Alexandra Bergson: Struggling as a Masculine Heroine

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Abstract: This thesis takes the perspective of feminism to discuss the image of Alexandra Bergson as reflected in O Pioneers!, who is independent, self-reliant, pursuing her freedom, destiny, happiness, and self-value. Through a detailed analysis of the protagonist in the novel, this thesis attempts to investigate Cather’s sincere concern over women’s predicaments as well as her unremitting efforts to undo women’s predicaments.

Keywords: Willa Cather; O Pioneers; Alexandra Bergson

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O Pioneers! announced a wholly different Willa Cather, one who had found her literary bearings; and critics were convinced of her talent by her evocation of the pioneer era in Nebraska. Even more reassuring to her was their admiration for her rendering of character, that mainspring of fiction. Her novel told a good story, but it went considerably beyond mere story quality to something finer, a direct, human tale of love, struggle and attainment. A power without strain had been achieved by her simple treatment of an intense situation. Her preoccupations with formal symmetry abandoned, she had used an episodic structure that the Bookman called “a serious of separate expected to shatter it” (Cooper 667). Most reviewers of her time felt, in brief, that few American novels in recent years had been so impressive.

O Pioneers! is a story concerned with its protagonist Alexandra’s struggle to run her life successfully despite difficulties she meets under subjective and objective circumstances. With Cather’s exploration, Alexandra displays her growing process from an innocent girl who admires men greatly to a mature woman, holding female subject firmly. From wearing a man’s long ulster to protecting her own property against her brothers; from taking over family affairs to seeking for her own happiness, Cather portrays a new woman who is different from the traditional frontier ones. In the process of pursuing her identification and self-construction, Alexandra shows us as a masculine heroine.

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Alexandra makes a very striking entrance, a tall, strong girl in walking rapidly and resolutely; she wears a man’s long ulster (not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her). She had a glance of Amazonian fierceness and a dazzling head of reddish-yellow curls. She is tender and protective towards her brothers, hard only through necessity; a strong, independent and generous woman. In fact, in her manly appearance Cather describes, we can find a male figure with female physiological characteristics, owning man’s values.

At first, Alexandra wants to conquer everything like a man because she admires the power and position that man has and she is eager to get it. In O Pioneers! Cather describes the Bergson family, their neighbors and their battle to survive on the windy Nebraska tableland. While life is still hard and the crop is uncertain, Mr. Bergson dies and entrusts the future of his family and the possibilities of his hard-won land to Alexandra -- his daughter. He would much rather have been able to appoint his sons. Lou and Oscar, but he has to accept the situation as it is. This also hints the rights handed over to female.

Alexandra, defined through contrast, is positioned among her family in order to shine more brightly against their weaknesses. The elder of her two elder brothers, Oscar, is totally blind to the potential of the Divide (Cather had written that a pioneer should have imagination). Slavish adherence to routine is his crippling vice: Oscar works like an insect, always doing the same thing in the same way, regardless of whether it is best or not. Precisely as Eden Bower sings her Puccini over and over as if she were a singing machine programmed to give her audience what they like. Oscar plods indolently from hour to hour, day to day; he is a mechanism to whom any notion of change or improvement is foreign. At another extreme, Lou, the younger brother, is unequipped to establish the simplest economical routine; a leafhopper, he flits in agitation from one inconsequential chore to another while his neglected wheat hangs overripe in the fields. Between these pole stands Alexandra, methodical enough to complete her task, yet free from slavery to repetitious routine; alert to change, she is not erratic but imaginative.

After three years of drought and failed crops Alexandra’s brothers want to sell the farm and move to the more fertile valley. Many of their neighbors are discouraged and leave while the smart men in the town buy the land very cheaply. With the pioneer’s uncanny blend of mysticism and materialism, Alexandra persuades her brothers to mortgage the farm and buy more of the apparently useless high land. Lou and Oscar are unwilling to do so, but she insists on it and believes she is right. She unites the old world belief in land with new world opportunism, the pioneer’s big chance being the acceptable face of the American dream.
Alexandra is born with the ideal synthesis. Her abilities appear in childhood, just as artistic talent might make itself known in a different Cather heroine. By the time she is fifteen, she knows exactly where she is going; and cloaks in a man’s long ulster. She assumes the aspect of a young warrior, a glance of Amazonian fierceness on her face. So armed, she is ready upon her father’s death to shoulder his challenge, no simple chore. The land is possessed of its own will; it demands to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness ... like a horse that no one knows how to break to harness. Considering that western roads are only faint tracks in the grass and even the fields are scarcely noticeable, it is understandable that in eleven long years Alexandra’s father has been able to make little impression on the land. Cather has written that the first generation comes too late in life: “After a man has passed his fortieth birthday it is not easy for him to change the habits and conditions of his life” (Schroeter 144). But his daughter is young, bent on a mission, infinitely capable, and wholly determined.

Before she is twelve, Alexandra can talk competently of farm affairs and can guess the weight of a hog more accurately than John Bergson himself. Her strength of will and simple, direct way of thinking serve her well, for a girl farming an untamed prairie needs such attributes. Even so, three hard years of drought poses special problems, she needs the stamina not to retreat to city factories as her neighbors do at the first crop failure. She needs imagination as an artist needs talent -- an ability to foresee potential, to recognize her advantages, and to press them.

One additional virtue equips Alexandra to wrestle with the land as Medusa: self-confidence. Faith in one’s ability and in the primacy of one’s goal has been essential to Cather’s singers and painters, and Alexandra declares a similar vow. She believes that the land itself will be worth more than all they can ever raise on it. She must have faith in the high land. She is confident and finally it proves that she is right.

Were the novel to close on this note, it would be pure and simple; but the spectre of the price that Alexandra pays now enters, nearly half of O Pioneers! is devoted to showing what her achievements cost her. The book has been called split by critics who feel that it breaks midway and forgets Alexandra for the tragic romance of Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata; but this split is no more than a shift of emphasis: the thematic center of the story is unimpaired. Rather than be limited to the struggle or its outcome, the attention is turned to aftereffects; and Alexandra remains the unifying figure. Whatever exists for her sake; and this includes the Emil-Marie story, even though its form creates an illusion of separate existence. Even prior to this desolate climax, however, the worm has been despoiling Alexandra’s harvest. She reflects as she considers the rich farm built from her labor.
We grow hard and heavy here. We don’t move lightly and easily… our minds get stiff. If the world were no wider than my cornfields, if there was not something besides this, I wouldn’t feel that it was much worth while to work. (Cather, 1913:462)

As middle age with its gray cloud of disillusionment darkens her outlook, life appears empty, and Alexandra yearns for satisfactions beyond a career. She searches where Cressida Garent searches -- in her family -- and finds what Cather’s strong individual always find -- that no one can build his security upon the nobleness of another person. The price of triumph is isolation, a thought that Cather feels to be true. For a true female writer, no escape from the knowledge of loneliness exists. Also as a female, no one could escape it. Here we can see that Cather depicts a mature female step by step.

Compared with Emil, the younger brother of Alexandra, Cather opens out Alexandra feminine identity gradually. Emil, who her hopes are centered on, is unlike Alexandra. He is expected as the baby of the family, Alexandra pins him fondest hopes, fashioning him as her surrogate. In that world wider than her cornfields, he will have a chance, a whole chance. She can afford to send him to university and she feels that all her hard years are vindicated in the opportunities they have afforded him. She is gratified that he has a personality apart from the soil. But in fact he is motiveless and confused. Emil is one of Cather’s Hamlets of the Plains; discontented, introspective and lost. He suffers from a kind of cultural schizophrenia; he has lost touch with his past, and finds himself unable to engage in the present. His function, in her eyes, is to provide the full meaning of her long struggle. But her hope, grounded upon an illusory child-parent relationship, is doomed. Emil drifts into his impetuous love intrigue with Marie, and both are shot to death by Marie’s husband beneath Alexandra’s white mulberry tree. One finally cannot squeeze more from life than life is prepared to yield. Realizing this, Alexandra is shocked and she gets to know the importance of understanding one another. The feminine characteristics appear on her gently.

Alexandra also reaches for contentment with Carl Linstrum, but she finds his weakness incompatible with her own power. Their romance has been sporadic; it promises never to be wholly satisfying, merely a piece of salvage from wreckage. Then the old disparity between Alexandra and her brothers grows. They refuse to acknowledge their sister’s skill; as time goes on, they delude themselves into thinking that theirs is the true faith, that they built the Bergson Empire. Inevitably a break occurs, and Alexandra’s lament is that of every Cather artist. She wonders why she has been permitted to prosper, if it is only to take her friends away from her.

On the threshold of the personal happiness, Alexandra hears her suitor branded a fortune hunter; and her brothers forbid her to place their property and their homestead in a stranger’s hands. They have forgotten that when times are hard they have advocated selling
out and retreating to factories; and they have also ignored their sister’s longstanding determination to create the biggest, best-run, and most profitable farm in the region. Alexandra is obliged to dismiss her greedy brothers:

Go to town and ask your lawyers what you can do to restrain me from disposing of my property. And I advise you to do what they tell you; for the authority you can exert by law is the only influence you will ever have over me again (Cather, 1913:172).

With her words, we have seen a great woman standing in front of us: self-consistent, self-reliant and self-confident. As a woman, she knows that she should have her own temperament, she should protect her own rights; the emancipation of women depends on themselves. Woman should make their efforts to change man’s ideas and make them respect women.

Cather’s novel O Pioneers! is just the beginning of her Nebraska Novels. It speaks for the Middle Western immigrants and women, taking root in a new land. Cather shows that the pioneers include both men and women, and that the vast fields of wheat and corn which stretch across Middle American are foreseen and planted by people like Alexandra(s). Women, as she points out, should realize their own power and construct their own identification. If we say Alexandra at first is a male figure with female physiological characters, then with her struggle and efforts, she gets to become a perfect woman with female values internalized.

Works Cited