Subverting Gendered Destiny: Willa Cather's Revision of the Bildungsroman in the Great Plains Trilogy

Lauren Marler

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/2366

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@claremont.edu.
SUBVERTING GENDERED DESTINY: WILLA CATHER’S REVISION OF THE BILDUNGSROMAN IN THE GREAT PLAINS TRILOGY

By
LAUREN MARLER

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR THOMAS KOENIGS
PROFESSOR AARON MATZ

11 DECEMBER 2022
Introduction

In Hermoine Lee’s biography, *Willa Cather: Double Lives*, she describes Cather’s notorious contempt of fame and remarks: “When you set out to write about her, you feel she would not have liked what you are doing, and would not have liked you either” (Lee 3). With Lee’s witty warning in mind, this thesis explores genre, coming-of-age, and gender in Willa Cather’s Great Plains Trilogy, with specific attention paid to *My Ántonia*. The Great Plains Trilogy, made up of *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918), sets female protagonists’ coming-of-age against the backdrop of the Great Plains. Cather’s second published novel, *O Pioneers!* follows Alexandra Bergson, a pioneer woman characterized by her stoic nature and dedication to the land. This novel takes particular interest in her familial and romantic relationships, particularly with her brothers and Carl, a childhood friend turned husband. *The Song of the Lark* tells the story of Thea Kronberg as she pursues a musical career, from her childhood in a small town called Moonstone to her young adulthood in Germany. Thea is fiercely set on her musical goals; the novel highlights the difficulties and sacrifices necessary for an artistic career. Lastly, *My Ántonia*, considered one of Cather’s best works, follows Ántonia Shimerda, an immigrant from Bohemia, and Jim Burden through their childhood as pioneers on the Nebraska frontier. Jim narrates both his and Ántonia’s coming-of-age, and the novel concludes with him visiting Ántonia, back on the frontier, with her children.

Willa Cather’s novels are famous for her “celebration of rural America and her nostalgia for pioneering values” (Lee 4). Her position as a 20th century woman writer is unique; Lee
situates Cather as one of the few women of this period to appropriate the tradition of male American writing. She does this through the use of male narrators and a focus on pioneering. Lee writes: “She is intervening in a masculine language of epic pastoral. The western frontier was a man’s world, subjected to masculine pioneering and male speech” (Lee 5). Cather directly interacts with the literary canon, which was then almost exclusively male: for example, her novel title *O Pioneers!* refers to a poem by Walt Whitman from his classic collection, *Leaves of Grass* (1865).

Cather’s break from traditional femininity appears in her biography, too. Current scholars consider her to be a lesbian, and often use her period of cross-dressing and asking to be called William as evidence of her androgyny (Lee 10). Lee connects her tendency to do away with gender norms in her writing to her personal life, describing “her appropriation of a male tradition” as “an appropriation which had everything to do with her sexual alienation from conventional femininity” (Lee 10). Lee then argues: “Virginia Woolf’s well-known idea of an artist with an androgynous, ‘man-womanly’ mind, in *A Room of One’s Own* (contemporaneous with Cather’s great novels of the 1920s), finds its best illustration, in an American context, in Willa Cather’s writing” (Lee 10). In fact, Cather had read *A Room of One’s Own*¹ and thought Woolf “awfully clever.”²

Cather’s appreciation for Woolf is striking because (other than her respect for George Eliot and the Brontës), Cather often criticized women’s fiction. Lee quotes Cather: “‘I have not much faith in women in fiction. They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable [...] When a woman writes a story of adventure, a stout sea tale, a manly battle yarn, anything

---

without wine, women and love, then I will begin to hope for something great from them, not before’” (Lee 12). Lee also quotes Cather’s scathing review of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, in which she associates Edna Pontellier with Emma Bovary: “‘With them everything begins with fancy, and passions rise in the brain rather than in the blood, the poor, neglected, limited one-sided brain that might do so much better things than badgering itself into frantic endeavors to love’” (Lee 12-13). Cather disapproves of sentimentality and overwrought love in women’s fiction; she seems to expect more from women writers. She did, however, admire the older writer Sarah Orne Jewett. Jewett served as Cather’s friend and mentor; Cather even dedicated *O Pioneers!* to her. Lee writes that Cather respected Jewett’s writing for its qualities: “strong, truthful, and authentic, and could not be dismissed as ‘merely’ feminine” (Lee 15). Cather measures her own literary endeavors against the male canon and writers she respected: Henry James, Walt Whitman, and Jewett, to name a few. She seems determined to move beyond traditional feminine subject matter. Female protagonists in Cather’s novels stubbornly refuse femininity, too, as Ántonia staunchly states: “I like to be like a man” (Cather 85).

In addition to pioneer novels, the Bildungsroman is another commonly male literary tradition from which Cather did not shy away. The Great Plains Trilogy can be regarded as classic Bildungsromane in that they follow protagonists from childhood to adulthood. The Bildungsroman’s roots are in the German Enlightenment: “bildung” means education in German, while “roman” means novel. Thus, the Bildungsroman is definitionally a novel of education, also defined as a novel of development or self-cultivation. In the introduction of *A History of the Bildungsroman*, Sarah Graham posits the genre as “one of the most popular and enduring” in literary history (Graham 1). She describes “the relationship between self and society” as the

---

Bildungsroman’s principal exploration (Graham 1). Scholars debate the origins of the term; some believe Karl Morgenstern coined the term in his 1819 lecture, “On the Nature of the Bildungsroman,” while others believe Wilhelm Dilthey popularized it in his 1906 study, *Poetry and Experience* (Graham 2). Graham writes that many scholars view Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s second novel *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795-6) as the genre’s urtext (Graham 2). Cather read both *Wilhelm Meister* and Goethe’s play *Faust*.4 We do not know whether she read these works before she embarked on her trilogy, but we can assume Cather’s awareness of the Bildungsroman, or at least the conventions of the coming-of-age genre, because of its popularity in 19th century literature. Thus, the novels of The Great Plains Trilogy show Cather self-consciously working with the genre.

This thesis explores the question: How does Cather employ the Bildungsroman genre in *My Ántonia*, and what are the implications of this? I argue that Cather engages with the traditionally male Bildungsroman in order to expose the genre’s narrow ideas of success, specifically in its focus on social integration. Ántonia does not socially integrate to the extent the Bildungsroman genre requires; however, this is not representative of failure as a coming-of-age protagonist, but rather an alternative set of values with which Cather imbues her text. As Cather transgresses the traditional Bildungsroman, she also revises female archetypes, such as those found in the Seduction Plot and the Marriage Plot, which present female coming-of-age stories as downward spirals: with protagonists ending up unhappy or dead. Instead, Cather imagines a hopeful ending for Ántonia which disrupts generic expectations of female destiny.

I. Generic Subversion in *My Ántonia*

Since its publication, Franco Moretti’s *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987) stands as a pivotal study of the Bildungsroman genre. Moretti writes that Goethe’s novel, *Wilhelm Meister*, codified the Bildungsroman as a narrative form which tracks a character’s coming-of-age and entrance into society (Moretti 3). Notably, the Bildungsroman plot includes a key tension between socialization and self-determination (Moretti 15). In other words, a character’s individuality is often at odds with what society considers normative; the reckoning and potential resolution of this conflict is a crucial part of what makes up the Bildungsroman. Thus, strengthening “one’s sense of belonging to a wider community” symbolizes successful coming-of-age (Moretti 19). Moretti writes that Bildungsromane often conclude with marriage, which signifies integration into society (Moretti 22-23). The Bildungsroman is also characterized by a focus on youth, hence often prompting “hero and reader to look back,” and the ending of such novels represents “the rationalization of the accomplished journey” (Moretti 68).

*My Ántonia* by Willa Cather can be classified as a Bildungsroman novel, as Jim Burden narrates both his own and Ántonia Shimerda’s development into adulthood. Cather takes an interest in Jim’s rendering of Ántonia’s coming-of-age, which is imbued with his nostalgia for youth. Cather seems to be self-consciously employing the Bildungsroman plot: particularly using the genre’s value of education and social integration, as Ántonia learns English and moves to town. While Cather begins *My Ántonia* as a Bildungsroman plot, she ultimately subverts generic expectations. Ántonia has a child out of wedlock: a far cry from Moretti’s understanding of inclusion into society as the ultimate sign of a triumphant protagonist. Cather highlights Ántonia’s failure to live up to expectations of propriety for women, specifically through how Jim
and other townspeople criticize her. Here, Cather seems to introduce a Seduction Plot, featuring Ántonia as a fallen woman who faces destitution for her blunder. Yet Cather once again subverts generic expectations, as Ántonia emerges stronger from her misstep. Cather renders Ántonia as a failed Bildungsroman protagonist, yet still a successful protagonist in the novel’s own terms, which value pioneering and personal strength. Thus, the novel plays with the conventions of both the Bildungsroman and the Seduction Novel, in order to suggest the inadequacy and limitations of both.

Cather follows the Bildungsroman’s emphasis on the experience of childhood. Moretti explains that in Goethe’s formative Bildungsroman text, *Wilhelm Meiser*, youth is posited as “the most meaningful part of life” (Moretti 3). Particularly for Bildungsromane from the 19th century, “‘maturity’ is no longer perceived as an acquisition, but as a loss. We do not become adults by becoming adults, but by ceasing to be young: the process involves primarily a renunciation” (Moretti 90). The importance of youth rings true to *My Ántonia* as a whole, but is particularly clear in the introduction. An unnamed narrator, another childhood friend of Ántonia’s, recounts a conversation between her and Jim Burden. The narrator and Jim share an understanding of Ántonia: “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” (Cather 5). Jim and the narrator’s memories of Ántonia encapsulate childhood on the Nebraskan frontier. Jim’s youth clearly remains deeply significant to him, which proves Cather’s interest in characters looking back on their pasts. In general, the novel presents childhood memories as comforting and meaningful. For the narrator and Jim, Ántonia represents childhood. There seems to be a trend, throughout the novel, of Cather positioning characters as representative of larger ideas: Ántonia
represents the land and childhood, while, throughout her coming-of-age, Jim comes to represent a traditional societal voice and way of life.

My Ántonia grapples with the influence of external and internal forces on a Bildungsroman protagonist’s coming-of-age. Since the novel is written from Jim’s point of view, we learn about Ántonia primarily through his physical descriptions of her, in which he often tries to match her inner qualities with her exterior. When Jim moves in with his grandparents at the beginning of the novel, he meets Ántonia for the first time, and briefly compares her to her younger sister: “The little girl was pretty, but Án-tonia - they accented the name thus, strongly, when they spoke to her - was still prettier. 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” (Cather 20). This is the first point at which Jim describes Ántonia’s eyes as warm, which he continues to do into her adulthood. Because eyes are sentimentally thought of as “windows into the soul,” this passage can be read as Jim’s initial attempt at understanding Ántonia. Here, as elsewhere, his physical descriptions of her recall inner attributes; the novel characterizes her as warm and vibrant.

Cather’s choice to employ Jim’s perspective is fascinating, in part due to the Bildungsroman’s concern with the roles that individuation and socialization play in a protagonist’s coming-of-age. According to Moretti’s model, “the Bildungsroman creates a continuity between external and internal, between ‘the best and most intimate’ part of the soul and the ‘public’ aspect of existence” (Moretti 30). The potential discordance between Jim’s understanding of Ántonia and her own experience of growing up is made plain in the novel’s introduction. When Jim began his manuscript about Ántonia, he “wrote on the pinkish face of the portfolio the word, ‘Ántonia.’ He frowned at this a moment, then prefixed another word, making
it ‘My Ántonia.’ That seemed to satisfy him” (Cather 6). Cather makes the reader aware that the novel is not just about Ántonia, but who she was to Jim. The reader is not privy to Ántonia’s subjective experience of growth and development, which is often a significant part of Bildungsroman narratives. The two other novels of Cather’s Great Plains Trilogy employ third-person, omniscient perspectives. One need not question the reliability of the narrators of *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*: they are silent observers, rather than characters in their own right. Cather uses the free indirect style to put the protagonist’s inner nature on display for the reader, while in *My Ántonia*, readers must rely on Jim’s experience of Ántonia and his descriptive skills in portraying her; thus, Cather seems particularly concerned with the public or external aspects of coming-of-age.

As in the Bildungsroman structure, Cather highlights Ántonia’s education and its use in her coming-of-age. Ántonia’s father gives Jim the task of teaching her English:

> Before I got into the wagon, he took a book out of his pocket, opened it, and showed me a page with two alphabets, one English and the other Bohemian. He placed this book in my grandmother’s hands, looked at her entreatingly, and said, with an earnestness which I shall never forget, ‘Te-e-ach, te-e-ach My Ántonia!’ (Cather 23)

Education is crucial to the bildungsroman plot, as it allows the protagonist to gain knowledge about the world and thus begin to enter it. Ántonia’s learning English allows her independence from family, as her parents do not learn English, and is therefore an avenue for her integration into society as an individual. Notably, Cather sets up many of Ántonia’s first interactions with Jim as English lessons: education leads to their friendship. Through Moretti’s model, this can be viewed as the first step in Ántonia’s social integration.

Ántonia’s experience as an immigrant adds another layer to her coming-of-age, as she assimilates to a new culture while growing up. Thus, the Bildungsroman plot in *My Ántonia* is set in a specifically American context of an immigrant family, struggling to get by in unfamiliar
conditions. In *A History of the Bildungsroman*, Sarah Graham points out ways in which the American Bildungsroman differs from Moretti’s European model. Graham makes a connection to the American Dream, arguing that the American coming-of-age plot often features a protagonist who experiences disillusionment after not being able to achieve their greatest ambitions: “In these Bildungsromane, economic gain is neither available to all nor lasting, and the characters’ sense of dispossession mirrors that of many Americans who cannot realize their dreams” (Graham 118). Ántonia does not seem to experience this disillusionment directly, but her father suffers in this way. He dies by suicide, likely due to homesickness for Bohemia and his difficulty assimilating to Nebraskan culture. The novel posits Ántonia’s English education as a factor in her adjustment to the new culture, as she forms connections with Jim and others more easily. Cather presents her youth as another significant factor: she has fewer memories of her native land than her father, who remains emotionally attached to his homeland. Because of Ántonia’s age, her integration into Nebraskan society happens fairly naturally.

The novel uses the death of Ántonia’s father as a catalyst for her development and the responsibility she takes on in her family. Ántonia discusses her family’s plans with the Burdens: “Ántonia explained that her father meant to build a new house for them in the spring; she and Ambrosch had already split the logs for it, but the logs were all buried in the snow, along the creek where they had been felled” (Cather 50). While her father had occupied a traditional paternal role of financially supporting the family, Ántonia now steps into his shoes, taking on more farm duties and making arrangements with neighbors, like the Burdens. Moretti’s model posits joining society, which can be in the form of service to one’s community, as a primary result of coming-of-age. *My Ántonia* carries out this structure as Ántonia grows up to be able to help her family. A few times in the novel, Ántonia asks Jim to remember her father: “‘You won’t
forget my father, Jim?’ ‘No,’ I said, ‘I will never forget him’ ” (Cather 77). These moments seem to reassure Ántonia and help her retain her own comforting early memories. The novel positions her father as representative of childhood. When he dies, Jim and Ántonia’s childlike innocence goes with him, to be replaced with a strong sense of duty.

Cather does away with some basic tenets of traditional femininity in order to follow the Bildungsroman’s standards of development. For example, she portrays Ántonia becoming increasingly opinionated and sure of herself just like male protagonists in classic Bildungsromane. In contrast, Jim is ill at ease with Ántonia transcending a traditional female role:

Nowadays Tony could talk of nothing but the prices of things, or how much she could lift and endure. She was too proud of her strength. I knew, too, that Ambrosch put upon her some chores a girl ought not to do, and that the farm-hands around the country joked in a nasty way about it. Whenever I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered, I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed, ‘My An-tonia!’ (Cather 78)

Jim feels that Ántonia has gone past the boundaries of appropriate girlhood as a result of rough farm work and a budding ego. He clearly views pride as an undesirable trait in women. In noting that the farm-hands have been talking about Ántonia, he seems to express both disapproval and protectiveness; he would prefer she escape their notice. Thus, Cather associates Jim with conservative societal expectations for women. Ideally for Jim, Ántonia would be more demure and keep to the domestic sphere. As the Bildungsroman genre holds tight to traditional values (including gender roles), Cather deploys Jim as a voice for the genre when he criticizes Ántonia for transgressing traditional femininity. Jim’s mention of Ántonia’s father further emphasizes his discomfort with how Ántonia is growing up, in contrast to her more impressionable nature in girlhood, in that the novel associates Ántonia’s father with her childhood.
In *O Pioneers!*, Cather similarly positions Alexandra’s brothers as representative of a restrictive societal voice. The siblings share a divided homestead, and the brothers downplay Alexandra’s role in its success. She responds: “‘I’ve made more on my farms since I’ve been alone than when we all worked together’” (Cather 84). She then lists her decisions which have aided their business, such as stopping them from selling the homestead and being the first to plant alfalfa (Cather 85). Earlier, in a conversation with Marie, Alexandra explains that her brothers find her too independent (Cather 60). This is reminiscent of Jim’s discomfort with Ántonia’s increasing agency, but the brothers are perhaps even stronger representations of a conservative perspective. Oscar makes a statement about all women based on working with his sister: “‘You can’t do business with women,’ Oscar said heavily as he clambered into the cart” (Cather 86). With this, Cather positions Alexandra in conflict with a traditional worldview, rather than just with her brothers; they represent a much larger ideology. The men in Cather’s novels attempt to limit the force of female characters, in part by directing them into traditionally feminine roles in the domestic sphere rather than business. Cather seems to convey the ineffectuality of these voices, as her female characters do not yield to this kind of pressure.

As a teenager, Ántonia moves to Black Hawk, a nearby town, to work for the Harlings; this move follows Moretti’s model of socialization. It brings her into a more vibrant social scene than the farming settlement, but her gender becomes increasingly significant. In one exemplary scene, Italians come to town, bringing a dancing pavilion:

It was at the Vannis’ tent that Ántonia was discovered. Hitherto she had been looked upon more as a ward of the Harlings than as one of the ‘hired girls.’ She had lived in their house and yard and garden; her thoughts never seemed to stray outside that little kingdom. But after the tent came to town she began to go about with Tiny and Lena and their friends. The Vannis often said that Ántonia was the best dancer of them all. I sometimes heard murmurs in the crowd outside the pavilion that Mrs. Harling would soon have her hands full with that girl (Cather 124).
The expansion of Ántonia’s social world follows Moretti’s model, as he posits moving from the country to the city as important in one’s integration into society. Ántonia finds belonging in the “hired girls,” a group of working, immigrant girls. However, Cather emphasizes how external Ántonia’s coming-of-age becomes in town; there are more eyes on her. Male protagonists do not face the same concerns in the traditional Bildungsroman. Ántonia being “discovered” in the tent paints her adolescence as something to be observed and judged by others. The gossip that Mrs. Harling will have her “hands full” with Ántonia brings to light a perceived danger for maturing girls: that they will be seduced by men and led astray from a proper path.

Cather positions Lena Lingard’s coming-of-age as comparable to Ántonia’s; Lena is also a “town girl” who matures quite publicly. Similarly to how Ántonia was “discovered” in the dancing tent, Lena is suddenly noticed in church one day: “The congregation stared at her. Until that morning no one - unless it were Ole - had realized how pretty she was, or that she was growing up. The swelling lines of her figure had been hidden under the shapeless rags she wore in the fields” (Cather 103). The process of development in town puts both Ántonia and Lena on display. There is a voyeuristic dimension here, in that other characters notice and discuss how the girls’ bodies have changed. The town members who enforce social order are titillated by these young girls. Cather may be drawing attention to the irony in their ideas of social discipline. In contrast, other than a stern talking to from his grandmother, Jim has more room for his coming-of-age in town, meaning that he is not limited by others’ perceptions. He observes the judgments the girls face but does not have to negotiate the same scrutiny of his adolescent body. Cather seems to be making an argument here: perception by others is a distinct aspect of female coming-of-age.
The novel quickly diverges from Moretti’s structure when Ántonia has a child out of wedlock. At this point in the text, Jim has left Black Hawk to pursue his education in Lincoln. When he returns for a visit, he learns that Ántonia has had a child with a man who now will not marry her. Jim feels “bitterly disappointed in her” (Cather 179). Jim’s disappointment is rooted in the fact that Ántonia, whom he cares for deeply, has chosen the one path almost everyone in that period would condemn: sexual relations outside marriage. As Moretti’s Bildungsroman model places importance on a protagonist’s respectability as a burgeoning member of society, Cather here diverges from the genre. She moves Ántonia’s plot into more unconventional territory. The novel now presents Ántonia as a failed Bildungsroman protagonist, having fallen off the track of propriety. Notably, Jim hears of Ántonia’s fate from others; the novel again associates him with a societal voice that holds tight to traditional expectations of women while holding up the expectations of the Bildungsroman.

Starting when Ántonia comes to town and continuing when she has a child out of wedlock, Cather poses the specter of the Seduction Plot as a potential disruptor to Ántonia’s successful coming-of-age. This genre deals with young women being punished as a result of a love affair, specifically involving premarital sex. *Charlotte Temple* (1791) by Susanna Rowson was one of the first American novels which codified the Seduction Plot. Rowson tells a cautionary tale of the horrible fate that befalls a young woman as she succumbs to the temptations of a man: estranged from her family, she ultimately dies. In a sense, Seduction Novels are directly opposed to the Bildungsroman. While both feature a young protagonist coming-of-age, the Bildungsroman values a protagonist’s correctness and the Seduction Plot shows the flipped side of this: what happens if a protagonist steps off the path of propriety. Importantly, Seduction Novels usually end with the protagonist, a Fallen Woman, presented as a
social outcast, while the Bildungsroman ends with a protagonist’s inclusion into society. Because of this, the Seduction Novels can be seen as the Bildungsroman gone awry.

The Fallen Woman archetype was common particularly in literature from the 19th century. In her essay, “New Woman, Fallen Woman: The Crisis of Reputation in Turn-of-the-Century Novels by Pauline Hopkins and Edith Wharton,” Kristina Brooks explains that the Fallen Woman archetype largely hails from Victorian constructs of morality. Brooks cites Gail Cunningham’s book, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel*, in which Cunningham writes: “The fallen woman was a stain on society and had to be punished, either by the intolerable pangs of conscience or by death - preferably both” (Brooks 92). Brooks then adds: “The typical narrative solution to the fallen woman’s predicament was to kill her off, thereby simultaneously enforcing social judgment and enabling readers to feel sympathy for the dead woman.” Between 1880-1920, more sexually liberated female characters appeared in literature. However, audiences were not always willing to accept these New Women. Brooks uses the unpopularity of Kate Chopin’s novel, *The Awakening* (1899), as an example of this. The Fallen Woman archetype comes from a pervasive fear of women’s sexuality. In the chapter “Love Between Men and Women” in *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction*, Annis Pratt writes: “Women engaging in sexuality outside of marriage are ‘fallen,’ ‘abnormal,’ or ‘whores’” (Pratt 74). Ántonia’s desire is notably absent from the novel, likely because Jim is not an observer of her love affair. Passion or eroticism are not one of the many themes Cather tackles, unlike traditional Seduction Novels, in which much of the excitement derives from the female protagonist’s inner struggle about whether to yield to the desires of her or her seducer. However, undertones are present, as Jim and other town members’ feeling of shame for Ántonia
demonstrates discomfort with her sexuality and its consequences. Thus, Cather begins to move Ántonia from the Bildungsroman into the Seduction Plot.

As an adult, Jim has mostly lost touch with Ántonia when he hears of her during a visit to Salt Lake: “When I met Tiny Soderball in Salt Lake, she told me that Ántonia had not ‘done very well’; that her husband was not a man of much force, and she had had a hard life” (Cather 197). Cather continues to pair characters with genre. Similarly to the novel’s association between Jim and the values of the Bildungsroman genre, Tiny seems a part of a chorus believing Ántonia to be a Fallen Woman, living an unhappy life as punishment for her immoral actions.

The end of the novel makes clear that the Seduction Plot remains a specter, not Ántonia’s reality, as she achieves a rich life. When Jim visits Ántonia, he walks into a joyful scene as he meets Ántonia’s children: “We were standing outside talking, when they all came running up the steps together, big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight. It made me dizzy for a moment” (Cather 203). The children are full of life, just like Ántonia. This energy makes Jim dizzy, which suggests his surprise: perhaps because of what Tiny had told him to expect of Ántonia. Jim joins the family for dinner: “What a tableful we were at supper: two long rows of restless heads in the lamplight, and so many eyes fastened excitedly upon Ántonia as she sat at the head of the table, filling the plates and starting the dishes on their way” (Cather 208). Then, they look at photographs together: “In the group about Ántonia I was conscious of a kind of physical harmony. They leaned this way and that, and were not afraid to touch each other” (Cather 208). These passages are saturated with a sense of abundance. Ántonia lives a life of fullness with her children: if not in wealth, in familial love and closeness. Unlike the archetypal Fallen Woman, Ántonia is not punished for her perceived blunder of premarital sex; by this point
in the novel, it actually becomes quite insignificant. Cather is offering an alternative ending to the Seduction Plot, allowing Ántonia happiness.

After adopting the Bildungsroman structure and then the Seduction Plot, Cather ultimately lays both aside. Ántonia does not end up socially outcast, as the Fallen Woman does. Despite having a child out of wedlock, she has a joyful family and remains loved by friends. Jim notably connects her to society through his continued affection for her. While, through most of the novel, he represents a traditional voice, this eventually yields as he observes Antonia’s happiness as a mother: any previous moralizing about femininity falls away, and he ceases to represent conservative society. Ántonia’s integration into society is not as complete as in the traditional Bildungsroman, however, as she raises her family outside of town. Cather positions her somewhere in between the differing destinies of the Bildungsroman and Seduction Plot, fulfilled on her own terms: separate from conservative society but by no means isolated. The next section highlights scholarly conceptions of the Female Bildungsroman as a revision to Moretti’s model of the Bildungsroman. Cather upsets the Marriage Plot in both the traditional Bildungsroman and the Female Bildungsroman, in order to create female destinies beyond matrimony.

II. Gendered Destiny and the Female Bildungsroman

Scholars have adapted understandings of the traditional Bildungsroman structure to include 19th and 20th-century novels featuring female protagonists. In Chapter 8 of A History of the Bildungsroman, “The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century,” Maroula Joannu writes that the classical Bildungsroman’s origins are “associated with the rigid class and gender hierarchies of the eighteenth-century German Enlightenment and dated to the publication” (Joannu 200). Structurally, they are “based on the assumption of the male self as the universal
self” (Joannu 202). As a result, the Female Bildungsroman evolved with special attention paid to how gender affects the way in which a protagonist interacts with society. Scholars conceive of the Female Bildungsroman protagonist’s coming-of-age as riddled with confinement and a lack of choice. Aspects of *My Ántonia* that deviate from the traditional Bildungsroman (for example, that moving to town is not as expansive and fulfilling for Ántonia as it might be for a male protagonist) do align with novels that fall within the tradition of the female Bildungsroman. However, Cather also moves beyond the expectations of the Female Bildungsroman tradition. She presents Ántonia, as well as her other female protagonists in The Great Plains Trilogy, as having both agency and a fulfilling ending – qualities unusual in tales of female coming-of-age. Cather then unsettles the Marriage Plot typical of both Moretti’s Bildungsroman and the Female Bildungsroman, as she writes female protagonists for whom life is rich outside of marriage.

Joannu explains that in the male Bildungsroman, “the self-realization of the individual and the individual’s socialization into society are one and the same” (Joannu 200). Happiness comes from completed social integration, while this is not the case for female protagonists. Similarly, in Chapter 2, “The Novel of Development,” of *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction*, Annis Pratt and Barbara White explain that “at its roots the [female] Bildungsroman is essentially a novel of selfhood rather than of social conformity” (Pratt and White 37). This argument rings true for *My Ántonia*; Cather situates Ántonia’s move to town as bringing friends, but also more judgmental eyes. Most of her development seems to occur in relative isolation on the farmland where her family settled. Thus, Ántonia first finds selfhood in removal from general society, like many other protagonists of the Female Bildungsroman tradition.

Ántonia emerges from Cather’s novel as a powerful character, a marked move away from the Female Bildungsroman, in which, as Joannu writes, “disillusionment, disappointment,
diminution stature and the dashing of idealistic aspiration, if not disaster and death, are all too common for the heroine” (Joannu 204). While the traditional Bildungsroman ends in the protagonist joining society, many female Bildungsromane protagonists meet with suffering and a miserable fate: think of The Awakening, Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar and Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, to name a few. Pratt and White attribute this tragic fate to a lack of choice:

The hero does not choose a life to one side of society after conscious deliberation on the subject; rather, she is radically alienated by gender-role norms from the very outset. [...] In most of the novels of development it seems clear that the authors conceive of growing up female as a choice between auxiliary or secondary personhood, sacrificial victimization, madness, and death (Pratt and White 36).

This gendered destiny seems alarmingly bleak; however, the authors support their arguments by citing many coming-of-age novels in which women are either killed off, go mad, end up in confining marriages, or a combination of the three. According to Pratt and White, Female Bildungsromane are marked by the loss of childhood, rather than a positive acquisition of adulthood: “Growing up, according to contemporary gender norms, means growing down - atrophy of the personality, a premature senility” (Pratt and White 30). In My Ántonia, Cather diverges from these dark fates. Ántonia exercises agency in her decision to leave town and live on farmland; she chooses to raise her family far from the prying eyes of the townspeople. If a lack of choice is what makes protagonists in the Female Bildungsroman miserable, Ántonia’s choice to create a life which suits her inclinations leads to her happiness. Rather than maturity forcing Ántonia to “atrophy,” Cather portrays her becoming stronger into her adulthood. At the end of the novel, Jim describes Ántonia as abundant: retaining all the vibrancy of her youth. Through Ántonia’s prosperous end, Cather challenges notions that women must suffer as they mature.
Lena Lingard also exercises agency, allowing it to take her outside of the domestic sphere. In “Making it New: O Pioneers! As Modernist Bildungsroman,” Sarah Stoeckl writes that many female Bildungsromane of the nineteenth century contrast female destiny by showing the fates of characters other than the protagonist (Stoeckl 379). Through Lena’s ending, Cather presents an alternate female destiny from Ántonia’s. While Ántonia moves from town to farmland, Lena is more interested in leaving town to pursue a career in a city; she moves to Lincoln and becomes a successful dressmaker. Lena’s plot strays most notably from Ántonia’s when she does not marry or have children. As a teenager, Lena tells Jim: “I’ve seen a good deal of married life, and I don’t care for it” (Cather 100). Lena sticks to this ideology, focusing on her career rather than finding a husband and building a family. With Lena, Cather creates a character who is both unmarried and successful. Ántonia’s happiness at the end of the novel is significantly tied to her motherhood, yet Cather proves this unnecessary for female characters. Thus, Cather moves away from the archetypal Female Bildungsroman, as Ántonia and Lena make choices both in family life and careers, and succeed in different ways.

Another way in which Cather diverges the Female Bildungsroman is through her adaptation of the Marriage Plot. In her chapter, “Novels of Marriage,” Annis Pratt writes that, for female protagonists, marriage is a tool “for dulling a hero’s initiative and restraining her maturation” (Pratt 41). In the case of The Awakening, for example, Edna Pontellier’s marriage stifles her and she feels the need to escape it, a circumstance that does not arise in Moretti’s model for the male Bildungsroman. In “Making it New: O Pioneers! As Modernist Bildungsroman,” Sarah Stoeckl explains that, in the Bildungsroman, maturation is “generally signified by marriage” (Stoeckl 376). Later, she writes: “Moretti, Gilbert and Gubar, Etsy, and others agree that the traditional bildungsroman helps maintain society by reincorporating the
protagonist into the cultural fold, most often through plots ending in marriage” (Stoeckl 386). In *My Ántonia*, Cather transgresses the expectations of marriage in both the Female Bildungsroman and traditional Bildungsroman. Ántonia’s marriage to Anton Cuzak is not the culmination of her dreams but only a minor plot element. Marriage is clearly not her destiny, and is given little importance compared to her motherhood. Anton is unremarkable; Jim describes him as simply “companionable,” which suggests that the strength of his character does not compare to that of Ántonia’s (Cather 219). Unlike in the Female Bildungsroman, Cather does not create a marriage which dulls or limits Ántonia. On the contrary, since Anton knows little about farming, Ántonia is the driving force in their success on the settlement. Here, Cather presents a marriage that heightens Ántonia’s maturation, while at the same time not mattering much to her development. We are given the impression she would succeed just as well without him.

In fact, the novel seems more interested in Ántonia’s relationship with Jim than in her marriage. In the character of childhood love, Jim and Ántonia’s relationship often blurs the line between platonic and romantic attachment. As a young adult, Jim says to her: “‘I’d have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister - anything that a woman can be to a man’” (Cather 192). Despite their deep connection, Jim moves away and Antonia marries Anton. Thus, the most meaningful relationship in the novel exists outside of marriage, suggesting that marriage is not the highest signifier of love.

The importance of childhood love is echoed in another one of Cather’s novels, *The Song of the Lark*, which traces the rise and fall of a romance between Thea Kronborg and Fred Ottenburg, a charming man from a wealthy family. They share an idealistic summer in Panther Cañon, Arizona, while Thea takes a break from the stress of her music career. As their feelings towards each other grow more romantic, they muse about what their future could hold:
‘Suppose I were to offer you what most of the young men I know would offer a girl they’d been sitting up nights about: a comfortable flat in Chicago, a summer camp in the woods, musical evenings, and a family to bring up. Would it look attractive to you?’ Thea sat up straight and stared at him in alarm, glared into his eyes. ‘Perfectly hideous!’ she exclaimed. (Cather 290)

Fred is reciting the standards and routines of conventional middle-class married life, which it turns out neither he nor Thea want. In Panther Cañon, Thea also solidifies her desire to move to Germany to pursue music. These plans leave no room for a traditional marriage with Fred, but do not negate her attraction to him. He asks:

‘What do you want me around for? - to play with?’ Thea struggled up among the blankets. ‘I want you for everything. I don’t know whether I’m what people call in love with you or not. In Moonstone that meant sitting in a hammock with some-body. I don’t want to sit in a hammock with you, but I want to do almost everything else. Oh, hundreds of things!’ (Cather 297).

Thea’s sentiment towards Fred cannot be neatly encapsulated in marriage. Cather creates a somewhat unconventional love between these characters, as she did for Jim and Ántonia. Like Thea, Jim is not quite sure of what role he wants to fill in Ántonia’s life, but knows that he loves her.

Cather’s interest in Thea and Fred’s relationship exists outside of their matrimony. As their time in Arizona comes to an end, Thea and Fred toy with the idea of marriage, yet Fred withholds that he is already married to a woman in California. Eventually, although they remain in sporadic communication while she is pursuing music, she attempts to disentangle herself from Fred by refusing his financial support. Together again at the end of the novel, they reflect on their relationship. Thea says: “‘In a way, I’ve always been married to you. I’m not very flexible; never was and never shall be. You caught me young. I could never have that over again. One can’t, after one begins to know anything. But I look back on it’ ” (Cather 411). Even without the bonds of marriage, Thea and Fred remain tethered to one another. Cather once again depicts love
which runs deeper than matrimony. This passage also conveys Thea and Fred’s love as a singular experience tied to their youth. Soon after, Thea says to Fred: “‘Who marries who is a small matter, after all’” (Cather 412). This striking line encapsulates Cather’s project working with the Marriage Plot: her novels present marriage as a mere label, while the characters’ attachments to one another are complex and weighty. The epilogue of *The Song of the Lark* focuses on Tillie, Thea’s aunt and the last Kronberg living in Moonstone. Here, Fred is referred to as Thea’s husband, implying that they marry after the book’s narration ends. Instead of feeling like a romantic culmination of their long relationship, this mention makes the marriage feel like an afterthought and fairly insignificant, since Cather does not include it in the main narrative. Thea’s plot ends with her achieving musical success in Germany, rather than in her marrying Fred.

*O Pioneers!* is another novel in which Cather de-emphasizes marriage. Alexandra and Carl, former childhood friends, reunite and marry at the end of the novel. However, their marriage is strikingly devoid of passion. In Jonathan Goldberg’s essay “Willa Cather and Sexuality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather* by Marilee Lindemann, he describes their relationship as “a marriage between friends that is only nominally heterosexual and certainly not the endpoint of a romance plot” (Goldberg 97). More brutally, the union could be summed up as “an assertive woman [marrying] a shrinking man” (Goldberg 97). Sarah Stoeckl agrees that Alexandra’s marriage is more friendly than romantic. In fact, she argues that Alexandra’s relationship with the land is more erotic in tone (Stoeckl 387). At the end of the novel, Alexandra anticipates that her marriage to Carl will be comfortable because of their lasting friendship: “‘I think we shall be very happy. I haven’t any fears. I think when friends marry, they are safe. We don’t suffer like - those young ones’” (Cather 159). Alexandra is
undoubtedly thinking of Marie and Frank, whose passionate love was short-lived. Marie describes to Alexandra the faults of marrying for desire, before truly understanding one another:

‘Do you know, Alexandra, I could pick out exactly the right sort of woman for Frank - now. The trouble is you almost have to marry a man before you can find out the sort of wife he needs; and usually it’s exactly the sort you are not. Then what are you going to do about it?’ she asked candidly (Cather 101).

This passage portrays Marie and Frank’s marriage as an unsuitable and unhappy match, in which they are trapped. Marie’s attention shifts to a new romantic pursuit, Emil, Alexandra’s younger brother: “‘When everything is done and over for one at twenty-three, it is pleasant to let the mind wander forth and follow a young adventurer who has life before him’” (Cather 103).

Cather posits marriage as the end of Marie’s life in more ways than one. Marie feels that Fred’s possessiveness has kept her from an adventurous life. Eventually, Fred shoots Marie when he sees her with Emil; thus, Marie’s husband is the death of her intellectual and spiritual development and finally of Marie herself. Just as scholars see marriage in the Female Bildungsroman as a tool to stunt female protagonists, Marie is thwarted in her attempts to live fully. Cather sets this up in contrast to Alexandra and Carl’s relationship, and perhaps as a caution of the perils of fiery love. Alexandra and Carl do not experience romantic desire for one another, nor tragic highs and lows. Cather shows that romantic love is not necessary for marriage. The inverse of this occurs in Song of the Lark and My Ántonia, in which Cather’s female protagonists experience love–from companionable to passionate–outside of marriage.

In Alexandra, Cather creates a protagonist for whom love is not a primary pursuit. Initially, the narrator attributes Alexandra’s lack of romantic daydreams to the hardness of her life: “She had never been in love, she had never indulged in sentimental reveries. Even as a girl she had looked upon men as work-fellows. She had grown up in serious times” (Cather 106). Alexandra does indulge in fantasies, but they seem both sensual and religious:
There was one fancy indeed, which persisted through her girlhood [...] Sometimes, as she lay thus luxuriously idle, her eyes closed, she used to have an illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by some one very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but 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 shaft of wheat. She never saw him, but, with eyes closed, she could feel that he was yellow like the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him. [...] As she grew older, this fancy more often came to her when she was tired than when she was fresh and strong [...] Then, just before she went to sleep, she had the old sensation of being lifted and carried by a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness (Cather 106).

Despite the portrayal of Alexandra as highly independent, the novel here unveils her deep desire to be held and supported. Traditionally, women would lean on men to fill this need, seeking protection in marriage. Instead, the novel makes explicit that Alexandra is not fantasizing about a human. The subject of her reverie is given distinctly non-human characterization, in his size and yellow color. J. Russell Reaver, in “Mythic Motivation in Willa Cather's O Pioneers!,” discusses the folkloric aspects of this reverie and identifies the man as a Corn-God. Thus, neither the novel nor Alexandra see romantic relationships as a solution to one’s loneliness or need of respite, which undoes the logic of the Marriage Plot.

Cather is notorious for writing female protagonists who are disenchanted with romance. In The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather, Jonathan Goldberg writes that Cather and her writing project dispose of “the marriage plot as female destiny” (Goldberg 95). We have Cather’s own, somewhat sneering, remarks about the presence of marriage and love in fiction. In her review of The Awakening, she describes both Edna Pontellier and Emma Bovary as representative of romantic female archetypes: “they are victims of the over-idealization of love. [...] These people really expect the passion of love to fill and gratify every need of life, whereas nature only intended that it should meet one of the many demands.”

---

Cather distinguishes her own work from those who write love-obsessed female protagonists. Ántonia’s life moves beyond her love for Jim; her marriage with Anton is not particularly exciting, nor does it hold her back. Thea detaches herself from Fred in order to pursue music. Her eventual marriage to him is almost insignificant; Cather mentions it at the last minute, but is more interested in Thea and Fred’s conversations about what they mean to one another. Lastly, Alexandra desires something different than romantic love, and her marriage to Carl is essentially a friendship. In these protagonists, Cather subverts both the traditional Bildungsroman and the Female Bildungsroman in terms of their understandings of love and marriage. Both genres give marriage more significance than Cather does, whether as representative of societal integration or a method of squashing women’s autonomy. Cather’s protagonists have autonomy in the domestic sphere as well as in their careers, which varies greatly from the Female Bildungsroman structure in which women suffer because they can not choose otherwise. Cather imagines a wider female destiny, in that her characters have the agency to create a life which suits them.

III. The Novel’s Values

What values does My Ántonia present as a coming-of-age novel, if it is neither a successful traditional Bildungsroman nor a Female Bildungsroman, with its emphasis on the Marriage Plot? Clearly, Ántonia is a new kind of heroine, perhaps representative of Cather’s own values: seen in the importance Cather places on Ántonia’s return to farmland, joy in motherhood, and integrity which she retains through adulthood. Cather presents the end of Ántonia’s story, though humble by some means, as more meaningful than Jim’s success as a lawyer. Thus, Cather creates her own standards of achievement in the novel, which value familial and personal fulfillment over monetary achievement, and emotional self-sufficiency over traditional marriage.
Ántonia’s happiness rests on her dismissal of societal conventions, and thus the values of the Bildungsroman. At the novel’s end, she apologizes to Jim for her trouble speaking English: “‘I can’t think of what I want to say, you’ve got me so stirred up. And then, I’ve forgot my English so. I don’t often talk it any more. I tell the children I used to speak real well.’” She said they always spoke Bohemian at home” (Cather 201). Ántonia’s choice not to speak English with her children signifies a return to her family’s culture. Speaking English and assimilating was necessary to get by at first, but now, Ántonia uses her native language: perhaps a reclamation of her native culture and a tribute to her late father. Similarly, Ántonia left town to live on farmland when she started a family. She tells Jim: “‘I belong on a farm. I’m never lonesome here like I used to be in town. You remember what sad spells I used to have, when I didn’t know what was the matter with me? I’ve never had them out here. And I don’t mind work a bit, if I don’t have to put up with sadness’” (Cather 206). Ántonia’s move signifies her re-entry into a way of life more natural to her. Cather presents a refusal, or perhaps undoing, of Ántonia’s original assimilation, which disrupts the Bildungsroman plot. Notably, Jim ceases to represent a societal voice here; he remarks fondly on the life Ántonia has created for herself, proving his affection for her to have overpowered his conventional expectations.

The novel also clearly values the country over the town. In Chapter 2 of Regional Development of the American Bildungsroman 1900-1960, titled “Developing the Countryside: Cather, Hughes, and the Poetic of Rurality,” Tamlyn Avery explains that in Moretti’s model of the Bildungsroman, the protagonist abandons the country for the city as a critical part of their development (Avery 45). Tamlyn writes that Cather’s novels challenge the notion “that those rural communities are premodern, backward, ‘colorless,’ and ‘uneventful’” because they feature both older and younger generations in regional spaces (Avery 52). Ántonia experiences both
youth and adulthood on farmland: both being periods of joy and adventure. Ántonia’s time in town was not useless, however. She tells Jim: “I’m glad I went! I’d never have known anything about cooking or housekeeping if I hadn’t. I learned nice ways at the Harlings’, and I’ve been able to bring my children up so much better” (Cather 206). Time in town benefits Ántonia insofar as she is able to bring her children up with manners. Thus, rather than being the completion of Ántonia’s coming-of-age, her time in town is just a part of her education, giving her valuable skills that she can pass on to her children.

Beyond Ántonia’s happiness on the farm, the novel associates her with the land and with nature. Chapter 2, “The Novel of Development,” in Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction discusses the role of nature in female Bildungsroman novels. Annis Pratt and Barbara White write that female protagonists often have a connection to nature which “remains a refuge throughout life.” They then explain that in certain novels, “nature is the protagonist’s entire world” rather than simply a temporary source of renewal (Pratt and White 17). Pratt and White use Cather’s novel O Pioneers! as an example of a novel in which the protagonist gains “life-long psychological sustenance” from the land (Pratt and White 19). Nature keeps the female protagonist “in touch with her selfhood, a kind of talisman that enables her to make her way through the alienations of male society” (Pratt and White 21). With Ántonia, Cather creates another protagonist for whom connection to the land is a life-long attachment. As stated in the introduction, for Jim and their other friend, Ántonia means the country and its conditions (Cather 5).

In fact, Cather posits leaving the homestead and the setting of one’s childhood as a loss. Carl, in O Pioneers!, moves from country to city, like Jim, leaving the Divide for New York city. His career as an engraver in New York proves to be utterly unfulfilling: “Well, you see, for one
thing, there’s nothing to look forward to in my profession. Wood-engraving is the only thing I
care about, and that had gone out before I began” (Cather 62). Once he returns to Nebraska, Carl
tells Alexandra about his disillusionment in the big city:

‘Freedom so often means that one isn’t needed anywhere. Here you are an individual, you
have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the city there are
thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody,
we own nothing. When one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him’
(Cather 62).

For Carl, urban anonymity feels like a force of estrangement from himself. Alexandra has a solid
sense of identity on the Divide but, in the city, Carl seems to experience a disturbing loss of both
self-understanding and recognition from others. Leaving home to pursue one’s career is often
thought of as a triumph, or at least as a milestone in personal development, yet this is not so for
Carl. Instead, city life alienates him and makes him aware of his own lack of achievement. He
explains to Alexandra: “‘Measured by your standards here, I’m a failure. I couldn’t buy even
one of your cornfields’ ” (Cather 62). While Jim of My Ántonia at least earns a good living in his
years away, Carl does not even have this marker of success for his long chosen exile in the city.
In this way, Cather argues for the countryside and its values, in part due to the human connection
and sense of community that Carl misses, but also because the wide spaces of the countryside
allow for individualism: the pursuit of selfhood and individual purpose, as shown through the
lives of Alexandra and Ántonia. This nuanced view goes far beyond the conventions of the
Bildungsroman.

While Ántonia is linked to the land, it is Jim who embodies much of the nostalgia which
Pratt and White describe. They argue that the “green world” in Bildungsromane is often
connected with retrospection, representing innocence or something left behind in the
coming-of-age of a female protagonist (Pratt and White 23). Similarly, in chapter 5 of A History
of the Bildungsroman, Sarah Graham writes that the Bildungsroman contains a “regressive impulse.” She argues: “Rather than maturing, many young protagonists would rather return to their earlier life, often to reconnect with someone or something significant they lost as they matured” (Graham 122). In *My Ántonia*, Jim’s narration is laden with nostalgia for his childhood spent with Ántonia. Contrary to Pratt and White’s idea about nostalgia and female coming-of-age, Cather presents Jim as more attached to the past than Ántonia. Even as Ántonia looks at old photos with her children and Jim in one of the book’s final scenes, Cather does not portray her as longing to return to childhood. Instead, Ántonia looks back with contentment for where she has ended up in life. Jim seems inclined to re-attach to a more childlike identity, specifically when in Ántonia’s home. She asks him where he wants to spend the night: “I told her I would like to sleep in the haymow, with the boys” (Cather 206). He then drifts off listening to them “giggling and whispering” until they fall fast asleep (Cather 211). The boys’ laughter and instant slumber seem quintessential tokens of childhood, showing purity and emotional simplicity. The interest Jim takes in them, as well as his desire to sleep by them—as if he were a friend of theirs, a boy visiting for the night—shows his attachment to youth. Because his childhood was spent on a farm much like Ántonia’s, perhaps he identifies his coming-of-age with that of her sons. The novel sets up a dynamic in which Jim aligns himself with the boys rather than with Ántonia and her husband. This suggests that Jim has perhaps lost more, in growing up, than Ántonia, and finds satisfaction in briefly revisiting his boyhood.

The novel gives deep significance to Ántonia’s fulfilling ending, which is distinct from Jim’s success as a lawyer. In Chapter 2 of *Regional Development of the American Bildungsroman 1900-1960*, Tamlyn Avery describes Ántonia as “an immigrant whose lack of autonomy contrasts with Jim’s upward mobility” (Avery 50). Jim is afforded more mobility in a
traditional sense, as he leaves Black Hawk to pursue education and a law career. However, the novel gives more merit to Ántonia’s ending, presenting her joy in motherhood as particularly rewarding. At the end of the novel, Ántonia shows surprise that Jim has not had children: “And how many have you got, Jim?” When I told her I had no children, she seemed embarrassed. ‘Oh, ain’t that too bad! Maybe you could take one of my bad ones, now?’” (Cather 201). In a novel so interested in childhood, the trajectory of Jim’s life is now portrayed as almost incomplete because he is childless. Despite his successes, he has somehow failed to achieve the things that really matter, at least in Ántonia’s eyes. In contrast, Ántonia’s motherhood gives her character path meaning as well as completion in the novel: from playful girlhood to mature motherhood. In the introduction, the narrator explains that she has not seen much of Jim in recent years, mostly because of her dislike of his wife: “When Jim was still an obscure young lawyer, struggling to make his way in New York, his career was suddenly advanced by a brilliant marriage. Genevieve Whitney was the only daughter of a distinguished man” (Cather 3). The narrator then describes Genevieve as caring little about the charitable causes which she financially supports. Thus, Genevieve is portrayed as wealthy and superficial: strikingly different from Ántonia, who is warm and genuine. The word “brilliant” to describe Jim and Genevieve’s marriage may be ironic, pointing to the fact that this marriage’s benefit is only in the improvement of Jim’s career, connections, and resources. Genevieve seems to represent superficial aristocracy, which the novel condemns.

Cather often creates female protagonists who enjoy more fulfilling lives than their male counterparts. In Chapter 6 of A History of the Bildungsroman, “The Modernist Bildungsroman,” Gregory Castle writes that modernist Bildungsromane usually feature protagonists who refuse traditional standards of success: “This refusal is not so much a failure to achieve as it is a
falling-away from the teleology of achievement; it is a productive failing on the part of a hero whose aspirations are spent more often on resistance to ideals than on their realizations” (Castle 147). In *My Ántonia*, Ántonia’s success is based on personal fulfillment and has little to do with money or a career, which are more traditional (male) standards of achievement. The novel seems to favor a life like Ántonia’s–family-centered, rural, working-class–over Jim and his wife’s glittering financial success. This is made clear by the narrator’s portrayal of Jim’s marriage in the introduction, as well as by Jim’s reports of Ántonia’s joy in the book’s final scenes. In “Rereading *My Ántonia*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*, Anne E. Goldman argues that Cather writes female protagonists who, “despite personal tragedy, summoned the courage to try to live well throughout middle age and beyond” (Goldman 164). Goldman then describes Jim as “rippled (burdened) by his eternal attitude of retrospection. By contrast, the older women of her novels are more determined than thoughtful. Forgoing the attitude of contemplation, they remain connected with the world, risking its apparently never-ending capacity to hurt” (Goldman 166). Cather portrays Ántonia’s fortitude and purpose strengthening as she ages while, from what we learn about Jim, it seems his childhood was, perhaps, the best period of his life.

Goldman’s argument rings true for *O Pioneers!* as in her adulthood, Alexandra “has more color. She seems sunnier and more vigorous than she did as a young girl” (Cather 45). This paints Alexandra as growing even brighter in middle age; perhaps her adulthood is richer than her childhood. In the book’s final pages, Alexandra comes to revelations about the permanence of the land, contrasted with the impermanence of human life. Unlike her brothers, who are chiefly concerned with money and exploitation of the land, Alexandra wisely says that “the land belongs to the future [...] We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love
it and understand it are the people who own it - for a little while” (Cather 158). She is aware that her vision is not shared by her money-minded brothers: “Lou and Oscar can’t see those things ” (158). Though simply put, this line encapsulates the contrast between Alexandra and her brothers. They exist on different levels: Alexandra understands the world with a depth her brothers cannot access. Thus, the novel privileges Alexandra’s wisdom and far-sightedness over her brother’s preoccupation with business profits.

Cather’s female protagonists are famously beloved; their valor and endurance through difficulty has won over countless readers in the last century. Cather’s male characters, particularly Jim and Carl, dim in comparison. They often struggle with reckoning the past and the present, and understanding their purpose after moving on to cities and their supposedly larger destinies as men. Thus, Cather’s values, and standards of success, in her novels are clear: fortitude and longevity in the face of hardship, as well as a focus on the land and family in place of the city and money. Through characters such as Ántonia, Cather models different virtues than those in the Bildungsroman tradition, primarily individualism and personal fulfillment over social and financial success.

Conclusion

I was initially drawn to Cather’s Great Plains Trilogy because of the nostalgia imbued in these texts, as well as Cather’s affection for characters who have a profound impact on one’s childhood. I identified these texts with Cather’s rich sentimentality for the past; what I was less aware of at the time, though, was the novels’ significant focus on the future. At the end of My Ántonia, Ántonia’s financial troubles are largely resolved, she has a loving family, and the reader can expect she will continue living an emotionally full life. It seems she is likely to remain a stable presence that Jim can return to when he needs to reconnect with the land and his past. O
Marler 33

*Pioneers!* concludes with Alexandra’s awareness that the land will infinitely outlast her; she settles for a humble contentment to enjoy the Divide for her lifetime. Meanwhile, in the epilogue of *The Song of the Lark*, Thea’s aunt revels in reading newspaper clippings of Thea’s musical success; in this way, we learn that Thea has realized her career dreams. Cather’s endings suggest that her central characters will continue to “live well” as they grow older, in the words of Goldman. Cather places importance on youth, but her protagonists are not so consumed with their pasts that they are unable to move forward. Rather, Cather is interested in the trajectory of a life, which requires letting some things go in order to experience new things.

In this thesis, I used Moretti’s framework of the Bildungsroman to analyze Cather’s use of the genre: I conclude that, in *My Ántonia* specifically, Cather follows the Bildungsroman structure in order to diverge from it, proving the genre’s limitations, specifically in the the context of a female protagonist. Cather poses the specter of the Seduction Plot as an alternative ending once Ántonia strays from the Bildungsroman plot. However, Cather subverts both genres by giving Ántonia a fulfilling ending even after her perceived misstep. Scholarship on the Female Bildungsroman can explain the role gender plays in Ántonia’s experiences in her coming-of-age; however, Cather disrupts Marriage Plots in both the Bildungsroman and the Female Bildungsroman. Her protagonists live virtuously (at least according to the values Cather establishes) and have meaningful connections outside of traditional marriage. Cather’s values become clear in her novels: she prioritizes female protagonists who have emotional fortitude outside of relationships and in spite of hardships. Her women rarely follow the restrictive roles assigned to them by society, despite the judgments of those around them. Thus, Cather’s play with generic expectations aids in her project of creating women for whom coming-of-age leads to personal fulfillment and strength of character.

---

Works Cited


