

Original Research Article

# Analysis on *Cross-Dressing and Repression of Sexuality* in the Novel “O Pioneers!” Written by Cather Willa

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**Abstract:** This paper mainly analyzes the characters and plot of the pioneer’s novel, so that we can better understand the novel.

**Keywords:** Analysis; Repression; nature

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Willa Cather (1873-1947) is a great American woman writer in American literary history. She is famous for her portrayal of the pioneering life in the middle west of America. *O Pioneers!* is her first mature novel as well as the cornerstone of her literary fame. In the novel she has formed her own writing styles and expressed her love for nature.

At the very beginning of this novel, the heroine Alexandra comes out on the stage as a man without any female features in her behavior and manner. It is complete appearance of a man. She is “tall, strong” and walks “rapidly and resolutely”. She has a serious and thoughtful face. By using a lot of masculine adjectives in description, Cather presents the image of a female pioneer. More importantly, Alexandra breaks through gender and dress codes; she chooses to look like a man on clothes. 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” Alexandra’s transvestism hints her male-dominating value orientation, as Annie Woodhouse says in *Fantastic Women: Sex, Gender and Transvestism*, Appearance is more than simply the physical, outward manifestation of gender. It both molds and is molded by, a person’s own sense of identity. It is a means of signaling to others a whole range of meaning about oneself, about the relationship of self and others, and about the expressions one has of others and what their expectation in turn might be. In short, appearance makes a statement about what a person is (or would like to be) and about the groups that person identify with. When women do wear masculine-style fashion this can confer touches of masculine status.<sup>[1]</sup>

Therefore, in every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness. Gender difference is not simply a sign of sex difference; rather it is a symbol of the nature of gender status in day-to-day. While dress indicates social position in terms of wealth and standing, it also serves as a means of sexual display. It is said when women put on men’s clothes they usually present considerable dignity, and sometimes great elegance and sophistication.

Alexandra’s cross-dressing hints that she is willing to play the role of a man in the society, namely, to be the leader of the family and take on the responsibility of supporting the family. It shows her intention to expect others to consider her as a man. There is an obvious contrast between Alexandra in appearance and dressing and another important woman figure in the first part of the novel, Marie Shabata. More traditionally feminine than the young Alexandra, Marie has “brown curly hair, like a brunette doll’s”, and dresses in the “Kate Greenaway” manners, already a follower of fashion though she is a very little girl. As a petted, indulged little girl, she is in circle of males who make offerings of candy, little pigs and spotted calves to her as bribes to let her choose a sweetheart. Even when a child, responding to male admiration with great good nature and reaction Marie is seductive and flirtatious rather than Amazonian fierceness as Alexandra does.

In a sense, Alexandra’s cross-dressing is what Siduentes-Jauregui says “Transvestism becomes a special kind of self expression which shows the abandonment of aesthetics of the same sex and identification with the opposite sex.”<sup>[3]</sup> It is a statement about her identification with the men group. Therefore, Alexandra’s cross-dressing manifests her eagerness and aspiration to male power and status in her inner heart. It has a special symbolic meaning. It actually shows that the woman pioneer in this stage is a male conqueror who wears a “mask” of woman. She approves male-dominating value and rejects her own female identity.

In reality, Cather emphasizes more on Alexandra’s repressing her feminine mentality. Through the following depictions we can see Alexandra not only tries to deny her feminine physical appearance but also tries to repress her female sexuality. She has a dream in which she is lifted up bodily and carried away in the arms of an earth lover:

It was a man certainly, 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 sheaf of wheat. She never saw him, but, with eyes closed, she could feel that he was yellow like the sunlight,

and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him. She could feel him approach, bend over her and lift her, and then she could feel herself being carried swiftly off across the fields<sup>[4]</sup>.

This dream, which usually occurs on Sunday mornings when she is able to abed later, indicates Alexandra's desire for sexual fulfillment with a male. It's very normal and physiological need for a young woman like Alexandra. It also reveals the other aspects of the strong Alexandra's femininity. However, from her subconsciousness it is regarded as weakness and should be repressed. When she wakes up, "she is very angry with herself", "taking her bath with vigor and pouring buckets of cold water over her gleaming white body." This represents that Alexandra tries to control her body by her mind and give up her own sexual needs.

So from the above depiction of Alexandra's repression of sexuality we can see what ecofeminists fight against coincides with Alexandra's male-dominating value. Ecofeminism is a social movement that regards the oppression of women and nature as interconnected. The root of the oppression is androcentrism or male-dominance. These oppressions were created and are perpetuated by an ideology called patriarchy. The Western patriarchal way of thinking is based on "dualism". Dualism is a world view that splits men from women, mind from body, human from nature, spirit from matter. It thereby creates imbalanced power relationships by artificially dividing entities in half, according one side of the equation greater worth over the other. Dualism has established a self/other pattern of relationship among individuals even extends to the relationship of human and nature. Women are debased because they are the "other" of men; nature is debased because it is the "other" of human beings and also body is debased because it is the "other" of mind. So obviously in this stage, by trampling female body as disparaging "other", her body is controlled by her mind, Alexandra seeks a kind of masculinist ideology. Her sense of "self" (male-dominating value) establishes in this way together with her attitude toward women and nature.

## References

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