

THE IMMIGRANT ELEMENT IN THE NOVELS  
OF THE MIDDLE WEST

by

LILLIE DAVIS ZINNERMAN

B. S., Fort Hays Kansas State College, 1929

---

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

KANSAS STATE COLLEGE  
OF AGRICULTURE AND APPLIED SCIENCE

1934

Dell  
1814  
L.D.  
2688  
74  
1934  
Z.50  
C.2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
PREPATORY NOTE .....	2
ACKNOWLEDGMENT .....	4
THE NOVELS AND THE AUTHORS .....	5
THE IMMIGRANT IN AMERICA .....	26
The Lure of the Land .....	26
His Home Life .....	34
THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF THE IMMIGRANT .....	46
CONCLUSION .....	64
PARTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	66

## PREPATORY NOTE

The purpose of this thesis is to focus attention upon the novels of the Middle West published since 1900 which have dealt with the immigrant element, a middle western background, and, for the most part, the pioneering period between the years 1854 and 1890.

It has not been my purpose to discuss the subject of immigration from the standpoint of social science. I desired to make a comparative study of the ambitions, achievements, religious inclinations, cultural tendencies, and the personal and racial characteristics of the immigrants in the Middle West as described by the writers of fiction.

The term "immigrant element" used in the title of this work refers not only to those middle westerners who came directly from Europe to America but also to their immediate descendants.

The states referred to as Middle West include Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, The Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas.

Since all of the novels studied have appeared within the last thirty years, my purpose was to discover what apparent causes brought about their production in this period of American literature.

In preparing the thesis, I read novels by Upton Sinclair, Willa Cather, Ole L. Rolvaag, Bess Streeter Aldrich, Johan Bojer, Ruth Suckow, Herbert Quick, Edna Ferber, Anna M. Carlson, Martha Ostenso, Margaret Wilson, and Elmer T. Peterson. I did not attempt to read all of the work of each author; only such novels as were considered significant were examined.

The historical background for the novels and various criticisms of them are presented as introductory material.

L. D. Z.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The writer gratefully acknowledges her debt to Prof. J. P. Callahan, major instructor who suggested the problem and assisted with the work; thanks are also due to Miss Ada Grace Billings of the department of history, and to others who helped in this study.

## THE NOVELS AND THE AUTHORS

During the first quarter century of the history of the United States, there was an average of less than 10,000 immigrants to this country each year. By 1832, the average number had reached 60,000 annually. A tremendous gain in the number of immigrants occurred in the period between 1845 and 1850, due partly to severe winters in Europe and to the Irish potato famine. The total number of immigrants in the United States by 1861 exceeded 5,400,000.

Beginning about 1820 and lasting through the Civil War period, the migration waves brought to the Mississippi valley region many people from northern Europe. The Pre-emption Act of 1841 and The Homestead Act of 1862 were made effective by the United States government at a time when economic, social, and political unrest in Europe made American land with its western freedom seem highly desirable to the foreigner.

Not all of these incoming peoples, however, were lured to foreign shores by the free land fever. The young industries of America which sprang into existence with the close of the War of 1812 appealed to the unemployed artisans of the old country. Although by 1850 about 42 per cent of our foreign born population were of Irish birth, not many of

them came to the farming regions. They preferred the industrial centers of the East. The French, like the Irish, were inclined to stay in the cities and towns, although there are French settlements throughout the Mississippi Valley. Swiss settlers came as far west as Ohio and Wisconsin.

German immigrants who poured into America between 1820 and 1850 following the Napoleonic wars, were lovers of land. They started westward as soon as they reached our shores and settled on the fertile farm lands of Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Iowa. They started their farming venture immediately by building large barns and small log cabins.

"The German settler", says Russell Blankenship, "kept a model farm. He ditched and drained the swamps and low-lying fields, kept his buildings and fences in good condition, fertilized his exhausted fields, and introduced the practice of crop rotation. Within a few generations the farming methods of the Germans were in general use over the country."<sup>1</sup>

A revolutionary movement in Germany in 1848 lead by the educated class proved unsuccessful and thousands of the leaders were forced to leave the country. They were known

---

1. Blankenship, Russell. American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind, p. 30.

as "forty-eighters". Many of them came to America where they promoted their idealism and established cultural centers for music, science, and philosophy. The Teutonic element had a strong influence over leading western cities such as Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Cincinnati.

Samuel P. Orth in his history, Our Foreigners, says, "In the Middle West were whole regions where German was the familiar language for two generations. . . . Their artists and musicians and actors planted the first seeds of aesthetic appreciation in the raw West where the repertoire had previously been limited to 'Money Musk', 'The Arkansas Traveler', and 'Old Dog Tray'."<sup>1</sup>

Only a few of the sons and daughters of the early Dutch settlers of New York came to the Middle West. But since 1900, over 80,000 Hollanders have arrived in this country, the majority of them settling in the state of Michigan. Orth describes this recent settlement.

"The Hollanders have taken root chiefly in western Michigan, between the Kalamazoo and Grand rivers on the deep black bottom lands suitable for celery and market gardening. The town of Holland there, with its college and churches, is the center of Dutch influence in the United States. Six of

---

1. Orth, Samuel Peter. Our Foreigners. . . . p. 137-139.



the eleven Dutch periodicals printed in America are issued from Michigan."<sup>1</sup>

Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes came to the northern portion of the Mississippi Valley where the farming conditions were similar to those of their homelands and to which they adapted themselves easily and naturally. The tide of Scandinavian immigration to America reached its peak in the eighties. These modern vikings came directly to the upper Middle West from their mother countries, settling in Minnesota and the Dakota territories. They made other settlements in Kansas, Eastern Nebraska, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Northern Michigan.

Over 2,000,000 Scandinavians have come to America. The majority of them have had one ambition--the desire to own land which they could cultivate. According to Orth, "One can travel today three hundred miles at a stretch across the prairies of the Dakotas or the fields of Minnesota without leaving land that is owned by Scandinavians."<sup>2</sup>

In many instances, the Scandinavian settlers were instrumental in establishing units of local government in the Dakota and Minnesota territories. They possess an instinct for self-government and are skillful in its organization.

---

1. Orth, Samuel Peter. Our Foreigners. . . . p. 153.

2. *ibid.* p. 156.

Bohemian immigrants settled in the upper Mississippi Valley. They comprise about 9 per cent of the foreign born population in Nebraska. They began migrating about 1840 and they usually settled in colonies, retaining their native language and many of their old-country customs.

Other immigrants from southern Europe such as the Lithuanians, Italians, and Greeks have come to the middle western states in recent years but in much smaller numbers than to the sea coast states. Southern Europeans who have come to this section have settled mainly in the cities where they can find employment in industrial activities.

English, Welsh, and Scotch immigrants also found their way to the Mississippi Valley states in the home-steading days following the Civil War. Many of them filed claims to quarter sections of land and in some instances these farms are still in the possession of their descendants.

This is but a brief sketch of the immigration of foreign peoples to the Middle West between the War of 1812 and the decade following the Civil War. How does this panoramic view align itself with the geographical background or the settings which novelists have used in picturing the immigrant characters of this section some three-quarters of a century later?

Upton Sinclair, in 1906, startled the nation with his

novel, The Jungle. Aside from the interesting discoveries relative to our industrial system which the book revealed, as a result of his part in the government investigation of the Chicago stockyards, The Jungle brought to the realm of fiction a new element. Sinclair developed the story around a family of Lithuanians who came to the United States to find employment in the meat-packing industry of Chicago.

Since 1906, a number of novels have appeared by both American and foreign authors whose leading characters are middle westerners of foreign birth or are children of foreign parents.

Willa Cather's earliest novels, My Antonia and O, Pioneers, both have a Nebraska setting with Bohemian and Swedish characters. Bess Streeter Aldrich has also written novels concerning the Nebraska pioneers. Although her main characters are not people who have come directly from Europe, yet she describes a typical German family in A Lantern in her Hand and A White Bird Flying. In her most recent novel, Miss Bishop, she makes frequent mention of a Danish character. Mrs. Aldrich describes the immigrant settlements of Nebraska as follows:

"Many of these Nebraska homesteaders were of the old stock of corn farmers from Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, and Wisconsin. Many more were of foreign blood. These latter

because of their common language and background, tended to group themselves in the same regions. Thus, Kearney county became predominantly Danish; Phelps county, Swedish. The Mennonites grouped in Fairbury, the Bohemians in Saline and Butler counties, the Hollanders in south Lancaster. All were highly efficient farming people. But everywhere came the Germans, equally efficient and thrifty."<sup>1</sup>

Vandemark's Folly by Herbert Quick brings a Dutch boy from New York to Iowa where he develops a fine farm from a piece of land which was so unpromising that it was designated "Hell Slew". Quick also mentions Welsh and Norwegian characters in this novel.

Dutch farmers people the scene of action in Edna Ferber's So Big. The setting is a Dutch district lying southwest of Chicago, known first as New Holland and later as High Prairie. These people were truck farmers, as Dutch as the Netherlands from which they or their fathers had come. They wore wooden shoes in the wet prairie fields.

Dawn O'Hara, also by Edna Ferber, is concerned with German people who make up a large per cent of the citizens of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She relates this conversation between Dawn O'Hara, whose name shows her nationality, and Herr Knapf, a German hotel keeper of Milwaukee:

---

1. Aldrich, Mrs. Beas (Streeter). A White Bird Flying, p. 45-46.

"'Ach yes! ... a room we have saved for you--aber wunderhubsch! It makes me pleasure to show. Folgen Sie mir, bitte.'"

"'You--you speak English?' I faltered?"

"'Englisch? But yes. Here in Milwaukee it gives aber mostly German. And then too, I have been only twenty years in this country. And always in Milwaukee. Here it is gemütlich--and mostly it gives German.'"<sup>1</sup>

The author brings into this novel an interesting couple from Vienna. Frau Nirlanger of noble Austrian blood married a man younger than she and, in Austrian life, of lower social rank. The following conversation between Konrad and Frau Nirlanger shows Miss Ferber's clever method of stirring the melting-pot.

"'So?' he snarled, with a savage note in his voice. 'Now hear me. There shall be no more buying of gowns and fripperies. You hear? It is for the wife to come to the husband for the money; not for her to waste it wantonly on gowns, like a creature of the streets.'"

"'You forget,' she said, very slowly and distinctly. 'If this were Austria, instead of Amerika, you would not forget. In Austria people of your class do not speak in this manner to those of my caste.'"

---

1. Ferber, Edna. Dawn O' Hara, p. 75-76.

"'Unsinn!' laughed Konrad. 'This is Amerika.'"

"'Yes,' said Anna Nirlanger, 'this is Amerika'. . . . 'Now hear me! There will be gowns--as many and as rich as I choose'. . . . 'You shall learn that it is not a peasant woman whom you have married. This is Amerika, the land of the free, my husband. And see! Who is more of Amerika than I?'"

"The plucky little aborigine with the donning of the Amerikanische gown had acquired some real Amerikanische nerve,"<sup>1</sup> Miss Ferber concluded.

German people of the agricultural type are pictured by Ruth Suckow in Country People. She describes the thrifty German farmers who settled in the rich farming sections of Iowa, and whose children when they married became farmers in that same vicinity.

The setting for Margaret Wilson's novel, The Able McLaughlins, is also the state of Iowa in the Wapsipinicon country. They had come from Ayrshire, Scotland about 1850, and the author describes the McLaughlin clan:

"Since the day of the first McLaughlin alighting there had arrived, altogether, to settle more or less near him, on land bought from the government, his three brothers and four sisters, his wife's two brothers and one sister,

---

1. Ferber, Edna. Dawn O' Hara, p. 150-154.

bringing with them the promising sum of sixty-nine children, all valiant enemies of quietness and the fleeing rattle-snakes."<sup>1</sup>

One of the young McLaughlin boys was musically inclined and he made up this song about his neighbors:

"The Mc Whees, the Mc Nabs, the Mc Norkels,  
The Gillicuddies, the McElhineys, the McDowells,  
The Whannels, the McTaggerts, the Strutherers,  
The Stevensons, the McLaughlins, and the Sprouls."<sup>2</sup>

Giants In the Earth and Peder Victorious are novels based upon a Norwegian settlement in the Dakota Territory in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Irish and Swedish settlers are also mentioned in these prairie sagas by O. L. Rolvaag.

Johan Bojer, a Norwegian novelist, uses this same setting for The Emigrants, a novel divided into two distinct parts. The first part occurs in Norway and in it, Bojer introduces the characters in their native environment, giving their social background and their reasons for wishing to migrate to America. The second part gives their experiences in founding homes in the new country.

---

1. Wilson, Margaret. The Able McLaughlins, p. 2.

2. *ibid.* p. 20.

The fact that The Emigrants and Giants In The Earth are so much alike in their descriptions of Norwegian immigrants to America gives the reader the feeling that the statements are authentic. The similarity startled both authors but the fact that Rolvaag's novel was in the hands of Norwegian book dealers a little better than a month before Bojer's book appeared is conclusive evidence that neither author plagiarized the other.

Martha Ostenso received the Pictorial Review Prize in 1925 for Wild Geese, a novel which relates the story of a Scandinavian family living in the Lake district of Manitoba, Canada. It has not the breadth of view nor the classic qualities of Rolvaag's novels. It deals more intimately with the lives of the characters.

Swedish pioneers in Kansas with their varied and interesting experiences furnished material for Anna M. Carlson's The Heritage of the Bluestem, and for the very recent novel, Trumpets West, by Elmer T. Peterson. A review of Trumpets West in the Kansas City Star, Saturday, March 31, 1934 says, in part:

"The story sketches the lives of the Sigurd Andreens through three generations, from the landing in America of the original Swedish immigrant ancestor to the flight of the great-grandson still onward into the sunset, on a non-



stop airplane crossing of the Pacific. As an undertone to the adventure of living, as exemplified in the account of the Andreens, the reader is conscious of the rhythmic tramp of feet in the constant march of mankind into the West. The trumpets blow the same valiant note of the pioneer through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as they did when Ghengis Khan blew the signal for his followers to move toward Europe."

The reasons for suddenly thrusting the life stories of the foreign born Americans into the whirlpool of fiction material cannot be stated definitely. Perhaps the novelists themselves could not explain the causes; they may have had no specific purpose in doing so.

But the fact that novels featuring Scandinavian, German, Dutch, Scottish, Bohemian and other immigrant characters have appeared in rapid succession within a short period of twenty-five years, causes one to seek the underlying causes which have influenced their production.

In the first place, perhaps the World War broke down old prejudices between native and foreign born citizens to the extent that the author's pen need no longer fear to give foreign names a leading place in the list of characters of an American novel.

The amalgamation of our foreign population was con-

sidered a critical problem by sociologists during the World Conflict beginning in 1914. Prior to the War with its taunts and persecutions, the majority of the adopted citizens of the Middle West had long ago forgotten their foreign ancestry and had taken it for granted that they were a part of America. Had not their plows turned some of the first furrows in its native sod? Had they not established towns, built roads, welcomed the first locomotives, and worshipped at the shrine of Abraham Lincoln?

But if all these experiences and many more were insufficient evidence of their desire to be a part of American history, they were ready in 1917 to offer their sons on the altar of patriotism. They were willing to make the supreme sacrifice but they sometimes resented the implications of their native born neighbors that they were not Americans dying for America.

The renewed interest in our foreign population awakened by the War has no doubt influenced the recent fiction of the Middle West. At any rate, many novels have been written since 1917 whose stories have been woven around the lives of the prairie pioneers of foreign birth or of direct European origin.

Again, a change in the interests of reading people may have been a factor in the production of novels with an im-

migrant element. A greater demand in modern times for books of a biographical nature has acquainted thousands of readers with the interesting experiences of some of our naturalized citizens in becoming Americans. And it is but an em's distance between the strictly biographical books such as The Promised Land by Mary Antin or Bok's The Americanization of Edward Bok and Rolvaag's novel, Giants in the Earth.

Or it may be that the great wave of realistic thinking and writing which swept the world at the beginning of the twentieth century added this new theme to the epic of the plains. Under the spell of the realistic attitude, novelists have seized upon the pioneering experiences of early settlers in the Middle West as a rich field for exploitation. Here they can find in detailed rawness and simplicity, the epic material about which realistic tales can be told.

It is fortunate that during the last quarter century, this literary bonanza has been utilized, because just as surely as Twain's Mississippi river life is a thing of the past, so is Garland's Border Country slipping beyond the ken of the chronicler. That immigrant characters chanced to inhabit portions of this region is sufficient explanation as to why they figure in the pages of contemporary

realistic American fiction.

A theme which realistic writers enjoy using is the struggle of man with his environment. In discussing the work of Willa Cather, Blankenship offers this critical explanation:

"To many Willa Cather is distinctly the novelist of the Bohemian and Scandinavian immigrants in rural Nebraska. Such an estimate is misleading, for it utterly disregards all except three of the novels, and in these three Miss Cather's interest was surely not in the immigrant as a sociological figure. . . . First and last Miss Cather is interested in the clash of character and environment. . . . It is quite possible that an original interest in simple, almost primitive people struggling with their environment made Miss Cather utilize the immigrant in some of her early work."<sup>1</sup>

Blankenship points out that this struggle with environment gave Sinclair the necessary atmosphere for his story about the Lithuanian family in Chicago.

"The Jungle has tremendous power. The accounts of conditions in the packing plants are vivid enough in all conscience, but the finest thing in the book is the sympa-

---

1. Blankenship, Russell. American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind, p. 676-677.

thetic treatment of the ignorant and helpless workers, exploited and debauched by brutal superiors, who in turn are fast in the grip of a callous industrial system."<sup>1</sup>

Earnest Elmo Calkins in a recent article published in The Atlantic Monthly, claims that America is going through a period of homesickness; that the mad whirl of modern life has not been conducive to happiness so we are trying to escape it by turning back the pages of history that we may see what we were doing, thinking, saying, wearing, and drinking, ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. Recent books that show this trend, according to Calkins, are Only Yesterday, Our Times, As the Earth Turns, and The Farm.<sup>2</sup>

This homesick feeling may have been one incentive that urged Rolvaag, Quick, Peterson, and Miss Carlson to turn away from municipalities with their grand hotels long enough to enjoy, retrospectively, the journeys of conestogas through the bluestem.

If, then, the nation is celebrating an extended and universal "Grandparents' Day", many middle westerners must revert to a foreign tongue and produce a mental European

---

1. Blankenship, Russell. American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind, p. 554.

2. Calkins, Earnest Elmo. The Atlantic Monthly, April 1934.

background if they are to enjoy the family reminiscences.

The folk idea which has been rapidly growing in America may lie back of novels featuring immigrant pioneers. Ruth Suckow says:

"The folk spirit is the basic, unifying element of that intellectual and aesthetic confusion--that bewilderment of variety--of which we are hearing so much just now. This, for Americans, of whatever race, is a return to their fathers. In the folk spirit, with its directness, its simplicity, its intimacy, and its broad generosity, the family raciness of its history bound up with the American soil, its only half-used power, the possibilities are rich; and the chief of these is a greater and greater inclusiveness."<sup>1</sup>

It is altogether probable then, that many influences have swept the foreign born and their descendants into the field of modern fiction; the dying out of racial prejudices, the discovery that their life stories are rich in realistic material, a fad for recalling a happier though more primitive yesterday, and the growing interest in a folk lore for America.

Biographical facts indicate that writers of novels which include immigrant characters have natural qualifi-

---

1. Suckow, Ruth. Scribner's Magazine. Sept. 1930.

cations for their work in that they are either of foreign parentage themselves, or they have lived among immigrant settlers of this country. Willa Cather, Edna Ferber, Ruth Suckow, Bess Streeter Aldrich, Herbert Quick, Margaret Wilson, Anna Carlson, and Elmer Peterson were either born in the Middle West or have spent a major portion of their lives there.

Ole L. Rolvaag was born in Helgeland, Norway but came to America at the age of twenty, and since then he has lived in South Dakota and Minnesota.

Martha Ostense was brought to America in infancy from Bergen, Norway and was educated in the public schools of Minnesota and the University of Manitoba.

America cannot claim Johan Bojer whose birth place was near Trondhjem, Norway and who has lived in his native country most of his life. However, his novel, The Emigrants, is distinctly a picture of pioneer life in Middle Western America.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to discuss whether or not the novels mentioned will live in American literature. Only Time can answer that.

If recognition by the cultured class of readers is a criterion by which to judge the future status of a book, perhaps at least a few of these novels will stand the test

of years. That they have this recognition is evident from the fact that their titles appear on reading lists for secondary schools and colleges; some have been granted prizes by literary organizations, and many have been translated into several foreign languages.

It has already been shown that the writers were very closely associated with their subject matter. In his estimate of literary values, John Burroughs offered the following paragraph as one of his explanations of what he considered the best literature:

"Another thing is true of the best literature; we cannot separate our pleasure and profit in the subject-matter from our pleasure and profit in the personality of the writer. . . . Where there is no distinct personal flavor to the page, no stamp of a new individual force, we soon tire of it. The savor of every true literary production comes from the man himself. Hence, one may say that the literary quality seems to arise from a certain vital relation of the writer with subject matter."<sup>1</sup>

Arnold Bennett made a similar statement:

"The makers of literature are those who have seen and felt the miraculous interestingness of the universe. And

---

1. Burroughs, John. Literary Values and other Papers, p. 13.



the greatest makers of literature are those whose vision has been the widest, and whose feeling has been the most intense."<sup>1</sup>

And still another quotation, this time from Russell Blankenship, is predictive:

"The poems of Carl Sandburg and the very significant novels, Giants In The Earth and Peder Victorious, by O. L. Rolvaag are great portents of the future of American literature in the hands of Scandinavians. That the Norsemen can write great novels and dramas is proved by the work of Ibsen, Bjornson, Strindberg, Bojer, Undset, Hamsun, Hexo, and others. . . . There is no reason for thinking that the Scandinavians in America who attempt writing will abandon any of the characteristics that ennoble the literature of the mother countries."<sup>2</sup>

Louis Kroninberger in a critical review praised Willa Cather's first period of books which contain immigrant characters and the pioneering element. Kroninberger doubtless met much opposition from other critics when he voiced his preference for My Antonia and O, Pioneers over her later work in the following discussion of them:

---

1. Bennett, Arnold. Literary Taste: How to Form It, p. 11-12.

2. Blankenship, Russell. American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind, p. 40.

"There is something Virgilian about them (it is not for nothing that Miss Cather's fiction is full of Virgilian tags and echoes); Miss Cather, like Virgil, has treated essentially Homeric material, not with straightforward vigour, but with a peculiar nostalgia and humaneness and sense of retrospection. . . . All her later work is distinctly minor, pale, beside the rich earthiness of the earlier novels, thin beside their vibrant sturdiness, sterile where they were fecund."<sup>1</sup>

These few quotations are suggestive--not conclusive. Regardless of whether the novels under discussion later become classic literature or not, no one can deny that they are widely read today and that at least the present generation of readers can understand the immigrant American better if they add to the historical data concerning him, those emotional and vital characteristics which the fictionists give him; and which, after all, portray the real man.

The next two parts of this thesis are an endeavor to show how the novelists have traced this emotional thread through the lives of their characters, and to show by comparative study that the thread has many strands whose texture remains much the same.

---

1. Kroninberger, Louis. Bookman, Oct. 1931.

## THE IMMIGRANT IN AMERICA

### The Lure of the Land

When settlers from overseas poured into the original thirteen colonies along the Atlantic sea coast, they had two main objectives in mind--political and religious freedom. The clearing of the land and the cultivation of the soil were activities which necessity forced upon them.

Immigrants who came to the great Middle West in the nineteenth century were also in search of a place where they might enjoy religious and political freedom but they had another incentive for coming, perhaps stronger than either of these--a love for land and a desire to possess it.

The Mississippi valley with its wide fertile acres was open and waiting for husbandmen who longed to delve into rich black loam which they could proudly call their own. Hamlin Garland in his Middle Border stories has related the experiences of pioneers from the eastern part of the United States who came out to the free land area, but they were lovers of a frontier rather than lovers of land. Mr. Garland's father, the central figure in the Border stories, became restless each time his farm lost its newness and then he was eager to move on to another frontier. The women of

Garland's novels endured rather than enjoyed the pioneering venture.

Novelists who have written about immigrant characters point out that, with but one or two exceptions, these people desired to make their piece of land a permanent home and that the women were as great lovers of the soil as were the men.

Morten Kvidal, a young Scandinavian in The Emigrants by Bojer, had always admired the farms of the wealthy and he had just enough schooling to make him dissatisfied to live as his forbears had done. The lure of the rich farm land of America proved too strong an inducement. The one impelling motiving which made it possible for him to consider duty, love, and homeland as secondary interests was his ambition to found a home of which he could be proud.

Per Hansa of Giants In The Earth expressed a similar ambition when he said to Beret, "Just wait, my girl, just wait. It's going to be wonderful; you'll see how wonderful I can make it for you, this kingdom of ours." He laughed until his eyes were drawn out in two narrow slits. 'And no old worn-out, thin-shanked, pot-bellied king is going to come around and tell me what I have to do about it either.'<sup>1</sup>

---

1. Rolvaag, O. L. Giants In The Earth, p. 44.

Country People by Ruth Suckow is a story of the experiences of a German farmer, August Kaetterhenry, and his family. Kaetterhenry had worked as a farm laborer from the time he was eleven years old. His dream from early childhood was to own some day, a farm free from debt. With this purpose in mind, he slaved early and late until he had acquired the land and had it well-improved. Starting with nothing, he built up a fine farm and home in Wapsipinicon County, Iowa, when that state was still young.

The thrifty Scottish settlers of The Able McLaughlins had also come to the Wapsipinicon river country of Iowa from Ayrshire about 1850. Cheap government land had attracted a veritable clan of McLaughlins to America. They had become quite firmly established on the land when the Civil War called some of their sons to service. Wully McLaughlin's father bought an adjoining eighty acres of land for his son with two hundred dollars which had accrued to Wully while he was held captive in a southern army prison. The following quotation from the novel gives Margaret Wilson's interpretation of the Scottish attitude toward American farm land:

"The elder McLaughlin sighed with satisfaction as he talked. Even yet he had scarcely recovered from that shock of incredulous delight at his first glimpse of the in-

credible prairies; acres from which no frontiersman need ever cut a tree; seres in which a man might plow a furrow of rich black earth a mile long without striking a stump or a stone; a state how much larger than all of Scotland in which there was no record of a battle ever having been fought--what a home for a man who in his childhood had walked to school down a path between the graves of his martyred ancestors--whose fathers had farmed a rented sand-pile enriched by the blood of battle among the rock of the Bay of Luce.

"Even yet he could scarcely believe that there existed such an expanse of eager virgin soil waiting for whoever would husband it. Ten years of storm-bound winters, and fever-shaken, marketless summers before the war, had not chilled his passion for it--nor poverty so great that sometimes it took the combined efforts of the clan to buy a twenty-five cent stamp to write to Scotland of the measureless wealth upon which they had fallen.

"From the time he was ten years old, he had dreamed of America. He had had to wait to realize his dream till his landlord had sold him out for rent overdue. . . .

"Some of the immigrants had long since lost their illusions. But not John McLaughlin. He loved his land like a blind and passionate lover. Really there was nothing

glorious that one was not justified in imagining about a nation to be born to such an inheritance. . . .

"And the McLaughlins prided themselves on the fact that they were no American 'soil scratchers', exhausting debauchers of virgin possibilities. Their rich soil, they promised themselves, was to be richer by far for every crop it yielded."<sup>1</sup>

A German family of major importance figures in Bess Streeter Aldrich's novels, A Lantern in her Hand and A White Bird Flying. Gus and Christine Reimueller, thrifty, hard-working, German settlers had come to Nebraska as homesteaders. They were not merely lovers of land; they were land worshippers. The original eighty acres grew until they owned eleven eighties. In later years, their sons and daughters married and lived on the various eighties. None of these children had been allowed to go beyond the grade school in his education. Herman, the youngest son, attended a high school for one year and then dropped out at his parents' derisive remarks,

"'For what good you thinks them Latins is?' Christine wanted to know. And Gus had laughed, 'Ya, Herman, . . . that Latin make you pick more corn faster and bring you in

---

1. Wilson, Margaret. The Able McLaughlins, p. 22-23.

more pigs . . . huh?"<sup>1</sup>

Immigrants to this country from worn out farming regions of Europe felt that they had reached an agricultural Utopia. Magnus Thorkelson, a Norwegian in Vandemark's Folly drew an interesting comparison:

"'Forty acres,' said he, 'bane pretty big farm in Norway. My fadder on twenty acres, raise ten shildern. Not so gude land like dis. Vun of dem shildern bane college professor, and vun a big man in leggislatur. Forty acre ban gude farm, for gude farmer.'<sup>2</sup>

In the same novel, Jacobus Vandemark, the Dutch boy, caught the lure of the land.

"Prior to this time I had been courting the country; now I was to be united with it in that holy wedlock which binds the farmer to the soil he tills. Out of this black loam was to come my own flesh and blood, and I believe, in some measure, the souls of my children. Some dim conception of this made me draw in a deep, deep breath of the fresh prairie air."<sup>3</sup>

The Dutch truck farmers in the Chicago district described by Edna Ferber in So Big were slow, phlegmatic,

- 
1. Aldrich, Mrs. Bess (Streeter). A White Bird Flying, p. 49.
  2. Quick, Herbert. Vandemark's Folly, p. 225.
  3. *ibid.* p.210.



plodding tillers of the soil but they were as deeply consecrated to their small acreages as were the German and Scandinavians to their more expansive fields.

American farmers, whether foreign or native born, in many instances, attempt to educate this inherent love for land out of their children. But the sons and daughters of pioneers very often find the call of the open fields too strong to be resisted. So we have such characters as Alexandra, Antonia, Peder Victorious, Wully McLaughlin, and Allen Rinemiller<sup>1</sup> who represent the second and third generation of land lovers.

Willa Cather has given to the world of fiction two noble characters who epitomize the second generation of immigrants in the Middle West and who show that the pioneering instinct with a love for the land can be handed down to the daughters as well as to the sons.

The stories of Antonia, the Bohemian girl, and Alexandra of Swedish descent, are analogous. Both girls were born in the Old Country; they both were daughters of men who had married beneath them; and the two fathers died when the girls were yet young. Both Mr. Shimerda and Mr. Bergson had recognized the innate strength and determination of

---

1. The first generation spelled the name, "Reinmueller."

the girls. Perhaps the desire to justify paternal pride prompted Antonia and Alexandra to become true and successful daughters of the land. Although Antonia spent a few years of her girlhood working as a "hired girl" in the villages, she soon grew tired of this vocation, which is common to daughters of immigrant families, and returned to the land to work with the soil and rear her sons.

The opposite type of woman character is described by Martha Ostenso in Wild Geese. Judith Gare longed to leave the farm and its drudgery. She despised rural life as she did her father, Caleb Gare, who ruled his family with a despotic hand. Gare's love for the land was not prompted by a desire to utilize it in gaining life's opportunities. His was a selfish love for material possessions.

When an immigrant to the Middle West became the owner of land--that precious substance which was to raise him out of the stratum of society which he had endured in the Old Country--he sometimes became a slave to it. He was like a child who has been given a bright new toy. The very possession kept him awake at night lest the miraculous power which had bestowed it upon him should return and snatch it away.

The vast amount of work required to convert a strip of prairie into an improved farm loomed ahead of the pioneer

as a task too great for accomplishment in an ordinary span of life. He tried to crowd it into his allotted time by working day and night and by enlisting the aid of every member of his family. Giants In The Earth, Country People, and Wild Geese emphasize this characteristic of the immigrant pioneer.

When the foreign born American staked out one hundred and sixty acres of virgin soil for a farm, he no doubt felt that he was realizing the dreams and ambitions of his ancestors and that he was laying a strong and sure foundation for the future life of his children.

#### His Home Life

American novels with a middle western setting and immigrant characters almost invariably mention the houses and yards. The waving wheat fields, the corn rows, and large herds of grazing cattle were American; but the houses were not always that patriotic.

The cross-country traveler of the twentieth century can even now see remnants of an attempt to drop bits of Old Country landscapes onto the once treeless plains.

By leading the American born woman into the homes of foreign mothers, writers who have given realistic pictures of the Mid-West have shown that "Judy O'Grady and the

Colonel's lady, are sisters under the skin."

All through the wheat country of the Mississippi Valley are evidences that Per Hansa of Giants In The Earth had many Scandinavian followers, who had the same ambition as Rolvaag wrote of Per:

"When, long ago, Per Hansa had had his first vision of the house, it had been painted white, with green cornices; and these colors had belonged to it in his mind ever since. But the stable, the barn, and all the rest of the outhouses should be painted red, with white cornices--for that gave such a fine effect!"<sup>1</sup>

German settlers built large two-story houses; plain, high-ceilinged, and airy. They cared little for ornamentation. Every board and nail added to the general utility of the structure. When the old German couple of Suckow's Country People left the spacious farm house to live in the modern American bungalow which they built in town, they found that the kitchen was the only room in the house where they felt at home.

Bess Streeter Aldrich in A White Bird Flying tells an interesting life history of a German home. Old Christine Reinmeuller had first lived in a dugout on the Nebraska

---

1. Rolvaag, O. L. Giants In The Earth, p. 46.

prairie. The dugout was followed by a cheap two-roomed frame house. And then came the big white house which "sat back so far that one approached it down a long private lane bordered by walnut trees. The house itself was plain, a white box so symmetrical that, save for the narrow porch across the front, it looked like a child's huge cubic-shaped block set down in the exact center of the Reinmeuller holdings."<sup>1</sup>

Chrintine's youngest son, Herman, lived in the same square structure, but he added a tin bath tub, a piano, a sideboard, and gaudy store carpets. Allen Rinemiller, a member of the third generation, wanted rugs with colors blended into soft harmony, pretty lights, cushions, and book-ends.

Edna Ferber gives a description of the Dutch houses in So Big.

"The Klaas Pools lived in a typical High Prairie house . . . These sturdy Holland-Americans had built here in Illinois after the pattern of the squat houses that dot the lowlands about Amsterdam, Haarlem, and Rotterdam. The houses were many-windowed, the panes the size of pocket handkerchiefs . . ., Spotless window-panes were a mark of

---

1. Aldrich, Mrs. Bess (Streeter). A White Bird Flying, p. 45.

social standing in High Prairie."<sup>1</sup>

Following is an interesting self-criticism of the early pioneer and his idea of house-building:

"If we first settlers in Iowa had possessed the sense the Lord gives to most, we could have built better and warmer, and prettier houses than the ones we put up, of the prairie sod which we ripped up in long black ribbons of earth; but we all were from lands of forests, and it took a generation to teach our prairie pioneers that a sod house is a good house. It was not until in the eighties that the popular song, 'The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim', proved that the American pioneer had learned to build with something besides timber."<sup>2</sup>

Scottish, English, and Welsh pioneers were great lovers of flowers and trees. They were eager to imitate the homes of the gentry of their native Isles, and now that they were out of the coal mines and away from industrial centers, they planned fenced-in flower gardens like those of Glasgow, neat hedge rows to separate the fields in English fashion, and a bit of bluegrass lawn in front of the house.

Many of them had brought precious flower seeds from

---

1. Ferber, Edna. So Big, p. 31.

2. Quick, Herbert. Vandemark's Polly, p. 226.

the Old Country. Others had picked up cuttings of trees and bushes as they came across country in their wagons.

The interior of the homes of foreign pioneers is a rich field for the pen of realistic writers, but it is a field which is rapidly disappearing under the stress of an amalgamative modern culture.

On the other hand, the observant reader can see in the apparent separation from the mother-rock, the same spirit still holding the elements together. For instance, does not the same love for the artistic prompt the young lady of today to hang a piece of tapestry above the mantel that inspired Jeannie McNair of The Able McLaughlins to spread the linen sheets of her dowry on the walls of her cabin to give it a "hint of old-country decency"?

The luncheon which invariably comes as a climax to an afternoon of "Bridge" in modern times is probably a third cousin of the German "Kaffee and Kaffeekuchen"<sup>1</sup>, or the Welsh "Ta Bach"<sup>2</sup> which these people so hospitably offered to guests in homesteading days.

People from Europe who settled in the prairie states immediately following the Civil War can be regarded as cultural nuclei around which institutions of learning and self-advancement later sprang into existence. This is a

---

1. Coffee and coffee cake.  
2. Little tea.

fact which was often overlooked by Americans living in the Eastern States, many of whom were already two centuries removed from their mother countries.

Settlers who emigrated to the West from the eastern part of the United States were products of a new country, where educational and cultural opportunities were still in the formative stage. They had not yet acquired a knowledge of the arts and sciences usually found in older countries. However, these people carried with them the American ideals of freedom, justice, progressiveness, and that spirit of democracy which enabled them to join hands in a common cause with their foreign neighbors of the Middle West.

The American born immigrant helped the new comer remove his European shackles and fetters even while he thanked him for a share of his old world culture. While this process of sloughing off his undesirable traits, adopting American ideals, and planting germs of his own richer heritage upon a new soil was going on, the man from overseas retained his racial characteristics to a marked degree.

Blankenship presents the following discussion relative to this point:

"Americans of the present generation, especially those who are removed from immediate contact with recent immigrants, have been so drilled to think of the 'melting pot'



aspects of American life that only with genuine difficulty can they think of an American composed of divergent and often opposing racial elements. To many people the term "Americanization" stands for a vaguely understood process that immigrants have always been subjected to and that promptly and completely transforms its subjects from Europeans into Americans. But the indisputable fact remains that a man's method of thinking and his culture cannot be deeply affected by a process of adoption, however loyally attached the man may be to the country that adopts him.

"Racial characteristics in thinking are as unchanged by naturalization as are physical characteristics. The melting pot merely obscures; it never obliterates traces of racial elements. Our immigrants keep for years or even generations the intellectual traits and outlook that were the product of their old European environment."<sup>1</sup>

Anna Carlson in The Heritage of the Bluestem describes the settlers of Pilgrim Valley as people who were educated in Sweden and that there was not an illiterate among them. They were familiar with old-world classics and music and desired the same training for their children. As soon as the first hard prairie years were over, they founded an

---

1. Blankenship, Russell. American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind, p. 21.

academy which was to become a leading musical center in the state.

Else, a Colonel's daughter in The Emigrants, was often homesick to hear once again "a sonata of Beethoven, a nocturne of Chopin, or one of Schumann's songs!"<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Shimerds, the Bohemian;<sup>2</sup> Allen McLaughlin, a young Scotch boy,<sup>3</sup> and Magnus Thorkelson of Norwegian blood,<sup>4</sup> were all described as violinists of unusual ability. When the Civil War claimed Allen McLaughlin's life as a sacrifice to his country, his mother saw one of her cherished hopes destroyed. "She had thought at times that Allen was to be another Burns, a maker of songs for a new country. In her dreams, to be great was to be one of three things, a Burns, a Lincoln, or a Florence Nightingale."<sup>5</sup>

That German settlements were centers of culture is a fact which Edna Ferber brings out when she has one of her characters, Dawn O'Hara, describe a hotel in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. "The house is filled with German civil engineers, mechanical engineers, and Herr Professors from the

- 
1. Bojer, Johan. The Emigrants, p. 108.
  2. Cather, Willa Sibert. My Antonia.
  3. Wilson, Margaret. The Able McLaughlins.
  4. Quick, Herbert. Vandemark's Polly.
  5. Wilson, Margaret. The Able McLaughlins, p. 88.

German academy. . . . I'm the only creature in the place that isn't just over from Germany. Even the dog is a dachshund. It is so unbelievable that every day or two I go down to Wisconsin street and gaze at the stars and stripes floating from the government building, in order to convince myself that this is America."<sup>1</sup>

It was difficult at first for the immigrant settlers to break away from their foreign languages in the little rural schools which they established for their children. But, fortunately, the young people themselves were instrumental in wiping out the barriers of language as they were eager to adopt a democratic, universal medium of thought exchange.

In several of the novels which have been discussed, the authors emphasized the domestic friction which arose between parents and children on the subject of dropping the mother tongue entirely for the adopted language. But no instance was recorded wherein a parent wondered why a natural Norwegian, Bohemian, Scottish, or Dutch language should be excluded from his child's linguistic repertoire only to have the high schools and universities demand an acquired French, Spanish, or Italian vocabulary later on. Perhaps the pioneer parents were too busy conquering the prairie to wonder

---

1. Ferber, Edna. Dawn O' Hara, p. 74.

about the trends of the times, or to worry over future curricula. Many of them were eager for their children to learn the English language. They realized that before they could adapt themselves to the new country, they must be able to converse intelligently with their neighbors. Mr. Shimerda, a Bohemian character in O, Pioneers, begged his American neighbors to teach his daughter Antonia to read the English language.

A trait of the immigrant settlers which several of the novelists describe was the affection they felt for their live stock, especially for the cattle. The cow was their guarantee against starvation and she was a criterion by which the pioneers measured their wealth. Only the rich people had cows back in the old country.

Another interesting characteristic was their European method of cooking. A delicacy which Antonia's parents brought with them from Bohemia was a flour sack full of dried mushrooms. When Antonia visited her Russian neighbors, they gave her some ripe cucumbers and a lard pail full of milk in which to cook them.

Barbara McNair of The Able McLaughlins was known in the neighborhood for her sweet cakes which her husband disapproved because of their costliness.

"'I dinna like so many cakes!' he remarked severely.

'One must begin with these women at once', he seemed to be thinking. He had forgotten apparently that his bride came from the very land of cakes, though he wasn't allowed to forget it often in the future."

"She said apologetically;"

"'They're not so good, I doubt. I couldn't find any currants in the house. When we get currants you'll like them fine.'"

"'There's too much in them now!' he declared bravely. 'We don't have cake every day.'"

"'I do', she said placidly. 'I like a wee cake with my tea.'"<sup>1</sup>

The immigrant families enjoyed much the same types of recreation as their American neighbors. A custom which furnished great merriment was the big dinner and beer drinking at the barn-raising.

Young people danced and put on home talent plays followed by box suppers at the school houses.

Anna Carlson describes a jubilee in The Heritage of the Bluestem. The celebration was to honor the coming of the first locomotive into Pilgrim Valley. She writes:

"No conquering hero, returning from battle, could have been greeted with greater acclaim than that funny looking

---

1. Wilson, Margaret. The Able McLaughlins, p. 121.

locomotive and the still queerer coaches received. For the most part, it was a noisy, demonstrative welcome, but some of the colonists, who hadn't seen a train since they left their native land, wept for joy."<sup>1</sup>

In the same novel, the author tells how a necessity proved to be a recreation. The settlers found it convenient to have home made sleds to facilitate travel over the tall, slick, blue stem. The young people searched the chests for sleigh bells brought over from Sweden. With the bells jingling on the horses' harness, they made merry as they went sleigh riding in mid-summer.

Mr. and Mrs. Kaetterhenry of Ruth Suckow's Country People enjoyed the first real vacation of their lives when they took a trip to Rochester, Minnesota to consult the "Mayo Brothers" concerning Mrs. Kaetterhenry's health. The pleasures of the journey were so marvelous that they forgot to fear the impending operation.

The home life of all people is usually accompanied by a certain amount of affection between members of the family group, whether that affection is outwardly shown or not. In the novels read for this thesis, the characters are very similar in this respect. The northern European is shown as

---

1. Carlson, Anna Matilda. The Heritage of the Bluestem, p. 153.

being much less demonstrative than the southern European. Anna Carlson's description of the Scandinavians verifies this statement in regard to the Nordics:

"They were not given to demonstrations, these people of an undemonstrative race, but under the exterior, which seemed cold and unemotional like the land of snow and ice from whence they came, burned brightly the flame of an all enduring love, which drudgery and privation could not quench. Theirs was a comfortable companionship, vouchsafed to those who are friends as well as lovers, and they faced the isolation of the prairie unafraid."<sup>1</sup>

The home life of these European-Americans as described in the novels of the Middle West reveals that their racial characteristics persist to a marked extent even though the home is founded on foreign soil.

#### THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF THE IMMIGRANT

The religious instinct in the human individual is as old as the race itself, and has been a power in his development from the moment primitive man first responded to its noble passions to the present day. That religion and the various creeds into which it divides itself played an

---

1. Carlson, Anna Matilda. The Heritage of the Bluestem, p. 24.

important part in the lives of immigrants to the American Middle West is a fact which has been emphasized in recent novels.

At no time in one's life does he feel the need of the Omnipotent Guide and Comforter more than when he is separated from home, friends, and native country by thousands of miles of land or sea.

Early immigrant pioneers to America not only brought their families, cattle, and meager household furnishings to the West, but they transplanted their God to the boundless prairie to help them interpret His own handiwork. This God understood their language, their hopes, their ambitions, and to Him they devoted a liberal share of their time. Men froze to death in prairie blizzards because there were no familiar landmarks to guide them to shelter; women gave birth to children unattended, but there were no barriers between the soul and its God. He was as near and as potent a factor in the lives of the settlers in this bleak new country as He had been along the Banks of Lofoten or in the Scotch Highlands.

Long before churches and official altars could be erected, the families worshipped. Sometimes they grouped together in a centrally located "soddy" for a service of hymns and prayers; sometimes, a lighted candle in the win-



dow proclaimed a settler's faith.

The McLaughlins in Margaret Wilson's novel were Scotch Presbyterians and they held family devotions loyally and consistently. Once when a guest was present, the father began the evening meal with a long prayer. At the close of the supper, the mother lead them in singing the twenty-third psalm and the father read from the Scriptures. Then they all pushed their chairs back from the table and knelt while the father prayed again, this supplication being concluded by a repetition of The Lord's Prayer by the whole family.

"Nothing lacking but the collection"<sup>1</sup>, the stranger thought.

Religion was more than mere form, however, in the McLaughlin home. The author showed throughout her story that these fine Scottish people were elevated by their religious creed. Mrs. McLaughlin had a highly developed sense of honor which became evident when her son, Wully, deceived her into thinking he had brought disgrace upon the family name. Over and above her disappointment in her son, and her dread of the unfavorable comments which his actions would inevitably arouse, her first consideration was for the young neighbor girl whom Wully pretended to have betrayed, and of her own failure to train the boy in principles of chivalry and decency. "Was it not for the children's sake they had

---

1. Wilson, Margaret. The Able McLaughlins, p. 12.

endured this vast wilderness, and endured it in vain if the children were to be of this low and common sort?"<sup>1</sup>

The religious element is a predominating characteristic of Rolvaag's realistic novels, Giants In The Earth and Peder Victorious. These Scandinavian pioneers possessed doctrinal principles which were vital and beautiful, but which at times proved to be as overwhelming as their virulent Dakota Territory. Beret Holm, bowed down by homesickness, made her religion a bug-a-boo to herself, her family, and her neighbors. Instead of allowing it to enrich and calm her inner life, she thought of it as a whip which she seemed to delight in using for self-inflicted punishment. She almost lost the power of her old-country religious training during the first few hard years in her prairie home, and then, after sinking to the depths of mental and spiritual despair, she regained her hold upon the faith of her childhood and went to the opposite extreme. Rolvaag thus revealed the opinion of Beret's neighbor, Tonseten: "Since Beret had recovered, he couldn't stand her. She had become so pious that if a fellow made the most innocent remark, she was sure to preach at him. And never a drop of whiskey would she tolerate, either for rheumatism or for cough. . . . One ought to have some sense, even if one was

---

1. Wilson, Margaret. The Able McLaughlins, p. 85.

going to be religious."<sup>1</sup>

In spite of Tonseten's secret attitude, the Norwegians in the little colony respected Beret Holm and her religion. They helped her worship, and once when an itinerant preacher visited the settlement, they gathered in her home for communion service. They used an old chest, which they had brought from Norway, for an altar; Per Hansa made benches for them to sit on; and Sorrina brought two rugs from her home to spread on the benches. Years later, they built a church which they called Saint Luke's Norwegian Lutheran Church. Some of the "second generation" in Peder Victorious broke away from the mother church and formed the Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church. The dissenters objected to the use of the Norwegian language in the church and to the radical social views held by their elders.

The religion of his parents played a strong part in the life of Peder Victorious, youngest son of Beret and Per Hansa of Giants In The Earth. Beret felt that Per Hansa had sinned against God when he named his son, "Victorious". This strange conception of sin caused her to build an unusual atmosphere about the child and he was very conscious of it. Then, too, he had been born with the caul and this, according to Norse tradition, prophesied that he would be-

---

1. Rolvaag, O. L. Giants In The Earth, p. 437.

come a minister. Rolvaag showed in his novel that Peder broke down religious scruples and superstitious traditions by living a normal boy's life and when he desired to marry a girl of the Catholic faith, he wanted to know of her, "But in the sight of God we're just two human beings!"<sup>1</sup>

Johan Bojer in The Emigrants also pointed out the ceremonial religious devotions of the Norse pioneers who found their way to America. The first thing they did upon reaching the land which was to be their future home was to gather around their camp fire in a lonesome, fearful huddle and sing a hymn at the suggestion of Karen Skaret. "It was a very long time since they had been to church, and it would be a very long day before they went again. But several of them had once been in the choir, and Ola Vatne was something of a singer. Jo Berg began to hum one or two tunes, and presently hit upon 'A Fortress Sure is God our King'. . . . Softly and silently the little choir sang the hymn through to the end."<sup>2</sup>

Magnus Thorkelson, the Norwegian character in Vandemark's Folly may have found it impossible to attend a church regularly in the sparsely settled country, but he had the spirit of the Golden Rule when he laid his hand on the head

1. Rolvaag, O. L. Peder Victorious, p. 325.

2. Bojer, Johan. The Emigrants, p. 84.

of the young Dutch boy and said, "I halp you. You halp me. Ve halp each udder. Ve be neighbors always. I halp you build house, an' you halp me."<sup>1</sup> The story shows that Thorkelson carried out his precept and was a true friend and helper to the younger pioneer.

It is interesting to note as one makes a study of immigrant characters described by fictionists of the Middle West that they are pictured as possessing to a marked degree those qualities of truth, honor, and justice which are universal ear-marks of the Christian religion. Why did the novelists feel it necessary to emphasize these traits? Had followers of Christianity not strayed so far from its attributes in pioneer days? Or did the man and woman with foreign blood in their veins practice Christ's tenets to a more marked degree than did their native born neighbors? Thorkelson's application of the Golden Rule and Mrs. McLaughlin's loyalty to honor and justice have already been mentioned. Another instance of similar nature appears in Vandemark's Folly. A very strong characteristic of Quick's hero, Jacobus Teunis Vandemark, was his unwillingness to lie or cheat. After trading his team of horses to some Abolitionists for cattle, Vandemark describes himself:

"I rode up behind the Abolitionists' wagon, waving my

---

1. Aldrich, Mrs. Bess (Streeter). A Lantern in her Hand, p. 45-46.

hat and shouting. They pulled up and waited.

"'What's up?' asked Dunlap. 'Going with us after all? I hope so, boy.'"

"'No,' said I, 'I just wanted to say that that nigh mare was lame day before yesterday, and I...I...I didn't want you to start off with her without knowing it.'"<sup>1</sup>

A fellow traveler on the journey to Illinois asked Vandemark to allow a woman to ride across the ferry in his wagon, that she might avoid being apprehended by officials. The Dutch boy was willing to oblige them but Quick gives this interesting bit of conversation:

"'I'll have to tell the ferryman,' I said."

"'Will you?' he asked. 'Why?'"

"'I'd be cheating him if I didn't,' I answered."<sup>2</sup>

Even the girl whom he loved could not persuade Vandemark that lies might sometimes be justifiable.

"'Wouldn't you lie,' said she, 'for me?'"

"'I would do anything for you,' said I boldly; 'but I'd a lot rather fight than lie.'"<sup>3</sup>

Sir Gawain was not more sorely tempted by the fair lady

1. Quick, Herbert. Vandemark's Polly, p. 103.

2. *ibid.* p. 108.

3. *ibid.* p. 173.

of the castle than was Vandemark in "The Grove of Destiny",<sup>1</sup> and no member of The Round Table could have displayed a more chivalrous knighthood or a greater loyalty to right and honor than did Quick's hero of the plains, during this critical experience in his life.

Not all of the immigrant characters, however, responded to such noble impulses as those mentioned. There were such persons as the tyrannical father of Wild Geese and Frank Shabata of O, Pioneers who committed a double murder.

The majority of the foreign born settlers in the Midwest were the middle class type. They were founders of homes, churches, and schools, and their lives were directed by worthy principles.

The Dutch Reformed Church was erected in High Prairie, where Selina of Edna Ferber's So Big taught school. The services were conducted in both English and Dutch languages.

Roelf Pool, a member of the second generation in this community, was artistically inclined and he loathed the combination of red and yellow paint which was used to decorate the pews and windows. The intensity of the colors perhaps reminded the older members of the congregation of the gay tulips of their native Holland, but it irritated Roelf's sense of the poetic.

---

1. Quick, Herbert. Vandemark's Folly, chapters 9 and 10.

The first generation in Suckow's Country People maintained a German church and it grieved them sorely when their grandchildren started to go to an "English Church". "'Ach, das ist nicht recht!'" old man Stille would say sadly. After moving to town, Mr. and Mrs. August Kaetterhenry, leading characters of Suckow's novel, found that their church helped to break the monotony of town life and its activities gave them something to do. A "Mrs. Kaetterhenry" can be found in almost any village in the Middle West even now; a subdued little woman of foreign blood and accent who would rather carve the chicken and wash the dishes in the church kitchen than to be conspicuous in the dining room. Her language is broken but her quiet economy and efficiency make her an asset to "The Foods Committee."

The Reinmuellers of A Lantern in her Hand dropped the German church for the English church when they became "Rine-millers" in A White Bird Flying.

Perhaps no writer of American fiction has had as great an opportunity to observe the religious ceremonies of as varied a group of Europeans in the Middle West as has Willa Cather. Her descriptions of their sacred rites are so natural and so unbiased that many people after reading one of her charming stories, will ask, "Is Miss Cather a Catholic, or is she of the Protestant faith?"



A beautiful instance is recorded in My Antonia. Mr. Shimerda came over to the Burden home on Christmas day. Otto Fuchs, an Austrian "hired hand", had placed underneath the Christmas tree little wooden images of the Babe in the Manger, the angels singing, the camels, and the three kings. His mother had sent Otto these symbols of the Nativity from Austria. That evening when the candles were lighted, Mr. Shimerda made the sign of the cross and knelt beside the images. Mr. Burden bowed his head reverently while his Catholic neighbor worshipped. "The prayers of all good people are good," Mr. Burden later explained to his grandson.

Some controversies arose after Mr. Shimerda's death as to where he should be buried. The Catholic cemetery was too far away for them to reach it through the snow drifts and the Norwegians refused permission to place the body in their burial grounds. Jim's grandmother was provoked at this lack of Christian courtesy and remarked: "If these foreigners are so clannish, Mr. Bushy, we'll have to have an American graveyard that will be more liberal-minded'. . . 'If anything was to happen to me, I don't want the Norwegians holding inquisitions over me to see whether I'm good enough to be laid amongst 'em.'"<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Shimerda averted what might

---

1. Cather, Willa Sibert. My Antonia, p. 127-128.

have proved an embarrassing situation by deciding to bury her husband on the southwest corner of their own land.

The Lithuanian family described by Upton Sinclair in The Jungle were of the Catholic faith and they were loath to give up their religious ceremonials at weddings, funerals, and special days even though their environment in Chicago made it very difficult for them to observe them, or even to keep their faith. Their moral standards were high when they came to this country and even though several members of the group finally sank to the depths of moral degradation, the author shows convincingly that their falling to such a level was forced upon them. At heart, they still believed in the principles of their church and in the ideals of decency.

A desire to free themselves from the power of a State Church was an impelling force which brought the Scandinavian colony to Kansas in Carlson's The Heritage of the Bluestem. The colonists were of the Lutheran faith and they considered as outsiders all prairie settlers who professed another religion.

"Scarcely had they begun building their little homes before they started the erection of a house of worship. It was a humble building of native stone, quarried in the nearby hills, with sod roof and native prairie floor, but mean as it was, it was their Sanctuary, the place where they met

God and communed with Him."<sup>1</sup>

It did not take long, however, for the more liberal-minded of the Bluestem settlers to realize that they were setting up the same ironclad religious restrictions in the New World against which they had rebelled in the Old. Dissensions arose in the newly organized church and the "Separatists" founded another one of their own. Miss Carlson, continuing her description of the settlement and its religion, wrote:

"One day Pilgrim Valley awoke to the realization that Christianity is not so much a matter of creed as of the Christ spirit. With the arrival of settlers affiliating with other denominations, other churches sprang into existence. They were received with cold tolerance at first. Gradually they grew into the community fabric and were accepted as a part of its constructive force."<sup>2</sup>

Very peculiar and interesting superstitions were held by some of the immigrant characters. They are mentioned here because superstitions are often closely akin to one's religion if not a distinct part of it. As a rule, people are very sensitive about their superstitious beliefs and the fact that the writers of these realistic novels have in-

---

1. Carlson, Anna Matilda. The Heritage of the Bluestem, p. 41.

2. *ibid.* p. 45.

cluded information on the subject is evidence that they were not only observers of the outward characteristics of the persons they have portrayed, but that they were very intimately acquainted with their innermost theories and beliefs.

It is not at all strange that here and there among European settlers in America, can be found persons who still cling to tales they heard in childhood in their native lands--tales of fairy-rings, headless horsemen, mystic cures for maladies, witches, ghosts, and hobgoblins--many of them as enticing as Shakespeare's tale of the three weird sisters.

For instance, Karen Skaret in The Emigrants knew that a little Brownie lived under the floor of her kitchen in Norway and as long as he was there, no great calamity could befall the household. The little Brownie followed her to America where he charmed away the hardships of the prairie. But she dared not disclose this secret. If she told any of her neighbors about Brownie, it might mean bad luck for man and beast.

A superstition caused Beret Holm and Per Hansa of Giants In The Earth an untold amount of mental anguish after Per Hansa pulled up some stakes which he thought might cost his neighbors their precious holdings. In Norway, to tamper with another person's landmarks was considered such a sin that it was believed a person guilty of such an act was

doomed for special punishment in the next life.

"Crazy Bridget" in this same novel was called to administer home remedies to Hans Olsa who had been partly frozen in a blizzard. She made thick poultices of onions and some vile-smelling stuff from a bottle. "Then", Rolvaag related, "she put these on Hans Olsa's back and chest; but before she put them on she took out of her pocket a small rusty crucifix, mumbled some words over it, and stuck it into the poultice which was to lie on his chest."<sup>1</sup>

Another queer idea was held by "Crazy Ivar", who was somewhat of a hermit and seer in O, Pioneers. Ivar had a notion that by always going barefooted, he could overcome temptations of the flesh. He explained that all other parts of the body had divine prohibitions set down for them in the Ten Commandments. Only the feet were free, and he could indulge them all he wanted to without bringing harm to anyone.

Some quaint philosophies of life were held by many of the characters of foreign blood depicted in middle western novels. They did not speculate upon these beliefs in idle dreaming; they actually used them as guiding principles by which to live. The following citations illustrate this point.

---

1. Rolvaag, O. L. Giants In The Earth, p. 436.

Old Man Evans, a Welsh character in Vandemark's Folly, worked out a theory based upon a mixture of theology and natural history. Quick brought out the old man's philosophy in the following conversational passage:

"'Prairies!' said old Evans. 'Prairies!' What do you expect to do on the prairies?'"

"'Farm,' I answered."

"'All these folks that are rushing to the prairies,' said the old man, 'will starve out and come back. God makes trees grow to show men where the good land is. I read history, and there's no country that's good for anything, except where men have cut the trees, niggered off the logs, grubbed out the stumps, and made fields of it---and if there are stones, it's all the better. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread," said God to Adam, 'and when you go to the prairies where it's all ready for the plow, you are trying to dodge God's curse on our first parents. You won't prosper. It stands to reason that any land that is good will grow trees.'"

"'Some of this farm was prairie,' put in Preston, 'and I don't see but it's just as good as the rest.'"

"'It was all openings,' replied Evans. 'The trees was here once, and got killed by the fires, or somehow. It was all woods once.'"

"'Isn't the sweat of your face just as plenty when you delve in the prairies?' asked Dunlap."

"'You fly in the face of God's decree, and run against His manifest warning when you try to make a prairie into a farm,' said Evans. 'You'll see!'"<sup>1</sup>

Edna Ferber described Dawn O'Hara as being intensely affected by Blackie Griffith's philosophy of life and death. Blackie, an optimistic little Welshman, refused to worry about his financial status. In the vernacular of the newspaper "back shop", Blackie announced:

"'But sa-a-ay, girl, it's a lonesome game, this re-tirin' with a fortune. I've noticed that them guys who retire with a barrel of money usually dies at the end of the first year, of a kind of a lingerin' homesickness. You c'n see their pictures in th' papers, with a pathetic story of how they was just beginnin' t' enjoy life when along come the grim reaper an' claims 'em'. . . . 'F I got to die I'm going out with m' scissors in one mitt, and m' trusty paste-pot by m' side.'"<sup>2</sup>

The novelists have shown, whether purposely or not, that the immigrant families who came to the Middle West in the nineteenth century brought their Bibles, hymn books, and

---

1. Quick, Herbert. Vandemark's Folly, p. 96-97.

2. Ferber, Edna. Dawn O' Hara, p. 100-103.

their faith just as devotedly and loyally as did that little band of Pilgrim Fathers who landed at Plymouth Bay in 1620, determined to enjoy religious freedom and toleration.

Religious institutions were brought to the New England States as organized units. Settlers in that section had the churches to guide and support them in their pioneering venture. In the Middle West, the vast expanse of prairie made it difficult for the settlers to group about a central place for public worship. But they held tenaciously those religious ideals which they brought from their native land, and when the country was sufficiently developed, churches sprang up here and there over the prairie.

Religion, Superstition, Philosophy! What a rich heritage the Mississippi Valley holds as a result of the emotional life of its inhabitants who came from lands of culture, traditions, and Christian civilization.



## CONCLUSION

The research work which was carried on in the preparation of this thesis revealed that the authors who have used the immigrant element in their novels have built their stories around characterizations rather than plots. They have done this to such an extent that many of the books have a biographical tone rather than fictional.

The authors of the novels are themselves of foreign blood or are men and women who have spent a major portion of their lives in the Middle West. They have dealt sympathetically and understandingly with the immigrant characters due to their close relationship with them.

A study of these novels shows that the immigrants to this section of America from northern Europe in the nineteenth century came to the New World for the purpose of acquiring land and building permanent homes. They were ambitious to own a home, to educate their children, and to enjoy political and economic freedom. Once having established themselves upon American soil, they considered themselves a part of their adopted country although it often took three generations to break them away from their mother tongue. An analysis of their personal traits, their racial characteristics, and their European cultural background, as

described by the fiction writers, indicates that the immigrants to the Middle West brought with them a distinctive heritage. Their life stories have afforded material which novelists have been able to utilize in following the literary trends of the last quarter century.

## PARTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aldrich, Mrs. Bess (Streeter).  
A Lantern in her Hand. N. Y. Appleton. 1930.
- A White Bird Flying. N. Y. Appleton. 1931.
- Miss Bishop. N. Y. Appleton-Century. 1933.
- "Wild Critics I have Known." Bookm. 72: 264-5.
- Bennett, Arnold.  
Literary Taste: How to Form It. N. Y. Doran. 1910.
- Blankenship, Russell.  
American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind. N. Y. Henry Holt. c. 1931.
- Bojer, Johan.  
The Emigrants. tr. from Norwegian by A. G. Jayne.  
 N. Y. Century. 1925.
- Burroughs, John.  
Literary Values and other Papers. Boston and N. Y.  
 Houghton-Mifflin, The Riverside Press. 1902.
- Cannon, Joseph G.  
 "Native American." Outlook 112: 787-788. April 1916.
- Carlson, Anna Matilda.  
The Heritage of the Bluestem. K.C., Mo. Burton. c.  
 1930.
- Cather, Willa Sibert.  
My Antonia. Boston and N. Y. Houghton-Mifflin. 1924.
- O, Pioneers. Boston and N. Y. Houghton-Mifflin. 1915.
- Dickinson, Thomas H.  
The Making of American Literature. N. Y. Century.  
 1932.

- Fairchild, Henry Pratt.  
Immigration, a World Movement . . . N. Y. Macmillan.  
 1913.
- Ferber, Edna.  
American Beauty. Garden City, N. Y. Doubleday. 1931.
- Dawn O' Hara. N. Y. Harper. 1911.
- So Big. Garden City, N. Y. Doubleday-Page. 1924.
- Hall, Prescott F.  
Immigration and its Effects . . . N. Y. Holt. 1906.
- Hewes, F. W.  
 "Where our Immigrants Settle." World's Work. (Charts)  
 6: 4021-4024. Oct. 1903.
- Hopkins, Mary Alden.  
 "Whom the Land Loves." Atlant. M. 129: 620-622.  
 May 1922.
- Humphrey, Grace.  
 "Lincoln and the Immigrant." Outlook 115: 234. Feb. 7,  
 1917.
- Kunitz, Stanley J. (Dilly Tante, pseud.)  
Living Authors. N. Y. Wilson Co. 1931.
- Orth, Samuel Peter.  
Our Foreigners . . . New Haven, Yale Univ. Press.  
 1920.
- Ostenso, Martha.  
Wild Geese. N. Y. Grosset-Dunlap. c. 1925.
- Peterson, Elmer T.  
Trumpets West. N. Y. Sears. 1934.
- Quick, Herbert.  
 "I Picked my Goal at Ten." American Magazine 94: 50-  
 51. Oct. 1922.
- Vandemark's Folly. Indianapolis. Bobbs-Merrill.  
 c. 1922.

Replier, Agnes.

"Modest Immigrant." Atlan. M. 116: 303-12. Sept. 1915.

Rolvaag, O. E.

Giants In The Earth. N. Y. Harper. c. 1927.

-----  
Peder Victorious. English text by Nora O. Solum and the author. N. Y. Harper. 1928.

Sinclair, Upton.

The Jungle. Chicago. Regan Pub. 1906.

Suckow, Ruth.

Country People. N. Y. Knopf. 1924.

-----  
 "Folk Idea in American Life." Scribner's N. 88: 245-255. Sept. 1930.

Wilson, Margaret.

The Able McLaughlins. N. Y. Harper and Bros. c. 1923.