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# Cather and the Turner thesis: reimagining America's open frontier

Tonya Ann Tienter  
*Iowa State University*

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**Cather and the Turner Thesis: Reimagining America's open frontier**

by

**Tonya Tienter**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:  
Matthew Wynn Sivils, Major Professor  
Linda Shenk  
Julie Courtwright

Iowa State University

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2015

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my Master's thesis to my grandparents, Carolyn and Leland Tienter.

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## ABSTRACT

Willa Cather often earns attention from environmental literary scholars for her beatific and nostalgic depiction of “the frontier,” though in this ecocritical study, I argue that Cather presents a unique, multi-faceted evolution of America’s frontier and claims it, once again, as a physical place that deserves salvaging. From 1913-1925, Cather worked within Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier rhetoric, yet she moved America’s frontier from a physical landscape of the past to a frontier-of-war in France and finally into the home. With *O Pioneers!*, Cather offers a nostalgic view of life in Nebraska, though she rejects Turner’s creation of a strictly masculine frontier. In *One of Ours*, Cather explores how feminized characters might exist on a frontier-of-war, but she concludes that such a frontier perpetuates violence and the destruction of art. Writing *The Professor’s House*, Cather offers one more solution to reopening Turner’s closed frontier: the home. Working to reopen the frontier on a physical plane rather than a metaphorical one became important to twentieth-century Americans, as it meant the continued development of a unique American character. Beyond humanity though, rediscovering the frontier in any capacity gives power back to the physical environment, and empowering the environment becomes a step toward treating it with respect and seeing it as something worth our care.

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Willa Cather often earns attention from environmental literary scholars for her beatific and nostalgic depiction of “the frontier,” though in this ecocritical study, I argue that she reopens a new, geographical frontier for Americans. The frontier often appears as a divide between the wild, natural world and humanity, but like modern ecocritics,<sup>1</sup> she conceives of an American frontier marked by the overlap of nature and culture. In particular, Cather’s *O Pioneers!* (1913), *One of Ours* (1922), and *The Professor’s House* (1925) highlight the interactions between people and the natural world on different frontiers and expose the problems of traditional frontier rhetoric. These novels also labor towards a solution that keeps America’s frontier alive without fueling the hegemonic displacement of Native Americans, the despoliation of the land, and the subordination of women. Because “the frontier” has lived and will live in the (sub)consciousness of American life for centuries, those concerned with American history and politics as well as environmental issues will benefit from exploring the process by which Cather evolves her fictional frontiers.

Much of the frontier rhetoric that shaped Cather’s era and the twentieth century hails from historian Frederick Jackson Turner and his seminal essay, “The Significance of the American Frontier.” Delivered as a speech to the American Historical Association in 1893, Turner’s essay defines the frontier as an “edge” and a “line” that human

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars observing an overlap between “nature” and “culture” include Bruno Latour and Jhan Hochman, who have coined the terms “nature-culture” and “worldnature,” respectively.

civilization pushed west towards uncharted territory, which closed in 1890 after the U.S. Census Bureau reported a consistent pattern of settlement that eliminated further expansion (200, 201). Turner's essay further credits the frontier in forging the American character, and so its closing wrought concerns for the continued development of American integrity. Dubbed the Turner thesis, this school of thought dominated American studies until the 1920s at the peak of Cather's writing. Modern historian Gerald D. Nash concedes that from 1890-1920, American writers relied heavily upon Turner's thesis as a template for examining American life, while Sarah Jacquette Ray envisions writers of this time fulfilling a more didactic purpose: "If the frontier encounter was necessary for the creation of the ideal American...the qualities that made Americans unique would have to be artificially produced" (12). Artificially producing a physical frontier meant cordoning off land to create national parks, though more pertinently, this process also meant re-crafting the frontier with literary artifacts like Cather's novels. The story of a Turnerian frontier where pioneering men and women touch and then inhabit new land burns at the heart of several Cather novels, and literary scholar Marianne Davidson devotes an entire monograph to investigating the connection between Turner and Cather's Prairie Trilogy but not necessarily the ways in which she rewrites Turner's claims. However, after Turner's death in 1932 and after the end of World War II, the popularity of Turner's thesis declined.

In modern literary and historical scholarship, the progressive qualities associated with Turner's frontier thesis and the physical American frontier pale in comparison to the wrongs enacted on behalf of frontier exceptionalism. Nash again weighs in on the historical reception of frontier rhetoric and explains that by the 1990s, "The frontier they

[scholars] viewed no longer had a positive impact on American society...They saw it as the instigator of violence, anti-intellectualism, racism, sexism, and environmental desecration” (99). This opinion remains valid as an honest analysis of frontier literature and rhetoric cannot feign blindness to hegemonic ideology, though these scholars also seem hesitant to admit any munificence born of the frontier. Similarly, Jennifer K. Ladino eschews the study of America’s frontier altogether, claiming, “Indeed, I would be surprised to see anyone vouch for a concept that historians have dubbed ‘the f-word’” (11). Nearly calling the frontier a profane taboo, Ladino rightly identifies the challenge of studying the frontier in history, in literature, etc.: the frontier no longer exists as a single, physical place somewhere in the American West but as a metaphorical concept America projects onto the geographical globe with astounding multiplicity. For scholars interested in Cather then, studying the frontiers of her novels might be worrisome if not for the fact that other ecocritical scholars are working to salvage frontier discourse from slander.

Recent undertakings in ecocritical studies specifically focused on the frontier cite the frontier’s relationship to the sublime and the American psyche as reasons why the frontier and frontier literature like Cather’s novels remain relevant. The frontier, as many understand it, carries a connotation of wilderness. The frontier is not the wilderness, but the frontier is partially defined by the sublime wilderness, the awe-inspiring uninhabited land, laying just beyond. Rick Van Noy asserts, “The sublime produces an active, resistant space and promotes humility...humans are not the masters of the landscape” (201). On the frontier, humans confront the sublime, and they must also acknowledge the environment’s active resistance to settlement. Continuing to study the frontier means

accepting and respecting the natural world's power, and with this respect, people value the natural world and seek to care for it. In short, studying the frontier can promote an environmental ethic. Moreover, Turner's frontier thesis remains so embedded in the American psyche that refusing to engage in a critical discussion of the frontier does not mean harmful frontier rhetoric will abate. As Richard Lehan insists, "In an era following incursions in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, we have created new forms of frontier reality by serving as the material source for a frontier hinterland that parallels Turner's open-and-then-closed frontier" (56). Discourse that acknowledges the harmful effects of Turner's thesis but also works to constructively reshape it proves necessary. My study of Cather, which includes an analysis of the her novel set during World War I, becomes particularly relevant in this context, as Cather writes within Turner's thesis to subvert the damaging rhetoric of a new frontier-of-war.

Other scholars secure Cather's status as an influential environmental writer, though I extend their dialogue to show Cather as an environmental writer ahead of her time and the inventor of her own frontier rhetoric. She looks at the frontier with ecological concern and does not prioritize the quest of a heteronormative, Euro-American man above the well-being of the land. Karen E. Waldron avers, "While Cather's descriptions of place have long been recognized as important, there has been far less attention to the ways her narrative methods articulate the changing nature and representations of the foundational American places she endeavors to re-imagine and re-present," first and foremost the frontier (xxvii-xxviii). Waldron reveals an important gap in Cather scholarship that does not account for the evolutionary bend of Cather's writings and her willingness to re-conceive places like the frontier. Following Waldron's lead, I

consider just how Cather's fictional frontiers change in accordance with America's changing landscape, and I investigate how she reopens a physical frontier.

In essence, this study encapsulates two arguments: Cather advocates for reopening the American frontier as a physical space in the early-twentieth century while I advocate for salvaging frontier discourse as it applies to the environment. Each of the three chapters in this study addresses one of the following novels: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *One of Ours* (1922), *The Professor's House* (1925). Each chapter uses an ecocritical approach that promotes a type of agency inherent in the natural world and focuses on characters' relationships to the frontier. In addition, each chapter examines the frontier as a different, physical space – Nebraska's prairieland, war-torn France, and an old house – despite the fact that all three novels are set in the Midwest. Each chapter also emphasizes a slightly different theme, including gender, war, and imagination, though these themes undoubtedly overlap.

These chapters also rely on a particular vocabulary that is often debated among ecocritical scholars and deserves clarification for my purposes here. When referring to the *frontier* in this study, I mean a physical space, a variable area that sees the nascent convergence of dominant Euro-American cultures and the wild, natural world. While other ecocritics explicate the frontier as a process, a myth, a social construct, etc., I examine the phenomenological frontier with materiality. It is also worth noting that some scholars use the term *West* interchangeably with frontier, though I understand *West* as a region of the United States, and when employed in its lower case form, the historical bearing of an itinerant, American frontier. *Wild nature* in the forthcoming chapters denotes a place that sees the overlap of human and nonhuman forces, but where

nonhuman forces have a greater, more active presence. I mostly avoid the term *wilderness*, which, like Roderick Nash and William Cronon, I define as socially constructed space, and I do not believe *wilderness* is synonymous with *frontier*. *Civilization* particularly in the third chapter refers to an advanced state of human development that, according to Turner and Cather, often appears at odds and superior to the natural world.

In my first chapter, I examine the first novel of Willa Cather's Prairie Trilogy, *O Pioneers!*, and I argue that the unbroken land in Nebraska is a self-defeating frontier and allows protagonist Alexandra Bergson to temporarily experiment with her gender-identity. Utilizing scholars like Douglas W. Werden and David Laird, I first establish Alexandra's desire to transgress normative female roles and explain how the frontier as a physical space allows this transgression. Alexandra enters into a masculine sphere and assumes a more masculine role, but by retaining certain feminine aspects of her persona, she embraces a gender-fluid identity. In turn, this gender-fluidity grants Alexandra a unique understanding of her environment, which then permits her to break the wild land. However, because Alexandra is so successful, she ushers civilization and patriarchal structures back onto the frontier. Cather reiterates Turner's notion that the American frontier creates a unique, American character dependent on rugged individualism amongst other things, but she finds fault with Turner's reliance on masculinity. She ultimately suggests that for women, the physical frontier closed long before 1890.

The second chapter of my study analyzes Cather's 1922 novel *One of Ours* and the problem she identifies when applying Turner's frontier rhetoric to America's newly acquired frontier: the frontier-of-war in France. Protagonist Claude Wheeler lives on his

family farm in rural Nebraska, but he enlists in the army when the United States enters World War I. By enlisting, he hopes to satisfy his pioneering urge and tell stories upon and through the frontier. In Nebraska but especially in France, the natural world becomes a prevailing and appropriate vehicle for describing the culture surrounding Claude and his peers. Relying on Justyna Kostkowska's work with cognitive metaphors and ecopoetics, I examine Claude's function as a storytelling pioneer who articulates the inherent overlap of humanity and the natural world, and even though the frontier-of-war allows Claude to ecologically and artistically fulfill his storytelling desires, he does not survive. With Claude's death, Cather exposes the danger of believing Turner's frontier thesis completely: reopening a frontier-via-war does not viably preserve the American character, especially any artistic desire.

My third and final chapter discusses *The Professor's House* (1925) where I see Cather proposing a solution for reopening America's physical frontier in the form of St. Peter's "wild nature house." Following two separate protagonists, the late archeologist-turned-student Tom Outland and the discontented professor Godfrey St. Peter, Cather's novel preemptively tempts readers to believe in a Turnerian frontier that divides humanity and the natural world. Upon closer examination, Cather unites humanity and the natural world – "civilization" and "savagery" – through the Blue Mesa; however, the Blue Mesa does not exist as a sustainable or ethical frontier for quenching the pioneer thirst. Cather more practically presents St. Peter's old home as a type of frontier, combining elements of wild nature and human society. Envisioning the home-as-frontier invites a wide demographic of Americans, especially those caught up in urbanization, to believe the frontier can exist as a place and will still create a unique American

disposition. Problematic elements with Cather's solution (like St. Peter's arguable isolation) cannot be ignored, but she writes within Turner's thesis and transforms it for the better.

Collectively, these three chapters demonstrate Cather's deference to the frontier rhetoric of her times but also her ambition to change that way of thinking. Beginning on a traditional frontier and moving towards alternate frontiers of war lands and the house, Cather highlights certain problems with Turner's thesis including frontier masculinity and violence. She also sees the value in his thesis and attempts to salvage some of the rhetoric with her final novel in my study, *The Professor's House*. Though Cather does not discover a perfect solution to keep the frontier alive, she reaches toward that end. She evolves her frontiers and her understanding of frontiers across *O Pioneers!*, *One of Ours*, and *The Professor's House*, and because traditional frontier rhetoric remains so embedded in the American mind, current literary scholars might follow Cather's lead and begin salvaging frontier discourse. Even if we are not immediately or universally successful, Patricia Nelson Limerick reminds us that "By keeping us alert to the limitations and contradictions in our power to reshape the world, projects in restoration immunize us against arrogance and overconfidence" (4). By reclaiming environmental, frontier discourse and by embracing the difficulties of that feat, people can better learn to care for and heal their world in an age that faces increasing environmental destruction. In sum, by reading Cather and thinking critically, we can ensure our own eco-future.

## CHAPTER 2

SOWING AND REAPING GENDER NORMS: THE SELF-DEFEATING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ALEXANDRA AND HER FRONTIER IN *O PIONEERS!*

Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) champions the courage of women like protagonist Alexandra Bergson who tame the Nebraskan frontier, yet in doing so, the novel exposes the consequences of female success. *O Pioneers!* begins on the barren Nebraskan landscape as Alexandra's father dies from disease, though not before willing his land and power as head-of-household to Alexandra rather than his sons. Alexandra's intuitive guidance and hands-on labor within a male-dominated farming society become both communally remunerative and personally gratifying. Her masculinized labor also precipitates the formation of an "atypical" gender identity outside nineteenth-century norms and a battle with misogynistic beliefs. By the end of the novel, however, Alexandra concedes to such derisive beliefs and curiously accepts more feminized, subordinate roles within frontier society.

This trajectory from living with empowered masculinity to accepting less-empowered feminization prompts scholars to question why Alexandra's gender identity changes so radically through the course of the novel. Scholars such as Douglas W. Werden and Daniel Worden highlight the strength of Alexandra's masculine identity, especially as the novel opens, while others like Robert Azzarello and Margaret Marquis suggest that Alexandra embodies and revels in queerness. Together, these scholars propose that Alexandra's defiance of gender norms and what I will later call her gender-fluidity empowers her to succeed within a masculine sphere but also makes her "relapse" into traditional feminine roles disturbing. Nathan Erro agrees that the "narrative

difficulty” of *O Pioneers!* hinges on Alexandra’s feminine forgiveness of men, but he prioritizes her asexual relationships over her relationship with the land (Erro). Since Alexandra’s bond with the land figures so prominently in the novel,<sup>2</sup> the frontier itself deserves scrutiny in connection with Alexandra’s shifting gender identity.

As a female pioneer, Alexandra’s unique bond with the land offers an explanation for her devolvement and engages some of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier rhetoric. In *O Pioneers!*, an open frontier stands beyond the reaches of rigid patriarchal conventions, and so it gives Alexandra the opportunity to move outside a typical feminine sphere; however, this opportunity is illusory. Rather than granting her freedom, Alexandra’s success working the land places her back within a normative feminine sphere. Cather grieves with Turner and shares his nostalgia for the days of “Westward ho!” but she also recognizes that Turner’s frontier does not account for the evolution of women in American society. Ultimately, Alexandra’s work-based relationship with America’s physical frontier offers an unexpected reversal: her labor lets her explore gender-fluidity, the masculine and feminine aspects of her identity and the land itself, but her success ushers in patriarchal structures, which demand she sacrifice her gender-fluidity and conform to expected gender norms.

In the opening of *O Pioneers!*, Cather explicitly presents the frontier as a formidable, dangerous, and unstructured place for men and women alike. The second chapter of *O Pioneers!* sees Alexandra’s father on his deathbed, tallying his failures as a

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars in support of this reading include Marilyn Aronson (7), Hermione Lee (105), Carol Loranger (42), and Ann Moseley, who expressly claims, “the most important artifact in the novel is the land itself” (“Mythic” 94).

farmer against the vicissitudes of the frontier: “One winter his cattle had perished in a blizzard. The next summer one of his plow horses broke its leg in a prairie-dog hole and had to be shot. Another summer he lost his hogs from cholera and a valuable stallion died from a rattlesnake bite. Time and again his crops had failed. He had lost two children, boys” (*Pioneers!* 14). Mr. Bergson’s misfortunes result from now-iconic elements of America’s frontier. The non-human world in every capacity – its weather, pathogens, animals, plants, and terrain – thwart his attempts to make a living. His recollection of unforgiving winters, risky crop ventures, and the evils of vermin characterize America’s prairielands and prove the region formidable for men, however hard-working and deserving they may be. The hazardous frontier even claims the lives of newborn (or unborn) children, and while only Mr. Bergson laments these deaths, Mrs. Bergson weighs in on other frontier perils. Debating whether or not the family should move away from Nebraska, Mrs. Bergson reminds them of the “Drouth, chince-bugs, hail, everything!..No grapes on the creek, no nothing. The people all lived just like coyotes” (33). As a woman who suffered the loss of her children at the hands of America’s frontier, Mrs. Bergson speaks for women and people at large by recounting the land’s bleakness as well as its devastating effects. Pioneers in Nebraska scavenged for castoffs and lived like animals whose first priority was to survive; any thought of forming a structured society would have to come later. Both Mr. Bergson’s and Mrs. Bergson’s experiences underscore the dangerousness of the frontier.

The novel’s pioneers, with the exception of Alexandra, dwell extensively on the frontier’s formidability and assign the land a sex to explain the imbalance of power. In *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra and her dear friend Carl Linstrum visit the nearest town, Hanover,

and notice how other “settlers sat about on the wooden sidewalks in the little town and told each other that the country was never meant for men to live in” (27). Using the word “men,” Cather may only mimic the commonplace rhetoric which assumes sexed words, if representing men, inherently represent women too; however, Cather likely has another point. Declaring that men may not survive on the frontier implies that only men fight the land for the right to prosper. The settlers’ naysaying also accentuates the futility of male power, which implicitly assigns the frontier a sex. If the frontier were a female entity, the pioneer men would have successfully asserted their dominance and gained control over the land, or so the rhetoric goes. To preserve a patriarchal status quo, the frontier needs to be male as that is the only explanation why men cannot conquer it. Marianne Davidson, writing of the connections between Cather and Frederick Jackson Turner, recognizes how the brutal living conditions in *O Pioneers!* make the frontier “completely barren and fruitless, [and] the wild soil, anthropomorphized as a male force” (156). The frontier’s resistance to both habitation and cultivation abase the humanizing forces behind those pursuits very like the abasement of women in relation to men during Cather’s time and the era of her novel. The land’s barrenness, especially, contrasts the idyllic fertility of “Mother Earth,” and so frontier becomes like a male human being, too. As a result, the novel’s pioneers assume that a socially and physiologically male frontier must be broken by men.

The male frontier of *O Pioneers!* largely issues from Turner’s frontier thesis, which fashions the landscape of the novel. Writing about frontierswomen, Glenda Riley asserts, “[T]he settlement of the West traditionally has been interpreted as a male process replete with male images...To Turner...women were an invisible or perhaps nonexistent

force” (190, 189). In his frontier thesis, Turner makes more than thirty references to a “man” or “men” but not a single reference to women. Riley’s affirmation reflects life before Alexandra’s rise to success in *O Pioneers!* and thus Cather’s attempt to work within Turner’s rhetoric. Cather’s male frontier, though, springs from the writings of other American authors including James Fenimore Cooper and Walt Whitman, yet Whitman’s influence burns especially bright as his poem “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” served as inspiration for the novel. Whitman’s poem contains twenty-six stanzas conveniently praising “manly pride” (10). Like Turner’s thesis, it barely acknowledges the existence of women, and when it does, only those who are mothers, daughters, and wives (81-83). These female pioneers relegated to a whole three lines find value in the same way they obtain their identities, by their relation to men as a parent, a child, and/or a spouse. Interestingly, Alexandra Bergson refuses each of these identities in the novel. With Mr. Bergson dead and Mrs. Bergson all but forgotten, Alexandra does not seem so much a daughter as an orphan; she never bears children, and only in the final pages of the novel does she agree to become a wife, though readers do not see the fulfillment of her marriage. Like Turner and Whitman, Cather presents a frontier for men, but in contrast, she refuses to hide her women behind those men or make them disappear. The novel begins by fitting Turner’s prototype, but it eventually departs from his androcentric rhetoric and challenges the place of women upon America’s physical frontier.

Still, in the novel’s first section, Carl Linstrum parrots Turner and suggests that a manly frontier should be conquered by men. In his thesis, Turner concludes that “at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man” (201). In a strikingly similar statement, Carl, like the settlers in Hanover, “felt that men were too weak to make any

mark” upon the Nebraskan frontier (*Pioneers!* 10). Both testimonials place men and the frontier in a strong-man competition where there is a clear winner and loser. Carl believes that men are weak compared to frontier, and here again readers may question if Cather uses “men” synecdochally or if she truly means just one sex. Trusting that her linguistic choice serves a greater purpose, Carl’s statement suggests that if men are feeble, then women by nineteenth-century standards are feebler and would have little or no success creating a life upon the frontier. David Laird confirms that the frontier was “long the domain of a male-centered mythology” (243). The characters of *O Pioneers!* imagine for themselves a male frontier best met with male force, but the physical frontier – the land itself – does not embody an intrinsic gender or throw down a gauntlet for just one sex. “Male-centered mythology” signifies a male fantasy about conquering the frontier, but also the falsehood or “myth” surrounding those same men. To an extent, Alexandra lives by Laird’s insight: she realizes that a mannish approach for breaking her farmland will afford her the most success, but she also overturns the illusion that women have no power upon the frontier.

Carving out a place for herself, a woman on a male frontier, Alexandra casts off a typical feminine identity and projects a more manly persona. Before circumstances necessitate that she become estate-manager and head-of-household, Alexandra experiments with masculinity upon the frontier. 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; carried it like a young soldier)” (*Pioneers!* 6). Donning a coat made for a military man, Alexandra literally embodies masculine power, but more importantly, Alexandra feels comfortable and safe trying on this other gender. The ulster and its masculinity make her immune to

patriarchal condescension. Marilyn Aronson, too, acknowledges Alexandra's masculinity and asserts, "Alexandra replicates the heroic male individuality needed on the frontier" (6). Physically replicating the appearance of a man yet setting herself boldly apart from other women who wear their own sex's clothes, Alexandra models individuality. She comports herself like a soldier, heroically defending her community from crop failures, livestock mismanagement, disease, and everything else to which her mother and father succumbed. She wears men's clothing because she must work and behave like a man to prosper. Ultimately, Alexandra casts off a typical feminine identity and instead personifies qualities associated with masculinity. She simultaneously validates and invalidates Turner and shows that yes, the frontier is manly, but manliness can be appropriated by a woman.

Besides her choice to dress like a man, Alexandra adopts a masculine demeanor. Before dying, Mr. Bergson reflects on his daughter's personality, and in her he "recognized the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out, that had characterized his father in better days" (*Pioneers!* 15). Mr. Bergson praises Alexandra's willpower and her ability to reason, qualities that defined Alexandra's grandfather. John Bergson speaks of these traits as if they are unique to the Y chromosome, passed down through men, making Alexandra's inheritance of them a genetic anomaly. Beside her manly willpower and reason, Alexandra's masculinity surfaces in her fierce interactions with other men. When a Hanover resident flirtatiously comments on Alexandra's hair, she glares at him so unforgivingly that "he suddenly wished himself more of a man" (7). Daniel Worden reads this passage with attention to Alexandra's effeminizing effect, that the townsman's metaphorical castration "stems

from his inability to subject Alexandra to his gaze, as well as failure to exert dominance over a female body” (276). Alexandra and the man trade in atypical gender identities, as her fierceness appropriates whatever quantity of manhood he seems to sacrifice and wish back. She becomes the dominant and therefore masculine presence in the exchange while the man, failing at his task, descends into an inferior, feminized position. Between her dress and her personality, Alexandra displays what characters of the novel consider uniquely masculine qualities (as other female characters do not wear men’s clothes or have bold, domineering personalities). As the novel progresses past the first section and Alexandra enters a more masculine work sphere, she ostensibly begins defying gender norms.

Alexandra’s experiments with masculinity upon a traditionally male frontier, though, necessitate a discussion of sex as opposed to gender. Current feminist scholarship defines sex as a person’s biological identity but gender as an identity constructed by society and/or culture, often in relation to sex.<sup>3</sup> This scholarship separates the union of sex and gender in hopes of deconstructing binaries while giving those of non-dominant genders power against patriarchal norms and oppressive heteronormity. However, sex and gender are still confused and were largely conflated in Cather’s time. Wendy Cealey Harrison and John Hood Williams demonstrate this conflation and delineate the gendering of words prior to second-wave feminism. In mid-twentieth-century dictionaries, for example,

‘masculine’ is the adjectival form of the noun ‘male,’ describing ‘masculine’ as ‘characteristics...peculiar to a man or the male sex: mannish in gender’...[and] it

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<sup>3</sup> Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990. 27-28. Print.

is worth keeping in mind the continuing and close association between ‘male’ and ‘masculine’ and ‘female’ and ‘feminine.’ The presumption is *still* that one set of categories – those belonging to ‘gender’ – is based upon or the *property* of the other. (authors’ emphasis, Harrison and Williams 17)

Many people believe that a person is first born with a sex and that sex then bears their gender. On the contrary, “gender” is not the offspring of “sex,” “feminine” does not belong to all things female, and “masculine” does not belong to all things male. Willa Cather, a woman who dabbled in masculinity herself, knew of the false essentiality between sex and gender, but the beliefs of her time bind her writing. In *O Pioneers!*, sex and gender merge in some circumstances but remain separate in others. The novel’s presentation of men upon a male frontier denotes the sexed identity of Nebraska’s landscape and its people, but Alexandra’s man-like qualities better bespeak gender. Consequently, Alexandra’s inheritance of Grandfather Bergson’s willpower and logicity fuse sex and gender, her biological and social identities. Worden, continuing in his article “‘I Like to be Like a Man’: Female Masculinity in Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*,” notes that “one must think sexuality and gender as bound together but also as operating on different axes,” and while sexuality is markedly different from sex, his insight reiterates how labyrinthine the issue of gender can be (274). There is no easy way to navigate gender in *O Pioneers!*, but there remains a victory in attempting it.

Alexandra uses her burgeoning masculinity to confidently engage the frontier, and working the land lets her defy gender norms even more. After Alexandra successfully transforms the harsh, formidable prairie into farmable land, her estate becomes the most

prosperous for miles around, and this makes her even more masculine to her brother, Emil: “It had never occurred to him that his sister was a handsome woman until Marie Shabata had told him so. Indeed, he had never thought of her as being a woman at all” (*Pioneers!* 122). Emil does not view his sister as a woman, meaning he likely sees her as more of a man. He fails to notice Alexandra is attractive, though when he does, his word “handsome” bespeaks a more masculine beauty than a feminine one. Douglas Werden celebrates the integrity of Emil’s observation and calls Alexandra and Marie the novel’s real pioneers. He argues that the two women “subvert traditional late nineteenth century gender perceptions by eschewing the role of supporting a male...each of these women appropriates traditional male roles” (Werden 199-200). Though Marie’s ability to subvert gender perceptions is debatable, Alexandra occupies and appropriates a traditional male role, the head of her household and the overseer of her property, with determination, intelligence, and ferocity. She refuses to accept any lesser position or hand the farm over to her grown brothers when they demand it (*Pioneers!* 86). Her family depends on her financially, and so she supports them out of familial duty. She defies nineteenth-century gender norms that typically indorse a woman’s powerlessness and monetary dependence. Still, Alexandra retains certain feminine characteristics even as she adopts masculine ones.

Alexandra retains an important feminine part of her self working on the frontier, which scholars often overlook. At the height of her success, Alexandra employs immigrant girls as workers in her household, and “these girls, with their long letters from home, their finery, and their love affairs afforded her a great deal of entertainment” (46). Perfunctorily, this passage substantiates a stereotypical, feminine norm: the girls are

domestic, sentimental about home, materialistic, and easily-in-love. The entertainment Alexandra garners from this scene seems almost disdainful, from knowing she is not like them. Alexandra's amusement, however, also stems from an empathy with these girls. She may not delight in finery or love affairs in exactly the same way (her masculinity may preclude total empathy), but she takes pleasure in the similarities between them and herself. She can find feminine matters entertaining because she still fosters a feminine side. Werden once again weighs in on the matter of Alexandra's gender identity, maintaining, "Alexandra's movement in the novel is from an initial reject of traditional women's roles to an exploration of how she can be a woman in a dominant position and a family woman simultaneously" (199). Alexandra casts off traditional female or feminine roles in her labor with the land and adopts an amount of masculinity, though she does not wish to forsake her feminine identity altogether. As with the twittering servant girls, she admires a woman's domestic, familial sphere, but she wants to occupy it without losing the respect and authority she earned working as a man with other men upon America's frontier.

Alexandra's femininity reveals itself further in a regard for the domestic sphere that women primarily occupy and govern. Melissa Ryan focuses extensively on the novel's declaration "that properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors" (*Pioneers!* 45). Alexandra views the expansive frontier as a house, a place accommodating women and marked by a feminine touch. The frontier-as-house (which Cather will later explore in *The Professor's House*) likewise becomes a logic puzzle, for as Ryan explains, "[T]he same language that expands Alexandra's house inevitably shrinks the space of 'the wild land'" (277). Alexandra's house and her domestic space overtake the frontier, which

makes a traditionally masculine space significantly less masculine. Carol Loranger adds to this point by noting, “Alexandra extends to the outside world of the farm the same care as she does to the inside world” (42). Alexandra’s masculine work essentially becomes a continuation of her “inside,” or feminine, labor. The ease at which typical masculine and feminine spheres bleed into one another and the dexterity by which Alexandra navigates these convoluted, multi-gender spaces attest to the gender-fluidity permeating the novel. The spectrum of masculinity and femininity that Alexandra embodies also illustrates the complexity of her gender identity and how she does not live in a completely masculine realm or a feminine one. Alexandra subverts Turner’s rhetoric by constructing her frontier experience as something other than absolutely masculine, and this subversion continues as she works the land.

Alexandra’s gender identity appears both masculine and feminine, and so her defiance of gender norms affords her a gender-fluid identity. At one point in the novel, Alexandra’s older brother, Lou, proclaims, ““Alexandra ain’t much like other women-folks,”” but the truth is she “ain’t” like men-folks either, at least not entirely (*Pioneers!* 88). As much as she works in the male-dominated sphere, making decisions about which crops to plant, which tools to purchase, and when to harvest, she works in the female sphere too, living by herself, taking care of her own domestic affairs, and applying domestic concern to the land. Hermione Lee emphasizes what I call Alexandra’s gender-fluidity – her masculine assertiveness, strength, and authority as well as a more feminine preoccupation with domestic business and even love – and purports, “The attributes of the strong pioneer figure who *combines* masculine and female qualities is firmly introduced” (author’s emphasis, 106). Lee articulates the issue of Alexandra’s genders

more clearly and comprehensibly than any other scholar. The pioneer, according to Lee, becomes strong and successful in breaking the land because he or she subverts the binary of accepted gender norms. Alexandra emerges strong and successful because she approaches her work with gender-fluidity, assuming a masculine persona while never completely relinquishing her feminine one.

Scholars including Ann Moseley and Marilyn Aronson recognize Alexandra's multi-gender identity but deem it androgyny, which carries a slightly different connotation than gender-fluidity. Aronson avers that as "an androgynous character, Alexandra is tall, strong, serious" (5). Moseley, on the other hand, does not feel Alexandra is androgynous but acts androgynously in her relationship with the land. Focusing on sexual overtones, Moseley explains that as Alexandra phallically ploughs the field, she assumes a man's role during intercourse, but when she "gives" herself to the land, she plays a more womanly part ("Mythic" 100). Whether analyzing Alexandra's sexuality, personality, or physicality, scholars agree that Alexandra is not decidedly feminine nor masculine; however, calling this intersection "androgyny" does not fully encapsulate her gender identity. "Androgyny" in this context denotes a combination of sexed and gendered qualities, but it also insists on a type of stasis, a fixed point between genders. Alexandra more accurately oscillates between masculinity and femininity during different parts of the novel, and so rather than being androgynous, she expresses gender-fluidity.

Alexandra's fluid gender identity emerges on social and somatic planes, but her understanding of the frontier develops with particular attention to the body. As discussed earlier, Alexandra embraces both masculinity and femininity. Socially, she prefers to

work within a male-oriented sphere, but she enjoys the companionship of women.<sup>4</sup> Somatically (but not necessarily biologically), she clothes her body in men's wear, yet she dreams about the pleasures of taking a male lover (*Pioneers!* 106). And while Alexandra seems stunted emotionally or in the very least emotionally unaware, she realizes that her body matters in constructing a gender-fluid self. Absorbed in memories of her past, "There were certain days in her life, outwardly uneventful, which Alexandra remembered as peculiarly happy; days when she was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination of the soul" (105). Alexandra's ruminations connect Nebraska's physical frontier, its unsown land, with her physical body. She feels and experiences the earth through her bodily self. She internalizes the barren land and makes it grow into a happiness she can easily reap. Sarah Jacquette Ray contributes to the discussion of female body awareness, stating, "[E]cophenomenologists and some feminists reveal the ways in which the body is the first environment...and that knowledge about the environment can be understood only through the body" (6). The body exists as a site of naturalness that, like the frontier, undergoes cultivation, especially if that body belongs to a woman. Alexandra's attention to her body means she has the capacity for understanding her frontier environment, and because her body awareness incorporates gender-fluidity, she sees the frontier as having gender-fluidity, too. Gender-fluidity becomes both the means and motivation for looking

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Loranger highlights this fact by insisting, "[S]he prefers socializing with women; other than the hermit Ivar, her closest relationships are with the doomed, young Marie Shabata and the spry and toothless crone Mrs. Lee" (43).

beyond the land's gendered dichotomies, and this makes her a successful farmer when so many others failed.

Although the frontier initially appears as a male landscape meant for men, Cather uses ambiguous language when gendering the space in later sections of the novel. When Alexandra begins interacting with the land through her work, Cather suggests the frontier is both male and female, writing, "The little town behind them had vanished as if it had never been, had fallen behind the swell of the prairie, and the stern frozen country received them into its bosom" (*Pioneers!* 10). Cather mixes sex and gender, biological and social signifiers, yet again. The town, a crux of human society on the frontier, becomes enveloped by the "swell" of the prairie, so the land takes on a phallic, masculine quality. However, in that same sentence, the prairie bares a "bosom" that nurtures the town with feminine concern. In sum, the frontier represents biological maleness and femaleness as well as the social standard of masculine oppression and feminine care. Cather conflates sex and gender, but she also collapses binaries. Laird subscribes to a similar belief and explains, "Alexandra's intense relationship with the land is projected in strong, deliberately gendered images, sometimes feminine, sometimes masculine" (244). The phallus and the bosom of the prairie illustrate Laird's point perfectly, and because Alexandra's relationship with the land is first and foremost work-based, she approaches her labor with gender-fluidity; she sees the land as herself. Cather rejects Turner's premise that the frontier is male and only meant for men and shows that gender-fluidity can inspire the frontier's fertility and the female pioneer's freedom.

Cather employs this same fluid rhetoric when describing Alexandra's work on the land in another section of the novel. When Alexandra toils away on the frontier, "The

brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow” (*Pioneers!* 41). The land firstly appears female when considering the penetrative nature of the plow, a phallus parting and then entering the earth, yet referencing the earth’s strong “power of growth” also suggests an erection. Cather gives the land both male and female anatomy again and therefore some combination of masculine and feminine genders. Davidson further addresses the land’s duplicity by saying of *O Pioneers!*, “The wild land itself...is the male force that wrestles with the colonist and overwhelms him or it appears as gynemorphic virgin soil that keeps luring the pioneer, making him seek new horizons” (168). Turner and Cather paint their frontiers as male/masculine and female/feminine, capable of overwhelming colonists with sheer strength yet intrinsically poised to bear life. Since Turner apparently viewed the frontier with gender-fluidity, Cather perhaps creates a fluid frontier based upon his ideals. Turner’s thesis, though, does not encourage gender-fluidity in people.

Turner’s thesis does not specifically promote gender-fluidity, though he curiously defends the “fluidity of American life” (200). As the American frontier moved west, pioneers kept establishing their societies anew, and “this perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character” (Turner 200). Turner credits the frontier as a place and a process for forging “American character.” The plight backwards and forwards along a scale of progression holds pioneers in a fluid state of being that might seem laborious and dizzying but ultimately sculpts their Americanism. With a closed frontier, Turner mourns the end of this process and the end of frontier fluidity. Turner’s notion of fluidity, however, only

extends to the evolution of humanity along a line of primitivism and advanced civilization. Turner does not apply his reverence for frontier fluidity to matters of gender.

Alexandra's unconventional perception of the frontier earns her success, but scholars disagree if that success comes from being a woman who approaches the frontier like a man or from being a woman who approaches the frontier like a woman. In his article probing biocentric, homocentric, and theocentric environmentalism, Patrick K. Dooley contends that in *O Pioneers!*, "The land submits to the human hand that develops, tames, subdues, orders, masters, controls and improves (all Cather's terms) it" (67). This laundry-list of active verbs signifies a violent methodology where only male pioneers "throw" themselves at the frontier "and try to *subdue* it with sheer physical force" (emphasis mine, Davidson 172). An aggressive approach to the frontier supposes a masculine approach, but it does effectively overcome the land. Loranger, however, perceives the situation differently and proclaims, "Alexandra's broader vision [to achieve prosperity and respect] arises from a special relationship with the land, which Cather presents as intimate and loving" (42). In direct opposition to the aggressive approach Dooley identifies, Loranger insists that Alexandra approaches the frontier with tenderness and wifely care.<sup>5</sup> That scholars cannot agree upon a violent, masculine approach or a soft, feminine one solicits the validity of each argument and the futility of such a divide. Rather than pitting Alexandra's masculine relationship with the land against her feminine one and proving which is more correct, scholarship can more meaningfully consider them together and reap the benefits of breaking down a gender dichotomy. Alexandra and Cather, it appears, were women ahead of her times in respect to gender and

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<sup>5</sup> Relating to Alexandra's "wifeliness," Marilyn Aronson asserts, "the land is Alexandra's husband" (7).

environmental matters, honoring the frontier with Turner's rhetoric but recreating a physical space where frontier women are welcome.

The fluidity that Alexandra sees within the frontier also holds real-life applications for women pioneers outside the novel's context. In a letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant about her progress drafting *O Pioneers!*, Cather addresses the "problem" of a supple plot structure:

The skeleton [of *O Pioneers!*] does not stand out enough. The modelling is not bold. But the country itself has no skeleton – no rocks or ridges. It's a fluid black soil that runs through your fingers...It's all soft, and somehow that influences the mood in which one writes of it – and so the very structure of the story." (*Selected* 177)

Cather directly links the physical frontier of Nebraska, its flat land and black soil, with the materiality of her novel to a point where a real, physical frontier governs the novel's structure and conceivably other parts of the narrative. The reality of Cather's frontier develops and controls the novel's pioneers while Cather's fictional frontier bends to the force of humanity. A reader also has to wonder about the soil's "fluidity," if the fluid landscape of Cather's reality injected itself into multi-gender characters like Alexandra, or if Alexandra's gender-fluid identity retrospectively informed Cather's understanding of the frontier, or if Cather's own experiences defying gender norms prompted her to recognize that quality in the soil. In any case, the land's fluidity in Cather's world and in Alexandra's benefits women at large. Relatedly, Annette Kolodny claims that while men preferred frontiers with forests, "The prairie, however, spoke to women's fantasies" (6). Kolodny has other reasons for believing prairie frontiers benefit women, but prairies in

the novel allow an exploration of gender fantasies beyond heteronormative and patriarchal creeds. As Cather and Alexandra prove, the prairie is a fluid landscape and lends its fluidity easily to women who dream of changing their restrictive feminine identities and spheres. With this, however, readers can never be certain which came first, Alexandra's gender-fluidity or the frontier's.

Alexandra cultivates such a powerful relationship with the fluid frontier that she transcends the sphere of her story; she creates and reenacts human history. In a particularly didactic moment of the novel, the narrator boldly claims, "The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman" (*Pioneers!* 35). Unlike earlier when men tried and failed to conquer the frontier, the country here reaches the hearts of both men and women. The narrator's declaration helps prove that Cather's rhetorical use of "men" in the early chapters was intentional and did reference just one sex. The land, however, is not just masculine or feminine, it is both. Therefore, it is affective towards all. The history born out of men's and women's hearts depends on the land's gender-fluidity where anyone can shape the course of their nation. Moving from history to-be-created towards history long-past, Dorothy Tuck McFarland asserts, "Alexandra's creative response to the land is symbolically parallel to the Creation... which already contains foreshadowings of the Fall – the breaking of right order" (23). Forging a work-based relationship with the frontier dependent on creation, Alexandra stands as a godhead in charge of history. She no longer finds herself trapped in a gendered sphere but a divine one with godlike power to change the course of her future, unlike her father, brothers, even neighbors. Those men do not possess the same godlike omnipotence, perhaps because they cannot not understand the land's gender-fluidity. Nevertheless,

McFarland also foreshadows the consequences of living in an Eden with subverted order and broken rules, including the subverting and breaking of gender norms. Alexandra may have agricultural super powers begotten from her gender-fluidity, but those powers do not last, and she tumbles from godhead to transgressor.

The power Alexandra gains from filling a masculine role and working on a gender-fluid landscape ultimately leads to a “fall” where she no longer subverts Turner’s androcentric rhetoric or resists nineteenth-century gender norms. Living on a frontier void of strict societal structures, Alexandra freely explores her own gender identity. As she then engages in a work-based relationship with the land, she uses her gender-fluid identity to see the land like herself and approach it with masculine force and feminine care. Alexandra orders her brothers to forcefully plow and till the land, but “for the first time, perhaps since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning” (*Pioneers!* 35). This yearning seems exceptional as Alexandra does not only desire the land for what it offers her; she loves the land for its own sake. Alexandra’s unique combination of force and affection renders the land habitable and prosperous, but Alexandra’s success causes her to devolve. Now that the frontier is broken, sectioned off by acres, bought and sold by men, societal structures remerge and the strict gender norms, once suspended for the sake of survival, snap back into place. Working on the frontier becomes a self-defeating process for female pioneers. When shaping their own fluid gender identities and earning esteem in male-dominated spheres, women like Alexandra might bring about their own bondage. Mary Paniccia Carden comes close to articulating this unfortunate reversal, saying that “her success is simultaneously glorifying and stultifying...her alternative self-making

both a triumph and a limitation” (295).<sup>6</sup> The frontier endows Alexandra with the power to explore masculinity and work in a male sphere, but her incredible success doing so ushers in social confinements. The untamed frontier showcases her triumph as a gender-fluid woman, but when broken, the frontier also takes some of that triumph away. By the end of the novel, Alexandra sacrifices the strength of her character in firstly forgiving the man who murdered her brother (when earlier she could not even forgive a townsman’s jest about her hair) and secondly with her engagement to Carl.

Alexandra’s devolvement, her acceptance of typical female roles at the novel’s end, exposes the ultimate futility of life for Cather’s women on the frontier. The novel ends with Alexandra consenting to marry Carl even though she does not love him romantically. Likewise, Alexandra visits Frank Shabata, Emil’s murderer, in prison and eagerly forgives his heinous crime. These two actions, marriage and a sort of sentimental vulnerability, signpost Alexandra’s relapse into a typical feminine sphere. When speaking with Carl before their marriage, Alexandra reflects on his past working in the California goldmines. Carl assumes he has “nothing to show for it all,” but Alexandra counters him saying, ““You show for it yourself, Carl. I’d rather have had your freedom than my land”” (*Pioneers!* 64). At first, Alexandra’s statement seems odd as the land gives her power, money, and therefore freedom, but knowing that her successful work takes away that same freedom justifies her point of view. Alexandra knows her time defying gender norms has come due and that working the land equally confines and liberates her. Even Carl’s grand pronouncement that Alexandra “belong[s] to the land” reverberates with despair (260). Alexandra belongs to the land because it influences her

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<sup>6</sup> Unlike the argument of this essay, Carden insists that as the novel ends, Alexandra preserves her female power.

identity and also because the broken land heralds patriarchal oppression and the sacrifice of gender-fluidity. A question, though, still haunts the novel: Is Alexandra's success within a masculine sphere worth the fleeting freedom? Or for Alexandra, does participating in a masculine sphere and embracing a more liberating concept of gender pain her more once that freedom is taken away? To attempt an answer, the end of the novel must be considered.

When Alexandra literally walks off into the sunset with Carl, Cather yanks her heroine back to a feminine sphere. In the final scene of *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra admits that she is tired and lonely, and “they [her and Carl] went into the house together, leaving the Divide behind them, under the evening star” (161). Alexandra physically turns her back upon the frontier to enter a domestic, feminine space, and so when readers close the book, they lock Alexandra inside her home. The name Cather gives to Alexandra's frontier, “The Divide,” also retains value for the ending. Geographically, The Divide refers to Nebraska's area of elevated prairieland, but as Alexandra leaves The Divide, she walks away from the divide she meant to reconcile. She forsakes her life's work trying to merge once-dichotomous genders and spheres, and with Carl, she cannot even stay the master-ess of her house. Carl will take over as head-of-household, a position that Alexandra dominated for more than twenty-years, and though Carl swears to respect Alexandra's work with the land, dominant gender conventions require that Alexandra respect his patriarchal power. Ryan trumpets the confining nature of Alexandra's house in relation to Crazy Ivar, a hermit who lives with Alexandra: for Ivar, “her household, presented as *an* asylum (sanctuary) is ultimately *the* asylum (the juridical space in Foucault's terms, of disciplinary confinement)” when Alexandra's brother's suppose his

extreme reverence for the land makes him asocial and crazy (author's emphasis, 283). However, Alexandra's household becomes a place of disciplinary confinement for Alexandra, too. As the novel begins, Alexandra's house metaphorically compares to the natural world, a big place without any sort of boundary where she can find strength and purpose. When she chooses to marry Carl, she will have to accept more domestic duties within the confinements of walls and doors as punishment for rebelling against gender norms.

After Carl escorts Alexandra into her home, Cather offers one last image of the frontier that satirizes Turner's frontier rhetoric. *O Pioneers!* ends in the same apostrophic tone first invoked by the title and speaks to the frontier land itself: "Fortunate country, that is one to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (261). This poetic tone nearly chimes like church bells, rejoicing in Alexandra's give-and-take relationship with the land but memorializing it too, as that relationship will change with marriage. In his article titled "The Frontier and American Institutions: A Criticism of Turner Theory," George Wilson Pierson states, "Turner was apparently so confident that the results of our frontier experience were liberating, and in the whole beneficent, that the very language of his essays in dealing with this subject took on a warm and almost lyrical quality" (231). The lyricism and warmth Pierson identifies in Turner surfaces with the novel's final image: the musical lilt of the language, the stunning beauty of the natural world scene, and the couple's walk towards hearth and home. However, Cather's scene does not reflect the same level of liberation. The "warm" and "lyrical" elements speak to Alexandra's confinement and her *lack* of personal liberty. She shows that for women, the

frontier can be lyrical but never a place of permanent freedom. She agrees with Turner that the frontier traditionally appeals to men, but she disagrees that it must remain a space just for men, and so with *O Pioneers!*, she tries and, in part, fails to open a frontier space for women of any and all genders.

Alexandra's paradoxical predicament whereby freedom creates confinement mirrors the troubles of Marie and Emil who also find themselves plagued by patriarchy. Marie and Emil complement Alexandra and show that while many characters face gendered challenges with the land, Alexandra handles them the most appropriately and ecologically. Robert Azzarello, for one, investigates environmental agency and queerness within *O Pioneers!*. Azzarello credits the landscape for allowing Emil and Marie Shabata to consummate their illicit affair. However, "The White Mulberry Tree"<sup>7</sup> under which they lay does not sufficiently hide their tryst, and Marie's husband murders them both: "'The soil' in the end is not figured as mother's milk, not as 'green breast,' but as lethal invitation" (Azzarello 91). Azzarello blames the frontier for offering a deadly invitation to Emil, though this statement equitably applies to Alexandra. The frontier, more specifically a Turnerian frontier, challenges Alexandra to embrace masculinity, but she pays a deadly price. The complete freedom and self-reliance readers respect Alexandra for obtaining dies with her forgiveness of Emil's murderer and her marriage to Carl. Emil's demise also reveals the power of the frontier and incoming patriarchal institutions, or in the very least, patriarchal archetypes like the jealous, shotgun-toting husband who takes justice into his own hands. Howard I. Kushner identifies the patriarchal luggage of Turner's thesis, that "Turner's 'West' serves as a

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<sup>7</sup> The title of the novel's fourth section.

symbolic promise of the reinstatement of patriarchy,” though he does not specifically apply it to Cather (Kushner). No matter who or what broke the West, patriarchal forces always returned and pocketed the glory. Alexandra and Emil illustrate Kushner’s claim to near and unfortunate perfection.

The Turnerian frontier that Cather simultaneously adapts and subverts additionally poses a problem for women who obediently fulfill typical feminine roles. Marie Shabata, Emil’s lover, becomes Alexandra’s closest female friend, but she does not follow Alexandra in stepping outside a feminine sphere. Marie enjoys baking sweets, weeps at the sight of dead animals, and still flinches at memories of living in a convent (*Pioneers!* 67, 75, 100). Richard F. Hardin feels Marie’s domestic world still yields to the novel’s demanding landscape and argues, “Although Cather would have applauded Marie’s choice to stay with the hard country life rather than live in the city, Cather also recognizes that kind of impermanence for Marie” (210). Hardin’s argument places Cather alongside the reader and perhaps forgets that she dictates Marie’s choices, including Marie’s decision to pursue an affair that can only end in violence. Cather never has the chance or never gives herself the chance to applaud Marie’s stalwart nature, simply because she brings about her death. Hermione Lee appreciates the critique of gender norms inherent in this plot choice and portends that Marie “is destroyed by her traditional femaleness” (114). Marie’s normative female role and associative feminine identity diminish her ambitions and remove her understanding of consequences. Marie’s traditional femaleness constricts her world to the point of destruction, but then again, Alexandra’s nontraditional femaleness does the same. She does not die exactly like Marie, but she still suffers a death of selfhood and the end of her liberation, and so the

novel exposes a double-bind for women on the Turnerian frontier: remain traditionally female and be destroyed by its limited sphere or defy gender norms and be destroyed by the success of that defiance. Another question that deserves asking pertains to the double-bind and why a Turnerian frontier necessitates the reemergence of patriarchal structures.

A Turnerian frontier's perpetuation of patriarchal structures results from a fear of superfluity, according to Annette Kolodny. In *The Land Before Her*, Kolodny avers, "The post-bellum Eve of California and Oregon, the Dakotas and the high plains, soon spoke in the voice of *both* adventurer *and* domesticator. . . . Indeed just as Eve had once been edited out of the wilderness paradise, so now Adam would become superfluous" (author's emphasis, 240-41). The "Eve," or woman, of the frontier (what Kolodny calls the wilderness) learns to fend for herself and prosper without needing a man. Men experienced anxiety when realizing their superfluity, and so they forcefully reintegrated patriarchal structures upon the frontier. With these structures, men felt they would never be unnecessary. Kolodny's claim applies to Alexandra's plight in that she does shoulder domestic responsibilities, but she also becomes an adventurer working on the wild frontier. Alexandra figures as this "Eve" so Cather might show the nation what happens to strong, independent women upon a Turnerian frontier. Kolodny's claim may also speak to Alexandra and Marie together, Alexandra as the adventurer and Marie as the domesticator. Their unconscious partnership poses an even greater threat in the form of communal resistance. They work in cahoots defying men, and so they each must sacrifice their life for men to feel secure.

*O Pioneers!* advocates for the power of women upon America's physical frontier, but it exposes the consequences of defying nineteenth- and twentieth-century gender norms. Alexandra Bergson assumes a masculine role, working the land and managing the family estate with a degree of masculinity. However, she also retains her femininity, and so she projects a gender-fluid identity that unfortunately succumbs to patriarchal structures by the novel's end. Forcing Alexandra to devolve in the final pages of her novel, Cather depicts the reality of women working on the frontier. Though current American society upholds pioneer women as underappreciated icons of human achievement, they did not always overcome repression and confinement. Realizing the self-defeating plight of the female pioneer, though, ultimately explains Alexandra's devolvement – why she suddenly becomes content fitting narrower, feminine roles – and helps to answer the problematic plot twist that scholars have long explored. Acknowledging Cather's simultaneous admiration for and subversion of Turner's frontier thesis also sheds light on her evolution as a female writer and the contradictions she works through trying to celebrate, critique, and reopen the American frontier.

## CHAPTER 3

FRONTIER, FEMALE, CATHER, CLAUDE: NATURE AS A VEHICLE FOR  
STORYTELLING IN *ONE OF OURS*.

Though often called a war novel, *One of Ours* remains less about battle than about characters who tell stories and myths about a new American frontier. Cather's 1922 Pulitzer-prize winning novel chronicles the brief life of Claude Wheeler, an effeminate farm boy who joins the army during World War I to fight overseas in France. The novel often receives condemnation for denying Claude an experience of disillusionment that would expose the bloody reality of a wartime frontier.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars like Mary Ruth Ryder point to Cather's love of ancient mythology that glorifies war as a reason for his continued illusion, while Steven Trout contends that *One of Ours* "reflects [new] myths used by many Americans to *remember* the war and to make sense of the more than 100,000 American soldiers who died in it" (author's emphasis, 190). The desire to excavate Cather's source-work and explain away casualties certainly contributes to the novel's optimistic outlook on war and Claude's ambition to become a myth-teller, but so does a continued nostalgia for what Frederick Jackson Turner identified as the closing of America's physical frontier.

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<sup>8</sup> One critic who condemned Cather for gentrifying war was Ernest Hemingway, who accused her of plagiarizing battle scenes from other war novels. He remarks of Cather, "Poor woman, she had to get her war experience somewhere" (150).

While America's frontier officially closed in 1890,<sup>9</sup> the First World War afforded Americans another chance to affirm their colonial spirit. In his frontier thesis, Turner writes, "The importance of the frontier, from that day [beginning the American Revolution] to this, as a military training school, keeping alive the power of resistance to aggression and developing the stalwart and rugged qualities of the frontiersman" cannot be underestimated (211). Turner, speaking on behalf of a greater, American ideology, views the frontier as property of the United States military, a tool for perfecting the art of resistance, or considering America's displacement and decimation of Native American populations, for perfecting the art of war. His thesis establishes a relationship between the physical frontier and war, namely that the frontier prepares men for war but more implicitly that a frontier defines itself by encouraging and "keeping alive" violence. Cather explores this aspect of Turner's thesis and challenges the integrity of reopening America's frontier via war with respect to gender, a land ethic, and narrative art.

Cather's exploration of war upon a frontier markedly intersects with a concern for telling frontier stories within and apart from Turner's thesis. Like her earlier novel *O Pioneers!*, *One of Ours* presents a violent, masculine, and therefore Turnerian frontier. However, *One of Ours* progresses beyond a masculine ideal and realizes the impossibility of reopening a frontier with nostalgia. *One of Ours* displays a yet unconquered landscape in France (unconquered because the Allies had not yet overcome Central Power

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<sup>9</sup> In *Guarding the Frontier: A Study of Frontier Defense from 1815 to 1825*, Edgar Wesley explains that the 1890 U.S. Census Bureau defined "frontier" as "the edge of the region that had fewer than two persons to the square mile" (1). The census revealed such an extensive population distribution in America that, by the bureau's definition, a physical American frontier ceased to exist.

strongholds) and prioritizes the reaping of narrative art rather than any earthly bounty. In this chapter, I analyze the novel's remedial effects with attention to Claude Wheeler. Specifically, I argue that Claude rejects a masculine, Turnerian identity, uses various frontiers as vehicles for his narrative art, and achieves a degree of success, though not enough to where war becomes a solution for reopening America's frontier.

Cather's *One of Ours* fits within a longstanding tradition that muddles the difference between a frontier-of-war and a frontier-as-war. A frontier-of-war sees the frontier as a specific, physical battleground, but a frontier-as-war engages metaphor without attention to concrete geography. A frontier-as-war assumes that the thing called war performs a frontier-ing process. For instance, English novelist Stevie Smith writes of combatting German militarism in her suitably-titled 1938 novel *Over the Frontier*.<sup>10</sup> Frank Herbert's science-fiction novel *Dune* (1965) continues her pattern and engages the rhetoric of Turner with alien peoples battling over interstellar, resource-ridden lands.<sup>11</sup> Richard Slotkin moves the conversation of frontier rhetoric to wartime realities in *Regeneration Through Violence* by highlighting the inadequacy of literature to contain pioneering aggression, as Americans found their new frontier in Vietnam (564). Harold Schechter and Jonna G. Semeiks expand the work of Slotkin and his literary predecessors when discussing the Vietnam War as a frontier in films, specifically *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (1985) and *Platoon* (1986), and finally Barry Stephenson sees the hegemonic effects of Turner's rhetoric as the Bush administration justified the United States' War on

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<sup>10</sup> Diana Wuatin, for example, liberally interchanges "frontier" and "battle front" in her article "*Over the Frontier and into the Darkness with Steve Smith: War, Gender, and Identity.*"

<sup>11</sup> R. J. Ellis and Andrew Hoberek call special attention to Turnerian rhetoric in *Dune*.

Terror. Reviewing this litany shows that Turner's rhetoric equating the frontier with violence, and not just violence but war, endured for more than a century and penetrated many genres of literature. Indeed, America's physical frontier has always been a frontier-of-war to some degree, as pioneers battled Native Americans for the "right" to push west. Understanding that *One of Ours* belongs to this tradition provides another link between Cather and Turner, and Cather ponders the possibility of moving America's frontier to wherever a "military training school" might come to exist.

Before illustrating the battlefield as a type of frontier in *One of Ours*, Cather plants inklings of warlike rhetoric in her early novels. For example, in *O Pioneers!* readers first encounter protagonist Alexandra Bergson wearing a man's long coat, carrying herself "like a soldier" and imitating Turner's belief in a militaristic frontier (6). The fact that Alexandra must act like a soldier on the frontier validates Turner's claim and depicts farmers and other landowners as army-men waging war on their environment. Alexandra herself never wages war with the land as her fellow pioneers do, but she consistently battles frontier masculinity that belittles and confines women. *O Pioneers!* also casts its characters as mythological warriors, Alexandra as an Amazon and her brother Emil as a gladiator (7, 42). The fame of these archetypal warriors renders Nebraska a metaphorical frontier-of-war, and not even metaphorical when remembering that Native Americans were massacred by United States soldiers all across the West. The Amazon and the gladiator symbolize violence that moved out of myth, across the sea, and into America's heartland (because nowhere else were they more "needed" than upon America's frontier). Thus, Cather's allusions to Alexandra's soldierly disposition and other Classical warrior archetypes confirm her attention to Turner's thesis and preview

the evolution of her own frontier rhetoric that firmly begins on native soil but then travels to lands of greater war. *O Pioneers!* also foreshadows *One of Ours* in a concern for how masculinity and femininity should exist upon a violent frontier. Both Alexandra and Claude defy gender norms, but Claude's lack of masculinity precipitates a more feminine, artistic desire.

Like *O Pioneers!*, the characters of *One of Ours* emerge from myth and from pointedly feminine archetypes. *One of Ours* contains superficially masculine mythology – Claude is explicitly referred to as Odysseus and implicitly as Aeneas when aboard the warship *The Anchises* (199), – but Josephine Donovan and Charmion Gustke argue that feminine archetypes govern the novel. Donovan sees shades of the Demeter-Persephone myth in *One of Ours* when Claude and Mrs. Wheeler gaze out the window (73) and “[t]heir selves merge – a striking image of the mother-daughter reunion” (Donovan 117). In this scene, Claude assumes a feminine identity, his mother's daughter rather than her son, and he even seems to share his mother's womanly body. Gustke detects feminine archetypes as well, noting Claude's relation to Cleopatra (21). Gustke's mention of Cleopatra has special feminizing effects, as her manipulation of Roman rulers via her sexuality and feminine wiles remains legendary. What is more, Claude has “an almost Hippolytean pride” that scholars associate with the Greek myth of Hippolytus even when the adjective equally references Hippolyta, a woman who dies tragically at the hands of Heracles (*One* 49). Cather resists pinning Claude to just one woman of myth, and while the variety of archetypes seems confusing and unstable, his likeness to Persephone, Cleopatra, Hippolyta, and others simply demonstrates the importance of his feminization.

Claude's persona essentially absorbs feminine archetypes because they come to bear a greater importance for his identity.

The most intriguing aspect of Claude's relationship with feminine archetypes arises with the Muse and Genius in Cather's previous novels. In *My Antonia*, protagonist Jim Burden calls upon a Muse, one of the nine female deities who reign over art and inspire male artists. Jim's plea issues a complicated power struggle, for Mary Carruthers explains, the Muse needs a vessel: "she only speaks through him... [but] the basic relationship of dominance and possession is constant between her and her poet" (295). As Claude Wheeler shares Jim's passion for intellectualism and narrative art, contemplating the presence of a Muse in *One of Ours* proves insightful. Even though Claude never prays to any sort of goddess for a divinely-wrought mind, a Muse still exists. Claude is literally possessed by a female force – Cather – who fuels his storytelling desires, but this becomes problematic. A writer answering her character's call for inspiration makes her subordinate to the thing of her creation and replaces her inventiveness with his, but beyond the unfortunate necessity of ventriloquism, Cather ultimately controls Claude and the story. Thus the novel begins with Claude possessed by a Muse and with Cather determined to find a place for women and artists like herself on some kind of American frontier. The Muse in Cather's oeuvre also accompanies her "Genius," the mythical, male counterpart of inspiration appearing in *O Pioneers!*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Anne Moseley and Melissa Ryan identify the Genius of the Divide as male, and as Moseley claims, "[T]he Genius of the Divide is a deeply complex mythic figure. On one level, *he* is representative of celestial or spiritual forces; on another level, however, *he* is representative of the land itself" (emphasis mine, "Mythic" 97).

Cather's Genius tries to possess Alexandra, yet Alexandra retains her identity and her own poetic vision of Nebraska's frontier. With these two mythic archetypes, Cather promotes female literary art. Alexandra embodies womanhood and an artistic vision apart from any male Genius while Claude adopts a feminine persona, in part because a Muse manifests within him.

Claude typifies female archetypes of myth, but also how real women "embody" myths in other practical ways. Mary Ruth Ryder cogently observes, "The ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome, and particularly their myths, became an integral part of Willa Cather's thought and artistic expression" (7). Having a Classical education in her childhood home of Red Cloud and at the University of Nebraska, Cather studied Greco-Roman civilizations. She read and owned copies of the *Iliad* and *Histories of Cyrus the Great and Alexander the Great*, and she took courses in Greek poetry and drama (Woodress 41, 61). She learned the literature of these ancient civilizations, and through literature she learned about their cultures. John Heath, author of "Women's Work: Female Transmission of Mythical Narrative," asks:

We know women told stories and sang songs – but what were they, and did they have a significant role in disseminating traditional tales?...it is almost certain...that in a predominately oral society like the Greek and the Roman during the Republic, women story-tellers contributed a great deal to preserving and handing down the cultural tradition. (69)

Since Cather had knowledge of Classical civilizations, she would have known that women were the storytellers of their cultures and bore the responsibility of passing down a *mythos*. This knowledge became "integral" to *One of Ours* and shapes Claude's

character. By adopting a feminized persona in relation to mythological archetypes, Claude connects the mythic and the real through storytelling. He, or rather Cather, uses his feminization and “mytholization” to preserve their own cultural traditions on the frontier, especially since Turner declared the American frontier “closed.” And by telling stories on and about the frontier, using its myths, he and Cather keep the frontier alive.

Early in the novel, Claude displays a liking for myth- and storytelling. Cather constructs Claude with consistent interiority, and readers have the privilege of hearing Claude think. In a moment of reverie, he reflects, “It was a curious thing...that a character could perpetuate itself thus; by a picture, a word, a phrase, it could renew itself in every generation and be born over and over again in the minds of children” (*One* 54). Claude’s reflection illustrates his interest in stories but also his wish to learn more about storytelling. He displays curiosity and a genuine desire to learn what about a character is self-perpetuating. He sees that someone must create pictures, words, and phrases for a story to come to life. With the mention of children, he also dances around Heath’s contention that women, bearing sons and daughters and their culture’s traditions, are best suited for the job. Claude, however, does not merely reflect on characters and storytelling; he begins the process of becoming a storyteller on and through America’s frontier.

Claude trains to be a storyteller firstly with the legend of Jeanne d’Arc. While still living in Nebraska, Claude enrolls in a history class at the local university and writes a thesis about Jeanne d’Arc. Finishing his work, Claude feels proud that “he had kept all personal feeling out of the paper; that it was a cold estimate,” yet Jeanne d’Arc still seems mythic (53). After all his research, he “knew very little more about the Maid of

Orleans than when he first heard of her from his mother, one day when he was a little boy” (54). Claude’s aversion to feelings when writing his thesis does not portray a lack of interest in storytelling, just the necessity of being objective and calculated when writing a historical assessment. In reality, Claude still shares some sort of myth, as he preserved Jeanne d’Arc’s illusiveness from the story of his youth. When Claude turns in his thesis, he dreads placing it on the professor’s table, but when the professor carries it with him, Claude feels “pleased” (55); he is able to relate his story with a sense of immediacy that functions like pseudo-oration. Josephine Donovan best puts this exchange in perspective when insisting, “Thus, it is not patriarchal knowledge derived from the objective modes of university learning that Claude finds most powerful; rather, it is the tradition of oral feminine knowledge that has remained persuasive in his memory” (117). Claude values the opportunity of a college education and hones his skills writing, but he inherently resists that type of learning. He does not surrender himself to the masculine way of telling stories, not completely anyway, because he imbues his thesis with feminized and mythologized oration. Oration, or the type of storytelling that relies on spoken narrative as Heath suggests to disseminate tales, beckons to Claude.

Although Claude somewhat fails in properly telling the story of Jeanne d’Arc, he participates more successfully in the storytelling tradition as an apprentice to his mother. As a grown man, Claude still enjoys listening to his mother tell stories, and after a hard day’s work, Claude requests that his mother read *Paradise Lost*: “‘Read aloud, won’t you? Just wherever you happen to be. I like the sound’” (*One* 72). Claude expresses pleasure in hearing stories told out loud and contemplates what makes his mother’s oration enjoyable. Indeed, he observes that she “always read deliberately, giving each

syllable its full value. Her voice, naturally soft and rather wistful, trailed over the long measures...all familiar to her and full of meaning” (72). Claude actively listens to his mother and how she gives the story special meaning through the tone of her voice, the tempo of her recitation, and the careful pronunciation of her words. Readers witness more of Claude’s apprenticeship when Bayliss admits “it used to make him bitterly jealous to hear his mother coaxing Claude to read aloud to her” as a child (73-74). Mrs. Wheeler long-encouraged Claude to perfect his reading and orating abilities with gentle coaxing rather than regimented university study, and though Bayliss does not have a storytelling desire, he envies the pursuit. Mrs. Wheeler treats Claude rather than Bayliss as an apprentice, encouraging the development of his artistic gift while demonstrating what a master storyteller should do and be.

Claude’s role as a feminized storyteller also gains significance seeing that Cather opposed traditional gender norms. Cather struggled between accepting gender norms of the early-twentieth century and becoming a writer. Sharon O’Brien asserts, “Underlying Cather’s association of...epic poetry is a set of metaphoric equivalences – weapon/sword/pen/penis – that reveal her equation of creativity both with paternity and an aggressive, phallic masculinity” (148). Early on, Cather believed she must assume a masculine identity to seriously participate in the literary world and create narrative art. This conviction also accounts for her imperfect faith in Turner’s rhetoric that favors men and masculinity, especially in her earlier novels, and her willingness to test a weapons-ridden frontier-of-war. Occasionally using the name “William Cather,” she felt it necessary to adopt a manly persona, yet O’Brien also says, “Somewhere in her consciousness she knew that women could be strong, vibrant, creative storytellers” (96,

125). Cather's inner tensions of male versus female competency reveal themselves in Claude. He appealed to Cather as a man with power by normative gender conventions, but his relationship to myth and oration allies him with women. In sum, he stands as the perfect amalgam of a female desire to tell stories and a male power to do so successfully during the early-twentieth century. Claude became a way for Cather to negotiate her own storytelling ambitions in a socially acceptable way and upon a landscape she loved: Nebraska's frontier.

Additionally, Claude's identity as a feminized storyteller establishes a bond with the natural world and thus his means for communicating. Susan Griffin, early ecofeminist and author of *Woman and Nature*, proclaims, "[T]he woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. That the dead sing through her mouth and the cries of infants are clear to her" ("Prologue"). According to Griffin, the traditional relationship with women and nature has been that woman speaks with nature. She communes with the natural world, interpreting its different dialects, and with that ability she better understands humanity. The woman's connection with nature makes her mouth a vessel for stories not unlike the relationship between a Muse and her poet. Claude illustrates this connection with nature in the novel when, out for a stroll, "his body felt light in the scented wind, and he listened drowsily to the larks, singing on dried weeds and sunflower stalks. At this season, their song is almost painful to hear, it is so sweet" (*One* 55). Like the embodiment of woman in Griffin's prose, Claude listens to the natural world via the lark-song and understands the language, whether it is painful or sweet or a combination of both. Nature essentially possesses him: the wind removes him from his body and birdsongs fill his head.

Incidentally, Claude interprets these voices of nature as he shares his own. Claude's stroll is to the university where he will submit his thesis, and so the feminized voice of the natural world and his voice as a storyteller merge for the first time.

Claude's relationship with the natural world upon Nebraska's frontier also appears much less violent and therefore less stereotypically masculine. Claude disdains the men in his family for their wastefulness and insensitivity, which they display in relation to the natural world. Claude's father chops down his favorite cherry tree, leaving only a "bleeding stump" that takes weeks to die (25). The farmhand, Jerry, carelessly pulls a nail from an old mare's hoof and idly watches the horse "standing in her stall for weeks, patiently suffering" (4). Claude despises Jerry and his father for torturing his horse and his tree for no other reason than asserting their masculine power. Claude also counters his brothers who bask in the family's profits, feeling "it was not right they should have so much land – to farm, or to rent, or to leave idle" (68). Similar to the cherry tree and the old mare, Claude recognizes his family's legacy of dominating the land, for making sure Nebraska's frontier stays tamed, "civilized," and closed, and for deciding what lives, what dies, and what suffers in the process. Claude develops an environmental ethic that rejects excessive masculine dominance. Instead, he favors an environmental ethic that appreciates a more feminine, more poetic, and more life-giving connection to the frontier, almost the exact opposite of traditional war-culture tenets.

*One of Ours* imparts poetic images of nature upon the Nebraskan frontier, though Claude's voice and the narrator's disconcertingly overlap. But firstly as a point of clarification, Claude lives upon a categorically "closed frontier." Census records in the early 1900s indicate that Nebraska supported a sufficient population and could not boast

an “edge” or “line” bordering wild, unfettered territory (Turner 199, 200). For Claude, Nebraska stands as an icon of the frontier that *was* there. It may be closed, but it retains the “frontier feeling” through wishful remembrance and nostalgia. Therefore, Claude does still live upon something called the frontier. In support of this conclusion, John J. Murphy points out that “there are more factual details of the land and of farming in *One of Ours* than either *My Ántonia* or *O Pioneers!*” (“*One*” 235). This abundance of land and farming details equate Nebraska’s “frontier” in the 1910s with the open frontiers of other, earlier novels. These many details, though, obscure a clear narrative voice. Dix McComas avers, “What continues, therefore, to make *One of Ours* difficult for its readers is that, as Sharon O’Brien has written, ‘Cather’s detachment from Claude’s perspective is unstable and shifting’” (96). Because Cather writes very close to Claude’s perspective and then far away from it, Claude seems like a separate narrative entity. The novel invests itself in the details of Nebraska’s closed frontier like Claude invests himself on the farm, so readers do not always know who is speaking. *One of Ours* nearly becomes a material manifestation of Claude’s voice, a story by his own hand, but his death at the novel’s end calls Cather back into the picture. In sum, Cather and Claude both have close ties with the Nebraskan landscape and share a narrative voice. The Muse and her poet take turns speaking, but this allows readers to witness Claude’s storytelling journey more objectively and completely with distance and intimacy.

Using the power of a shared narrative voice, Claude compares people to Nebraska’s closed frontier and gives them life in new, creative ways. Assessing a girl from the University, Claude observes, “Her hair was yellow and curly, – the short ringlets about her ears were just the colour of a new chicken” (*One* 47). Claude perceives the

girl like an animal that is not wild but a part of frontier culture. The Wheeler's African-American maid, Mahailey "toss[es] her head like a horse in fly-time" when angered by one of Claude's brothers (63). Again, Claude understands Mahailey's actions by comparing her to an animal that he encounters on the homestead. Both of these descriptions serve to creatively illustrate the people in Claude's life, and Claude continues with the pattern: Mahailey also resembles a "chained coyote," Ralph's hands look "very much like the teats of the cow," and Claude himself is "bearish" when giving hugs (64, 84, 40). These musings seem mostly internal, yet with Cather's narrative distance in flux, Claude reaches out to readers. He has an audience listening to the makings of a story; he uses a familiar landscape to describe people anew.

Claude's approach to narrative art, his use of nature as a vehicle for storytelling, exemplifies the concern of eco-poetics. In his monograph aptly titled *Eco-poetics: The Language of Nature and the Nature of Language*, Scott Knickerbocker wonders how language and nature interact: "On the one hand, humans are distinct from (though not superior to) the rest of nature in our use of language...but on the other hand, because we are part of nature, our language is part of nature too" (4). Knickerbocker's contention ultimately supposes that language fits within nature because people are "natural." Claude's use of any language, then, connects him with the natural world, but his use of a specific, comparative vocabulary highlights his mission to speak through and about America's physical frontier. Joining Knickerbocker in the interest of eco-poetics, Justyna Kostkowska explores the poetic language of Cather's contemporary, Virginia Woolf. In her novel *The Wave* (1931), Woolf consistently employs the pathetic fallacy but also turns that fallacy around to describe humans in nature-like terms. Just like Claude

Wheeler, Woolf's narrator uses nature as a vehicle for perceiving the world, and this "poetic language (especially cognitive metaphor) makes us question the boundary between the human and nonhuman by imaginatively rediscovering the relationship between them," according to Kostkowska (9). For Claude, an imaginative rediscovery uniting the human and the nonhuman on Nebraska's closed frontier never really surfaces, as Claude seems to have known of that unity all along, but nevertheless, Claude's consciousness of that poetic knowledge ignites his narrative imagination and pushes his storytelling desires towards fruition. That Cather and Woolf, both female writers, compel their characters to articulate experience in terms of the natural world suggests a greater pattern: successful women writing in the early-twentieth century use the natural world to make art, and the relationship between women, environment, and art also emerges in *One of Ours* with Claude's mother.

Claude's memories of his mother continue to illustrate how he uses Nebraska's closed frontier as a means for telling stories, even if just to himself. As Claude comes nearer to enlisting and leaving Nebraska, he recalls Mrs. Wheeler standing out by the oxen when he was just a child, that "his mother's face was almost as brown and furrowed as the fields, and her eyes were pale blue, like the skies of early spring" (*One* 114). Summoning this memory becomes an act of storytelling for Claude. He retells himself the story of his mother and the oxen, and he does so again with the help of the frontier. The land serves as a memorable and accurate means of comparison, with the color and texture of his mother's face like their family's farmland and the color of her eyes like the open sky. Claude uses certain features of his frontier as a lens for filtering the world

around him, but that task becomes somewhat futile considering Nebraska's frontier is closed.

The natural world of Nebraska benefits Claude's storytelling, but without an open frontier, the land hinders his bigger ambitions. The Wheeler's lands produce a steady supply of crops, but Claude thinks he belongs to a "big lonely country, where people worked hard with their backs and got tired like the horses, and were too sleepy at night to think of anything to say" (*One* 70). The country is lifeless because it makes Claude lifeless; it stifles his passions and dries up his creative energies as a storyteller. Claude abandoned his university education where he was content crafting story-like theses because his father needed help on the farm, but back on the homestead, the agriculturally-lucrative closed frontier continues to stymie his storytelling. At the end of the day, he is too tired to think (much less think creatively) or tell any kind of story. Interestingly, the lifeless country also mirrors the lifeless pronunciation of Claude's name. A local preacher named Mr. Weldon and Enid, Claude's wife, both pronounce his name "exactly like the word 'Clod,' which annoyed him" (109). Claude may take issue with their pronunciation because "clod" also means "idiot" or "dolt," but symbolically the pronunciation fits. Equated with a lump of dirt, Claude knows he is uninspired. Nebraska's closed frontier does not much help him grow as a storyteller. He writes a thesis, creatively perceives the world around him, studies under his mother, but never completely succeeds.

Despite being thwarted as a storyteller thus far, Claude succeeds when applying language of his frontier to subjects of war. For a large portion of the novel, Claude's storytelling consists of reciting passages from books, writing (not orating) his Jeanne

d’Arc thesis, creatively perceiving the people in his life, and retelling himself a memory. One day, Claude opens a newspaper and reads that the French might christen Bordeaux as the new seat of government. Concerned for the fate of Paris, the current seat, Mrs. Wheeler orders Claude to retrieve the encyclopedia. Unlike childhood when Mrs. Wheeler prompted Claude to read aloud or when Claude asked his mother to read from a book, Claude takes the initiative. He says:

*‘Defences: Paris, in a recent German account of the greatest fortresses of the world, possess three distinct rings of defences...Now what do you think of that? A German account, and this is an English book! The world simply made a mistake about the Germans all along. It’s as if we invited a neighbor over here and showed him our cattle and barns, and all this time he was planning how he would come at night and club us in our beds.’ (139)*

Claude develops his own storytelling abilities that include oration and a connection with the natural world. Claude reads from an encyclopedia, regurgitating the knowledge of some other, nameless author, but then he reshapes the information with his own narrative voice. He compares Parisian defenses to “cattle” and “barns” on Nebraska’s closed frontier, and he shares the comparison aloud with his mother. For the first time, Claude effectively demonstrates his graduation from apprenticeship with the understanding that effective storytelling uses a feminine linguistic system associated with the frontier *and* subjects of war. Claude’s epiphany influences his decision to enlist in the army: in the very last, war makes for good stories.

Claude’s decision to enlist additionally stems from his belief that a new frontier will aid him as a storyteller. Explaining again why Claude leaves Nebraska, Donovan

asserts, “The East is associated with a weaker ‘feminine’ culture and the West with macho masculinity” (93). The lifelessness and superfluous masculinity of Nebraska’s closed frontier makes Claude’s home doubly useless for a feminized storyteller like himself. Partway through the novel, Claude gives voice to this combination when thinking of the Osage orange hedges that farmers used to plant. The hedges were now “being cut down and grubbed up. Just why, nobody knew” (*One* 85). The “why,” however, should be self-evident: The Wheeler family farm and other farms in the area were once filled with trees and orchards, but farmers like Mr. Wheeler now use their rugged masculinity and individualism to clear the area for more crop-sewing and money-making on a hopelessly closed frontier. Simply put, the absent hedges are a symbol of lifelessness, macho-masculinity, waste, and everything Claude hopes France is not. Even if weaker, the French landscape might let him reopen a new, fertile frontier.

In France, Claude experiences a frontier that sees the meeting of savagery and civilization. When traipsing through France from trench to trench, Claude finds a small wreckage of buildings and observes, “The stagnant pools and the weeds that grew in ditches gave out a rank, heavy smell. Wild flowers grew triumphantly over the piles of rotting wood and rusty iron; cornflowers and Queen Anne’s lace and poppies; blue and white and red” (307). Claude prefaces his observation by saying, “There was nothing picturesque about this,” but he does not seem to mean it (307). While his comrades see only what is ruinous, Claude sees the beauty of the wildflowers and describes the ditch-weeds in a beautiful lilt. The Nebraskan farmers might purposely cut down the orange hedges and work the land to make crops grow, but in France, the land is not purposely destroyed; the destruction comes as a mere by-product of war. The ruin of things man-

made alongside natural growth illustrates Frederick Jackson Turner's definition of a real, open frontier, a "meeting point between savagery and civilization" (200). In Claude's Nebraska, no meeting point exists as civilization and the permanent establishment of farming communities reign supreme, but in France, these meeting points materialize. The savagery of war and its destructive tendencies meet with the curious "civilization" of wildflowers that titivate the land, yet the fragments of wood and iron and civilization also seem aggressively and savagely overtaken with weedy growth. France should perhaps appear as a wasteland, but Claude envisions the very definition of Turner's open frontier. He sees an irrepressible fertility that can only aid his storytelling ambitions.

Claude's obsession with finding a fertile frontier also grows out of his obvious infertility with his wife. Claude courts and marries a neighbor girl, Enid Royce, though on their wedding night, she refuses his company (*One* 161). Enid's rejections continue well into their marriage, for "Everything about a man's embrace was distasteful to Enid, something inflicted upon women, like the pain of childbirth, – for Eve's transgression, perhaps" (172). In her own way, Enid tries to create a frontier narrative that empowers women, which is not wholly different from Claude's storytelling desires. According to Richard Slotkin, "The point of repeating the Frontier Myth in that form was to suggest that our history embodied a fatal mistake, which could be corrected by symbolically reenacting the past" (*Fatal* 17). While the frontier Enid and Claude inhabit in Nebraska is mostly civilized and therefore closed, Enid embraces a simulacra, something representative of the old and open frontier. Because of this simulacra, she relives the frontier myth to correct the fatal mistake of Eve. She seeks to right an old wrong and reverse the fall of humankind by rebuffing her husband's advances, though her self-

imposed celibacy also denies the toxic rhetoric whereby women's bodies are ploughed and (im)planted with violent force just like the lands of the frontier. Still, Enid's lack of sexual interest leads to Claude's diagnosable infertility.

As Claude comes to terms with his infertile existence, he reaffirms a type of reproductive power through the frontier. Sitting on the timber pile behind his house, Claude liked "[t]o lie in the hot sun and look up at the stainless blue of the autumn sky, to hear the dry rustle of the leaves as they fell, and the sound of the bold squirrels leaping from branch to branch; to lie thus and let his imagination play with life – that was the best he could do" (*One* 174). Claude feels content in the warm embrace of an iconic, if somewhat vanished, frontier, which takes the place of his wife. The nature surrounding him – the leaves, the squirrels, the sun, the sky – spark his imagination and let him create something, if only pleasant thoughts. This type of creation "was the best he could do" and the only type of fertility available. In *Birthing a Nation*, Susan Rosowski perceives a predicament like Claude's with positivity. As way to move beyond Turner's frontier rhetoric that hails violence, masculinity, and physical labor, Rosowski hails peaceable regeneration and narrative art: "Writers were to take America (i.e. the West) into themselves, as if by insemination, to carry it about within themselves, as if in gestation; and to create something original, as if giving birth to new life" (2). Claude fulfills this very oracle: his feminized persona and his attention to the frontier landscape let him observe (take in), contemplate (carry), and articulate (birth) new life in the form of his narrative art. The fertile frontier in France, however, becomes problematic and in some ways encumbers Claude's storytelling. War destroys rather than creates new life, and Claude knows this.

In France, Claude continues using the frontier as a vehicle for nascent storytelling, though he witnesses suffering from the war, too. Claude makes many comparisons between people and the natural world like he did with the university girl, his mother, and Mahailey: French prisoners behave “like tadpoles from the cellars”; a soldier’s wound looks “like a great cow’s liver”; and a lost English boy had “cheeks like pink apples” (*One* 348, 323, 303). The natural world molds Claude’s perceptions and hides the ugliness of war. He makes light of gruesome situations to erase his new reality. Prisoners do not appear demoralized or fatigued. They seem instead like frisky frogs, and because most people have not seen a cow’s liver, its likeness to a wound becomes moot. Murphy also identifies this contrast and declares, “[F]raming these horrors are bucolic scenes rendered impressionistically” (“Compromising” 160). Claude successfully leaves his readers with the impression that a frontier-of-war can be beautiful and can aid in creative endeavors, but that impression hides an important truth. When Claude’s company comes under fire, he glimpses “the land of France turning gold...all the willows by the little streams had become silver” (*One* 326). Claude clings to images of the landscape more than images of human desolation, and while he can temporarily lose himself within a frontier made of silver and gold, readers might not do the same. He begins using the natural world and things on his frontier to cover up what he sees rather than create a story.

Claude’s extreme preoccupation with France’s beautiful frontier becomes a means to compensate for the horrors of war, which ultimately overtakes Claude’s volition as a storyteller; in other words, Claude tries to find beauty on a frontier-of-war when it does not always exist. Jean Schwind comments that in *One of Ours*, “the vaguely dreamlike

landscapes of Books IV and V contrast sharply with realistic descriptions of Nebraskan farm life” (61). Unlike the landscape of Nebraska that apparently lacked vitality and artistic charm, the landscape of France encourages Claude to use and live through his imagination. The frontier in France, however, becomes too surreal. It transports him into a dream world so he cannot tell his stories. At this point, a reader might recall Mrs. Wheeler reading Claude his old favorite, *Paradise Lost*: “The room was growing greyer as she read on through the turgid catalogue of the heathen gods, so packed with stories and pictures, so unaccountably glorious” (*One* 72). When listening to that story, Claude becomes like a character of Milton’s poem, absorbed into the pages as reality becomes grey and fades away. In France, Claude undergoes a similar experience; he becomes a character possessed by the frontier-of-war rather, living in some kind of Miltonian hell. The landscape absorbs him as he tries to stay alive, which presents a paradox. Claude enlists in the army to experience both a war culture and find an open frontier to aid him in storytelling, but because the war is so savage and the landscape so beautiful, Claude’s creative capacities are overwhelmed and paralyzed. Moving America’s frontier to war-torn lands does provide Americans with a new landscape to subdue and conquer, but for Cather, that type of frontier cannot hold. A frontier-of-war does not allow for the creation of art, as the grotesque sights and sounds incapacitate the artist and force him or her to become lost in overcompensations. Additionally, a frontier-of-war like the frontiers in *O Pioneers!* and *One of Ours* do not account for femininity or find a place for women. In France, Claude once again finds himself living within a masculine frontier that privileges violence over feminized nature.

Claude's ultimate failure as a storyteller and his subsequent death expose the impracticality and immorality of reopening America's frontier as a frontier-of-war. *One of Ours* explains more about America's need to find and reopen Turner's closed frontier than about the nature of war itself. Claude respects the land unlike most other male characters, and he uses what is left of Nebraska's frontier to articulate life on the plains. In France as the novel comes to a close, Claude attempts to wield the landscape, a frontier-of-war, as a storytelling tool, but he does not succeed. In fact, his death assures readers he never will. The death of an artist on and because of the frontier also surfaces in Cather's other works. As Aronson explicates, "In *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, Cather shows that prairie cultures cannot understand the artistic person...In *O Pioneers!*, Frank Shabata, the jealous husband, kills Emil, the artist. In *My Ántonia*, disillusionment and homesickness drive Mr. Shimerda, the artist, to commit suicide" (12). With Claude's death, Cather acknowledges that moving America's physical frontier across seas to war only repeats a fatal design: the artist cannot survive. And like the ending of *O Pioneers!* where Alexandra complies with patriarchal structures and returns to a more feminine sphere, Claude's death confirms that a frontier-of-war does not empower femininity or women. In this way, Cather rejects any frontier-of-war as a viable or moral solution to reopen America's closed frontier, though she keeps searching for an answer.

As further evidence that Cather disavows an American frontier-of-war, Claude's life in France, while seemingly charming, mirrors the ills of a permanently closed frontier. Expounding upon the consequences of Turner's closed frontier, Slotkin avers, "The end of the Frontier was imagined as a permanent expulsion from Eden, to be followed by subordination, poverty, toil, and strife" (*Fatal* 40). Without a physical

frontier to traverse and conquer, Americans feared they would lose the blessing of exceptionalism, and the consequences of their lost blessing precipitate national ruin. In trying to reopen or keep open America's frontier, Claude faces each of Slotkin's aftereffects. He successively meets poverty, toil, and strife sleeping in rat-infested trenches, crawling miles through ditches during heavy shelling, and firing upon the German enemy for a couple of yards of No Man's Land. The tragedy of closing America's frontier indeed replicates the tragedy of keeping America's frontier open. *One of Ours* exposes this irony but does not resolve it: Claude's "story still goes on... [b]y the banks of Lovely Creek, where it began" (*One* 369). The war frontier robs Claude of his narrative power and objectifies his life, but it also threatens to make the artist irrelevant. Within traditional frontier rhetoric, an American frontier-of-war can persist at the cost of people's lives, or the American citizenry can carry on, alive and far from the warpath, but without a frontier to essentially pioneer. Cather works to subvert this fallacious ultimatum and find a frontier that welcomes women and artists.

Despite Cather's conclusion that a frontier-of-war does not hold up to female, artistic endeavors, she issues a glimmer of hope. Reviewing Cather's impact as an environmental writer, Karen Waldron states, "Cather's works are some of the most successful texts not only in creating the American literary landscape, but also in showing what the frontier imagination wrought," and in *One of Ours*, Cather shows both the good and the harm of that imagination (xxvii). Frontier imaginations like hers and Claude's seek a kingdom of narrative art, but other frontier imaginations informed by Turner's thesis reproduce militarism and violence. Richard Lehan describes the experience best when saying, "Willa Cather looked to the West with renewed expectation, followed by a

sense of disappointment at failed achievement” (29). In looking to the West, what I call the frontier, Cather looks east to the war-torn lands of France. She sees the potential for renewing America’s belief in the pioneering spirit and reopening a physical frontier, but she sees the inherent failings.

*One of Ours* too often seems a war novel or Cather’s reconfiguration of Classical myth, but when stripped of these overworked labels, *One of Ours* becomes a story about storytelling on a new, physical frontier. As Barry Gross declares, “At this late date it should not have to be said, but apparently it does: *One of Ours* is no more about World War I than *Moby Dick* is about whaling or *The Great Gatsby* is about bootlegging” (73). *One of Ours* highlights Claude’s feminized ambition to tell stories even when he lives in hyper-masculine cultures. Claude serves as an apprentice to his mother and repeatedly tries to assert his autonomy as a master storyteller, but he only does so when comparing the frontier with war. Realizing that war – and a new physical frontier – are required for his unique success, Claude enlists in the army. In France, however, Claude does not maintain the same control over the frontier landscape; he cannot tell his stories or think about telling stories because the land’s beauty and the war’s savagery overwhelm him. In this capacity, *One of Ours* presents a frontier-of-war, one Turner would tout, but war as America’s new frontier kills both the “pioneers” who inhabit it and the artistic spirit. In response to Gross’s statement, I would agree that *One of Ours* is not about war. The novel is about the frontier’s influence on storytelling and Willa Cather’s continued mission to advance her day and age past Turner’s frontier rhetoric and find an open, less-violent frontier.

## CHAPTER 4

## BEHIND CLOSED DOORS, AN OPEN FRONTIER: CATHER'S IMAGINATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF ST. PETER'S "WILD NATURE HOME"

Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925) mourns the end of wild American lands, yet it reassigns frontier-value to a so-called civilized sphere. Cather's novel contains three distinct sections: the first and third depict the posh, urban lifestyle of protagonist Godfrey St. Peter while the second titled "Tom Outland's Story" extols pioneering in the American Southwest. As such, Cather scholars operating with an ecocritical lens mostly focus on section two. Celine Manresa argues that Cather's "mode of nature-writing" in the novel depends upon landscapes of the West, specifically New Mexico's Blue Mesa (430). Rafeeq O. McGiveron sees this Blue Mesa as a powerful instrument for introspection and spiritual awakening, and Glen Love regards "Tom Outland's Story" as the center from which biological evolution can be realized (McGiveron 396; Love 17).<sup>13</sup> These scholars represent a widespread approach discussing nature and the frontier with singular respect to "Tom Outland's Story" while implying the cultural sphere chiefly belongs to St. Peter's life and home.

Scholars' replication of a nature/culture binary within *The Professor's House* hearkens to the traditional frontier rhetoric of Frederick Jackson Turner. In his 1893 essay, Turner defines the frontier as a boundary separating the wild, natural world and

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<sup>13</sup> While Love views the Blue Mesa as a key feature of the natural world, he argues that the mesa contains elements of culture as well. He explicitly avers, "She [Cather] avoids the one-dimension approach that reads culture and nature according to the current reigning ideological stance" (21).

humanity, “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (200). These two forces rarely, if ever, coexist in the same place for Turner because one naturally transfigures the other. And the pioneer became so good at transfiguring savage nature that he closed the American frontier. Cather’s earlier novels publish same this process as Alexandra Bergson (*O Pioneers!*) and her community of immigrants bring their civilizing forces onto the Nebraskan prairie and destroy “The Wild Land”<sup>14</sup> for profit, while Thea Kronborg (*The Song of the Lark*) visits Panther Canyon for her personal renaissance but leaves its wilderness and frontier intact. Panther Canyon, though, only seems like an open frontier. It grants what Turner calls a “perennial rebirth” of selfhood, but it houses memories of the native Cliff-dweller people (200). This contradictory overlap between the wild natural world and humanity upon a frontier does not deter Cather. Rather, it inspires her, and she continues mixing “savagery” and “civilization” in *The Professor’s House*.

While *The Professor’s House* outwardly lobbies for a Turnerian frontier separating the natural world and humanity – Tom Outland’s section on Blue Mesa and St. Peter’s narrative within the city of Hamilton, – the novel more accurately compounds both spheres. The novel’s frontiers exist as places where wild nature and humanity can viably overlap, and much of *The Professor’s House* sees St. Peter negotiating the doubled identity of his house as a realm of modern, cultural privilege and primitive, wild living. Ultimately, Cather overturns Turner’s frontier rhetoric to unite the forces of humanity and the natural world within St. Peter’s “wild nature home,” which nurtures St. Peter’s imagination and advocates for a viable reopening of America’s physical frontier. After

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<sup>14</sup> The title of the novel’s first section.

all, Cather lived in an era that believed no physical frontier meant no more unique American character, and so she sought a solution.

In *The Professor's House*, the American Southwest represents the most obvious and sublime frontier reproducing Turner's rhetoric. Journeying across the Southwest, Tom Outland, a future colleague of St. Peter's, sees a landmark the locals call the Blue Mesa. Consumed by its grandeur, Outland reflects, "Just across from us, overhanging us, indeed, stood the mesa, a pile of purple rock, all broken out with red sumach and yellow aspens up in the high crevices of the cliffs...It was the sort of place a man would like to stay in forever" (*Professor's* 168). The vivid colors mesmerize Outland and paint a beautiful picture, though the aspen and the sumach present like a rash and make the picture uncomfortable, too. The cliffs themselves loom over Outland and threaten a rock slide, but he still finds them attractive. These terrifyingly beautiful aspects of the mesa render it sublime in relation to Turner's frontier. As a place that is beautiful and deadly and beyond human reach, the mesa represents the savagery of Turner's definition while Outland's human self stands in for the civilization. When Outland nods at the sublimity of the mesa, he nods at its separateness and looks across Turner's frontier line.

Cather further depicts a frontier line as the Blue Mesa poses a wild, animalistic threat. While still gazing across the distance, Outland notes the mesa's contour "was like the profile of a beast lying down" (170). What is more, he admits, "[T]he thing bothered us and tempted us; it was always before us, and was always changing. Black thunderstorms used to roll up from behind it and pounce on us like a panther... [with a] prolonged growl" (171). The mesa sits at such a distance, so foreign to humanity, that it seems nonhuman. It seems more like a predatory animal beyond Outland's control.

Roderick Nash maps how animals helped construct modern conceptions of “wilderness” and reports, “Etymologically, the term means ‘wild-deor-ness,’ the place of wild beasts” (2). With the help of an occasional thunderstorm, the Blue Mesa fits Nash’s definition. It roars like a panther but not before leaping on top of its human prey. This “wilderness” also provides a reference point, one variable to the “savage” and “civilized” equation that determines where the frontier line stands. Still, Cather captures the Blue Mesa’s wilderness more completely when giving it powers to un-tame products of Outland’s cultural sphere.

The mesa’s ability to extend its wilderness and turn things wild becomes apparent when Outland neglects the livestock he was hired to herd. As a farmhand, Outland manages a herd of cattle, though a number wander onto the Blue Mesa. His overseer admits he cannot retrieve them, explaining, “The mesa has been populated by runaways from our heard, till now there’s a fine bunch of wild cattle up there” (*Professor’s* 169). The once-domesticated cattle leave Outland and the domain of humanity, cross the frontier line, and find a new home within the mesa’s savage wilderness. The cattle now belong more suitably to natural world, and just as Turner claims, wilderness and civilization cannot overlap without one encroaching upon and transfiguring the other. Interestingly enough, the cattle represent an inverted pioneering experience compared to Cather’s other novels. Characters from these novels, with the help of beasts, usually convert unbroken lands into livable space, but in *The Professor’s House*, the land, with the help of an absent-minded Tom Outland, transforms broken beasts back into something wild. Probing this type of reversal, American author Wallace Stegner notes that in Cather’s fiction, characters face “deculturation enforced on the frontier” (148).

While Stegner primarily references *My Ántonia* and how the harsh environment strips away an Old World identity from immigrant families like the Shimerdas, his insight pertains to *The Professor's House*, too. The frontier via the wilderness lying just beyond has the power to de-culture products of civilization like Outland's tamed cattle. The Blue Mesa seemingly reifies Turner's savage/civilized divide. Cather, however, overturns this reification by presenting St. Peter's old house as a wilderness equal to the Blue Mesa, and by offering readers an easily-identifiable Southwestern frontier, she tempts them – like the Blue Mesa tempts Outland – to change their understanding of what a frontier can be. Cather first fashions a clear, Turnerian frontier and works within his rhetoric to effectively demonstrate that frontiers do exist outside of that one imagining.

Cather's creation of a wilderness in relation to the frontier requires some rethinking with William Cronon's well-received scholarship. Writing long before the advent of ecocriticism, Cather likely believed in a physical place called "the wilderness," but according to Cronon, "wilderness" does not exist: "Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it [the wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation... It is a product of civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made" (69). Cronon does not think of "wilderness" as a manifestation of the wild, natural world but a human containment of that wild, natural world and therefore a product of our making. "Wilderness" is not the love-child of Mother Earth but a thing of human creation and defined by our presence or absence from it. Therefore, the "wilderness" that Outland sees on the Blue Mesa exists as nothing but a construct of his mind, a place he alone cordons off, yet neither Outland nor Cather operate with Cronon's lens. When Cather begins painting St. Peter's house as a "wilderness," readers

might more accurately label it a “wild nature house.” Cronon supports the idea of “wild nature” and qualifies his writing by saying, “I hope it is clear that my criticism in this essay is not directed at wild nature per se, or even at efforts to set aside tracts of wild land...It is not the things we label as wilderness that are the problem” (81). While Cronon never fully defines “wild nature,” I understand it as a place that might see the overlap of human and nonhuman forces, but where the nonhuman forces have a greater, more active presence. Thus, the Blue Mesa is wild nature, and so is St. Peter’s house.

Rivaling the Blue Mesa, St. Peter’s old house exists as a type of wild nature representative of the natural world while standing as an earmark of culture. The novel does not open with a description of St. Peter or Outland as one might expect but with a description of St. Peter’s old home, and standing in the entryway, St. Peter muses, “It was almost as ugly as it is possible for a house to be; square, three stories in height, painted the colour of ashes...oak mantles with thick round posts crowned by bumptious wooden balls, over green-tiled fire-places” (*Professor’s* 3). This description calls forth the image of curved wooden beams, verdure flooring, and smoldering flames, which translates into a wild forest scene of tall trees, green flora, and primitive log fires. The image of a handcrafted fire also favors “wild nature” and a limited human presence rather than a “wilderness” devoid of any human life. The geometric shape of the house and its precise squareness, on the other hand, mark it as symbol of human invention, yet because St. Peter deems the house such an ugly representation of human culture, he denies it singularity in a civilized sphere. This interpretation departs from scholars like Paula Kot who critique the “commodification that stifled Godfrey St. Peter’s home and American culture in general,” as opposed to the “breath of fresh air” upon the mesa (395). Kot’s

assessment stems from one of Cather's few publicized statements about *The Professor's House* where she likens "Tom Outland's Story" to a refreshing narrative window (*Writing* 31-32). Assuming that a stifling commodification of culture really does escape out from St. Peter's home into the Blue Mesa via the novel's three-part structure, opening Outland's window allows for diffusion in both directions. The stifling aspects of modern society flow outward, though the mesa's wild, natural air also drifts in.

Another type of wild nature home preceding *The Professor's House* figures in *O Pioneers!*. When Alexandra visits Ivar's property to ask him for advice, she barely distinguishes his home from the land. His house "was an earthen dam, planted with green willow bushes, and above it a door and a single window were set into the hillside...But for the piece of rusty stovepipe sticking up through the sod, you could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation" (*Pioneers!* 21-22). Unlike St. Peter's house that symbolizes the pastoral, Ivar's house literally rises from the natural world. The soil of the hillside structures his walls and the grass forms his roof. Ivar's house does not welcome marks of culture, as he lets the stovepipe rust and be overtaken by the elements. In this way, St. Peter's wild nature home better combines the seemingly opposite forces of "savageness" and "civilization." It receives people into wild nature whereas Ivar's home repels even temporary guests. Ivar's home embodies more of a pristine "wilderness" cut off from cultural diffusion that does not create a responsible, environmental ethic on the frontier or anywhere else.

In contrast, scholars like Ann Moseley and Stuart Burrows locate a diffusion of nature and culture across *The Professor's House*. Ann Mosely sees overlapping elements

of nature and culture in the novel and explains how grottos within the Blue Mesa slope downward like an attic while shadows in St. Peter's own attic look like cave-drawings upon the wall ("Spatial" 205-06). The cave and the attic double and conflate nature and culture for Outland *and* St. Peter. Mosely also hints that finding nature in cultural spaces summons the imagination. The attic only becomes cave-like when St. Peter sees artistry and patterning in the shadows (*Professor's* 251). Stuart Burrows expounds this same link between St. Peter's attic and the Blue Mesa's abandoned Cliff City, pointing first to Cather's technique of recycling images and then concluding that a "reader is left to make the obvious connection between the professor's sloping roof and Tom's cliff city by herself" (29). Michael Leddy takes this connection one step further and lists other ways the Blue Mesa and St. Peter's house overlap. Both locations look out toward a body of water, both have walls decorated in paper or frescoes, and both have floors covered with fibrous mats (186). Cather's initial portrait of the Blue Mesa as a traditional frontier separating "wilderness" and civilization (or culture) and other scholarship that sees the mesa within St. Peter's home both provide a template for locating more domestic signs of wild nature.

In addition to physically looking like wild nature, St. Peter's house exhibits a wild agency outside of his control. St. Peter describes the behavior of his house akin to Outland's initial description of the Blue Mesa: as a natural force resistant to human will. He does not like "the front porch just too narrow for comfort...the stairs that were too steep, the halls that were too cramped...certain creaky boards in the upstairs hall, had made him wince many times a day for twenty-odd years – and they still creaked and wobbled" (*Professor's* 3). St. Peter's house appears as an extension of the attic or a

cavern from Cliff City with every space overly enclosed and narrow, but the house compares with the entire Blue Mesa. The house manifests as a multi-faceted example of wild nature operating just beyond St. Peter's domestic idealities, restricting the things that live inside. Just as Outland cannot control the "outbreak" of sumach or the mesa's thunder-some growls, the porch, the stairs, and hall all possess a type of natural agency. They are too nonhuman and too much Other for St. Peter's control.

In spite of this Otherness, St. Peter attempts to gain power over his home's wild agency. Expanding the list of grievances against his house, St. Peter complains about the framework and its audible groans: "he could have easily fixed them, but there were always so many things to fix" (3). Initially, this statement portrays St. Peter as the dominating force; he has the knowledge and skill to fix the ills of his home, yet he does not fix the house because he cannot match the speed it misbehaves.<sup>15</sup> His superiority and the superiority of the cultural sphere bend to the house's wild nature. Bill Christophersen recognizes St. Peter's ineffective efforts as well, though in relation to the bathtub. Christophersen cites the passage in which St. Peter cannot force his bathtub to "behave like porcelain" and pronounces, "The accretion of layer after layer of ultimately futile sealer suggests other veneers, other artifices, that have succeeded only partially or failed altogether" (*Professor's 4*; Christophersen 89). The sealers do not have a permanent effect on the tub. They shroud the house in a pretense of cultural control while wild nature operates underneath. The house thus seems like one side of Turner's frontier line,

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<sup>15</sup> St. Peter's statement also parallels the narrative voice of *O Pioneers!* that claims "the [summer] rains had been so many and opportune that it was almost more than Shabata and his man could do to keep up with the corn; the orchard was a neglected wilderness" because it was not controlled (77).

but it does not stay contained in its “civilized” sphere. Turner’s frontier thesis wears away from the narrative like the sealer because it is an artifice that no longer applies.

The home’s wild nature exerts such influence like the “wilderness” of the Blue Mesa that St. Peter looks more animal than human. Shortly after describing the old house, St. Peter’s own portrait comes to life: he is an athletically-built, tawny-skinned man with a “Van Dyke, like a tuft of shiny black fur,” not to mention “a hawk nose, and hawk-like eyes – brown and gold and green” (*Professor’s* 4). St. Peter’s physique gives him a Darwinian advantage, the product of successful natural selection, though being part-animal makes St. Peter something Other. His facial hair, a tuft of fur, befits a lynx or large cat, maybe even the panther Outland imagined as the mesa, moreso than a person, yet St. Peter’s facial features make him bird-like, too. This combination of cat-like and bird-like qualities transforms St. Peter into a literal beast, a creature of no distinct origin with no distinct name. Like the cattle that wander onto the Blue Mesa, St. Peter’s house turns him wild, but St. Peter may also wish for this metamorphosis. Becoming a hybridized animal might offer a way to survive in his own, wild nature home or understand the nature of his home more completely.

Alternate definitions of “wild” as they apply to people, animals, and places also validate the agency of St. Peter’s wild nature home and its animalizing powers. In just the second sentence of novel, the house appears “dismantled” (*Professor’s* 3). This word grows particularly relevant when evoking Nash, who continues tracing the origins of the word “wild.” Nash determines that in early Teutonic languages, wild was a word used “to convey the idea of being lost, unruly, disordered, or confused” (xv). The shambolic quality of St. Peter’s old home follows this early definition, and readers might claim with

comparative accuracy that St. Peter stands alone in his “disordered” house, and considering the flooring, porch and other elements that will not conform, “unruly” may also apply. It is worth noting that St. Peter’s house appears dismantled, in part, because his family moved to a new home, but other evidence suggests that the house exercised its unruly agency before their relocation (it has been creaky, narrow, wobbly, ugly, and precipitous for twenty-some years). Only when St. Peter fears he must leave his old home does he palpably recognize the space as wild nature.

St. Peter also recognizes the wild nature of his home by comparing it to his garden, which is not a wild or even natural space. Though gardens often appear as manifestations of the natural world, St. Peter’s garden flaunts structure and rule. The garden – “tidy,” “symmetrical,” and “clipped” – lies directly outside the doors of his home, and because he “had tended this bit of ground for over twenty years...[he] had got the upper hand of it” (*Professor’s* 6). Unlike his unruly, dismantled house, the garden conforms to basic maintenance, clipping, tidying, and whatnot. Where the house resists St. Peter’s humanizing touch, the garden welcomes it, and where St. Peter never fully gains control over his wild nature home, in the garden he proudly possesses the “upper hand.” The garden stays a space of culture to counter the house, which is natural and wild. Deborah Karush also finds St. Peter’s garden fascinating and posits a reason for all the neatness, stating, “The imposition of order is excessive as if the Professor were afraid that his ‘tidy half-acre’ might slip back into its natural state any time” (162). St. Peter’s obsession with his ordered garden results from an anxiety about the natural world. However, that anxiety more properly comes from his wild nature home, that the house’s unruliness could infect the garden at any time if he forgoes his diligent upkeep. But even

with this fear, St. Peter reveres his old, unruly home and regularly takes leave of his new house to live there.

Cather continues to parade St. Peter's house as a "wilderness" akin to the mesa when he envisions the dangers of his abode. On the Blue Mesa, Outland consistently meets life-threatening dangers: hazardous weather conditions, rattlesnake bites, and treks across treacherous terrain. Every morning and night, St. Peter similarly takes a "perilous journey" through his house (*Professor's* 18). On this journey, he "would almost surely become interested in what the children were doing or in what his wife was doing – or he would notice that the kitchen linoleum was breaking under the sink" (18). The tone of this passage sounds merely hyperbolic, mocking the "peril" of spending time with family, yet the last and most significant danger St. Peter postulates remains the decaying kitchen floor. Like the steep stairs and the cramped hallway, the flooring possesses a natural agency resistant to human will, and this appears to upset St. Peter as much than anything. The frustrations of unending repairs also include the house's lack of heating, which presents a genuine danger for St. Peter and his family. St. Peter's attic does not sufficiently retain heat, so he warms the room with an old gas stove. In the final pages of the novel, St. Peter nearly dies of asphyxiation when the gas becomes poisonous, and he only survives by happenstance. The house, its poor heating and poor ventilation, possesses a tangible and threatening agency, which adds to the home's identity as a type of wild nature like the Blue Mesa. St. Peter's imagistic description of his home, the house's own unruly agency, and the house's association with danger all demonstrate just how the old house retains sovereignty. With this rhetoric, Cather establishes the home as a site of "savagery" with the obvious stamp of civilization. The process of wild nature

meeting, even overlapping, with elements of culture disavows Turner's belief in a hard and fast frontier "line" and transfigures St. Peter's home into a unique kind of frontier.

St. Peter's old home earns the label of "frontier" more completely when St. Peter devolves into a primitive pioneer. St. Peter's family does not inhabit the old house as it possesses dangers, both figurative and real, but St. Peter continues renting it. By choosing to stay in the wild nature home, St. Peter also becomes like a "...frontiersmen [who] had to contend with wilderness as uncontrolled and terrifying as that which primitive man confronted" (Nash 24).<sup>16</sup> Living with all the house's unruly elements, the creaky stairs, claustrophobic hallways, leaky pipes, not to mention the noxious heater and other ills, St. Peter assumes a pioneer-like identity where he must confront uncontrolled, wild nature and carry on alone. The image of St. Peter's home as a forest with trees, undergrowth, and a log fire amplifies this primitive picture of St. Peter without modern means. In actuality, the house and St. Peter reinforce each other's identities, as there cannot be a frontier without a pioneer and vice versa. In the article, "*The Professor's House: An Abode of Love and Death*," Sister Peter Damian Charles explicates St. Peter's primitivism, saying, "St. Peter reverts back to an almost primitive existence, goes back, it

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<sup>16</sup> Nash's comment pertains to the historical reality of pioneering, though critical reviews of Willa Cather's pioneer narratives also speak to a different reality of pioneer life, a reality that likely existed historically but, more accurately, was the reality of frontier mythology. Stuart P. Sherman's critical review of Cather's writing that appeared in *The New York Herald Tribune Books* during September 1925 (and now appears in *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*, edited by Margaret O'Connor), helps to demonstrate this secondary reality, for Sherman writes, "For pioneers, these books tell us, there is naught but this: food, shelter, clothing, and reproduction of their species; just not to perish; just to hold one's own on the hard bedrock of existence" (242).

seems to pick up threads of reality – in contradistinction to the romantic life he had indulged in with [his wife] Lillian and Tom” (78). According to Charles, Tom Outland and Lillian characterize a type of indulgence contrary to primitivism and pull St. Peter away from reality. The primitive, pioneer-like existence offers a more natural mode of being from which reality can be rethreaded and woven. This primitivism beget from the wild nature house ultimately pushes St. Peter to become a more genuine frontiersman than Outland and implies that even urbanites can occupy and open some kind of new frontier.

In *The Professor's House*, St. Peter undergoes a more real pioneering experience than Tom Outland, who does not confront the Blue Mesa's "wilderness" as he had hoped. The distinction between civilization and "wilderness" initially presented by Cather in the American Southwest collapses mostly obviously once Outland journeys onto the mesa and finds evidence of a vanished people. When Outland leaves his fellow ranch-hands and travels into the mesa, he discovers an abandoned city: "pale little houses of stone nestling close to one another, perched on top of each other, with flat roofs, narrow windows, straight walls" (*Professor's* 180). The houses have marks of a cultured people who knew to build "straight walls" and "flat roofs," yet within the natural cliff face, they retain some of the mesa's rugged façade. The houses, Outland concludes, belonged to the ancient Cliff-dweller people and provide evidence that the mesa's presumed wilderness was never a wilderness at all, not since the Cliff-dweller people lived there anyway. The supposed wild-ness of the mesa – its un-scalable walls and dry, blistering air (things that made it beastly in Outland's opinion) – provided protection from dampness and scavenging, preserved the Cliff-dweller houses, and ironically kept

remnants of that culture alive. This moment also reinforces Cronon's point, as Outland ignores the presence of people in his "wilderness." Many Americans prefer to forget that Native American populations inhabited what pioneers thought of as "wilderness," and at times Cather is no different. She belonged to an age when American society could not decide if Native Americans represented the savagery of which Turner speaks or the civilization, and this shows in her writing.<sup>17</sup>

Unintentionally, Outland displaces the wild nature from his beloved Blue Mesa after discovering and appropriating Cliff-dweller artifacts. While the mesa's natural features preserve the Cliff-dweller ruins and challenge traditional frontier rhetoric, Cather uses Outland's fondness for artifacts to continue erasing a frontier line. By having Outland insert his human, cultural self into a "wilderness," Cather dissolves the strict boundary between savagery and civilization. Outland situates his cultured self into another culture, one that is already integrated with nature, and so she blurs the line twice over. Audrey Goodman notes the conflation of what I call wild nature and culture in her article, "The Immeasurable Possession of Air: Willa Cather and Southwestern Romance," and states, "We see that artifacts provide an outsider access to a native sensibility because they reify the vanished relation between culture and its environment" (59). Goodman makes this statement regarding one of Cather's other novels, *The Song of the Lark*, but

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<sup>17</sup> In her article "Conveniently Situated Museums: The House Museum Movement and Modernist Interiority in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*," Elizabeth Festa explains that collecting Native American artifacts became popular in the 1920s due to national anxieties about immigration. Many Americans transformed their homes into personal museums so they might pay homage to America's indigenous cultures and civilizations.

her assertion remains relevant for *The Professor's House*. Outland finds countless artifacts in the cliff houses like woven mats, water jars, grinding stones, even mummies, and he brings artifacts with him into St. Peter's home (*Professor's* 186-87, 191). Trying to dissect this viscous re-appropriation, readers firstly see the house as a cultural sign of achievement, but secondly realize it contains inherent elements of wild nature like claustrophobic walls, which thirdly shelve artifacts from the Cliff-dwelling culture that were fourthly created in Cliff City's wild, rugged environment. The artifacts undo Outland's initial impression of wilderness existing at a distance and become another way Cather counters Turner. In opposition to Turner's thesis, Cather posits that a frontier comes to life when wild nature and civilization significantly overlap rather than just meet. St. Peter the pioneer faces this very intersection in his own home more completely and with more awareness than Outland ever does.

St. Peter's reversion to pioneer-like primitivism affords him a dualistic<sup>18</sup> identity related to both wild nature and civilization. Theorizing about primitive environments and human nature, Paul Shepard declares, "The nature of the primitive world is at the center of our dilemma about essence... we are not now what we once were – we are not bacteria or quadruped mammals or apish hominids... yet we are not so sure that our being doesn't still embrace that other self who we were" (45). According to Shepard, human nature preoccupies itself with primitive existence. People find it natural to wonder how much of their current essence belongs to a chain of evolutions long past, and reconciling this preoccupation with a modern self means humanity can embrace a two-fold identity. St.

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<sup>18</sup> While I understand other areas of literary study, including feminist and queer studies, use the word "dualism" to mean a binary, I use the term "dualistic" to mean "possessing dual qualities; twofold."

Peter symbolizes this same dualistic identity by dwelling within the primitive and more civilized elements of his home, which also underscores other dualisms, or doubles, in the novel. For example, St. Peter owns two houses, has two daughters, and encounters two mummy-like women (Mother Eve from *Outland's* narrative and Augusta's sewing busts in St. Peter's house). Hermione Lee believes these pairings arise because Cather "is pulled between the natural and the artificial...she relishes troll-like energy and primitivism as much as delicacy and culture...Her fictions are of split selves and doublings" (16). Cather found herself caught between contrary concepts, and she reincarnated that dualistic interest by creating doubles or "one of each." Seeing that ecocritics align "contraries" of nature and culture and that Cather had homes in both Nebraska and New York, her fictions move into a new concept of "one *in* each." St. Peter's old home sustains signs of savageness and civilization, wildness and domesticity, nature and culture, and so while the old house has its physical double, it has a doubled identity. The house's doubled identity as a feat of human architecture and a physical reincarnation of wild space invites St. Peter to explore his own doubled identity as pioneer survivalist and an inventive scholar, characteristics that Turner sees forged upon and because of the American frontier.

The concept of doubling and identity becomes especially important as Freud's groundbreaking work in psychoanalysis runs concurrent with Cather's career as a writer. In 1919 after Cather published all three of her widely-popular prairie novels, Sigmund Freud lectured on his theory of the uncanny, which relies chiefly the definition of the home. Freud's theory states that something can be equally familiar and foreign, and he uses the German word *heimlich* to demonstrate his point. "Heimlich," Freud explains,

means “familiar, friendly, belonging to the house,” though it also means “concealed, kept from sight” (223). The definitions of familiar and known versus concealed and therefore unknown collapse in on one another, and so *heimlich* and its opposite, *unheimlich*, are doubles and can mean the same thing (224). Roughly translated into English, *heimlich* meaning “homely” and “unhomely” possess the same meaning, and St. Peter’s house conveniently demonstrates this dualistic quality. The old house seems homely and familiar “where he [St. Peter] had lived ever since his marriage,” but it also seems unhomely, an unfriendly “wilderness” that threatens him (*Professor’s* 3).

With Freud’s theory, the working definitions of primitivism and “wilderness” depend on the *unheimlich*, too. Nash recalls the German cognate of wilderness (*wildnis*) and states that “*Wildnis* has a twofold emotional tone. On the one hand it is inhospitable, alien, mysterious, and threatening; on the other, beautiful, friendly, and capable of elevating and delighting the beholder” (4). *Wildnis* like *unheimlich* negates itself and denotes both inhospitable and friendly qualities. Readers can perceive how *un-wildnis* (unfriendly) has the same, doubled meaning of the inhospitable *wildnis*. In addition to the definition of “wilderness,” the definition of primitivism relies on doubling. The primitivism that Shepard espouses means “double being, in spite of our modern perspective,” where people feel that their primitive selves are unfamiliar (because they have biologically evolved over thousands of years past prehistoric identities), though familiar, too (because they wish to “embrace,” in Shepard’s words, that part of themselves) (45). St. Peter embodies this primitive and wild double-being in more than one way: he becomes increasingly inquisitive and imaginative because he reverts to primitivism.

Phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard patently addresses the interplay between primitive and more imaginative desires within the poetic image of the home. While some critics note the antithetical nature of psychoanalysis and phenomenology, the study of unconsciousness versus the study of conscious perception, and question the use of both to explain St. Peter's identity, others like Thomas J. Csordas and Gunnar Karlsson unite the schools of study.<sup>19</sup> In his seminal work, *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard states,

[French novelist] George Sand said that people could be classified according to whether they aspired to live in a cottage or in a palace. But the question is more complex than that. When we live in a manor house we dream of a cottage, and when we live in a cottage we dream of our palace... We descend to living close to the ground, on the floor of a cottage, then would like to dominate the entire horizon from a castle... (63)

Bachelard acknowledges simultaneous desires, how people wish to inhabit more advanced feats of architecture like the palace and less modern, more primitive, structures like the simple cottage home. The scale of transition between living in a less civilized space and a more civilized space might also be conceived as a scale between the polarities of Turner's thesis, of wild nature and civilization. Bachelard, however, does not draw a separating line. Like Cather, he conceives of a fluidity and mobility between the two spheres. Tom Outland ascends and descends the Blue Mesa he once thought out of reach, Bachelard's subject moves upward and downward between different kinds of

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<sup>19</sup> Csordas, Thomas J. "Psychoanalysis and Phenomenology." *Ethos* 40.1 (2012): 54-74. *Wiley Online Library*. Web. 12 Feb. 2015.

Karlsson, Gunnar. *Psychoanalysis in a New Light*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. Print.

home, and St. Peter experiences different levels of wild primitivism and refinement in his old house depending on the day.

St. Peter's fixation with wildness aptly reflects Cather's own Bachelard-ian experience when composing the novel. In a 1924 letter to playwright Zoë Akins, Cather admits to feeling a sense of wildness when writing *The Professor's House*. Her letter, written on birch bark, opens with that very statement: "Here I am in wild woods and wild weather [on Grand Manan Island, CAN]. I've been working awfully hard on a quite new novel and have got nearly halfway through the first writing of it" (*Selected* 361). From the wild nature of the Blue Mesa to the wild nature of St. Peter's house, Cather imbues her writing and her fictional frontiers with the wildness she experiences. The wild nature of Grand Manan Island also appears to enhance her creative capacity as she penned half of her first draft amidst and possibly because of that environment. Still, readers cannot forget that Cather experiences a "wilderness" void of danger and marked by the presence of people. On the island, Cather traverses well-worn paths and unabashedly enjoys the comforts of her "lovely little cottage" (359); she does not tell of facing frontier dangers, poison gas in the case of St. Peter or a deadly rattlesnake bite like *Outland's* comrade. What seems hypocritical on Cather's part, however, only reveals her progressive thinking. Her movement back and forth between her cottage and the rugged, forested island becomes a small yet relevant example of reimagining the frontier without illusory lines between civilization and wild nature. In fact, Cather's reliance on the Grand Manan cottage may be what first allowed her to reconceive America's frontier in St. Peter's home, since Bachelard explains a house, no matter a cottage or a palace, "shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace"

(6). Cather found protection in the cottage from the island's elements and perhaps found it safe to dream of changing frontier rhetoric. Like Cather, St. Peter's own relationship with daydreaming and writing cannot be ignored, yet it is a relationship not easily understood.

Although he lives in a wild nature home, St. Peter still needs a greater dose of the wild, which he receives through his daydreams. While at the opera with his wife, St. Peter fantasizes about living on a remote desert island. After arriving back home, "St. Peter still played with his idea of a picturesque shipwreck...Indeed nobody was in it but himself..." (*Professor's* 79). Like a pioneer in wild nature, St. Peter's daydream has him mostly alone, separated from civilization, and even though the shipwreck appears serenely "picturesque," he might have drowned when losing the vessel at sea. Besides the danger of the shipwreck, St. Peter envisions a savage environment in the "gleaming snow peaks, agonizingly high and sharp" (79). If St. Peter tried to hike these precarious peaks like Outland hikes the rock-strewn paths of Cliff City, he might not survive. Notably, St. Peter begins this daydream out in public but he finishes it in his *new* home. Bachelard might suggest the new house enables St. Peter to fantasize because, compared to his wild nature home, it offers more protection and more peace, yet readers must ask why St. Peter's daydreams return to places that do not offer protection. What remains certain, though, is that St. Peter's identity has evolved. From the novel's beginning, the wild nature home forced St. Peter to adopt a pioneer-like identity, but he desires that type of life now more than ever.

St. Peter's identity and imagination continue to evolve when he experiences another daydream of venturing into wild nature. St. Peter's second daydream reveals his

desire to live in a sea cave like the Classical Athenian playwright Euripides. St. Peter idealizes the wild sea cave because, for Euripides, “houses had become insupportable” (136). St. Peter’s daydream reflects his desire to abandon civilization and live completely in the wild, natural world. His daydream also evokes a passion for primalness, to live away from modern culture and in the historical past, and like the shipwreck, this daydream also happens within St. Peter’s new house. A paradox reemerges in that the safety of St. Peter’s new house permits him to daydream, but he dreams of escaping the house, perhaps because the house cannot support his creative ambitions just as Euripides’s house could not support his. Thus, seeking out wild nature in his daydreams becomes a solution to reignite the imagination.

St. Peter’s wild nature home, a frontier that conflates both the natural world and civilization, gives St. Peter ideal access to his full imagination. In his essay, Turner writes, “From the conditions of frontier life came intellectual traits of profound importance” (226). Though Turner maintains that the separation of savage nature from civilized culture forms America’s frontier, he applauds the frontier’s ability to bring forth invaluable intellectual abilities, chiefly “inquisitiveness” and an “inventive turn of mind” (227). Together, this inquisitiveness and inventiveness fashion the imagination, the aptitude to ask and wonder and contrive something new. As such, imagination as an intellectual trait materializes from the frontier and expands when the frontier becomes a place where nature and culture purposely coincide rather than diverge. Early in the novel when St. Peter barter with his landlord to keep renting the wild nature home, he proclaims, “That’s one thing I’m renting your house for, to have room to think” (*Professor’s* 41). St. Peter recognizes that the house opens a space for his mind to

wander and think creatively, and he makes this proclamation after pointedly remembering all of the house's unruly ills. At some level, he understands that the unique combination of wild nature and civilization in his home serve as a boon for his imagination and artistic ambitions. The frontier that is St. Peter's wild nature home resolves the paradox of his daydreams: it contains the civilizing forces that enable daydreams and the wild nature that inspires them.

Some scholars, however, argue that the wild nature home debilitates St. Peter and makes him an uninspired recluse. Burrows, for example, feels that St. Peter's doubled identity fractures his imagination and robs him of a coherent self-image; this feeling, then, may account for St. Peter's "attempted suicide" (40-41). Readers can see the validity of this interpretation when recalling the narrator's thoughts about St. Peter's changed identity: "The Kansas boy who had come back to St. Peter this summer was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water...He was earth, and would return to earth" (*Professor's* 241). Here, in the novel's final pages, Cather solidifies St. Peter's identity as a primitive pioneer. Like a pioneer, he finds himself surrounded by the wild, natural world; he even forsakes his cultural identity as a scholar and adopts an autochthonous outlook on life and death. He may, in effect, create an unmanageable identity and lose himself too much in the wildness of his home. Since Cather departs from Turner's traditional frontier rhetoric by conflating wild nature and civilization in her novel's frontiers, she also experiments with the practicality of that departure. Through St. Peter's debilitation, Cather questions how much one should embrace wild nature versus civilization to form their most complete and satisfying self.

Her recipe for identity, while it incorporates both nature and culture, still lacks a definite ratio.

St. Peter's imagination does benefit from the house-as-frontier, and though his evolving identity distances his family, he finds a larger community. Marianne Davidson, who directly links Cather and Turner, states, "The westward advance of American settlement, following the pattern of recurring evolution, was the most dynamic element in the nation's social and political history" (66).<sup>20</sup> Advancing along the frontier, pioneers faced a recurring evolution where settling on the land meant consistently adopting a primitive lifestyle and then progressing beyond that towards civilization. The transition from primitivism to civilization occurred again and again as pioneers moved the frontier west, and so the frontier became a place for cyclical evolution. Since the frontier stimulates the imagination, permanently living on the frontier facilitates a continual evolution of the mind. St. Peter lives on the frontier of his wild nature home and cannot help but undergo that evolution; his imagination cannot help but to grow. He begins fitting within a narrow family unit, but he eventually finds a place within larger cosmic forces, namely the primitive life forces from which he evolved.

The frontier expands imagination, though imagination also proves necessary for expanding the frontier, especially since Turner declared the frontier closed. The frontier of St. Peter's home enhances his imagination, though some degree of imagination is

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<sup>20</sup> I prefer Davidson's explanation of Turner's thesis for the sake of clarity, but Turner himself says, "American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line...American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier" (200).

required on the reader's part to conceive of his house as that new type of frontier. Cather paints "Tom Outland's Story" so vividly that New Mexico's physical frontier reaches out from the text and encourages readers to envision physical frontiers elsewhere. The house-as-frontier seems more practical, accessible, and real than looking off into a pristine, desert wilderness somewhere out West. John Hilgart reacts to Cather's own hand in this type of reader-response and states, "To be socially powerful, the artist and the text must actively maintain the friction between what is and what imagination allows one to conjure" (381). The friction Hilgart speaks of appears as the friction between "wilderness" and civilization and Cather's careful construction of the two in separate spheres. That friction remains necessary for a reader to understand why traditional frontier rhetoric should not continue and how, with a little imagination, the line can viably collapse. Cather does construct her novel to be socially powerful as Hilgart claims, and she lobbies for the restructuring of frontier rhetoric to reopen a frontier home.

Tom Outland replicates this belief and, as Cather's tool, advocates for an everlasting openness of the frontier. When Outland leaves the Blue Mesa for good, he erases any signs of his presence within Cliff City. Karush reads this passage with insight, that "Tom's own efforts at 'tidying up the ruins to wait another hundred years, maybe for the right explorer' transform expansion into an activity that can be repeated infinitely within the same geographical space" (151). While Karush insists on repeated expansion, I would add that Outland idealizes repeated evolution and how frontiers incorporating both wild nature and civilization, frontiers like Cliff City and St. Peter's wild nature home, never really close. With the home as a frontier that can be repeatedly encountered, the evolution of one's identity, specifically the imagination, can evolve along a timeline

that does not end. The home-as-frontier also harbors potential for a greater environmental ethic. After disavowing a “wilderness” that stands separate from humanity, Cronon calls for geographical unification: “we need to discover a common middle ground in which all of these things, from the city to the wilderness, can somehow be encompassed in the word ‘home.’ Home, after all, is the place where finally we make our living. It is the place for which we take responsibility, the place we try to sustain” (89). Cather found and created what Cronon is asking for, a home that integrates urbanism and “wilderness” or wild nature. She encompasses those elements where St. Peter makes his living as a husband, father, and writer without designating a border or a line or an edge. And so besides administering a perennial rebirth of the human imagination, her construction of the frontier-home serves environmentalist causes. It asks St. Peter, readers, and everyone else to take responsibility of nature within their homes and hopefully outside of it.

Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House* seemingly conforms to Turner’s traditional frontier rhetoric, though upon closer examination, Cather collapses Turner’s frontier line and integrates wild nature and civilization within St. Peter’s home. Benjamin West professes, “Certain critics argue that Cather’s novels celebrate traditional pioneer values, while others opine that Cather was at her time a revolutionary author,” though these two tenets are not mutually exclusive (17). *The Professor’s House* does both these things: it celebrates the frontier and revolutionizes frontier rhetoric. The novel first creates a stark distinction between “wilderness” and civilization, though it undermines that distinction to demonstrate how frontiers can be found elsewhere besides the “wild West.” Fashioning St. Peter’s old house as a wild nature home, Cather portrays the house’s natural agency

while acknowledging its function as a cultural shelter. The home as a frontier where wild nature and civilization, even urbanization, overlap also provides St. Peter with invaluable access to his imagination and suggests that readers who reconceive of the house as a type of frontier are provided the same. The frontier, if moved into one's own home, need not be closed, and the power of the frontier to shape American identity will live on.

## CHAPTER 5

## CONCLUSION

When read alongside Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 frontier thesis, Willa Cather's novels demonstrate an adherence to Turnerian rhetoric but also her wish to depart from that rhetoric and create a new, physical frontier. Beginning with *O Pioneers!*, Cather attempts to reopen America's physical frontier through nostalgia and the story of Alexandra Bergson. The nostalgic era of Cather's novel, though, does not serve Alexandra well as she often battles frontier misogyny. Alexandra succeeds in breaking the frontier land and in crafting for herself a gender-fluid identity that incorporates masculinity as well as femininity, but Alexandra's triumph only ushers in patriarchal structures that, once again, relegate her to a lesser, feminine sphere. With this, Cather refuses Turner's premise that the frontier should only be a place of manly pride, and she seeks new ways in which America's physical frontier might be opened with specific attention to women.

After Cather progresses through her series of prairie novels, she writes *One of Ours* to commemorate World War I and explore a frontier-of-war. Like *O Pioneers!*, she concerns herself with finding a place for women on a new frontier, as Claude possesses a feminine persona and wishes to pursue a more feminine calling. He desires to become a storyteller but finds that Nebraska's closed frontier hinders his ambitions, and so he enlists in the war. Searching for adventure and a new frontier, Claude finds the French landscape beautiful and uses the natural world around him as a vehicle for perception and storytelling. However, on a frontier-of-war Claude becomes engulfed in suffering and strife and overcompensates with dreamy characterizations. With Claude's ultimate death,

Cather concludes that a frontier-of-war, while backed by Turner's call for militarism, does not stand as a viable solution to reopen an American frontier. The frontier-of-war especially remains harmful to artists, women, and feminine personalities, as they literally cannot survive.

In *The Professor's House*, Cather more fully explores the concept of art and imagination and how a frontier must serve creativity, regardless of gender. Cather cleverly begins with Turnerian rhetoric that observes a dichotomy between savagery and civilization, nature and culture, but as the novel progresses, Cather illustrates how a frontier line can be blurred, especially within St. Peter's "wild nature home." In his home, St. Peter lives with elements indicative of wild nature and, of course, human civilization. This combination of elements allows him to increase his imaginative capacity and undergo a "perennial rebirth" of creativity. Constructing the house as a type of frontier, Cather finds a physical space that is neither violent nor hostile to women. With the house as a frontier, Cather avoids the harms of traditional frontier rhetoric that encourage the displacement of Native Americans and the destruction of the land. Working to reopen the frontier on a physical plane rather than a metaphorical one seemed important to Cather, as it allowed Americans to satisfy their pioneering desires that, thanks to Turner, remain deep-seated in the American mind. Working to reopen literary discourse about the frontier and salvage that singular word benefits more than just humanity. Recasting the frontier as a physical place gives power to the physical environment – a city park, desert terrain, or even one's own home – and empowering the environment becomes a step towards treating it with respect and seeing it as something worth our care. In essence, Cather's mission to reopen America's frontier stands as a symbol of her

progressive environmental ethic: she enjoyed the natural world and what it could do for humanity, but she also respected it and wanted it preserved, as should we all.

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