriarchal power (i.e. the "pen/sword/penis"). I agree Thea does gain individual power from her singing, as she attains wealth, fame, freedom from a husband, and ultimately spirituality. However, Thea's vessel is not one of female power, but a "container" for masculine authority. Thea enters the "priesthood of art," only by representing and internalizing the feelings and desires of the collective public or audience (Cather, *Kingdom of Art* 153). As demonstrated, Thea's art and role as priestess is a means of containing of female sexuality, as the collective public Thea represents is almost entirely male. Thea internalizes only the masculine gaze, and by focusing her sexuality into her work, she is contained, and the patriarchy is saved from her employing her sexual nature on more dangerous practices or challenging behaviors. Thea does not experience sexual freedom, choosing which man she desires, as she concentrates her sexuality only on her art. Thus, although the novel applauds Thea for her sublimation of sexuality in art and resulting achievements, it inadvertently undermines its powerful female character, as Thea is sexually contained and becomes a container for patriarchal gaze.

In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather portrays a young female artist, who enters the "priesthood of art" through her ability to employ her body as a vessel or channel to express her sexuality in art. Thea achieves her divine spirituality as a Wagnerian

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5 In addition to O'Brien assessment, Nettels also sees this text as an example female liberation: "But in the performances of actresses and opera singers, especially Wagnerian sopranos, Cather saw embodied the creative powers and authority she believed denied to women writers. On the stage, a woman's sex empowered rather than diminished her" (124).
soprano, and the text upholds Wagner’s principles throughout. Thus, the novel depicts
Thea as internalizing the “collective wantings” of her audience. Like Alexandra, Thea
masculinizes herself, evading categorization into either sexual binary, appearing to gain
power in this manner. Depicted as an androgyne, Thea embodies the erotic impulses of
both male and female. Thea contains both the feminine body and the masculine voice.
As the voice is truly masculine, in that it represents not only the phallus, but also the
masculine desires and gaze, Thea becomes a Wagnerian androgyne, representing both
masculine and feminine sexualities. Upon her second awakening in Panther Canyon,
Thea realizes the connection between nature, art, and the body. She experiences a
spiritual and sexual awakening, as she embarks on a sexual relationship with Fred. Yet,
Fred’s betrayal is vital for Thea because she then sublimates her sexuality in art,
becoming a series of sensations, in order to better understand and represent the idea to her
audience.

As a result of her transformation, Thea achieves divine spirituality. Her body
suffers greatly though, as she employs it to express these sexual sensations through art.
Thea draws upon her sexuality to rejuvenate her spirit and maintain the necessary
strength to reach the pinnacle of art. In doing so, she channels her sexual energies into
her work through her body. However, while the novel attempts to depict a powerful,
independent, sexual female, it simultaneously undermines this idea. As Thea becomes a
Wagner androgyne, she loses much of her sexual freedom. Embodying both male and
female desires, Thea does not represent a true independent female. Rather, she loses her
autonomy as she performs her masculine audience’s desires. Her freedom and
achievement is an illusion, for while she appears to be sexually free, she can only situate
her sexuality into her art. As Bartky argues, her sexuality has become a tool to control and discipline her body and mind, as she has internalized this discipline. The discipline Thea “severely” employs on her body produces, as Foucault asserted, “subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (*Discipline and Punish* 138). Thus, despite the fact that Thea employs her body to act as a priestess and serve the God of art, her sexuality is inevitably contained as she internalized and communicates the masculine ideology through her songs.
Chapter 4: Constructed Bodies: The Search for Identity in
My Ántonia

Lena Lingard came across the stubble barefoot, in a short skirt, with a curved reaping hook in her hand, and she was flushed like the dawn, with a kind of luminous rosiness all about her. She sat down beside me, turned to me with a soft sigh and said, ‘Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like.’ (179)

Like The Song of the Lark, Cather’s My Ántonia has several extremely erotic passages. The connection between sexuality and death is not displayed as explicitly in My Ántonia as was seen in O Pioneers!. Yet, such a correlation between these concepts still exists, as this passage about Lina Lingard demonstrates. Here Jim relates one particular dream he experienced throughout his life, in which Lena, a childhood friend, comes to him. In his sexual fantasy, Jim imagines Lena, “flushed” and wearing few clothes, when she comes to kiss him as much as she likes. Although readers do not usually associate sex with Cather’s My Ántonia, this passage reveals an exceedingly sexual moment, as both Lena’s body and words reflect her aroused sexuality. However, Jim’s dream conveys more than just an innocent sexual encounter. As Blanche H. Gelfant accurately points out in her groundbreaking essay, “The Forgotten Reaping Hook: Sex in My Ántonia,” Lena carries a reaping hook to this sexual excursion in Jim’s fantasy. While the reaping hook symbolizes Jim’s fear of castration and his apprehension about his own sexuality, it also represents his fear of acknowledging Lena’s female sexuality. Gelfant argues, engaging in sexual activities brings destruction upon one’s self, “leading almost axiomatically to death” (96).

My Ántonia, like O’ Pioneers! insinuates that female sexuality leads to destruction, humiliation, and at times even death. Building on Gelfant’s article, I argue
that the novel critiques female sexuality through this connection with death. The physical depictions of Cather’s characters reinforce a fear of female and male sexuality, and imply an inevitable containment of sexuality. Gelfant expounds upon this connection in her article: “sex unites one with another. Its [sex] ultimate threat is loss of self....Only Ántonia manages to grow older and retain her original integrity...Through her, Jim hopes to be restored himself” (113). Sex, in Gelfant’s analysis of the novel, equates to a loss of identity. However, while Gelfant argues that Ántonia maintains her sense of originality, I argue that the depiction of her physical body reveals rather a loss of self, as seen in the case of Ántonia. Ántonia loses her sense of distinctiveness, as she struggles to come to terms with her gender identity. As she attempts to define herself as a woman and express her sexuality, Ántonia experiences gender confusion. Unlike Alexandra in O Pioneers!, Ántonia is not secure in her sense of any gender identity. Rather she vacillates between masculine and feminine identity, eventually losing sight of her own identity. Her gender confusion acts as a means of sexual containment. I argue that the characters’ sense of self comes from clear gender patterns that they can either embrace or reject. The characters’ bodies are intimately described to expose their sexual nature and tendencies, as well as to reinforce the idea that sexuality ultimately leads to devastation. My Ántonia demonstrates, like Cather’s two previous novels, that female sexuality is inevitably contained in masculine discourse and society.

The novel critiques female sexuality as a negative or destructive force, recommending that it should be completely repressed. The employment and depictions of the characters’ bodies reinforce this idea of destructive sexuality. Critics debate about Cather’s ideas about women’s roles. Some feminist critics align her point of view with
the primary narrator, Jim, seeing *My Ántonia* as supporting patriarchal values. Other critics argue that Cather employs Jim as a masquerading narrator, as she validates her love for other women.\(^6\) While each argument has valid reasoning, placing the novel on either side of this dichotomy (of her lesbianism or patriarchal support) limits Cather's genius, as it situates her in a particular position, ignoring the tensions in the work.

Although the novel critiques sexuality, recommending its complete repression to avoid sorrow, it also presents compelling portraits of women escaping traditional gender roles. While these women do not escape sexual containment, as they lack the power to tell their own stories, they do escape into the imaginative space beyond the narrative. Thus, Lena Lengard and Tiny Soderball employ their domestic skills to earn an independent living, free from the authority of any man. The novel alternatively depicts two women prospering on their own resourcefulness and fortitude. Domestic work becomes an escape from traditional heterosexual relationships or marriage. Yet, *My Ántonia* also recommends that female sexuality be regulated and confined. While I recognize that the novel also describes male sexuality as a thing to be feared, for this paper I will focus primarily on female sexuality.

As mentioned earlier, Cather resisted political movements, refusing to take a public stand. However, her 1918 novel reflects the dominant questions of her era, as it continues to represent sexuality as a negative and detrimental force, which should be repressed. By the 1920's America was entering a new sexual era. According to D'Emilio and Freedman's work, *Intimate Matters*, a shift towards a "philosophy of

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\(^6\) The first article to which I refer is Marilee Lindemann's "It Ain't my Prairie": Gender, Power, and Narrative in *My Ántonia*. Lindemann argues that Cather has imagined a man, who figures a woman with her mouth shut. Hence, she claims the novel is not feminist as extreme limitations are placed upon women (130). The second position – i.e. that Jim is speaking for Cather, masquerading her love for women – is
indulgence” occurred (223). Margaret Sanger advocated women’s right to birth control, and sexual theory abounded during this time. Freud and Ellis expounded upon sexuality, accrediting to “sexuality the power of individual self-definition” (D’Emilio and Freedman 225).7 As the 1920’s began, traditional views of femininity had changed, as women were thought to harbor strong sexual instincts, and sexuality came to be thought of as a natural instinct. A new emphasis upon personal gratification arose, as individual happiness was emphasized. Even though other types of social controls might exist within society, the new philosophy argued that the body should remain a “source of fulfillment” and “autonomy” (D’Emilio and Freedman 235).

Although Cather never publicly proclaimed her personal opinion about the current issues of the role of sexuality or contraception, her work critiques the laws that prevent women’s access to birth control, as Ántonia physically experiences the harsh, tiring results of interminable fertility. While sexuality moved into the public sphere and the individual’s control, My Ántonia argues that sexuality should be suppressed as it only leads to devastation. The bodies in the work manifest the pain and anguish which results from exercised sexuality and overindulgence of the body. Sexuality, and its consequential physical union, may result in loss of self, as signified in the depictions of the bodies. Although the novel offers positive depictions of female sexuality, as evident through Lena as a believable, sympathetic, sexual woman, the work recognizes a containment of sexuality.

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7 Havelock Ellis, an English sexologist, achieved widespread popularity for his beliefs that sexual gratification did not pose as a threat to one’s health or disposition. In his Studies in the Psychology of Sex (published between 1897 and 1910), Ellis sought to authorize a broader range of sexual opportunities rather than strictly heterosexual, martial relationships (D’Emilio and Freedman 224).
Set in Black Hawk, Nebraska, *My Ántonia* tells the story of childhood friends, Jim Burden and Ántonia Shimerda. Jim Burden, a railway lawyer, encounters another childhood friend whilst traveling by train. They agree to write their stories about Ántonia. While the story is titled after Ántonia, it essentially tells about Jim and his efforts to regain his glorious past and lost self. Immigrants from Bohemia, Ántonia’s family arrives in Nebraska at the same time as the orphaned Jim, who goes to live with his grandparents. Both families farm for a living, and Jim teaches Ántonia to read and speak English. Later, the Burdens move to Black Hawk. Through the assistance of Jim’s family, Ántonia achieves a housekeeping position in town, where she learns domestic duties. Jim leaves for college, returning to learn that Ántonia’s fiancé has abandoned her, leaving her pregnant and alone. Jim visits her once during this time, expressing how he wishes he could have her for a “sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister – anything that a woman can be to a man” (251). However, rather than acting upon these feelings, Jim leaves Ántonia again. He returns twenty years later to Ántonia, who is “grizzled” from her life on the farm and the births of her many children. Yet, Jim views her as a triumphant Earth mother, as he experiences a “coming home” feeling upon seeing her again (288). For despite the hardships Ántonia has experienced in her life, Jim believes she has managed to retain her true identity, the one task he has failed at in life.

**Discrediting Jim’s Account of Ántonia**

I argue that Jim negates the positive image of Ántonia as an Earth Mother nurturing her children, in that he proves to be an unreliable narrator. Jim’s unreliability as a narrator further demonstrates Ántonia’s construction as a symbol or figure, emphasizing his desire to constrict her to a certain gender role. The novel’s introduction
demonstrates Jim's untrustworthiness as a narrator when he discusses Ántonia with the unidentified narrator. The original narrator relates how she and Jim both remember Ántonia from Black Hawk. She communicates Jim's unhappiness in his marriage to a "restless, headstrong" New York girl (2). Jim's discontented marriage reveals his tendency to romanticize and idealize his past relationships with Ántonia and Lena. As the friends continue to discuss Ántonia, the narrator comments how both of them viewed her.

More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood. To speak her name was to call up pictures of people and places, to set a quiet drama going in one's brain. (3)

As this passage indicates, the memory of Ántonia carries a lot of emotional baggage for both the narrator and Jim. To each of them, she represents the "country," as well as the "whole adventure" of childhood. Such memories are suspect as Jim's account of Ántonia becomes not an accurate portrayal of the young woman, but what she symbolizes to him.

In her article, "'It Ain't my Prairie': Gender, Power, and Narrative in My Ántonia," Marilee Lindemann points out that the introduction establishes Ántonia not as a character, but as a "figure" (My Ántonia 3). Lindemann argues that a "figure" is "several steps further removed from 'reality' than a 'character' and so is psychologically less substantial, complicating the reader's desire to ascribe motives, affix labels, or establish sympathetic connections" (Lindemann 115). As the critic accurately claims, Ántonia exists not as a character to Jim, but as a "figure." Thus, Jim fashions Ántonia as he wants the reader to imagine her, further displacing her from reality. As he relates her life story, he emphasizes the events he deems important. Her story becomes focused around his life, according to his desires and wishes. To Jim, her life symbolizes an idyllic childhood.
and glorious past. Simply to speak her name initiates a “quiet drama” in their heads, invoking a sentimental response. The narrative becomes not an accurate account, but rather one man’s emotional version of his past.

The novel further emphasizes this idea as the original female narrator recounts Jim bringing his manuscript to her. As he lays down his document, he decides to simply title it “Ántonia.” Unsatisfied with this inscription, he places the possessive “my” in front of her name: “My Ántonia” (5). While his new caption may perhaps invoke sentimental responses on the part of the reader, his actions are still problematic, for his title indicates a desire to possess or own this woman, as well as his acknowledgement that this story is her version of her. While marriage or love is often (rightfully or wrongfully) thought of in the economic terms of ownership, as his narrative progresses, Jim concedes that his relationship with Ántonia never progressed beyond friendship. His employment of the possessive demonstrates only a desire to control or own someone who rightfully does not belong to him. While women are not property to be owned, the novel implies that “ownership” occurs as the women are broken, silenced, and constructed according the male view. Hence, while Jim “owns” neither Ántonia nor Lena he endeavors to tell their stories, silencing their viewpoints in favor of his own construction. He possesses Ántonia as he has the power to relate her narrative and thus, place a possessive in front of her name. Jim attempts to control his past and secure his future by falsely identifying Ántonia as his personal property. In possessing and identifying her as a mother figure, he locates his own identity as one of her children, gaining strength and confidence to grow in the future. This original misconception sets the tone for the remainder of the novel,
illustrating that Jim is an unreliable narrator who willfully constructs and distorts the past and Ántonia as he desires.

Jim's Fear of Male and Female Sexuality

While Jim willfully attempts to fashion Ántonia’s character and shape his past, his narrative reveals his fear of female and male sexuality. Although I am most concerned with his fear of female sexuality, his fear of male sexuality discloses how he locates all responsibility for devastation onto the female body and sexuality. Jim’s fear of female sexuality can first be seen when he and Ántonia run through the prairie, stopping to “snuggle” in the grass while Jim teaches her new words. Jim describes her as “alive, and very eager” (27). Again, his words suggest her sexuality, as they snuggle down beneath the wind. Her eagerness also implies that perhaps she desires to learn more than simply the English language. Jim interprets the event in a similar manner, as after their activities, Ántonia wishes to give Jim a “little chased silver ring,” which she wears on her middle finger. While she thinks not of marriage, wanting to express her gratitude for the teaching, Jim is “repulsed” by her behavior, thinking she is “reckless” and “extravagant.” Jim claims that he cannot fathom why she would want to give one of her few possessions to a boy she just met. However, as marriage is often associated with the ring, the event could highlight Jim’s fear of marriage and the resulting sexual act. While Jim could be afraid that Ántonia wants more intimacy from him, rather than just sex, his repeated associations with sex and death suggests that again the ensuing sexual encounter is what he actually fears. For instance, Jim not only imagines a scantily clad Lena coming to him with a reaping hook, he also associates death with Wick Cutter, as Cutter attempted to rape him and later murdered his wife. While Jim views Ántonia as a feminine, albeit
reckless woman, he fears her sexuality, as he continues to describe her as “reckless” and “extravagant,” revealing his discomfort and foreshadowing Ántonia’s later sexual indiscretion.

He again expresses his fear of sexuality when he kills a rattler while protecting Ántonia. Coming back from Russian Peter’s house, Jim and Ántonia stop to investigate a prairie dog town. Equipped with a shovel, Jim is prepared when he hears Ántonia scream upon seeing the snake erect and ready to spring. The event exposes Jim’s fear about male sexuality, as seen in his description of the snake.

He was not merely a big snake, I thought – he was a circus monstrosity. His abominable muscularity, his loathsome, fluid motion, somehow made me sick. He was as thick as my leg, and looked as if millstones couldn’t crush the disgusting vitality out of him. (41)

The snake implicitly references male sexuality, and Jim’s obvious sickness at the sight illustrates his fear of male sexuality. Jim even employs the word “vitality” to further express his association of male sexuality and the fearsome, disgusting rattlesnake. He sees his sexuality, like Ántonia’s and Lena’s, as something which is almost uncontrollable. He believes male sexuality to be “loathsome” and monstrous. However, Jim views male sexuality as having the ability to destroy others. As men become overcome by their desires, Jim believes they lose their reason and commonsense, executing any deed to fulfill their sexual needs. Thus, Jim describes Wick Cutter as going “insane” when being thwarted in his intentions to rape Ántonia. This attempted rape scene explicitly shows Jim’s interpretation and subsequent fear of male sexuality. Jim takes Ántonia’s place in the Cutter household while the family is away, as she feels uncomfortable staying alone. When Cutter sneaks back to rape Ántonia, he finds and beats Jim mercilessly. Jim blames and “hates” Ántonia for the event: “I hated her almost
as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness” (197). The event demonstrates Jim’s association of violence, fear, and potential death with male sexuality, as he is almost raped by Cutter. Yet, interestingly, Jim blames Ántonia for his violent encounter with Cutter. Like Alexandra placing responsibility on Marie, he essentially blames Ántonia’s body and appearance for producing such desires in Cutter. Rather than blame his attacker for the resulting beating, Jim places all responsibility on the female body. While Jim fears male sexuality, as he associates it with devastation, he holds the female body and female sexuality responsible for the “disgustingness” of uncontrolled male sexuality. Thus, Jim’s fear of male sexuality reveals his fear and critique of female sexuality and woman’s body, demonstrating how he places all accountability on the female.

After Jim leaves for college, Ántonia goes to marry a railroad man, who deserts her upon their having sex. She returns to Black Hawk, pregnant, humiliated, and alone. After her pregnancy, she reverts back to more traditionally masculine behavior. Thus, when Jim comes to see her once more before going east, he finds Ántonia working in the fields. Yet, despite her more masculine attitude, Jim still experiences a desire to become more intimate with her. He longs to have her for a “sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother, or my sister – anything a woman can be to a man” (251). While Jim’s desire is not necessarily sexual, as he would have her for a “mother” or “sister,” he does desire to possess her in any manner. As Ántonia is not his blood relation, Jim would have to possess her as either a “sweetheart” or “wife.” Yet, he is too frightened of her and his own sexuality to place Ántonia in any role that might require sexual contact. He is afraid that sexuality might cause him to behave irrationally like Ántonia previously did or as her
father, who married a lower class woman upon impregnating her.\(^8\) Thus, Jim represses his sexual urges, abandoning Ántonia once more.

**Jim’s Invalidation of Traditional Gender Roles**

Jim’s adventure with the snake also exposes the gender roles that he attempts to avoid as he fears sexuality. After he kills the snake, Ántonia attempts to comfort him, wiping his brow with a handkerchief. While Jim acknowledges that he looked and felt sick, he snatches the cloth away from her, not wanting her condolences or loving care. Here Ántonia tries to comply with traditional gender roles, caring for Jim and bolstering his confidence upon completion of the event. She steps into the conventional role of lover and helpless female, as the weaker person who needs protection and shelter. In return for this service, she (the woman) cares for and exalts her lover. In the same manner, Jim follows traditional behavior patterns for men, not allowing Ántonia to comfort him, as he is strong and capable of facing such challenges. However, although both Ántonia and Jim play roles and comply with established gender behavior patterns, Jim undermines his role of powerful, virile man as he comments that his quest was really a “mock adventure.”

Subsequent experiences with rattlesnakes taught me that my first encounter was fortunate in circumstance. My big rattler was old, and had led too easy a life; there was not too much fight in him…So in reality it was a mock adventure; the game was fixed for me by chance, as it probably was for many a dragon-slayer. I had been adequately armed by Russian Peter; the snake was old and lazy; and I had Ántonia beside me, to appreciate and admire. (44-45)

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\(^8\) Ántonia’s father never wished to come to America. The novel portrays him as an artist, who no longer desired to play the violin after experiencing the loneliness and harsh conditions of the frontier. The text blames Mr. Shimerda’s suicide on his wife, for insisting he give up everything he loved to relocate. Also, the work implies that his sexuality is at fault for his unhappiness, as he should not have engaged in sexual relations or married a lower class woman (Cather 75).
Rather than using the event to validate his role as a man, he claims that he had beaten the
deer, not by skill or wit, but by sheer "chance". Despite that Jim and Ántonia accept
their prescribed gender roles, Jim invalidates their behaviors by saying that his bravery
and manliness are not what won the battle. Not only does Jim refuse to accept this
concept of man, his view of the adventure reveals his fear of his and Ántonia's sexuality.
Instead of authorizing the adventure and stepping into the role of dominant man, Jim
recedes from this image. He establishes his identity as yet a child, playing a game of
"dragon-slayer" or having a "mock adventure." His invalidation reveals his fear of his
own sexuality and masculinity. He does not want to be responsible for Ántonia. In the
same manner, Jim's nullification of Ántonia in the role of his lover or girlfriend suggests
his fear of female sexuality. Thus, Jim chooses to term the event a "mock adventure,"
continuing to reside in a childlike state and avoiding all possibilities of facing female or
male sexuality.

Thus, Gelfant argues that Jim's recapitulation of the past seems to be a "final
surrender to sexual fears. He was afraid of growing up, afraid of women, afraid of the
nexus of love and death" (98). Jim's adventure further signifies these fears as he resists
identification as a mature adult. In analyzing this event, Gelfant argues that while Jim's
snake adventure reveals his fear of male sexuality, it also illustrates his awareness of the
duplicity in which he is involved. Gelfant maintains that Ántonia "betrayed him from first
to last" (104). As a mother figure, Ántonia "betrayed" Jim as she leads him into danger
and validates the action. The critic argues that in pronouncing Jim a man, she "keeps him
a boy" (104). She concludes Jim's mock adventure is indeed a symbolic quest for self-
knowledge, which turns into a nightmare as he does not discover or authorize his ideal of
self. Gelfant correctly surmises that Jim’s escapade reveals his ineffective adolescent search for self. However, I disagree with her claim that Jim’s unsuccessful quest for self-knowledge is Ántonia’s fault as she “closes off the road to authentic initiation and maturity” (104). The novel lays no blame on Ántonia for Jim’s mock adventure with the snake and failure to embrace manhood, as Jim himself invalidates the experience by comparing it to dragon-slaying. While Ántonia steps into the role of lover and caregiver, Jim refuses to take responsibility for the adventure, determining it was by mere chance that he was able to kill the snake. Gelfant’s conclusion dangerously continues to censor women for the failures of men, and gives Ántonia authority and autonomy which she never really experiences.

The descriptions of Ántonia’s body reflect how the novel constructs her identity and places value upon it. Before Jim even meets her, the train’s passenger conductor describes her physical appearance to the boys: “She’s as bright as a new dollar. Don’t you want to go ahead and see her, Jimmy? She’s got pretty brown eyes, too” (10). The novel describes Ántonia in economic terms, as she is like a “new dollar.” Such a description of her body foreshadows that Ántonia and her body will always be viewed as a commodity. She is something to be possessed and dominated, used to the maximum potential. Ántonia never experiences agency or autonomy as she is constructed according the male view.

Ántonia’s Gender Confusion and Vacillating Identity

Sexually contained, Ántonia wavers between a masculine and feminine identity. Although Jim attempts to portray her as an affirmative Earth mother, nurturing her multitude of children, the physical depictions of Ántonia’s body delineates a different
idea, as she is shown as a broken woman. Rather than give an affirmative view of procreation and sexuality, the physical bodies reveal the gender confusion the characters experience. The novel depicts Ántonia as losing herself and learning to fear her sexuality, and her physical description reinforces this conclusion. Her body regularly betrays her gender confusion, in addition to revealing how Jim fears female sexuality.

While Jim depicts Ántonia as a confident mother, who remains secure in her identity, Ántonia actually suffers a loss of self as she attempts to define herself and experience her sexuality. Her physical depictions reflect this idea, as Ántonia continually searches for her identity, vacillating between a masculine and feminine identity.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Bartky describes how a woman structures her sense of self: “The sense of oneself as a distinct and valuable individual is tied not only to the sense of how one is perceived, but also to what one knows, especially to what one knows how to do” (77). In this passage, Bartky argues that women define themselves by how others perceive them and by what they know how to do. Yet, if a woman cannot clearly perceive what others think of her, she would experience gender confusion and possible identity loss. In the case of Ántonia, she defines her self by what Jim thinks about her. However, Jim wavers in his views of her, first thinking of her as feminine and then later as masculine. Thus, she cannot locate herself in a particular identity, as Jim refuses to construct her as having a specific distinctiveness. Ántonia also defines herself by the work she is able to perform. Hence, she occasionally boasts of her ability to work like a man, using her labor as a definition of self. When she moves to town, learning domestic duties, Ántonia experiences an interruption in her sense of self, as she can no longer define her self as being able to perform farm labor. Ántonia is kept as a docile, subjected
body, in that she is never able to locate herself to a specific gender category, as her work changes and Jim refuses to maintain a single definition of her.

When Jim first meets Ántonia, he views her as an attractive, feminine, young woman. Also, she appears to have a stationary identity, in which she is secure.

I remembered what the conductor had said about her eyes. They were big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood. Her skin was brown, too, and in her cheeks she had a glow of rich, dark colour. Her brown hair was curly and wild-looking. (24).

In this passage, Jim describes Ántonia in a similar manner to Lena. Concentrating on her physical appearance, Jim stresses her “pretty” body. He describes her eyes as “big and warm and full of light.” This description of her eyes suggests that she not only are her eyes “big” and “warm,” but also she is open-minded and loving. He describes her as warm and vivacious, and even her cheeks reflect her sexuality. They are bright and glowing, symbolizing her youth and vitality. Jim also carefully divulges her nonnative status as an immigrant, depicting her otherness as she is of “dark colour.” Yet, Jim feels attracted to her despite her minority standing. Perhaps because of her minority status, he views her as an erotic being and emphasizes her body to illustrate not only his fascination, but also her sexual nature. Even the description of Ántonia’s hair exhibits her sexuality. “Curly and wild-looking,” Ántonia’s uncontained tresses imply a wildness that extends beyond her hair. She possesses a sense of independence and wildness, yet remains fully feminine in her sexuality. Ántonia’s body can be likened to the prairie on which she resides, as it too is viewed as wild and needing to be possessed.

The text demonstrates Ántonia’s confusion over her gender identity as she boasts of her ability to work like a man. While Jim originally describes her as a feminine, sexual young woman, he later depicts her as a hardened, sunburnt laborer. Her body
reflects this gender confusion, as Jim describes the changes she experiences upon the death of her father.

Her outgrown cotton dress switched about her calves, over the boottops. She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor’s. Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf. One sees that draught-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries. (99)

While Ántonia’s dress still floats about her bare legs, in this scene, it comes almost to her boot tops. Her footwear demonstrates she has no time for frivolities or pleasure. Instead, she must roll up her sleeves and work “all day.” Her arms and throat reflect that she constantly toils outside in the sun, trying to perform her father’s job. Ántonia’s body reveals she has become like a man, executing a man’s work. Upset with this new Ántonia, Jim compares her to a work horse, as his romantic desires are disillusioned with her workload. Yet, Ántonia’s words, in addition to her body, signify her noncompliancy with conventional gender roles, as she determines to become like a man: “I ain’t got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can’t say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm” (100). Feeling pressure from her mother to help on the farm, Ántonia determines to put learning and school behind her, focusing on making the land “one good farm.” She abandons her feminine identity for more traditionally considered masculine traits. Jan Goggans accurately analyzes in her text, “Social (Re)Visioning in the Fields of My Ántonia,” the perception of being similar to a man is “the notion of being meaningful in the world” (163). Hence, like Alexandra, Ántonia willingly forsakes her feminine qualities in an attempt to gain power, recognition, and autonomy in the world.
In her article, "‘Fire and Wit’: Storytelling and the American Artist in Cather’s *My Ántonia*," Paula Woolley examines how the novel erases Ántonia’s female identity. The critic points out that in addition to her rough appearance and mannish boasts Jim occasionally calls Ántonia by the masculine nickname: “Tony.” Woolley argues that this elision refers to Jim’s awareness of her “slippery gender identity” and reveals “insecurity about his own manhood” (155). While Ántonia does revert back to her more feminine nature for a time, Woolley correctly demonstrates how Ántonia suffers from gender confusion and how Jim could find her identity disagreeable as a result of his insecurity about his own manhood and sexuality.

Ántonia chooses not continue as a male-identified female for the remainder of the novel. Upon moving to town, she learns domestic skills and again adopts conventionally feminine forms of behavior. Jim sees her once more as attractive, commenting that “love and credulousness” seem to look out of her eyes (186). He idealizes Ántonia, constructing her identity as a loving female. After one dance, he even attempts to kiss her, only to be rebuffed. Ántonia tells him he should not kiss her “like that.” Jim retorts that Lena allows him to kiss her in such a manner, and he is not nearly as “fond of her” as he is of Ántonia (177). In this instance, Jim admits his sexual desire, only to discover she does not view him in that light. Rather, she sees him as a younger companion and friend, as illustrated at the conclusion of the tale. There Jim admits he was “very much in love” with Ántonia to her boys, and they are quite surprised (269). Yet, the boys know all about Jim Burden, through Ántonia’s own account, frequently responding to Jim’s stories with “we know.” Their surprise demonstrates that Ántonia does not view the past in the same manner as Jim, illustrating his construction and idealization of her identity. As
Woollery argues, Ántonia has told a different story, viewing Jim as an “awkward-looking” child. The discrepancies between the different stories reveal Jim’s desire to construct his past in a fictitious manner and thus, his unreliability as a narrator (Woolley 152).

Ántonia’s Body Symbolizes her Lost Identity

Jim returns to Ántonia twenty years later, constructing her identity as a mother figure and looking to relocate his self in his past. The conclusion of My Ántonia is greatly debated, as critics argue about Ántonia’s identity and her effects on Jim. For instance, Paula Woolley sees Ántonia as an artist, telling her own stories, and gaining power and agency as a result (Woolley 152). Yet, she cannot be figured as an artist or narrator, as Jim continues to construct or frame her story and voice. Her own voice rarely emerges from the novel, as Jim filters her stories, reinterpreting them to make them his own. On the other hand, Marilee Lindemann argues that Ántonia is policed and contained, as Jim consistently figures her as a maternal figure, who holds no “threat to Jim’s masculine discursive power” (Lindemann 127). As Lindemann accurately illustrates, Ántonia is sexually contained, as she marries, begins a family, and is constructed through the male viewpoint. She is not, though, the triumphant mother figure Jim would try to present. As an unreliable narrator, Jim’s account and interpretation of Ántonia cannot be trusted. Rather, Ántonia’s body tells a different story, as she is shown as a broken woman, who has lost her own identity.

Upon going to her Black Hawk farm, Jim describes Ántonia:

Ántonia came in and stood beside me; a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled. It was a shock of course...As I confronted her, the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger. She was there, in the full vigor of her personality,
battered but not diminished, looking at me, speaking to me in the husky breathy voice I remembered so well. (258)

Jim claims that while Ántonia has changed physically, she still maintains the same “personality.” He insists that her identity has actually grown “stronger.” Yet, his statements contradict each other even in this paragraph, as he also acknowledges that Ántonia is “battered, but not diminished.” While Ántonia’s identity has “not diminished,” it is also not “stronger,” as she has been “battered.” Rather, her identity has suffered, as she has struggled to raise her children and assist her husband on the farm. Also, her body serves to reinforce the gender confusion Ántonia has experienced throughout the novel. As demonstrated, Ántonia vacillated between a masculine and feminine identity throughout the text as she attempted to locate her identity. In this passage, Jim portrays her as having lost all of her femininity. While Ántonia’s aging does not necessarily mean a loss of self, her body becomes the instrument to reveal her gender confusion and lost identity. Ántonia is a broken woman. Her skin is hardened and “brown” from long hours in the fields. Even her once “curly and wild-looking” is now “grizzled.” She is also “flat-chested,” further emphasizing her loss of her sexuality, as well as her femininity. This change reflects that her sexuality has been contained and subdued. She no longer exists as a dangerous, erotic, female, but as a grizzled, old woman.

Her body further reinforces this idea, as Ántonia herself acknowledges that she looks older, and worn-down: “His teeth (her husband, Anton’s) have kept so nice. I haven’t got many left. But I feel just as young as I used to, and I can do as much work” (261). While I recognize that female gender does not equal youth and beauty, the text employs Ántonia’s body to symbolize her broken spirit and lost identity. Ántonia has
aged fast, having lost most of her teeth in addition to her youthful looking skin. Interestingly, she measures her youth by her ability to perform work, rather than by physical or sexual traits. Although she claims she still feels young and can perform the same demanding labor, her body tells a different story. The story is that of a young woman, prematurely aged due to interminable fertility and overexertion at manual labor. As Ántonia fluctuates between masculine and feminine identities, she eventually loses her sense of self, having no clear gender pattern or behavior to accept or resist. Her gender confusion is a means of sexual containment, and her body symbolizes this loss. Although Jim insists on her strong identity, he too invalidates this image. He refers to Ántonia as “mother” instead of by her given name (262). Desiring to create an affirmative image of Ántonia as an Earth mother, Jim constructs and emphasizes her identity as a maternal figure. Yet, his wording reveals that as he attempts to place Ántonia into the traditional gender role, she further loses her identity. She has no voice within the novel. Jim forgoes her original being or self, in an attempt to morph her into a mothering figure that will help him regain his “precious,” “incommunicable past” (289). Ántonia loses her identity as Jim constructs her into a figure or symbol, which represents everything for which he has been longing. As Jim attempts to construct Ántonia’s identity, he situates her into the distinct categorization of idealized mothering figure. Yet, My Ántonia, like Cather’s two previous novels, fights categorization, showing the destructive results of placement within these antithetical disciplinary classifications.

The novel further demonstrates Ántonia’s lost sense of self when she and her children take Jim to see their “new fruit cave” (262). The group descends into the cave through the cellar door, and the family is “proud” of this pantry. While the excursion
appears as an innocent account of Ántonia showing off her home and hard labor, Ántonia and Jim’s exploration below the surface of the farm signifies to me an important mimetic act. Who are they once they descend into their inner selves? What secret desires do they store a way in the depths of their subconscious? The cave scene reveals Ántonia’s acknowledgement of her lost identity, as she, along with Jim examine their buried desires. C. G. Jung, in his text, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, explains that caves are representative of transformation processes. When speaking of the Islamic legend, “The Cave,” Jung argues that caves symbolize our unconscious desires.

Anyone who gets into that cave, that is to say into the cave which everyone has in himself, or into the darkness that lies behind the consciousness, will find himself involved in an – at first – unconscious process of transformation. By penetrating into the unconscious he makes a connection with his unconscious contents. This may result in a momentous change of personality in the positive or negative sense. (135-136)

Some critics might view this mimetic act of transformation to be solely Jim’s, as he narrates the piece. Upon emerging from the cave, Jim declares he feels “dizzy,” looking at all of Ántonia’s children pour forth from the earth (264). Jim’s dizziness and his exploration of the cave and his subconscious desires could reflect his transformation, as he locates his identity as one of Ántonia’s many children. While I agree Jim does find contentment in finally constructing Ántonia as the triumphant mother figure, I believe the cave scene also signifies Ántonia’s transformation. As Jung explains, the cave represents a transformation in either the “positive or negative sense.” While Jim experiences a positive transformation, the cave symbolizes Ántonia’s final transformation into a broken woman, who has lost her sense of self. While Jim again comments on Ántonia’s children in this scene, situating her into the gender role of mother, the novel does not allow her
that position as it emphasizes that they are “Cuzak’s Boys” (253). Hence, the novel employs the cave to further imply Ántonia’s lost identity and sense of self.

This section, in which Jim returns to visit Ántonia, is titled “Cuzak’s Boys.” Jim strives to become one of Cuzak’s boys, evading adulthood and sexual maturation. In this instance and others, Jim projects his own feelings and desires onto Ántonia. Fearing female and male sexuality, Jim strives to reenter childhood to escape what the novel terms as the inevitable destruction and humiliation caused by sexuality. His wording reflects her lost identity, as she no longer is named but is described as a figure or construction. Losing her sense of self, Ántonia is silenced and constructed according to Jim’s view within the novel. Hence, the text laments Ántonia’s sexuality as the cause for her initial unhappiness and devastation. In depicting Ántonia as a broken, lost woman, the novel critiques sexuality and recommends its repression.

**Fashioning the Body: Jim’s Projections of Lena Lingard’s Identity**

Sexuality in *My Ántonia* cannot adequately be discussed without examining Lena Lingard. Profoundly sexual and erotic, Lena’s physical beauty and body inspire Jim to frequently think about her. He describes her in detail, imagining himself enjoying sexual delights with her. Unlike Ántonia, Lena appears to resist sexual containment, gaining agency at the conclusion of the narrative as she escapes Black Hawk to work as an independent seamstress. However, while Lena does not lose her sense of self, the physical depictions of Lena later insinuate an inevitable containment of her sexuality, as she is silenced in favor of Ántonia’s narrative. Lena’s body is stressed to reinforce her refusal of traditional sexual behavior, as well as to illustrate Jim’s construction of her character. First introduced in the “Hired Girls” section, Lena comes to visit Ántonia
when she works for the Harlings. As Jim is also calling on his neighbors, he describes his encounter with Lena. Although Jim has previously met Lena, he first introduces her to his audience in this section.

A plump, fair-skinned girl was standing in the doorway. She looked demure and pretty, and made a graceful picture in her blue cashmere dress and little blue hat, with a plaid shawl drawn neatly about her shoulders and a clumsy pocket-book in her hand. (129)

While Lena appears anything but an erotic, magnetic female in this passage, the physical description fittingly foreshadows her later containment. At first glance, Jim does not imagine Lena as a dangerous siren, as he typically portrays her. Instead he constructs her image as a safe, "demure" girl, from whom he has nothing to fear. Rather than existing as a volatile, sexual woman, she is a "demure" young girl. Her clothing reinforces this harmless, nonsexual image of the docile, young girl. Fully clothed in a conventional blue dress, hat, and plaid shawl, Lena exemplifies the epitome of conservatism. Even her "clumsy pocket-book" emphasizes that idea that rather than being a sexual, alluring female, she is but a clumsy adolescent. It is this image which Jim will later fall back on when constructing her identity one last time as a harmless, nonsexual girl.

Yet, in the next passage, the novel displays Lena’s sexual nature, as she “archly” speaks in a “smooth, low voice” (129). Her voice reveals Jim’s depiction of Lena as an extremely sexual being. Jim proceeds to relate how he had not recognized Lena because he was not accustomed to seeing Lena fully dressed: “I had never seen her before with a hat on her head – or with shoes and stockings on her feet, for that matter. And here she was, brushed and smoothed and dressed like a town girl, smiling at us with perfect composure” (129). The discrepancy between the two passages is difficult to miss, suggesting fluidity in Lena’s identity. She morphs from impoverished immigrant to a
prettily dressed “town girl.” While this fluidity could be a result of going from poverty to financial independence, the physical descriptions exhibit how the person doing the telling or narrating constructs identity. Jim emphasizes the fact that he did not recognize Lena, establishing her as having multiple identities. Also, Lena’s body and attire appear responsible for reflecting her identity and sexuality. Jim depicts Lena as “brushed and smoothed,” in a manner similar to describing a cat or pet. While she is completely clad, Jim’s wording exposes her sexual nature, as he portrays her body in sexual terms. Lena, however, resists being placed into an established gender role. While she may look like a “town girl,” she has no intention of following their traditional behavioral patterns. Even at the beginning, she declares, “I don’t want to marry Nick, or any other man. I’ve seen a good deal of married life, and I don’t care for it” (131). Not only is Lena a sexual woman, she resists being confined and constrained by marriage or the authority of a man. Not wanting to ask “lief of anybody,” Lena determines to do as she pleases, making a life financially independent of men. Her body serves to reinforce this noncompliancy with the traditional ideas of marriage and domesticity for women, as Jim increasingly emphasizes her body to illustrate her sexuality.

Jim further dreams about Lena, depicting her in bodily terms as can be seen not only in his fantasy about the reaping hook, but also in his narrative about Lena and Ole Benson. Jim begins by relating how he remembers Lena.

Before I knew Lena, I thought of her as something wild, that always lived on the prairie, because I had never seen her under a roof. Her yellow hair was burned to a ruddy thatch on her head; but her legs and arms, curiously enough, in spite of constant exposure to the sun, kept a miraculous whiteness which somehow made her seem more undressed than other girls who went scantily clad. (133)
In this passage, Jim shows his interpretation of Lena, as he pictures her as "more undressed" than other "scantily clad" girls. "Wild" and untamable, Lena's body reinforces her unconventional behavior. Yet, her body retains a "miraculous whiteness," which conveys her maintained sexuality, as it makes her appear more undressed. Sexual, unconventional, and utterly feminine, Lena is an embodiment of the prairie to Jim, as she always exists outdoors. Like the prairie, Lena and her sexuality exist as something wild, which needs to be feared, contained, and dominated. In the same way that Jim categorizes Ántonia, he also attempts to categorize Lena, placing her into the role of seductive, dangerous whore. While Jim will later fall back on his imagery of Lena as a docile girl, in his mind he associates her with sex and death, placing into this categorization. Lena's encounter with Ole reinforces this idea of sexuality as a dangerous, potentially volatile force, which needs to be censored and suppressed.

**Containing the Body and Female Sexuality**

Although Ole is married, his wife is viewed as having an unstable mind. Ole visits Lena in the fields as she cares for her flock. The old man becomes so attached to her he neglects his farm to accompany Lena. Yet, Jim describes Ole's attention to Lena not as a simple desire for companionship, but rather as a sexual attraction. Thus, Jim interprets how Lena had become a young woman one Sunday: "The swelling lines of her figure had been hidden under the shapeless rags she wore in the fields" (135). Again Jim emphasizes Lena's body to highlight her sexuality. But this sexuality contains certain consequences, as Ole's wife "Crazy Mary" attempts to chase down and kill Lena with a corn-knife. Seeing Lena as sexually deviant for making "eyes" at a married man, Mary attempts to punish her. She passionately chases after her, desiring to "trim some of that
shape” off her body (135). While Mary’s craziness might account for her violent behavior, this role of “madwoman” could easily be a construction placed upon her, as she refuses to comply with conventional gender codes of behavior. Mary’s anger demonstrates that Lena’s sexuality is seen as dangerous, and her words reflect that Lena’s body exists as the cause for this fear. Like Jim’s blaming Ántonia for his encounter with Wick Cutter, Mary, too, places responsibility on the female body. Rather than recognizing and acknowledging her husband’s desire and actions, she willfully chooses to blame Lena and the female body. As Foucault argues, sexuality becomes a determinant factor of one’s identity. The body becomes synonymous with identity, as Mary believes that because Lena exists as a beautiful, magnetic woman and conforms to this gender role, she must also desire sexual encounters. By harming Lena’s body and essentially her sexuality, Mary believes she will damage Lena’s identity. Hence, she wants to “trim” or injure Lena’s body, that she may no longer be a threat or have such desires.

While Lena does not die, as she successfully hides from Mary and her knife, Mary’s choice of weapon again symbolizes the connection between sexuality and death. Like the scene in which Lena carries a reaping hook, the novel suggests that sexuality and death are innately linked. While Lena was not attempting to kill Jim when she comes to kiss him, to Jim, her desire for sex is destructive. Hence, he imagines her with a reaping hook, fearing her sexuality, as he believes it will lead only to devastation. In the same manner, the text depicts Mary attempting to kill Lena for her sexual transgression, demonstrating once again a relationship between sexuality and death. Although Lena escapes harm, the novel suggests that there exists a real and viable social punishment for noncompliant bodies. If a character does not contain or repress her sexuality, she risks
humiliation and even death. The textual bodies reinforce this conclusion, as Lena must physically run from Mary in order to retain her life. Like *O Pioneers!* where Marie is physically punished for bodily disobedience, *My Ántonia* also suggests that the social punishment for deviant sexuality is death. The text implies Lena, like Marie and Ántonia, is to blame for a man’s incorrigible behavior. Like Jim blames Ántonia’s body for Cutter’s desire, so does Mary hold Lena responsible for her husband’s sexual desires. Yet, the text also considers Lena deviant. Sandra Lee Bartky analyzes how women are trained to become “docile bodies.” She argues, “feminine faces, as well as bodies, are trained to the expression of deference” (68). Thus, under male scrutiny, women are trained to avert their eyes, casting them downward (68). Lena, however, rejects this expected behavior. She looks back and is accused of making “eyes at married men” (*My Ántonia* 136). Because Lena refuses to comply with the gender norms of residing within the private sphere, becoming a “docile” body, she must be physically and publicly punished for its behavior. Hence, Mary chases her, attempting to write and display the sentence upon Lena’s body. Death or bodily injury becomes a means to contain female sexuality.

Yet, Lena escapes bodily punishment, establishing a business in Lincoln and later San Francisco. While her successful conclusion and financial independence perhaps imply freedom from sexual restriction, Lena’s autonomy exists only as an illusion. Jim constructs every depiction of Lena, establishing her identity. While Lena is sexual and erotic, resisting containment and social limitations, Jim abruptly abandons her story in favor of Ántonia’s. His desertion suggests Lena’s resistance to his attempts to contain her sexuality. While Lena might gain agency and perhaps even sexual freedom in the
larger city, Jim inevitably contains her sexuality as he sustains the power to tell her story. Marilee Lindemann supports this argument of Lena’s sexual containment in her article “‘It Ain’t My Prairie’: Gender, Power, and Narrative in My Ántonia.” She argues that while Lena is a “figure of excess uncontainable and unobtainable,” who withholds part of herself, Jim must “forcibly” abandon her (124). Lindemann claims that although Lena successfully maintains her sexuality and overturns the body/land metaphor, she loses her freedom and is sexually contained, as she disappears from Jim’s narrative. Thus, as Lindemann writes, Jim is left with “both the prairie and the last word,” which exemplifies the powerlessness and limitations women face (Lindemann 126). Possessing the ability to speak and relate her story, Jim represses Lena’s sexuality, leaving her noticeably alone in Lincoln. Although, he revisits her story later, he only briefly relates her location in San Francisco, focusing on her companionship with Tiny Soderball and again skirting the question of her sexuality, or at least her heterosexuality.

The novel supports this reading of an inevitable containment of sexuality, as Jim constructs Lena’s body and identity the nonsexual, “demure” girl. Jim falls back upon his earlier descriptions of Lena, as he attempts to reenter his childhood. His concluding description of Lena’s body reflects his willful construction of her identity, suggesting a suppression of the erotica. Upon viewing a photograph Ántonia shows him, Jim describes her: “Yes, it was exactly like Lena, I told her; a comely woman, a trifle too plump, in a hat a trifle too large, but with the old lazy eyes, and the old dimpled ingenuousness still lurking at the corners of her mouth” (272). Falling back to his first description of her, Jim emphasizes that Lena is “too plump.” Rather than being an erotic, magnetic woman, she is simply a “comely woman” who wears hats to large for her. The
physical depiction signifies that Lena does not know exactly what to wear or of what her identity consists, as Jim relates Lena, the seamstress, as unable to find a proper fitting hat or gender role. The absurdity reveals that Jim attempts to construct her identity, squelching her femininity and sexuality into a nonsexual, overweight woman. Thus, he constructs Lena as also experiencing gender confusion, as a means to contain her sexuality. While he does acknowledge Lena’s “lazy eyes,” the term lazy suggests not vitality, awareness, or sensuality, but rather a sleepy, lethargic attitude. Unable to fight Jim’s depiction of her, Lena must accept his creation of her identity, losing agency as Jim establishes the discourse. Despite Lena’s bodily resistance to sexual containment, Jim ultimately abandons her narrative in favor of Ántonia’s tale. His rejection of her narrative reinforces the idea that female sexuality should be feared and contained. At its conclusion, the novel depicts Lena as a “docile” body. As Bartky argues, the “ideal body of femininity” is constructed. Feeling threatened by her sexuality, Jim constructs Lena’s identity, placing her in the category of gender-confused woman in an attempt to restrain her sexuality.

Cather’s *My Ántonia* is full of tensions, as the novel both critiques female sexuality and illustrates women escaping traditional gender roles through the employment of their domesticity. While Jim abandons Lena in favor of Ántonia’s narrative, Lena’s placement and physical depiction in the novel suggests that there exist other alternatives for determined, intelligent, diligent women. Lena employs her domestic, typically considered “feminine” traits to gain agency and financial independence. The novel implies that Lena’s sexuality is uncontainable and uncontrollable, in that she refuses to marry and submit to the authority of any man. However, through Jim’s authority to
construct her final physical description and character, the novel acknowledges an inevitable containment of sexuality. By constructing Lena as confused about her gender, Jim attempts to contain her sexuality. Female sexuality is inescapably controlled, constructed, and repressed in masculine discourse and society. The novel suggests that expressing one's sexuality results in humiliation, destruction, and occasionally even death. Like O Pioneers!, this text communicates a connection between sexuality and death. While the relationship is not as prevalent, the text implies that female sexuality results in, not only occasional physical death, but also the death of one’s identity. While I recognize that the body is not synonymous with female identity, the physical descriptions of Ántonia reinforce her gender confusion and loss of self as she vacillates between masculine and feminine identities. While Lena exists as a sexual woman, Ántonia wavers between sexual and nonsexual, as well as feminine and masculine identities. The gender confusion that Ántonia experiences and is projected upon Lena is a means of sexual containment. Although Jim fears both male and female sexuality, the bodily images reveal how the female characters are constructed and contained within the text. My Ántonia critiques female sexuality and recognizes an unavoidable containment of female sexuality. The text and its bodies illustrate the difficulty women experience as they attempt to form their identities. Rather than being autonomous individuals who are free to experience and indulge their sexualities, women are fashioned according to the male viewpoint, as seen in the case of Jim. As they are placed within this complex patriarchal heterosexist disciplinary framework which attempts to regulate and control women's bodies and minds, the female characters experience unhappiness and devastation. The novel recognizes a social regulation and construction of female bodies
and identities in masculine discourse, which often results in gender confusion and an inevitable containment of female sexuality.

**Conclusion**

In her work, *O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, and My Ántonia*, Willa Cather acknowledges a tragic, inevitable containment of female sexuality through the physical depictions of her characters' bodies. As Sandra Lee Bartky argues, as women sexualize themselves, their sexuality and bodies are controlled and disciplined. Women internalize the patriarchal gaze, becoming self-policing subjects. Cather’s work recognizes this problem, demonstrating a keen awareness of the way female sexuality is regulated within this patriarchal heterosexist disciplinary framework. Thus, the novels depict masculinized characters, such as Alexandra, as women to emulate. Yet, a tension exists within Cather’s work, as she also shows attentiveness to the dangers of women’s free or unregulated expression of their sexualities. The novels recognize a need for the repression of female sexuality, as they argue the free expression of women’s sexual passions often leads only to humiliation, degradation, and death. The tension that exists within the novel characterizes the whole patriarchal system, which attempts to discipline women’s bodies, minds, and sexualities. Women are situated into two antithetical categories, that of the idealized wife or the demonized whore. Cather’s novels recognize that these two perspectives work together as an elaborate interconnected disciplinary framework. Both roles are needed for the continuation and survival of the primary patriarchal power relations. In *My Ántonia*, Jim attempts to locate Ántonia into the category of idealized mother, but rather she is shown as experiencing identity loss. The
novels demonstrate the dangers of classification, as the women are situated into specific roles, often experiencing sorrow and humiliation. In the same manner, *O'Pioneers!* casts Marie in both of the categorizations, demonstrating the difficulty women have maneuvering through the system and escaping destructive classifications. The novel acknowledges the tragic death of Marie, as she is inevitably contained for her act of deviant sex and her attempt to reside in both categorizations. The novel actually upholds the system it is fighting against, as resistance is proven futile.

Cather's work attempts to offer a solution to this problem of categorization, arguing that if a woman can avoid this destructive either-or labeling, she may find a place on the margins of this system, which maintains the sexual and spiritual constriction of women. Thus, the novels present masculinized women, who attempt to escape this patriarchal system by evading sexual classification. For instance, in *The Song of the Lark*, Thea serves as a priestess to the god of art, by becoming an androgyne and internalizing her audience's feelings. However, while Thea gains autonomy and financial independence, she is still sexually contained. While the novels attempt to depict women who have evaded this patriarchal heterosexist system functioning to regulate women's bodies and desires for existential freedom, they undermine this solution, as the women are still sexually contained and often constructed according to the male view. Alexandra is limited in her independence as a masculinized land owner, as she suppresses her sexuality, marrying Carl only for friendship. She is a carefully contained and controlled female, as she situates all of her energy into her work. In the same manner, Thea is not free to expend her sexual energy on anybody other than her art. She, too, is constrained and restricted, as she internalizes the desires of her male audience, becoming, as Bartky
argues, a self-policing subject. Thus, although Cather’s novels attempt to show the limitations of the system and offer a solution, by depicting her female characters avoiding sexual categorization, living on the fringes of this system, the women are still inescapably sexually contained and restricted.
Bibliography


