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The Unity of Willa Cather's "Two-Part Pastoral": Passion in *O Pioneers!*

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

THE UNITY OF WILLA CATHER'S "TWO-PART PASTORAL": PASSION IN *O PIONEERS!* Sharon O'Brien* Willa Cather formed her first successful novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913), by combining two previously written short stories: "Alexandra," a 1911 version of Alexandra Bergson's taming of the wild Nebraska soil, and "The White Mulberry Tree," a tragic tale written a year later in which a crazed Bohemian farmer kills his wife, Marie, and her young Swedish lover.¹ Although Cather wrote the two stories separately, she experienced a "sudden inner explosion and enlightenment" when she realized that they belonged together.² It was as if she had brought together two chemicals with a powerful elective affinity, and *O Pioneers!* was the resulting compound, a "two-part pastoral" as Cather later described it.³ Most of the novel's critics, however, argue that the fusion

of the two fictional elements is imperfect.⁴ According to this common view, the love affair of Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata, derived from "The White Mulberry Tree," has no real connection with the primary plot, Alexandra's conquering of the stubborn land. The result for E. K. Brown, Cather's first biographer, was the novel's "happy looseness of structure."⁵ David Daiches found this looseness less happy. In his opinion, this "episodic" and "unevenly patterned" novel contained "disparate elements which are never wholly resolved into a unity."⁸ In particular, the love affair of Emil and Marie seemed to him "a feverish episode outside the mainstream of events."⁷ A recent commentator on the novel, David Stouck, echoes these early objections, finding the lovers' tragedy a subplot that "distracts us from the epic theme for long sections in the middle and latter part of the book."⁸ Cather's critics have tended to see the love story as a diversion or tragic interlude aside from the main plot because they have generally failed to recognize that the two intertwined stories are thematically connected. "The cold Swedish story" and "the Bohemian story" do belong together.⁸ Each is a parable about passion: Alexandra Bergson's taming of the soil chronicles the heroic results of passion regulated and channeled, whereas the lovers' doom records the destructive outcome of passion indulged and unleashed. Artfully counterpointed and carefully contrasted, the two stories reflect one of Willa Cather's most persistent fictional preoccupations: the insufficiency, even the danger, of sexual passion and the opposing grandeur of passion deflected from the personal to the impersonal object. Willa Cather had recorded her hostility to sexual passion as early as 1899 when she attacked Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in a review for the *Pittsburgh Leader*, finding the novel's theme "trite and sordid" and its adulterous heroine "limited."¹⁰ Other genteel or prudish critics had bristled at Edna Pontellier's immorality,¹¹ but Cather, who consistently denounced the pious didacticism of Victorian fiction in her journalism of the 1890s, faulted Edna's priorities rather than her morals in exalting a passionate love over more worthwhile pursuits like "the arts and the pleasurable exercise of the intellect" (p. 698). She severely criticized Edna Pontellier and nineteenth-century fiction's other romantic suicides, *Anna Karenina* and *Emma Bovary*, for their membership in the unfortunate group of women who demanded "more romance out of life than God put into it" (p. 698). Willa Cather contended that such women were deluded in expecting "the passion of love" to "fill and gratify every need of life"; they mistakenly assumed that an "individual and self-limited passion" could provide what art, literature, or philosophy gave to "less limited and less intense idealists" (p. 698). Setting the sexual passion of the adulterous woman against the creative passion of the artist, Cather clearly aligned herself with the latter group: "So this passion, when set up against Shakespeare, Balzac, Wagner, Raphael, fails them. They have staked everything on one hand, and they lose" (p. 699). The two adjectives Cather uses to describe passion here, "individual" and "self-limited..."

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*Professor O'Brien teaches English at Dickinson College. She has published in *Women in Literature* and *The Kate Chopin Newsletter* and is currently at work on a book on Willa Cather.





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