

WILLA CATHER'S LAND

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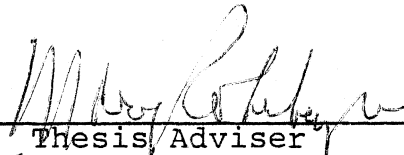
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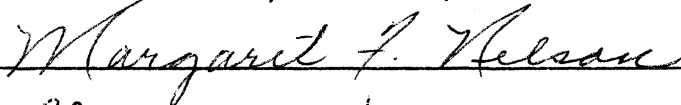


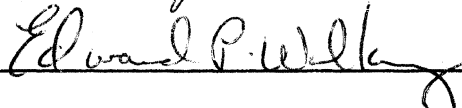
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PREFACE

Willa Cather's work has always held a fascination for me, and as I have a mid-western background, I found the use of the land in her prairie fiction particularly intriguing and meaningful. This study examines some literal and symbolic uses of the land in O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, and "Neighbour Rosicky."

I would like to extend a generous note of thanks to my major adviser, Dr. Mary Rohrberger, for her guidance and patience, and also to the other members of my committee, Dr. Margaret Nelson and Dr. Edward Walkiewicz, for their time and help.

I must also express my appreciation to others who have given me assistance during the completion of this project, Dr. Peter Rollins and the late Dr. Clinton Keeler. Others who must be included on this list are my parents and brother, Russel, Pauline, and Kevin, for without their encouragement, manual labor, and financial aid, this study would not be complete. Two others who have extended friendship and guidance are Carolyn Hanneman and Dr. C. T. Shades, of Phillips University, who first introduced me to Willa Cather.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

That the need for land is the basis for much human migration and cultural development can nowhere be better seen than in the settlement of the American West. Without families to homestead a farm on the American plains, conquest of the continent would have been slower in coming. Farmers brought schools, churches, and a familiar social structure to an area where those things were non-existent. The literature of this period in American cultural development is fascinating, speaking as it does of a land embedded in mystery with a power of seduction so great that it became the catalyst for the settling of the American frontier.

In her prairie fiction, Willa Cather presents the land as a strong natural force that has to be overcome in order that men may live successfully and harmoniously upon it. Three pieces of her fiction, O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, and "Neighbour Rosicky," from the short story collection entitled Obscure Destinies, deal exclusively with families trying to tame the land on the Nebraska plains. The interesting thing about these works is that the main characters are immigrants from Europe. An immigrant has more to overcome than an American because he not only has to contend

with the raw land of the West, but also to adopt American customs, learn English, and adapt his way of life to a new one. Beginning a new life on the American frontier, according to David Stouck in the Prairie Schooner, can be called the "American epic--the struggle of man against nature."¹

Willa Cather's first published novel, Alexander's Bridge, was, she admitted, a conscious imitation of Edith Wharton and Henry James; the setting and characters were thus too sophisticated and cosmopolitan for her own tastes and background. So, she shifted her subject matter to what she knew best--the Nebraska prairie and its people. She wrote of warm, friendly memories close to her heart, and, as Henry James Forman puts it, because her affections were there, the land lured her to immortalize it.² For this reason, her prairie fiction is especially memorable.

There are good reasons why the land should play such a significant role in much of Cather's work. When she was nine years old, in 1883, she and her family moved from Back Creek, Virginia, to the Nebraska plains to a town called Red Cloud. Here, the prairie was not completely conquered, and Cather was exposed to the land and forces of nature on the inhabitants of the area, notably the foreign population; she enjoyed their company and was impressed greatly by them. Cather's interest lay in the people who conquered the wild frontier and in the folk from the Old World who brought their traditions with them.³ The courage

and determination of these transplanted Swedes, Czechs, Frenchmen, Bohemians, and Russians impressed her greatly, and they came to populate her prairie fiction, her better fiction. Cather thought that these Europeans had more affinity for the land than Anglo-Saxon Americans did, because their natures seemed more sympathetic or attuned to the soil. As John H. Randall III writes in his book The Looking Glass and the Landscape, "Of all the books Willa Cather ever wrote it is the prairie novels with their European protagonists in America which are the most convincing, the most affirmative, and the most memorable."⁴ In Cather's work, one can see how the land affected the Nebraska population and Willa Cather. This communion between the land and its inhabitants is rather mystical, but Cather's prose is so strong and meaningful that people, even if they do not have an agricultural or rural background or are unfamiliar with the history of the Westward movement of the last century, can realize and appreciate what significance the land can hold.

The land is such an important part of Cather's fiction that it has received a fair amount of critical attention. Normally, critics deal with the land as a symbol of freedom, or as a representative of a sense of place, timelessness, and natural beauty. David Stouck says in "Perspective as Structure and Theme in My Antonia" that Cather uses the prairie to search for "a timeless, indestructible order where some permanent values might be found and guaranteed."⁵

Maynard Fox in Western American Literature admits that "the dominant symbols in the novels of Miss Cather are nature-centered."⁶ Stouck, in "O Pioneers!: Willa Cather and the Epic Imagination," notes that the title of this novel is striking as it refers to pioneers and the challenge of conquering a new land.⁷ My Ántonia, according to "My Ántonia and the American Dream" by James E. Miller, Jr., concerns "a national experience--the frontier or pioneer experience--and its rapid diminishment and disappearance from the national memory."⁸ Bernice Slote writing in the Kansas Quarterly claims that O Pioneers! and My Ántonia are "landmarks in American fiction, recognized as the first novels to treat seriously the immigrant settlers of America's midland melting pot."⁹ Randall believes that "Rosicky" describes the final days of a truly yeoman farmer.¹⁰

However, no critics of Cather's work have dealt with the intense way that those connected with the land feel toward it. Those individuals who cherish the land are able to see its dual functions, literal and symbolic. Land serves as a constant, a place to make a living, something to conquer, a burial place, and a showcase for Mother Nature. In a symbolic sense, it can represent a sanctuary or haven; it can show the Divine Order of God, dictate one's lot in life, illustrate fate, figuratively feed a certain adventure-some spirit, symbolize freedom, and assume the role of a sexual substitute. Prairie inhabitants cannot help but be affected by the power that the land extends over them, for

their very lives are one with the soil. Therefore, it is imperative that they understand all these qualities of the land, and after reading Willa Cather's Nebraska stories, anyone can.

Pioneers, Ántonia, and "Rosicky" have several common threads. Each story occurs in Nebraska and involves the land and agriculture. In each, there is an immigrant family who is struggling to create a new life on the resisting prairie. These families are from a lower or Eastern European country and are unfamiliar with American ways, but above all, they treasure their new land. Also, each family encounters a sympathetic American male to take its side, console, and give advice. In Pioneers, this character is Carl Lindstrum; Jim Burden becomes the Shimerda family's confidant in Ántonia, and Dr. Ed Burleigh is the sympathizer in "Rosicky." Also, the central characters in the stories, Alexandra Bergson, Ántonia Shimerda, and Anton Rosicky, also want to learn American ways and customs and create good, prosperous lives for their families, and they realize that the way for them to achieve this goal is through the land. The people in these stories do not want to lose their land because it offers them security and a way to become Americanized. Alexandra, Ántonia, and Anton meet the demands of the frontier and develop according to the land's needs, for without the land, the characters would not exist as the land and its nature form them. The

land is a powerful force and shows itself in their thoughts, attitudes, and deeds.

There are differences in the three pieces of fiction, too. Platonic relationships between Alexandra Bergson and Carl Lindstrum in Pioneers and Ántonia Shimerda and Jim Burden in Ántonia develop, but no relationship of this kind is present in "Rosicky." There are also some inherent differences based on the two genres examined. Cather takes Alexandra and Ántonia from childhood to womanhood in the course of the novels, while one only discovers Rosicky a few months before he dies. Also, the locale for the stories differ. In the novels, the scenes change from farm to town to city, while in the short story, the action is centered on Rosicky's farm. Pioneers is narrated in the first person and not related in the third person as Ántonia and "Rosicky" are.

This paper will show the various literal and symbolic roles of Willa Cather's land. Cather demonstrates that people who live on the land must have the vision to see how the land functions in their lives. If they can understand how strongly the land influences their lives and thoughts, the land and the people can live harmoniously.

NOTES

¹David Stouck, "O Pioneers!: Willa Cather and the Epic Imagination," Prairie Schooner, 46 (1972), 26.

²Henry James Forman, "Willa Cather: A Voice from the Prairie," Southwest Review, 47 (1962), 253.

³Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 4, 13; Mildred R. Bennett, "Willa Cather and the Prairie," Nebraska History, 56 (1975), 231; J. Russel Reaver, "Mythic Motivation in Willa Cather's O Pioneers!," Western Folklore, 27 (1968), 19.

⁴John H. Randall III, The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 62.

⁵David Stouck, "Perspective as Structure and Theme in My Antonia," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 12, (1970), 286.

⁶Maynard Fox, "Symbolic Representation in Willa Cather's O Pioneers!," Western American Literature, 9 (1974), 188.

⁷Stouck, "O Pioneers!: Willa Cather and the Epic Imagination," 31.

⁸James E. Miller, Jr., "My Antonia and the American Dream," Prairie Schooner, 48 (1974), 7.

⁹Bernice Slote, "Willa Cather as a Regional Writer," Kansas Quarterly, 2 (1970), 7.

¹⁰John H. Randall III, "Willa Cather: The Middle West Revisited," New Mexico Quarterly, 31 (1961), 26.

CHAPTER II

CATHER'S LITERAL USES OF THE LAND

For the pioneer families, the land is a constant; it will never die, given the proper attention by sun and rain. The John Bergson family in O Pioneers! leaves Sweden to seek a new, rich life on the Nebraska plains near the fictitious town of Hanover. This promise of a new beginning leads Bergson, an ex-ship builder, to try to tame a rather wild thing--land. The land can shelter a man and his family and promise them better things in the future; to them, the land is something that will always be there to care for and provide for them.

In O Pioneers!, Alexandra Bergson says, "There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years."¹ She continues to say that the land is elusive, but as constant and as continuing as a sunset. "We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it--for a little while" (Pioneers, p. 308).

Cather repeats this idea in My Ántonia in a description of summer fields: "It took a clear, meditative eye . . . to foresee that [the fields] would enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerda's cornfields, or Mr. Bushy's, but the world's cornfields; that their yield would be one of the great economic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war."² Anton Rosicky takes comfort in the thought that his sons will maintain his land long after his death; this continuity pleases him, and he realizes that if his sons know that "what you had was your own"³ all will go well for them.

Land also provides a living for everyone who lives on it and tends it. John Bergson's final instructions to his daughter and sons concern the use and direction of his land so that it will continue to feed his family after he dies. So that it will do this, Bergson suggests that his boys turn "the land, and always put up more hay than you need" (Pioneers, p. 27). Ántonia Shimerda determines to "help make this land one good farm" (Ántonia, p. 123) to give her family a better life after her father dies. While in New York City, Rosicky yearns to live on the soil to get some "freedom and wide horizons" (Destinies, p. 30) in his life. "To work on another man's farm would be all he asked; to see the sun rise and set and to plant things and watch them grow" (Destinies, p. 32). To him, that way of life seems the best. Rosicky also believes that the farm environment would be better for his sons than their residing in a city.

He sees that the soil is kinder than "the cruelty of human beings" (Destinies, p. 60) in towns and cities.

People desire a secure future if they are associated with the land or not. Those individuals who have land may have more secure futures than others because the land is something that will never die. The Bergson family believes that the land will secure a good future for them. Alexandra feels that the land is "going to go up enough to pay the mortgages" (Pioneers, p. 67) because when she drives "about over the country you can feel it coming" (Pioneers, p. 67). With pride, she tells Carl Lindstrum that Emil, her youngest and favorite brother, is "going to have a chance, a whole chance; that's what I've worked for" (Pioneers, p. 117). This chance for Emil is made possible because Alexandra has "land enough, at last!" (Pioneers, p. 117). The Shimerda family sees a future, not years ahead, but weeks ahead--in spring. "If they could get through until spring came, they would buy a cow and chickens and plant a garden, and would then do very well" (Antonia, p. 76). Mrs. Shimerda leaves her home in Europe for a promise of a bright tomorrow for her children in America. She believes that in America her children will lead good, successful, and happy lives. "America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls" (Antonia, p. 90). Anton Rosicky believes that he has no future without the land. "To be a landless man was to be a wage-earner, a slave, all your life; to have nothing, to be nothing" (Destinies, p. 40).

With this belief in the future, land owners have assurance about their tomorrows because they have the land.

Raw land on the Nebraska prairie in the nineteenth century had to be conquered. Immigrants who arrived on the Great Plains were ill-equipped for this conquest, but they grappled with nature with determination and courage using what few weapons they had. Cather proves that the land is indeed conquered in O Pioneers! by her chapter titles. Randall notes that the first chapter is "The Wild Land," and it is followed by a chapter whose title suggests something tamer: "Neighboring Fields."⁴

Carl Lindstrum realizes that Alexandra has conquered her land; she has succeeded in her life while he has failed to claim such a victory in his. "I've been away engraving other men's pictures, and you've stayed at home and made your own" (Pioneers, p. 116). This statement is prophesied prior to John Bergson's death when Alexandra promises her father that the family "will never lose the land" (Pioneers, p. 26). In My Ántonia, after the Shimerdas have a new log house with "four comfortable rooms to live in, a new windmill . . . a chicken house and poultry" (Ántonia, p. 120) they are "now fairly equipped to begin their struggle with the soil" (Ántonia, p. 120). Conquering a new, forbidding, and barren section of land is not easy for anyone, and Ántonia realizes that things "will be hard for us" (Ántonia, p. 140) because her family is poorer and less familiar with America than native farmers.

Willa Cather alludes to being buried in the land. By dying and being buried, one is forever entitled to at least a six feet by three feet plot of ground. Also, family graves on the land make that land more precious to those who remain and own the land; graves of dead loved ones endear the land even more. When John Bergson realizes that he will die, he is "quite willing to go deep under his fields and rest where the plow could not find him" (Pioneers, p. 25). Soil as a final resting place does not disturb Emil Bergson as he gazes at the grave that will soon receive the coffin of his friend, Amédée Chevalier; he thinks of the grave as a "simple doorway into forgetfulness" (Pioneers, p. 257) for "the heart, when it is too much alive, aches for that brown earth, and ecstasy has no fear of death" (Pioneers, p. 257). Even though those words are credited to Emil, one cannot help but think of them as Willa Cather's musings. Pioneers' last sentence refers to the promise of death and the grave and how it is involved with the land. "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (Pioneers, p. 309). After death, the land will be nourished by the bodies that once took their nourishment from it. To Cather, in death, there is the promise of a new beginning and better tomorrows.

Jim Burden's grandmother in My Antonia becomes upset when several immigrant cemeteries will not accept Mr.

Shimerda's body because he has committed suicide. In response, she decides that a new American graveyard should be developed that will "be more liberal minded" (Ántonia, p. 112). Cather's description of Mr. Shimerda's grave on his land is a beautiful picture which includes references to nature, religion, nostalgia, and color. The gravesite, surrounded by a sagging wire fence, is overlooked by an unpainted cross; "the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island; and at twilight, under a new moon or the clear evening star, the dusty roads used to look like soft grey rivers flowing past it Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, . . . without wishing well to the sleeper" (Ántonia, p. 119). This idyllic description shows that the land sees to it that Mr. Shimerda is at rest.

At one point, Rosicky reflects upon a graveyard and believes it to be "snug and homelike, not cramped or mournful" (Destinies, p. 18). To him, a man simply rests in a cemetery after he dies and enjoys looking at the wide expanse of sky above him and the grass around him. He is comforted to know that his grave will not be any further away from his land than the edge of his hayfield. Doctor Ed Burleigh decides that in his grave Rosicky got "the open country" (Destinies, pp. 19, 71) for which he has always longed.

The most obvious use of land in Cather's writing is to show the glories of nature. Land and nature often can

be used synonymously. Her descriptions of the changing seasons and what they do to the prairie are vivid and beautiful. In the following passage from O Pioneers!, Cather uses color to create a mood of depression and lifelessness, yet she always manages to hint at the promise of spring and the renewal of life that it will bring.

Winter has settled down over the Divide again; the season in which Nature recuperates, in which she sinks to sleep between the fruitfulness of autumn and the passion of spring. The birds have gone. The teeming life that goes on down in the long grass is exterminated. The prairie-dog keeps his hole. The rabbits run shivering from one frozen garden patch to another and are hard put to it to find frost-bitten cabbage-stalks. At night the coyotes roam the wintry waste, howling for food. The variegated fields are all one color now; the pastures, the stubble, the roads, the sky are the same leaden gray. The hedgerows and trees are scarcely perceptible against the bare earth, whose slaty hue they have taken on. The ground is frozen so hard that it bruises the foot to walk in the roads or in the ploughed fields. It is like an iron country, and the spirit is oppressed by its rigor and melancholy. One could easily believe that in that dead landscape the germs of life and fruitfulness were extinct forever (Pioneers, pp. 187-188).

In "Neighbour Rosicky," Cather also pictures winter as a time that "meant rest for vegetation and men and beasts, for the ground itself" (Destinies, p. 19). It seems as though Cather is particularly fond of winter because she sees it as a resting period for her land; a time that it may recoup its losses and prepare to give of itself again--to care for those who care for it.

In contrast, spring is described in My Ántonia: "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 and playful like a big puppy that pawed you and then lay down to be petted. If I [Jim] had been tossed down blindfold on that red prairie, I should have known that it was spring" (Ántonia, p. 120). These descriptions show a promise of life through nature--through the land. The closest that one can come to the land is to appreciate it and revel in nature, and Cather pictures nature so well that a reader may directly experience the sunshine, the wind, and the cold.

The land that Cather describes is the common denominator between the reader and the land-based person. In this way, the reader and the farmer see the same things. This common ground must be there so that the reader can prepare to understand the symbolic functions of the land. Readers must be able to see the literal uses of the land before they can comprehend beyond that level to what Cather intended as her symbolic functions.

NOTES

¹Willia Cather, O Pioneers! (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), p. 119. From this point, references will be made inside the text.

²Willia Cather, My Antonia (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), p. 137. From this point, references will be made inside the text.

³Willia Cather, Obscure Destinies (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p. 59. From this point, references will be made inside the text.

⁴The Landscape and the Looking Glass, p. 73.

CHAPTER III

CATHER'S SYMBOLIC USES OF THE LAND

In a symbolic sense, land serves as a spiritual sanctuary--a place to come, feel secure, and be blessed. In My Ántonia, this meaning is evident as Jim Burden says, "Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out" (Ántonia, p. 8). The essence of the American West is captured in one sentence when Cather comments that: "In every frontier settlement there are men who have come there to escape restraint" (Ántonia, p. 209). They came to find a sanctuary and lose themselves from the law, family, or financial problems. Burden claims that: "Out there [on the countryside, he] felt at home again" (Ántonia, p. 370). Land functions as a haven to return to and feel comfortable in.

Jim, as a young boy, feels a certain sense of serenity and security in his grandmother's garden as he "did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, . . . I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy" (Ántonia, p. 18).

Marie Shabata's garden is a haven for her and Emil as they arrange to meet there for their trysts, including the

final, fatal one. When Emil and Marie meet in her orchard, there is a dream-like, misty quality of timelessness about it. "Long fingers of light reached through the apple branches as through a net; the orchard was riddled and shot with gold; light was the reality, the trees were merely interferences that reflected and refracted light" (Pioneers, p. 258). At one point, during one of their meetings, Marie believes that what she is experiencing is a dream, and she implores Emil not to destroy her dream (Pioneers, p. 259).

The Rosicky family's covered arbor provides them a place to escape when the weather is unbearably hot or when they are beset with problems. After the summer heat ruins their corn crop, they picnic in the arbor, for within the confines of a man-made arbor on the land, they can escape and lose their problems, at least for a little while (Destinies, pp. 47-49). They can do this because the land enables them, through their own ingenuity and desires, to have a place to escape. Only with the land are they able to do this.

Outside the Bergson home in O Pioneers!, a passerby feels that "order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the wind-breaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds, planted with scrub willows to give shade to the cattle in fly-time" (Pioneers, p. 84). Land, life, nature, and God combine to become one on the prairie. Jim Burden feels the immenseness of the world at peace with itself.

the light air about me told me that the world ended here: only the ground and sun and sky were left, and if one went a little farther there would be only sun and sky, and one would float off into them, like the tawny hawks which sailed over our heads making slow shadows on the grass I did not want to be anything more. . . . Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great (Antonia, pp. 16-18).

Symbolically, the land can represent human life. Things grow on and from the earth, but not all of these things grow easily, for some have a very hard time existing and must fight for life. Antonia Shimerda realizes this fact when she tells Jim that "things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us" (Antonia, p. 140). People not only live and grow, but so does the land. "Life can't stand still" (Antonia, p. 193) for people, and it cannot for the soil either because the land is constantly changing and developing and growing--the process never ends. Farming the land helps people to mature early. "The older girls, who helped to break up the wild sod, . . . had . . . been early awakened and made observant" (Antonia, p. 198). However, Cather also observes that "there is often a good deal of the child left in people who . . . had to grow up too soon" (Pioneers, p. 17). Living on a farm shortens childhoods, for too many responsibilities and duties fall to the maturing person's lot. When one lives on the land, one must accept his lot and live his life to the fullest.

Rosicky's philosophy of life is tied closely to the soil: "We might as well enjoy what we got" (Destinies, p. 49).

Fate plays an important role in conjunction with the land. Natural phenomenon can make or break a farmer in reference to his crops, his livestock, his family, or his life. In O Pioneers! and My Ántonia, Bergson and Shimerda die because of the land they so desperately want. When they finally achieve their goals, the land kills them. The lives they create for themselves are stronger than they are; they are unable to cope with the pressures that the land forces them to assume. The land eventually takes Anton Rosicky's life. In trying to help his son make a success of his farm, Anton rakes some hay, and the exertion causes him to have a heart attack, and he dies the next day.

Ántonia and Alexandra's fates are tied to the land because it holds them captive. They cannot go to school for they have to stay on the farm and help their families plow, sow, reap, milk, and do other numerous chores. Farmers and their children also lead more narrow lives and have less spare time than others as they have to help on the farm to make it prosper so that the family can pay its debts. The land dictates their lives (Pioneers, pp. 24-28; Ántonia, pp. 94-97, 123, 199-200; Destinies, pp. 62-71).

Against the backdrop of the wide expanse of the Nebraska prairie, humans seem rather small and insignificant. Men try to conquer the sea of land, but the forces of nature and ill-fortuned finances often make these attempts appear

foolish or ridiculous. What is man against nature, especially on the nineteenth century American prairie? To illustrate this feeling of smallness, Cather creates the picture of a plow on the horizon standing against the setting sun which lasts but a moment. "The fields below were dark, the sky was growing pale, and that forgotten plough had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie" (Ántonia, p. 245). In the opening paragraph of O Pioneers!, Cather states: "One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away" (Pioneers, p. 3). This statement suggests that man is an intruder on the plains and a rather unwelcome visitor, for nature sees to it that his position there is precarious at best and that his hold on the land is tenuous.

The regard for land gives rise to a certain spirit that prompts people to continue to place their trust and hope in the land. John Bergson and his daughter, Alexandra, have this spirit because they have the land. Bergson "died in a dark time. Still, he had hope. He believed in the land" (Pioneers, p. 238). Alexandra, too, has this same faith--in her land and in Emil. "She had always believed in him, as she had believed in the land" (Pioneers, p. 239).

However, the land takes lives when the land overpowers the human spirit. This fact causes broken lives, hearts, and dreams. In "My Ántonia and the American Dream," James E. Miller, Jr., writes that the dreams of many

pioneers can be shattered, "their lives broken by the hardness of wilderness life."¹ Ántonia Shimerda agrees that her father and Francisco Vasquez de Coronado have something in common--they both died of broken hearts when the wilderness broke their spirits. The spirit that prompts many people to leave secure positions and come to the plains has to be maintained or else it fades away and the people die--like Shimerda. Some persons often become discouraged because the land wins several battles in the first few years of homesteading. After Ántonia marries, she and her husband encounter difficulties in starting their farm. "The first ten years were a hard struggle," (Ántonia, p. 342) but they persevere because the land means so much to her. This pioneer spirit had to be more powerful than the feeling of discouragement or else the American West would never have been conquered and settled.

Rosicky realizes that he has this pioneer spirit when he discovers why he does not care for his life in New York City. "The trouble with big cities; they built you in from the earth itself, cemented you away from any contact with the ground. You lived in an unnatural world" (Destinies, p. 31). No spirit is needed to live in an unnatural world, but Rosicky has the spirit of the pioneer and has to put it to use.

This spirit is akin to the feeling of freedom, too. People who live on the land assume that they are freer than those who do not and appreciate that fact. It must be the

expanse of the countryside that gives them the feeling of freedom. There are no skyscrapers, housing additions, or mountains, so that the inhabitants of the plains can fully appreciate the freedom of wide-open spaces. In My Ántonia, Jim kills a rattlesnake to protect his companion, Ántonia. After the deed is done, he feels like the master of his world, and he and Ántonia feel quite exultant. "The great land never looked to me [Jim] so big and free. If the red grass were full of rattlers, I was equal to them all" (Ántonia, p. 48).

In O Pioneers!, Alexandra devotes her life to her land and her younger brother, Emil. Oddly enough, Alexandra does not do the obvious in Pioneers--she does not marry Carl Lindstrum. She never enters a love affair as she transfers her sexual love to the land, and therefore, it becomes a symbol for sexual fulfillment. She gives all her energies to the land, and she gets more and more from it (Pioneers, pp. 79, 168). While walking on the prairie, she feels flushed and sees it "with love and yearning" (Pioneers, p. 65). "It seemed beautiful . . . Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her" (Pioneers, p. 65). The longer she lives, the more she knows "how much the country meant to her" (Pioneers, p. 71).

After living in Norfolk, Nebraska, Carl visits Alexandra when she is forty, and he is thirty-five. He wants to marry her, but he realizes that he does not have much to offer her; therefore, he leaves for Alaska, but

promises to return in a year when he hopes to be successful. After he departs, Alexandra has a recurring dream which always comes when she is overly tired from tending her land. "She had the old sensation of being lifted and carried by a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness" (Pioneers, p. 207). This dream-being "was a man . . . but . . . like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat. She never saw him, but, . . . she could feel that he was yellow like the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him" (Pioneers, p. 206). This being certainly is unlike a man such as Carl Lindstrum; he is a figment of Alexandra's imagination created by her intimacy with the land. This image is her ideal male concocted by her feelings for the soil and nature. No man could possibly be like this one, so she invents him. She has always been superior to men; Carl has told her that, "It is your fate to be always surrounded by little men" (Pioneers, p. 181). However, her imaginary man is equal to the land and therefore, superior to her, for Cather does not want a human to be in complete control of the land, because it is the most powerful force in Pioneers.

Lindstrum stays away for more than a year, and Alexandra grows discouraged and wonders "whether she would not do better to finish her life alone. What was left of life seemed unimportant" (Pioneers, p. 286). Carl's absence

only adds to her disgust and frustration caused by Emil's murder. Her energy is sapped, and she cannot see much of a future for herself. At this point, Carl returns from the Alaskan goldfields, and she realizes that she needs him. She agrees to marry Carl and go to Alaska with him, with the stipulation that they not leave Nebraska forever. Carl acquiesces, because his fiancée belongs "to the land . . . as [she] . . . always said. Now more than ever" (Pioneers, p. 307). It is her land, because it is the product of her hand and her love and because Emil is buried there.

After people realize how the land functions symbolically in Cather's prairie fiction, they can understand it on a different level. Now, her prairie fiction becomes not only entertaining, but allows the reader, through the symbolic meanings to see why and how rural inhabitants revere and cherish their land. At this point, Cather becomes a successful writer, for she enables people who are unfamiliar with the land to comprehend it as a dominant force in their lives.

NOTES

¹"My Ántonia and the American Dream," 117.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The land is used in many ways in Cather's work; it is especially easy to see its many literal and symbolic uses in O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, and "Neighbour Rosicky." She apparently has a spiritual affection for the soil, and she writes of the land in a fashion that enables her readers to realize this attachment to the soil. True, much of Cather's work appears to be a nostalgic look at a simpler, earlier mode of life, but that is not her only purpose, for the role of the land supercedes that. As Evelyn J. Hinz writes, all her major characters are drawn from the Jeffersonian, yeoman farmer motif; they need to be for these people have a bond with the land--they are people of and on the soil.¹ They are the medium who can perfectly express what Cather feels about the land and rural existence.

Cather's portrayal of people and their land is a meaningful one as land is a force that has played a major role in history, especially American history. Land offers itself as something to be conquered so that men may establish a civilization. Conquering and making land a profitable tract is a spiritual, as well as an historical, experience

that is common to all men. When overcome, the soil becomes a servant and benefits its tiller and affords him a sense of accomplishment. In Willa Cather's prairie fiction, it is easy to see this struggle between man and the land, and the satisfaction and disappointments that are a natural by-product of such a relationship. The people involved have to hold the land in high regard and respect and understand what it offers them.

Cather shows the struggles, appreciation, and rewards that a person of the soil encounters. Even though the picture that she provides in these three works is not an entirely optimistic one, because of murders, crop failures, deaths, natural disasters, and suicides, she does illustrate how the land prompts hope and love in anyone who is willing and strong enough to attempt to tame it. If one feels for the soil and is able to see it in various ways--literal and symbolic--then, he can tame it. Willa Cather feels that way for the land, so her characters do too, and therefore, they prevail over the land they love.

NOTES

¹Evelyn J. Hinz, "Willa Cather's Technique and the Ideology of Populism," Western American Literature, 7 (1972), 48.

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