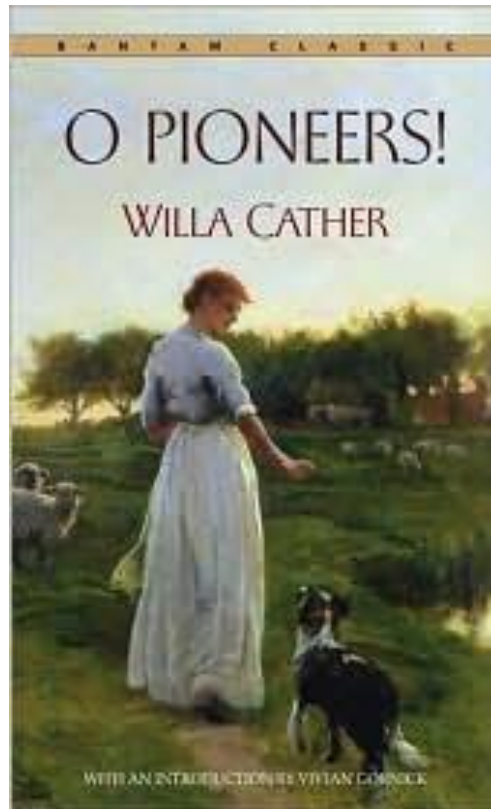


**The Fusion of Human Love and Love of the Land –
A Transcended Renewal in Willa Cather’s *O Pioneer!***

Mrs. Bharthi. B., Ph.D. Research Scholar



Abstract

Writers play an important role in the environmental movement, indirectly by promoting a vision of life in harmony with nature, and directly by inspiring action to preserve landscapes and ecosystems. The sacred quality of places enables individuals to make intimate contact with the wild world and in turn with the wild self. The conservation of nature requires a respectful attitude towards place and landscape. The land is seen as a community to which people belong, and naturally it is used with love and respect.

Key words: prairie, pioneers, land, divides, Willa Cather

Introduction

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Like nations, regions exist as combinations of geographical fact and historically determined, culturally bound perceptions. All regions have defining myths or symbolic identities. Midwestern writers have tended to dwell on picturesque qualities in the quieter landscape, less dramatic beauty, resulting from subtle irregularities and the juxtaposition of human and natural elements. Even when they have been harshly critical of the region's culture, Midwestern writers have written lovingly of its landscape and unique places. Willa Cather has justified herself as a regional writer by concentrating on the theme of feeling one with the land in the novel *O Pioneers!*

Attachment to the Prairie Landscape – Sense of Dislocation

The central character becomes physically and emotionally attached to the prairie landscape in order to achieve spiritual fulfilment as well as financial success. Although Cather was born in Virginia and lived most of her adult life in eastern cities, she is most often identified with the long grass prairie landscape of southeastern Nebraska, the setting of many of her best fictions. Cather's family moved to Nebraska in 1883, when the region was still in its frontier period. Having previously known only the forested, hilly terrain of Virginia, the nine-year old Cather initially felt homesick and lonely in the "Divide," as the country between the Republican and Blue Rivers was known, experiencing "a kind of erasure of personality" in the vast and seemingly barren plains. This sense of dislocation motivated Cather to befriend her immigrant neighbours, especially the Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, and Czechs, who then greatly outnumbered American born, settlers in Nebraska. These foreign born pioneers, made up for what she missed in the country. She particularly liked the old women; they understood her homesickness and were kind to her. Cather came to view the pioneers as heroic creators of the Midwestern cultural landscape.

O Pioneers!

O Pioneers!, Cather's breakthrough work, is the novel which established her Nebraska as a notable locality in the geography of world literature. It is the struggle of westering pioneers to subdue the wilderness and establish Euro-American civilization in the vast continental interior. Cather derived her title, from Walt Whitman's poem *Pioneers! O Pioneers!* to idealise the collective heroism of a central inland race.

National Pride

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Cather shares with Whitman a sense of national pride in the adventure of western settlement. It's a fusion of two different stories, one about a Swedish pioneer woman and another about a tragic love affair. Life in the city and in the country is compared and contrasted through characters representing urban and rural experience. Tragedy occurs in the form of unpredictable weather and economic trends, as well as in the fortunes of love and health. *O Pioneers!* begins in winter in a hostile environment, when the prairie is bitterly cold and depressingly colourless, which signifies the theme of struggle. Alexandra Bergson, the novel's central character, triumphs victoriously by solving the enigma in this epic struggle.

Central Character - Alexandra Bergson

Alexandra Bergson is from a strong hostile section of Nebraska. Her father dies at the opening of the novel and leaves the farm, as well as his wife and three sons, in the capable hands of Alexandra. It is a wild and a bitter land which these foreign tailors, joiners and shipbuilders have challenged. They are small and without strength, when compared to the vast prairies. The malicious spirit of the grassland destroys their cattle with blizzards, hogs with cholera, horses with snake bites and broken legs in prairie-dog holes, and often cuts off the people themselves, in the prime of their years. Many surrender and return to the soft ways of the cities. But confident Alexandra persuades her brothers not to sell but to expand to ensure confidence for the future.

The author foreshadows the rewards to come from this faith by a sentimentalism, wherein the great spirit of the unfriendly soil, bends a little before Alexandra's love and her indomitable will. The rewarding fruit of this vision is the transformation of the wild land into the prosperous countryside with telephone wires, white roads, gayly painted farm houses, red barns with gilded weathercocks, still windmills, and mile-long furrows in the squares of corn.

Tragedy and Strength of Character

A theme of minor interest is the fatalistic acceptance of the tragedy in which Frank Shabata shoots his beautiful wife Marie and Alexandra's beloved youngest brother, Emil, when he finds them dreaming in each other's arms in the tall grass like two enchanted children. Marie was simply too beautiful for this world, and helplessly and innocently she brought destruction upon herself and others because of an excess of loveliness.

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Alexandra's strength of character is established when her dying father gives her the responsibility of the farm and the family. According to John Bergson, the father, land in itself is desirable and he subscribes to that old-world belief. He believes in the land's potential, but has an idea that no one understood him, on how to farm it properly. "In eleven long years John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame".(20) He could not emboss any difference either in its appearance or its productivity. The only accomplishment after years of crop failures and natural disasters is to have completed payments on his land (a typical farm of the prairie Midwest: a full section of six hundred and forty acres). He senses that his intelligent and diligent daughter, will come to understand the enigmatic land.

His two older sons Lou and Oscar are hard workers but suffer from the dearth of foresight. Mrs. Bergson contributes significantly to the household, but "had never quite forgiven John Bergson for bringing her to the end of the earth; but now that she was there, she wanted to be let alone to reconstruct her old life in so far as that was possible."(30)

Create the Old World in the New

Thus Mrs. Bergson attempts to create the old world in the new. Among her family, only Alexandra has the courage, patience, and intelligence to make the prairie bloom, to transform it from undifferentiated space to significant place. Alexandra learns not only from her neighbors' mistakes, but from their successes too.

O Pioneers! thus presents the land tamed by imagination and love rather than by force and active will. Alexandra's epiphany on the 'Divide' is evident of Cather's aesthetic tendency to romanticism. Alexandra prefers to live a simple life, in close contact with both nature and her employees, while her brothers lack love for the land and represent the new materialistic spirit of the settled Midwest.

Placelessness

Another conflict involving place and placelessness in *O Pioneers!* is between Alexandra and Carl Linstrum, her childhood friend. Carl fails as an engraver in Chicago and returns years later to visit Alexandra. At the age of thirty-five, Carl is a displaced country parson. In a conversation about the advantages and disadvantages of a mobile, unattached

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life, like his own, and of a settled grounded existence, such as Alexandra's, this would-be couple reveal their envy of the others' a lot. When Carl expresses his sense of failure, Alexandra tells him that she would rather have had his freedom than her land. But Carl insists that attachment to a place brings greater happiness in the long run.

Here you are an individual, you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody, we own nothing. When one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him We have no house, no place, no people of our own"(123)

At the novel's end, when Carl has begun to succeed in Alaska, and has again returned to Nebraska, Alexandra is presented with the opportunity to broaden her horizons, to travel with Carl to Alaska. They plan to marry, with the understanding that they will return to the farm, where even after tragedy and loneliness there will be great peace and freedom. Alexandra's first devotion is to the land, and Carl must give up his wanderlust, if not, become a creature of place, to become her husband. "We come and go," Alexandra tells Carl, "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."(308)

Incarnational Feeling

Alexandra Bergson is especially gifted at intuiting the incipient fertility of the grudging prairie. The ineffable power abiding within the slumbering grasslands touches her in a manner that is vaguely incarnational: "Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman. "(65)

Through her devotion, therefore, Alexandra takes possession of the prairie in a way no mere conqueror ever could, and in the only way any mortal can ever hope. Alexandra's surrender to the prairie is perhaps best seen in her recurring fantasy of willful abandonment to a shadowy but gentle lover-god. Her reverence for the land, which in her fantasy approaches passionate love, enables Alexandra to see that, while the rolling grasslands endure, all that lives upon them eventually passes away. Her tranquility with this reality perhaps serves as the finest measure of the depth of her submission to the land. Joining Alexandra in this

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worshipful stance toward the land is crazy Ivar, a harmless, though mistrusted, eccentric. Like Alexandra, Ivar's respect for the land is borne of a deep spiritual awareness:

He expressed his preference for his wild homestead by saying that his Bible seemed truer to him there. If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land, the smiling sky, the curly grass white in the hot sunlight; if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant.(38)

Theme of Union

Cather's theme of union with land opens up to encompass the entire natural world. Her characters have the ability not only to apprehend nature, but to respond to the divine force dwelling within:

Alexandra drew her shawl closer about her and stood...looking at the stars which glittered so keenly through the frosty autumn air. She always loved to watch them, to think of their vastness and distance, and of their ordered march. It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security. (70-71)

The scene of spring plowing is highly intoxicating in the novel *O Pioneers!* The brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and the power of growth, its fertility, yields itself eagerly to the plow, so much so that Alexandra, who has devoted all her youth to it, feels she is getting rich just from sitting still. And Carl, who loved painting from his childhood and who has been away for over ten years, sees the most beautiful picture on his return. It is a picture that he can never paint for the canvas. The endless land, and the painter, Alexandra are thus identified.

Embodiment of Intrinsic Beauty and Solid Wisdom

Alexandra, the heroine of the book, is the embodiment of intrinsic beauty and solid wisdom, which are closely associated with the land. The several passages which describe her best, combine land, farm work, scenery and her good feelings in a remarkable manner. In the year of great drought which forced others to sell their land and leave, Alexandra came back

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with much more confidence after having examined the situation in the neighbouring village. On her way back, her radiance surprised her younger brother, who was attached to her.

For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her....That night she looked up at the starry sky, thought about the laws governing the movement of the universe, and felt a new attachment to the land.” (65)

Alexandra is a typical country girl: steady, honest, and sometimes even a bit slow. But she can absorb new ideas, and run risks. This is the quality of pioneers and entrepreneurs. She evinces lot of care to people, in return nobody bothers to reciprocate. The only person who understands and appreciates her beauty is Carl Linstrum. Carl alone understood what land means to Alexandra and fully appreciates her outstanding ability in managing her farm. The courtship is a little too long, characteristic of that time and of an agricultural society. This kind of love is gold and is as solid as diamond. The pioneering spirit is still the crystallizing quality of Americans as a whole. Cather writes about the frontier in an era infused with nostalgia for a mythologized American past and with anxiety about America’s post frontier purpose.

O Pioneers! offers a portrayal of Alexandra, a Swedish immigrant, who suppresses her need of personal satisfaction for love of the land. Her personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence; like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there, at intervals months apart, and then sank again to flow on under her own fields. Her youth and natural yearning for human love, which she had pushed down below the conscious surface, rise again and again in recurrent dreams, where she has the illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by some one very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat. To her, he seemed to be yellow like the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him. It is in her dreams, a psychic process beyond the control of the conscious mind, that human love and love of the land interact and fuse.

Profound Memories

However deeply buried in the unconscious the memories of an individual's past may be, there are profounder memories still of one's cultural heritage; hence it is conceivable that all minds have a common substratum. After being out all night in a storm, Alexandra remarks to her friend that the feeling of the penetratingly cold rain carried her back into the dark, before her birth, where you can't see things, but they come to you, somehow, and you know them and aren't afraid of them. Maybe it's like that with the dead. If they feel anything at all, it's the old things, before they were born. There are nevertheless a number of poetic passages manifesting the author's regional affection and pride in the courage and grit of the pioneers who, at great cost, subdued this wild land.

Cather preferred to think of *O pioneers!* as her first novel. This is the story of Alexandra Bergson, the oldest child of a Swedish immigrant who dies in the struggle to tame the wild land. Alexandra holds the family together with her industry and vision, keeps her plodding brothers from giving up the struggle, and plans a brilliant future for her beloved younger brother Emil. Alexandra and her brothers prosper, but the brothers turn out mean-spirited. And when Emil falls in love with their neighbour's wife Marie, tragedy ensues. But Alexandra endures, and when her old friend Carl Lindstrom returns from years of wandering, she can look forward to a serene middle and old age with him. The novel ends on a note of transcendental renewal: 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."

The relationship of Alexandra Bergson to the land is unique. She directs her sexual vitality towards the land and experiences a recurring fantasy of being carried away in the arms of an earth lover, which she tries to purge by pouring cold water over her body. This fantasy and her attempt to suppress it suggest the extension of her sexual self to the land, which at times represents her lover and at times is associated with her body; she felt "close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination in the soil"(204)

Conclusion

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This is a story forever repeating itself in the history of man's development, ancient but often renewed, common but soul stirring. A group of people, old and young, men and women, leave their homes for a primitive and desolate tract of land, and start cultivating it with their bare hands. It is hard work. Some fall before they can realize their goals, and some retreat in the face of difficulties. Victory belongs to those who persist and command confidence, willpower, and wisdom. Nature with its wild resistance to man is subdued by such people. The desolate plains and hills become fertile land. The pioneers finally create for themselves good homes and a good life, and eventually realizing their self-fulfillment in their struggle to survive. This little novel possesses a unique charm and heartrending beauty. This beauty comes from a deep love for the land. One can say that from the words on the flyleaf to the last sentence of the book there burns a passion, a persistent pursuit, a burning attachment, hope and disappointment, pain and happiness, yearnings, selfless devotion, which the author holds for the land deep in her heart. The special sentiments toward the land come from the hard struggle to subdue it.

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