

## ANALYSIS

*O Pioneers!* (1913)

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

“It is touched with genius.”

Floyd Dell  
Review of *O Pioneers!*  
*Chicago Evening Post*  
(25 July 1913)

“Few American novels of recent years have impressed us so strongly as this.... She dwells with unforced emotion upon the suffering and the glory of those who have taught a desert to feed the world. The scene is laid in the prairie land of thirty years ago.... The sureness of feeling and touch, the power without strain, which mark this book, lift it far above the ordinary product of contemporary novelists.”

Review of *O Pioneers!*  
*Nation* 97  
(4 September 1913)

“*O Pioneers!* Miss Cather’s new novel of the Nebraska prairie, is an answer to most of the speculations which ‘The Bohemian Girl’ aroused. She is in no danger of exoticism. The book is so deeply, unaffectedly American in style and inspiration that it may disappoint some of Miss Cather’s readers by its very simplicity. It stirred me like a trumpet call....

Miss Cather has stripped her style of cleverness, and has found a new warm simplicity of phrase. Alexandra’s story moves quietly; it is merely part of the history of the evolving race. She marries Carl Linstrum without knowing that she does not love him and probably journeys with him to serene old age without once finding it out. She is a great relief in an age that is obsessed by the idea of sex. Her deepest, most personal experiences have been what others would call impersonal. Her struggle has been with the natural forces of a new, unbroken country. She has become part of the prairie. In comparison with pulsating Marie Shabata, sullen Frank, introspective Carl and all the other astonishingly vivid folk of this life-like book she seems like a great, calm, kindly, elemental fact. She could not possibly be dramatized. She creates her impression by triumph of actual existence, by character and that individual coloring which the inner life gives to a personality. She is infinitely restful, infinitely mysterious and infinitely lonely.”

Celia Harris  
Review of *O Pioneers!*  
*Lincoln Sunday State Journal*  
(3 August 1913)

“Willa Cather...found her way, in *O Pioneers!* (1913), by trying to tell the story of her characters as if she were talking about them to Miss Jewett.... The novel itself was, whether consciously or not, an allegory of the conflict in Willa Cather herself between her instinctive love for her native place and her deliberate appetite for other regions. *O Pioneers!* was dedicated to the memory of Sarah Orne Jewett, ‘in whose beautiful and delicate work there is the perfection that endures,’ but the title came from Walt Whitman.... Alexandra drags her dull brothers after her and establishes the family fortunes.”

Carl Van Doren  
*The American Novel 1789-1939*, 23<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 283-84

“John Bergson, a strong-willed Swedish immigrant, struggles to build a farm on the Nebraska prairie, aided by his wife, their sons Lou and Oscar, and his favorite, the capable, intelligent daughter, Alexandra. At his death, Alexandra assumes her responsibility for the farm and the family, since her mother lacks ingenuity or determination, and her older brothers are obstinate and plodding, while her brother Emil is a child of five. She possesses the heroic, creative quality of the passing frontier, and over a period of years her faith in the soil is rewarded by rich harvests. She is not satisfied by her increasing prosperity, however, for after the departure of Carl Linstrum, who seeks a career as an engraver, she lacks companionship in a society of weaker and meaner individuals. Emil is now a grown youth, sensitive and intelligent, for whom Alexandra has great hopes, but he has a secret affair with her friend Marie Shabata, and the two are killed by Marie’s jealous husband Frank. Meanwhile Carl has visited the Bergsons on his way to the Klondike, and he and Alexandra find in each other the complimentary qualities each needs. When he learns of Emil’s death, Carl returns to marry Alexandra, and they plan to share the responsibilities and fulfillments of life on the farm.”

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 548

“Self-discovery came with *O Pioneers!* (1913). Actually, it was a rediscovery, since the early stories...prove that she had already employed some of her basic themes while still an undergraduate. *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* (1918) should be read together, though *My Antonia* is the better book. Antonia Shimerda, ‘a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races,’ is a greater creation than Alexandra Bergson. But both books have the same sense of reality, the same passionate honesty, the same somber, lonely beauty. Alexandra is the kind of person Captain Forrester has in mind when he speaks of the West as having developed out of dreams—‘the homesteader’s and the prospector’s and the contractor’s. We dreamed the railroads across the mountains, just as I dreamed my place on the Sweet Water.’ She becomes the head of the family after her father’s death, and it is her far-seeing vision, her faith in the land, which keeps her stolid and her vacillating brother tied each to his task in the ‘hard times’ when they are asking only for release. Her self-denial is in marked contrast to their selfishness, and their greed for the land that she has won keeps happy marriage away from her for years.”

Edward Wagenknecht  
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:  
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*  
(Holt 1952) 324

“*O Pioneers!* (1913) was Miss Cather’s first full-length work in her mature style, following the Jamesian and derivative *Alexander’s Bridge* (1912). In it she attacks for the first time in a novel the main theme of her work: the reaction of an immigrant family to the Nebraska frontier. The Swedish immigrant John Bergson, hard-working and devoted, has established his family on a farm near Hanover, Nebraska. As the novel opens he dies; the mother lacks character, and the responsibility for the family falls on the heroic and sensitive daughter Alexandra, the central figure of the novel. There are three brothers: Lou and Oscar, and the youngest, Emil, a favorite of Alexandra. Under her guidance the farm prospers; she forms a friendship with the restless young Carl Linstrum, but is unable to marry him because of her responsibilities. He goes away to the city to become an engraver, and Alexandra loses herself in the hard work of the farm.

Meanwhile the scene has been set for another tragic love-drama: Marie Tovesky, a little Bohemian girl Alexandra has befriended, grows up and marries the farmer Frank Shabata. Emil, Alexandra’s delicate young brother, falls in love with the young married woman; the two are discovered together and killed by Frank. Alexandra, long grief-stricken, recovers only when Carl Linstrum returns from the Klondike; the old friendship of the pair grows into a renewed love, and they decide to marry and devote their lives to the responsibilities and satisfactions of the farm. ‘Fortunate country that is one day to receive the 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.’ Even the violent tragedies that beset Alexandra cannot suppress her immigrant optimism and vitality. This novel is particularly interesting as an embryonic version or preliminary study for *My Antonia*; the main difference is that Alexandra is somewhat excessively depersonalized and symbolic, and thus does not seem as real a person as Antonia.”

Donald Heiney

"Miss Cather, in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* [1918], offers a land myth and a land goddess to rule it; a noble creature, strong, patient, robust, sensitive, and enduring, who undergoes a symbolic courtship with the land. The land at first coerces the heroine, but at last she is able to dominate it. It then becomes metaphorically 'polite,' civilized, classically ordered, and religiously fertile. It acquires a 'manner,' and the result is a noble, creative, and productive unity of man and nature. Like most carefully wrought designs, this pattern of decorum and fertility is threatened from without. The ugly, venal, amoral cities offer another way of life, a deceptively easy and distracting one. But the cities are not communities; they are huge congested areas in which man lives and dies in isolation—dies frequently *of* isolation. The exploiter—the man who sells what other men make, the man who is interested only in calculating risks and profits—is the villain: Ivy Peters of *A Lost Lady* (1923), whose instinctive sense of business contrasts eloquently with the grand manner of Captain Forrester; Bayliss Wheeler who is merely a servant of industry and the machine.

From her reflections upon the moral and religious significance of the pioneer scene, Miss Cather suggests her ideal pattern of morality and decorum. Her hero or heroine has a strong sense of what is proper: great sensitivity (which by itself, however, often leads to disaster), great strength and courage, an almost superhuman talent for heroic struggle and fortitude, most of all, a *faith*, which is realized in the fertility rites of the seasons on the land, the sowing and the harvest, and in ceremonials (both secular customs and religious rituals), which are accepted without question or skepticism."

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade*  
(1949; Viking/Collier 1962) 182-83

"The great novels of the prairie states are *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* (1918). In these novels, with one emphasis or another, Miss Cather had worked out what she thought were the principal themes that literature might discover in that setting. The first of these was the hardness of the land, which offered its pioneering settlers disappointment and disaster more often than success. It was under these conditions that the challenge to character was most severe, and only the strongest succeeded. Strength for Miss Cather seemed, at least in these novels, to be almost solely the possession of women; these heroines—Alexandra Bergson of *O Pioneers!* and Antonia Shimerda of *My Antonia*—are, in the words of T.K. Whipple, 'simple, primeval, robust with a strain of hardness, heroic.' They must possess a power which enables them to outstay temporary disappointments, to accept the harshness of nature on its own terms and to fight it by enduring it. They must have the faith in the land which comes from identifying oneself with it....

In these novels, the masculine and feminine principles are reversed. It is the heroine who endures, the man who provides the meaning of her struggle and who interprets its results. The men of Miss Cather's novels are the sensitive souls, artists often, out of place and out of sympathy with the rigorous demands of the land. Antonia's father, Carl Linstrum, Emil Bergson, the young men and artists of several of her short stories—these seem to offer a sensitive view of life that the country cannot accept because it is insufficiently civilized to allow for it. In one way or another, they surrender to circumstances or are victims of it. It is through the women that their loathing for the land, or dissatisfaction with it, is absorbed and dissipated. The triumph over the land is due to the endurance of the heroine: but it is through the male's self-defeating sensibility that other values, alien to the land, are preserved....

Both Burden and Carl Linstrum leave the prairies for the cities; the responsibility of keeping the land alive and habitable is left to the women. And it is significant that Linstrum should return to marry Alexandra only after her purpose has been successfully fulfilled. Through these means Miss Cather has pointed out the complementary roles of man and woman in her Nebraska novels."

Frederick J. Hoffman  
*The Modern Novel in America*  
(Regnery / Gateway 1951) 60-62

“The imagination in primary epic expresses itself in the creation of public myths. The artist articulates in his work society’s most fundamental and cherished values, giving voice to the quest and aspirations of a whole people. An epic is nationalistic for it makes its appeal to a whole people by defining a common enemy; consequently, it tends to be simplistic in terms of both the struggle it presents and the moral values it affirms.... Finally, because epic evokes a simplistic response to life that suppresses all critical distinctions, its tone is humble and eulogistic and its vision (that of the people) is sentimental. In writing about the settling of the Midwest in *O Pioneers!* Willa Cather chose her subject, as Melville had earlier, from the classical matter for American epic—the struggle of man against nature. As much as from revolution and civil war, America came into being and achieved its identity from the struggle of the common man to subdue the lonely and terrifying wilderness around him....

While Alexandra as a woman is a particularized character, her struggle to prevail over the landscape and prepare the way for generations to come is representative of the race of early pioneers who settled the American prairie. Our attention is frequently directed in the epic manner to the activities of a whole people.... We are reminded of the movements of a whole people in those conventional set pieces (the French church fair, the grain harvesting, the great confirmation service, the mourning of the people for Amedee Chevalier), which expand the novel’s focus to include those joys and sorrows which are communal. A visually striking epic sequence (the single image multiplied) describes the cavalcade of forty French boys riding across the plains to meet the bishop... But always in the foreground remains the figure of Alexandra whose valor and foresight embody the essence of the heroic spirit.... But consequently Alexandra is essentially a flat, one-dimensional character. While she suffers through many disappointments and losses (most agonizing is the death of Emil and Marie), there is never any question as to how she will respond; her character is constant and predictable. It is to Alexandra that everyone else turns to with his or her troubles: she protects the old people like Crazy Ivar...

Alexandra is one-dimensional because as epic heroine she is idealized, and accordingly we can feel only a limited sense of identification with her. Her sorrows and her triumphs are those of someone stronger than we are. We hold her strength and virtue in high esteem and yet we cannot really share or emulate them. Rather our imaginative involvement is with that maternal protection she affords those around her.... Our sense of Alexandra’s heroic stature is greatly enhanced by a number of visual images, like Carl’s memory of her at dawn, in which her figure is adorned with light and radiates calm strength. When her father is dying and makes her his chief heir, she comes to him, a tall figure with the light of a lamp behind her. When she is working on the farm, the braids of reddish-gold hair about her head burn in the sunlight (the image suggests a gleaming Germanic helmet) and the fiery ends of hair make her head look like a big sunflower.... Much of our instinctive pleasure in reading *O Pioneers!* must derive from our sharing in that wish to find a sheltered place, a refuge carved out of a hostile terrain. Mrs. Bergson’s house and garden in which she tries to retain the order and routine of her life in the old country is an image of such a refuge maintained against formidable odds....

The two stories woven together in *O Pioneers!* stretch back to Genesis. Alexandra’s is the story of creation, the story of a human civilization being shaped out of a land as flat and formless as the sea. Emil and Marie’s is the story of lovers cast from the earth’s garden through sin. The timeless, ever-recurring nature of these stories is secured by literary allusion. Alexandra’s heroic character and actions are enriched by its association with the old Swedish legends. Emil and Marie’s story acquires a universal pathos by its association with classical tales of lovers who die. When old Ivar comes to the despoiled orchard at dawn he sees two white butterflies fluttering over the dead bodies, like metamorphosed lovers in Ovid’s tales. The staining of the white mulberries with the lover’s blood recalls specifically the story of Pyramus and Thisbe....

In terms of the novel’s epic theme—and it is the epic note which prevails at the end—the death of the lovers is necessary to give Alexandra’s story a tragic depth and to allow her old antagonist, nature, to reassert its power. Marie’s garden represents that order of life that Alexandra has worked so arduously to create out of the uncultivated landscape.... She loves both Emil and Marie, and without looking ahead to the possible consequences she encourages their friendship, much as if they were still young children. Their death gives Alexandra’s life a tragic quality and yet it is the land which still has possession of her.... For here the epic view of nature as universal foe gives way to a cyclical and reassuring vision of mutability, and

here the author can express once more those feelings of love and admiration for her heroine and her people.”

David Stouck  
“Willa Cather and the Epic”  
*Willa Cather's Imagination*  
(U Nebraska 1975)

“Cather’s passionate romance...dramatizes the natural law, while the story of Alexandra framing it celebrates the law of restraint. The same kind of sympathetic dualism is evident throughout *The Scarlet Letter*.... The cosmic vision advanced by the tragic circumstances in *O Pioneers!* and ultimately by Carl is unquestionably informed by the poetry of Walt Whitman.

Not only did Cather take her title from Whitman’s ‘Pioneers! O Pioneers!’ but her prose approximates his free verse in lyric passages devoted to what he describes in paragraph 3 in ‘Song of Myself’ as ‘The procreant urge of the world. / Out of the dimness opposite equals advance...’ At the beginning of ‘Neighboring Fields,’ for example, air and earth ‘are curiously mated and intermingled, as if the one were the breath of the other’ (77) also, the responsive earth ‘yields itself eagerly to the plow...’ This creative urge explains Alexandra’s sensation of germinating soil, her fantasy of being carried across the fields by a gigantic earth figure, and her spiritual communion with the Genius of the Divide. The ‘love and yearning’ she feels for the ‘free spirit which breathes across’ the land (65) resembles the intercourse between poet and soul in Whitman’s paragraph 5... Cather’s final words, that the land will receive hearts like Alexandra’s to give them out again in various forms of life, echo the conclusion of Whitman’s great poem: ‘I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love’...”

John J. Murphy  
“A Comprehensive View of Cather’s *O Pioneers!*”  
*Critical Essays on Willa Cather*, ed. Murphy  
(G.K. Hall 1984) 113-27

“*O Pioneers!* is a triumph of regional writing given cosmic meaning... The story is an extraordinary one, episodic and celebratory of the great virtues of heroic persons—like Alexandra Bergson—who hold the land sacred, giving themselves wholly to its dangers and hardships.... During the long, lyrical account, Alexandra becomes a heroic woman. She is charged by her dying father, who has been defeated by ‘the wild land he had come to tame,’ to head the family and to save the land for her brothers and her mother.... ‘She had not the least spark of cleverness.’ Her gift is prophetic: ‘Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring’...in her first Nebraska novel, Cather has sounded what are to be major themes in all the immigrant novels: the nobility and beauty of the wild prairie; the brave, enduring foreigners who suffer as they farm it; and the slackness and venality of the next generation, who inherit the cultivated richness of farms that no longer satisfy them.

Into the pastoral of Alexandra’s success enters the tragedy of the love affair of Emil and a neighbor, Marie, and their murder by her wildly jealous husband, Frank. The brave dream has disintegrated. The idealism and innocence of Alexandra (‘her mind was a white book, with clear writing about weather and beasts and growing things’) have begun to come apart when Carl visits the Bergson brothers; he understands their unworthiness and tells Alexandra: ‘It is your fate to be surrounded by little men.’... The novel closes with the heartbroken Alexandra as forgiving savior, selflessly promising to help free Frank, who is in jail. Carl returns to claim her in marriage, but on her terms. They will travel but then will come back to the farm to live.... Their union is not to be romantic or passionate, we know. Alexandra assures him: ‘When friends marry, they are safe.’...

Alexandra is as creative with the land as are the artists in Cather’s earlier stories. She becomes part of a historic dream, conqueror of the forces of nature. The personified land and Alexandra, one with the land, are the stuff of American epic. Nebraska, Cather saw, was not simply territory or one homesteaded place on the American continent, but a universal symbol of suffering and hardship overcome by the indomitable immigrant spirit.”

Doris Grumbach  
Foreword, *O Pioneers!*

(Houghton 1988) xvi-xviii

“Nature showed her that the world might be beautiful, and loud with life, yet wholly indifferent to the happiness of its creatures. In *O Pioneers!* Carl Linstrum, at sunrise, listens as ‘in the grass all about him the small creatures of the day began to tune their tiny instruments. Birds and insects without number began to chirp, to twitter, to snap and whistle, to make all manner of fresh shrill noises’ (117). Before the sun sets again, many of these creatures will be dead, just as Emil, racing through the nets of gold, has only an hour or so to live, just as Claude, a few short years after the scene in the alfalfa field, will perish in the war he went to in order to escape his marriage. It happens all the time, Cather seems to say, and by saying so, she only makes it more heartbreaking, because she makes it into a principle. Such a view does not accord with any program of political reform, for it gives implicit assent to life’s unfairness, the very unfairness that political reform seeks to banish. And that is why Cather has given her political critics so much trouble.”

Joan Acocella  
*Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*  
(U Nebraska 2000) 89

Michael Hollister (2015)