O Pioneers! the first Nebraska novel of the prairies published in 1913, tells the story of taming the ‘wild’ prairie land. It is based on Cather’s Nebraska childhood memories. She uses her memories to create the portrait of life on the frontier. Alexandra Bergson’s portrait is based on Cather’s childhood friend Hilda Kron who is immigrated from Sweden to Catherton and married to lazy Swedish pioneer E.J.Peterson.

Alexandra Bergson, a young Swedish immigrant is the dominating figure which exemplifies the American pioneering experience. Alexandra is a ‘tall’, ‘strong’ girl. Her admiringly pleasant personality reveals her unique appearance. She had a serious thoughtful face, and her ‘clear, deep blue eyes’ were fixed intently on the distance without seeming to see anything, as if she were in trouble. She wore a man’s “long ulster and a round plush cap” tied down with a thick veil not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her. She walked “rapidly and resolutely” like a young soldier as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next (140).

The immigrant Alexandra Bergson with a ‘glance of Amazonian fierceness,’ a ‘striding hero’, wearing a man’s coat and woman’s veil with a severe look as Hermione Lee remarks, combines “masculine and female qualities the attributes of a strong pioneer figure.” The traveler’s passing by would admire her “shining mass of hair’, as she like to dress it up with ‘two thick braids, pinned about her head in the German way with a fringe of reddish yellow curls’ (140).
Having great passion for reading during the week Alexandra read only the newspapers, but on Sunday, and in the long evenings of winter, she read a good deal; read a few things over a great many times. She knew long portions of the “Frithjof Saga” by heart, and like most Swedes who read at all; she was fond of Longfellow’s verse, - the ballads and the “Golden Legends” and “The Spanish Student.” Alexandra also loved to read the ‘Swedish Bible’ (167).

A crayon portrait of John Bergson hung on the wall. Alexandra ‘had it made from a little photograph taken for his friends just before he left Sweden; a slender man of thirty-five, with soft hair curling about his high forehead drooping mustache, and wondering, sad eyes that looked forward into the distance, as if they already beheld the New world’ (188). Alexandra admired plain things herself. She did not like pomp or show. She said frankly that she knew nothing about such things, and she was willing to be governed by the general conviction that the “more useless and utterly unusable objects were, the greater their virtue as ornament” (185).

She always appreciated the universal beauty, to think of their vastness and distance, and of their ordered march. It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she could forget her body aches. She could watch the changing nature and with it, Alexandra ‘felt a sense of personal security’ (173). There was one fancy indeed, which persisted throughout her girlhood. It most often came to her on Sunday mornings, the one day in the week when she lay late a bed listening to the familiar morning sounds. The country meant to Alexandra a good deal the “chirping of their insects down in the long grass had been like the sweetest music” (173).

The Swedish tradition that runs in the family is depicted as Alexandra has love for antiques and puts them carefully, which depicts the traditional customs and values.
Alexandra has brought together the old homely furniture that the Bergsons used in their first log house, the family portraits and the few things her mother brought from Sweden. Alexandra loved the nature, and feels the need for the ‘order and fine arrangement’ (178).

As rightly perceived by Philip Gerber:

> Alexandra Bergson is equated with the artists who seek the Bright Medusa because, in Cather’s expanding approach to the term, an artist may express himself in any medium. Cressida Garnet sings, Harvey Merrick Sculpt, and Don Hedger paints; but for Alexandra, daughter of the Middle Border, it is in the soil that she expresses herself best.²

The Swedish immigrant Alexandra Bergson has a unique physique. Her figure is fuller and she ‘has more color’. She seems ‘sunnier’ and more ‘vigorous’ than she did as a young girl. Her ‘skin was smooth and white’ as none but Swedish women ever possess ‘skin with the freshness of the snow’ itself. Her father always admired her. “In his daughter, John Bergson recognized the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out, that had characterized his father (149). As stated by Willa Cather John Bergson “felt her youth and strength” (150).

The Bergsons are typical of the immigrant families Cather had known in Red Cloud Nebraska. The mother and father are first-generation Americans who settled with the hope of owing land and of securing better lives of their children. These immigrants were generally unsuccessful at crop production because they lacked the rural background and skills of a previous generation being manual tradesman themselves. Alexandra’s father John Bergson’s represents brave pioneer family moving onto the “virgin” land, breaking the sod, and fighting the hardships of the climate. Father of Oscar, Lou and Emil, had been a shipwright in Sweden, but became
a farmer in the untamed, hardscrabble prairie lands of Nebraska who had its "Old-World belief that land, in itself is desirable." Human effort seems inconsequential for even after seasons of striving:

   The record of the plow was insignificant, like the feeble scratches on
   stone left by prehistoric races, so indeterminate that they may, after all,
   be only the markings of glaciers, and not a record of human strivings'.
   It was this land pieces, John Bergson has fought so hard to cultivate
   out of the stubborn wilderness." (148)

For weeks, John Bergson on his death bed, all depressed thinks of an idea how to make the land productive. His bed stood in the sitting-room, next to the kitchen. Through the day, while the baking and washing and ironing were going on: he lay and looked up at the roof beams that he himself had hewn, or out at the cattle in the corral. He counted the cattle over and over. It diverted him to speculate as to how much weight each of the steers would probably put on by spring. He often called his daughter in to talk about this.

   Having faith in the eldest child of the Bergson family; Alexandra is given
   charge as John Bergson, succumbs to his battle with death, of the family. Alexandra
   the eldest, of the four children is chosen to accept the role of head of the family. The
   Bergson family also includes three sons: Oscar, Lou and Emil. However Alexandra is
   the child chosen to take control of the Bergson land. John Bergson, in fact, begins to
   recognize the wisdom of his eldest child and leaves her as the caretaker of the farm at
   a young age.

   Before Alexandra was twelve years old she had begun to be a help to
   him, and as she grew older he had come to depend more and more
   upon her resourcefulness and good judgment. His boys were willing
enough to work, but when he talked with them they usually irritated him. (148)

The image of Alexandra as a child is realistically depicted as:

The eyes of the girl who seemed to be looking with such anguished perplexity into the future, upon the somber eyes ... who seemed already to be looking into the past... there is often a good deal of the child left in the people who have had to grow up too soon. (146)

As a young girl Alexandra had the ability of a creative mind, it was she who read the papers and followed the market, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors. Alexandra who could always tell about what it had cost to fatten each steer, and who could guess the weight of a hog before it went on the scales closer than John Bergson himself (149). The young Swedish Bergson was ‘intelligent’ like her grandfather, who had been a ‘ship builder’, a man of considerable force and of some fortune (149).

The pioneering Alexandra Bergson struggles in the fields taming the ‘tough prairie sod’. As perceptively observed by Susan J. Rosowski; as a privileged noble peasant Alexandra is protected from labor by her father,³ as such John Bergson suggest that ‘Alexandra must not work in the fields any more’. He further says “Hire a man when you need help. She can make much more with her eggs and butter than the wages of a man. It was one of my mistakes that I did not find that out sooner. Try to break a little more land every year; sod corn is good for fodder. Keeping turning the land and always put up more hay than you need” to keep it fertile. (151)

It was Alexandra’s shrewdness that has saved the family from squandering its money in crops, which failed when, put to the test on neighboring farms. Their personal philosophy is a huge limiting factor in their development.
Then came the hard times that brought every one on the Divide to the brink of despair; three years of drought and failure, the last struggle of a wild soil against the encroaching plowshare. The first of these fruitless summers the Bergson boys bore courageously. The failure of the corn crop made labor cheap. Lou and Oscar hired two men and put in bigger crops than ever before. They lost everything they spent. (161)

Burdened with family crisis, Alexandra often would get lost in her own thoughts, thinking over and over imaginatively as Cather quotes "She was standing lost in thought, leaning upon her pitchfork, her sun bonnet lying beside her on the ground" (161). Having deep faith in her land, that it could yield a bountiful harvest she faces the challenges single handedly. The land was not easily controlled and willing to cooperate at first, as it was subjected to draughts and stormy winds, but Alexandra was determined to save the land.

Alexandra doesn't get discouraged and she exhorts Emil to take a chance and further says that's we must have faith in the land.

There's nothing in it for us down there, Emil. There are a few fine farms, but they are owned by the rich men in town, and couldn't be bought. Most of the land is rough and hilly. They can always scrape along down there, but they can never do anything big. Down there they have a little certainty, but up with us there is a big chance. We must have faith in the high land, Emil. I want to hold on harder than ever, and when you're a man you'll thank me (170).

She went to examine the situation in their neighboring village and came back with much more confidence. On her way back she was more radiant. This made her to
hum an old Swedish hymn, and she looked gay for the first time and she climbed the long swells of the Divide which surprised even her younger brother, who was closest to her. Alexandra with a deep sigh of relief expresses her emotions: “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” (170).

The first woman on the Divide was Alexandra, who had “determination and strength” of character whereby she adopts innovative farming techniques like that of her new ‘pig corral’ and the ‘silos’ (160). The major plantations were of sweet potatoes and the vines seemed to be drying out and a variety of fruits like yellow seed- cucumbers and pumpkins and citrons were among of them. Along to the feathery asparagus, were red berries and rhubarb at one end. Growing in the middle of the garden were gooseberries and currant bushes. Zinnias, marigolds and scarlet sage were amidst them (161). It thus becomes clear that Alexandra is stronger and more resolute than her brothers. Many families, including Carl Linstrum’s sell their farms and move away. But Alexandra believes in the promise of the untamed country, to Alexandra ‘alfalfa has been the salvation of her country’. She did not try to conquer the land, as her brothers may have desired; instead she chose to work with it.

Having all faith that the land was eager to produce, Alexandra comments “You all laughed at me when I said land here was ready for wheat, and I had to raise three big wheat crops before the neighbors quit” (221). James Seaton notes: “The narrator encourages the reader to see in Alexandra’s triumph the fruit of a new relation to the land, a relation of love rather than conflict.” Not only Barney Flinn, red - headed Irishman who was her foreman, showed a bad temperament when Alexandra put up her new ‘silo’ on the Divide also Alexandra’s neighbors and her
men questioned her accepted belief. This shows her tenacity as Barney remarks: “To be sure, if the thing don’t work we’ll have plenty of feed without it” (180).

Having drawn inspiration from her father the pioneering immigrant Alexandra had the knowledge of land, her intelligence makes the land, ‘wake up out from its sleep’, ‘so big so rich’. Though she had lack of capital she borrowed from the people and invested in the land, then people were ready to lend her money “when she did not need it” (194).

The Swedish Alexandra Bergson is proud of owing the great farm:

There was something individual about the great farm a most unusual trimness and care for detail. On either side of the road, for a mile before you reached the foot of the hill, stood tall orange hedges, their glossy green marking off the yellow fields. South of the hill, in a low, sheltered swale, surrounded by a mulberry hedge, was the orchard, its fruit trees knee-deep in timothy grass. (178)

Cather redefines the American Dream as she writes. This was one of the richest farms on the Divide, and that the farmer was a woman, “Alexandra Bergson.” Alexandra whose name hails from a Greek word meaning “to defend”; she did not bother what the people had to say; she went ahead with work in her farms. As she believes in independent nature Alexandra wisely manages the farm. The industrious and moral nature of female immigrants is revealed as Mrs. Bergson prefers logs to sod houses as such the family works hard for it.

As Oscar comments:

Oh, now, Alexandra, you always took it pretty easy! Of course we wanted you to. You liked to manage round, and we always humored you. We realize you were a great deal of help to us. There’s no
woman anywhere around that knows as much about business as you do, and we’ve always been proud of that. (220)

As the brothers wanted to sell the land Alexandra was firm not to sell it. She is able to dissuade her brothers from selling out their farms explaining how a local land dealer is capitalizing on the discouragement of their neighbourhood. And there by takes right decision for her family.

Land sells for three times as much as this, but in five years, we will double it. The rich men down there own all the best land, and they are buying all they can get. The thing to do is to sell our cattle and what little old corn we have, and buy the Linstrum place. Then the next thing to do is to take out two loans on our half-sections, and buy Peter Crow’s place; raise every dollar we can, and buy every acre we can. (171)

The immigrant pioneer Alexandra Bergson with her keen insight and imagination thinks of the future and ways of clearing the family debt. She convinces her brothers to re-mortgage their farm and buy more land.

We borrow the money for six years. Well, with the money we buy a half-section from Linstrum and a half from Crow, and a quarter from Struble, maybe. That will give us upwards of fourteen hundred acres, wont it? You wont have to pay off your mortgages for six years. By that time, any of this land will be worth thirty dollars an acre- it will be worth fifty, but we’ll say thirty, then you can sell a garden patch anywhere, and pay off a debt of sixteen hundred dollars. It’s not the principal I’m worried about; it’s the interest and taxes. We’ll have to strain to meet the payments. But as sure as we are sitting here to-
night, we can sit down here ten years from now independent
landowners, not struggling farmers any longer. The chance that
father was always looking for has come. (171)

Unlike many women of the period, in Cather's novel *O Pioneers!* Alexandra
Bergson does not rely on a man for her success though her brothers seem to feel her
achievements are aberration due more to luck than skill. She is ready to go ahead with
farming even though Lou and Oscar back out. Alexandra takes charge at the age of
twenty of the family farm and proceeds to transform a struggling homestead into a
thriving business.

Alexandra is proud of her Swedish heritage. She further comments; we are
better fixed than any of our neighbors because father had more brains. Alexandra
finds that the Swedish were better people than these in the old country. She insists to
her brothers "we ought to do more than they do, and see further ahead." Alexandra is
methodical enough to complete her task, yet free from slavery to repetitious routine,
being alert to change, she is not erratic but imaginative.

In the absence of her father, Alexandra plays a dual role of sister and that of
mother and comforts Oscar that he will not have to work hard to tame the land.
Alexandra tells her brother "You poor boy, you won't have to work it. The men in
town who are buying up other people's land don't try to farm it. They are the men to
watch, in a new country. Let's try to do like the shrewd ones, and no like these stupid
fellows." I don't want you boys always to have to work like this. I want you to be
independent, and prefer Emil to go to school. Alexandra shows ardent desire for the
boys to be independent and Emil 'to go to school'. She did not appreciate Lou and
Oscar because they were 'bigoted and self-satisfied, whereas she had all praise for
Emil. It’s mainly because of Alexandra’s encouragement that Emil received good education. Although her brothers talk vague things, she shows tolerance.

Swedish Immigrant Alexandra Bergson on gaining prosperity moves on to “her new house on the hill, that has several rooms, that are papered, carpeted, and furnished”. Alexandra’s dining room is filled with varnished wood, bright glass and china; guest rooms contain fancy candlesticks and jars. As such Alexandra’s house is the big out-of-doors (83-84). As Squire notes: “Swedish heirlooms gracing the sitting room are a reminder that immigrants brought their cultural heritage with them and that women perpetuate their heritage.”

Alexandra accommodates her guests tastes who were probably immigrants themselves, As Beth Rundstrom opines “When they saw tokens of prosperity in Alexandra’s house, they were reassured that they could be productive, successful citizens, and that her home incorporates and maintains the old Scandinavian pioneer culture.”

Alexandra may present a model of an independent woman, however she does not attempt to influence others around her to view life in the same manner she does. She is a quiet observer of those around her. While dinning with her hired men and her family Alexandra did not talk much at the table, but she encouraged her men to talk, and she always listened attentively, even when they seemed to be talking foolishly.

After the marriage of Lou and Oscar, land was equally divided. They liked their own ways of doing things, and did not altogether like Alexandra’s ways.

Now that Alexandra’s farm has proven to be the best, the brothers are afraid they will lose any claim they might have over it. As such Alexandra confronts with her brothers patriarchal opinion when they claim that ‘the farm is truly theirs’.
Carl puts up with Alexandra for a fortnight stay Lou and Oscar try to get hold of her property. In her defense Alexandra speaks of her solitary achievements:

I've made more on my farms since I've been alone than when we all worked together ... I've built it up myself, and it has nothing to do with you.” Oscar sat up suddenly and Lou clutched at his bristly hair. “Give him?” And Lou shouted. “Our property, our homestead? (220)

As Lou and Oscar always expected that it would be left to their children, Alexandra replies in an even quiet tone “I'll do exactly as I please with the rest of my land.”

Although Alexandra is a spinster, she has maintained relationship with her brothers and their children. She further remarks “I have had to think for myself a good many years and am not likely to change... On the whole, we take as much comfort in each other as most brothers and sisters do. And I am very fond towards Lou’s oldest daughter” (195). Lou’s oldest daughter Milly was no so much at ease with her mother as she was with aunt Alexandra, owing her generous nature. Alexandra thinks of gifting a piano for Milly for her appreciation and liking for music:

Alexandra replies firmly, “I think Milly deserves a piano. All the girls around here have been taking lessons for years, but Milly is the only one of them who can ever play anything when you ask her. she further explains: I’ll tell you when I first thought I would like to give you a piano, Milly, and that was when you learned that book of old Swedish songs that your grandfather used to sing (188).

Alexandra had no personal gain, cultivation of the land, seeking others cooperation for cultivation and thus to provide help for her family was her main aim.
Her personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence; like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there, at intervals months apart, and then sank again to flow on under her own fields (273).

As her emotional life remained subconscious, that vitality she channels into her enterprises and succeeds. Alexandra chooses to sacrifice her own love and happiness to a single-minded pursuit- it is the education and unrealized potential of her brother, Emil. Oscar comments on Carl and Alexandra’s relationship as he puts up with her for a short stay. Oscar rose. “Yes,” he broke in, “everybody’s laughing to see you …at your age, with him. Everybody knows he’s nearly five years younger than you, and is after your money. And further reminds her saying, Alexandra you are forty years old!”(221). Alexandra’s autonomous nature is revealed as she responds:

All that doesn’t concern anybody but Carl and me. Go to town and ask your lawyers what you can do to restrain me from disposing of my own property. And I advise you to do what they tell you; for the authority you can exert by law is the only influence you will ever have over me again (221).

Most of Alexandra’s happy memories were impersonal; yet to her they were very personal. “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” (238). Alexandra loved freedom but never misused it or shirked from her responsibilities. Willa Cather symbolically depicts this aspect when she sees a wild duck on a lake when she is with her brother Emil.
Under the overhanging willows of the opposite bank there was an inlet where the water was deeper and flowed so slowly that it seemed to sleep in the sun. In this little bay a single wild duck was swimming and diving and preening her feathers, disporting herself very happily in the flickering light and shade. They sat for a long time, watching the solitary bird take its pleasure. No living thing had ever seemed to Alexandra as beautiful as that wild duck (237).

She somehow compares herself to the duck, and longs for freedom. Alexandra also envy's Carl’s freedom, thereby she remarks: “But you show it yourself, Carl. I’d rather have had your freedom than my land” (197). When Alexandra felt tired after a hard day’s work, she went to the bathhouse that was partitioned off the kitchen shed. “There she would stand in a tin tub and prosecute her bath with vigor, finishing it by pouring buckets of cold well-water over her gleaming white body which no man on the Divide could have carried very far” (238).

Emil graduates from college, sees the world and welcomes opportunity and freedom, the dreams of every immigrant. Emil ‘on the outside is just like an American boy...but underneath he is more Swedish than any of us (195). Alexandra's brother Emil even after undergoing studies at the University has retained the old cultures and she is proud of him. Alexandra feels that by sending him to the state university, she has given him the opportunity he needs to find fulfillment—“a chance, a whole chance.”

Alexandra was well satisfied with her brother Emil ...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. And that, she reflected, was what she had worked for. She felt satisfied with her life (241). Having a strong belief
for the change in culture Alexandra encourages Emil to go and present himself to the society. She was so proud of him that she decided at once to take him up to the church supper, and to make him wear the Mexican costume he had brought home in his trunk (240). Cather wanted to show changes in the society, thereby she reveals this by portraying changes in Emil’s personality and having got the talent of playing the guitar.

Emil felt a new thrill of admiration for his friend, Amédée Chevalier, a French immigrant and with it the old pang of envy at the way in which he could do with his might what his hand found to do, and feel that, whatever it was, it was the most important thing in the world. “I’ll have to bring Alexandra up to see this thing work.” Emil thought, “it’s splendid!” (257).

Although Alexandra never married, but she always saw that her girls married at the right time. Alexandra gave words of good courses and two milk cows as a wedding gift. Alexandra would like to extend her helping hand to old-fashioned people like old Mrs. Lee! Alexandra is desperate on loss of her friend and her brother Emil. Alexandra feels tormented when she learns about the tragic death of the couple, Marie and Emil. Later when Frank gets imprisoned Alexandra’s heart grieved towards Frank and wants to reach out to him to set him free.

Alexandra thought of how she and Frank had been wrecked by the same storm and of how, although she could come out into the sunlight, she had not much more left in her life than he. She remembered some lines from a poem she had liked in her schooldays:

Henceforth the world will only be

A wider prison-house to me.- (284)
And sighs, as a disgust of life weighed upon her heart.

Alexandra finds faults in Emil and Marie and thereby consoles Frank in prison. She wants to will the land to the future generation. Alexandra gives a stirring statement about the land and its importance to her. She openly acknowledges the ability of the land to triumph and to triumph continually in the future through the hands of the right people. She states:

Suppose I do will my land to their children, what difference will that make? The land belongs to the future, Carl; that's the way it seems to me. How many of the names on the county clerk's plat will be there in fifty years? I might as well try to will the sunset over there to my brothers' children. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it – for a little while (284).

Alexandra shows concern for Crazy Ivar who is deeply religious and slightly imbalanced elderly man who distrusts civilization and behaves bizarrely around people. Lou insists Alexandra to file a complaint against Ivar and get rid of him, as the doctor who treated him, has the notion that he's likely to set fire to the barn any night, and take after you and the girls with an axe. To that Alexandra, realizes that there is great potential even in crazy people like Ivar, "Ivar's queer, certainly, but he has more sense than half the hands I hire" (186) And in spite of getting him locked up, Alexandra wants to render all the help, "Well, Lou, if any of the neighbors try that, I'll have myself appointed Ivar's guardian and take the case to court, that's all I am perfectly satisfied with him." Alexandra is intelligent thinking helps her to protect the dignity of lay people like Ivar. "In my opinion, Ivar has just as much right to his
own way of dressing and thinking as we have. But I'll see that he doesn't bother other people. I'll keep him at home” (187).

As she grew older, this fancy more often came to her when she was tired than when she was fresh and strong. Sometimes, after she had been in the open all day, overseeing the branding of the cattle or the loading of the pigs, she would come in chilled; take a concoction of spices and warm home-made wine, and go to bed with her body aching with fatigue. Then, just before she went to sleep, she had the old sensation of being lifted and carried by a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness (238-239).

As Alexandra grew older, the illusion of being lifted and carried by a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness came to her more often. Alexandra longed for companionship. Sometimes, as she lay thus luxuriously idle, her eyes closed, she used to have an illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by some one very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but he was like no man he knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat. She never saw him, but, with eyes closed, she could feel that he was yellow with the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him. She could feel him approach, bend over her and lift her, and then she could feel herself being carried swiftly off across the fields. Alexandra did not take pride in her business matters. When speaking of the success of her farm, she takes absolutely no responsibility for she feels that:

The land did it. It had its little joke. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so
big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting
still (194).

As Susan J. Rosowski notes: “Alexandra has released the sleeping country
from darkness.” She further remarks “the old country “has vanished forever,” and
nature, freed from chaos, revels in its new life.

The shaggy coat of the prairie, which they lifted to make him
[John Bergson] a bed, has vanished forever. From the Norwegian
graveyard one looks out over a vast checker-board, marked off in
squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light...the
furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length, and the brown
earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such power of growth
and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from
the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a
soft, deep sigh of happiness. The wheat cutting sometimes goes all
night as well as day, and in good seasons there are scarcely men
and horses enough to do the harvesting. The grain is so heavy that
it bends toward the blade and cuts like velvet (174).

Alexandra’s feelings toward the land read like a love story, with the land
personified as the beloved: “For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from
the waters of geologic ages, a human face set toward it with love and yearning. It
seemed beautiful to her, rich strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it,
until her tears blinded her” (170).

Cather thinks that the characters must submit to, rather than conquer the land.
She tends to personify “the land “and makes it one of the main protagonists in her
story. It is more true to say that the land “owns” Alexandra than the opposite.
Because of this she is naturally a conspicuous local figure, made more so by her forward thinking adaptive approach to the business of farming. Alexandra’s represents the beginning of a new woman. She defies gender stereotypes she conquers, but in the extension of love that she transmits to the land. Once she has established her “new relation to it”, she almost loses herself in the land: “She [feels] as if her heart was hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring” (173).

The omniscient narrator concludes with the blessing of timeless truths:

‘They went into the house together, leaving the Divide behind them, under the evening sun. 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! (290)

Alexandra’s peculiarity and her tremendous ability, which reveals her latent talent winds up in Cather words, as admiration to Alexandra:

Isn’t it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years (196).

Cather remarks about pioneers, which is also an indirect compliment to Alexandra, “Pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves” (161). As John Randall observes that Alexandra’s brothers Oscar and Lou have strength, but strength alone is not enough, and as John Bergson was imaginative, ‘he wore himself and died’ in an attempt to
retrieve his fortune. He opines that ‘A pioneer must have both imagination and strength’. He further comments on the clear superiority of Alexandra over her father and brothers, for what they possess separately, she is able to combine.9

It is customary that Alexandra has certain weaknesses as a normal human being. Unlike Lou and Oscar she is aware of her own and theirs. She confides to Carl that she has little to do with her brothers and that her independent ways alienate them. Alexandra fails to protest where Carl says he liked the old Lou and Oscar better and she admits to the limiting effects of life on the land: as she states, “and our minds get stiff.” (124). John J. Murphy opines: confessing a preference for Carl’s freedom from the land she equates purpose and survival with a sense of the larger world: “If the world were no wider than my cornfields if there were not something beside this, I would” not feel that it was much worth while to work.10

Alexandra treats her European hired hands, Barney Flinn and Nelse Jensen, as trusted family members’ (39). She keeps three pretty young Swedish girls in her house not because she needs that much help but “to hear them giggle” (186). She takes the young girls into the flower garden; and keeps Ivar, who is “too old to work in the fields,” and sometimes “calls him into the sitting-room to read the Bible aloud to her” (187). She is an important force in her neighbours lives and draws them into her community: she depends on young Marie Shabata’s companionship; she attends Sunday services with Marie in the neighbouring French Catholic community. As Sally Peltier Harvey notes: Alexandra values the Old World ways and finds more satisfaction in their traditions and customs.11

Alexandra’s relationship with Carl Linstrum brings out distinct qualities of Alexandra. Carl Linstrum, a tall boy of fifteen, was lonely. He was thin frail boy with brooding dark eyes, very quiet in all his movements. There was a delicate pallor in his
face, and his mouth was too sensitive for a boy's. He needs Alexandra now and then. Her brothers dislike their relationship. Whenever Alexandra meets him, she watches him with curiosity and sympathy. He meets Alexandra in the drug store; sometimes they are together walking down the streets. Alexandra seeks Carl's assistance and as childhood, friends there by he renders to help Emil to come out of his problem.

Alexandra has soft corner for Carl. Alexandra did not like Carl wasting his time. You are able to do much better things. You are nearly nineteen now, and I wouldn't have you stay. I've always hoped you would get away... She brushed the tears from her cheeks, not trying to hide them (163). Both liked the same things without anybody else knowing. Carl all considerate and caring for Alexandra, he said sadly and thoughtfully, "I've never been any real help to you, beyond sometimes trying to keep the boys in a good humor."

Alexandra consoles herself saying:

Nothing like that. It's by understanding me, and the boys and mother, that you've helped me. I expect that is the only way one person ever really can help another, I think you are about the only one that ever helped me. Somehow it will take more courage to bear your going than everything that has happened before. (163)

When Carl wants to leave the Divide, she says:

And we've had good times, hunting for Christmas trees and going for ducks and making our plum wine together every year. We've never either of us had any other close friend... "And now I must remember that you will find the work you were meant to do. But you'll write to me, Carl? That will mean a great deal to me here." "
I'll write as long as I live, "cried the boy impetuously". And I'll be
working for you as much as for myself, Alexandra. (163)

Alexandra did not like many people leaving the country. She felt they make
them low-spirited. I'm afraid they are beginning to feel hard toward me because I
won't listen to any talk about going." Sometimes I feel like I'm getting tired of
standing up for this country (164). When Carl expresses his desire to leave the
country the pioneering woman Alexandra's accepts the role not only as a sister but as
protective mother to Emil she says: "Now I shall have nobody but Emil. But he is my
boy and he is tender-hearted."

It's in Hanover with Alexandra that Carl prefers to stay only a few days, as he
is on his way to the coast. Later Alexandra welcomes Carl for a weeklong stay when
he is on his way to Alaska in search of gold mines. Carl had changed, Alexandra felt,
much less than one might have expected. He had not become a trim, self-satisfied city
man. Alexandra's curiosity is depicted as she inquires with Carl earnestly. " Why are
you dissatisfied with yourself?" Carl replies "well, you see, for one thing, there's
nothing to look forward to in my profession. Wood engraving is the only thing I care
about, and that had gone out before I begun. Everything's cheap metal work
nowadays, touching up miserable photographs, forcing up poor drawings, and
spoiling good ones. I am absolutely sick of it all" (196).

He further consoles himself, Carl says, "Yes, I am going there to get rich.
Engraving's a very interesting profession, but a man never makes any money at it. So
I am going to try the gold fields." Alexandra envy's Carl freedom, which makes her to
remark "I'd rather have had your freedom than my land." She further remarks 'people
living on the Nebraska "grow hard and heavy." This observation holds true for
Alexandra; her life seems to have been composed of endless observations of the world around her. As such Carl comments:

Freedom so often means that one isn’t needed anywhere. Here you are an individual you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody we own nothing. When one of us dies, they scarcely know (197).

She has a latent desire of enjoying Carl’s freedom Alexandra felt the need to live in a world that big and interesting and she further goes to say that is what goes on in the world that reconciles me. Alexandra seems incapable of strong emotional attachments. For Alexandra love is memory. In them she appears as sunshiny, vigorous and youthful. After Emil’s murder, when she might be expected to cling intensely to those she cares about, she is still at a distant although she seeks comfort from Carl. “She put her hands on his arm” I needed you terribly when it happened. Carl, I cried at night. Then everything seemed to get hard inside of me. Alexandra thought perhaps she should never care for Carl again. But further she comments: when I got your telegram yesterday, then – then it was just as it used to be. You are all I have in the world, you know” (287).

Alexandra “feels at peace with the world” When discussing their impending nuptials, Alexandra speaks of safety, not of love: “I think we shall be very happy. I haven’t any fears. I think when friends marry, they are safe”(290). There is no sense of intimacy merely comfortable complacency. When Carl and Alexandra finally kiss, it is ‘softly’. It reveals a quite companionship, not passionate love of men and women.
Ending of the novel predicts a conventional union as friends, Alexandra and Carl will marry, but in doing so they pledge there faith not to each other but to far more important bond: Carl compliments his future wife not that she belongs to him, but that she belongs “to the land... now more than ever.” Alexandra “had never been in love, she had never indulged in sentimental reveries. Even as a girl she had looked upon men as work-fellows. Alexandra has no time for finding a partner as all her energies are directed towards making the farm a success. As Alexandra at an early age had to shoulder the responsibilities of her own age in this sparsely settled area contribute to her delayed sexual awakening and sublimation of sexual vitality.

I agree with John Randall who says “One must remember the peculiar light in which [Willa Cather] viewed the fact of human conflict and struggle. For her, struggle had to lead to the absolute triumph of the will... and the putting down of all opposition.” She is unlike all of the other female characters depicted in the course of narrative- in particular lacking Marie’s emotional spontaneity, and the Swedish helping hands ‘need’ to settle quickly and raise a family.

The obvious similarities between Cather’s own life and that of her heroine Alexandra Bergson cannot be overlooked. Alexandra is 40 years old, like that of Cather, in 1913 when she published *O Pioneers!* her second novel. Both women, had devoted their lives to a single pursuit, sacrificing personal relationships-or, at least those of a romantic nature for the cause, as such Cather never married, as so does Alexandra Bergson, until the end of the novel. Alexandra like Cather is felt to be creator and writer as well as pioneer. She is also attentive to detail-she identifies with the insects and the ‘small wild things’ hidden in the grass. She describes herself as part of nature, “If you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard like a tree” (171).
Through Alexandra Bergson, Cather has communicated her love of the land and her concern for the well-being and dignity of her fellow creatures. The novel draws the endurance, vitality, and optimism of the pioneers. Alexandra Bergson remains “uncorrupted” by the materialism of success. “Alexandra isn’t much like other women folks.” In *O Pioneers!* Cather initiated a different relationship between a woman and the land than the one generally espoused by the patriarchal American culture. Joyce McDonald observes and rightly opines: “Immigrant Alexandra Bergson capably achieves financial success and aristocratic status and therefore no longer needs to engage in working the land herself.”

The creation of strong female protagonist in *O Pioneers!* has given feminist critics a novel to admire. As rightly observed by Susan J. Rosowski, “Cather avoids sexist roles in her pioneer women, for Alexandra combines the attributes of both sexes on the frontier.” She has the vision and energy to tame the wild land, a role usually assigned to male pioneers, and the stabilizing nurturing traits traditionally belonging to pioneer women. As such Cather believed that immigrants would persevere and advance in status.

Pioneering had traditionally been viewed as a kind of a battle between the land and its conquerors, who were invariably male. Instead, *O Pioneers!* takes a deep, almost mythological approach to the subject. Here is no conquering hero, battling savages and subduing nature, but a woman who tames the beast through her love and intelligence. Cather’s heroine, Alexandra Bergson, has one great passion, and it is not another human, but the great, unconquered prairie. Alexandra is a perfect example of one who submits to both her heritage and to the land. She prospers because she honors her father’s wishes and respects the land and has his strength. The other family
members being subdued and ineffectual Alexandra plays the role of mother, father, sister and wife.

In the words of John Murphy: Alexandra Bergson remains “uncorrupted by the materialism of success” as evident in Lou and Oscar. Alexandra the Swedish immigrant heroine is the embodiment of intrinsic beauty and wisdom. Alexandra’s intelligence is not of the showy type. She is honest, and sometimes a bit slow like the country girl. But she has more brains more pursuits, than her neighbors and her two brothers. This quality distinguishes her from her neighbors who cling to tradition, and enables her to be always a step ahead of others. Alexandra has prophetic faith and the shrewd business acumen to hang on to and to invest in the land. This is the quality of pioneers. Providing for Emil her younger brother gives her purpose to carry out her task. His education and opportunities satisfy her need for a larger world. She denigrates her pioneering efforts exclusively to his future. Alexandra’s unique brother sister relationship with Emil when he leaves for Michigan to study law is revealed as she appreciates the western culture.

She wins respect and esteem from her neighbors by her successful enterprises and generosity. All her decisions arose from a sense of duty as opposed to personal gain. First she worked hard to fulfill her father’s dream and so Emil could have opportunities she never had. In the life of Alexandra Bergson the novel measures the potency of the remarkable individual against universal human desires and the forces of natural history. In a land that celebrates individualism and the pioneering spirit, the pull of conventional opinion is irresistibly strong. Alexandra defying the public attitudes proves herself as a true individualist. Her life long fight to survive and succeed Cather relates an important chapter in history. Being stronger and more creative than the men around her she has established herself as a capable woman.
II

Secondary Characters

Marie Shabata

Marie Tovesky is a pretty vivacious Bohemian girl; she was a stranger in the country who came from Omaha. “She is a dark child, with brown curly hair, like a brunette doll’s, a coaxing little red mouth, and round, yellow brown eyes that sparkled like gold stone or in softer lights like that Colorado called tiger-eye” (143). Marie “pretty and carefully nurtured” child, walked graciously and was admired by the country children for her elegant way of dressing, which was referred to the “Kate Greenaway” manner. With her ‘charming’ grace, the boys wanted her for a sweetheart (143).

Marie had ‘her ears pierced by her great aunt’ when she was seven. She had worn ‘bits of broom-straw, plucked from the common sweeping-broom, in the lobes until the holes were healed and ready for little gold rings’ (242). Marie was interested in ‘sewing or crocheting’ but more than that she was involved in fieldwork (236). Marie the youngest child by a ‘second wife’ of Albert Tovesky and was the ‘apple of his eye’. Her father was one the more intelligent Bohemians who came West, “settled in Omaha” and ‘became a leader and adviser among his people’. She had her graduation in the Omaha High School, at sixteen (208). With the arrival of Frank Shabata from Bohemian, Frank set all the Bohemian girls in a flutter. Marie after her graduation was engaged to Frank at a Bohemian picnic ‘when they went rowing down the river’ Having missed Frank Shabata for a year, she longs for him, and on meeting him at ‘Union Station in St. Louis’, she flees away with him to get married.
Marie’s father disliked Frank because he is not from good family background. Frank being jobless, her father purchased them a farmyard that ‘took her fancy’ and set them up (196). Even after marriage, she doesn’t take her relationship with Frank seriously. Alexandra introduces her to Emil. Marie was delighted to see Emil come from Mexico in his ‘conspicuous attire’. There are many admirers of Marie and Carl is one of them. Carl admires Marie for her charming nature and feels that her husband is envious of her nature and Alexandra too, believes that there aren’t many ‘like her anywhere’ (205). Marie does not find Frank compatible and yet times he behaves like one of these ‘wild fellows’. Marie is a very lively person, all excited and gay’ laughing and shaking hands with people whom she encounters at the church meetings (196). Marie could make people laugh for a while by creating a light irony at ‘fortune telling’ (244).

The farm boys would always do anything for Marie, as such Frank was ‘jealous’ about his pretty wife. Franked looked out for an opportunity to make ‘Marie thoroughly unhappy’, but ‘She, never humbled herself’. Cather hereby portrays the liberation of woman from inequalities and lower status in relation to man.

The distance between them had widened and hardened. It no longer contracted and brought them suddenly together. The spark of her life went somewhere else, and he was always watching to surprise it. (245)

Marie in her orchard under her white mulberry tree, with pail full of cherries, talks to Emil about the religion the Swedes had way back and goes further to say that “The Bohemians were tree worshipers before the missionaries came... they believe that trees bring good or bad luck”, and that trees like’ lindens purify the forest, and do away with the spells”(212). Marie’s workaholic temperament is seen as Alexandra’s comments:
She has it hard enough, anyway. She’s too young and pretty for this sort of life. We’re all ever so much older and slower. But she is the kind that won’t be downed easily. She’ll work all day and go to a Bohemian wedding and dance all night, and drive the hay wagon for a cross man next morning (197).

The Bohemian Marie is dissatisfied with Frank in their marital relationship, so she turns to Emil. Marie’s marriage has turned out to be a ‘mistake’. She gave the suggestion for Emil to run away to Mexico. She had her own ways of living. Marie receives Emil’s letters more than that of Alexandra, which are ‘more personal’, full of descriptions of the gay life in the old Mexican capital in the days when the strong hand of Porfirio Diaz was still strong...they were the kind of letters a young man writes to a woman when he wishes himself and his life to seem interesting to her, when he wishes to enlist her imagination in his behalf (235). In absence of Emil, Marie feels tired of everybody around her, as she feels she is being deprived of love. In so far as she was concerned, Emil was already gone. They could not meet anymore. There was nothing for them to say. They had spent the last penny of their small change; there was nothing left but gold.

Cather wanted to show the changes in the society, thereby she reveals this by portraying changes in Emil’s personality on his return from Mexico and having got the talent of playing the ‘guitar’ (240). Marie could not live without love, in Emil she found a perfect match. The pretty vivacious young Bohemian wife of Frank Shabata becomes Emil Bergsons love interest. Alexandra speaks to Marie about Emil when he returns. In fact Alexandra has brought them together so that Emil could learn good manners from Marie. Marie realizes she is not the right match for Frank. Frank feels that he should get all the attention from Marie, but due to her friendly nature, she
couldn't resist staying aloof, she remarks: "Frank's wife ought to be timid, and she ought not to care about another living thing in the world but just Frank" (250). Emil follows Marie to comfort her in times of loneliness. Marie reflects on her own life and her relation with Emil.

How terrible it was to love people when you would not really share their lives! When a girl had loved one man, and then loved another while that man was still alive, everybody knew what to think of her. What happened to her was little consequence, so long as she did not drag other people down with her. Emil once away, she could let everything else go and live a new life of perfect love (260).

Marie thought that he might come over again. She left the path and went across the pasture. She had scarcely thought about where she was going when the ponds glittered before her where Emil had shot the ducks. But she did not want to die. She wanted to live and dream—a hundred years, forever! As long as this sweetness welled up in her heart, as long as her breast could hold this treasure of pain! She felt as the pond must feel when it held the moon like that; when it encircled and swelled with that image of gold (261). Frank feels dejected when he sees Marie with Emil, Frank gets tormented, and one night the two forget discretion and are found in the orchard by the infuriated husband, who wreaks prompts vengeance and thus puts an end to both Marie and Emil using his gun.

The gun sprang to his shoulder; he sighted mechanically and fired three times without stopping, stopped without knowing why. He peered again through the hedge, the two dark figures under the tree. They had fallen a little apart from each other (268).
When Alexandra learns of Emil’s and Marie’s murder she felt ‘benumbed’ and consoles Frank inspite of murder and thinks they were more to blame. Her sympathy for Frank is described in Naturalistic terms: “Being what he was she felt, Frank could not have acted otherwise (278). Marie seemed to be carefully crafted, as individual. Her flirting with Emil was a fatalistic decision. Her moving with Emil was not in conformity according to the social and ecclesiastical tradition of that period and did not let Marie and Frank Shabata admit their mistake and end their mutually destructive marriage. Being a good Catholic Marie takes her religion seriously. She encourages Emil to pray as he is adamant about it. She at first takes comfort in religion herself as seen in this episode; ‘She struck the ground with her little foot fiercely’. “That won’t last. It will go away, and things will be just as they used to. I wish you were Catholic. The Church helps people, indeed it does. I pray for you, but that’s not the same as if you prayed for yourself” (214).

Divorce was not an option for a Catholic couple in that setting. There was no physical or any other verifiable abuse that would merit a socially acceptable separation of the two. And yet the marriage was slowing killing them. John Randall observes: “It is the ability to throw herself wholeheartedly into emotional situations that makes Marie so humanly attractive and so successful in dealing with people.”

Randall further opines:

Marie’s instincts are those of a happy child; although she has herself suffered in her unhappy marriage she has no conception that suffering may be an inescapable part of human existence. To her, life means happiness, and the very measure of a person’s vitality is the amount of joy he can draw from existence... She has all the good qualities which belong to Alexandra, including the drive and
the enthusiasm with which she throws herself into her work, and she also has those qualities which Alexandra knows herself to lack: an understanding of people, a keen zest for the enjoyment of living, and a vivaciousness which reflects itself on everyone. Marie completes Alexandra by taking up where Alexandra left off; she is the new generation for which the pioneers were struggling when they came to America so that their children could have a fuller and richer life.  

Signa:

Signa is one of the youngest pretty Swedish girls who did Alexandra’s housework. She is ‘loyal’ maid experienced in ‘cutting pies refilling coffee-cups, placing platters of bread and meat and potatoes upon the red tablecloth, and continually getting in each other’s way between the table and the stove’. Signa, who has a pretty figure, mottled pink cheeks, and yellow hair, Alexandra is very fond though she keeps a sharp eye upon her. Signa is apt to be skittish at mealtime, when the men are about, and to spill the coffee or upset the cream. It is supposed that Nelse Jensen, one of the six men at the dinner table, is courting Signa, (179).

A lot of humility is seen in Swedish girls like that of Signa. As Alexandra remarks, “There is a good deal of ‘cow’ in them. Alexandra assures her maid with words of good counsel after their marriage and gifted her with two milk cows. As such she has respect for her mistress. In time of trouble she stayed with her mistress, for she was the only one of the maids from whom Alexandra would accept much personal service.
When Alexandra in distress, Signa assists her, especially after Emil and Marie’s death telling her ‘when to eat and when to go to bed’ (274). Even after Emil’s death as Alexandra is tired of life and Signa and Ivar looks after her. Signa had a fire burning in the sitting-room stove. She assisted Alexandra in undressing, and gave her a hot footbath. Signa sows boundless sympathy as she prefers to sleep on the slat lounge outside her door. Alexandra has trust in Signa, Cather in the words of Ivar, tries to convey the message of ‘peace’ and that is only possible to experience “when the eyes of flesh are shut the eyes of the spirit are open” (274). Cather further says that it clearly indicates that the two are always with each other and there we have to surrender over one of them. Alexandra ‘endured’ their service patiently (276).

Alexandra takes interest in arranging the marriage however Signa’s marriage to Nelse Jensen seems ‘ill-fated’. Girls on the Divide, the wealthy farmers’ daughter no longer went out into service, so Alexandra got her girls from Sweden, by paying their fare over. They stayed with her until they married, and were replaced by sisters or cousins from the old country. More than the work they performed she wants them to keep her company. The few scenes that take place indoors involve several people. They are the origins of feminine connections.

Annie Lee:

Lou Bergson’s wife of Swedish heritage has sharp, aggressive looks. She is a petty woman, who is obsessed with her dress and Swedish language but is much afraid of being caught at it. Annie with her ‘aggressive’ looks is more curious like her husband. She is particular about her lifestyle, as “she wears her yellow hair in a high pompadour, and is bedecked with rings and chains and “beauty pin.” Her tight, high-heeled shoes give her an awkward walk and she is always more or less preoccupied.
with her clothes. As she sat at the table, she kept telling her youngest daughter to “be careful now, and not drop anything on mother” (186). Annie with her dominating nature speaks to her husband Lou in a warning tone. “Pass the preserves, Lou”. She had reasons for not wishing her husband to cross Alexandra too openly. Annie too disregards Ivar, as she considers him disgraceful object.

Annie is fond of gossiping and indirectly trying to get the news of Alexandra’s secret of success through her prattling maids than from Alexandra herself and what she discovered she used to her own advantage with Lou. Annie thinks of shifting to town as girls grow old enough, and as also Lou loves to go into business (192). Annie is as intent as her husband on securing Alexandra’s farm as an inheritance for their children.

Milly:

Milly is a charming and decent young girl. Alexandra is very much ‘fond’ of the little girls and loves to move into the flower garden with them especially of Milly. Alexandra’s favorite niece is the ‘musician’ of the family, she was interested in singing and that she had learned Old Swedish songs and works wonders with burnt wood. She loves to portray pictures with charcoal right from childhood. Annie and Oscar the parents of Milly has a family of four, the youngest being the boy (191). Milly is intelligent and friendly in contrast to her small minded and devious parents. Annie’s materialistic nature is seen as Oscar objects Alexandra to gift a piano to Milly as she has an organ. Annie defends him by saying, “Milly can play in church just the same, and she’ll play on the organ. But practicing on it so much spoils her touch. Her teacher says so,” Annie brought out with spirit.
Mrs. Bergson:

Mrs. Bergson the matriarch of the Bergson’s clan, wife of John Bergson, and mother of Alexandra, Oscar, Lou and Emil. She is old fashioned, Swedish woman who finds her happiness in her family life when the boys wanted to leave the place. She is far unimaginative. Mrs. Bergson is a pious, God fearing woman loved to go to ‘church’ especially on Sundays’(167). The Swedish culture of Mrs. Bergson is well worth focusing on.

John Bergson had married beneath him, but he had married a good housewife. Mrs. Bergson was a fair-skinned, corpulent woman, heavy and placid like her son, Oscar, but there was something comfortable about her; perhaps it was her own love of comfort. For eleven years she had worthily striven to maintain some semblance of household order amid conditions that made order very difficult. As Cather quotes “Habit was very strong with Mrs. Bergson, and her unremitting efforts to repeat the routine of her old life among new surroundings had done a great deal to keep the family from disintegrating morally and getting careless in their ways”(151).

The Bergsons had a log house, for instance, only because Mrs. Bergson would not live in a sod house. She missed the fish diet of her own country, and twice every summer she sent the boys to the river, twenty miles to the southward, to fish for channel cat. When the children were little she used to go fishing herself. Mrs. Bergson has been a good mother to her children and ‘she has always missed the old country’. She enjoyed household chores. She was glad when her children were old enough not to be in her way in the kitchen. She had never quite forgiven John Bergson for bringing her to the end of the earth; but, now that she was there, she wanted to be let alone to reconstruct her old life in so far as that was possible.
Mrs. Bergson has a ‘deep attachment’ for the place she has been living in. When the family decided to move from the Divide, Mrs. Bergson was weeping quietly. She ‘weeps bitterly’ as she is reluctant to move and is being consoled by her daughter Alexandra. In her she finds solace and strength when Alexandra puts a ‘soothing hand’ on her shoulder she, assures her, “A third of the place belongs to you by American law, and we can’t sell without your consent.”

Mrs. Bergson recalls the early years spent on the wild prairie, which was so ‘depressing’ and ‘disheartening’. In Cather’s mind her writing about the prairie years, became away to show approval of the victory of traditional values against countless difficulties. “Oh worse! Much worse,” moaned Mrs. Bergson. “Drouth, chinch-bugs, hail, everything! My garden all cut to pieces like sauerkraut. No grapes on the creek, no nothing. The people all lived just kike coyotes” (167). The fight to remain human and in love with life, inspite of all hardships gives the people in Cather’s stories purpose and calm.

Old Mrs. Hiller:

The Bohemians like old Mrs. Hiller could bake seven kinds of fancy bread’. Cather suggests in her portrayal that “The Bohemians,” certainly know how to make more kinds of breads than any other people in the world (232). Old Mrs. Hiller is crippled with rheumatism and ‘has only her lame boy, the shoemaker to help her’. Mrs. Hiller is sympathetic in nature and very enthusiastic of cross-stitch and has a ‘garden’ around (286). Old Mrs. Hiller went to the ‘French church’ whatever the weather and got helping hand from Alexandra whenever needed as she loved to pay visit to the old people and gift them.
Old Mrs. Lee

Old Mrs. Lee liked to walk 'barefoot' (152). And Alexandra 'love to see her maintain her old tradition as Alexandra narrates to Ivar:

Oh, never mind about your feet, Ivar. We can remember when half our neighbors went barefoot in summer. I expect old Mrs. Lee would love to slip her shoes off now sometimes, if she dared. (183)

Old Mrs. Lee resists to use the 'great white tub, 'to' wash herself in as she feels it was impossible to wash herself clean in it, instead “when they are all asleep, she washes herself in a little wooden tub she keeps under her bed”. Mrs. Lee's comment about hot water baths is that 'she cannot clean herself', cannot “make strong suds”, so she pretends to be conventional. There is no tolerance for the traditional ways. This disharmony within the society is a greater division for Cather: it is a division between those who can only think within the constraints of the past and the present: there is no evidence of a hunger for progress, only for the rapid accumulation of wealth. Alexandra feels sorry as she is deprived to follow her old ways of living. “Poor old Mrs. Lee! They wont let her wear nightcaps, either ... she can do all the old things in the old way and have as much beer as she wants” (184).

Despite Alexandra's dislike for her sister-in-law, Annie Lee, has great affection for Annie's elderly mother. Old Mrs. Lee loved to see Alexandra and spends a long yearly visit as she 'enjoyed the liberty' which prevailed over. She could 'wear her night cap' and 'sleep with all windows shut'. She could 'run about among the stables' and was interested in reading of the Bible in her old ways (230).

Old Mrs. Lee had been afraid that family misunderstandings might deprive her of her yearly visit to Alexandra. But the next day the old lady arrived with her bundles. For twelve years Mrs. Lee had always entered Alexandra's sitting room with
the same exclamation, “Now we yust-a like old times!” (229). She enjoyed the liberty
Alexandra gave her, and hearing her own language about her all day long. She could
talk incessantly about stocks she need in the Swedish papers, she would narrate her
life on dairy farm in Gottland when she was a teenager. She would enjoy a little
brandy in hot water and sugar before she could go off to bed. “It sends good dreams”
she would say with a twinkle in her eye (230). Although Old Mrs. Lee was ‘bent’
almost twice she was as ‘spry as a gopher.’ She likes her ‘old times’. Her face was as
brown as if it had been varnished, and is full of wrinkles as a washerwoman’s hands.
She had three jolly old teeth left in the front of her mouth, and when she grinned she
looked very knowing, as if when you find out how to take it. Life wasn’t half bad.

She read in a Swedish family paper, ‘telling the plots in great detail; or about
her life on a dairy farm in Gottland’ when she was a girl. Sometimes she forgot which
were the printed stories and which were the real stories, it all seemed so far away.
(230) She appreciates the reverence shown by Alexandra for the old Swedish tradition
and relishes the delicacies prepared by Marie Shabata. Old Mrs. Lee very fond of
dressing in style as she put on her ‘best black satin dress’ – she abominated woolen
clothes, even in winter. And she was very conscious of her garments she stitched, and
was very selective in choosing the best of the thread for sewing (231). Cather has
precisely depicted the language of Mrs. Lee: “No, just las’ night I ma-ake. See dis
tread; verra strong, no wa-ash out, no fade , My sister send from Sweden. I just-a ta-
ank you like dis” (231).

All the secondary women characters reveal the traits of their own traditional
ways and manner. As these events unfold, the European backgrounds are developed
and displayed. We get a sense of the Old World being absorbed in the New, though
some elements like the nostalgic Mrs.Lee is kept from her Old-World habits.
The character of Alexandra Bergson represents author’s search for the meaning of the text. The principal one being contained in the quotation “We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it - for a little while” (289). In Alexandra’s face “There was that exalted serenity that sometime came to her at moments of deep feeling” (289). She has clear eyes’ with the inference being that she sees clearly now above all other times of realization. It follows from her life and story that the land is a metaphor for nature, which is intrinsically bound up in the experience of human life.

‘Alexandra has left child bearing so late as to not be an issue’. One feels that she all the time intended simply to will her land to the brothers children. The threat of Alexandra as feminist icon is almost negated both by [this] and because “her work may be seen as an act of loyalty to her departed father” (x). To achieve the relationship with the land, which she does, Alexandra is forced to forgo the making of a personal life; though she has many close friendships within her household and the neighboring farms, in Carl’s absence she has no one close to her who would rise to the status of confidante.

Alexandra assumes a masculine role; the land is anthropomorphically represented as being female, welcoming the genuine attempts by another to stimulate and seed it. Alexandra is the supreme artist. Her selfless passion for the land contrasts sharply with the merits of hostility. Her success in reading order and beauty in the natural world takes place against the failure and defeat of the men.

John Randall rightly acclaims:
Alexandra has more controversial ideas. It is this which marks her out as something special; she was born with the fiery imagination of the true pioneer, born to prosper in "The struggle in which [she] was destined to succeed while so many men broke their hearts and died". Alexandra is not merely a forward thinker; she also occupies the rather unusual position of a woman farmer in an overwhelmingly male dominated rural society. Alexandra sees that a new world requires new way of thinking. She knows the land can be made to yield its riches if only she can discern its secrets.  

Alexandra by cultivating the land, she breaks gender codes. She is also characterized as appearing rebellious to social convention. Once she has established her "new relation to it". Alexandra almost loses herself in the land: Alexandra triumphs over the intractable prairie amassing a fortune and stabilizing the future for her three brothers.

Alexandra symbolizes self-sufficiency order, attractiveness, culture, morality stability and permanence. Alexandra's finely arranged and comfortable homestead celebrates women's sense of order and independence. Cather depicts a symmetrically laid out form. Alexandra's combines both power and beauty, authority and submission. Alexandra succeeds by the traditionally female virtue of loving, but she does so in untraditional ways by turning her feeling to the land rather than to a man.

Cather has a remarkable ability to create memorable characters, both major and minor. Although Alexandra is bigger than life early in the novel, a monumental figure of myth, by the end she is an ordinary woman who has achieved much, though at the expense of friendships and happiness. The steady hard working, innovative,
competent, skillful, self-confident forward going qualities of Alexandra are perhaps the contributions brought to America by the immigrants of various nationalities to make up the land.

Cather's narratives have a progressive structure, with the hardship of the frontier and personal tragedies requiring sacrifice and suffering, but ultimately leading to prosperity, persistence on the land, or success, and highlight the centrality of these women in this process. Willa Cather achieved more than a portrayal of American frontier women in a fictional sense. She provided an accurate impression of the stamina, passion, and vivacity which actual frontier women possessed and utilized. The pioneers of America worked a great labor of love, and Willa Cather recaptures their passion in a tribute worthy of their sacrifice.

CHAPTER REFERENCES

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9 May 2003.


88


18 Ibid., 78-79.

19 Ibid., 71.