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writers of the century. Few modern American novelists have had the temperament or discipline to create twelve novels (ten if *A Lost Lady* and *My Mortal Enemy* are considered "nouvelles") of fundamental serious nature and refined art. And few can claim three significant novels, one which aspires to greatness. Her precise understanding of the power and the limitations of the individualism necessary for the artist allowed her to achieve so much. In 1936, when social criticism branded much of the work of the preceding decade as "Escapism," Cather recognized the true basis of the judgment. "The revolt against individualism," she wrote, "naturally calls artists severely to account, because the artist is of all men the most individual: those who were not have been long forgotten."  

She knew, however, that individualism had its limitations. "Nearly all the Escapists in the long past have managed their own budgets and their social relations so unsuccessfully that I wouldn't want them for my landlords, or my bankers, or my neighbors. They were valuable, like powerful stimulants, only when they were left out of the social and industrial routine which goes on every day all over the world." Willa Cather's achievement as an artist lies in her recognition that the standards of individualism can not be applied to landlords, bankers, or neighbors. Though she never lost sight of the problem of the individualist, she came to see them as a part of a larger cultural pattern uniting the creative individualist with his fellow human beings.

34 *On Writing*, 26.

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**O PIONEERS! IN THE LIGHT OF WILLA CATHER'S "LAND-PHILOSOPHY"**

**By Sister Lucy Schneider, C.S.J.**

I had searched," Willa Cather says, "for books telling about the beauty of the country I loved, its romance, the heroism and strength of its people that had been plowed into the very furrow of its soil and did not find them. And so I wrote *O
Miss Cather did this when she was forty years of age—old enough "to know the village," having already "known the world." And she dedicated the work to Sarah Orne Jewett who had indicated to her the wisdom of such a choice of material and such timing in giving it form.

The title of the novel, taken from Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers!", focuses immediately on the importance of the land in relation to the people and the meanings and values dramatized in the work as a whole. One recalls Whitman's lines:

We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

From Nebraska, from Arkansas
Central inland race are we . . .

See my children, resolute children,
By those swarms upon your rear we must never yield or falter,
Ages back in ghostly millions frowning there behind us urging,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Whitman's poem presents the challenge to conquer the wild land and prepare the way for the generations to come. But more than that, it celebrates the human spirit itself as pioneering. Miss Cather's novel also confronts the challenge of pioneering in both its material and its spiritual aspects, but it likewise gives full play to the tensions involved therein among divergent yet basically admirable impulses. Underlying the whole movement of the novel is the narrator's statement, "A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves."

As an inscription to *O Pioneers!* Willa Cather employs one of her own poems, "Prairie Spring":

Evening and the flat land,
Rich and sombre and always silent;
The miles of fresh-plowed soil,
Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness;
The growing wheat, the growing weeds,
The toiling horses, the tired men;
The long empty roads,

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1 Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln, 1961), 139.
Sullen fires of sunset, fading,
The eternal, unresponsive sky.
Against all this, Youth,
Flaming like the wild roses,
Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
Flashing like a star out of the twilight;
Youth with its insupportable sweetness,
Its fierce necessity,
Its sharp desire,
Singing and singing,
Out of the lips of silence,
Out of the earthy dusk.

As one might expect, the poem embodies a theme relevant to the novel. The two parts of the poem juxtapose a heavy picture of the land's rich, somber fertility with a pulsing description of Youth's vibrant, effusive desire. But in the last three lines Miss Cather integrates the meaning of the black, silent soil of the first part with the brilliant singing Youth of the second. There she indicates the origin of Youth's singing; i.e., "Out of the lips of silence, Out of the earthy dusk." Indeed in the human drama of *O Pioneers!* Willa Cather shows that individual lives may accentuate either somber fertility or ephemeral brilliance. Nevertheless her basic theme in the novel corresponds with that of her poem: a youthful pioneering spirit draws its vitality from the land at the same time that it humanizes it.

From the novel's opening sentence until its final one, its tensions and resolutions revolve around a relation to the land. The precarious beginnings of life on the Nebraska Divide appear in the initial sentence: "One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away" (p. 3). A statement of the dearly achieved results of a completed life on the land forms the closing sentence of the novel: "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!" (p. 309).

In the two sentences quoted and in all the sentences between them, *O Pioneers!* exemplifies several of the cardinal points of what I term Miss Cather's "land-philosophy" and employs effectively many of the supporting land-related images and "land-details." An examination of her subsequent fiction reveals that Willa Cather later makes these "land" principles and
details the basis for a fully developed, inclusive artistic vision. But even in such an early work as *O Pioneers!* she tellingly utilizes large segments of her “land-philosophy” in creating a vision in keeping with this stage of her development.

Among Miss Cather’s fundamental “land” concepts underlying *O Pioneers!* are the following: the land as a good in itself—but as a good that affects people variously and which elicits diverse responses; the land as the field in which aspirations take root—sometimes to wither and die, but sometimes to come to harvest; the land as a symbol for such “essentials” as strength, fertility and beauty.

Specific “land-details” and related natural details that complete Miss Cather’s artistic embodiment of her vision in *O Pioneers!* include the wild grass and the crops and the trees, the birds and the insects, the wind and the snow, the sun and the stars.

Whatever the particular land ideas or details which Willa Cather uses in her Nebraska fiction, the obvious yet basic fact remains that rapport with the land constitutes for her the *sine qua non* condition for portrayal of a sympathetic character. When Alexandra Bergson says to Carl Linstrum, “We come and go, but the land is always here” (p. 308), she pinpoints the underlying principle from which Miss Cather’s correlation between sensitivity of one kind or another to the land, and sympathetic character portrayal flows; i.e., the fact that, for her, the earth and nature represent the personal basic, primeval forces that sustain and enrich life and the creative force. For Willa Cather, unless a character has some appreciation for one or more qualities which she associates with the land, that character will not be a genuine, unique person. In her fiction this appreciation for that which sustains life and the creative force necessarily takes a variety of forms and involves a great deal of tension within an individual and among individuals; for life, being dynamic and not static, implies selectivity and uniqueness.

Although Alexandra Bergson figures centrally in the theme of *O Pioneers!*—i.e., earth’s solidity and fertility responding to humanization—anything approaching an adequate picture of that theme demands an examination of other characters of the novel in their land-related, distinctive inclinations and qualities,

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and in the stress and distress that divergent tendencies precipitate.

Alexandra's father, John Bergson, a quiet, intelligent man who sang in a male chorus during his ship-building days in Sweden, retains the Old World belief in the intrinsic value of land. Most himself when writing his long letter home on Sundays in "a fine, regular hand, almost like engraving" (p. 236), he realizes his inability to farm his land properly, and breaks under the hard conditions of his eleven years on the Divide. Yet he transmits his faith in the land and its possibilities to his daughter in whom he recognizes "the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out" (p. 24) that had characterized his own father in his younger days.

Whereas Willa Cather portrays John Bergson as representing the implantation of cultured values in Nebraska through landholding, she has the young neighbor Carl Linstrum represent a pure artistic impulse. From a sad, delicate youth, hungry for whatever meager artistic materials the Divide has to offer, he progresses to the study of wood-engraving—an art that was replaced by a cheap metal process before he had the chance to practice his chosen vocation. Hating farming as a youth, he felt "that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness" (p. 15). But he loved the country on the days when he "felt something strong and wild come out of it, that laughed at care" (p. 49). Later, returning to a land tamed by cultivation, he speaks out for the enduring appeal of this same quality of the land: "there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years. Now, when I come back to all this milk and honey, I feel like the old German song, 'Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebtest Land?' " (p. 118).

Retaining his humanity, Carl never becomes a really successful artist in a society where cheap mass production has largely replaced conscientious individuality. But Miss Cather makes it clear that Carl's questing impulse remains, manifesting itself, perhaps in a corrupted fashion, in the dreams of a Klondike prospector, and finding its final complement in the accomplish-
ments of a resolute Alexandra, who combines imagination with steadfastness.

Sensitive to beauty, and an amateur maker of music, Alexandra's youngest brother, Emil, is neither the truly artistic person that Carl Linstrum shows himself to be nor the frustrated farmer that his own father becomes. Rather Willa Cather makes Emil Bergson the embodiment of a freedom that is built on both Old and New World foundations—foundations that offer him a bright pattern of beautiful as well as challenging possibilities. According to Alexandra, "He shall do whatever he wants to . . . He is going to have a chance, a whole chance" (p. 117). Nevertheless, with his feeling for Marie Shabata arousing a storm within him, "His ideas about the future would not crystallize" (p. 235).

Although Emil has the privilege of seeing Alexandra's happiness when, on their return to the Divide after visiting the river farms, she faces the land "with love and yearning," and although he sympathizes with her response to the land, he is not cut out for farm work any more than was his father or Carl. His most memorable experience of the land, one which he and Alexandra share, occurs on the trip just referred to. While the brother and sister eat lunch on the river bluff, "a single wild duck was swimming and diving and preening her feathers,disposing herself very happily in the flickering light and shade" (p. 204). "Our duck," as Emil refers to it when recalling the experience, impresses Alexandra as being the most beautiful living thing she had ever seen, "a kind of enchanted bird that did not know age or change" (p. 205). This duck, as ageless as the land itself, perhaps appeals to Miss Cather as the Nebraska version of Keats's nightingale. Whereas Keats's nightingale symbolized the perdurability of art, this wild duck suggests an eternal ideal that is every bit as real as that of art but not so precise and refined.

The lasting freedom and beauty that the wild creature seems to signify make a strong appeal to both Emil and Alexandra. So when the brother and sister discuss the progress being made toward the fulfillment of their father's belief in the land, Emil's silent incredulity gives way suddenly to his spontaneous question, "Alexandra, do you remember the wild duck we saw down on the river that time?" (p. 240). Restless Emil's approach to
the land involves an acute tension between the almost mystical "single-wild-duck" experience and the prosaic, patient plodding of "men and horses going up and down, up and down" (p. 156), with a distant but inevitable harvest in prospect—a harvest not only of crops but of free, cultured individuals as well.

Sharing Emil's youthful passion and impatience, Marie Shabata is characterized by Willa Cather as lacking that young man's brooding preoccupation, but having in its stead an easily-kindled warm-heartedness and impulsiveness; she is incapable of giving a lukewarm response. In the latter quality Marie can be compared to the "open face of the country . . . [which] gives itself ungrudgingly to the moods of the season, holding nothing back" (p. 76). But, living with Frank Shabata on the farm her father had bought her "in the country that she had loved so well as a child" (p. 146), Marie finds herself thinking not of the "open face of the country" but of trees, "because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do" (p. 153). Yet despite Marie's good will in trying to be resigned to her situation, she eventually spreads ruin around her, to use Alexandra's words, "just by being too beautiful, too full of life and love" (p. 304). Miss Cather portrays Marie as a person with many admirable qualities, but nevertheless a person lacking in detachment and balance.

A very different sort of a person from Marie in many respects, Ivar resembles her in that he both draws support from Alexandra and gives her understanding in return. The mystically-inclined "Crazy" Ivar is depicted by Willa Cather as approaching the land by way of contemplation. This latter-day Thoreau, who understands animals and whose pond attracts the "strange voices" of exotic birds, maintains his individuality and integrity not by a subjugation of nature, but by letting all living things give their own spontaneous praise to the Creator. He follows the same plan himself, eschewing any established church and reinforcing the truth of his Bible by his experience of the "rough land, the smiling sky, the curly grass, white in the hot sunlight . . . the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence" (p. 38). Like the Indians of Miss Cather's Death Comes for the Archbishop, Ivar "uses" nature as if he used it not. "Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face
of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done” (p. 36). But despite—or perhaps because of—his mystical approach to life, it is to Ivar that Alexandra goes for advice more often than to anyone else. (p. 94)

Minor character in terms of frequency of appearance in the action of the novel, Milly Bergson, the daughter of Lou Bergson and Annie Lee, nevertheless assumes a major role in terms of the total meaning of *O Pioneers!* In her person she combines a reverence for inherited “land” values and a promise of the future victory of the artistic impulse over second-generation crassness and insensitivity. Hers are among the first of the “shining eyes of youth” (p. 309) that the Nebraska land gives in return for the human effort and love expended on it by an older generation. The “great hopes” that Alexandra holds for Milly find adequate support throughout the novel. On the one hand Milly has the “comfortable and comfort-loving nature” (p. 101) of her grandmother, and on the other, she takes it upon herself to learn the Swedish songs that her gentlemanly grandfather used to sing. On those occasions when Milly spends a week with Alexandra, the young girl “read aloud to her from the old books about the house, or listened to stories about the early days on the Divide” (p. 105). Alexandra’s estimate of Milly’s artistic possibilities seems to rest on her own commonsense, intuitive judgment regarding music, for she admits to a total lack of taste and discrimination in regard to interior decoration. Witness the shiny colored woodwork and glassware with which she permits the Hanover furniture dealer to adorn her “company rooms.” But Alexandra is not alone in noting Milly’s sensitivity to the beautiful. For when the girl’s somewhat frumpish mother loudly proclaims her daughter’s accomplishments, the artistic Carl Linstrum observes that Milly looks uncomfortable and is distressed by her mother’s way of talking. He takes her hand in silent assurance of his understanding (p. 110).

Not to be counted among Willa Cather’s really sympathetic characters in *O Pioneers!* is Frank Shabata whose death-dealing gun invades Emil and Marie’s world of light and illicit love. This once gay blade, now turned surly husband, has for five years “flung himself at the soil with savage energy” (p. 146). For him the soil becomes a refuge from having to face up to the
demands of humanity. Having previously been almost unconsciously angry with Marie for her universally loving nature, in prison Frank tells Alexandra during their visit of his and Marie’s mutual responsibility in the disintegration of their marriage. Frank, now dehumanized in appearance, bemoans the fact that “dat place all go to hell what I work so hard on” (p. 294). Included in “dat place” is Frank’s alfalfa field “where myriads of white and yellow butterflies were always fluttering above the purple blossoms” (p. 151). These butterflies, evanescent embodiments of life and beauty, appear in the blood-stained orchard later in the novel as the other half of the gruesome story. “Above Marie and Emil, two white butterflies were fluttering in and out among the interlacing shadows; diving and soaring, now close together, now far apart” (p. 270). To make their meaning explicit, the narrator links these butterflies with “the last wild roses of the year [that] opened their pink hearts to die” (p. 270). Life and beauty, the images say, have built-in risks. Or, in other words, evanescence characterizes the material side of anything organic—of all that is on the land.

The preceding discussion of seven key characters in O Pioneers!—i.e., John, Emil and Milly Bergson; Carl Linstrum; “Crazy” Ivar; Marie and Frank Shabata—not only indicates the play of varied and unique responses to life on the Divide within and among these individuals, but it also constitutes an indispensable backdrop before which to study the central character of the novel, Alexandra Bergson.

Although Willa Cather allows Alexandra to stand out as something of an earth-goddess, an embodiment of the desirability of rapport with the land, even in her life as a real human being Alexandra exhibits the play of tensions among life’s various impulses and possibilities. It takes the tragic deaths of Emil and Marie, for example, for her to fill in her “blind spot” in regard to youthful passion. But on the whole Alexandra appears to others to be a triumphant person.

As a young girl Alexandra gave the impression of knowing “exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next” (p. 6). Accepting from her dying father the task of developing the “possibilities of his hard-won land” (p. 24, and losing simultaneously the companionship of her only close
friend, the artistically-inclined Carl Linstrum, Alexandra guides her unwilling brothers through three years of prosperity, then "three years of drouth [sic] and failure, the last struggle of a wild soil against the encroaching plowshare" (p. 47). Alexandra, a real person yet mythic as well, experiences a full-scale understanding of the Divide when she makes her decision in favor of the "big chance" of the high land over the "little certainty" of the river farms. On her return to the Divide after she and Emil have visited the low land, her humming of a Swedish hymn and her whole-hearted acceptance of the country create a religious aura and a tone of natural exultation.

When the road began to climb the first long swells of the Divide, Alexandra hummed an old Swedish hymn, and Emil wondered why his sister looked so happy. Her face was so radiant that he felt shy about asking 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 the tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman (p. 65).

In Alexandra’s experience Miss Cather illustrates Evelyn Underhill’s statement, “Beauty is simply reality seen with the eyes of love.”

With love for and understanding of the land achieved, Alexandra, at the close of part one of O Pioneers! formulates for herself the dual realities of order and wild vitality which this Nebraska country offers for the taking, and its willingness to submit, in turn, to human effort and control. Willa Cather depicts Alexandra standing and looking at the stars.

She had 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. That night she had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it. . . . She had never known before how much the country meant to her. The chirping of the insects down in the long grass had been like the sweetest music. She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring (p. 71).

It goes without saying that Miss Cather attaches considerable symbolic import to the concepts of order and wildness contained in the preceding passage with which part one of *Pioneers!* concludes. And she advances the theme of a humanizing cycle or a continuum of human values as the “Wild Land” of part one becomes the “Neighboring Fields” of part two; the “shaggy coat of the prairie” changes into a “vast checkerboard, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light” (p. 75). Well-painted houses and barns, telephone wires and windmills testify to the accomplishments of the past sixteen years. The Divide has responded to human effort and, in Alexandra’s case, to love. “The brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear [sic] . . . with a soft, deep sigh of happiness. In season, this frank . . . joyous . . . open face of the country” yields its “heavy harvest” (p. 76). Miss Cather elaborates the response of the country yet more fully:

It gives itself ungrudgingly to the moods of the season, holding nothing back. Like the plains of Lombardy, it seems to rise a little to meet the sun. The air and the earth are curiously mated and intermingled, as if the one were the breath of the other. You feel in the atmosphere the same tonic, puissant quality that is in the tilth, the same strength and resoluteness (pp. 76-77).

Upon the strong open country, Alexandra imposes pleasing symmetrical arrangements—in the flower garden, in the fences and hedges, in the pasture ponds and the beehives. The big, white inconsistently-furnished house on the hill might be designated Alexandra’s house; but, Willa Cather’s narrator observes, “You feel that, properly, Alexandra’s house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best” (p. 84).

This is the soil, however, that according to Alexandra deserves the credit for what has been accomplished. “The land did it,” she declares. “It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still” (p. 116). But Alexandra’s wealth, obviously, consists in more than the profits from material harvests. She possesses in her very real relationship with this country both the reality of the land itself and Reality and Life.
which it symbolizes. In other words, she has access to the vastness and the vibrancy, the spontaneity and the beauty of the land of her farm, but she has likewise a breadth of appreciation and sympathy for the wider world of men and manners where these same realities may be translated into terms outside her own immediate experience. Alexandra suggests that perhaps she is like Carrie Jensen, the sister of one of her hired men. Carrie’s limited provincial background led her to believe “life was just the same thing over and over.” But returning from a trip to an adjacent state, Carrie is cheerfully content “to live and work in a world that’s so big and interesting . . . it’s what goes on in the world that reconciles me” (p. 124). A much more perceptive Alexandra is reconciled, Willa Cather shows, by what goes on in individuals characterized by uniqueness and imagination, whatever form those qualities flesh themselves out in.

In fact Alexandra has room—and in some cases real need—in her scheme of things for persons very different from herself, especially Carl, Emil and Marie. She also understands a bare-footed, anti-bathtub, domestically artistic Mrs. Lee whose look says “when you found out how to take it, life wasn’t half bad” (p. 189), and the similarly bare-footed, shaggy mystic, Ivar, who rebels against the New World’s insistence that all should be alike. “Let people go on talking as they like,” Alexandra sympathetically advises him, “and we will go on living as we think best” (p. 94). Again Miss Cather reveals Alexandra as big enough to admire in the French and Bohemian boys the spirit and love of variety which she finds lacking in the more self-centered Swedish boys who are “apt to be egotistical and jealous” (p. 214). Alexandra, though not a “Catholic,” includes in her “catholic” response to reality an esteem and respect toward the Church of Sainte-Agnes which “looked powerful and triumphant there on its eminence so high above the rest of the landscape, with miles of warm color lying at its feet” (p. 211). Thus in such an early novel as O Pioneers! Willa Cather allows a church building in a particular setting on the land to hint at an integration of meaning and a vision that will find its culmination in her final novel of the land of the Southwest, Death Comes for the Archbishop.

Though Alexandra impresses those about her as a successful,
triumphant woman, her victories have been costly. She responds to her farmer brothers' accusations with, "Hard on you? I never meant to be hard. Conditions were hard. Maybe I would never have been very soft, anyhow; but I certainly didn't choose to be the kind of girl I was. If you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard, like a tree" (p. 171). Her type of life has helped to give her "something of the impervious calm of the fatalist, always disconcerting to very young people, who cannot feel that the heart lives at all unless it is still at the mercy of storms; unless its strings can scream to the touch of pain" (p. 226).

Thus Miss Cather portrays Alexandra as failing to perceive the development of Marie and Emil's passion, so different is the older woman's self-realization from theirs.

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 under her own fields. Nevertheless, the underground stream was there (p. 203).

Alexandra experiences a deep happiness on certain "outwardly uneventful" days—"days when she was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination in the soil" (p. 204).

Having "grown up in serious times," (p. 205) Alexandra tends to remember the impersonal—or so an outsider might conclude from the above references. "Yet," Willa Cather's narrator insists, "to her they were very personal. Her mind was a white book, with clear writing about weather and beasts and growing things. Not many people would have cared to read it; only a happy few. She had never been in love, she never indulged in sentimental reveries" (p. 205). But there are the "happy few," chief among whom is Carl Linstrum, whose departure from the Divide coincides with Alexandra's assumption of the challenge of the land passed on to her by her father. The sensitive, artistic Carl—her only real friend at the time—helps Alexandra "in the only way one person ever really can help another" (p. 51); that is, by understanding her. Sharing the same thoughts and liking the same things, they both realize that Carl belongs elsewhere, doing the work he is meant to do. But much as Alexandra has "always hoped . . . [Carl] would get away,"
she admits that “Somehow it will take more courage to bear your going than everything that has happened before” (p. 51).

When Carl returns to the Divide sixteen years later, dissatisfied with himself as the frustrated creator of an art for which there is no demand, he generously praises Alexandra: “What a wonderful place you have made of this, Alexandra . . . I would never have believed it could be done. I’m disappointed in my own eye, in my imagination” (pp. 107-8). And she in turn tells him he too has something very valuable accruing from his seemingly fruitless years. He has himself and his freedom. Carl’s mournful comment, “Freedom so often means that one isn’t needed anywhere,” (p. 122) leads to Alexandra’s thoughtful response, “And yet I would rather have Emil grow up like that than like his two brothers” (p. 123). Both lives—that of unlimited freedom and that of settled regularity—exact a price. But in the character of Alexandra, Willa Cather demonstrates the fact that, although a certain tension between the polarities of unlimited freedom and settled regularity will always exist, the alternatives in any one life are not limited to two; i.e., being a rootless dreamer on the one hand or a settled clod on the other.

Voicing his feelings for Alexandra, Carl exclaims, “But you must see that you astonish me. You must feel when people admire you” (p. 132). However, believing that he must offer her something in the way of a career or financial security before asking her to marry him, Carl does not, at this time, offer himself as she has always needed him; that is, as one who lovingly understands and completes her. It takes the tragic deaths of Emil and Marie to prompt Carl to act according to Alexandra’s common-sense observation: “What good comes of offering people things they don’t need? . . . I have needed you for a great many years” (p. 181).

In Alexandra’s recurrent pre-sleep experience, the land assumes the explicitly symbolic form of a young man, large and strong, a mythic lover who carries her swiftly across the fields. But after Emil has spilled out with Marie his warm-heartedness, spontaneity and love of life, Alexandra’s amplitude of vision and her sensibility come to terms with a fuller picture of reality than they had heretofore encountered. For Alexandra had always believed in Emil “as she had believed in the land” (p.
237). She now comes to realize who this mightiest of all lovers really is—a land-death figure—"and where he would carry her" (p. 284). However, with Carl's return after the deaths of "the best we have"—i.e., Emil and Marie—a weary but still triumphant Alexandra sees that her dream will not come true now "in the way I thought it might" (p. 308). She now possesses human love, and she "possesses the land"—as land, and as all the fullness and complexity that it has come to mean, including death and life after death. For when death, the mighty lover, does call for her, the cycle of love and understanding will continue—a love and understanding that result not only in actual material harvests of "yellow wheat and rustling corn"; but, more importantly, in "harvests" of human passion and aspiration, "in the shining eyes of youth" (p. 309).

A grassy graveyard tells of the cycle of wildness, cultivation, civilization. Lying buried there, "the best we have" represent the "human stories... that 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" (p. 119).

Thus Willa Cather employs both a graveyard and a harvest field to sum up the meaning of O Pioneers! As this study has shown, she portrays civilization as gaining the victory over the wild land when people with an Old World inheritance join themselves in one way or another to the wild land considered as an underlying life force or as a source from which their imagination and spirit can draw strength and inspiration. The unique personal development becomes a possibility, as does artistic unfolding. In other words, creative individualism may flourish.

In O Pioneers! Miss Cather deftly but firmly draws the tensions among and within characters as well as the entire humanization process in terms of her "land-philosophy." Perhaps only for an Alexandra does the land itself become the willing recipient of a person's love and understanding. For a Carl Linstrum, on the other hand, the stability yet the spontaneity of the land serve as an almost unconscious basis for art and freedom which, in turn, testify to humanity's attempts at civilization. To persons deficient in balance and detachment, one facet or other of the land's significance leads them to undesirable extremes; e.g., Oscar and Lou Bergson assume a clod-like stolidity in their
thoughts and actions, while Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata spoil their warmth and impetuosity by illicit indulgence.

As a study of *My Antonia* and succeeding novels in the light of Willa Cather's "land-philosophy" reveals, *O Pioneers!* represents an important but obviously partial embodiment of her full artistic vision. Granted, in *O Pioneers!* the land actually figures as a character, contributing to the action of the novel. But while depending as much as ever on the land as a vehicle for conveying her vision in succeeding novels, Miss Cather progressively achieves a certain physical detachment from that land, along with a corresponding enlargement of her discernment. She explores and illumines the areas of the family, mechanization, art, learning and religion in the light of her inclusive "land-philosophy," at the same time that she stands, feet firmly planted, in the world of the five senses. In fine, she immerses her readers in visible, tangible reality, awakens them to the transcendent, reveals their inextricable inter-connection, and, in *The Professor's House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, advances through the subtleties and complexities of life's materials to a hard-won, convincing artistic vision.

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**THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE: AN ABODE OF LOVE AND DEATH**

By SISTER PETER DAMIAN CHARLES, O.P.

*The Professor's House*, published in 1925, is undoubtedly Willa Cather's most complex novel in theme, in structure, and in characterization. Thematically, she touches upon preoccupations that have long been present in her fiction: the interaction of the Past upon the Present; the encroachment of a materialistic world upon man's spirit; the opposition between the personal self and the idealistic, dedicated self; the "connection or opposition between youth and age, the way they mutually stir[red] one another."¹ Structurally, *The Professor's House* is so complex that it baffled many critics until, in 1938,

¹ Willa Cather on the novel, as quoted in Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (Lincoln, 1963), 204.