

**The Dovetailing of Man and the Land in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!***

Author and Research Ward: S. Sangeetha

Assistant Professor

Bishop Heber College

Trichy 620 017

sangeethaenglit@gmail.com

&

Co-author and Research Supervisor: Dr. K. Shanthi

Bishop Heber College

Trichy 620 017

shanthiclement98@gmail.com

**Abstract:**

*The relationship between the human and the land has been the subject of discussion for the past six decades. The issue is never-ending. Willa Cather insists on the importance of this through Alexandra. A woman with confidence struggles against the wildland and wins it at the end. The text suggests that man's response to his physical environment and his relationships with the land will ensure the quality of his life and survival.*

**Keywords:** The keywords used in this article are pioneers, prairie, human and non human environment, landscape.

Ecocriticism is an environment oriented literature namely physical, social, ecological, cultural environment. Each and every environment is interconnected. The changes in one will affect the other. Here the theory asserts the relationship between human and nonhuman. In this novel *O Pioneers!*, which is one of the prairies trilogies of Willa Cather also unleashes the relationship between man and land. Land becomes pertinent in the lives of characters. Cather tries to bring out this importance of the constructive relationship between man and land i.e between human and non-human through her prairie trilogy and in some of her other novels too. She wants to bring back man's respect and responsibility for land through portraying the characters' ongoing relationship with the land in her novels.

Willa Cather is a famous American writer from the American West who was born on December 7 in 1873 at Virginia. She has received Pulitzer prize for her novel *One of Ours*. She is more often recognized for her prairie trilogies and her portrayal of the landscape such as The Divide, The Prairie, the rural Nebraska, Virginia and desert landscapes in her novels. Her love

for landscape is not passionate rather bringing the past lost values into the minds of the audience through her powerful characters.

With the production of *O Pioneers!* Willa Cather became suddenly in control of her inner creative forces which remained dormant for so long. She started writing for herself, about the people who had been her neighbours who were immigrants from Scandinavia and Bohemia.

When Cather returned to Red cloud from her visit to the southwest in 1912, she found in her mind a story, which was to be called "The White Mulberry Tree" and a poem "Prairie Spring". These two pastoral poems, after considerable additions linking and clarifying the relationships of the two stories, became the novel *O Pioneers!*. The poem, which is, in essence, the poetic distillation of *O Pioneers!* She laced at the beginning of the novel. David Stouck says "*O Pioneers!*, in the light of its epic vision and in view of the author's imaginative origins in the Midwest" (Stouck 24).

Though the Nebraska setting of *O Pioneers!* was at the time of its writing, unconventional, its themes are classic and universal. The basic theme of the novel is a pioneer's story of taming and making the wild prairie fruitful. The background against which it is set is more personal, but thematically similar to the stories of love, birth, and death, the basic realities of man's existence.

'The Wild Land' deals with the pioneers' (Alexandra and her neighbours) experience, which stresses the importance of the relationship of man to the land. The novel opens on the coarse, barren countryside during winter. The savage vastness of the untamed land is pictured against men who to seem weak and puny, their houses dwarfed, their roads with only faint tracks in the grass. Having struggled to wrest a living from the wild land for eleven years, John Bergson passed his land to his daughter Alexandra to exercise her patrimony over the family's possession. Alexandra exemplifies one possible relationship to the land, which is her impersonal ownership of the land. After the death of her father, Alexandra, her brother and Carl Linstrum her friend go to visit crazy Ivar, a Norwegian old man who lives close to nature with the simplicity of a wild creature.

To John Bergson, his land was untamable and wild against which any man has to put his strength only to die. But to Ivar, it is transparent to the glory of God. Alexandra responds to Ivar's advice on the case of her hogs but her brothers Oscar and Lou, have no love for nature and view their farm merely as a source of making a living. The novel, suggests that the native people disown their land and leave the divide because they find the land unruly.

The idea of man's creative relationship to the land is personified in Alexandra. This is dramatized when drought and crop failure threaten to drive the settlers out including Carl Linstrum's family. Alexandra's brother wants to sell the land, against her deep faith in the future of the land. She takes interest to visit the nearby farm to the south, to see how things are happening. On her return, she renews her faith that the divide, the high plateau country, will yield to her nurturing and will become a rich farmland. She fortifies her determination to remain

close to her land both in body and spirit. "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" (Cather 65).

As Alexandra's connection with land ameliorated and her nurturing of the land made a headway, she decided to cultivate the land, which has appeared beautiful to her eyes. Right relationship with the land produces the right order. Thus Alexandra's intention was not only to plough and to make the land fruitful but also to revive the land to thrive with life.

In the chapter, 'Neighboring Fields', Cather shifts the focus from the man's relationship to the land and to the human community. Alexandra's creative response to the land is symbolically parallel to the creation. The Primordial chaos is aligned with the unruly land and correspondingly the creation of World by God is collated to the right relationship through exertion upon the land which is revealed in the case of Alexandra's concern for her land.

Part II of the text is suggestive of Eden, which foreshadows the fall, the breaking up of the right order and the death as its consequence. The scenes that follow reinforce the contrast between the way of life that grows out of Alexandra's relationship with the land and that of her materialistic brothers. Lou and Oscar now have farms of their own and yet criticize her progressive ways of farming and grumble that Ivar is precarious.

When Carl visits Alexandra for a while it is evident that Lou and Oscar do not respect their sister and her friend. They display a sense of discontentment over the money they earned from the land and their land was just as a source of income and nothing more.

When Emil, Alexandra's brother, shoots the duck, Marie is much worried what her careless joy in pursuing the birds with Emil has done. The love stories within the human community are thematically parallel to Alexandra's loving response to the Divide, for both reflect the reaching out of the human heart toward beauty and the fullness of life. The human love between Alexandra and Carl Linstrum, Emil and Marie and Amedee and Angelique. The love between this pair is threatened by the society. In a way, the unruly land, the relationship between the land and human beings are subjected to threat. Some of them find it is difficult to carry their connection with the land like Carl Linstrum.

Emil returns from Mexico after a year. While he is about to leave for studies, his friend dies. When he comes to bid goodbye to Marie, they spend their time on their familiar spot on the land near 'The Mulberry Tree' which reveals their sustained love and relationship with the land as something greater than them. Here it is evident that Cather reveals her deep faith in the spiritual past which represents an order in the universe.

As Emil and Marie are shot dead by Marie's husband, Alexandra undergoes the experience of death. She finds herself physically exhausted during the rainstorm and imagines (illusionary) that someone lifts her in one's hand. She compares it to her love for land which cares for her when she really is in need of it.

Alexandra's ascent from death is facilitated through the love of Carl, who gave up his business for her and returned to be with her. Through Carl and Alexandra, the human stories are brought again into the larger perspective and seen in relationship with the land, the source from which the characters spring and to which they must return. At the close of the novel, the land theme wells up, larger than all the human beings who have emerged from and being enriched in their lives as they are sustained by the land that bears them and which will someday receive them.

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