

THE WILD AND THE TAME:
LANDSCAPE AND CHARACTER IN TWO OF CATHER'S RED CLOUD NOVELS

by

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Introduction

When the Cather family left their Virginia home, Willow Shade, in 1883 to live on a homestead on a sparsely settled Nebraska Divide that separates the Republican and Little Blue Rivers, nine-year old Willa Cather was, to say the least, in for quite a shock. Accustomed to mountains and trees, neighbors and civilization in general, Willa could not adjust to the treeless open space she found. "The land seemed to her as bare as a piece of sheet iron, or as she put it another time, as 'naked as the back of your hand.'"¹ Years later in a 1921 interview, Cather described her Nebraska experience: "I was little and homesick and lonely and my mother was homesick and nobody paid any attention to us. So the country and I had it out together. . . . It has been the happiness and the curse of my life."² Mildred Bennett has noted that "The impression of Nebraska which engraved itself so deeply on the young Willa may have been more sharp and enduring because in Virginia she had been more or less protected from seeing the actual struggle for survival. But in this new land of the '80's there was no hiding the poverty, the worry, the necessity for heart-breaking labor."³ James Woodress claims that this negative attitude toward Nebraska can be found in Cather's early short fiction but by the time she wrote her novels, "the ugliness of the western prairie had been filtered out of the picture, leaving only a retouched mythic landscape. When she suggests that she and the country had it out together by the end of the first autumn, she is foreshortening considerably. There is ample evidence to show that the glow that lights O Pioneers! and My Ántonia was a good while in coming."⁴ Indeed that lack of glow toward the prairie characters, as well as landscape, is obvious in many of her early short stories published from 1892 to 1912.

Cather, in her early writing, seems to admire her wild or spontaneous characters and yet she often destroys them. A good example is found in the short story "The Joy of Nelly Dean." Nelly, the heroine, is a wild young thing:

Everyone admitted that Nelly was the prettiest girl in Riverbend, and the gayest--oh, the gayest! When she was not singing, she was laughing. When she was not laid up with a broken arm, the outcome of a foolhardy coasting feat, or suspended from school because she ran away at recess to go buggy-riding with Guy Franklin, she was sure to be up to mischief of some sort. Twice she broke through the ice and got soused in the river because she never looked where she skated or cared what happened so long as she went fast enough. . . . They [the women of the community] had good daughters themselves . . . and they loved their plain girls and thanked God for them. But they loved Nelly differently. . . . I think they loved her for her unquenchable joy.⁵

But the years are hard on Nelly and she dies in childbirth. When the narrator pays a visit to see the new baby, the child makes a lunge for the flower on her hat. The grandmother warns, "'Don't let him spoil it. . . . He loves colors so--like Nelly.'"⁶ For Cather, untamed, spontaneous youth are delightful; nevertheless, they are destructive and often marked for destruction in her fiction. Cather will allow these characters to survive only if they change, become tame. Yet, Cather can barely tolerate those drudges who merely plod through their unimaginative, unmemorable lives.

Not only does Cather express contradictory attitudes toward the characters in her early fiction, but also she reveals a mixed response toward the landscape she describes. She very often portrays the land as harsh destroyer. A clear example is "On the Divide," the story of Canute Canuteson, a Norwegian immigrant who understands the harsh frontier he inhabits:

He knew by heart every individual clump of bunch grass in the miles of red shaggy prairie that stretched before his cabin. He knew it in all the deceitful loveliness of its early summer, in all the bitter barrenness of its autumn. He had seen it smitten by all the plagues of Egypt. He had seen it parched by drought, and sogged by rain, beaten by hail, and swept by fire, and in the grasshopper years he had seen it eaten as bare and clean as bones the vultures have left. After the great fires he had seen it stretch for miles and miles, black and smoking as the floor of hell.⁷

Here the frontier takes on the visage of Hell itself. Desolate, lonely, the prairie is barely inhabitable. Cather saw that these conditions of the prairie had devastating effects on the immigrants who had come to build their futures. One case which particularly affected Cather was the suicide of Francis Sadilek, father of her close childhood friend Annie. This man would play a key role in Cather's fiction as Peter in the story by that name and as Mr. Shimerda in My Ántonia. "On the Divide" vividly portrays how the land defeats the settlers.

Insanity and suicide are very common things on the Divide. They come on like an epidemic in the hot wind season. Those scorching dusty winds that blow up over the bluffs from Kansas seem to dry up the blood in men's veins as they do the sap in the corn leaves. Whenever the yellow scorch creeps down over the tender inside leaves about the ear, then the coroners prepare for active duty; for the oil of the country is burned out and it does not take long for the flame to eat up the wick. It causes no great sensation there when a Dane is found swinging to his own windmill tower, and most of the Poles after they have become too careless and discouraged to shave themselves, keep their razors to cut their throats with.⁸

The bleak picture of the prairie is also found in other Cather stories.

"El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional" shows the Solomon River Valley where

"it seemed as if God himself had only made it for purposes of speculation

and was tired of the deal and doing his best to get it off his hands and deed it over to the Other Party."⁹ "Peter" is the story of a musician defeated by the artistic and spiritual sterility of the prairie. In "A Wagner Matinee" Aunt Georgiana, a music teacher married to a man from the plains, has suffered for years on the stark prairie. When she returns to Boston to visit her nephew, she hears a concert and cries because she must leave the music hall and return to the Midwest. Her nephew sympathizes:

I understood. For her, just outside the door of the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs; the tall, unpainted house, with weather-curved boards; naked as a tower the crook-backed ash seedlings where the dish-cloths hung to dry; the gaunt, moulting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door.¹⁰

Critics like Woodress argue that Cather's opinion of the American prairie as harsh, sterile destroyer changed as she matured and drew away from her childhood home, that her distaste turned into an admiration for home.¹¹ But there is evidence that Cather's mixed feelings appeared in even her earliest fiction. In an article entitled "Willa Cather's Early Short Fiction in the Light of her 'Land-Philosophy,'" Sister Lucy Schneider notes that these stories "reveal that, during this twenty-year period, Willa Cather's feeling and reactions regarding the land are indeed ambivalent. Denigration and reflection appear in this fiction; so also do appreciation and acceptance."¹² Alongside stories like "On the Divide" and "A Wagner Matinee" Cather published "Tommy, the Unsentimental," the story of a midwestern girl, who upon graduating from high school, attends an eastern school. When she returns to her frontier home, after a year away, Tommy admits:

It's all very fine down East there, and the hills are great, but one gets mighty homesick

for this sky, the old intense blue of it, you know. Down there the skies are all pale and smokey. And this wind, this hateful, dear, old everlasting wind that comes down like the sweep of cavalry and is never tamed or broken, O Joe, I used to get hungry for this wind! I couldn't sleep in that lifeless stillness down there.¹³

Now, this "dear, old everlasting wind" that Tommy misses is the same wind that blows off the Kansas bluffs to destroy Canuteson's farm in "On the Divide." Both stories were published in 1896. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, in Willa Cather: A Memoir, notes:

But the general effect of the West had been overpowering--she had run into the same old shock she used to suffer at the mere size of it. When she was in the East, she forgot everything but the sharp, specific flavor. Once there, an unreasoning fear of being swallowed by the distances between herself and anything else jumped out at her--as in childhood, again. On the plains the wind is soporific. She was afraid to drowse and dream. Why did she have such feelings if she were to write about the country--unsuitable, wasn't it?¹⁴

These mixed feelings for the prairie land, which remained with Cather the rest of her life, carried into her novels O Pioneers! and My Ántonia.

O Pioneers! it is important to note, is told from an omniscient point of view, and on the basis of biographical information, it is quite clear that this narrator shares Cather's feelings toward the prairie. Cather also has chosen specific characters in the novel to voice her own diverse attitudes toward the land and its inhabitants. Alexandra, the novel's heroine, sees the beauty of the wild land; yet, she realizes how confining the pioneer's lifestyle can be. Also Cather admires, questions, and finally attempts to come to terms with the wild characters. Carl Linstrum praises Alexandra's productive homestead, but he nostalgically

yearns for the old way of life. Alexandra's mother, Mrs. Bergson, an old-world immigrant, dwells on the hardships of prairie life.

My Ántonia is told from the first person point of view of Jim Burden. Like Cather, Jim has been uprooted from his Virginia home and transplanted to a small Nebraska town. Like Cather, the narrator goes East after graduation and makes occasional nostalgic visits to his prairie home. Jim Burden expresses Cather's sentiments about the Midwest. Other characters in My Ántonia also give voice to Cather's mixed feelings for the prairie. The immigrant Cuzak is a fellow who has suffered the treachery of the untamed land. His wife Ántonia has made the farm productive, but she remembers the hardships that she endured in the taming of the land and of herself.

In a lecture on Cather, Eudora Welty notes: "What she has given us is of course, not the landscape as you and I would see it, but her vision of it; we are looking at a work of art."¹⁵ Here the key word is "vision" for, indeed, Cather's vision of the prairie land, as well as of the prairie characters, is a complex one. The Cather critics whom I quote in this study have employed various terms in an attempt to describe her vision: Sister Lucy Schneider and John H. Randall have used the word "ambivalent"; James Woodress, "retouched"; and Mildred Bennett, "mixed feelings." "Ambivalence" is a term that presents a problem: Cather felt both drawn toward and repulsed by the landscape and certain characters, but generally she did not express these emotions in her fiction simultaneously. Although "ambivalence" is used by some to describe her sharply conflicting feelings, the term, I believe, is inadequate to convey the muted contrasts as well. Woodress' term "retouched" is also inadequate in that Cather always had complex feelings

toward the wild landscape and characters and did not, as Woodress believes, intensely dislike her Nebraska home and slowly, over the years, "retouch" her feelings and thus her vision to create a more idyllic land and people. Mildred Bennett's term "mixed feelings," which I have incorporated into the thesis of this report, most closely expresses Willa Cather's overall attitude toward the landscape and characters. The reader of Cather's fiction soon finds that the author neither totally admires nor fully despises the Nebraska landscape or the people who settled it. The phrase "mixed feelings," although somewhat vague, describes more adequately than either of the other terms Cather's complete vision, for it allows for the expression of feelings in shades of gray as well as in bold blacks and whites.

Willa Cather's complex attitudes toward her prairie experience first emerged in her early short fiction. But these attitudes were carried into her Red Cloud novels. As this study will show, Willa Cather's mixed feelings toward the wild and tame are clearly reflected in her depiction of the landscape and her portrayal of the characters in O Pioneers! and My Ántonia.

Part I

Some twenty-odd years had passed from the time Cather left Red Cloud until the publication of O Pioneers! in 1913, but she was never totally able to filter out all of the ugliness, hardship and heartache that she as a child saw on that windswept Nebraska frontier. The prairie of her childhood somehow possessed the mature Cather and periodically drew her back home to Nebraska. Elizabeth Sergeant notes:

. . . after a few months in the city, she got wildly homesick for the West. She would dash out to see her "family"--"my mother and father especially," and the wheat harvest, and then flee back to Pittsburgh . . . for fear of dying in a cornfield. . . .¹⁶

Cather's mixed emotions about the Nebraska frontier are carried over into her art: in O Pioneers! and My Ántonia the untouched prairie is frequently portrayed as a beautiful, living symbol of freedom; yet the untamed land is also depicted as a heartless and defiant foe of the settlers.

In O Pioneers! when Carl Linstrum, a weak boy who eventually leaves the prairie, sees the land on certain quiet summer evenings, he recognizes its beautiful qualities. "Carl, never a very cheerful boy, and considerably darkened by these last two bitter years, loved the country on days like this, felt something strong and young and wild come out of it, that laughed at care."¹⁷ Carl's family eventually is defeated by the prairie life and is forced to move on. But when Carl returns after many years' absence, he still feels an appreciation for the beauty of the wild land.

Carl sat musing until the sun leaped above the prairie, and in the grass about him all the small creatures of day began to tune their tiny instruments. Birds and insects without number began to chirp, to twitter, to snap and whistle, to make

all manner of fresh shrill noises. The pasture was flooded with light; every clump of ironweed and snow-on-the-mountain threw a long shadow, and the golden light seemed to be rippling through the curly grass like the tide racing in.¹⁸

This scene literally vibrates with motion and sound; it is a pleasant picture because Carl is basically fond of the prairie.

Another character who loves the landscape is Crazy Ivar, the hermit. Living alone in a clay bank miles away from anyone, Ivar communes with nature. Crazy Ivar's country is even wilder than the land that the immigrants homestead. The buffalo grass is short and gray, the draws are deep, the hills and clay ridges rugged. In Crazy Ivar's country only the hardiest wildflowers, shoestring and ironweed and snow-on-the-mountain, can grow.¹⁹ This is not the pastoral countryside that Carl sees. It is wilder, grayer, lonelier; yet Ivar's country has a beauty all its own. It is here the wild birds come to roost, where the coyotes live; it is here that Ivar says he feels closest to God. The narrator describes Ivar's relationship with the country:

He best expressed his preference for his wild homestead by saying that his Bible seemed truer to him there. If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land, the smiling sky, the curly grass white in the hot sunlight; if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant.²⁰

Ivar's land perhaps symbolizes the greatest freedom that the prairie possesses. Too rugged to till, the only way it will be subdued by future pioneers is by pasturing it.

Alexandra, the earth mother of the novel, perhaps loves the land the most.

She had never known before how much the country meant to her. The chirping of the insects down in the long grass had been like the sweetest music. She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun.²¹

Alexandra views the wild land for the potential fruitfulness it holds and she feels a personal fulfilling relationship with the land's wild character.

For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geological ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.²²

Through pioneering souls like Alexandra the free spirit of the Divide will fulfill its destiny.

Sister Lucy Schneider sees the "land as good in itself--but as a good that affects people variously and which elicits diverse responses; the land as the field in which aspirations take root--sometimes to wither and die, but sometimes to come to harvest. . . ." ²³ Carl, Ivar, and Alexandra love the wild land, and thus can admire its wild qualities, but there are characters in O Pioneers! who are intimidated by the untamed prairie. They see it as a heartless, defiant beast that they must dominate or break. For these people, the land is the enemy that they must defeat or it will defeat them. These pioneers find taming the land a continual struggle: the grass grows quickly hiding the winding wagon roads; the wind and drought defeat the newly planted saplings; the grasshoppers riddle the corn; and the very towns themselves seem swallowed up by the endless prairie.

In "Chapter One" of O Pioneers! the town of Hanover is just a few scattered buildings thrown together on the landscape. Young Carl Linstrum notes as he drives homeward, "the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes . . . he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness."²⁴ And Carl is right; the land cannot change to suit the hopes of the immigrants of the new country. Instead it will encase them and smother them if it can. The very homes of the settlers, the narrator tells us, "were built of the sod itself, and were only the inescapable ground in another form."²⁵ In a way, these sod enclosures foreshadow the lonely, unmarked prairie graves that will someday hold the defeated settlers. John Bergson is one such settler. Bergson has come to the new country with the dream of owning his own land, but as it turns out, he is too homesick, too old, too weak to develop the homestead. John Bergson "made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame. It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods; and no one knew when they were likely to come, or why. Mischance hung over it. Its Genius was unfriendly to man."²⁶ For Bergson, "this land was an enigma. It was like a horse that no one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces."²⁷ This pioneer has suffered much in his struggle with the land.

One winter his cattle had perished in a blizzard. The next summer one of his plow horses broke its leg in a prairie-dog hole and had to be shot. Another summer he lost his hogs from cholera, and a valuable stallion died from a rattlesnake bite. Time and again his crops had failed. He had lost two children, boys, that came between Lou and Emil, and there had been the cost of sickness and death.²⁸

When Bergson himself dies, Alexandra wishes that she can join him and "let the grass grow back over everything."²⁹ And indeed, she and Carl do notice the pervasiveness of the grama grass. "Just ahead of them was the Norwegian graveyard, where the grass had, indeed, grown back over everything, shaggy and red, hiding even the wire fence."³⁰

Mrs. Bergson, who is left to carry on when her husband dies, can never adjust to her new home; she "had never quite forgiven John Bergson for bringing her to the end of the earth."³¹ Remembering her hard times on the plains, she cries, "'Drouth, chince-bugs, hail, everything! My garden all cut to pieces like sauerkraut. No grapes on the creek, no nothing. The people all lived just like coyotes.'"³²

And the new land has been hard on everyone--not just the Bergsons. Along with many other defeated immigrants, the neighboring Linstrums sell out which allows Alexandra to buy up the homesteads and expand. Then like an act of defiance, the land becomes parched and the summers "fruitless":

Then came the hard times that brought every one on the Divide to the brink of despair; three years of drouth and failure, the last struggle of a wild soil against the encroaching plow-share The settlers sat about on the wooden sidewalks in the little town and told each other that the country was never meant for men to live in; the thing to do was to get back to Iowa, to Illinois, to any place that had been proved habitable.³³

Cather's mixed feelings toward the land is also found in My Antonia. Jim Burden, the narrator, a lawyer who spent his childhood in the small Nebraska town, Black Hawk, sees the prairie as a wild and beautiful symbol of freedom. Jim depicts the sense of constant motion in the prairie landscape:

I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth

itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping. . . .³⁴

At another time Jim remembers the "seascape" of the open prairie.

As I looked about me I felt the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running.³⁵

On his first trip to visit the neighboring Shimerdas, Jim again notes the wild beauty of the landscape. From his high wagon seat he views the miles of red grass before him. The bare road he drives on winds about like "a wild thing" as it avoids the deepest gullies and crosses draws only at their wide, shallow points. And all along the way Jim admires the huge sunflowers that line the trail, like "a gold ribbon across the prairie."³⁶ On certain fall afternoons, Jim experiences the absolute grandeur of the prairie. He describes it with biblical language; its redness is like "the bush that burned with fire but was not consumed." He equates its grandeur with the death of heroes--"heroes who died young and gloriously."³⁷

After Jim displays his courage for Antonia by killing a large rattlesnake, he decides on his heroic victory march homeward that "The great land had never looked to me so big and free."³⁸ Jim Burden, like Alexandra Bergson, sees the potential of the wild land, its vitality.

There was only--spring itself; the throb of it, the light restlessness, the vital essence of it everywhere: in the sky, in the swift clouds, in the pale sunshine, and in the warm, high wind--rising suddenly, sinking suddenly, impulsive. . . .³⁹

But Jim has not always held such benevolent feelings for the prairie landscape. He is, after all, an eastern boy who has been transplanted to

his grandfather's homestead. The Nebraska frontier is very different from the Virginia he knows. He has a difficult time adjusting to the open space, the meandering overgrown roads, the treeless prairie. The newcomer notes that there seem to be no fences, fields, or even creeks and trees. He is threatened by the sense of infinite space and feels "that the world had been left behind."⁴⁰

Jim remembers the struggles the pioneers had keeping their newly planted orchards alive: "Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons."⁴¹ "The little trees were insignificant against the grass. It seemed as if the grass were about to run over them, and over the plum-patch behind the sod chicken-house."⁴²

Ántonia, too, recalls her struggle against the treeless prairie. "'There wasn't a tree here when we first came,'" she reminisces with Jim. "'We planted every one, and used to carry water for them, too--after we'd been working in the fields all day.'" Her husband, Anton Cuzak, a city man, used to get discouraged, but Ántonia persisted: "'Many a night after he was asleep I've got up and come out and carried water to the poor things.'"⁴³

As in O Pioneers!, the harsh environment in My Ántonia can prove too hard to bear for some settlers. Ántonia's father, Mr. Shimerda, finds his new life on the prairie absolutely unbearable. He is an immigrant who cannot bear the spiritual sterility of his new home, so on a blizzarding winter day he goes to his barn, takes off his boots, hangs up his coat, and calmly blows his head off. Jim realizes that the poor man had been homesick and "so unhappy that he could not live any longer."⁴⁴ The land slowly and stealthily wears away men like Mr. Shimerda until death is a welcome idea. Perhaps they

are too old, too set in their ways to adapt to the challenges of the Divide. Thus, it is the young, strong pioneers like Alexandra Bergson, or Ántonia Shimerda and her brother who possess the will and imagination to take up the plowshare where their fathers have left it.

Part II

In Cather's Red Cloud novels the land is a wild spirit that the pioneers must eventually tame; and in this rough and savage geography dwell individuals who appear as untameable as the land itself, and for whom Cather has great admiration. There are two basic types of wild characters: the eccentric and the untamed. The eccentric is shunned and feared by the community, but he is truly not dangerous. The untamed character, the truly wild, is young and reckless; his/her violent emotions and ungoverned spontaneity create the potential for harm and destruction.

In O Pioneers! Crazy Ivar fits into the first category of wild characters. His wildness is merely eccentricity. Because he lives by himself in the wildest section of the prairie, runs around barefoot, and is thought to have spells, his neighbors have started rumors about him. When Alexandra is growing up, she asks her friend, "'Did you ever hear him howl, Carl? People say sometimes he runs about the country howling at night because he is afraid the Lord will destroy him.'"⁴⁵

Even after many years, when Ivar goes to live with Alexandra, he still goes barefoot and he insists on sleeping in the barn. Thus the rumors continue. The region has become more civilized now and eccentrics like Ivar are suspect. Her brothers warn Alexandra "'He's likely to set fire to the barn any night, or to take after you and the girls with an axe.'"⁴⁶ Ivar eventually feels threatened by the gossip that he is to be taken to Engelside, the state mental institution. Alexandra, the earth mother of the novel, shelters the harmless old man and protects him from the community. These two characters are drawn together because Ivar, like Alexandra, has a special relationship with the Genius of the Divide.

The narrator sympathetically depicts Ivar as a kindred spirit of the free and beautiful prairie landscape. He clearly blends in with the wild land which is his home. The old man lives in a remodelled coyote hole in a clay bank; no pathway leads to his door. Like the prairie creatures, Ivar lives in simplicity. He does not believe in cluttering his dugout or the landscape with unnecessary litter. Another admirable characteristic is his ability to understand and sympathize with the prairie creatures. He protects the waterfowl that stop to feed at his pond; he comforts and mysteriously cures the ailing livestock of the pioneers. The narrator depicts Ivar as a kind and gentle, although misunderstood man.

But Cather does portray three truly wild characters in O Pioneers!: Marie Tovesky, Frank Shabata, and Emil Bergson. These three have certain characteristics in common--they are all young; they cannot control their emotions; and they ultimately lead each other to destruction.

Marie is a Bohemian girl whom the community has always admired. Her passionate nature and her tragic fate are foreshadowed by the description of her as a child: "a dark child" with "a coaxing little red mouth," dressed in a scarlet frock.⁴⁷ She is cuddled and fawned over by the men of the community. Like Nelly Dean in the short story "The Joy of Nelly Dean," Marie has brown eyes with "golden glints that made them look like gold-stone, or, in softer lights, like the Colorado mineral called tiger-eye."⁴⁸ Like Nelly Dean, she is the special little beautiful girl that everyone loves.

When we see Marie next she is a young girl married to Frank Shabata, a young immigrant she met while she was at the convent school. She had seen Frank, fallen in love with him, and against her uncle's wishes, had run away to marry him. When Frank had first met Marie, he was a popular young fellow

with the girls and had not paid much interest to the girl from Hanover, but when he discovered that her uncle did not want him to see her, his interest was kindled. More out of spite for the uncle than love for Marie, Frank had married Marie and now he farms the Linstrum's old homestead for Alexandra.

But Frank is discontented with his lot in life. He is not suited to farming, and unlike Alexandra, he is out to defeat the prairie. Frank "had flung himself at the soil with savage energy."⁴⁹ The neighbors note his savage nature. Alexandra sees Frank as "one of those wild fellows."⁵⁰ At another time she notices, "Even in his agitation he was handsome, but he looked a rash and violent man,"⁵¹ and she sees "discontent in his blue eyes."⁵²

Because he is unhappy, Frank makes Marie unhappy. Since Marie is always the gayest, most popular girl at parties, Frank easily becomes jealous.

In the first days of their love she had been his slave; she had admired him abandonly. But the moment he began to bully her and to be unjust, she began to draw away; at first in tearful amazement, then in quiet, unspoken disgust. . . . The spark of her life went somewhere else, and he was always watching to surprise it. He knew that somewhere she must get a feeling to live upon, for she was not a woman who could live without loving.⁵³

So Frank keeps his wife confined on their farm and, when the winter snows come, it is literally months before she can see any one of her neighbors. But Marie is not made for this life of solitude. She is passionate; she is ready to live. The narrator describes her as being "incapable of being lukewarm about anything that pleased her."⁵⁴ Once Alexandra asks, "'But can't she walk? does she always run?'"⁵⁵ Just like Nelly Dean, Marie does not care what she does just as long as she goes fast enough.

Emil Bergson, Alexandra's youngest brother, has fallen prey to the charms of his neighbor. He loves Marie and, as she grows more discontent with Frank, she turns to Emil. Finally the storm grows in Emil and he must travel to Mexico. But neither Marie nor Emil can shake their love for each other and this leads to the ultimate disaster: Frank discovers the two lovers in the orchard, and shoots them. At the end of the novel the two lovers are buried in the cemetery and Frank is sent to prison. All three have been destroyed because they could not control their passions.

Spontaneity is the downfall of these three wild characters. They do not reason enough to note the consequences of their actions. Marie does not ever imagine that she will be "stuck" on an out-of-the-way homestead with a rash and violent husband when she marries Frank. Frank himself cannot adjust to the farming life he has been thrown into by rashly marrying Marie. And Emil can only see that he is in love with Marie. He does not take into account the consequences of being in love with a married woman.

But as John H. Randall has noted, "Willa Cather considered spontaneity the trait of a great nature and gave it to all her heroines, just as she gave it to Marie. For her, spontaneity always involved extreme, total reactions, whether for good or for bad."⁵⁶ Marie's spontaneity, her wildness, is what makes her so special but it is also what leads to the disaster at the end of the novel. Certain passages show us that Cather admires these wild characters although they are ultimately destructive. When we first see the grown Emil, the narrator describes him as "a splendid figure of a boy, tall and straight as a young pine tree, with a handsome head, and stormy gray eyes, deeply set under a serious brow."⁵⁷ Here the narrator depicts Emil in admirable terms, yet the "stormy gray eyes" hint

at the boy's discontent and potential for ultimate destruction. Alexandra, too, has mixed emotions concerning Emil, her younger brother. She admires him, feels "no anxiety" about him; in fact "she had always believed in him, as she had believed in the land."⁵⁸ Yet his explosive nature does worry her: "'Sometimes he is so like father that he frightens me; he is so violent in his feelings. . . .'"⁵⁹

It is through Alexandra, who, as Randall notes, feels a "complete ambivalence toward the wild characters,"⁶⁰ that Cather reflects her own mixed feelings toward such characters. Why, Alexandra asks herself, should the affectionate Marie have brought destruction and sorrow to all who had loved her? "Was there, then, something wrong in being warm-hearted and impulsive like that? Alexandra hated to think so."⁶¹ She recalls the memory of "beautiful, impulsive" Marie and the tragic scene of the dead lovers in the orchard with "aching tenderness."⁶² Their compulsive natures, their inability to be "luke-warm" about anything, led to their downfall. Youth, Cather seems to be reluctantly saying, must learn to curb their impulsiveness and spontaneity, learn to compromise, else they will suffer severe, even fatal, consequences.

In My Ántonia, the farm girls--Ántonia Shimerda, Tiny Soderball, and Lena Lingard--qualify as the wild characters. These girls have grown up on homesteads under very harsh conditions. During their teen years they have hired out as servant girls in the nearby town in order to help support their poor farming families. Unfamiliar with the "civilization" of the townlife, they are healthier, freer, and wilder than their more genteel city sisters. Clearly Jim admires these three wild characters as he describes them most favorably in comparison to town girls. The country girls are indeed

beautiful; they exhibit a special physical attractiveness. They have a healthy glow about them; they are scantily clad with their dresses pinned out of the way of their work and necklines unbuttoned to catch a cool breeze; their hair is often left loose about their shoulders. These girls have not been threatened with corsets or pointed-toed shoes. Jim describes his first impressions of the country girl Lena:

Before I knew Lena, I thought of her as something wild, that always lived on the prairie, because I had never seen her under a roof. Her yellow hair was burned to a ruddy thatch on her head; but her legs and arms, curiously enough, in spite of constant exposure to the sun, kept a miraculous whiteness which somehow made her seem more undressed than other girls who went scantily clad.⁶³

There is something about the country girls that makes them disdain the rules of society. Jim remembers Antonia as a girl: "Grandmother made her wear a sun bonnet, but as soon as we reached the garden she threw it in the grass and let her hair fly in the breeze."⁶⁴

These girls possess characteristics which are commonly equated with the prairie landscape. They display the colors of sunflowers and wild plums. Their skirts blow in the breezes like the prairie flowers. They are a far cry from the anemic town girls who disdain them.

Physically they were almost a race apart, and out-of-door work had given them a vigor which, when they got over their first shyness on coming to town, developed into a positive carriage and freedom of movement, and made them conspicuous among Black Hawk women. . . .⁶⁵

On the other hand, Jim unfavorably depicts the Black Hawk girls as quite lifeless:

. . . they stayed indoors in winter because of the cold, and in summer because of the heat. When one danced with them, their bodies never

moved inside their clothes; their muscles seemed to ask but one thing--not to be disturbed.⁶⁶

If the country girls work hard as servants, they party hard as well. When there is a dance, Ántonia is sure to be there until the last song is played. In fact, Ántonia becomes such a socialite that Mrs. Harling, her employer, worries about the girl's reputation. Finally, Ántonia is dismissed because of her wild nature.

Ántonia's wild life comes to a halt when she goes to Denver to marry her lover, Larry Donovan, a train conductor, only to return a month later unwed and pregnant. When she returns, Ántonia is a changed person. Mrs. Steavens, Ántonia's neighbor, later tells Jim:

The next time I saw Ántonia, she was out in the fields ploughing corn. All that spring and summer she did the work of a man on the farm; it seemed to be an understood thing. . . . We never even saw any of Tony's pretty dresses. She didn't take them out of her trunks. She was quiet and steady. Folks respected her industry and tried to treat her as if nothing had happened. They talked, to be sure; but not like they would if she'd put on airs. She was so crushed and quiet that nobody seemed to want to humble her. She never went anywhere.⁶⁷

Ántonia will never again be that wild, spontaneous creature she once was. With the birth of her child, she, even more so than Alexandra, becomes the earth mother. Ántonia, like Alexandra, has a destiny. She marries a good man, bears ten more children, and builds a farm for their future. The tamed Ántonia is as bountiful as the land which she has tamed.

When Jim visits his childhood companion twenty years later, she remarks on her downfall: "'The trouble with me was, Jim, I never could believe harm of anybody I loved.'"⁶⁸ Like Marie, in O Pioneers!, Ántonia had been passionate, naive about human nature, ready to act without thinking

of the consequences. But she escapes ruin. By settling down, *Antonia* is able to provide a productive life for herself and her family.

Although the other two wild country girls, Tiny and Lena, eventually settle down, they never conform as completely as *Antonia* does to the norms of society. When Jim meets Lena in Lincoln, she is "quietly conventionalized by city clothes"⁶⁹ and owns her own dressmaking shop. Although she never follows the conventional path by marrying and having children, Lena triumphs in her own professional world and becomes a very successful, wealthy woman. Lena is a success because she is such a hard worker. While other girls go out to social gatherings, Lena stays home and pores over fashion books. A clear example of Lena's self control is shown when she and Jim pass by a candy shop and she murmurs, "'Get me by if you can.' She was very fond of sweets, and was afraid of growing too plump."⁷⁰ Although a small point, this incident tells us that Lena is not a spontaneous creature of the prairie any longer. She knows the consequences of a moment of rashness.

Tiny Soderball, another country girl and friend to *Antonia*, has been a special worry to her employers. This girl has a special affinity for travelling salesmen and the community knows she will come to harm.

They were all generous, these travelling men;
they gave Tiny Soderball handkerchiefs and
gloves and ribbons and striped stockings, and
so many bottles of perfume and cakes of
scented soap that she bestowed them on Lena.⁷¹

But Tiny, like Lena, surprises everyone. She goes out West to make a life for herself.

A boy from the hometown Black Hawk finds out that Tiny has gone out West with a definite goal in mind. She has turned an empty waterfront building into a sailors' lodging house. And as Jim and the entire Black

Hawk community find out, "Of all the girls and boys who grew up together in Black Hawk, Tiny Soderball was to lead the most adventurous life and to achieve the most solid worldly success."⁷² Tiny sells her boarding house for a profit, goes to Alaska during the gold rush and runs a hotel for the homeless prospectors. She is paid quite handsomely for her services and even inherits a claim which makes her a rich woman. It is important to note that all of Tiny's money has come to her through her wise business sense and a tremendous amount of hard work. She, like Lena, does not live a conventional life, but neither does she lead a frivolous one.

John Randall believes that Willa Cather was "unable to conceive of her characters as making the compromises necessary in everyday living. They either triumph completely or else, if balked are powerless to adjust themselves to the new situation and try again; they are victims of their own all-or-none emotional responses."⁷³ As we have seen, Marie Tovesky, Emil Bergson, and Frank Shabata are victims of their own ungoverned emotions. But Randall's statement proves inaccurate when applied to Antonia and the other two country girls in My Antonia. These wild country girls do adjust and make new beginnings. Cather admires her free-spirited, wild characters, but unless they are tamed, they are doomed to destruction.

Part III

Over time the wild land is settled by the strongest pioneers and it becomes a bountiful cornucopia. But through the taming process the prairie loses its romance. In O Pioneers! the time given for the taming process is sixteen years. Many changes have occurred in the time since John Bergson has died.

The shaggy coat of the prairie, which they lifted to make him a bed, has vanished forever. From the Norwegian graveyard one looks out over a vast checkerboard, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light. Telephone wires hum along the white roads, which always run at right angles. From the graveyard gate one can count a dozen gayly painted farm-houses; the gilded weather-vanes on the big red barns wink at each other across the green and brown and yellow fields. . . . The Divide is now thickly populated. The rich soil yields heavy harvests; the dry, bracing climate and the smoothness of the land make labor easy for men and beasts. There are few scenes more gratifying than a spring plowing in that country, where the furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length, and the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow. . . . The wheatcutting sometimes goes on all night as well as all day, and in good seasons there are scarcely men and horses enough to do the harvesting. . . . There is something frank and joyous and young in the open face of the country.⁷⁴

This is the country that Alexandra has always anticipated. She has always held that the country would become such a productive Eden. And Eden is perhaps a fit name for the idyllic land.⁷⁵ The trees which once had such a hard time surviving are now producing fruit, the corn now grows, the wheat and alfalfa flourish, the once scarce water is now supplied by the wind-powered mills. The roads no longer follow the contours of draws but are in

geometrical dimensions like the hedgerows and surveyed boundary lines. There is a planned, ruled order about the land. The endless prairie landscape has turned into a "checkerboard" of fields.

When you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds, planted with scrub willows to give shade to the cattle in fly-time. There is even a white row of beehives in the orchard, under the walnut trees.⁷⁶

Alexandra's fields represent what Henry Nash Smith in The Virgin Land calls the "garden of the world."

The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow.⁷⁷

Alexandra's farm, in particular, has become quite a show place. Through her willingness to experiment with new ideas--a new type of alfalfa seed, a different way to prevent disease in swine, an untried way to till the land--Alexandra has been able to live up to her father's wishes and till a little new sod each year until hers is the most profitable farm on the Divide. But it is important to note that Alexandra has not won the land through a sense of greed or power struggle. Unlike other pioneers who attempt to dominate the land, Alexandra has given herself to the land. She understands its way; she senses its vitality. It is through the land that Alexandra fulfills her own productivity. She is the earth mother; by mating with the land, she produces bountiful harvest for herself and future generations.

Although she admires and loves the new productive land, Alexandra cannot help but sense a loss which has occurred through the taming process. In a way she liked the struggle with the land; she nostalgically senses a time which has passed away forever. She refuses to allow one of her share croppers, Frank Shabata, to plow over the last few chunks of the original sod house Mr. Linstrum had built. When Carl Linstrum returns to visit, Alexandra explains that she enjoys the new land but that there has been her own loss of freedom in the taming process. For her, the struggle has meant more than the end product.

Carl Linstrum also feels a sense of loss when he returns to his childhood home and views the new prairie. True, he admits that Alexandra has done a wonderful job with the farm. "'I've been away engraving other men's pictures, and you've stayed at home and made your own.'"78

And yet Carl fondly remembers how it was when the land was young and wild.

"I even think I liked the old country better. This is all very splendid in its own way, but there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years. Now when I come back to all this milk and honey, I feel like the old German song, 'Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebtest Land?'"79

This loss of romance in the country goes hand in hand with the characters' personal loss of youth. When Carl was young, anything was possible. Then he still believed he could be an artist; now, during the time of the tamed land, he realizes he is just an engraver. Alexandra, older, too, realizes she has given up something by staying on the land. She has bound herself to the soil and for her there is no escape; she has chosen her life. It is only through her dreams for her younger brother Emil that her romantic notions still survive. It is for him she has tamed the land.

The world that *Ántonia* creates in *My Ántonia* is just as productive as Alexandra's world. *Ántonia* has turned her wild prairie into a garden. She plants hollyhocks around her house; chickens and tame ducks look for bugs in the lawn; her husband quotes the latest market prices for wheat. But in *Ántonia*'s world the orchard comes to represent the productivity of the land. When Jim returns home after many years' absence, he records a visit to *Ántonia*'s farm. He admires the two well-planned orchards: the cherry orchard with its rows of gooseberry and currant bushes, and the apple orchard which is carefully sheltered by a wire fence, a thorny locust hedge, and a mulberry hedge.

The orchard seemed full of sun, like a cup,
and we could smell the ripe apples on the
trees. The crabs hung on the branches as
thick as beads on a string, purple-red.⁸⁰

Again, as in *O Pioneers!*, we see the image of the enclosed garden with its straight lines, the even rows, a sense of a definite end. Domesticity fills the atmosphere. The rest of the country is following the trend of *Ántonia*'s garden. Jim sees the changes that have occurred in the years that he has been gone. The wheat harvest is successful as threshing machines smoke in the fields. The red grass prairie is being broken up into wheat and corn fields. Wooden houses replace the original sod shanties and dugouts while red barns and other outbuildings testify to productivity. "All the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea."⁸¹

But if Jim Burden admires the new land, he also feels deeply a sense of loss for his childhood and the way the plains once were. When he and *Ántonia* visit for the first time since he has been away, they walk home over

the prairie and he admits, "'I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there.'"⁸² Jim later goes to town and becomes depressed because the people have changed so or have died. Then he takes a walk on the prairie where the ground is so rough it cannot be plowed. The red grass still grows shaggy, and the autumn sky is still an enamel blue. He recognizes the river bluffs and the drying cornfields. The Russian thistles piled against fences remind him of barricades.

"As I wandered through those rough pastures, I had the good luck to stumble upon a bit of the first road that went from Black Hawk out to the north country; to my grandfather's farm, then on to the Shimerda's and to the Norwegian settlement. . . . I had the sense of coming home to myself. . . ."83

For Jim Burden the lost romance of his childhood is tied up with his lost romance of the land. When he sees the last bit of ragged red grass, the overgrown graveyard where Antonia's father lies buried, he is mourning for a loss of childhood pleasures, of picnics on the prairie, of talks with Antonia, of the day he killed the huge snake. But the wild prairie, like Jim's childhood, has vanished forever.

Part IV

In Section II of O Pioneers! the omniscient narrator presents the lovely domestic scene of the now settled and productive prairie.

They drove westward toward Norway Creek, and toward a big white house that stood on a hill, several miles across the fields. There were so many sheds and outbuildings grouped about it that the place looked not unlike a tiny village. A stranger, approaching it, could not help noticing the beauty and fruitfulness of the outlying fields. There was something individual about the great farm, a most unusual trimness and care for detail. On either side of the road, for a mile before you reached the foot of the hill, stood tall osage orange hedges, their glossy green marking off the yellow fields. South of the hill, in a low, sheltered swale, surrounded by a mulberry hedge, was the orchard, its fruit trees knee-deep in timothy grass. Any one thereabouts would have told you that this was one of the richest farms on the Divide, and that the farmer was a woman, Alexandra Bergson.⁸⁴

But Alexandra and the other pioneers who toiled long and hard to tame the land have paid a high price. They have forfeited, to varying degrees, their freedom of movement and mind.

When Carl returns to Nebraska after a sixteen years' absence, he considers himself a failure because he has become an engraver rather than an artist, and as a result, has nothing to show for himself. Alexandra, the richest farmer on the Divide, replies, "'But you show for it yourself, Carl. I'd rather have had your freedom than my land.'"⁸⁵ When Carl reminds her that a city man like himself has no real roots, no property to call home, Alexandra comments:

"And yet I would rather have Emil grow up like that than like his two brothers. We pay a high

rent, too, though we pay differently. We grow hard and heavy here. We don't move lightly and easily as you do, and our minds get stiff. If the world were no wider than my cornfields, if there were not something besides this, I wouldn't feel that it was much worth while to work. No, I would rather have Emil like you than like them. I felt that as soon as you came. . . . And it's what goes on in the world that reconciles me."⁸⁶

Alexandra sees the high price a pioneer pays when he ties himself to the soil. In conversation with Carl, Alexandra emphasizes the cultural barrenness of the otherwise fruitful prairie. She notes that she often feels like her neighbor Carrie Jensen, who "had never been out of the cornfields." The poor woman had become despondent and claimed that life was just "'the same thing over and over.'" After she had attempted suicide, her folks sent her to Iowa to visit relatives. Upon her return, she was perfectly happy to work in a world that was "'so big and interesting.'"⁸⁷

When Alexandra looks at her two brothers, Lou and Oscar, she sees two creatures barely human plodding through life much as they plod through their own fields. The brothers are two machines with only one purpose in life, to break even each year. Cather describes Oscar as a powerful man with tremendous endurance. He is an automaton, the type of man who could be attached to a cornsheller like an engine. But Oscar lacks initiative and imagination. "He worked like an insect, always doing the same thing over in the same way, regardless of whether it was best or no."⁸⁸ These brothers own their farms because Alexandra has divided the original homestead three ways when Lou married. Upon their father's death, the two brothers had wanted to sell out and return home, but Alexandra had refused, knowing that her father would not have wished that. Never close to the land, the brothers have only managed to maintain their shares of the original homestead, while

Alexandra's farm has continued to grow and prosper. These brothers lack the true imagination it takes to be a pioneer. Alexandra is the first to try a new alfalfa seed, or raise a hog in a new way, or put up a windmill. The brothers are too lacking in daring and imagination to take a chance on what they are not sure of. "They did not mind hard work, but they hated experiments and could never see the use of taking pains. Even Lou, who was more elastic than his older brother, disliked to do anything different from his neighbors."⁸⁹ When Alexandra's farmhand Barney notes--"Lou, he says he wouldn't have no silo on his place if you'd give it to him. He says the feed outen it gives the stock the bloat."--the earth mother replies, "Well, the only way we can find out is to try."⁹⁰ Alexandra is willing to experiment, to take risks, even if her unorthodoxy makes her suspect in the eyes of the community. But Alexandra is bold only by comparison; she is keenly aware of the "stiff" minds and the narrow horizons of the pioneers, even her own. "Her life," the narrator tells us, "had not been of the kind to sharpen her vision . . . her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence; like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there, . . . Nevertheless, the underground stream was there, and it was because she had so much personality to put into her enterprises and succeeded in putting it into them so completely, that her affairs prospered better than those of her neighbors."⁹¹ Alexandra's brothers, who lack in the necessary "personality," well illustrate her indictment of the stifling life on the prairie. They are cautious, dull plodders. It is their plodding, their lack of imagination, that limits the freedom and success of these two pioneers.

Anton Cuzak, Antonia's husband, is another pioneer entrapped by the frontier. Granted, he and his wife have developed the land into the

bountiful garden described in Section III, but he, like Alexandra, has given up much in order to do so. Unlike Antonia, Cuzak does not adapt to the pioneer life. It is through the strength of his wife that he has become the success that he is now. Growing up in Vienna, spending an idle youth as a furrier's apprentice, he had journeyed to New York, Florida, and finally to Nebraska where he had met Antonia. Their first years as man and wife had been difficult and Cuzak comments, "'Sometimes I git awful sore on this place and want to quit, but my wife she always say we better stick it out. . . . I guess she was right, all right.'"⁹²

But Cuzak is not a very good farmer. Even Tiny Soderball, from as far away as Salt Lake, confides that she has heard that Cuzak "was not a man of much force. . . ." ⁹³ Cuzak still gets very homesick for his childhood days in Vienna.

He was still, as Antonia said, a city man. He liked theatres and lighted streets and music and a game of dominoes after the day's work was over. His sociability was stronger than his acquisitive instinct. He liked to live day by day and night by night, sharing in the excitement of the crowd. --Yet his wife had managed to hold him here on a farm, in one of the loneliest countries in the world.⁹⁴

Men like Lou, Oscar, or Cuzak would have given up and sold out years ago if it had not been for the strength and imagination of the heroines, Alexandra and Antonia. But all the pioneers pay a high price on the Divide; in taming the wild land, they lose much of their own freedom.

Conclusion

In her introduction to The World of Willa Cather, Mildred Bennett describes Cather's varied response to the Nebraska frontier.

Her mixed feelings toward this world of bleak, wild prairie, where she lived from 1883 to 1896, her love and hatred of it, were the feelings of a sensitive child to a parent: she blessed what it gave her, in life-long friendships, in emotional release, and, in a more material sense, in subject-matter for her greatest writing; she hated it for the hold it had on her, for the acute longing she felt for it wherever in the world she happened to find herself. Employ it she did, magnificently; overcome it, never.⁹⁵

Cather's mixed feelings toward the land had begun the moment she had first arrived in Nebraska; her first ride over the rough prairie, she later would remember: "I had heard my father say you had to show grit in a new country, and I would have got on pretty well during that ride if it had not been for the larks. Every now and then one flew up and sang a few splendid notes and dropped down into the grass again. That reminded me of something--I don't know what, but my one purpose in life just then was not to cry, and every time they did it, I thought I should go under."⁹⁶ But before the first autumn the prairie beauty had captured Cather's heart as she roamed about gathering wild flowers, picnicking on the Republican River. Even after she had lived in the East for many years she could still feel the pull of her Nebraska home.

"Whenever I crossed the Missouri River coming into Nebraska the very smell of the soil tore me to pieces. I could not decide which was the real and which the fake me. I almost decided to settle down on a quarter section of land and let my writing go. My deepest affection was not for the other people and

the other places I had been writing about. I loved the country where I had been a kid, where they still called me Willie Cather."⁹⁷

Cather's complex attitude toward her prairie home is woven into the fabric of O Pioneers! and My Ántonia. Cather, on the one hand, presents the prairie as a devastating force with its destructive power over weaker immigrants like John Bergson and Mr. Shimerda. The author shows that its harsh winter, scalding summers, and multitude of various plagues can be disheartening, if not defeating, for certain pioneers. Yet Cather also develops a set of characters that represent her love for the beauty of her prairie home. Carl Linstrum, Crazy Ivar, Alexandra Bergson, and Ántonia Cuzak love the Genius of the Divide. They understand it and love it for what it is. The prairie for them is not something to defeat, but it is rather a kindred spirit that they must work with hand-in-hand in order to produce the abundant harvests.

Although Cather wrote fondly about the taming of the prairie, she grew discontent with the mechanization of her western home. Cather hated change, but neither the world, nor the Nebraska frontier could slow down for her. "This rage for newness . . .," she wrote, "is one of the things which I deplore in the present-day Nebraska."⁹⁸ She felt left behind by the march of progress; "The world broke in two about 1920," she declared, "and I belonged to the former half."⁹⁹ By 1918 Cather had already created her two Nebraska novels--O Pioneers! (1913) and My Ántonia (1918)--in which characters, like herself, are nostalgic for the wild, beautiful prairie land. Alexandra Bergson never allows anyone to plow over the Linstrum's sod home; and Carl Linstrum and Jim Burden spend their adult lives longing for the untamed prairie of their childhoods.

Cather herself was an "impulsive" person, according to Mildred Bennett. Her reaction to people, writes Bennett, "was violent--stormy as the tempests she so much enjoyed at sea or the winds that swept the Nebraska plains."¹⁰⁰ Again, Cather borrowed from life and created characters who were surely as impulsive as, if not more impulsive than, the author herself. Marie Tovesky and Antonia Cuzak are such characters. Spontaneous and caring, these young women have so much to give their communities if only their natures can be harnessed. They possess unlimited joy, they are imaginative, they are in love with life itself. But Cather, as a serious artist, came to realize that one must discipline the self in order to produce, and this is what her characters must do or they perish. If her wild characters direct their energies down the proper channels, they become very productive members of the community. Antonia, who never does lose her fire for life, learns to curtail her passions and thus creates a successful farm and the dynasty to inherit it. Marie Tovesky, on the other hand, does not learn to control her passions and, as a result, destroys herself and the two men who love her.

Cather could admire and sympathize with the wild characters even if they never become tame. Yet, the author never could feel any kind of compassion for the unimaginative pioneers like Lou and Emil Bergson, who do not love the land and who only work it in order to make a profit. If the author had bought a farm in Nebraska (a move that she had seriously considered), Cather would surely have found it difficult to sympathize with those real-life prairie farmers who worked only for material gain and never in partnership with the Genius of the Divide.

Her Nebraska experience was the great influence of Cather's life; from it she gained the background for her greatest literary works:

O Pioneers! and My Ántonia. In both novels she clearly shows her mixed feelings toward the prairie land itself and the settlers who inhabit it. When she died in 1947, she was buried (by choice) in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, far from the final resting place of her parents in Red Cloud.

Notes

¹James Woodress, Willa Cather: Her Life and Art (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p. 32.

²Woodress, p. 32.

³Mildred Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 139.

⁴Woodress, p. 45.

⁵Willa Cather, "The Joy of Nelly Dean," in Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction: 1892-1912 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 56.

⁶Willa Cather, "The Joy of Nelly Dean," p. 68.

⁷Willa Cather, "On the Divide," in Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction: 1892-1912 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 494.

⁸Willa Cather, "On the Divide," p. 495.

⁹Willa Cather, "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional," in Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction: 1892-1912 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 303.

¹⁰Willa Cather, "A Wagner Matinee," in Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction: 1892-1912 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 242.

¹¹Woodress, p. 35.

¹²Sister Lucy Schneider, C.S.J., "Willa Cather's Early Stories in the Light of Her 'Land-Philosophy,'" The Midwest Quarterly, 9 (1967), 77.

¹³Willa Cather, "Tommy, the Unsentimental," in Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction: 1892-1912 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 475-76.

¹⁴Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather: A Memoir (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1953), p. 79.

¹⁵Eudora Welty, "The House of Willa Cather," in The Art of Willa Cather, ed. Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), p. 4.

¹⁶Sergeant, p. 49.

¹⁷Willa Cather, O Pioneers! (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), p. 49.

¹⁸Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, pp. 126-27.

¹⁹Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, pp. 35-36.

²⁰Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 38.

²¹Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 71.

²²Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 65.

²³Sister Lucy Schneider, C.S.J., "O Pioneers! In the Light of Willa Cather's 'Land-Philosophy,'" Colby Library Quarterly, 8 (1968), 58.

²⁴Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 15.

²⁵Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 19.

²⁶Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 20.

²⁷Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, pp. 21-22.

²⁸Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, pp. 20-21.

²⁹Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 16.

³⁰Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 16.

³¹Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 30.

³²Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 60.

³³Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 47.

³⁴Willa Cather, My Ántonia (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 16.

³⁵Willa Cather, My Ántonia, p. 15.

- ³⁶Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 19.
- ³⁷Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 40.
- ³⁸Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 48.
- ³⁹Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 120.
- ⁴⁰Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 7.
- ⁴¹Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 29.
- ⁴²Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 15.
- ⁴³Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 340.
- ⁴⁴Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 103.
- ⁴⁵Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 32.
- ⁴⁶Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 100.
- ⁴⁷Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 11.
- ⁴⁸Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 11.
- ⁴⁹Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 146.
- ⁵⁰Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 120.
- ⁵¹Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 140.
- ⁵²Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 143.
- ⁵³Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 222.
- ⁵⁴Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 217.
- ⁵⁵Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 136.
- ⁵⁶John H. Randall, III, The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 78.
- ⁵⁷Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 77.
- ⁵⁸Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 239.
- ⁵⁹Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 117.
- ⁶⁰Randall, The Landscape and the Looking Glass, p. 85.

- ⁶¹Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 296.
- ⁶²Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 285.
- ⁶³Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 165.
- ⁶⁴Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 138.
- ⁶⁵Willia Cather, My Ántonia, pp. 198-99.
- ⁶⁶Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 199.
- ⁶⁷Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 314.
- ⁶⁸Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 344.
- ⁶⁹Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 265.
- ⁷⁰Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 280.
- ⁷¹Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 170.
- ⁷²Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 299.
- ⁷³John H. Randall, The Landscape and the Looking Glass, p. 85.
- ⁷⁴Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, pp. 75-76.
- ⁷⁵John H. Randall in The Landscape and the Looking Glass (pp. 71-75) devotes a section to the garden imagery in Willia Cather.
- ⁷⁶Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 84.
- ⁷⁷Henry Nash Smith, The Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 123.
- ⁷⁸Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 116.
- ⁷⁹Willia Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 118. "Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebtest Land?" translates, "Where art thou, where art thou, my most beloved land?"
- ⁸⁰Willia Cather, My Ántonia, pp. 339-41.
- ⁸¹Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 306.
- ⁸²Willia Cather, My Ántonia, p. 322.

- ⁸³Willla Cather, My Ántonia, pp. 369-71.
- ⁸⁴Willla Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 83.
- ⁸⁵Willla Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 122.
- ⁸⁶Willla Cather, O Pioneers!, pp. 23-24.
- ⁸⁷Willla Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 124.
- ⁸⁸Willla Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 55.
- ⁸⁹Willla Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 45.
- ⁹⁰Willla Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 89.
- ⁹¹Willla Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 203.
- ⁹²Willla Cather, My Ántonia, p. 365.
- ⁹³Willla Cather, My Ántonia, p. 327.
- ⁹⁴Willla Cather, My Ántonia, p. 366.
- ⁹⁵Bennett, p. xii.
- ⁹⁶Barbara Bonham, Willla Cather (Philadelphia: Chilton Book, 1970),
p. 9.
- ⁹⁷Bennett, p. 138.
- ⁹⁸Bennett, p. 148.
- ⁹⁹Bennett, p. 148.
- ¹⁰⁰Bennett, p. 221.

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THE WILD AND THE TAME:
LANDSCAPE AND CHARACTER IN TWO OF CATHER'S RED CLOUD NOVELS

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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In her Red Cloud novels O Pioneers! and My Ántonia, Willa Cather reveals mixed feelings about the Nebraska landscape as well as the characters she creates. In both novels the author portrays the Nebraska Divide as a beautiful symbol of freedom with its miles of shaggy red grass and its endless horizon. Although beautiful, the untamed prairie can prove heartless and defiant to the immigrants who have come to break the sod and build lives for themselves. At times the frontier life proves so unbearable that a pioneer commits suicide rather than continue the constant struggle with the land.

But, in spite of tremendous hardships, the pioneers in both novels tame the soil. The land becomes a virtual cornucopia spilling forth its produce. But the romance of the wild prairie has been lost in the taming process. For the true, imaginative pioneers, the struggle has meant more than the end product.

Cather also holds complex viewpoints toward her characters in these Red Cloud novels. The author appears to admire her wild, spontaneous characters and yet she sees their wildness as destructive. In other words, these individuals' most admirable characteristics also prove their most devastating. Yet, Cather cannot truly admire those plodders who have harnessed themselves to the plow in order to defeat the prairie. These are characters who have given up a much broader world in favor of farming the land. These characters, heavy and dull, are enslaved by their environment.