CHAPTER-6

CONCLUSIONS

Willa Cather has become a national literary icon in America. Her name evokes the courage of immigrant farmers struggling with the raw American plains, and her reputation rests secure on her frontier masterpieces, with which miraculous economy and stylistic excellence capture a defining moment in the American experience. Her life her work and her personality have a simple unity and consistency.

Willa Cather was born in Back Creek Valley, near Winchester, Virginia in the home of her maternal grandmother Rachel Boak. The eldest child of Charles and Mary Cather, both descendants of established Virginian families. Her childhood was reportedly happy and well-ordered, and is remembered in her late novel Sapphira and the Slave Girl. In 1883, the Cathers' moved to Webster County, Nebraska, joining members of the family who settled there earlier. This crucial move, dislocating and dramatic, introduced Cather to the landscape and to the ways of life she would memorialize in her famous prairie novels, O Pioneers! My Ántonia, and A Lost Lady, as well as in parts of The Song of the Lark. In the small town of Red Cloud, Nebraska, Cather was a notably energetic, intelligent, and outspoken child, while, as her novels show, the town often seemed to her repressive. In Lincoln, Nebraska, where she attended the state university, she began her journalistic career, writing numerous reviews for the local newspapers. There, too, she published her earliest stories, formulated her idealistic and romantic ideals about art, and nurtured her literary ambitions. Those ambitions had to wait for their fulfillment while she earned a living in Pittsburgh as journalist and teacher, and then in
New York as an editor for McClure's Magazine. With the publication of *O Pioneers!* in 1913, Cather became the dedicated writer of her own dreams, in time achieving recognition for her prairie novels and for rare and unique works such as *My Ántonia*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and *Shadows on the Rock*. She led an ordered life, writing stories, novels, and critical essays, traveling regularly, and maintaining valued friendships among them with neighbors from her childhood, as well as with famous writers and musicians. She was honored for her writings, receiving the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 for *One of Ours*, a novel about a soldier in World War I.

Cather became a strong individual, despite all the sufferings. She discovered her literary talent at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and began to use it immediately. Cather strove to express herself in an environment where self expression outside of set narrow limitations was considered eccentric and an active mind for a woman was unthinkable. During her lifetime she became increasingly alienated from the materialism of modern life and wrote of alternative visions in the American Southwest and of the past. For many women in the nineteenth century writing novels was just one of the things they did. For Willa Cather, writing was her life.

Willa Cather came to Nebraska in 1883 after a year the family moved to Red Cloud. As a child she was surrounded by older women- the pioneering immigrant settlers from Scandanvia, Russia, Germany, France, and Bohemia. "What was unique about the immigrant settlers for Cather was that they were the past. The old women were not words, or tales, or the pages of a book. They came, living, from the Old World, and turned the stories into reality." She used to listen to the stories of their homeland. After eighteen months her family moved to a small farm house in Red Cloud. Soon Cather
developed a fierce passion for the land which has remained at the core of her writing. This childhood environment influenced Cather’s life as an artist as discussed earlier. It oriented her towards the land, the immigrants and Europe, in short towards the essence of American pioneer experience. Many of the experiences and people played significant roles in her novels.

Cather was one of the few writers to depict the community of new immigrants in a positive manner at a time when most Americans viewed these new comers with fear and suspicion. She could see that ‘Old World’ values were fading away and so she had a special attachment to and appreciation for this transplanted community. She was fascinated by immigrants’ speech, customs, and the way of living. The immigrant women spoke a different language, they wore strange garments: even their smell was different—exotic. She had respect for European traditions and culture. The old hands that Willa saw kneading dough represented generations of technique. They were patient hands, performing everyday tasks from a long tradition of care and love. She developed not only sympathy for the struggling immigrant women but the empathy. Sometimes this very tradition became the downfall of the immigrants, when they tried to farm a new land with old techniques. Failure, starvation, even death usually followed for those who could not adapt even partially, such as the suicide of Francis Sadilek, alias ‘Papa Shimerda’ of My Ántonia. Thus she developed attachment for these women for their heroic endurance and fortitude as they finally triumphed over the initially unyielding soil. Cather celebrated their success in some of her fiction notably in O Pioneers! and My Ántonia.

Cather has expressed her views on art from time to time in interviews. She compared writer to the musician, writing being to the author what music is to the
violinist. According to her life, in itself is a great task and to live it well or decently is an art. She believed that artist should enjoy liberty. She felt an art to be universal must be true and not an imaginary. She had no faith for the schools which offered the courses in writing. She believed that religion and art spring from the same root therefore they are close kin.

Her life as a writer is so important to her that she writes about the artistic process of writing. Consequently, she develops a philosophy to explain how one gains entry into the kingdom of Art. Cather’s artistic credo is worth noting: “Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named- that one might say is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, which gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself.” Cather was a dedicated artist and deeply moral. Because of this, her criticism of moral values has stretched into realm of aesthetics, just as her sense of beauty.

Cather owed a great deal to the women who brought her up her own ruthless drive towards independence, her ambition, her resilience and adventures, her competence in organizing the shape of her life, her great capacity for work, her impatience with the illness she suffered in later years. It is possible to study Cather’s work from a feministic point of view. Her subject matter and her main characters as well as her own emotional life almost seem to invite such an approach. It is also important to remember that Cather did not consider herself a feminist writer. Often she dismissed women writers as overly sentimental and incapable of writing poetry. Willa Cather is neither antifeminist nor a staunch supporter of feminism. However she has empathy for women. Cather’s
immigrant novels under study have brought her immense popularity as an important writer in American literature. I have examined in the foregoing chapters of Cather's novels *O Pioneers! My Ántonia, The Song of the Lark* and *Lucy Gayheart* in the light of the definition of the immigrant fiction given by William Q. Bohelhover as mentioned in the first chapter. It is a journey of an immigrant protagonist through an alien culture of America with its trials and agonies. All the protagonists in her immigrant novels are women. Cather frequently used women pioneers as representative heroic figures. Informing her creation of these icons was her faith in the cultural values revealed in their struggles, a heritage transmitted to their female descendants.

Cather clusters immigrant women to reflect her experience with Scandinavian and Bohemian immigrants in Nebraska. Willa Cather's first major attempt to bring life and breath to frontier women through literature embodied itself in *O Pioneers!* This novel, published in 1913, follows the life of a family settling on the land of the American West. Cather weaves the tale of the Bergsons, a Swedish family, and details the life and times of the members of this small clan. Her main focus lies on the character Alexandra Bergson, and her surprising role as head of the family. Moreover, Cather expresses both the changing roles of women and the true connection experienced between the frontier women and the land.

Alexandra is given charge of the family when her father, John Bergson, succumbs to his battle with death. Alexandra is the eldest child out of the four children and is chosen to accept the role of head of the family. Alexandra is the child chosen to take control of the Bergson's land. John Bergson, in fact, begins to recognize Alexandra's strengths at a young age. He had come to depend more and more upon her
resourcefulness and good judgment. His boys were willing enough to work. Alexandra’s final promise to her dying father focuses on the responsibility bestowed upon her and the conviction in her own mind. She says, “We will never lose the land” (O Pioneers! 15).

In O Pioneers!, Willa Cather provides a deeply focused look at a frontier woman determined to belong to and work with the land. Certainly, Cather takes a brave step both in the world of reality and the world of literature by providing a female protagonist as the figure in the form of a friend, relative, or husband. Cather also chooses to portray Alexandra as a decidedly stronger character than the majority of the male characters in her novel. In fact, Cather’s main female character turns to a man only when her work is seemingly done and she is prepared to retire to a less vigorous lifestyle. The love, which Alexandra holds for the land and her methods of working with the land, mirror Cather’s personal love for the land of the American West. Her vivid descriptions of the land itself and the labor of those who work the land provide a means for Cather to live vicariously through her character, Alexandra.

Through the character of Alexandra Bergson, Cather makes available to the reader a woman of intense desire to prevail and an intense need to produce fruit from the land. Alexandra is headstrong, intelligent, opinionated, and yet empathetic to those around her. However, she is quite realistic concerning her status as a woman and her more inferior position in society. When asked by her father to take over the Bergson land, Alexandra realizes that life for her will not simply be a series of menial tasks or “traditional” jobs for women of that period. Instead, she will have to defy her brothers who often think her decisions are incorrect and a society that does not consider women on equal footing with men, yet she proceeds with passionate determination.
Towards the middle of the novel, Alexandra's brothers severely question her judgment and the topic of Alexandra's gender comes into play at this time. Lou Bergson, one of Alexandra's brothers, questions her with these words. "This is what comes of letting a woman meddle in business," he said bitterly. "We ought to have taken things in our hands years ago. But she liked to run things, and we humored her. We thought you had good sense, Alexandra. We never thought you'd do anything foolish" (O Pioneers! 98). Further on in the dialogue, her brothers accuse her of not deserving the land due to her gender: "the property of a family really belongs to the men of the family, because they are held responsible, and because they do the work" (98). These hurtful words sting Alexandra's pride and cause her to virtually disown her brothers for their greedy and hasty words. Though the circumstances against Alexandra are great in this novel, she does indeed earn recognition at the end, as said by her friend, Carl Lindstrum, "You belong to the land ... as you have always said. Now more than ever" (179). Alexandra has succeeded on the Nebraska land due to her fervent determination and her ability to work and to appreciate the land.

Taking a closer look at Ántonia Shimerda herself, the internal and physical strength she possessed are abundantly clear as well as her desire to ultimately become a mother of a family and the frontier itself. She comes to the frontier not only as a young girl, but also as an immigrant to the United States. She is expected to take a principal role in the family regardless of her gender of age. In fact, Jim Burden notices this and comments, "Much as I liked Ántonia, I hated a superior tone that she sometimes took with me. She was four years older than I to be sure, and had seen more of the world, but I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protecting manner" (My Ántonia 30).
Specifically when her father dies, Ántonia is hired out to other farms to assist in the farm work. Cather writes, "Mrs. Shimerda then drove the second cultivator, she and Ántonia worked in the fields all day did the chores at night" (85). Ántonia’s life did not consist only of housework and caring for her younger siblings.

When Jim visits Ántonia many years later, her achievements are tangible, in the forms of her children and the amount of land she owns. He barely recognizes her upon first glance, but then he realizes that "She was there, in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not diminished, looking at me ..." (My Ántonia 214). Through Ántonia, Willa Cather exemplifies the ability of women to succeed on the frontier despite huge disadvantages as both a woman and an immigrant. Through her ability to work with the land, Ántonia survives and, in many ways, replicates images of historical American frontier woman.

By looking specifically at the relationship between the characters of Alexandra Bergson and Ántonia Shimerda and the land, further conclusions can be drawn about this essential partnership. Both of these women worked alongside the land, and their stories are somewhat replicated in other frontier women who also had to learn how to deal with the inconsistencies of the prairie land and the often unfortunate circumstances which arose on a daily basis. Ántonia Shimerda also acquires an authoritative role of caring for her family, though not as a direct claim to the headship of the family. Her employment spans farming in the field to housekeeping in the ever-growing Nebraska town life. Ántonia constantly works for her family, pushing herself to great limits to establish a life for her mother, sisters, and brothers. When Jim asks her if she would like to go to school in order to improve her English, she responds, "I ain’t got no time to learn. I can work
like man’s now. My mother can’t say no more how Ambrosh do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm” (My Ántonia 80).

Cather sees Ántonia’s European culture as something richer and superior to the American culture of materiality and holds the two civilizations up against each other. Ántonia represents a “counter culture in the west…. poverty rather than riches, family rather than town society, and spiritual rather than material prosperity.”

Ántonia represents immigrant struggles with a foreign land and tongue, the restraints on women of the time with which Cather was very much concerned, the more general desires for love, family, and companionship, and the great capacity for forbearance that marked the earliest settlers on the frontier. Willa Cather focuses on ‘human condition in the portrayal of Ántonia. As rightly perceived by Blanche H. Gelfant: “Ántonia Shimerda with the universal physical and spiritual drives have permitted humanity to flourish.”

The Song of the Lark is a story of the emergence of the artist; most of its major themes are related to issues of identity. Cather believed that every artist had to “make himself born.” The Song of the Lark may be seen as the struggle to give birth to the artistic itself. The Song of the Lark is the story of a young Swedish immigrant girl who comes of age in a pioneer western town, maturing through several stages of awakening into a woman and later becomes a famous singer. The story is set in Moonstone, Colarado, a small Western town that resembles Cather’s own hometown an exact replica of Red Cloud, Nebraska where Cather spent her youth. Much of Thea’s story concerns
her struggle to bring the artist, within her to life. It would mean hard work, discipline and perseverance and passion.

A major theme of *The Song of the Lark* is the power of the dream as something that must be carefully guarded and protected if it is to be realized. From the opening pages of the novel, Cather presents her heroine, Thea Kronborg. Thea’s childhood friend, Doctor Archie, himself destined to become a tycoon by the novels’ end, recognizes her potential, her “cryptic promise” (9). Thea, discovering her passionate desire to pursue a dream to make something of herself, quickly begins to associate this dream with art. After her music teacher guesses her ambition to sing, Thea senses a secret between them: “Together they had lifted a lid, pulled out a drawer and looked at something. They hid it away and never spoke of what they had seen; but neither of them forgot it” (70).

Protecting this dream requires fierce self-confidence as well as a determination to renounce the compromises demanded by one’s family or community. Indeed, the community may not recognize the power of the dream. Thea is compared with the conventionally pretty and insipid “Lily Fisher,” whom the community of Moonstone adores and looks like pictures of children advertising boxes of soap. Thea’s gift, in contrast, goes unrecognized, but neither will it be compromised or commercialized for mass consumption. As Willa Cather stresses in the preface to her book, Thea is a “talented young girl fighting her way” to the top. It sometimes seems that men appear like magic to “liberate her from commonness.” Thea embodies the quality of “desire and glorious striving of human art!” The experience of childhood positively contributes to the development of her aesthetic sense.
The others against whom Thea defines herself as a young girl and ambitious artist are the failed artists of her hometown. For example, her German music teacher, Herr Wunsch, is a passionate but dissolute, washed up musician who drowns his awareness of his own failure in alcohol. Wunsch is both excited and ashamed when he recognizes Thea’s potential, since it drives home to him an awareness of his own bad faith and his inability to realize his artistic dream. Similarly, there is a Spanish Johnny, who is carried away by the intoxication of performance and loses himself in drunken escapades. Cather writes that his “talents were his undoing” (38). The capacity for a powerful emotional response to art is valued regardless of the cost of this ecstasy. These failed dreamers are Thea’s early heroes who form an alternative set of values of Moonstone’s dull conformity. But Thea is different. What they have lost, and what Thea stands to gain, is the emergence of an artistic identity that offers her the expectation of wholeness.

Thea Kronborg whose first name means “gift of God” and surname means “crown fortress” is presented as a woman both blessed and isolated by her divine gift. She is completely obsessed with the intellectual and physical rewards of her craft. She grieves at the conflict between personal and professional needs. Cather always maintained that the great artist must be what people call ‘selfish’; she must always keep others from cluttering up the path on which she drives herself forward. Thea like Alexandra Bergson, before her and Antonia Shimerda later is that best sort of second generation American who leaves or retains some of the intellectual and artistic tradition of Europe, without losing the American freshness and without falling into the common trap of a commercial and limited ‘practicality’. These are all success stories of sorts and all reflect a very American groping toward a secure identity.
In writing Lucy Gayheart Cather returned imaginatively to the Nebraska home she had lost in her life and to memories of a youth now far behind her. The central character is based upon two girls she had met while leaving there. Sadie Becker in Red Cloud was known for her skating, for her vivacious manner and her romance with a local boy. The second model Miss Gayhardt was from a later period whom she met in a dance at a small town, who was a teacher in a remote village. Cather wrote this novel as she was nearing the end of her long career. The model presents several hackneyed versions of Lucy’s love affair; involves her in a variety of eternal triangles, and places her in two obviously formulaic plots. In one, Lucy finds and loses a lover, and in the other, the epilogue’s sub plot, she is lost and miraculously recovered. The characters’ versions of these plots include Harry’s self-serving story of a young girl’s infatuation, Fairy Blair’s “story” of her suicide, Pauline’s of her jilting, and the townspeople’s whispers of her desertion by the man who had “got her in trouble.”

In some aspects this novel is the reminiscent of The Song of the Lark. Like Thea the protagonist of Lucy Gayheart is a small town girl who loves to study music but while Thea’s desire for artistic creation itself, Lucy finds the embodiment of her desire in the singer Clement Sebastian. There are several suggestions that Lucy possesses at least the vestiges of the artist self, and in fact, Lucy and Thea share many of the same characteristics with regard to artistic sensitivity. Both possess the “quivering nerve” and inner “vibrating” and a degree of expressiveness as powerful at moments as a machine.

It is a sort of awakening novel. Unlike Chopin’s novel, in which the heroine awakens to a sexual passion that dramatizes the insufficiency of her life, Cather’s novel begins by teaching her heroine a lesson about what “the passion of love” can and cannot
fulfill in a life. Only when Lucy Gayheart finally understands and accepts what the narrative argues is the insufficiency of love does she “awaken”- into death.\(^7\) Both of these schemes involve the protagonists learning a lesson of sorts. The lesson Lucy learns is one about the proper expectations for and limits of her own passion. She never once conceives the desire to be an artist, however aspires throughout the novel to be nothing more than Clement’s apprentice, or his accompanist and spiritually as devotee to what art offers through him. Her tragedy is that she has the desire, but not the will or talent for an artistic career. Cather in *Lucy Gayheart* has written a novel about a limited and potentially tragic heroine who awakens to, but does not master, “the art of living.”

Willa Cather’s concept of the woman artist was affected in another way by the supposedly anomalous position of the woman artist: while she believed that a woman had to forego the typical life of women if she did not want her art to suffer, Cather presents us with an image of the relationship between the woman artist and her genius that is fundamentally “feminine” and so merges the woman and the artist on another plane.\(^8\) I agree with J. Susan Rosowski that Lucy Gayheart fits Cather’s early descriptions of women distinguished by an ability to love rather than by drive and ambition, for she is “too kind” to live the harsh life of an artist.\(^9\)

Cather peopled her fiction with individuals and immigrant groups who had not been written about before. Her characters are individualized, intriguing and true-to-life. Sensitive to the mannerism and phrases of the people who inhabited her spaces, Cather brought individual and American regions to life through her loving portrayal of it. She was captivated by the customs and languages of the diverse immigrant population of Webster county. She felt a particular kinship with the older immigrant women and spent
countless hours visiting them and listening to their stories. They are simple primeval, with a strain of hardness and heroism. This exposure to Old World culture figures heavily within Cather’s writing and choice of characters. Cather once remarked that the city robbed man of his roots, heritage and continuity of feeling with the earth and mankind. The land of the Nebraskan country symbolized permanence, freedom of spirit, timelessness and a sense of endurance. She viewed earth and nature as the personal, primeval force that enriched and sustained life and creativity. The pioneers passed on their old customs, culture and ways of life that enriched the life and the new way of life. The frontier gave the immigrants and pioneers creative individualism, a free will and an opportunity to develop the pioneer spirit.

Cather appreciates women who choose to serve their husband and children and also as a woman who follows her career. She believes that even after marriages “Nightingales seldom sing.” Women must choose love or music. Cather presents increasingly restrictive social and economic circumstances surrounding her female characters at the same time giving them increasingly personal and specific strength to defy apparent restrictions placed upon them. Cather created strong female characters with the courage and vision to face all obstacles in their difficult lives.

Struggling with the growing awareness of her sexual nature and wishing desperately to be accepted by the male literary establishment Cather denigrated women artist in her writing. All the immigrant women characters in the novels O Pioneers! My Ántonia, The Song of the Lark and Lucy Gayheart exhibit the following qualities: Alexandra is an embodiment of dedication, vitality, and has the power to love the land. Pioneer values, such as strength, courage, hard work, self-reliance, and the refusal to
submit to adversity as exemplified by Ántonia, discipline, almost boundless satisfaction, genuineness determination as shown by Thea; while in depicting Lucy Gayheart her classic symptoms of powerlessness, passivity, victimization, subordinance and psychic annihilation are portrayed. We get the affirmative portraits of women in Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg and Ántonia Shimerda. Cather greatly admired the pioneers who struggled to cope with the wilderness and to make a better life for themselves and their families. These pioneers were family oriented and wanted nothing but the best possible for their families. Cather focuses on depicting ethnic values as discussed above of the different cultures of the various immigrants who came to Nebraska in the late nineteenth century America.

Cather’s favorite theme persists through out: the conflict of the superior individual with an unworthy society with the lure of greed and materialism. Her view is that the pioneers in general were folk largely endowed with creative power and imagination. These pioneers worked a true labour of love. Cather is most often remembered as a chronicle of the pioneer American West much like the women, artist and immigrants she depicted in her fiction. Critics note that the themes of her work are intertwined with the universal story of the rise of civilization in history, the dramas of the immigrants in a New World, and views of personal involvement with art. Cather’s fiction is characterized by a strong sense of place, the subtle presentation of human relationships. When the country was struggling to assimilate waves of foreign newcomers, the public of 1918 welcomed Cather’s celebration of a Bohemian immigrant girl. Ántonia’s struggle condensed the nation’s predicament, and her success in overcoming poverty and exile expressed America’s hope for the future.10
The depiction of these immigrant women reveals that Willa Cather had much admiration for Europe and its culture. Europe, stood for in Willa Cather's system of values, Europe is meant to symbolize a civilized society, one in which intelligence is appreciated to the extent that a man can make a career for himself as contrasted with the back breaking manual labor necessary to make a career on the Divide. It is a society which provides outlets for the satisfaction of cultural needs such as the male chorus to which John Bergson belonged, and it encourages the amenities and rituals of civilized life, such as the dress suits which the sinners have to wear when giving a performance. Life in Europe is seen as pleasant as and far more stimulating than in the Middle West; it is more varied and contains pleasures which Nebraska never dreamed of. In brief, the image of Europe represents civilized sensibility, a heightened enjoyment of life, and a response to art, all three of which Willa Cather sees as painfully lacking on the Divide.

In spite of all its manifold virtues, however, Europe for Willa Cather lacked one thing which frontier Nebraska had and that one thing was of the highest importance to her. She supposed that in Nebraska no restrictions were placed in the development of superior people; that America was par excellence the land of the creative will. On the frontier, she believed, there was freedom to develop as one pleased; to follow one's career or bent without hindrance from anybody. This accounts for her all-important choice of the immigrant as her protagonist in the prairie novels, rather than a pioneer of Native American stock. Cather regarded the immigrant as having at his best, all the civilized sensibility of the European together with the freedom of action of the American. He is the cream of two continents and combines the best features of both Old World and New. Cather approached her characters with deep respect for what they had endured and
accomplished. Having great insight into women psyche Cather expressed what she saw in these immigrants and that she presumably wanted the rest of the nation to value, if not to imitate.

Critics like Joseph R. Urgo has dismissed Willa Cather’s work as regional writer and Ann M. Begley excluded her from the mainstream of American fiction. I don’t agree with these views. Her works possess much more than local colour. These pioneers stood for spiritual and moral values maintaining their personal integrity within an unworthy society. The moral thrust of Willa Cather’s art, her concern with pioneers and artists as symbolic figures represents the unending human quest for beauty and truth and places her among the number of the true spiritual pioneers of all ages whose life or works other men shall continue to find inspiration. I consider Willa Cather rose above women of her times in thought and creativity and has taken herself out of the rank of regional writers and given us something we can fairly class with the modern literary art.

CHAPTER REFERENCES


7 Deborah Carlin, Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading (The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992) 120.


