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## The Significance of Land in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*

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### **Abstract:**

Willa Sibert Cather is considered as one of the best chronicles of pioneering life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bringing the beauty and vastness of Western plains to national consciousness she has established a reputation for giving life to the landscape of her work. *O Pioneers!* is the story of a Swedish immigrant girl Alexandra Bergson and her quest to cultivate the prairie. The land is stubborn and unyielding and no one knows how to farm it but Alexandra succeeds to transform it into a prosperous enterprise. In *My Ántonia*, the central character Antonia Shimerda is also an immigrant girl. Despite the many hardships she remains dedicated to the land and emerges as victorious. The present paper is intended to analyze the struggle of immigrant settlers on the American soil and the significant of the land in the lives of the characters in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather.

**Keywords:** Pioneers, Struggle, Stubborn, Prairie, Wilderness, Harshness, Triumph.

“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!”

*O Pioneers!*

Willa Sibert Cather was a great American writer who achieved recognition for her novels of frontier on the Great American Plains. Her memorable novels are *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Ántonia* (1918) and her Pulitzer Prize Winning novel *One of Ours* (1922). She was born in Virginia but lived in Nebraska from the age of nine until her graduation from college. The early years of her life left a memorable impression on her and formed the basis for her work. It was the time when European immigrants were coming to Nebraska with the dreams of establishing themselves.

Willa Cather was greatly influenced by the vastness and the environment of Nebraska prairie as well as by the various cultures of the European-American immigrants. She felt an intimacy with the older immigrant women and spent countless hours with them. Cather's high regard for the immigrant families, their hardships, pains, feeling of loneliness, devotion to the land, struggle for existence on the Nebraska plains shaped a good deal of her works.

Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) is the story of the immigrant farmers and their quest to cultivate the prairies. It is a uniquely American epic of hope and courage in the late 1800s on the American frontiers. With the publication of the novel Willa Cather began to achieve national stature as a novelist. Alexandra Bergson, a woman of strong will and desire, inherits her father's farm and transforms it from a wild prairie into a fruitful garden. In the novel wild land is also an equally important character and it yields according to her moods. The story begins from a gloomy town named Hanover with the description of the first settler on the windy Nebraska tableland. The narrator describes the fierceness of weather and wilderness of land:

One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska table land, was trying not to be blown away. A mist of fine snowflakes was curling and eddying about the cluster of low drab buildings huddled on the gray prairie, under a gray sky. The dwelling-houses were set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod; some of them looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves, headed straight for the open plain. (*O Pioneers!* 3)

Alexandra's father Mr. John Bergson came here to tame the land. He tried hard but could make only little impression upon it. It is still a mysterious wild thing and no one knows how to control it. The most depressing and disheartening thing about the new land is the absence of human landmarks and a record of human strivings. He believes that the land in

itself is desirable but “this land was an enigma. It was like a horse that no one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces” (*O Pioneers!* 15). He often discusses with Alexandra about crops, soil and weather because she has greater insight than her brothers. So many calamities like crop failures and diseases make him so depressed that he dies at an early age of 46. Before dying he leaves his farm land and other property under the care of Alexandra as she is the eldest child and best knows what to do.

Alexandra and her brothers work hard to fulfil their father’s dream. As a result their farm prospers. She is protected from labour by her father and her work is mostly intellectual. She reads agriculture news papers, visits other farms, discusses with farmers and also takes advice from Crazy Ivar. Sometimes she appears motionless and lost in thought with an open Bible on her knee. She “was looking thoughtfully away at the point where the upland road disappeared over the rim of the prairie. Her body was in an attitude of perfect repose, such as it was apt to take when she was thinking earnestly” (*O Pioneers!* 39). Even in years of drought she seems away from the anxiety and any kind of stress. Many farmers give up their land, her brothers also want to quit but she has faith in it and knows that the land is valuable. She hopes they will become independent land owners within ten years.

Alexandra has dauntless spirit and flexible mind to accept challenges and doesn’t afraid to make mistakes. She is an innovator and uses new techniques in farming. Unfortunately, her brothers and neighbours do not have imagination and refuse to accept new ideas and reforms, sticking to the old ways. She goes to the river country to understand their land and new techniques. She talks to the farmers about their soil, crops and learns a great deal. She realizes that her land is better than the river land and her fortune lies on the Divide: The narrator describes her feeling of happiness:

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. 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. (*O Pioneers!* 41-42)

While returning to the Divide Alexandra experiences a sense of connectedness to the place. She decides to take loan and buy more lands. Her pioneer imagination, strength and devotion enable her to achieve the American dream of success in a new harsh land. She never

tries to overcome the land but loses herself in it. The land yields according to the seasons and keeps nothing back. As Cather writes, "There is something frank and joyous and young in the open face of the country. It gives itself ungrudgingly to the moods of the seasons, holding nothing back" (*O Pioneers!* 50).

Alexandra's vision makes real, and by love she releases the sleeping country from the darkness. The old country has disappeared forever. Alexandra and the others who have pioneer's vision and strength succeed to transform the wild land and undeveloped, crude society into one of the world's most productive region. Her success is the success of pioneers. She becomes a powerful, independent landowner because she regards the integrity of the landscape. She seeks harmony rather than mastery and humbly surrenders herself to the spirit of the natural world. Her feelings and imagination are closely bound to the land. Her happiness comes from the days when she was very close to the nature.

Alexandra's farm estate with its fruitful ordered fields and gardens is the evidence of her harmony and close relationship with the land. As Willa Cather writes, "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 had never indulged in sentimental reveries. Even as a girl she had looked upon men as work-fellows" (*O Pioneers!* 130). The tamed land seems to bow to the human will and love and in fact, even to return that love.

The unification of the meditative and the concrete in Alexandra's pastoral life is peculiarly exemplified through her affinity to Crazy Ivar. He is a kind of nature god who lives in a sod house near the pond away from the human habitations. He prefers his wild homestead because his Bible seems truer to him there. He understands the birds and animals and communicates with them. His pond is a kind of wild sanctuary for the migratory birds where guns are not allowed. The birds come there to drink water and to bathe in before going on with their journey. Ivar explains the orderly text of the migrations of birds:

They have their roads up there, as we have down here.... They can only stand it there a little while half an hour, may be. Then they fall back and the wedge splits a little, while the rear ones come up the middle to the front. Then it closes up and they fly on, with a new edge. They are always changing like that, up in the air. Never any confusion; just like soldiers who have been drilled. (*O Pioneers!* 28)

Ivar criticizes the uncleanness of human habitations and prefers the tidiness of the wild sod. He has been living there for three years “without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done” (*O Pioneers!* 24). Like Ivar, Marie also feels a strong kinship with the natural world. She loves her farm, white mulberry tree and living near the nature enjoys its beauty and calmness. She is a tree worshiper and believes in the potential of nature and the power of the linden’s virtue to purify the forest. Her garden interprets that order of life that Alexandra has worked so laboriously to produce out of the uncultivated landscape.

Alexandra’s strong will, passion and desire enable her to habituate to the circumstances easily and adopt new ideas warm-heartedly. Finally she succeeds to bring prosperity to her family and community, and plant civilization to the wilderness. Alexandra is a creator, writer as well as a pioneer and her life is the story of creation, the story of a human civilization being formed out of a wild stubborn land.

*My Ántonia* (1918), the final book of Willa Cather’s prairie trilogy, is based on her childhood memories, experiences, her move from Virginia to Nebraska and struggles, hardships of immigrant settlers. The heroine of the novel Ántonia Shimerda comes to Nebraska with her parents to settle in a raw neighbourhood farm. Jim Burden, the narrator of the story, also arrives at the same time. Gradually they develop a strong attachment to the Nebraska landscape. It plays a key role in their growth and development and is closely linked with nearly every aspect of their young lives. With Jim and Ántonia, the land around Black Hawk also grows and develops and gradually transforms into settled farms. When Jim first encounters the landscape of his new home on the Nebraska plain, he is excited to see the boundary less vast wild prairie, completely different from the mountain ridge of Virginia. He reflects:

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land- slightly undulating, I knew, because often our wheels ground against the brake as we went down into a hollow and lurched up again on the other side. (*My Ántonia* 9)

In this new undeveloped place, where humans have not yet made homesteading advancement, Jim experiences God’s present so apparent that prayers are redundant. On his

first day in Nebraska in his grandmother's garden he finds himself in the beginning of a new world. In this pastoral Edenic world, the garden seems nature's womb and he has the sense of spacelessness and freedom in the boundless prairie that is always an essential part of Jim's description of the landscape. He experiences the feelings of happiness and content that he has never felt before. For the first time, he feels closely connected to the nature and surrenders himself to a new experience:

I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entire happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, of goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep. (*My Ántonia* 15)

Although life on the wild prairie is often a source of pleasure and contentment for Jim, it is a hard struggle for Shimerdas. In a new country they suffer terribly the harshness of prairie life. The poverty of the Shimerda family compels them to live like animals in a leaky dugout not better than a badger hole. The misery of this new life brings some of the immigrants an early death. Mr. Shimerda also becomes victim of harshness of life on prairie and in a state of utter depression and homesickness he commits suicide.

After his death, Ántonia is forced to work in the fields. She confronts many challenges such as the brutal winter, the lack of warmth and food and loneliness but she doesn't lose her courage. She works like a man and losing her nice ways assumes a power and pride. She appears determined to transform the land into a good farm. Jim finds that she has great strength and endurance, and enjoys to work out-of-doors like a man. She doesn't care for the muscles swell in her arms. Jim comments, "How much older she had grown in eight months! She had come to us a child, and now she was a tall, strong young girl, although her fifteenth birthday had just slipped by.... She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor's" (*My Ántonia* 71).

When Ántonia comes to Black Hawk to work as a hired girl, she is unable to survive without her natural environment. Isolated from the land, she loses her moral strength and succumbs to Lary Donovan. This unfortunate love affair leaves her pregnant and abandoned. But she doesn't break down and regaining her strength and courage returns to the country to work in the field. She wants to live and die in her country where she knows every stack and tree and feels more close to her papa, who never has gone out of her life. As she grows older

her bond with the land becomes stronger. She is always miserable and lonely in the city. In country she confronts many hardships but she somehow maintains the independence and eternal cheerfulness that makes her a strong woman character.

The annual cycle of seasons also play a very important role in the lives of the characters. They maintain their lives according to the seasons in order to survive. The toughness of reality is presented not only by the unwillingness of the land to be tamed, but also by the rigors of a continental climate. Willa Cather very effectively describes the winter in the Midwest:

The pale, cold light of the winter sunset did not beautify-it was like the light of truth itself. When the smoky clouds hung low in the west and the red sun went down behind them, leaving a pink flush on the snowy roofs and the blue drifts, then the wind sprang up afresh, with a kind of bitter song, as if it said: 'This is reality, whether you like it or not. All those frivolities of summer, the light and shadow, the living mask of green that trembled over everything, they were lies, and this is what was underneath. This is the truth.' It was as if we were being punished for loving the loveliness of summer. (*My Ántonia* 101)

The harsh weather is presented as the great enemy of the life while heat is correlated with vitality that brings happiness and joy. Jim's description of the extremes of hot and cold climate of Middle West and its impact on the people tells his emotional attachment to the land. The harshness of weather and brutal living condition on the Nebraska plain never reduce Ántonia's love to the land. All her life she remains devoted to her family and farm. Her life shows the triumph of the pioneer woman over her adversity and the powerful forces of nature which make the farming difficult. In transforming the wild unbroken prairie into a fruitful farm, Ántonia transforms herself from an innocent immigrant girl into a pioneer woman.

When Jim returns to Ántonia after twenty years, he finds that she has established her own farm. She is proud of her orchard that is the outcome of hard struggle and far surpasses that of any of their neighbours. She takes care of trees and plants as if they are her children. At the centre of all this fertility, she has produced a beautiful garden, a symbol of civilization and a place of quietness. By converting an unbroken prairie into a fruitful farm she has succeeded to impose order on the wilderness of Nebraska and become a figure of universal goodness. As Jim reflects, "She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little

crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions" (*My Ántonia* 200).

Ántonia's struggle with the adverse powers of nature and her triumph over them establish her as an earth-goddess. Like Alexandra, Ántonia is the living symbol of man's conflict to co-exist with the raw forces of nature. They are worshipper and lover of the land and finally unify with it, creating a garden out of the Nebraskan landscape. Their triumph over the land symbolizes victory of love over a stubborn and unyielding land.

In Willa Cather's fiction, the land is not just the background for the action, but it is figurative and crucial to the plot since it not only reveals the events of the characters but also moves the plot. The connection between the land and her characters is as timeless as the earth itself and this bonding is reflected through the personification of the earth and nature. The land is given inner-thought more than many of the real characters are.

The land is temperamental, antagonistic, and inclined to unyielding fits of temper and only few characters such as Alexandra Bergson, Crazy Ivar and Ántonia understand her moods. Through her novels Willa Cather presents the land and human relationship and the significant of the land in the lives of the characters. She seems to say that the people who are patient, hard worker and have single-minded determination can only succeed.

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