

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

152

Volume 152

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 152

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Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author’s works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Thomson Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *TCLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, and the *Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook*, which was discontinued in 1998.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

Willa Cather 1876-1947	1
<i>American novelist, short story writer, essayist, journalist, and poet</i>	
<i>Entry devoted to O Pioneers! (1913)</i>	
C(ecil) S(cott) Forester 1899-1966	127
<i>English novelist, short story writer, nonfiction writer, and scriptwriter</i>	
Shūsaku Endō 1923-1996	166
<i>Japanese novelist, short story writer, essayist, and playwright</i>	
Peter Weiss 1916-1982	244
<i>German-born Swedish dramatist, autobiographer, novelist, scriptwriter, nonfiction writer, filmmaker, translator, journalist, and illustrator</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 331

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 429

TCLC Cumulative Nationality Index 441

TCLC-152 Title Index 447

O Pioneers!

Willa Cather

American novelist, short story writer, essayist, journalist, and poet.

The following entry presents criticism on Cather's *O Pioneers!*. For discussion of Cather's complete career and work, see *TCLC*, Volumes 1, 11, 31, 99, and 132.

INTRODUCTION

Published in 1913, *O Pioneers!* portrays the lives of immigrants struggling to make a life on the Nebraska frontier. Cather described the novel as a "two-part pastoral," which consisted of two of her earlier short stories, "Alexandra" and "The White Mulberry Tree"; re-writing and additions linked the stories into an overarching whole. Although it was her second work of long fiction, Cather regarded *O Pioneers!* as her first true novel. It is still viewed as one of her best works, and signaled Cather's arrival as a prominent American novelist.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

O Pioneers!, whose title was taken from Walt Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers!", begins in 1883 and chronicles the story of Alexandra Bergson, the oldest child of a Swedish immigrant, John Bergson. In the first section of the novel, "The Wild Land," Bergson falls ill after struggling to make a living off of his farmland for eleven years. He dies, leaving Alexandra and her three brothers to work on the family farm. A few years later, the area is hit by a devastating drought and widespread crop failure, which forces several families to sell their land and move. Alexandra loses her best friend, Carl Linstrum, when his family goes bankrupt and leaves for the city. Two of Alexandra's brothers want to sell the farm, but Alexandra refuses. Moreover, she begins to buy more land, a risky financial move that incurs the disapproval of her brothers. The second section, "Neighboring Fields," takes place sixteen years later and Alexandra's instincts have proved successful; in spite of several obstacles, she has expanded her landholdings and implemented innovative farming methods that have made her a rich woman. Her youngest brother, Emil, falls in love with a childhood friend, Marie, who is married to a brooding neighbor. Alexandra considers marrying her childhood friend, Carl, an artist who has fled rural Nebraska for the city; he leaves, however, and



travels to Alaska to prospect for gold. The third segment of *O Pioneers!*, "Winter Memories," is a description of the harsh and unrelenting Nebraska winter, in which the land becomes the "iron country." In "The White Mulberry Tree," the fourth section, Emil and Marie are killed by her jealous husband after he catches them together. The novel ends on a muted note: in part five, "Alexandra," Alexandra, grieving and depressed after the lovers' murder, will marry her friend, Linstrum, who has returned from Alaska. But this is not the romantic ending of the sentimental women's fiction that Cather disliked. "When friends marry, they are safe," Alexandra observes, and the reader is left wondering about the submerged emotions the protagonist is still guarding.

MAJOR THEMES

Some critics regard the novel as a study of the immigrant experience in America: John Bergson, the sensi-

tive Swedish immigrant, is eventually destroyed by the unrelenting demands of the prairie, which deftly illustrates Old World values crushed by the harshness of the New World. In addition, *O Pioneers!* is perceived as an example of the American frontier myth. Commentators note that in her descriptions Cather strives to create an atmosphere of separation and alienation, which is juxtaposed against the passion and intensity of the youthful characters in the story. In addition, critics have explored the implications of passion and romantic love between the characters. Feminist perspectives have been applied to the novel, as the portrayal of female sexuality and Alexandra's role as Earth mother have been discussed. The symbolism of *O Pioneers!* is another recurring thematic concern; for example, the romantic interlude between Emil and Marie in the orchard is deemed as a metaphor for the Garden of Eden.

Alexandra's father does not succeed in his pioneer venture, Cather suggests, because he has no sympathy for Nebraska's landscape: he has come to conquer, not cultivate, and so he makes "little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame." Alexandra succeeds as a farmer because she combines traits her society divided between "female" and "male." Unlike her father and brothers, she loves the land, coming to sense poetry and beauty in its soil. Yet even while giving Alexandra a maternal, even erotic connection with the land, Cather grants her shrewd business sense and agricultural pragmatism. Alexandra experiments with new farming techniques, confers with other farmers, buys up the land others are deserting and expands her holdings. Alexandra's successful use of both "male" and "female" traits reflects Cather's own challenging of the polarized gender identities.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Initially, *O Pioneers!* was well received by reviewers and established Cather as one of the premier American authors in the early twentieth century. Yet critics found fault with the structure of the novel, contending that *O Pioneers!* was essentially still two separate stories, not a coherent, consistent work. This perceived flaw has remained a recurring theme in critical analysis of the novel. Cather was criticized for writing an episodic novel in which the lovers' subplot is imperfectly integrated into the whole, however both stories have the overriding theme of passion. Alexandra channels her passionate energies into the land; her younger brother and Marie, the Bohemian wife of a disgruntled farmer, channel theirs into romantic love, with disastrous results. The symbolism and mythological associations within the novel also have been a rich area of critical discussion. *O Pioneers!* is considered much more than a regional tale, as the themes of the novel are perceived to be classic and universal. Several critics have placed *O Pioneers!* within the context of Cather's literary de-

velopment, viewing it as an integral step in her maturation as an author. A *New York Times* critic praised Cather for creating a "new mythology" with this story of a "goddess of fertility" who is "American in the best sense of the word."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

April Twilights (poetry) 1903
The Troll Garden (short stories) 1905
Alexander's Bridge (novel) 1912
O Pioneers! (novel) 1913
The Song of the Lark (novel) 1915
My Ántonia (novel) 1918
Youth and the Bright Medusa (short stories) 1920
One of Ours (novel) 1922
A Lost Lady (novel) 1923
The Professor's House (novel) 1925
My Mortal Enemy (novel) 1926
Death Comes for the Archbishop (novel) 1927
Shadows on the Rock (novel) 1931
Obscure Destinies (short stories) 1932
Lucy Gayheart (novel) 1935
Not under Forty (essays) 1936
The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather. 13 vols. (novels and short stories) 1937-41
Sapphira and the Slave Girl (novel) 1940
The Old Beauty, and Others (short stories) 1948
On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art (essays) 1949

CRITICISM

The Nation (review date 4 September 1913)

SOURCE: A review of *O Pioneers!* *The Nation* 97 (4 September 1913): 210-11.

[In the following review, the anonymous critic provides a favorable assessment of *O Pioneers!*]

Few American novels of recent years have impressed us so strongly as this [*O Pioneers!*]. There are two perils by which our fiction on the larger scale is beset—on the one hand a self-conscious cultivation of the "literary" quality, and on the other an equally self-conscious avoidance of it. The point may be illustrated by the work of two "late" novelists of native force, Frank Norris and David Graham Phillips. There was no doubt about the Americanism of either of them, so far as their

subject-matter was concerned. It was the newer Americanism which has displaced the New Englandism of our nineteenth-century fiction. These men saw American life on a larger scale. Its scope and variety, its promise rather than its accomplishment, absorbed them. The big spaces and big emotions of Western life seemed to them far more interesting and more significant than the snug theory and languid practice of society in the smaller sense of the word. But Norris could not forget the books he had admired, and died before he had outgrown the influence of the French masters of "realism." Phillips, on the other hand, failed to shake off the pose of the plain blunt man, who thinks that the amenities of life are symptoms of weakness and that all Harvard men are snobs.

Now (in writing this story at least) it is the same big primitive fecund America which engages Miss Cather's imagination. 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 settlement to which we are taken is of some years' standing. The rough work has been done, the land cleared and broken up, sod homesteads built, crops planted—and then (the great test of courage and faith in that land) a succession of dry seasons. The weaker have already abandoned their claims, or lost them by mortgage. Only here and there a strong heart, like that of the heroine of the story, refuses to be discouraged, persists in believing that the country has a future. Her father, though defeated, has died in this faith, bequeathing it to her; so that when the stupid brothers wish to give up the fight, it is she who insists not only upon holding the land they have, but upon buying every acre they can in the thinning neighborhood. The years justify her, bringing wealth to her and to her beloved country. She prospers beyond her dull and penny-wise elder brothers, who nurse a grudge against her accordingly. Her heart she lavishes upon her younger brother, the baby of the family, and she procures for him the advantages of education which shall give him a larger horizon, more flexible interests, than her own. He is a fine lad, manly and responsive, but youth and circumstance prepare a dreadful end for him and for the hapless object of his love. The familiar matter of "rural tragedy" is here. Whether its detail is dwelt upon too ruthlessly is a question which readers will decide according to temperament and individual taste. To us the treatment of the episode seems justified by the mood of tragic emotion which underlies it. As for the bereaved sister, if loneliness has shadowed her youth and tragedy darkened her maturity, there still remains the quiet fulfilment of a long-dreamt-of happiness. The sureness of feeling and touch, the power without strain, which mark this book, lift it far above the ordinary product of contemporary novelists.

New York Times Book Review (14 September 1913)

SOURCE: "A Novel without a Hero." In *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Review*, edited by Margaret Anne O'Connor, p. 56. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

[In the following essay, the anonymous reviewer offers a positive assessment of *O Pioneers!*]

The hero of the American novel very often starts on the farm, but he seldom stays there; instead, he uses it as a spring-board from which to plunge into the mysteries of politics or finance. Probably the novel reflects a national tendency. To be sure, after we have carefully separated ourselves from the soil, we are apt to talk a lot about the advantages of a return to it, but in most cases it ends there. The average American does not have any deep instinct for the land, or vital consciousness of the dignity and value of the life that may be lived upon it.

O Pioneers! is filled with this instinct and this consciousness. It is a tale of the old wood-and-field-worshipping races, Swedes and Bohemians, transplanted to Nebraskan uplands, of their struggle with the untamed soil, and their final conquest of it. Miss Cather has written a good story, we hasten to assure the reader who cares for good stories, but she has achieved something even finer. Through a direct, human tale of love and struggle and attainment, a tale that is American in the best sense of the word, there runs a thread of symbolism. It is practically a novel without a hero. There are men in it, but the interest centres in two women—not rivals, but friends, and more especially in the splendid blonde farm-woman, Alexandra.

In this new mythology, which is the old, the goddess of fertility once more subdues the barren and stubborn earth. Possibly some might call it a feminist novel, for the two heroines are stronger, cleverer and better balanced than their husbands and brothers—but we are sure Miss Cather had nothing so inartistic in mind. It is a natural growth, feminine because it is only an expansion of the very essence of femininity. Instead of calling *O Pioneers!* a novel without a hero, it might be more accurate to call it a novel with three heroines—Alexandra, the harvest-goddess, Marie, poor little spirit of love and youth snatched untimely from her poppy-fields, and the Earth, itself, patient and bountiful source of all things.

Sister Peter Damian Charles, O.P. (essay date December 1965)

SOURCE: Charles, Sister Peter Damian, O.P. "Love and Death in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*" *CLA Journal* 9, no. 9 (December 1965): 140-50.

[In the following essay, Charles explores the conflict between love and death in *O Pioneers!*]

Like any other significant novel, Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* has elicited a variety of critical responses. E. K. Brown rejoices in its "happy looseness" of structure and "easy strength" of style characteristic of Willa Cather at her best.¹ David Daiches, though he finds the novel "episodic and unevenly patterned," grants it "moments of force and beauty and a general air of power and assurance."² To John Randall in his "search for values," the work suggests the conclusion that "love of the land is always safe, whereas love of human beings is not."³ An early reviewer, examining the book for *The Nation*, perceptively states that "the sureness of feeling and touch, the power without strain, which mark this book, lift it above the ordinary product of contemporary novelists."⁴ In spite of the considerable critical praise and attention which this work has received, however, I believe that new levels of richness, both in theme and in technique, can be revealed by a study of *O Pioneers!* in terms of a very basic theme—the conflict of love and death, Eros and Thanatos.⁵

A glance at the novel's inscription-poem, "**Prairie Spring**," introduces the reader to both theme and mood of the work as a whole. The first sentence of the poem with its picture of rich, serene, eternal fertility contrasts directly with the second, a vibrant, exciting, ephemeral "flash" of Youth. Rhythmically, too, their opposition is clear. The steady, smooth, quiet flow of adjectives describing the fertile land is set against the emphatic, highly accented, pulsing beats of the participles characterizing the vivacity of Youth. But the integral relationship between the two—the dark silent soil and the brilliant singing creature—is clarified in the last two lines when the "lips of silence" and the "earthy dusk" are revealed as the *source* of Youth's vibrancy. This close alliance between silence and song, soil and seed, indeed, death and life, are all evoked by the poem's cyclic structure and theme. Thus attuned to these natural rhythms of the earth, the reader is prepared to understand their reverberations in the human drama of *O Pioneers!*

Alexandra Bergson, the heroine of the novel, is almost a personification of the great power of the positive, the strong urge toward life in the large. Yet her life is not without its fierce battles with the principle of destruction in the story of Marie and Emil and their tragic grasping for the love that harbors death, as well as in the tensions that tell upon Alexandra herself, almost overpowering her in moments of total surrender to her love: the mythic Land-Death image that comes in her dreams.

The Eros-spirit of Alexandra's nature is developed in Part I of the novel, "The Wild Land," as Miss Cather shows the peasant girl taking hold of the untamed creature with a firm but loving hand. The first chapter introduces young Alexandra Bergson as "a tall, strong girl" who "walked rapidly and resolutely as if she knew ex-

actly where she was going and what she was going to do next."⁶ "Fine human creature" though she is, she is not an unbelievable character. Faced with her father's imminent death, she is perplexed and troubled. She even admits to her good friend Carl Linstrum, "I don't know what is to become of us, Carl, if father has to die. I don't dare think about it. I wish we could all go with him and let the grass grow back over everything . . . I almost feel as if there were nothing to go ahead for" (p. 16). Despite the urgings from Thanatos, Alexandra fearlessly faces the future. The picture which Miss Cather draws of her journeying homeward with her lantern, "a moving point of light along the highway, going deeper and deeper into the dark country" (p. 18), is symbolic of that fact.

The ensuing chapters of "The Wild Land" strengthen the portrayal of Alexandra as an Eros-figure by showing her reaction to her father's death, her relations with Crazy Ivar, Carl Linstrum, and her brothers Lou and Oscar, as well as her attitude toward the land itself. Alexandra's promise to her dying father, "We will never lose the land" (p. 26), gives her commitment to the "dark country" a totality that is almost sacred. John Bergson's Old-World belief "that the land itself is desirable" (p. 21), was understood and revered by his daughter Alexandra. Thus the father has complete confidence in entrusting the future of the land to her strong hands. It is this same understanding and reverence for natural creation that accounts for Alexandra's profound respect for Crazy Ivar. Shortly after their father's death when the Bergson family makes a trip to Ivar's homestead, Alexandra is not content merely to defend the old man's peculiar behavior before the others. She tells Ivar simply, "I came today more because I wanted to talk to you than because I wanted to buy a hammock" (p. 44). Listening to his advice on how to care for hogs, Alexandra quietly determines to carry out his suggestions despite her brothers' objections and derisions. Carl Linstrum's departure from the Divide provides another proof of Alexandra's strong affirmation of life. His understanding companionship has been a source of much joy to her. Indeed she tells Carl, "Somehow it will take more courage to bear your going than everything that has happened before" (p. 51). And it is only to Carl that she can confess, "Sometimes I feel like I'm getting tired of standing up for this country" (p. 53). Yet that she must do repeatedly before Lou and Oscar, her stolid, insensitive brothers, who are so eager to sell the land and move on to greener pastures. But the land is worth all this to Alexandra Bergson, a true pioneer, who is "able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves" (p. 48). This ability to savour the *promise* of the land has about it an air of primitive worship which young Emil Bergson senses as he travels home with his sister from a trip to the river farms: "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 her tears blinded her" (p. 65). After this ecstatic moment, Alexandra's "faith in the high land" is confirmed and extended into a spiritual affinity for the whole cosmos which creates for her a "sense of personal security" and forms within her "a new consciousness of the country." In fact, the narrator assures us: "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). There is no doubt at the close of "The Wild Land" that Miss Cather has drawn for us in Alexandra Bergson a positive and whole-hearted "lover" of the West—a kind of earth-mother, possibly, but at the same time a real woman singularly marked by her strong drive toward life in its totality.

The transformation of "The Wild Land" into "Neighboring Fields" is demonstrated fittingly when Part II of the novel opens with a panoramic view of the fertile plains and rich farmsteads that checker the Divide so loved by Alexandra Bergson. Her love has been fruitful beyond measure over the last sixteen years. It is not by accident, however, that Miss Cather portrays this plenty from the vantage point of the old Norwegian graveyard where John Bergson and his wife now lie. Eros and Thanatos are inextricably bound together, and where love and life flourish, death must also be. Nor is the appearance at the graveyard gate of tall young Emil Bergson, "sharpening his scythe in strokes unconsciously timed to the tune he was whistling" (p. 77), a fortuitous detail. Rather ominously, he even seems to conjure up the image of the "Grim Reaper"; the youth's "stormy gray eyes" are not, indeed, the first hint that Miss Cather gives the alert reader about Emil's tragic fate. In a few deft strokes, his relationship to the gay Marie Shabata is revealed in all its precariousness, and the reader may well suspect that Thanatos will play a major part in the lives of these two young lovers.

Having sounded these sombre notes in the first chapter of this section, Miss Cather turns again to the expansive fullness of Alexandra's nature. We first see her presiding over her household. In appearance, "she seems sunnier and more vigorous than she did as a young girl" (p. 87), and her pretty Swedish working-girls seem happy basking in her loving care. Old Ivar, too, now a member of her "family," finds her respectful understanding a joy to his old age: "I come to you sorrowing,

and you send me away with a light heart," he tells her. Even Lou and Oscar, having prospered because of their sister's fruitful husbandry, share, though limitedly, in her out-going, affirmative way. But it is in her relations with Emil and Carl Linstrum that Alexandra shows unusual openness of mind and heart to all of life. From her youth we have seen in her a restless realization that the Divide—precious as it may be to her—is only a small part of the immense cosmos, and she realizes intensely the existence of worthy goals and exciting worlds as yet unknown to her. This essentially pioneering spirit, this devotion to possibilities, makes Alexandra willing to endure Carl's departure. It also accounts for her eagerness to open Emil's eyes to the worlds beyond the prairies. Having given him a college education, she is filled with a sense of achievement which prompts her to reflect, "Out of her father's children there was one who was fit to cope with the world, who had not been tied to the plow, and who had a personality apart from the soil" (p. 213). Such breadth of vision must, of course, be whole. Thus Alexandra, her face turned toward life with love, sees also its dark, disappointing side. To Carl, who knows her heart best, she discloses her doubts and worries. To him she confides her fears for Emil, so like his father in his "sad times" and his "violent feelings." To him also she acknowledges her revealing regret, "I'd rather have had your freedom than my land," and further admits, "We grow hard and heavy here. We don't move lightly and easily as you do, and our minds get stiff" (p. 122, 124). But despite this rare objectivity, Alexandra does have a blind spot, "as Emil had more than once reflected" (p. 203). Her mind was "a white book, with clear writing about weather and beasts and growing things" (p. 205). Eros-inspired though she may be, she is totally unfamiliar with the most popular realm of that god—the passionate love of man and woman. Only as the love of Emil and Marie Shabata grows and bears its bitter fruit does this aspect of life's experience manifest itself to Alexandra Bergson.

The tragic character of their love affair is foreshadowed in the hunting scene that Carl Linstrum accidentally witnesses near the duck pond on the Shabata farm in the golden prairie dawn. The couple's innocent delight in their own youth and power, the sudden change that comes over Marie when she realizes the destruction that their pleasure has wrought, Emil's bitter reaction to her tender conscience—all of this metamorphoses beauty into horror—the transformation so soon to mark their love. Yet at the time of its occurrence this event is not suspected for what it is. The youthful neighbors try to mask their love from each other though its symbolic presence in the fragrant wild roses is ever with them. Finally, however, as the two meet in the orchard, Emil, armed again with his fateful scythe, warns Marie, "I can't play with you like a little boy any more. . . . If you *won't* understand, you know, I could make you!"

(pp. 156-157) Startled by his "fierce necessity" into facing reality, Marie pleads with him to be sensible, but ultimately admits, "All our good times are over." Emil's grim response, "Yes; over. I never expect to have any more," is given symbolic overtones as "he [grips] the hand-holds of the scythe and [begins] to mow" (p. 158). All the darker does the love of Emil and Marie appear when it is contrasted with the "sunny, natural, happy love" of Amédée and Angélique, the gay newly-weds of the village of Sainte-Agnes. Emil himself muses on the difference: "It seemed strange that now he should have to hide the thing that Amédée was so proud of, that the feeling that gave one of them such happiness should bring the other despair" (pp. 163-165). Driven by this desperation, Emil decides to leave the Divide and throw himself into a reckless existence in Mexico. Since the road of love is not open to him, he chooses the path that allows for possible brushes with death. Returning home after making this decision, his mind filled with his own dark thoughts, Emil finds his usually vibrant sister downcast by Oscar and Lou's suspicion of Carl Linstrum as a fortune hunter. As "Neighboring Fields" closes, the spirit of Thanatos—disappointment, sadness, despair—hovers over the Divide. Alexandra's faith in the future, so strong at the end of Part I, has dimmed, and she can only wearily say, "All at once in a single day, I lose everything, and I do not know why" (p. 183).

Alexandra's final bleak view of "Neighboring Fields" blends perfectly with the picture of the frozen Divide with which Part III, "Winter Memories," begins. Miss Cather immediately introduces the season "in which Nature recuperates, in which she sinks to sleep between the fruitfulness of autumn and the passion of spring" (p. 187). The once "wild land" becomes now the "iron country" in whose dead landscape "one could easily believe that . . . the germs of life and fruitfulness were extinct forever" (p. 188). Indeed this section of the novel seems to perform an analogous organic function for the material of the story. The seeds of the love-death conflict sown so carefully in the first two parts germinate quietly in the short, outwardly uneventful chapters of "Winter Memories" which search into the hearts of Marie Shabata and Alexandra Bergson.

In spite of her efforts to keep happy and active, Marie Shabata only grows in loneliness and unhappiness during the winter silences. Watching the endless whitened orchard from her kitchen windows, she seems "to feel the weight of all the snow that lay down there" (p. 202). Yet deep within her she shares with nature the belief that spring will come again. Alexandra's hours of stillness, on the other hand, bring her memories of days of particular happiness, "days when she was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination of the soil" (p. 204). Her full response to beauty is seen in her recol-

lection of the happy time when she and Emil watched the beautiful wild duck, "a kind of enchanted bird that did not know age or change" (p. 205). But Eros does not alone dominate Alexandra's remembrances. There are also the oft-recurring "fancies" of the powerful Land-Death being who "was like no man she ever knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat . . . [and] [who] took from her all bodily weariness" (pp. 206-207). Under cover of the chapter's leaden winter barrenness Miss Cather probes the intricate workings of the love-death dichotomy in the psychic terrain of these two women of the prairie. The result reveals a striking paradox: Marie, whose unhappy thoughts provoke a veiled death-wish, places her final hope in life—in the coming of spring; Alexandra, on the contrary, whose memories bring her singular joy, seems finally to rest content in the arms of her Death-Lover. Truly complex is the love-death struggle so basic to the human condition.

Part IV, "The White Mulberry Tree," set as it is in the warm fullness of the summer months, functions organically to bring to fruition the love-death conflict inherent in the Marie-Emil affair, as well as to sharpen the "blind side" of Alexandra's vision. When Alexandra proudly drives Emil "through the rolling French country toward the westering sun," she little imagines to what threshold she brings him. Face-to-face with Marie Shabata after a year's sojourn in Mexico, he places his life in her hands with his first words, apparently carelessly chosen: "Do you think you could tell my fortune?" (p. 223) Marie's flustered reaction to the love in his eyes fools neither herself nor him, and, moments later, their kiss in the dark crowns this recognition: "It was like a sigh which they had breathed together; almost sorrowful, as if each were afraid of wakening something in the other" (p. 225). Indeed the actual admission of love which Emil begs from Marie soon afterwards serves also to admit death to their relationship in the form of misery for her and a tortured leave-taking for him. Thanatos' cold spirit is felt everywhere as Emil prepares to depart, and the young man finds himself thinking in terms of a "definite break" and an "uprooting," while at the same time he cannot crystallize any of his ideas about the future. Similarly, Marie, the Eros-creature whose life has always been so intimately dependent upon love, becomes the "white night-moth" foreseeing days of agonizing yearning "until the instinct to live had torn itself and bled and weakened for the last time, until the chain secured a dead woman, who might cautiously be released" (p. 248). Thus racked by Thanatos, she makes a definite choice of Eros and resolves upon "a new life of perfect love," a heart filled with the sweetness of "this treasure of pain," imaged for her by the garden pond "encircled and swelled" with the golden moon. Emil, however, emotionally torn by his approaching separation from Marie and utterly bereft by the sudden death

of his vigorous young friend Amédée, seems to come closer and closer to death as his love grows in rapture. Stirred to near-ecstasy by the “equivocal” power of the music surrounding the Confirmation ceremony in the Church of Sainte-Agnes, Emil reaches “the height of excitement from which everything is foreshortened, from which life seems short and simple, and death very near, and the soul seems to soar like an eagle” (p. 257). In this state of exaltation, filled with a love that longs for death, Emil moves toward the Shabata farm “like an arrow shot from the bow” (p. 258). Finding the house empty, he roams the fields restlessly seeking mementoes of their love, but he discovers instead Marie herself lying under the white mulberry tree. As he throws himself down beside her, and takes her in his arms, her dream and his ecstasy fuse—love and death become one—a union sealed hours later by the blast from Frank Shabata’s gun.

from the elbow, was dark and gleaming, like bronze, and she knew at once that it was the arm of the mightiest of lovers. She knew at last for whom it was she had waited, and where he would carry her. That, she told herself, was all very well. Then she went to sleep

(pp. 282-283).

This mystical experience leaves Alexandra strangely serene and relaxed, and enables her to “think more calmly than she had done since Emil’s death” (p. 285). Out of this resignation to the power of love and death comes Alexandra’s resolution to do what she can for the convicted Frank Shabata. The stark circumstances of her visit to the prison, however, only increase the burden of disgust for life which now weighs upon her, and her mind echoes with the poet’s words:

Henceforth the world will only be
A wider prison-house to me—

But into this world so deeply dark for Alexandra love enters once more—in a realization of her need for Carl Linstrum and a recognition of her strong ties with the soil. Returning from Lincoln to Carl and to the Divide—to love and land—Alexandra feels once more that she is glad to be alive. It is as if she, like all the mythic heroes of the world, must descend into the darkness of death in order to rise and meet the glory of creation. From this encounter with Thanatos she emerges triumphant, gazing pioneer-like into the brilliant western sunset, reflecting in her face the “exalted serenity” of her deep feeling for the land. The affirmation of life so manifest in her strong spirit is bought at no cheap price. All love must accept its firm link with death, be it the passionate love of youth, the understanding love of middle age, or the comprehensive love of native earth. Such a union of Eros and Thanatos, Miss Cather seems to be saying in her last lines even as she suggested in the inscription-poem “**Prairie Spring**,” is ultimately responsible for the power and the glory of the human condition:

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).

As Part V, “Alexandra,” opens, the spirit of Eros seems to have almost disappeared from the novel. The first paragraph presents old Ivar bending over his workbench mournfully praying the 101st Psalm, the plea for God’s help for an afflicted soul. The psalmist’s cry of “days . . . vanished like smoke” and “bones grown dry like fuel for the fire” forms a fitting background for the sorrowful commentary of Ivar and Signa on the changes wrought in their mistress during the past three months. The picture of Alexandra herself, drenched by the October storm, looking “like a drowned woman,” rising from among the headstones in the old Norwegian cemetery, adds to the dark aura of the scene. That Alexandra almost dwells in the land of Thanatos seems even more certain when she says to Ivar, “When you get so near the dead, they seem more real than the living” (p. 281). Her living friends Ivar and Signa, however, insist upon the realities and soon have Alexandra safely home and in her warm bed. It is here, still profoundly moved by her spiritual encounter with the dead, that she seems to give herself totally to Thanatos for the first time. Alone in the dark she reflects that “perhaps she was actually tired of life. All the physical operations of life seemed difficult and painful. She longed to be free from her own body, which ached and was so heavy: she yearned to be free of that” (p. 282). Thus psychologically prepared by suffering and physically prepared by exhaustion, Alexandra lies ready for the ministrations of her illusory lover, the mythic Land-Death image of her dreams:

He was with her a long while this time, and carried her very far, and in his arms she felt free from pain. When he laid her down on her bed again, she opened her eyes, and, for the first time in her life, she saw him clearly, though the room was dark, and his face was covered. He was standing in the doorway of her room. His white cloak was thrown over his face, and his head was bent a little forward. His shoulders seemed strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm, bared

Notes

1. *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (New York, 1953), p. 179.
2. *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (New York, 1951), p. 29.
3. *The Landscape and the Looking Glass* (Boston, 1960), p. 104.
4. XCVII (September 4, 1913), p. 211.