

COMPARISON

O Pioneers! (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918)

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

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The importance to her career of Willa Cather's two prairie novels can hardly be overestimated. In them she gives the fullest expression she ever gave to one of her major themes, the meaning of the European experience in America. The exact significance of America differs in the two prairie novels. In *O Pioneers!* America functions as pure raw material; it is the land where the creative will best can operate. *My Antonia* does not contradict this, but the emphasis has shifted; America is now the land in which "Europe" can reach its finest flower. For Willa Cather as for many other nineteenth-century people Europe and America stood for pairs of opposites [as in Henry James]:

Europe was tangibly the past, America tangibly the present; Europe stood for order, America for chaos. The two are connected, since the present is always visibly chaotic and needs to have order imposed upon it by applying the lessons learned in the past. The most important antithesis of all, however, was that America stood for nature whereas Europe represented civilization. The difference between the two novels is that in *O Pioneers!*, even while Alexandra is struggling to conquer it, it is the wildness of nature which is being celebrated, the untamed vitality of the frontier, whereas in *My Antonia* the vitality and the discipline of civilization are combined to form a new synthesis, which provides the basis for a settled agricultural society like that eulogized by Horace and Vergil....

According to primitivism, since nature is seen as the source of all value, the closer a man lives to nature the better off he is, physically, mentally, and morally. According to the concept of the stages of society, all men progressed through certain stages of development proceeding from the most primitive to the most civilized, starting with the nomadic and proceeding upward through the pastoral and agricultural until finally they reached the industrial and commercial stages. These last two—the agricultural and industrial-commercial—correspond to the rural and urban stages, which I have discussed under the headings of country and town [identified with Jefferson and Franklin and represented by popular metaphors of heart and head]. In the nineteenth century the two turn up over and over again as contrasting ideals as to how life should be lived, the best literary expression of this being in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper.... Willa Cather herself vacillated between the two, as indeed Americans traditionally have done. In *O Pioneers!*, she merely states the case for both sides, without making any choice between the two. But in *My Antonia* she resolves the conflict in the direction of a highly civilized and sophisticated rural civilization, and this remains her ideal for the rest of her career, although in her later books (starting with her very next novel) she believes it to be an ideal impossible of achievement....[comparable to Hawthorne at the end of *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851)]

The concepts of primitivism and civilization have an all-pervasive influence on Willa Cather's fiction. They affect, for instance, her presentation of her heroines. In *O Pioneers!* she emphasizes the heroine as a solitary individual; in *My Antonia* she emphasizes the heroine as part of a group, first as a member of a family and then as its head. Similarly the differing treatment of the prairie in the two books likewise shows the influence of the two concepts. In *O Pioneers!* the land being eulogized is the entire Great Divide; Willa Cather tells us. "Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors." In *My Antonia* the center of attention has been narrowed down to the family living on the family farm; in other words, the homestead. This shows Willa Cather dealing in literary terms with a vitally important historical reality. The entire trans-Mississippi region was settled in the post-Civil War period by farmers called homesteaders; in fact, the Homestead Act of 1862 was conceptually based on just such a family unit as the Cuzaks.

O Pioneers! forms a sharp contrast to *My Antonia* in structure as well as subject matter. In structure the earlier book has a superimposed form while the form of the latter is largely organic and arises from the cycle of the seasons. The organizing principle of *O Pioneers!* is the theme of the creative will directed, first toward the world of nature, then toward the world of man; the organizing principle of *My Antonia*...is the vegetation myth. Of the two *O Pioneers!* has the tighter structure, popular opinion to the contrary. In *My Antonia* the part tends to be greater than the whole: one remembers fine but isolated passages such as Jim Burden's killing of the rattlesnake or the description of the plough against the sun....

Willa Cather has constructed [*My Antonia*] as a series of snapshots or vignettes, each of them commemorating some important event....In spite of its flaws, *O Pioneers!* on the whole is a successful portrait of an important American historical era. In the larger sense, it can be regarded as a kind of allegory on Western man and his entire history. It shows him—as he has historically been—as much more successful in dealing with his physical environment than with his fellow man: Alexandra's saga follows a success-failure pattern as she moves away from relatively simple problems and toward the more complex. I find it necessary to make separate judgments on the two parts of the book. In the main I believe Willa Cather is aesthetically and historically right when she takes the wild frontier as a symbol of the challenge offered to heroic souls by the precariousness of human existence, and sees the westward expansion in nineteenth-century America as a working out of the romantic aspiration toward a better life. But I believe she is dangerously idiosyncratic in seeing spontaneous relations between the sexes as being as uniformly dangerous and unrewarding as she makes them out to be. This view reflects her own particular upbringing and temperament—particularly the latter—and it severely limits her art.

Nevertheless, in spite of its limitations, *O Pioneers!* is a convincing novel...*My Antonia*, in some ways more successful than *O Pioneers!*, in other ways is less successful; it is more affirmative but less honest. If in the first book Willa Cather gives a frank portrayal of her gloomy and one-sided view of human relations, in the second she is willing to falsify the material she has at hand in order to make the final triumph of the heroine appear almost effortless. *O Pioneers!* is the more original in form, with its brilliant linking of plots to project the success-failure motif; *My Antonia* is more conventional in theme, if not in content, since it comes at the end of a long tradition of literary works written in praise of husbandry. It is an agricultural idyll, and its real subject is man's right relation to nature. The right relation turns out to be, not that defined by primitivism, but that of the agrarian tradition, a version of the concept of civilization which held that the stages of society culminate in the settled agricultural level, and that any further development in the direction of the city is a step downward.

In the largest sense the structure of *My Antonia* is based on the vegetation myth. The core of this age-old mystery...is the taking of the cycle of the seasons as the pattern for all recurrent rhythmical processes in nature...every person is "born again" through his children; the individual dies but the community lives on....If we compare the two prairie novels in terms of their use of vegetation myth, we find that *O Pioneers!* deals with the death of nature and *My Antonia* with its rebirth. *O Pioneers!* presents fertility of the soil and sterility in human beings; *My Antonia* shows fertility of both the soil and human beings. Thus, in a profound sense *My Antonia* is the most affirmative book Willa Cather ever wrote. Perhaps that is why it was her favorite.

But we have seen that as an author Willa Cather could not face certain facts of human experience—as, in *My Antonia*, the problem of apparently motiveless evil involved in Larry Donovan's seduction and abandonment of Antonia...Never once is a pregnancy or birth directly presented in Willa Cather's novels; what we do see is the corn growing. This implies that she only half understood the vegetation myth; she understood the cycle of the seasons but did not understand its application to the life of human beings and to their recurrent crises of birth, love, and death. She substituted in its stead, as we shall see in her later novels, an almost Platonic belief in essences, and the desire to freeze the world in the grip of form once the ideal is achieved."

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The Landscape and the Looking Glass
(Houghton 1960)

reprinted in *Willa Cather and Her Critics*, ed. James Schroeter
(Cornell 1967) 316-22