

**Finding Their Places In Time:  
An Examination of  
Alexandra Bergson and Julie Richards**

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The 1913 novel, *O, Pioneers!* By Willa Cather and the 1999 novel, *Gap Creek*, written by the North Carolina native Robert Morgan share the theme of work and strong women. Alexandra Bergson and Julie Harmon Richards share some similar traits and experiences. They are women thrust into a world of work and responsibility normally reserved for men. They both must make financial decisions that affect the futures of their families. They must deal with the deaths of fathers and brothers and decide how they will grieve. They have ineffectual mothers and siblings that are, at times, disruptive and resistant. Cather and Morgan have created similar characters, but they are women with several marked differences. The differences between the women stem from their attitudes about life, marriage, work and family, their sense of self and the permanence of the fruits of their labors. Alexandra, who was created by a woman born in the nineteenth-century, is actually a twenty-first century woman who has the freedom to work independently and is in control of her own wealth. Julie, created by a twentieth-century man remains a nineteenth-century character trapped in a cycle of poverty and bound by the traditional role of submissive, dependent wife.

Willa Cather, the eldest of seven siblings, was born 7 December 1873, in Virginia and moved to Nebraska in 1883. John J. Murphy, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, asserts that this uprooting move was Cather's "primary formative experience," based upon the interviews given by Cather in 1913 and 1921, in which she describes the experience as "having been thrown upon the land 'as bare as a piece of sheet iron ' she felt 'a kind of erasure of personality'" (32). Cather was in effect removed from her community and thrust into a situation

over which she had no control. This Prairie life did, however, give her the material and insight to produce remarkable books featuring strong female characters that enjoyed the freedom to accomplish things outside their commonly assigned gender roles. Willa Gather lived and wrote in an age that limited women in their rights. At the time of the publication of *O, Pioneers* in 1913, women were still seven years from suffrage, had little control over their property and wages, and still had very few options to marriage and domestic life. Gather stepped outside of her assigned role and chose never to marry. She also spent a period of time during her adolescence dressing as a boy and insisting upon being called "William." Gather projects her personal freedom and rejection of stereotypical gender assignments onto her characters.

Robert Morgan was born seventy-one years later, in 1944, in the small southern Appalachian town of Hendersonville, North Carolina. He is of Welch ancestry and was raised on a steady diet of the ghost stories his grandfather told as bedtime stories to his older sister, Evangeline, and him. Listening to these tales gave Morgan the basis for his remarkable story telling and keen ear for "voice." According to Cecelia Conway of Appalachian State University, Morgan grew up on the home place that his family had cleared in 1840 (DLB 292 253). Morgan did not experience the uprooting that helped to shape Gather. He remained in the sphere of extended family and enjoyed the benefits of continued contact with his grandparent and aunts and uncles.

In an interview with Suzanne Booker for the book, *Good Measure*, Morgan describes his mother and sister as good teachers and hard workers. His mother, while doing the expected housework, also worked in mills and beauty shops. His sister taught him to read. His mother taught him the pleasure of small things and the value of hard work (133). He experienced the women of his family in traditional roles of nurturers.

Gather's women do not follow the expected norms of their times and places. Alexandra strides into *O, Pioneers*, wearing a man's overcoat and solving the problems of her younger brother, Emil. She is described as "a tall strong girl and she walked rapidly and resolutely, as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next". In reference to her unusual garb, she wore the man's Ulster coat, "not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her; carried it like a young soldier" (18). Alexandra is, therefore presented first as an unconventional girl, with supreme confidence and a slightly militant attitude.

By contrast, Morgan's female characters are bound by the restraints of their time and place. They have little to say about the direction their lives are taking. They are strong women, but tend to stay in their expected roles. Julie in *Gap Creek*, in particular, finds herself doing the work expected of women at the turn of the century plus much of the "men's work," but enjoying none of the freedom and autonomy enjoyed by Alexandra. Former North Carolina poet laureate Fred Chappell, is quoted in the Conway article as saying that the Morgan's Novel should have been called *Job Had It Easy*. I could not agree more. The suffering that Julie experiences, both physically and emotionally would overwhelm lesser heroines, but Julie is accustomed to difficult situations and little comfort.

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., asserts in his book, *Remapping Southern Literature, Contemporary Southern Writers and the West* the "Western novel" is one of separating from the community and striking out on one's own into a life of freedom (4). The Bergson family in *O, Pioneers* comes from Sweden via Chicago to the newly opened Nebraska territory. The family settles into a land grant section in the Nebraska territory and spends eleven years getting into and out of debt. In *O, Pioneers*, Alexandra is faced with the opposition of her brothers as she

attempts the bold move of expanding the family land holdings by acquiring the surrounding land abandoned by others during hard times. While others pull up stakes and leave their claims, Alexandra digs in and fights. Her two oldest brothers, Oscar and Lou, resist the expansion and voice doubts as to Alexandra's ability to manage either the existing farm or any additional property. The youngest family member, Emil, is the family pet and Alexandra's apparent ally. Emil is, in fact, Alexandra's only weakness and her indulgence of his whims proves to be her only real failure. The confidence that Alexandra possesses is part of her personality early in the novel. She separates herself from the family with her independent actions and acts as a free agent in her business dealings. *O, Pioneers* is obviously a "Western Novel".

Julie Harmon, Morgan's protagonist in *Gap Creek*, also must deal with the death of her father, an ineffectual mother and siblings who do little to help her succeed. Julie has two older sisters, Lou, and Rose, and one younger, Carolyn. Her only brother, Masenier, dies a horrible death, choked by worms, at a very young age. Julie's remaining siblings are better suited to household tasks and her mother is in chronically poor health. As responsibilities mount and the workload increases, Julie casts about for escape and sees her only possibility for advancement and independence is marriage. At seventeen, she marries eighteen-year-old Hank Richards, and the newly wedded Hank and Julie leave the old mountain homestead and go to the North/South Carolina line to begin their new lives. Hank leaves his community of farmers to help build the textile mills and attempts to realize a measure of freedom and financial gain. Julie leaves housework in the mountains to become a housekeeper for "Old Man Pendergast" in exchange for room and board. Julie is unsure of herself in this new situation and expresses herself through her work, as has been her habit. Julie has none of the assertive qualities in this novel that we see in Alexandra. Julie is naive and makes some devastating mistakes. She deals with a new home,

unfamiliar surroundings, separation from family and loss. Julie and Hank find themselves inserted into a new community and attempting to become part of it. Their church and neighbors become the substitute for the family and community they have left behind. At the end of this novel, in order to survive, the young couple must return to the community and families in which they were raised and take their places as part of this community. Southern literature, according to the Brinkmeyer definition, celebrates the hero who stays in his place and becomes a part of the larger community while maintaining dignity and individuality (4). The couple's attachment to place and never moving far away affirms *Gap Creek* as a Southern novel.

The two young women are similar in many aspects; however, there is a defining difference between them, Alexandra is almost mythical in her supreme confidence and good judgment. Alexandra is described as an "Amazon" by Gather when she faces the rowdy man in the street. Danna K. Kinnison, in her article, "Gather's O, Pioneers" written for *The Explicator* asserts that the comparison of Alexandra to Amazons is apt in that like Amazons, she blurs traditional gender expectations" and that she functions independently of male support. She further states that the transformation of the barren plains into a fruitful garden, with virtually no apparent work is very like the self-sustaining gardens of the Amazons (Kinnison 97). This comparison to the female warrior is carried through out the novel. Alexandra is never actually portrayed as doing the work that is required to build the empire that she owns, but things seem to mystically come together for her.

Julie is the antithesis of the Amazon. She is depicted in every aspect of the work that is required to build the meager comfort gained by the young couple. On her first full day in Gap Creek, Julie faces the pile of dirty laundry belonging to Pendergast. The process is described in detail. "I grabbed the bucket and carried several gallons of water from the spring and poured

them into the pot. Then I got some kindling and wood from the shed and started the fire under the pot." (59). The labor and even the smell of the dirty laundry is described so vividly that one feels almost soiled by the reading. Her work involves sweat and the earth. She labors in the garden and at the wash pot, making contributions that are needed but not permanent. The fruits of her labor will literally be consumed. She grows vegetables that will be eaten, chops wood that will be burned and washes clothing that will be quickly soiled again. Julie cannot accumulate enough personal wealth from her labors to afford her even the least amount of freedom. She makes financially devastating mistakes and is bullied by old man Pendergast. The frustrating lack of respect for Julie's work is addressed by Elizabeth Engelhart, author of the article "Placing Their Feminism in the Southern Appalachian Mountains," who believes that the Appalachian women deserve to be appreciated as the contributors to society that they were and that the women of the mountains were not given enough credit for the work in which they excelled. She further states that mountain women must "awaken to the consciousness of themselves as people" (28).

Although Julie's contributions are vital to her family, they are viewed as somewhat less important than the work of men. There is no permanence in any thing that she produces in this first year. Her work earns no regular wages and the products that she has to convert into cash are limited to what she can grow or find. As a result, Julie never realizes her worth as an individual.

On the other hand, Alexandra is very aware of herself as an individual. David Stouck writes in his article *Willa Gather's last Four Books* that Gather's "major novels were all written as egotistic expressions of an individual consciousness seeking to know and understand itself (42). Alexandra's confidence and strength never seem to waver. From her first appearance when she finds the way to rescue Emil's kitten until she consents to marry Carl, on her terms, she is discovering the extent of her potential and exploits it.

Julie, however, is a bundle of contradictions. She is capable of chopping wood and slaughtering hogs but can not establish boundaries in her personal relationships. In a 2001 interview with Peter Josyph for *Southern Quarterly*, Robert Morgan said, "characters are often found through the paradoxes it is the contradictions that will make him or her most real." The reader can identify with the character, Julie, because of her underlying insecurities that she attempts to hide with a veneer of bravado.

The approach that Morgan and Gather take towards their philosophy of writing is reflected in the way their characters are presented to us. Alexandra is completely confident and capable. She faces a flirtatious clothing drummer in the streets with a stabbing glance and a drawn in lower lip. The man drops his cigar and retreats to a bar to salve his wounded ego. He is said to feel "cheap and ill used as if some one had taken advantage of him" (19). The drummer's effort at flirtation with, or perhaps his attempt to intimidate, the young girl results in the man feeling vulnerable. Alexandra does not need a man to protect or defend her. Her personality seems to have a solid core and appears to have no hidden flaws.

Julie's first appearance in *Gap Creek* is as she cares for her mortally sick brother. She recounts the death in gruesome detail, and then internalizes the incident saying that the death was "shameful". She is part of the family and sees everything that occurs in that family as a reflection upon her. The circumstances of the death are completely out of her control, but she feels shame because of it. As confident as Alexandra is, Julie is as insecure.

Julie excels and exceeds the expectations of her gender, but sees her value only in terms of the work she produces. During a conversation in Julie's kitchen just before Lou's marriage, Julie opens the exchange by asking who has done all the work since she left home. Lou tells her that it has fallen to her and that they (the family) had missed Julie. "Missed my wood chopping



and hog killing," I said" (180). Julie's work and contribution to the family is the primary way she defines herself.

The insecurity and internalized grief that Julie experiences is often experienced as depression. Julie's depression is exhibited in her silences and in her borderline manic sessions of work. This work is used as a palliative to the weight of the responsibility and the crushing grief that Julie experiences at the deaths of her brother and later, her father. In a 1984 study for the Department of Psychology at the University of Kansas, Lisa McCann and David S. Holmes found that strenuous exercise produced neurotransmitters that relieved depression. They further assert that the achievement of goals and distraction help to relieve the symptoms of depression. Morgan, in a fit of realism, contrary to the mythical essence of Alexandra, gives Julie both chronic depression and a realistic way to deal with it.

Alexandra, unlike Julie, places the responsibility for death and disaster squarely on the shoulders of those who are actually responsible. John Bergson's death is simply that, a death there is no anguish or recrimination on Alexandra's part and she moves on quickly to the business of planning. The only time a crack is found in Alexandra's fortress of confidence is at the death of Emil. Alexandra feels guilt in "throwing Marie and Emil together" (181). She feels guilty because the deaths of both the young people and the ten-year imprisonment of Marie's husband Frank, were a direct result of the affair in which Emil and Marie were engaged.

Upon the deaths of both characters' fathers, the work, and in Alexandra's case, the land is left to the young women. Alexandra has three brothers, but their father, John, chooses her to be responsible for the land and the supervision of the work. On his deathbed, her father considers Alexandra:

In his daughter, John Bergson recognized the strength of will, and the

simple, direct way of thinking things out, that had characterized his father in his better days. He would much rather, of course, have seen this likeness in one of his sons, but it was not a matter of choice, [he was] thankful that there was one among his children to whom he could entrust the future of his family and the possibilities of his hard-won land (27).

She knows that the farm was left to her care because her father thought her the only one capable of managing it properly.

Julie sees herself, as the inheritor of work, because there is no one else. The work falls to Julie as the last resort. During his final illness, Papa speaks to Julie about her work, " 'Whatever man marries you will be the lucky one,' Papa said to me. 'For you're the best of my girls, the best one.'" Julie is pleased with this affirmation but reflects on her father's motives, "he wasn't a flattering man, especially with his daughters. But I thought, he wouldn't talk so agreeable if a man actually asked for my hand. For what would he do without me to help him on the place? What would he do with nobody to bring in wood or hoe the corn?" (21).

Alexandra and Julie are faced with tasks that have historically been assigned to men and, just as they face grief differently they approach these tasks with different methods of accomplishing them. Gather leaves gaps in her narrative when the actual work is magically done. Phyllis Frus and Stanley Corkin explore the explanation for the tendency to leave gaps in her narratives in their article, "Willa Gather's 'Pioneer' Novels and [Not New, Not Old] Historical Reading". They contend that by leaving the reader to put back the "furniture" of the narrative, the story becomes more believable. Gather does not construct historically perfect stories, but engaging stories set in actual locations. By tying the story to an actual place the job

of filling in silences is made easier for the reader. Previous historical knowledge of place and time allows for fleshing out of societal expectations and role and gender restrictions. Gather's gaps are easier to fill when the reader has an actual location and time with which to work.

Morgan, on the other hand, describes each task that Julie does with minute detail. Morgan revels in the work that his subjects perform. John Lang's article for *Pembroke Magazine*, "He Hoes Forever: Robert Morgan and the Pleasures of Work", describes Morgan's celebration of work, "Morgan affirms its [work's] capacity to define and enlarge personal identity, to enhance community, and deepen spiritual and artistic vision" (221). Morgan's view of work may be romantic or idealistic, but Julie's actual work is simply hard. There is no need to fill in with the reader's imagination; each chore is fully explained.

One notices in Morgan's, *Gap Creek*, the enormous emphasis on the work that falls on the main character, Julie. The amount of work and the stress that it places on the relationship she has with her new husband is almost a separate character. The work takes up space and has bulk. This girl is not a feminist, but a pragmatist. She states in the second chapter that, "The job [wood cutting] fell to me, with out anybody explaining why. And since it had to be done, I done it, and kept on doing it" (*Gap Creek* 18). Julie was aware that the job was necessary and technically a man's job, but there was no available man to do the job.

Similarly, Alexandra is faced with the running of the family land grant that is left in her care when her father dies, not because there is no man available, but because there is no capable man. This historically male domain is successfully invaded and run by a young woman with the confidence that Julie lacks. Alexandra is capable and knows she is. Julie only accepts the responsibility thrust upon her, but Alexandra relishes it. Alexandra chooses to face her challenges alone, without, for most of the novel, even the comfort of her long time friend Carl,

but Julie wants to be a wife and only "help him work in the fields" (GC 44). Both are faced with situations that are not typical for women of the time. Alexandra responds with confidence and pleasure, Julie with weariness.

These women, strong in their different ways, have mothers who are incapable of stepping into the void left by the deaths of their husbands. Alexandra's mother's lack of participation in the planning and work of the farm is never satisfactorily explained. Her mother is described as someone who is optimistic, but unhappy in the pioneer life. This woman busied herself in the work of preserving and pickling. The description, "She was a good mother, but she was glad when her children were old enough not to be in her way in the kitchen" (30) exposes a woman who is absorbed in work as a means of distraction from her unhappiness. Her work, like Julie's, can be seen as a hedge against depression. Gather is, perhaps, drawing on her own experiences and thus created a less nurturing protagonist.

Julie's mother's weakness is explained as physical illness. Her back is too weak to lift or turn her sick husband and her participation in the farm chores is limited by this weakness. With Julie in the lead she does what she can in the fields. Julie is the obvious primary producer of all heavy work. Her mother is passive and malleable, a dependent homemaker. The only time she expresses a strong opinion or exhibits real leadership is during the courtship of Julie and Hank. She voices concern that Julie and Hank are too young and the courtship is too brief for the young couple to have a successful marriage. Otherwise, she defers to Julie's decisions.

The death of Alexandra's mother does not seem to make much difference in her life. At the beginning of part two of *O, Pioneers*, Alexandra's mother is dead and lies beside her husband, who has now been dead for sixteen years. Nothing more is said about her. Alexandra has at this point accomplished great things. Her work is an act of transforming the land from

wilderness to a cultivated condition. According to Marshall W. Fishwick, in his article for *Journal of American Culture* entitled "In the Work of Their Hands is Their Prayer," Willa Gather uses "imagery of the human body at work and play on the frontier under girded the 'civilizing' of westward expansion". Again, Gather casts Alexandra in a mythical role as the guardian of the new Eden. She is the agent of "civilizing" the raw prairie and developing the farm to its fullest potential. In Fishwick's words the prairie is a "good place to pick the nostalgia of a lost Utopia" (447). In the sixteen years that are left for the reader to "furnish" she has used her wits to acquire new land and develop it to the point that she is a prosperous and powerful person in the community. She has developed the land grant into a nearly perfect place, a sort of Utopia. Alexandra faces her brothers and their jealousy with the confidence the reader has come to expect from her.

There are few gaps in the story of Julie and Hank. The silences that are written into the story are primarily there to reflect the lack of communication between the young couple. After Julie is tricked by the grifters into giving up what little money they have, Hank slaps her, calls her a "dumb heifer" and leaves. (129). Julie is left in lonely silence. The gap is filled later in the text when Hank returns and excuses his violence by simply stating, "I got fired" (136) as if this will make Julie understand his outburst and resolve all of the turmoil that she has experienced.

In another act of gender blurring that Dawn Trouard attributes to the tendency of Willa Gather to project her own ambiguous gender identification on to her characters, Alexandra defends her friendship with the newly returned Carl Lindstrom. She asserts that she might consider marrying him. When the brothers object and express their fear that Carl is only interested in Alexandra because of her considerable wealth, she counters with, "Well, suppose I want to take care of him? Whose business is it but my own?" (110). Alexandra steps into a

mythical position of protector and provider this time directed towards Carl. She argues that her wealth was built after the older boys left home and the land had been equally divided among them. Again there is a mythical allusion to Alexandra's abilities. This time it is Biblical. The land and wealth multiplied in Alexandra's hands just as the small boy's lunch of five loaves and three fishes in John 6:1-12, was taken divided among five thousand and twelve baskets of leftovers were recovered. What Alexandra has obtained at the death of her father has been divided, and yet her portion has grown. Her brothers envy her and seek further control of the land and wealth. Alexandra is in control of not only her emotions, but also of her circumstances. She will hold onto the property that she has accumulated. She feels no guilt or particular responsibility towards her older brothers.

As land is a commodity in *O, Pioneers*, food fulfills that role in *Gap Creek*. The land is not a consumable product and, therefore, each acre acquired accumulates for Alexandra. Julie is; however, faced with the rapid disappearance of the food wealth that she manages to accumulate. According to Patrick Bizzaro, food is so valuable to Julie that it takes the place of cash and serves the purpose that is normally associated with money (29). She converts food to money and back to food again. Julie feels shame because of the hunger she experiences after the little money they have is lost to swindlers and the work for wages at the brick plant is lost. Again, Julie turns her grief and worry inward and suffers depression. Julie admits to being "slow and brooding" (264) which she attributes to hunger. Julie wanders around the farm trying to assess the food that is available and figure out how to stretch it to last the winter. She reflects on her situation and says, "It's shameful to admit that you have been hungry, that you have been hungry as a grown woman, as a married woman. It's even more embarrassing to admit you've been

hungry while carrying a baby. (264). Once more, Julie feels guilt over circumstances that are beyond her control.

Unlike Julie, little is out of Alexandra's control. She has the option of building her own family and proceeds to surround herself with an extended "family" that includes those who have skills useful to Alexandra, but no blood connection with the Bergson family. Alexandra has created a group to fill various positions on the farm. She has also filled her kitchen with young women, doing tasks she is capable of doing simply because she likes having young people around (64). She has created a support group that includes young and old, male and female. This group keeps her happy, and she provides a measure of protection for them. These reciprocal relationships begin during some of the "silences" in the text.

Ivar, one of Alexandra's household, is in need of her protection. He first appears at the door of his "soddy," a small house constructed of earth partially dug into a rise in the prairie. He is an eccentric man of simple thoughtful habits. Alexandra does not go into the earthen hole, but eventually brings Ivar out to live with her on the farm. She symbolically elevates the Norwegian immigrant from the pit in which he lives a solitary, contemplative life and places him into an open community. The wider community does not fully accept Ivar, but he is now under Alexandra's aegis. Ivar plays an important role in recovering the true Alexandra after the death of her younger brother, Emil. The value of "family" to Alexandra is supported by a study conducted by Roy F. and Kimberly K. Oman of the Health Sciences Center and the School of Social work, respectively, of the University of Oklahoma. In their 2002 study they discovered a correlation between positive support and feelings of ability and worth. The women of the study benefited when they enjoyed social integration, attachment and reassurance of worth. Alexandra builds a system for herself when her natural family does not supply these positive reassurances.

Julie's extended family is thrust upon her. She has little say in its compilation or composition. Old Man Pendergast and Ma Richards are added to Julie's life and promptly begin to undermine her. Ma Richards criticizes Julie's cooking and house keeping and seemingly allies herself with the old man. Julie has no ally or protector. She must find resources within herself to survive her "family." Pendergast spends most of his time trying to frighten or embarrass Julie. He carves a nude female figure in her presence in an attempt to unnerve her and micromanages and criticizes her efforts to clean (62). She receives none of the positive feedback that the Oman study indicates is helpful to her mental health. Her concocted family actually undermines her confidence and further isolates her. She is now at the mercy of those who actually profit from her endless unappreciated work.

In order to prepare dinner, Julie must go to Pendergast to ask the location of the "tater hole." This is a subterranean repository for root vegetables and home canned produce. In the dark of this cellar, she encounters Pendergast's "pet snake" (63). The white snake is reminiscent of the worms that killed Masenier and of the fever-induced hallucinations of snakes he suffered just before his death. Julie faces a deeply rooted fear and unsettling memory while in this sod enclosure. Julie takes consumable items, potatoes, away from this hole, along with an unwillingness to allow the old man to see how frightened she is by the snake.

Whereas Alexandra takes Ivar as a permanent asset from his hole to her farm, in *O, Pioneer*. Julie manages only to find perishable and disturbing things. In her article for "The Iron Mountain Review," Mary C. Williams asserts that Morgan uses holes and sheds as containers, "that the contents are not a personal accumulation of treasures, but impersonal objects that he wishes to examine" (27). If indeed Morgan wants Julie to examine the things in the "tater hole," she faces the insubstantial nature of the things she is accomplishing. Every thing in the hole is



consumable. With the exception of the snake, every thing in the hole is the product of hard work and will be consumed, only to be replaced with the fruit of hard work that will in turn, be consumed. Julie may expect to find that this is a pattern for the rest of her life.

Like Julie's work, the work that Hank finds for wages in the brick plant is temporary. Gordon McKinney, director of the Appalachian Center at Berea College, observed in his 1999 article, "The Blair Committee Investigation of 1883: Industrialization in the Southern Mountains" argues that the owners of the Southern mills had little invested in the area or people. One manufacturing village in Alabama cited in the article, "provided housing for \$4.00 a month and provided a daily wage of \$.60 for a ten hour day" (161). Based upon a six-day workweek the laborer could barely afford housing and food with one quarter of the income going back into the owners' pockets. In this system even the work for wages did not allow for any accumulation of wealth. There is almost no hope of financial freedom for these families. These entrepreneurs were in the area to exploit the abundance of cheap labor. The availability of women and children for these jobs made the individual expendable. He compares the period to the situation of slave labor in the same area before the Civil War (161). The temporary nature of the work and the meager rewards for that work is ingrained in the minds of the citizens of the mountains. Julie cannot see that there is any other way to exist. The absence of permanent, tangible compensation for her work is an idea that ties Julie to her region, her gender, and to the nineteenth century. Julie and Hank are extensions of the economy that conspires to keep them in poverty and subjection. Rebecca Smith points out in her article for "Pembroke Magazine" that Hank and Julie "leave Gap Creek, climbing the mountain to start a new life somewhere, taking with them nothing but that with which they arrived, not even the bounty of the earth they had worked so

hard to cultivate during the summer following the flood" (45). The young couple are as poverty stricken as ever.

Alexandra's life is as opposite Julie's as is possible. Alexandra assumes the life style of a very modern woman. She acquires property in her own name, selects and defends the members of her household and determines her personal relationships. She is in control of wealth that exceeds her brothers'. Her autonomy and power make her an excellent example of the best of twentieth-century, liberated women.

Alexandra is a woman who lives in a new land, and breaks ground, both figuratively and literally. She is able to acquire property and develop it to the fullest. Carl affirms Alexandra's connection to the land when he says, "You belong to the land, as you have always said, now more than ever" (193). The land that Alexandra acquires actually belongs to her. This is a departure from the norm of the time. Sandra Day O'Connor, in remarks published in the *Journal of Law and Religion*, asserts that the Bill of Rights did not actually deny rights to women, but it did not provide for real equality under the law. The states limited the rights of women. O'Connor argues that, "By law, wives could not hold, purchase, control, bequeath, or convey property, retain their own wages, make contracts, or bring legal actions" (30). This was the state of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Not until the ratification of the nineteenth Amendment in 1920 did women gain some voice and not until the late twentieth-century that women actually attained any real power or autonomy. Alexandra's purchasing and ownership of property was counter to the norm. She accomplished, in the Nebraska territory what could not be accomplished in the settled eastern states. O'Connor quotes Alfred Lord Tennyson in his assessment of the status of women, "a wife stood in legal relation to her spouse as something just, 'better than his dog, a little dearer than his horse.'" (30). It was not until the 1960's and

1970's that the inequality between the genders was finally fully addressed, and the 1980's that discrimination against women was no longer generally accepted (32). Women, by the mid twentieth century, could expect to own property and be fully involved in business. There were still, however, definite "norms" on the definition of "family."

The family, as described by Maxine Baca Zinn in her study entitled "Feminism and Family Studies for a New Century" states that the nineteenth century family was considered the building block of society. She also asserts that, "early family thinkers were extremely conservative in regard to family"(44). She further asserts that feminists actually deconstructed the traditional family worlds and redefined it. A family "is a construct of meaning and relationships; a household is a residential and economic unit." In other words, a family "designates the way things should be, while household refers to the manner in which women, men, and children actually come together in domestic units" (45). This twentieth century, feminist slant on the different ways we view the coming together of people, related and not related as a household, fits perfectly with the family that Alexandra has constructed for herself. She chooses those with whom she wishes to associate and there by breaks the nineteenth century mold. She is the person to whom those members of the household turn for protection. Ivar's fear of being sent to an asylum because of his eccentric behaviour is addressed, not by the brothers, but by Alexandra. She is able to sooth the old man and makes a statement on the variety of unusual people who inhabit the Nebraska territory. Her tolerance for the diversity of her neighbors is a late twentieth century virtue. She expresses appreciation for the customs of those of both diverse ethnicity and ages.

Her choice of friends and lover is indeed her own. She even chooses to stay single in her youth. When she has amassed her wealth and accomplished the job that her father left to her, she

is ready to marry. Her marital status is her choice. She does not succumb to social or family pressure to marry earlier. She does not link her personal worth to the accomplishments of either a husband or children. These are twentieth century notions.

Alexandra is as free as any twentieth-century woman. Her property is secure and the proceeds of her labor and investments belong to her. When *O, Pioneers* comes to a close, Alexandra and Carl are seated in the grass surveying the Prairie. Alexandra's conversation with Carl is more reflective of the twentieth century in its form and content than nineteenth century. The first notable statement that Alexandra makes is, "I try to be more liberal about such things than I used to be. I try to realize that we are not all made alike." (192). Alexandra consciously wants to be more accepting and tolerant of the differences of others. This concept is, in fact, years ahead of its time. The period of time in which Alexandra speaks and Gather writes is still filled with "Jim Crow Laws" and beliefs in the social and intellectual superiority of the white, Western European race. Next, she takes the initiative to tell Carl that she will go with him to the Klondike, but that she does not want to leave the Prairie permanently. Here she is defining her role in their relationship as an equal partner and expressing her preference for the location in which she will live permanently. Carl agrees with the conditions that Alexandra has placed upon their lives together understanding the emotional and financial investment she has in the Prairie. Without asking Carl's permission, she states that the land will be left to Lou and Oscar's children, again establishing her propriety over her land and her wealth. Only after she has established her authority does she, in the penultimate paragraph of the novel say, "I am tired," and "I have been very lonely" (196). Only after Alexandra is certain that she will not lose her autonomy in the relationship, does she allow herself to admit that she is weary and desires a more personal relationship with a "friend."

Julie, however, is an excellent example of the antebellum South. She is a model of the Protestant work ethic, eternal labor for little or no reward. Carl R. Osthaus notes in "The Work Ethic of the Plain Folk: Labor and Religion in the Old South" that, "Work, if not an end in itself, surely was the means to republican independence and self-sufficiency and was the major daily activity of yeomen and their wives. It was not a degrading sign of slave-like status but rather a means of differentiating themselves from slaves by achieving and maintaining independence" (749). Julie participates in this work ethic, but does not achieve independence, or self-sufficiency. She acquires no property in her own name and has few rights, but massive responsibilities. This connection with the "old South" has Julie in the grips of the nineteenth century. She is at the bottom of the freeborn social hierarchy. Julie is a prisoner of the past, with no rights, no power, no authority and no chance for independence. She will spend her life at the beck and call of husband, children, and her mother-in-law. In a subsequent novel by Morgan, *This Rock*, Julie appears again, this time as an older woman with a teenaged daughter. She is described as "pretty" "when she was younger" but now she had "big rough hands that showed how much work she had done." Julie is still exchanging consumable products, butter and eggs, for consumable products, sugar, coffee, and baking soda (175). In fact, her only differentiation from an eighteenth and mid nineteenth century slave was that she cannot be sold.

For Julie, the very title of the previously cited John Land article, "He Hoes Forever" is appropriate. Julie is in a never-ending cycle of plowing, planting, cleaning, cooking and preserving. She will spend her life breaking up the hard earth and the hard tasks that will yield nothing permanent. Morgan may believe that hard rural work, "awakens the spirit and nurtures a sense of transcendence by bringing human beings into contact with the mystery of nature's vitality, its energies of creation" (Lang 223), but Julie is just going to hoe forever. Julie says of

the hard rural work that she is engaged in, "The more I worked the more I had to work" (310). Her hard work still yields no lasting benefits. The child born of the "mountain of work" (284) Julie did all by her self on the kitchen floor died, leaving her with no permanent benefits from it. The products of her summer of work on Pendergast's farm are left behind and the young couple departs in the cold, pre-dawn hours with only the few things they brought with them the year before.

In the last few pages of *Gap Creek*, Julie exhibits traditional nineteenth-century behavior. She is intimidated by the lawyer from Greenville and frightened by the threats of a lawsuit for back rent to be brought by Pendergast's heirs. She feels insecure and has no confidence in her decision-making abilities. She relies upon Hank to decide the best course of action, even though he has not proven to have good problem solving skills in the past. Where as Alexandra defines boundaries and decides the direction her own life will take, Julie allows Hank to lead her, literally and physically, back to the mountain community from which they originally came. Julie is, once again, pregnant, further binding her to a life of hard work and responsibility that will yield little to benefit her personally. With the birth of children and the financial burden that comes with them, Julie will keep working just to make ends meet.

Many of the circumstances in Alexandra and Julie's lives are similar. Their responses to those circumstances, the permanence of their work and their self-confidence separates them by a century, making Alexandra a true liberated, twentieth century woman and Julie a traditional woman of the century before.

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