

# Making Do

Cora and the “Holy Trinity”

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# Making Do

To manage to get along with the means available.



Independence on the Plains

Gathering Chiles

How Did Our Parents  
and Grandparents  
**MAKE DO** ?



# World War II



How Do We  
**MAKE DO**  
in the Twenty-first  
Century?





Many pioneer women  
also “**Made Do**” with  
the circumstances life  
handed them upon  
homesteading the  
Great Plains.



# The Gentle Tamers

Men settled the West, and women civilized it. (Dee Brown)





# Women Domesticated the “Wilderness”



# Women Brought Culture to Their Lives



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# *Women Found Beauty in Nature*

*The Prairie Is My Garden*  
Painting by Harvey Dunn





# Many Found Satisfaction in Their Work





Like many pioneer women of her era, **Cora** in Wright Morris's *Plains Song: For Female Voices*, also “**Made Do**” with the circumstances life handed her, and in doing so, created for herself a full and independent life.

# Student Response to Cora





Cora “Made Do”

Physically  
and  
Emotionally

# Physical Conflicts





# Victorian Attitudes Toward Sex

Cora “would have sooner spied on her father than glanced at the mirror to see her own nude body” (5)

Cora’s wedding night was like “an operation without anesthesia. Horror exceeded horror. The time it required her assailant to do what must be done left her in shock. In the dawn light she found that she had bitten through the flesh of her hand, exposing the bone” (14).

Emerson told the doctor, “Horse bit her” (15).

# Childbirth Difficulties

“The gift of life was holy and one paid for it dearly. . . . Toward Emerson she felt no personal anger, admitting to the necessity of an accomplice.”

“The pastor in Battle Creek, learning of her condition, referred to her discomfort as wages.”

“In the hollow at her side Emerson slept soundly, and she was grateful for his indifference” (23).



“Cora made no sound. . . . When [Orion] returned the child was howling, but the woman on the bed appeared to be dead. . . .

She was not dead, but in a place so much like it no one but herself might have drawn the distinction. She had lost so much blood that Mrs. Kahler marveled how a body so thin had managed to contain it all” (25).

# Making Do Physically

She had no more marital relations and no more children.

Emerson said, "What a woman needs is one thing, but what a farm needs is another. . . . Dimly she gathered that Emerson, in speaking as he did, wanted her to know that she had failed him. What a farm needed was sons. . . . He did not move toward her. He did not caress or strike her. He lay awake with his thoughts or he slept, or he snored, as if they had reached an understanding. Was she right in thinking he had spoken as he did to relieve her of the burden of his expectations?" (37-8).



# Her Family Let Her Have Her Way

- When Cora wants a mowed grass yard, Emerson responds, “I guess it’s your yard . . . But don’t ask me what you plan to do for horsepower,’ and she never did. It was her yard, it would be her grass, and she would manage to care for what was hers” (56).
- “Time had proved it was best to let Cora light the fire and start the day by herself. . . . Cora was so long accustomed to doing things by herself she found it irksome if someone try to help her” (71).

# Cora's Rocking Chair Comforted Her



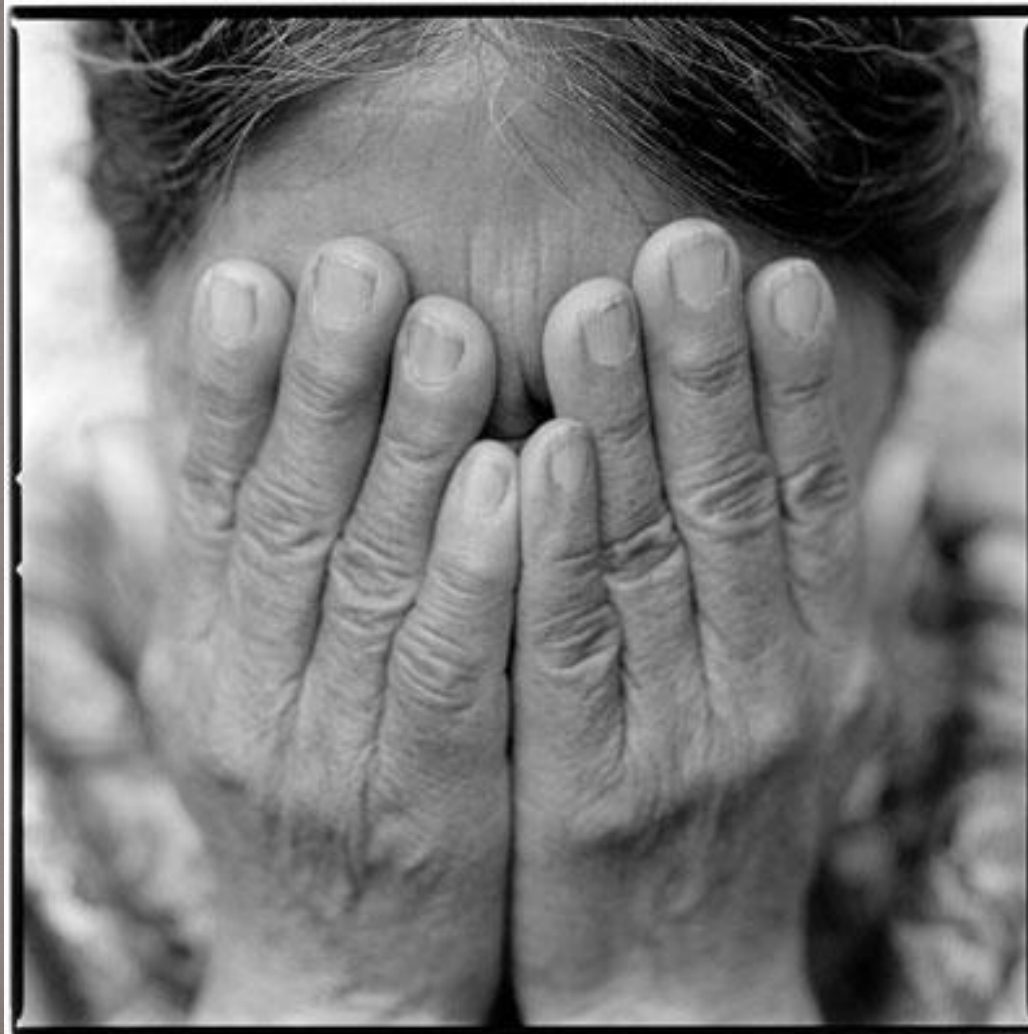
“ . . . rocking proved to be a comfort those moments she had to herself. Her arms crossed on her front, since the chair was armless, she rocked with both feet on the floor, lifting her heels on the backswing. Orion had brought back from Columbus a rug which she was at pains not to walk or rock on. The intricate pattern, in harmonious colors, provided the background for her thoughts” (30).



“The summer chores were demanding, each day long and exhausting, but never long enough for her to catch up. Too tired to sleep, she would sometimes rise from bed and go below to sit in her rocker” (35).

“As the summer ran down, Cora found time to sit, after washing the dishes, on the cool porch. In the evening hush, the chickens quiet, she could hear Emerson muttering to his cows and the squirt and froth of milk in the pail. Madge slept in a clothes basket, free of the tireless Sharon Rose, and Cora was free of Belle’s ceaseless prattle” (58).

# Emotional Conflicts





# Marriage of Convenience

“Cora was no prize.” Her father assured her that “a man with kids to raise, who had lost a wife, would see in her the virtues of a good hired hand” (5). Her uncle recommended marrying Emerson “if she felt no aversion toward him” (9).

Cora “came to see her that husband was a man of few words, and one unvarying mood . . . “His nature was like that of good livestock.”

Whatever Emerson’s feelings or thoughts in such matters [‘the breeding of children’], they were like hers in that he kept them to himself. (13).

# Homesteading Hardships

- “The building of the new house was delayed by the need to get the first crops in” (20).
- “A miscalculation in the tilt of the roof meant that the second floor windows were level with the floor” (21).
- Inside the house only the living room was plastered, the others ribbed with lath like a corncrib, looking more like a building that was coming down rather than one going up. . . Furniture was lacking, and colorful wallpaper, but lace curtains screened the light at two windows, with green blinds at the front on rollers. Who was to look at them but the chickens?” (29).



# Motherhood

“It was not Cora’s nature to handle or fondle a child if it would sit by itself” (28).

Cora “felt duties toward the child [Madge], and concern for her, but she was not so eager as Belle to hug, fondle, and pet her” (46).

“She was not affectionate. She never handled the girls as tenderly as she did an egg. If there was affection in Cora’s nature, it was not something she shared with people” (88).

# Making Do Emotionally

“Knowing that work was never done reassured Cora. She knew how to work, and asked only that she work to an end. Having worked, she had need to look around and see what she had done” (19).





# **Cora Gained Independence**

- HER House
- HER Kitchen
- HER Yard
- HER chickens and egg money
- HER modern conveniences (linoleum, electricity, bathroom, telephone)
- HER rocking chair

# Cora Enjoyed Life in Her Own Way

- “Cora had little desire to see more than she had already seen, or feel more than she had already felt” (61).
- Cora “churned the best country butter, she raised the best sweet corn, and her new white Leghorn eggs ran larger and cleaner than those from the dairy people in Columbus” (68).
- “I have never been beholden” (88).



“These were good years for Cora. Many things confirmed her feeling that the rightness of their lives was His rightness. Chickens, people, and eggs had their appointed places, chores their appointed time, changes their appointed seasons, the night its appointed sleep” (69).

“In the chill of the morning, or the cool of the evening, the air heavy with the drone of insects, Cora’s contentment might be so great it aroused her guilt. What had she done to be so favored with such peace of mind?” (70).

# **Wrights's “Holy Trinity”**

The three values that Morris believed made life “holy,” or worth living in the real world:

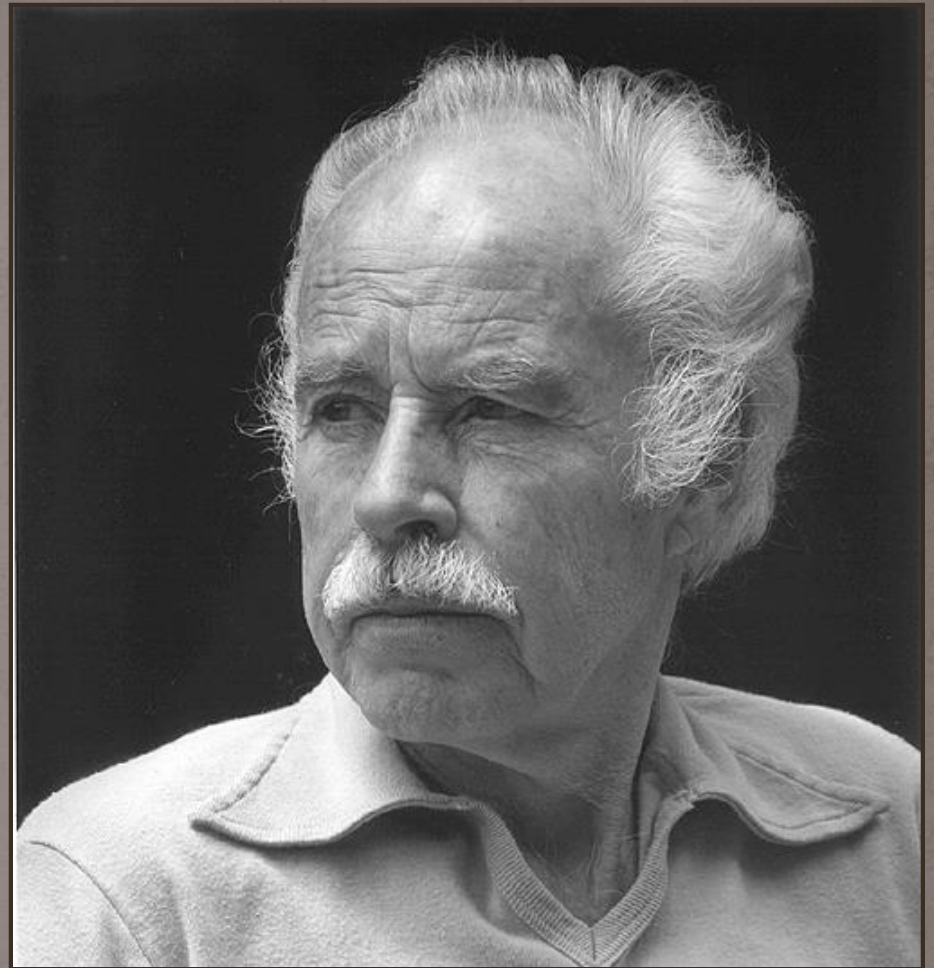
**Abstinence**

**Frugality**

**Independence**



“Character can be a form of passion. . . That kind of passion has made them holy things. That kind of holiness, I’d say, is abstinence, frugality, and independence—the home-grown, made-on-the-farm trinity. Not the land of plenty, the old age pension, or the full dinner pail. Independence, not abundance, is the heart of their America” (*The Home Place* 143).



Cora lived these values, and this made her life beautiful.

Morris describes her as a women who understood that the pleasures in life come not from what you indulge in, but what you do without.





# *Sabi* and Making Do

*Sabi* is a Japanese word that describes “the beauty of something that has stood the test of time and is still standing in spite of everything.

(Charles Baxter in the Introduction to *Plains Song*)

Worn by use and age,  
Cora achieved “sabi.”





# Cora's Legacy

“Aunt Sharon,” Caroline said with emphasis, “we don’t get married anymore unless we want to. We all had your example.” . . . I wanted my independence,” [Sharon] said, “like you” (196).

“As much or more than the child she had borne, Sharon had been Cora’s girl. Abstinence was something she understood; indulgence she did not” 216).

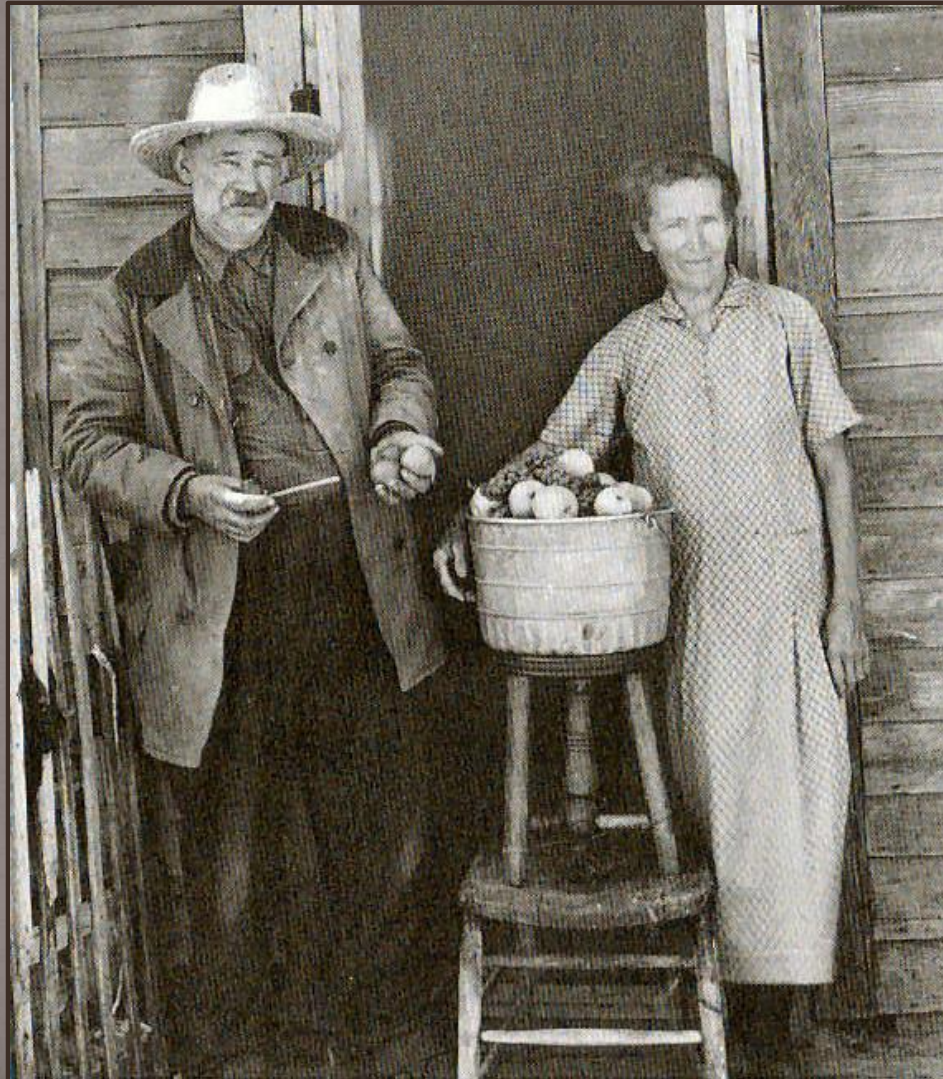
# Larry McMurtry

- *Plains Song* is a “great hymn to the pioneer spirit that values dignity if not sacrifice of those lives.”



Many Other  
Western Women  
in Literature  
Personify the  
“Holy Trinity”

# Mary in *Old Jules*





# My Antonia

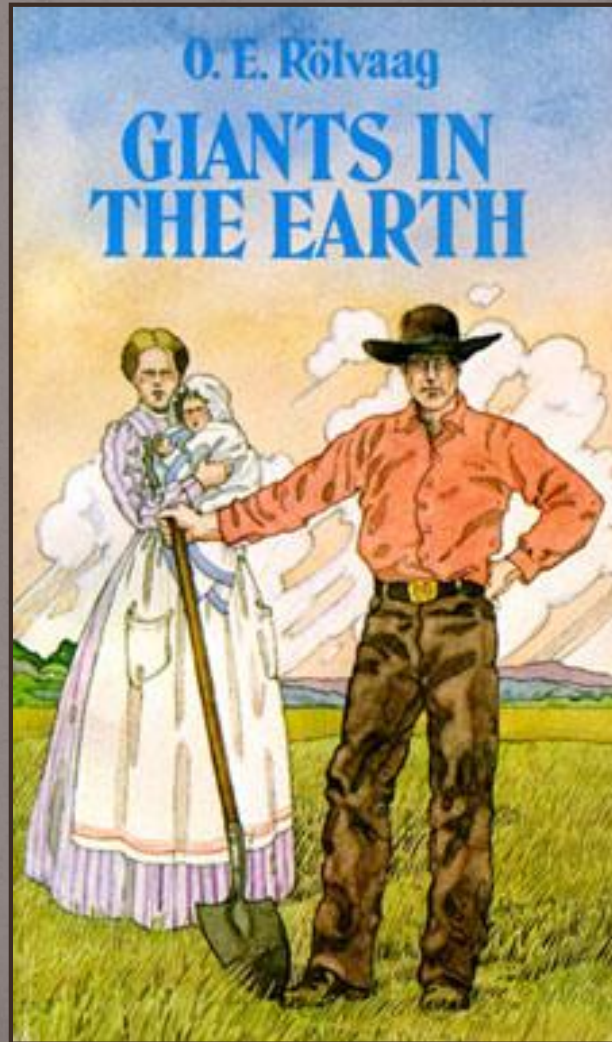


# Mary Holbrook in *Yonnonndio*





# Beret in *Giants in the Earth*



# Elinore Pruitt Stewart





# Mary in *Sandhills Ballad*



“Any woman who can stand her own company, can see the beauty of the sunset, loves growing things, and is willing to put in as much time at careful labor as she does over the washtub, will certainly succeed; will have independence, plenty to eat all the time, and a home of her own in the end.”

Elinore Pruitt Stewart





# “Independence on the Plains”



Independence on the Plains

Gathering Chips