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The "Gentle Doubter" and the Courageous Unbeliever: Influence of Mill on the Floss on My Antonia

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I have not much faith in women in fiction. They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable. They are so limited to one string and they lie so about that. They are so few, the ones who really did anything worth while; there were the great Georges, George Eliot and George Sand, and they were anything but women. —Willa Cather (Lee 12)

Willa Cather was painfully aware that in the vast span of history, only a few women actually managed to write something of substantial worth. Cather, intensely impressed by Eliot, often focused on the struggles of women in a male-ordered society, and specific elements in Cather’s writings on this theme point directly to a link between her and Eliot. In particular, My Ántonia (hereafter MÁ) bears the marks of this influence in its overwhelming resemblance to Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss (MF). “Of all George Eliot’s masterpieces,” Cather says ardently, “give me that one in which she touched the hearts of the people, The Mill on the Floss” (World and the Parish 362). Since Eliot is one of her favorite female authors, and MF is her favorite Eliot novel, it is unlikely that the abundant similarities are simply coincidental. Despite the superficial differences—while MF is set in the well-established British town of St. Ogg’s populated by proper Victorian families, MÁ takes place in the wilds of an untamed Nebraska where tattooed, roaming desperadoes sometimes work as farmhands—the parallels between the novels are too striking to ignore. Eliot’s influence on Cather is apparent in the heroines’ strongly similar relationships with fathers, brothers, and childhood friends, in their shared appearances and intense natures, in their thirst for learning, in their comparable periods of renunciation, and in their becoming fallen women. Tony, however, is less affected by society’s opinion than Maggie is, and Cather bravely
redeems Tony from her fallen status, allowing her to live and prosper, whereas Eliot avoids being too overt in her challenge of societal norms by ending Maggie's life directly after her fall.

Both heroines are clearly "Daddy's girls," though Maggie's father is less appreciative of her intellect than Mr. Shimerda is of Tony's mind. For example, Mr. Tulliver is furious when he finds out that his wife and son "let" his "little wench" run away. Displaying his favoritism, he says to Maggie, "You mustn't think o' running away from father. What'ud father do without his little wench?" (Eliot 97). After falling into shock-induced delirium, he recognizes only Maggie, who is very protective of and worried about him. Yet his pet name for her is bitter-sweet. As Elizabeth Ermarth of Dartmouth College relates, "Although Maggie is [his] favorite child, he deplores her acuteness" (589). He remarks that "an over-'cute woman's no better nor a long-tailed sheep—she'll fetch none the bigger price for that" (Eliot 12).

In MA, Tony and her father are also very close. More than once she tells Jim why she admires her father. "My father," she says proudly "went much to school. [. . .] He play horn and violin, and he read so many books that the priest in Bohemie come to talk to him" (Cather 95). Then, she too comes to worry about her father's state of mind. Another parallel arises in that "she was the only one of his family who could rouse the old man from the torpor in which he seemed to live" (36). Mr. Tulliver contrasts with Mr. Shimerda, who values his daughter's intelligence. Handing Jim's grandmother a book with the English alphabet and "look[ing] at her entreatingly," Jim says, "with an earnestness which I shall never forget," the old man pleads, "te-e-ach, te-e-ach my Án-tonia!" (26). Notably, both fathers violently self-destruct. A strong father-daughter bond is a basic theme in both novels and suggests Cather's connection to Eliot.

More important to the plot of each novel, the heroines are distressingly loyal to their harsh brothers. Tom, like a good brother, happily anticipates Maggie's joy in seeing the fishing gear he has brought for her; yet when he finds that she has let his rabbits starve, he says cruelly, "I don't love you, Maggie" (21). Being "a lad of honour" (33), he is "never" wrong, but plans to always "punish [Maggie] when she did wrong" (35). How loving! Of course, Tom does have his moments, as when he coaxes her to eat some pudding after she has cut her hair. Yet even when they reach adulthood, if she wants him to love her, she still has to abide by his terms: "I wish to be as good a brother to you as you will let me" (319). Tied tightly to Tom throughout her life, Maggie always thinks, "What was the use of anything, if Tom didn't love her?" (32). As a young woman, Maggie will not marry Philip since Tom threatens to disown her. Thus, "her need for love," Ermarth says, "is a morbid dependency, and Tom uses it to master her" (593). In Cather's opinion, "of all the blows struck at her when she came back to St. Ogg's," Tom's disowning her "went home the deepest" (WP 364). Enraged at Maggie's "elopement" with Stephen, Tom coldly rejects her without mercy: "I wash my hands of you for ever.
You don’t belong to me” (392). Cather actually defends Eliot fiercely from those who criticize Maggie’s abject dependence on Tom, saying people simply can’t comprehend

the love that sometimes exists between a brother and sister, a boy and a girl who have laughed and sorrowed and learned the world together from the first, who have entered into each other’s lives and minds more completely than ever man or woman can again. (WP 363)

Displaying her high admiration for Eliot’s skill in creating Maggie and Tom, Cather wrote, “no one else has ever been so successful in painting that strongest and most satisfactory relation of human life” (WP 363). With this in mind, Cather’s representation of Tony and Ambrosch’s relationship is more meaningful. Almost like Tom’s long-lost twin, Ambrosch is not only “a worker,” but “he’s a mean one” (62). With a sort of fawning loyalty reminiscent of Maggie’s own tendencies, the young Tony continues to look up to her brother, in spite of his harshness. For example, Jim remarks unhappily that she “often quoted his opinions to me, and she let me see that she admired him, while she thought of me only as a little boy” (97). Sure, Tony does prove her worth by plowing alongside him and working as a hired hand; but Ambrosch remains in control by keeping her wages. Just as Tom lords over Maggie’s heart, Ambrosch, according to Jim, “seemed to direct the feelings as well as the fortunes of his women-folk” (97).

Like Tom, Ambrosch is capable of kind acts, but only on his own terms. When Tony is preparing to be married properly, he gives her $300 of her own money and buys her a nice set of silver. It seems he, like Tom, might also be telling his sister, “I wish to be as good a brother to you as you will let me” (Eliot 319). Ultimately, Jim is less important to Tony than Ambrosch is, just as Maggie cherishes Tom more than anyone else. This is especially apparent in an incident that occurs during Tony’s teenage years. She turns against Jim and Jake to take Ambrosch’s side in an argument about a borrowed horse collar, although he is in the wrong. Showing her deep alliance with her brother, Tony yells childishly, “I never like you no more, Jake and Jim Burden! [. . .] No friends any more!” (Cather 99). Unsurprisingly, when Ambrosch discovers Tony has given birth to an illegitimate child, he is “much like devil,” according to his mother (Cather 234). In addition, he even has the nerve to mutter half-seriously in regard to the baby, “You’d better put it out in the rain-barrel” (234). As we have seen, Tom isn’t one whit happier when he hears of Maggie’s scandalous actions. Of course, Ambrosch doesn’t disown Tony, as Tom does Maggie. Yet when Tony returns, he works her mercilessly. Jim confronts Ambrosch for working her so hard, but Ambrosch again reveals his unbending harshness, saying nastily, “If you put that in her head, you better stay home” (233). Thus, Tony has “settled down to be Ambrosch’s drudge for good” (221), showing that even in her later life, she feels unavoidably tied to him, just as Maggie immediately goes to Tom after returning to St. Ogg’s. Instead of supplying
Tony with a totally benevolent brother, Cather creates a brother–sister duo that mirrors Eliot’s Maggie and Tom, two characters that captivated her.

A very interesting parallel exists between Philip and Jim, who both become gentler versions of the heroines’ brothers, though each desires to be more than friends. Having met Philip when she is young, Maggie only sees him as someone who was kind to her sick brother, not as a possible lover. The deformed, lonely Philip, noticing her fierce love for Tom, asks beseechingly, “[I]f you had had a brother like me, do you think you should have loved him as well as Tom?” (Eliot 153). Maggie herself recognizes he would be a better brother. For example, in the Red Deeps, as Philip protests against her self-renunciation, she says emotionally, “What a dear, good brother you would have been. . . . I think you would have made as much fuss about me, and been as pleased for me to love you, as would have satisfied even me” (267). Also, she has fixed him so firmly in the role of brother that she is totally astonished when he confesses that he wants to be more than just friends: “I am so surprised, Philip—I had not thought of it” (272).

In comparison, Jim is the one who becomes Tony’s best friend, not the hard-nosed Ambrosch. Tony continues to see Jim only as a friend or brother because she and Jim grew up together. Like Philip and Maggie, they have known each other since childhood. In discussing why Tony and Jim are never romantic, John Murphy, a professor at Brigham Young University, suggests another factor: “Jim is three years younger than Ántonia, a significant difference in age” and so “Jim is regarded by Ántonia as a child” most of the time (150). But Jim, like Philip, wants more. He dreams always of Lena walking through a field of stubble, sitting beside him, and saying, “Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like” and he wants to “have this flattering dream about Ántonia, but [he] never did” (Cather 169). Like Maggie’s reaction to Philip’s confession of love, Tony is completely taken off guard when Jim kisses her passionately. Of course, Maggie tries nobly to nurture romantic feelings for Philip, while Tony utterly rejects Jim’s advances, exclaiming, “Why Jim! You know you ain’t right to kiss me like that” (167). Ruefully, Jim replies, “you’ll always treat me like a kid, I suppose” (168). Still, the connection between Tony and Jim runs deep, just as it does with Maggie and Philip. For example, Maggie says of Philip that “no one else could be quite what he is to me” (Eliot 355); and when Jim tells Tony, “you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times, when I don’t realize it” because “you really are a part of me,” Tony gushes in amazement, “Ain’t it wonderful, Jim, how much people can mean to each other? I’m so glad we had each other when we were little” (Cather 237). The similarities, then, between Philip and Jim are quite significant.

Interestingly, both heroines are seen as muses. In an article devoted to exploring Maggie’s role as Philip’s muse, John Levay points out that Philip himself asks, “Wouldn’t you really like to be a tenth Muse, then, Maggie?” (Eliot 270). Her influence as a muse, in Levay’s opinion, is obvious in the letter (or we could say, the ode) he writes to Maggie. Philip says she has brought him, in his words, “a new
life,” and her “gift of transferred life” is “a new power” to him (71–72). Similarly, 
MÀ becomes Jim’s ode to Tony’s powers of inspiration. In speaking of all the hired 
girls’ vibrancy, Jim says, “If there were no girls like them in the world, there would 
be no poetry” (Cather 202). He takes care to quote Virgil: “for I shall be the first, 
if I live, to bring the Muse into my country” (197), indicating he wishes to be the 
poet with Tony as his muse. He even “claims” her by placing “my” in front of her 
name in the title. The similar roles of Maggie and Tony as muses are further evidence 
of Eliot’s influence on Cather.

Bursting with imagination, Maggie and especially Tony are also storytellers. 
Maggie has an aptitude for spinning stories. Filling her father with “petrifying 
wonder,” she tells Mr. Riley about the blacksmith who is really Satan in Defoe’s 
*The History of the Devil*, only to have Mr. Riley sneer that she should read “prettier 
books” (Eliot 16–17). Also, she conceives this grand vision of living with gypsies 
as their queen, thinking wildly that “everything would be quite charming when 
she had taught the gypsies to use a washing-basin, and to feel an interest in 
books” (91). To Tom, though, all her imaginative ramblings are nonsense and he 
condescendingly says she is “such a silly” (31). But through this imagination, John 
Bushnell writes, Maggie, as the narrator says, is trying to “give her soul a sense of 
home” in an unsure world (385).

Tony is greatly imaginative as well and in her stories she also tries to make hers 
and others’ belonging in the world more sure. For instance, after Jim manages to 
kill a huge, yet sluggish, snake, she dramatizes the incident with artistic fervor: 
“[The snake] fight something awful! He is all over Jimmy’s boots. I scream for him 
to run, but he just hit and hit that snake like he was crazy” (Cather 42). In her 
study of Tony’s stories, Evelyn Funda argues that Tony displays her talent by later 
embellishing the story to create “a legend” which is “meant to convince everyone— 
Jim, as well—that he is deserving of their respect and acceptance” (199). Also, 
Tony’s imaginative talents are so potent that, in regard to her stories of Bohemian 
Christmases, Nina Harling “cherish[es] a belief that Christ was born in Bohemia 
a short time before the Shimerdas left that country” (Cather 133). All in all, 
Cather, beyond making Jim the narrator, doesn’t hesitate to create a storyteller 
possessing the grand skills that Maggie never has the chance to fully develop. For, 
Maggie’s desire to pursue her inventive powers is greatly stunted by the practical 
Tom and men like Mr. Riley; but most everyone in Black Hawk is at least open- 
minded enough to appreciate Tony’s potent storytelling talents.

Importantly, both Maggie and Tony are portrayed as, according to societal 
norms, less-than-ideal with respect to their physical appearances. Flying in the face 
of tradition, Eliot creates a young heroine whose hair is forever unruly and straight 
and whose skin is a “dreadful” nut-brown color. We learn that “Maggie always 
looked twice as dark as usual when she was by the side of Lucy” (52), who is, of 
course, Maggie’s foil. Moreover, we find out that “the contrast” between them is 
like that “between a rough, dark, overgrown puppy and a white kitten” (52). Both
puppies and kittens are lovable, but the neat, white kitten is favored. Naturally, Mrs. Tulliver forever wishes Maggie could possess Lucy’s “classic” beauty, lamenting that Maggie’s “hair won’t curl all I can do with it” and whining that “it seems hard as my sister Deane should have that pretty child” (12).

Even in her later years, at age seventeen, her “dark colouring and jet crown surmounting her tall figure” contrast starkly with the typically petite, fair-skinned, and light-haired heroine. In fact, “she seems to have a sort of kinship with the grand Scotch firs” (243). Since “witchcraft,” according to Nina Auerbach, “is traditionally linked to tree worship” (162), Maggie’s appearance remains “defective.” Aware that such “darkness” as hers is undesirable (and indicative of a wicked nature), Maggie tells Philip why she won’t finish reading Corinne:

As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up. [...] I foresaw that that light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable. I’m determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness [...]. If you could give me a story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora Maclvor, and Minna and all the rest of the dark, unhappy ones. (270)

Tony’s most noticeable physical characteristics can almost be substituted with Maggie’s. Never depicted in terms of delicate femininity, Tony stands out as very different. In describing Tony as a child, Jim says fondly that “her skin was brown,” “in her cheeks she had a glow of rich, dark colour,” and “her brown hair was curly and wild-looking” (24). Except for her curly hair, Tony possesses the same traits that cause Maggie to seem less-than-desirable. As she grows, Tony, again like Maggie, does not become a slender, slight young woman with a light complexion. At the age of fifteen, Tony has grown into a tall, tanned, strong woman, which is somewhat astonishing even to Jim. Painting a picture for us, he observes warmly that Tony’s “neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like a bole of a tree out of the turf” (93). And as she works in the field, she can’t help but grow darker in skin-tone. Hence, neither Maggie nor Tony has the beauty of the stereotypical heroine, who is of average height with lily-hued skin and manageable, light hair.

This leads to another interesting parallel: both heroines exhibit rough, unmannered ways, which further distance them from society’s approval; yet Cather’s Tony cares less about this approval than Eliot’s Maggie does. We know Maggie loves to roam beside the Floss “like a wild thing” (12), and because she is so keen on moving about freely, she never keeps herself or her clothes looking neat. “How to keep her in a clean pinafore,” her bewildered mother confesses, “passes my cunning” (12). Lucy’s manners are, of course, unlike Maggie’s because, says Mrs. Tulliver, “you may set [Lucy] on a stool and there she’ll sit for an hour together, and never offer to get off” (37). For instance, during a visit to the Deanes’, Maggie is so thrilled by her uncle’s musical snuff box that she rushes to hug Tom, causing him to spill his wine. Instantly, three adults scold her; from her
mother she hears, “Why don’t you sit still, Maggie?” and from Aunt Pullet, “Little
gells mustn’t come to see me if they behave in that way,” and lastly her uncle
remarks, “Why, you’re too rough, little miss.” This has a huge impact on Maggie:
the music is “chased out of her soul” and “seven small demons” take its place (79).
As Ermarth deftly sums up this issue, “Maggie’s physical characteristics—her
unruly hair, her unruly manners, her physical robustness as a young woman—all
inappropriate for a Dodson girl, generally convince her relations that she is
a ‘mistake of nature’” (587). With society always trying to box her in, no wonder
her passion explodes as Tom ignores her in favor of Lucy, the perfect one—the
result is a very muddy Lucy. Responding to society’s maddening preference for
such kitten-like women, Cather comments warmly on poor Maggie’s “inferiority”:

And haven’t we all had pretty prim little cousins like Lucy Deane, whose hair
curled naturally, and who were always neat when we were dirty, and mannerly
when we were rude, and who never tore their frocks nor dropped their fork at the
table . . . ? And haven’t we all just ached to push these immaculate cherubs into
the mud—just as Maggie did? (WP 363).

Of course, in her teenage years, Maggie enjoys taking long, un-chaperoned walks,
but she suppresses her rambunctiousness as an act of submission to help her cope with
her family’s poverty. For example, she decides to earn money for her family
through learning “plain sewing” (239), which requires her to sit for long periods
of time. This is something Lucy would never have a problem with, but it would
be unbearable for the youthful Maggie. Also, she no longer ruins her clothes.
Mrs. Tulliver even marvels that “Maggie should be ‘growing up so good” (240).
However, Tony, as we shall see, actually grows more unladylike in her adolescent
years.

Considering Cather’s objection to such willy-nilly perfection as Lucy’s, and
considering that Cather was a tomboy herself, it is far from surprising that her
color Tony, like Maggie, is restless and active. As an energetic child, Tony
wanders with Jim on the untamed prairie. On one occasion, Jim says of Tony and
her sister that “the great fresh open, after the stupefying warmth indoors, made
them behave like wild things” (52). Of necessity, in her adolescent years, Tony
undertakes the strenuous work of plowing in the fields. She revels in the opportunity,
although Black Hawk society shakes its head in dismay. In contrast to Maggie,
Tony doesn’t try to conform to society’s wishes in her later years, nor does she
concern herself with what people think. Confessing her unabashed love for her
atypical role, she has Jim feel her strong muscles after saying defiantly, “Oh,
better I like to work out-of-doors than in a house,” and “I not care that your
grandmother say is makes me like a man. I like to be like a man” (Cather 105).
This seems to make even Jim uneasy: “She was too proud of her strength. I knew,
too, that Ambrosch put upon her some chores a girl ought not to do, and that the
farm-hands around the country joked in a nasty way about it” (96). Jim also
observes that by age fifteen, she “ate so noisily now, like a man” (95). Not only
does she eat, work, and tan like a hard-working man, but she frees herself from women's clothing, something the young bonnet-hating, pinafore-rumpling Maggie would have loved to do. Thus, Cather sculpts a character whose unlady-like ways strongly mirror Maggie's; however, Cather's Tony is less affected by society's opinions, and her manly roughness only intensifies as she grows older while Maggie suppresses her outward robustness indefinitely.

The town tries to re-feminize Tony through scolding, just as everyone tries to "cure" Maggie of her boyish, untidy ways. For example, Jim observes that his grandmother "saved her from again being hired out "like a man" (111). As proof of society's prejudice towards women like Tony, Jim angrily relates that all the hired girls are "considered a menace to the social order" (151). This is because "physical exercise was thought rather inelegant for the daughters of well-to-do families" (149). Jim states haughtily that "when one danced with them, their bodies never moved inside their clothes; their muscles seem to ask but one thing—not to be disturbed" (149-50). Yet even when Tony becomes a house servant, she doesn't try to hide or lose her vibrant robustness. Full of energy comparable to the younger Maggie, Tony shows she is the exact antithesis of proper Black Hawk women by participating in rollicking dances. "When you spun out onto the floor with Tony," Jim says happily, "you didn't return to anything. You set out every time upon a new adventure" (167). When Mrs. Harling demands that she either avoid the dances or find other employment, Tony declares boldly, "I wouldn't think of it for a minute! My own father couldn't make me stop!" (155). Thus, Tony resists conforming to the norm of feminine inactivity in order to receive approval, unlike Maggie.

Their deeply passionate, rebellious natures are too closely related to overlook, especially in their comparable passion for music; but, here again, while Maggie often feels ashamed of her actions, Tony typically doesn't. One passage that illustrates Maggie's fiery tendencies begins with her "heavy disappointment" of being forbidden to go with her father to bring Tom home from school because the dampness outside would ruin her bonnet. Crushed at missing out for such a silly reason, she "suddenly rushed from under her [mother's] hands and dipped her head in a basin of water standing near—in a vindictive determination that there should be no more chance of curls that day" (Eliot 24). One day Maggie cuts off her hair in a fit of passion, thinking this will help people see her intellect more clearly. After this act, she feels "a sense of clearness and freedom, as if she had emerged from a wood into the open plain" (55). Of course, after this brief joy, she is humiliated when Tom begins to laugh, because if Tom thinks her silly, "of course everyone else would" (56). Since her passionate impulses are always met with disapproval, the love-hungry Maggie usually regrets her actions.

Impulsively passionate herself, Tony is again very much like Maggie; however, Cather never has Jim tell us that Tony agonizes over what he or society thinks of her passionate nature or her manliness. This passion is manifested by her willingness
to put every bit of her strength into helping her family, and by her ability to rise above the bleakness of penury. As a child living in extreme poverty, Tony is “always ready to forget [her] troubles at home, and to run away with me over the prairie, scaring rabbits or starting up flocks of quail” (Cather 30). Rather than whining, she relishes fighting with her brother “about which of them had done more plowing that day” (95). In her book about Cather’s reworking of the American dream, Sally Peltier Harvey astutely sums up Tony’s passionately unabashed self-actualization:

[Antonia] is a poor immigrant and a woman in a world of narrowly defined roles for women. But throughout the novel, she still ‘tries on’ various selves, and makes choices that extend her limits. She establishes more control over her own destiny than one might think possible in turn-of-the-century Nebraska. (52–53)

Hence, we see how Tony is both like and unlike Maggie, for although Maggie acts passionately, she is forever “frightened lest she had been doing something wrong, as usual” (Eliot 35) and is “always wishing she had done something different” (45). Because of Maggie’s “hunger of the heart” (Eliot 34), she “responds by becoming self-effacing and dependent,” Ernarth explains (592). Here we see how Cather’s Tony becomes overall more independent of society than Maggie. In time, though, these heroines’ passionate, impulsive temperaments contribute to their comparable downfalls.

Music becomes a powerful indicator of these characters’ intense natures. In his study of music in MF, William Sullivan refers us to the narrator’s comment that Maggie’s “sensibility to the supreme excitement of music was only one form of that passionate sensibility which belonged to her whole nature” (233). In a moment that speaks of music’s effect on her soul, she begs Philip to sing for her and then covers her face with her hands so nothing will distract her. Hence, Maggie’s response to music highlights her spirited nature. Tony’s response to music is very similar. As a child, she begs her depressed father to play his violin. In talking about music in MA, Richard Giannone observes deftly that a love for music “implies a spirited and sensitive nature” (113). After Jim and Tony dance to the jubilant piano playing of Blind d’Arnault, Giannone states, “the excitement” is “strong enough to keep [them] stirred up for some time afterward” (119). Jim says they “lingered a long while at the Harling’s gate, whispering in the cold until the restlessness was slowly chilled out of us” (Cather 145). It is quite interesting that Cather, like Eliot, would use music as a metaphor for her heroine’s passionate nature.

Perhaps the most subversive and vital quality that Maggie and Tony share, however, is their “unwomanly” intelligence and their persistent thirst for education, which is thwarted in various ways. First of all, Maggie adores books. Bob is a “knight in armor” rescuing a “dark-eyed maiden” (Eliot 233) when he brings her such bound treasures; and so is Philip, albeit he is a “tempter” in this as well. Yet Maggie is denied a real, classical education, because she is only a girl. In her study of three female authors’ responses to Victorian patriarchy, Dierdre David wisely observes that Maggie’s treatment of her doll clearly shows the burden of
intelligence. "The humiliated and enraged child," David notes, "punishes the head of the doll as she is punished for her own 'head,' for her own acute intelligence" (219). Naturally, she is proud of herself for being interested in Latin which "Tom had said no girls could learn" (Eliot 123). But Mr. Stelling arrogantly puts her in her place: "[Women] can pick up a little of everything," he says, and "they've a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow" (126). But as a young woman, she thinks to herself that "if she had been taught 'real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew,'" instead of a smattering of this and that, "she thought she should have held the secrets of life" and thus find "some key that would enable her to understand [. . .] and endure the heavy weight that had fallen on her young heart" (234). Still, all she receives is time in a "third-rate schoolroom" (311). Benumbed by exclusion, she remains unprepared to face a harsh world. Because Maggie's life has "been filled with so eager a life in the triple world of Reality, Books, and Waking Dreams, [she] was strangely old for her years in everything except in her entire want of prudence and self-command" (225).

Especially in this respect, Tony is very much like Maggie. She has an acute mind and thirst for learning; moreover, she too becomes thwarted in her educational pursuits (though for different reasons), growing "strangely old," lacking the knowledge to battle the world. In describing her as a child, Jake says "she's as bright as a new dollar" (Cather 10), a description which fits Maggie as well. When Jim first meets Tony, he can see that "her eyes [were] fairly blazing with things she could not say" (25). During this meeting, she at once begins motioning for Jim to teach her words. Showing the value she attributes to this newfound knowledge, she even offers Jim her ring but he misunderstands her motives, thinking she is "reckless" (26).

Later on, she tries to hide the horrible anguish of being obligated to forgo school, showing she also feels the burden of intellect that Maggie feels, albeit for a different reason. When Jim asks if Tony will attend school next term, she says with forced unconcern, "I ain't got time to learn. I can work like a mans now. My mother can't say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him [. . .]. School is all right for little boys" (94). A few short moments later, however, Jim sees she is crying. After several minutes of meditation, she takes his hand imploringly and whispers urgently, "Sometime you will tell me all those nice things you learn at the school, won't you Jimmy?" (94–95).

However, the scene that is most telling of Tony's appreciation and yearning for what Maggie sees as "real learning and wisdom," is that of Jim's high school graduation speech. Hunting Jim down after he speaks, Tony cannot praise him enough: "Oh, Jim, it was splendid! [. . .] There ain't a lawyer in Black Hawk could make a speech like that." We find out from Jim that she is "breathing hard, as she always did when her feelings outran her language" (172). Associating great learning with her father, Tony impulsively grasps Jim's coat lapels and exclaims,
“There was something in your speech that made me think so about my papa!” (173). When Jim says he dedicated his oration to Mr. Shimerda, she bursts into tears, grateful for the dedication and for Jim’s success, yet sorrowful for her own lost opportunities. Sadly, like Maggie, her hard life and patchy education leave her vulnerable. The thwarted intellects of Maggie and Tony are vital similarities, because both Eliot and Cather felt the need to champion the widening of educational opportunities for women. Interestingly, though Tony could have attended a school that was less sexist than those in Victorian England, she is ultimately unable to do so.

For one reason or another, Maggie and Tony endure periods of self-renunciation. In Maggie’s case, she attempts to renounce all desire in order to deal with the bleakness of her impoverished family. Because her family is desperately poor, Tony feels pushed to toil on the farm instead of attending school so that her mother can’t claim her brother does everything by himself. Both heroines gain a type of sustaining joy from these renunciations. However, Maggie is sustained by a sort of suicidal joy at renouncing her desires, while Tony’s joy in her physical work is more positive. For example, Philip deplores Maggie’s renunciation, calling it a “long suicide” (Eliot 268) and telling her “you are shutting yourself up in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism; which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dullness” the “highest powers” of her soul (266). Thinking she is usually wrong, Maggie, as Ermarth explains, “develop[s] a fatal sense of the sweetness of submission” (594) which is a “negative peace” (Eliot 311). In contrast, we have seen that Tony genuinely enjoys being manly. Yet she too suffers and is reduced to tears when she contemplates her inability to attend school. Though Tony’s submission is not as suicidal as Maggie’s, it takes a toll, especially in contributing to her downfall. Just as Maggie’s self-imposed starvation explodes into a “savage appetite” (268) for excess when she visits Lucy, Tony’s long-term lack of intellectual and cultural stimulation leads her to an overindulgence in music and to her eventual ruin.

At length, Maggie and Tony’s fragmented educations and fiery, impulsive natures combined with their long suppression of a hunger for “the greatest and best things on this earth” (235), lead to their downfall because they are naturally too innocent and starved to withstand the world’s barrage. If Maggie hadn’t been so used to being “wrong,” had gotten a firm educational foundation, and hadn’t subjected herself to a long period of self-imprisonment, she would have been far less entranced by Stephen’s strength and chivalrous charm. Kathleen McCormack takes up this line of thinking by emphasizing Eliot’s agreement with Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote that uneducated women are doomed to be “systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions,” namely chivalry, “which men think it manly to pay to the sex”—attentions which are actually just shoring up a man’s superiority complex (606). McCormack points to the scene in MF where, after Stephen rushes to give Maggie a footstool, she “found her keen appetite for homage quite fresh” (Eliot 339). “The implication here that a decent education
might allow Maggie to keep gallantry in perspective,” McCormack argues, “links her susceptibility to Stephen to her brain-numbing experience at school” (606).

Also, as Ermarth observes, Maggie is so “used to treatment that is indifferent and pre-emptive” that she is “at the mercy of such flattery” as Stephen provides (598). In addition, she is so tired of trying to fit into the world, that when she is floating away with Stephen, she almost wishes “that the tide was doing it all—that she might glide along with the swift, silent stream, and not struggle any more” (Eliot 377). In straining after a classical education which she never receives, and then in trying to subdue her desires to become more resigned to her lot in life, Maggie becomes unable (and a little unwilling) to fight any more. Thus, Maggie can’t resist Stephen any more than she can keep herself from enjoying music with “emotion that seemed to make her at once strong and weak: strong for all enjoyment, weak for all resistance” (Eliot 337).

Indeed, just as Maggie is unable to resist the “spiritual intoxication” (Sullivan 242) she finds while at Lucy’s, Tony is easily intoxicated by the musical activity of dancing after so long a “drought” of enjoyment and impulsively propels herself toward troubled waters. Working in the silent fields day in and day out, Tony is starved for cultural experiences, and music speaks most powerfully to her soul. At Lucy’s, Maggie’s longings awaken after a long slumber, and while at the Harling’s, Tony’s passion is again reawakened by piano playing and dancing at the Vanis’s tent. But all too soon, the dances become an obsession. In Jim’s words, she “hum[s] dance tunes all day” and breaks dishes in anticipation of the nightly dances. Moreover, “at the first call of the music, she became irresponsible. If she hadn’t time to dress, she merely flung off her apron and shot out of the kitchen door” (154). Now, after Tony slaps an engaged youth for kissing her, Mrs. Harling demands that she stop going to the dances or find a new place to work—we already know her bold answer. Recognizing why she can’t restrain herself, Tony says “something” has come over her and “a girl like me has got to take her good times when she can” (156). As Richard Giannone relates, “sudden freedom and pleasure carry Antonia away, as first great pleasures can” (120).

With this impulsive act, she takes a position at the Cutters and is nearly raped. Later, she succumbs to Larry Donovan’s pseudo-gallantry. By appealing to Tony’s sympathetic nature and lavishing her with “special” attention, as Stephen does with Maggie, Larry wins over the naive, big-hearted, and undereducated Tony. Larry’s “unappreciated worth,” Jim says with loathing, is “the tender secret Larry shared with his sweethearts, and he was always able to make some foolish heart ache over it” (Cather 226). Talking about how Tony falls for the sly Larry, Lena tells Jim that “she’s so sort of innocent” (200) and the town laughs at Tony’s worship of this rogue “because she was never a girl to be soft.” Unfortunately, her ever-tender heart combined with years of hardship and a sudden re-involvement in a musical “education” renders Tony too soft to see through his misleading attentions. As we have seen, Maggie encounters practically the same dangers. After Larry
leaves her, Tony herself admits that her overreliance on her heart—and by extension, a lack of a firm educational base—is her biggest fault: “The trouble with me was, Jim, I never could believe harm of anybody I loved” (252). Perhaps it seems too big of a jump to say that if Tony and Maggie had received the education they crave, they wouldn't have become fallen women; yet, as McCormack hints, hopefully, an educated person would be more self-reliant and not totally ruled by a heart too easily swayed by anyone who appealed to its softness.

Although both heroines are ashamed after their misguided romances, Tony recovers her dignity, showing that Cather felt confident enough to rework the fate of the fallen woman, whereas Eliot knew that such outright radicalism wouldn't work in her day. Weighed down by a guilty conscience, Maggie will not marry Stephen. Also, her decision to stay in town is more a symptom of despair than a defiance of society: “I have no heart to begin a strange life again,” she admits (Eliot 402). Tony also feels great shame. After returning, “she never went anywhere” (Cather 232), not even to see a dentist when her teeth begin to ulcerate. In truth, Tony falls much farther than Maggie, but St. Ogg’s probably wouldn’t have been able to muster any more scorn for Maggie even if she had come back unmarried and pregnant.

With the birth of her baby, Martha, Tony instantly finds the courage to fight her way back to respectability, not caring what people think. Marilyn Aronson, in discussing Cather’s heroines, underscores this point, saying Tony “gains a new sense of purpose” (11). The best evidence of this, Aronson states, is when Tony confidently tells Jim that “I’m going to see that my little girl has a better chance than ever I had.” Unabashed, she displays Martha’s photo “in a great gilt frame” in the photographer’s shop, though a more typical woman “would have kept her baby out of sight” (Cather 225). Tony also lives to find an educated, compassionate husband, and she happily raises a large family on a flourishing farm.

Maggie never finds any such thing to rebuild her life—she perishes before she has the chance of doing much of anything. The debate over the end of MF is one that never seems to go away. But why? Perhaps no one explains it better than Dierdre David, who says Eliot’s own life “leads us to expect more from her than we do from other Victorian women intellectuals,” and as a result, “we unfairly and irrationally [. . . ] expect Eliot’s learning, intelligence, and success to make her extra-resistant to her male-dominated culture” (164). As Gilbert and Gubar explain, most early women writers were forced to ascribe to Emily Dickinson’s counsel to “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant,” in that they created literary “works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning” (73). Susan Gorsky calls such writers “gentle doubters” since “outright rejections of the traditional roles of woman or the received picture of the heroine are rare” (29).

The ending of MF is gently subversive because “the ending destabilizes the Victorian conventions that the ‘dark,’ passionate woman must die, by breaking
the realistic convention that such a death must not seem culturally imposed, but be a natural result of wrongdoing” because then society’s crushing conventions can masquerade as God-given and thus indisputable (Wasserman 267). “We should remember,” Bushnell cautions, “that it is not the river that kills [Maggie] and Tom,” but rather “they are swept under by the machinery from St. Ogg’s,” a symbol of the destructive force of society’s narrowness (379).

Moreover, the ending simply reinforces the pattern of the entire novel because any joy Maggie feels is always followed by disaster. “Small wonder,” Bushnell comments, “that life seems ‘a stored-up force [. . .] spent in this hour, unneeded for any future,’” because “in a frustrating world, Maggie has only this awful hour of self-actualization, and as usual it must be followed by disappointment” (393). Society’s overall ostracism of Eliot herself for living openly with a married man is yet another factor that determines Maggie’s untimely end. We may expect more from Eliot, as David relates, but she wisely authors a big-hearted character who serves as a somewhat gentle warning about the evils of oppressing women. If Eliot had provided a way for the tarnished Maggie to thrive in the face of Victorian ideals, “the world’s wife” would instantly have turned a more scorching gaze upon Eliot, perhaps causing the book to fail altogether (Eliot 397).

At any rate, Cather takes up the cause of women in MA and Eliot influenced how she goes about it. Yet Cather was the type of courageous writer who, living in America and writing MA thirty-six years after Eliot died, dared to blatantly show that she disbelieved the typical dogma of patriarchal society. One factor that allows Cather to pull off such a character is that the novel is set in a wild, mostly unstructured land. As Jim says of Nebraska, it is “not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (12). More importantly, Tony’s subversiveness is also slightly contained by the fact that Tony is already the Other by virtue of being an immigrant. Now, if Tony were a wayward daughter of a Virginian or Pennsylvanian family, the primary and acceptable members of Black Hawk society, her aberrant traits would have been much more glaring and threatening.

Notwithstanding these factors, which help Cather “disguise” Tony’s subversiveness, Jim’s tirade against the close-mindedness of Black Hawk is very daring on Cather’s part. In addition, Cather doesn’t stop there because her fallen woman triumphs after years of hardship. The once-jilted Tony winds up happy, and, as Jim relates fervently, “she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one’s breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things” (Cather 258). Cather’s reworking of the fallen woman’s fate is still quite a feat, even though Tony is the Other in a largely untamed Nebraska.

After reading what Woodress has to say about the public’s reaction to MA, I have come to believe that the book’s aberrant themes were largely overlooked because the novel’s pastoral, nostalgic vision of the American West helped revive
a shell-shocked nation's patriotic sentiments. As Woodress indicates, the novel appeared when America was finally on the verge of seeing the end of World War I. Essentially, *MA* reinforced Americans' sense of pride in their native land, especially for its uniqueness and natural splendor. Oliver Wendell Holmes, for instance, seems to notice only the book's "unfailing charm," calling it "a poem made from nature" which "makes the reader love his country more" (183). Referring to Holmes's reaction, Woodress notes that "the renewed sense of patriotism that *My Ántonia* gave the old judge, who started his career as a Union officer in the Civil War, was an unexpected and unplanned by-product" (183). Woodress never explicitly says that this factor allowed the atypical aspects of Tony's life to go unnoticed, but such a conclusion is not unwarranted.

Eliot's influence on Cather is evident in a variety of ways: the heroines share strikingly comparable appearances, passionate natures, longings for education, and relationships with others; and they also undergo similar periods of renunciation, later becoming fallen, isolated women. Yet Cather, unlike Eliot, creates a heroine largely unwilling to buy into society's ideology and then bravely redeems her from a fallen state. The only disappointing aspect of *MA*, seems to be that, although Tony is emotionally and physically fulfilled, she never receives the education Jim does. To Charlotte Goodman, this is Cather's way of "lamenting that a single individual cannot experience the female maternal fulfillment of an Ántonia and the male intellectual satisfactions of a Jim Burden" (139). Still, *MA* stands both as a testimonial of Eliot's influence on Cather and as a widely subversive yet captivating text exploring the atypical roles women can occupy.
Works Cited


