

A Lacanian Approach to the Other in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*

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I. The Discourse of the Other

Literature and psychology are not necessarily antagonistic, as they have been made to seem. They meet on common ground. By reinterpreting Freudianism, Jacques Lacan reformulates the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis. Lacan reappropriates Descartes's "cogito ergo sum: I think, therefore I am," arguing that "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think"(Lacan 166). His redefinition suggests that I can exist in "the other" without being aware of conscious thought, as a result, it is susceptible to a blurring of identity. Lacan argues as follows:

It[Freud's Es/Id/Ça] speaks in the Other, I say, designating by the Other the very locus evoked by the recourse to speech in any relation in which the Other intervenes. If *it* speaks in the Other, whether or not the subject hears it with his ear, it is because it is there that the subject, by means of a logic anterior to any awakening of the signified, finds its signifying place. The discovery of what it articulates in that place, that is

to say, in the unconscious, enables us to grasp at the price of what splitting(*Spaltung*) it has thus been constituted. (Lacan 205)

From one of Lacan's perspectives, "the other," Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918) share a common ground in each double character. Alexandra and Antonia, Cather's heroines in the two novels, emerge as the women with vitality and they are active participants in their destiny. Despite their effort to define themselves through the land, it seems to me that female protagonists have limitations in their desires to experience the outer world. While the women hold onto the farm in hard times, the men like Carl, Emil, and Jim go off to the outer world to seek adventure and the vast knowledge of the world. Female characters, being submerged in the prairie, are deeply repressed because their situation in the land restricts their options to encounter the broader world outside. Therefore, my point is that male protagonists embody women character's repression and project women's wish-fulfillment.

"Doubleness" makes division of subject or self, by raising one of the hottest issues in Post-structuralism. This paper is to make a comparison between Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* with an attempt to examine "the discourse of the Other" in terms of Lacanian theory. The subject is his own double more than he is himself, and the identity appears as character's double which means the Other. As a result, double identity representing mirror-self leads to the consideration of the double, Alexandra and Carl in *O Pioneers!*, and the other double of Antonia and Jim in *My Antonia*. In this sense, Lacan's famous statement, "man's desire is the desire of the Other"(264) refers that the human subject is decentered with constant inhibition by the Other.

II. Repression and *Objet a* in *O Pioneers!*

Cather's *O Pioneers!* is the story of Alexandra Bergson and her family as they struggle to make the wild Nebraskan land fertile and fruitful. Following her father's wish, Alexandra makes harmony with the land and renews her faith in the land, as is suggested in this scene: "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. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious"(44). At the ending of Part I, "The Wild Land," Alexandra seems to suffer, what Romantics call, a transcendental moment in nature: "Looking at the stars. . . she felt a sense of personal security. That night she had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it"(47).

Despite her apparent peace of mind through the oneness with nature, Alexandra is deeply repressed in her unconsciousness. In some ways, her sacrifice to pioneer on the untamed land means that she is stuck in the small world of Nebraska prairie. Alexandra is left without Carl Linstrum, her closest friend, since Carl goes to Alaska where he intends to find gold. Like Carl, her youngest brother, Emil is in Mexico for a year to expand his own vision and goes to the University. It is significant that "Alexandra depends too much on her brother Emil. . . to compensate for her deprivations"(Murphy 119). John H. Murphy poignantly points out this aspect: "Providing for Emil gives her purpose, and his education and opportunities satisfy her need for the larger world"(119). She tells Carl, "He[Emil] is going to have a chance, a whole chance; that's what I've worked for"(79). She also assures that "He[Emil] shall do whatever he wants to"(79). However, Alexandra cannot to do what she wants. She has to take the whole responsibility for the land and her family. Such careful, close reading, I think, reveals her desire to experience the outer world.

Her repression for not being able to get away from farm is exemplified when she quarrels with her brothers, Lou and Oscar over marrying Carl. Undoubtedly, "[s]he is conscious of the adverse effects of her sacrifices in fulfilling her pledge to her father,"(Murphy 119). She tells her brothers, "I never meant to be hard. Conditions were hard. Maybe I would never have been very soft, anyhow; But I certainly didn't choose to be the kind of girl I was"(114). Therefore, Carl's and Emil's adventure to the outer world embodies the sense of "lacking" or "objet a" from which Alexandra's submission to struggling with the land. In this respect, Carl and Emil, in Lacan's terms, are equivalent to "*objet a*" to which Alexandra's desire runs. "The *objet a* represents the lacking or lost object. . . Perhaps it would be best to describe *objet a* as the cause of desire. In a sense it is the phallus which the child wishes to be in order to complete its mother, the symbolic complement of its own lack"(Sarup 98). Thus, male characters serve as

Alexandra's unconscious signifiers of desire and equate with mirror images as others. No wonder, then, that "[h]er personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence"(135).

Alexandra seems to be suppressed not only because of her yearning for the outside world, but because of her own sexuality. She transforms herself like a strong, unyielding man to take care of her farm and family, as she says, "if you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard, like a tree"(114). Her repression of sexuality finds an outlet in recurrent reveries within the strong transporting arms of a lover. Blanche H. Gelfant suggests that "Her[Cather's] characters avoid sexual union with significant and sometimes bizarre ingenuity, or achieve it only in dreams" (104). Clearly, her recurring dreams about a strong man serve to highlight the depth of her repression.

Sometimes, as she lay thus luxuriously idle,
her eyes closed, she used to have an illusion of
being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by
some one very strong. It was a man, certainly,
who carried her, but he was like no man she knew;
he was much larger and stronger and swifter,
and he carried her as easily as if she were a
sheaf of wheat. (*O Pioneers!* 137)

One critic identifies this man in her dream "as a symbol of life force itself, life that contains both fertility and death"(Mcfarland 27). However, I would like to see him in her recurrent dreams as an indication of Alexandra's secret desire to be taken care by someone instead of always taking care of others. It is true "Cather avoids presenting Alexandra's conflict, merely suggesting in dream"(Murphy 121), but her dreams show how Alexandra was lonely and was repressed as a woman. Whenever she feels tired of life, tired of her aching body and longs to be free, she had the same dream of being lifted and carried by a strong man. Thus, Alexandra's unconsciousness consists of elementary signifying elements which take the form of dreams.

Emil and Marie's deaths by Frank Shabata awakens Alexandra's inability to control all destinies and make her realize her true heart. Her repression

in dreams and "her grief has opened in her a greater awareness of that need for him[Carl]"(McFarland 28): As her repeated dreams prefigure this scene, she leans heavily on Carl's shoulder, and confesses, "I am tired. . . I have been very lonely, Carl"(209). As Sally P. Harvey aptly observes, "[t]his secret longing for dependence embarrasses and angers her. Only in the final pages of the novel is she able to voice her desire openly"(39). Accordingly, their marriage is appropriate in that Carl satisfies Alexandra's longing for her femininity and he fills the lack of the outer world which she has not experienced. Alexandra will thus create her true self through the union with Carl who has been around the world. Therefore, she holds the balance of the outer and inner world, dependency and independency as well.

III. Doubleness in *My Antonia*

Many critics have pointed out that Jim Burden is Cather's persona, but it has less often noted that Cather also incorporated large elements of herself into Antonia Shimerda. Unlike most critic's opinions, I find Antonia stands in for Cather in many aspects. For instance, it seems that "Cather was a notorious tomboy, and surely Antonia reflects Cather's sentiment"(*My Antonia* xvi) as a woman. At the beginning of *My Antonia*, Antonia is clearly parallel to Alexandra, for both have to wrestle to make a living from the land, after their fathers died. Both female characters have strong attachment to the land through the harmony with nature. Antonia's bond with the land is presented when she tells Jim that "I belong on a farm. I'm never lonesome here like I used to be in town"(221). Moreover, she tells Jim that "oh, better I like to work out-of-doors than in a house!. . . I do not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man"(89). By switching her sexual roles, she seems to be quite content to her present life. However, the reality is quite different from what it looks. Antonia is repressed unconsciously for the same reasons that Alexandra has.

Proof of this can be found in many examples supporting this idea. Like the male characters in *O Pioneers!*, Jim Burden goes to the University, and he has been around the world for twenty years, becoming a lawyer and settling in New York. Thus, "Jim enters adolescence and moves into the complexities of adult social life as encountered in the town and the city"

(McFarland 42). When Jim asks her if she can go to school with him, Antonia answers, "I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now"(80). Jim feels something tense in her silence, and sees that Antonia is crying. It is evident here that Antonia envies Jim's opportunity of education. As Alexandra provides education for Emil to satisfy her wish-fulfillment for the larger world, Antonia tells Jim as the same way that Alexandra does: "You're not going to sit around here. . . You are going away to school and make something of yourself"(143). It is fairly true that "Jim is free to become the protagonist of his own Bildungsroman, and he experiences his journey with a freshness and romance"(Fisher-Wirth 49). Like Alexandra, Antonia wants adventure and vast knowledge in the outer world. Surely, she has a willingness to adventure and an eagerness to learn.

Antonia is faintly suggestive of her repression, as compared with Alexandra. Whereas Lena Lingard exuberates her energy and sexuality toward Jim, "Antonia, who cannot threaten him as Lena does by her sheer femininity"(Gelfant 110) is repressed in female sexuality. Lena becomes a successful dressmaker in Lincoln and later in San Francisco. The experiences of prairie give way to those of the town for Antonia. The repressed sexuality of Antonia finds an outlet in her passion for the vitality and freedom of dancing. Moreover, her longing for the outer world is partly resolved in her experience of town life. Antonia learns a lesson from town life and says, "I'd always be miserable in a city. I'd die of lonesomeness. I want to live and die here"(206). The fact that she wants to live in the country does not simply indicate the solution of her repression to sexuality and yearning for the outer world.

Jim Burden who takes the role of the other, embodies the sense of lacking in Antonia. There are striking examples to support my idea that they are double characters. Jim confesses to Antonia: "The idea of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don't realize it. You really are a part of me" (206). As Ann Fisher-Wirth aptly notes, "as if the two of them had ridden in the wagons together, *parallel and doubled*. . . *Like twins* they emerge together. . . and begin their journey down the road of destiny"(50, emphasis mine). Clearly, the ending of the novel accurately describes the doubleness of Jim and Antonia.

For Antonia and for me, this had been the road
of Destiny; had taken us to those early
accidents of fortune which predetermined for
us all that we can ever be. Now I understood
that the same road was to bring us together
again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed
together the precious, the incommunicable past.
(*My Antonia* 238)

His intensely felt awareness of the past with Antonia shows that they sustained 'doubleness' on "the same road" which brings them together. In spite of their need for each other, we may wonder why Jim does not marry Antonia. One critic argues that "Jim hints at his bitterness and anger over what he unconsciously sees as Antonia's betrayal"(Fisher-Wirth 44) as well as her sexual experience. We do not know why they did not get married, but Antonia has an option to marry Cuzak, a city man like Jim. Before he settles down as Nebraska farmer, Cuzak was a journeyman, a city-dweller, and had a job in New York and Florida. Antonia said to Jim that "He[Cuzak] is still a city man. . . His sociability was stronger than his acquisitive instinct"(235). Antonia comes to find another double character as a counterpart of Jim. In contrast, we find "Jim Burden. . . as a success in the world's eyes, but as an unhappy vagabond of the soul"(Harvey 54), because he fails to find a sense of belonging like "a rich mine of life"(227) from his present wife.

In sum, Antonia discovers her oneness with Jim as her double, until she meets her husband, Cuzak. Her repression of female sexuality as well as her desire to look beyond the small world remains a big traumatic charge and it finally seems to liberate through her marriage and many children afterward.

IV. Another I in Me

Jacques Lacan defines the unconscious as "a repressed but organized and intelligent discourse of the Other"(Ragland-Sullivan 99). The unconsciousness of characters in novels may be described theoretically, in the context that the signifiers repressed in the Other can be traced through

dreams, jokes, and symptoms. Accordingly, Lacan's concept of the Other, I believe, can be applied to Cather's novels, *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*. After their fathers died, Alexandra and Antonia take the burden of struggling with the land. By switching their gender roles to masculine roles, they appear to be seemingly satisfied. However, they are suppressed not only in their female sexuality, but also in their absence of the larger world. A sense of adventure pervades male characters' lives. Indeed, the desire or lack of women characters is supplemented by the broader experiences of male characters. Carl is suitable for a proper mate who can make up for Alexandra's deficiencies and desires. Antonia's desire and sense of lack come into accord through Jim, and later, the union with a city man named Cuzak. In this sense, Lacan's idea of "[t]he unconscious is the other of myself which sends my own message back to me in an inverted form"(Lemaire 124) was to mold Cather's two novels in the structure. Thus, the supposition that the subject is divided into the conscious and the unconscious, and I have 'another I' in me, is evidenced by "I think where I am not, therefore I am not where I do not think"(Lacan 166).

Cather engages in inventing complex characters who in some ways resemble her as well as women characters who take on the role of men. In this sense, *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* are the "perfect illustration of Virginia Woolf's insight that all writers must be androgynous, willing and able to express both the male and the female"(*My Antonia* xvi). Cather's androgyny derives, I believe, from her characters who take part in a tense dance between I and the other and the conscious and the unconscious. In Cather's works, identity can be doubly interpreted like a sliding signifier, constantly erasing the boundaries of identity between male and female. Like the front and back of a coin, women and men in Cather's world bear out double significance. To some extent, the genuine self for Alexandra and Antonia could be maintained with the presence of the other.

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Abstract

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This paper is to make a comparison between Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* with an attempt to examine "the discourse of the Other" in terms of Lacanian theory. From one of Lacan's perspectives, "the other," Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* share a common ground in each double characters. Alexandra and Antonia, Cather's heroines in the two novels, emerge as the women with vitality and they are active participants in their destiny. Despite their effort to define themselves through the land, female protagonists have limitations in their desires to experience the outer world. While the women hold onto the farm in hard times, the men like Carl, Emil, and Jim go off to the outer world to seek adventure and the vast knowledge of the world. Female characters, being submerged in the prairie, are deeply repressed because their situation in the land restricts their options to encounter the broader world outside. Therefore, male protagonists embody women character's repression and project women's wish-fulfillment. Conclusively, double identity representing mirror-self leads to the consideration of the double, Alexandra and Carl in *O Pioneers!*, and the other double of Antonia and Jim in *My Antonia*. In this sense, the human subject is decentered with constant inhibition by the Other.

Key words:

Cather, Lacan, The Other, Doubleness, Repression, Objet a
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