CHAPTER II

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Willa Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), was not her representative one. It marked the climax of her attempt to emulate Henry James and she was dissatisfied with it, as is evident from her note to Louise Pound asking him not to bother to read it but wait for "The Bohemian Girl." Even in 1908 she was aware that the western material was the right material for her but she did not use it in fiction because at the moment the magazine life had absorbed her completely. She did not leave the McClures' Magazine immediately because of several reasons – McClures' hold on her, the fascination of life in New York and her own top position on the magazine staff, the result of a long struggle. During the last years with the magazine she remained a split personality torn between the claims of literature and journalism. She did leave the magazine, though, two to three months after finishing the novel. She turned her back to her journalistic career and stepped into literature.

In her second novel *O Pioneers!* (1913) she wrote about her Nebraska background, following the advice of Sarah Orne Jewett:

"You must find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that to the world."¹

Willa Cather's break with the east occurred at an appropriate moment in the history of American letters. In 1913 John Macy expressed the need of celebration of man's
relation with land and explained that "no American poet had sung of his neighborhood with rapture, as if it were all the world to him." Van Wyck Brooks felt that the lack of harmony between man and earth in American life had led to premature aging of America. He pleaded for a relation with the soil. According to Boynton the finest art was rooted in the soil.

By 1882 the entire trans-Mississippi region had been completely settled by homesteaders and it was an idyllic setting for a happy innocent life, in close conformity with nature. 1887 brought blizzards and land boom which drove thousands of people out. The years were of triumph for settlers but the old magic was gone. Cather saw the period 1882-1887 as the most idyllic one. The Mississippi Valley had become the granary of the world, because, the pioneers had accepted the challenge of the wild frontier. The westward expansion in the nineteenth Century America had been seen as a working out of the romantic aspiration towards a better life.

During 1893-97 America faced the worst agricultural depression. The period coincided with Cather's tenth to sixteenth year, the period she considered most significant. The depression had been caused by drought, overmortgaging of farms and fall in the prices of wheat and cattle in the world market. The reaction was the Populist Movement which saw the social struggle as a conflict between the forces of good and evil and history as a conspiracy.
against the agrarian virtue. It "looked backward with longing to the lost agrarian Eden, to the republican America of the early days of the nineteenth century."\(^6\) Cather's family had also suffered during this period because her father's business was involved in farming activities and, as E.K. Brown notes, it was in "Desperate straits."\(^7\) While the political echoes of the Populist Movement are present in Cather's short stories "The Best Years" and "Two Friends" its emotional appeal influenced her prairie novels. Its implicit nostalgia, according to Randall, was responsible for the "petulant negativism"\(^6\) of her later fiction.

The image of the American figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities poised at the start of a new history, dating from the close of the war of 1912 was present in the works of philosophers and journalists in pre-civil war America like Emerson, Thoreau, Holmes, Lowell and Elder Henry James and Cather belonged to that tradition. As Henry Steele Commager puts it:

"She subscribed to that romantic tradition, so strong in American Literature and art, that saw nature splendid in all its manifestations and man virtuous only when he accommodated himself to nature - the tradition that stretched, politically, from Jefferson to Bryan, that found literary expression in so many writers from Cooper to Solvaag, that was reflected in the work of naturalists
like Burroughs and Muir and in landscape painters from the Hudson River School to Winslow Homer and Grant Wood."

Novelists from Henry James to Howells were concerned with the Adamic Myth. Willa Cather treated it to the fullest in O Pioneers! The myth of Adam in America was of an individual emancipated from history, free from ancestry, family and race, standing alone, inspired by his soul, ready to face his own unique and inherent resources. His sufferings, errors and experiments helped him attain self-knowledge and self-discovery. All along he was inspired by certain ideals and remained a dreamer, interested in the idea of things rather than in their material aspects. This aspect of being a dreamer continued even when he became materially successful because of his peculiar attitude towards things.

The Adamic Myth exalted the tiller of the soil. In this connection Richard Hofstadter may bear quoting at length:

"The yeoman, who owned a small farm and worked it with the aid of his family, was the incarnation of the simple, honest, independent, healthy, happy, human being. Because he lived in close communion with beneficent nature, his life was believed to have a wholesomeness and integrity impossible for the degraded populations of cities. His well-being was not merely physical, it
was moral; it was not merely personal, it was the
central source of civic virtue; it was not merely secular
but religious, for God had made the land and called man
to cultivate it."\(^{10}\)

The struggle with land was taken as a blessing as it
provided an opportunity to test the tiller's strength, courage
and determination. The difficulties faced by them were a
repetition of the story of the difficulties faced by the founders
of a civilization everywhere. Adversity was essential to test
their strength. Cather turned to the stoics who insisted upon
obedience to a superior will and believed in the superiority
of destiny. At the same time they also believed that though
destiny determined the overall pattern of a person's life, an
individual had it within his power to shape a single day, the
single event. The stoics believed in submission to the demiurage
that controls the individual fate that was responsible for success,
while failure was the result of rebellion against that same spirit.\(^{11}\)

Seneca declared, "No man seems to me more unhappy than
one who has never met with adversity; for such a man has never
had an opportunity to test himself. Though all things have
flowed to him according to his prayer, though even before his
prayer, nevertheless Gods have passed an adverse judgement upon
him. He was deemed unworthy ever to gain victory over Fortune."\(^{12}\)

Elizabeth Monroe once remarked that Cather's theme
included "a new settlement of the frontier by Swedes, Norwegians,
Poles, Slavs, Bohemians, and the French, the contrast between the civilizations involved in this settlement, the sweep of American religious history and the triumph of great personalities over the hardships of American life.\textsuperscript{13}

These were her themes but she was at her best while writing about the pioneer people. Carl Eric Bachhofer Roberts said that she was at her best while dealing with immigrants in Nebraska and brought out the beauty and mystery of her country and made in her work the melting pot of nationalities real.\textsuperscript{14} Alexander Porter-field also averred that her theme was the fusion of nationalities in America in a pattern and philosophy of American life related to the beginnings of a civilization.\textsuperscript{15}

Cather's conception of the frontier was mystical. Through Alexandra (\textit{O Pioneers!}), Antonia (\textit{My Antonia}), and Thea Kronborg (\textit{The Song of the Lark}) she embodied the mystical essence of the heroic age, which in her day was a thing of only recent past.

Her emphasis on heroism and piety of her protagonists is justified because these qualities did play their part in the conquest of the frontier. Her pioneers have been compared with the ancient wandering tribes of Israel going into wilderness, searching for an ideal and a sanctuary from a troubled existence and often finding a sanctuary in the wilderness. Carl Van Doren has said that "In Cather's quarter of the country there were still heroes during the days she has written about, still pioneers.... Her Americans,... are fresh from Europe, locked in a mortal conflict.
with nature. If now and then the older among them grow faint at remembering Bohemia or France or Scandinavia, this is not the predominant mood of their communities. They ride powerfully forward on a wave of confident energy, as if human life had more dawns than sunsets in it. For the most part her pioneers are unreflective creatures, driven by some inner force which they do not comprehend: they are, that is perhaps no more to say, primitive and epic in their dispositions.\(^{16}\) H. L. Mencken also noted that Willa Cather "discovers human beings embattled against fate and the Gods, and into her picture of their dull struggle she gets a spirit that is genuinely heroic, and a pathos that is genuinely moving."\(^{17}\)

The struggle with land was an unequal one. The European immigrants had found it savage and cruel but, ultimately, they made it a refuge and founded a new civilization. They had brought with them European graces, traditions, riches of mind and spirit to a remote country and, therefore, the new civilization they founded was bound to have something precious right from the beginning. Cather believed that there were only two or three human stories that went on repeating themselves.\(^{18}\) As a writer she was a pioneer in writing about the land and the people of Nebraska— the pioneers. She was primarily concerned with the supremacy of moral and spiritual over material value, "the ever recurrent but inexhaustible theme of gaining the whole world and losing one's soul,"\(^{19}\) and believed that ideals were the real source of power among men. She could see the real meaning
of America from the vantage point of the frontier. It "simplified, clarified and dramatized universal moral problems" and that is why she returned to it repeatedly for inspiration. Like the heroine of *O Pioneers!* she felt secure on reflecting upon the great operations of nature and the law that lay behind them. It stood for endurance, serenity and strength beside wide spaces and beauty.

In "On the Divide" she wrote, "the soul becomes weary of the conventions that are not of it, and with a single stroke reaches out and takes by force what it cannot win by cunning." She had always asserted her individuality and the energy, vitality, dynamism of the pioneers fascinated her and provided the symbols that she could accept. In "The Bohemian Girl" she was convinced that the second generation of pioneers was unworthy but that did not prevent her from celebrating the first generation in *O Pioneers!* after her visit to the South West which revitalized her. By this time she had enough experience of short story and journalistic writing which helped her in writing her first representative novel, which was dedicated to Miss Jewett, who wrote of the "shadows of memorable events, about the heroic cast to New England, elegies upon the epigones."

*O Pioneers!* was the result of bringing together her two stories "The White Mulberry Tree" and "Alexandra". In a presentation copy to Carrie Sherwood she wrote:

"This was the first time I walked off on my own..."
feet - everything before was half real and half an imitation of writers whom I admired. In this one I hit the home pasture and found that I was Yance Sargeson and not Henry James.23

Yance was a prosperous Norwegian immigrant farmer of Webster County who refused to give up old ways or to be impressed with his own success.

The title of O Pioneers! was taken from Whitman's "Song of Myself". Elizabeth Shapley Sargeant has remarked that with O Pioneers! Cather was "suddenly in control of inner creative forces which had tended to swamp her and make her dismal so long as she could not use them."24 Cather said that she wrote about some Scandinavians and Bohemians who had been her neighbours and whose conversation about the hard life of the pioneers had provided the intense intellectual excitement to her when she was eight or nine years of age. Those conversations were evocative and for them she developed an intense empathy. These fed her mind and after the necessary time-gap she returned to this material in her first representative novel. "...there was no arranging or "inventing"; everything was spontaneous and took its own place, right or wrong."25 She had seen the idyllic life in Nebraska's recent past and she knew she was doing something new in not writing about clever people in drawing rooms in Boston and New York but about farmers in the fields, pastures and digyards set in Nebraska. Willa Cather referred to a critic's comment that he did not care a damn about "what happens in
Nebraska no matter who wrote about it.\textsuperscript{26} The Swedes up to that
time were used only for humour sketches about their physical
strength and their inability to pronounce the letter 'J'.
The novel of the soil had not yet been fashionable. Therefore,
it was a pioneering effort by her to glorify the Swedes in the
Nebraska setting.

James Miller Jr. has said that "Nebraska was not her choice
but her fate.\textsuperscript{27} Her genius lay in her coming to "recognize and
understand" her experience in the West and to mine it for her
stories and novels.\textsuperscript{27} Dayton Kohler said that Cather wrote
about the subjects that teased her mind and that she "had little
to invent and much to record in \textit{O Pioneers!}\textsuperscript{28} In fact she was
following Sarah Orne Jewett's advice to recapture the past by
yielding to life. She used her training in the east as a
writer in writing about an unexplored area of experience in
the west.

The \textit{European immigrants} \textit{Willa Cather} celebrated as standing
for "old and deep and superior kinds of civilization\textsuperscript{29} were
generally thought to be of a low sort, belonging to the category
of servants, while the new ones represented the cultured people.
Thus she was doing something very bold. What was a new country
to these European immigrants was in fact geologically an old
land and posed a challenge to them. It had its own identity
and wanted to preserve it. It was indifferent to man and was
at times even hostile, even heroic characters occasionally felt
its indifference to be feared and terrible. They
realized that the physical difficulties could be overcome
by giants alone and men could hardly make a mark there.
After their long journey from home country the indifference
of the new land made them lose courage. There are many
references to this hardness of soil in *O Pioneers*,
*My Antonia*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *Death Comes for the
Archibalds*.

In *O Pioneers*, John Bergson failed to subdue land
even in eleven long years. Its genius looked unfriendly
and behaved like a wild horse difficult to break. It wanted
to preserve its fierce strength and savage kind of beauty and
resisted the encroaching ploughshares. The human settlement
looked insignificant against the backdrop of wild nature.
Men were too weak to make any mark there. John Bergson
lacked the initial qualifications to confer order on this wild
landscape. First, he was lacking in strength of will, and
second, he had come not on his own initiative but on the
persuasion of his son hoping to regain the financial
losses incurred by his own father in his home country, (very
much in the manner of Captain Forrester in *A Lost Lady*)
in trying to save small depositors' money in a bank crash.
John Bergson, however, passed on his old world belief,
that land was desirable in itself, to his daughter, Alexandra,
who ultimately did complete his work, through merging her
identity with land.

In *My Antonia*, Jim's initial response to the new land,
as already noted, expressed Willa Cather's own response to Nebraska, when she arrived there as a child of nine, from Virginia. Jim felt helpless and alienated, cut-off from his background. It looked the very end of the world to him prompting the thought that "what would be would be," 33.

Nothing could be done to improve matters there. He felt that it was too far off a place from his homeland for the spirits of his parents to reach him. The wild land looked the material out of which countries were made. He felt blotted out in the face of the hostile landscape and did not say his prayers on the night of his arrival. Mr. Shimerada committed suicide out of homesickness during the winter but passed on his mantle to Jim's shoulders. This is parallel to the death of John Borgson through heartbreak in *O Pioneers!* The former lacked imagination while the latter lacked will power.

In *The Song of the Lark*, they realized that the geological world was indifferent to man and could go on regardless of their activities and racial differences. She expressed a feeling which we sense in *My Antonia* that the rewards for the hard labour put in by early settlers on the new land were too little or that, to begin with, it was not friendly to man. They felt something malignant in the spirit of the canon that awakened
like an old man suffering from rheum and stiffness of joints.

In the Prologue to Death Comes for the Archbishop, the physical hardships to be the destiny of the new bishop on the new land are enumerated—thirst, hunger, fissures ten to a thousand feet deep in the earth. The new land would drink up the youth and strength of the new bishop and perhaps call for martyrdom necessary for the revival of the faith planted by Spanish friars. "The hard heart of the country was calculated to try the strength of giants."

Bishop Latour on a naked rock in the desert felt some thing reptilian and felt that men were made cruel there by a cruel life. He concluded that the early missionaries had endured physical hardships to a degree that could not be envisioned by even St. Paul. He longed for the aesthetic joys of Europe and realized that life in the New Land had remained static during the centuries which had seen cultural growth in Europe.

Cather shared the awareness of the geological world with the literary naturalists like Jack London and Norris but she did not, unlike London, revert to brutes. In contrast to the biological determinism of the naturalists she believed in the freedom of the human spirit which was sometimes limited by tragic facts of human nature.
Willa Cather humanized nature because she was interested in human passions. She believed that life "rushed from within, not without." She emphasized the human setting. Agreeing with Edward Bloom and Lillian Bloom's term 'Humanism', Dond Walker points out that in her fiction of the west the wild land is never seen as pure nature. It is never used to represent that larger world or process into which man can be absorbed. The absolute nature of both, romantic naturalism of Emerson, and Scientific naturalism of Norris is absent in her.

The human significance in her landscape has been underscored by Edith Lewis who said that she saw the country not as pure landscape, but filled with a human significance "lightened or darkened by the play of human feeling." The wild frontier, is approached by Cather's protagonists with a feeling of reverence. Carl in *Pioneers!* while recalling the early days when the frontier was still untamed, confessed that he had always been haunted by its mysterious beauty. That in *The Song of the Lark* felt that in the Nebraska plains there was a new song in the air "which had never been sung in the world before." It was "unsullied like a gift handed down from the heroic ages," as felt by Neil in *A Lost Lady*, on a May morning. There is some mystery about this new song in the air which cannot be expressed through words. It is "Like the light of the desert at noon or the smell of an agapant.
after rain, intangible but powerful." Latour, in *Death Comes for the Archibishop*, responded to the fragrance of hot sun and sagebrush and sweet clover in the morning breeze and felt younger.

The beauty of the novels of Willa Cather is enhanced by the sensuous imagery employed in descriptions of nature. For example, "Out of the saffron East, a thin, yellow, wine-like sunshine began to gild the fragrant meadows and the glistening tops of the grove" makes Nial in *A Lost Lady* feel that this morning beauty could not be spoiled by man. The description of the morning also serves as an example of Cather's capacity to recreate her impressions of nature through sensuous imagery. She affirmed the simple and natural life and believed in the purity and innate goodness of the primitives. She considered nature as the first teacher capable of rejuvenating man. The sensuous enjoyment of nature borders on religious experience. For example, Jim in *My Antonia* compares the prairie with "the Bush that burned with fire." The religious association is enhanced with the reference to Jim's grandfather, whose "meditative eye" could foresee that one day the prairie would become "the world's cornfields." The light of the setting sun seems to announce: "This is reality... This is the Truth," which indicates Cather's view that there is an element of sacredness in nature. 'Reality' and 'Truth' are linked with the theme of quest. The prairie was the promised
land and Jim said that "the sunflower bordered roads always seemed to me roads to freedom." 43

Writing about what he termed as Willa Cather's failure in *O Pioneers!* J.C. Lee said that she did not give a realistic picture of the bleak life on the frontier:

"I suggest that in an effort to please the McCulongs and Mr. Clure and Mrs. Fields and Miss Jewett, she chose the rosy tints of romanticism, which inhibit all her later writings about the West. She chose to write an idyll or a pastorale. Beautiful as it may be, it hasn't the strength or the vigor or the reality of the history itself. She has polished and tamed a land and its people out of all recognition. She did this, she had to do this in self-defense; who cared after all, about Nebraska? She had come, by 1913, to write from the point of view of the East, substituting artifice for truth." 44

This is too harsh a judgement. It is true that in *O Pioneers!* Willa Cather expressed her nostalgia for the first time, and it persisted. As James Woodress has pointed out, "The pioneer times are always a frame of reference and provide the contrast that becomes in her fiction a key structural device." 45

Granville Hicks said that in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* Willa Cather gave a credible picture of the bleak life on the frontier, although she laid greater emphasis on the heroism and piety of the pioneers. These qualities did, of course, play their
part in the conquest of the frontier. The nostalgic, romantic elements in these early novels "were at least partly justified by the nature of her themes, and they could be introduced without the sacrifice of honesty." 46 James E. Miller, Jr. has also said that, "By assuming the role of narrator in the novel, Willa Cather found herself forced to invest her feelings directly in the prairies and farms, in the struggling men and women, in the sunsets and seasons, as, for example, in the conclusion of the novel, where there is a felt need for a strong affirmation that should come surging up from the novelistic material itself." 47

It is true that Cather looked backward because only in the past she could find symbols of her ideals and the eternal verities with which she was concerned. All artistic creation is the subjective expression of a universal experience. She did not ignore the harsh realities on the frontier but attached greater importance to the heroism of the pioneers which has been misunderstood. She found the qualities of bravery, magnanimity, persistence, moral realism and the capacity to survive in an antagonistic world among the pioneers. She felt that the eternal quest after ideals expressed itself in different forms at different periods of history. All her pioneers - peasants, railroadbuilders, artists, scholars, priests and saints - have a creative attitude towards existence and have a fine and generous way of doing things. Their ideal or quest itself constitutes an act of creation. The relation of man as an idealist with land is a fundamental one.
is the first embodiment of the eternal quest. It is given a thorough treatment in _O Pioneers!_ and _My Antonia_. The heroines of these novels are guided by an inner vision which reduces the significance of external circumstances.

The immigrants from various European countries found a common cause on the frontier, as it provided them the freedom to create a world after their own heart. They lacked it in Europe. Cather felt that the civilizing influence had to come from Europe and by making her prairie heroines daughters of Continental Europeans she also expressed her disapproval of her own Anglo-Saxon stock, as already pointed out. They are divisible into the heroic and the unheroic, sometimes found within the same family. For example Lou and Oscar, the unheroic brothers of Alexandra in _O Pioneers!_. Land, in _O Pioneers!_ is the conclusive quest, and Alexandra is the embodiment of the essence of the pioneer spirit, marked by primitive goodness, sympathy, fatalistic acquiescence and submissive devotion to land, with something of a religious fervour.

Land has its own personality, wild and threatening. On one hand it offers protection and spiritual sanctuary to man and on the other, it makes them suffer. This divine super-sensible force compels recognition and obedience by the pioneers who are dreamers and act on intuition. Helped by the order and harmony they saw in nature the pioneers recognized it and bowed before
it, as if it had a human countenance. Sometimes they were
tender and sometimes heroic in action toward land. Thus Cather
found land in human form capable of causing a human response.
The spirit of the pioneer fertilized the land, which in turn
provided him his identity. Only when approached in this way,
the way of understanding and love, it responded and passed on
to human beings some of its vitality which helped in winning it.
Only through such a submission man could derive joy and survive,
achieving material and spiritual fulfilment. This led to
civilization of land. The rigours of seasons and all other
natural calamities were the tests through which human beings
proved their worth. It was not a taming of land but rather
its humanistic acceptance leading to a working out of a relation-
ship, a co-ordination and conferring of order. As a result, the
farms that were established had a larger human design. It was
a fragile relationship because the arrival of the pioneer marked
the end of the unsettled world of nature, causing a decline.
Yet what remained had a more human dimension. Cather had begun
by writing tales of rejection and denial and this insistence upon
an essentially human approach to land marked a definite progress
in her thinking. She decided that love was the basic force behind
civilization.

The first part of *Pioneers!* describes the creative and
destructive aspects of land and gives a credible picture of the
hardships of early settlers. Cather insists that love directed
towards land is beneficial. In the second part she points out that human relationships are the tragic necessity of life. Love directed towards fellow human beings brings ruin. Nature does not provide guidance to men in their choice. Against the backdrop of such an indifferent nature the human drama is laid. Men are portrayed on a reduced scale. Land serves as a substitute for human relationship. Human relationships do not have a satisfactory ending; and that sometimes wrecks all the labour. Alexandra works hard on land, establishes a garden, hoping that someday her brother Emil would have the right sort of advantages but Emil's illicit love affair with Shabata, a married woman, shatters the dreams of Alexandra, when Frank, in a frenzied moment shoots at his wife and her lover, soon after their love is consummated. Death intervenes to end the happiness of Amidee's family. There is no rational explanation for his death. He is a friend of Emil, and is happily married. Working on his farm, he develops acute pain and dies of appendicitis. Emotion of love directed towards fellow human beings does not lead to happiness.

Cathar insists that it should be directed towards land. She felt that breaking of the soil was the only fruitful activity accomplished by her generation. Every other activity led to failure. However, the shooting incident looks melodramatic and appears, finally, to remain emotionally unintegrated into the rich texture of feeling in the novel, falling into no natural relationship to the thematic overtones and undertones of the work, according to John E. Miller,
Jr, who finds it similar to Alexander's death by drowning in Alexander's Bridge caused by the fall of the flawed bridge constructed by him - the flaw being parallel to his own flawed character.

Cather shies away from accepting sex as leading to emotional fulfilment. Alexandra and Antonia become less feminine and do not fascinate as objects of desire, while they work on the fields. Alexandra had never been in love. Having grown up in serious times she was a practical person and looked upon men as work-fellows. Also, she was a fatalist believing that the heart lived only when its strings screamed to the touch of pain. Antonia also grew coarse as she used land as the medium to express her heroic energy. Crazy Ivar's constant vigilance is required to prevent men from defiling nature. This cannot be achieved through flight into wilderness, as is evident from the fact that Ivar had to be the messenger of sin and death of Emil and Mary Shabata in O Pioneers! Thus even in her first novel of affirmation a note of defeat had been struck.

Willa Cather was inspired to write My Antonia after a visit to Annie Pavelka, who had been kind to her when she was a mere child. Cather remembered her as one of the truest artists she had ever seen, marked by a keen and sensitive enjoyment, love of people and willingness to take pains. Cather saw her surrounded by her children and the sight inspired her to write the novel. Her husband was the model for "Neighbours Kosicky." Cather wanted the
novel to be like a Sicilian jar with flowers placed in the
centre of the table, which one may examine from all sides." It embodied all her feelings about the immigrants on the frontier
and the synthesis of vitality and discipline of civilization.
She celebrated the settled agricultural community in this novel
while in O Pioneers! she had celebrated the wilderness. Antonia
was not a visionary like Alexandra. She became, at the end,
"a mine of life, like the founders of early races" and found
fruition in maternity despite the betrayal by her lover leading
to unmarried motherhood.

The 1926 preface of the novel shows Jim already at work at
a manuscript about Antonia. He tells about it to the author, who
is a fellow traveller while the two are in a reminiscent mood
recounting their shared adventure of childhood, symbolized by
Antonia. Cather, thus reacquaints herself with Antonia through
the consciousness of Jim who becomes her vehicle for a quest for
meaning and value. Antonia is Jim's symbol for the meaning of a
valued and treasured memory.

Jim's relevance as narrator has puzzled several critics.
David Daiches says that the story does not bear out the suggestion
that it is about the relationship of Jim and Antonia. The three
strands—the history of Jim, the history of Antonia, and the scenes
of Nebraska life separate gradually as the novel proceeds.
E.K. Brown feels that Cather made a mistake in trying to make Jim
a lover as well as a detached observer of the world.
resulted in an emptiness at the very centre of their relation. According to Randall Jim and Antonia, the former looking to the past and the latter towards future, together constitute a Janus-faced personality.

My Antonia is not merely a regional novel. Cather seems to be suggesting that the individual is fettered by society, but whatever changes may be effected the human situation can not change. She contrasts the facts of life with the ideal, impossible of achievement, Jim dreams of it. He is able to do so because of having known Antonia. Jim realizes that the days of his youth have been the happiest of his life, and those days have been the "quickest to flee." He becomes reconciled to the present because of the enduring value of the past. He comes to possess that past anew because of the promise and vitality of the present evidenced by the sight of Antonia, battered but fulfilled. Antonia is Jim's personal symbol of the value of human experience. The novel is Jim's drama of memory of Antonia.

The first book of the novel introduces Jim coming from Virginia having lost his parents, within a year, to join his grandparents. Shimerdas from Czechoslovakia, also arrive by the same train. Both come from higher levels of culture to the wild prairie. Cather is autobiographical in recording Jim's initial response to Nebraska. He feels blotted out and has no hope of seeing human landmarks on the wild prairie. He resigns himself to the situation and surrenders to a fate which gives him peace,
This results in two years being the happiest of his life, never to be repeated, never to be forgotten. He achieves this through being absorbed into "something complete and great."58

Mr. Shimerda is a weaver by trade with experience of work on tapestries and upholstery material. He feels irrelevant in the new country. His fiddle and gun are the reminders of the culture he has left behind. He suffers from nostalgia and during winter commits suicide.

The Shimerdas have to contend with the forces of nature. It is a terrible struggle for mere existence. They live in a kind of cave and are helped by the Burdens in spite of all their rough behaviour. There are tensions among immigrants from different countries and they are frowned upon by the old Americans. Besides there are religious tensions.

The chapter following Mr. Shimerda's suicide describes the feel of spring, symbolising reawakening of the prairie. During the summer the hard struggle with the soil is described. It is like the struggle of the pre-historic man in the dawn of time. Antonia works with men and loses some of her feminine charm. The immigrants discover their strength and aim at creating a new world after their heart although in the process they lose their refinement.

The next stage of civilization is shown in Book II. The country girls work as 'Hired Girls' in black Hawk. They are superior to the conformists of the town. Jim studies hard to
prepare for college and when Antonia hears his commencement speech she is reminded of her father. This suggests the arrival of culture on the frontier, for which Mr. Shimerda had pined.

Jim's intellectual and emotional growth is stimulated under the influence of Gaston Claric, who teaches him Latin at the University of Lincoln. Claric symbolizes the world of ideas. Jim discovers the world of music, theatre and the relationship between the poetry of Virgil and girls like Lana. Thus he can relate literature or art with life and, therefore, he does not have to face the frustrations of Miel in *A Lost Lady*. The suggestion is of the rediscovery of the world of culture by the children of pioneers, who had lost it while engaged in their struggle with land. From there Jim goes to Harvard. At each shift there is a rise in the level of culture. Yet Jim remains aware of the persistence of the past. A casual visit to Bohemia and the native village of Mr. Shimerda marks the symbolic return to the point of origin. This completes the cycle of cultural movement in the novel. It confirms Turner's view that "there was reached a recurrence of the process of evolution in each Western area in the process of expansion." 59 When as a successful but weary person Jim revisits the scenes of his childhood he discovers that the values that endure do not depend upon levels of culture. He finds Antonia fulfilled in her children and also that human experience is a small circle. Thus there is affirmation towards the end of the novel, in spite of the novel that two paid
Antonia embodies the very soul of the land and its pioneer farmers in her love, patience, philosophical acceptance of betrayal, honesty and simplicity. She has a warm and deep nature and is an individualist of heroic proportions, with deep passion. In her single-mindedness and forward-looking attitude while faced with odds she is like Alexandra, Thea, and the artists of Cather’s earlier stories. The secret of her integrity and heroism is passion, the secret of all art. Compared with Alexandra and Thea she is gentle and her strongest impulse is to make others happy, to lend “herself to immemorial human attitudes” and confer a touch of reality on everything around her. Her trials include work as a field labourer, living in a sod hut under the most inclement conditions of weather, want, poverty, social disgrace, work as a hired girl. Yet she survives and is rewarded as mother of a number of healthy, happy children and her home is an example of the ideal life of homesteaders. It also shows Cather’s regard for four walls and a hearthstone. Antonia tells Jim “I help make this land one good farm,” thus emphasizing creation, implying passion. Tilling is linked with creativity. This is emphasized by Gaston Cleric who thought that Virgil on his death-bed must have thought of the perfect utterance of the Georgics, where “the pen was fitted to the matter as the plough is to the furrow.” The tilling led to physical, economic and social changes for the better, the culmination of which is indicated by the last pages of the novel.
The plough in the sun in *My Antonia* is a symbol of the heroic human will on the prairie. The momentary vision of the forgotten plough within the rim of the sinking sun "black against the molten red... heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun" is the epitome of the heroic individual on the prairie.

There are sexual connotations in man's relationship with land as well as that of land and air. For example, Alexandra feels in her own body the joyous germination in the soil. When she approaches land with love, the spirit of the Divide bends lower because of her human approach. She mingles her identity with land. At the end of the novel she belongs to the earth. The soil is blessed for having been enriched by the blood of hearts like that of Alexandra.

The open face of the country gives itself ungrudgingly to the moods of the season, holding nothing back. It is total surrender with sexual connotations. Similarly, the air and earth are curiously mated and inter-mingled as if the one were the breath of the other. The atmosphere and the earth have the same strength and resoluteness.

The hard labour is ultimately rewarded. The flat table land is mellowed and its fertility brings material prosperity and happiness to people. Jim finds beauty and harmony in the life of the homesteaders. As he looks at the individual trees and sandbanks he likens their growth to that of a greatman or of a
great idea, and remembers the "conformation of the land as one remembers the modelling of human faces." Willa Cather has been praised for humanizing the landscape of the Midwest.

The harmony and beauty of the landscape perceived by Jim is the result of the human endeavour. The pioneers humanized the West, accepted it, loved it, and while understanding it conferred order on it. Tom Outland in The Professor's House associated great happiness and religious emotion with co-ordination and simplification.

In The Shadows on the Rock, the nuns recognized the well-ordered universe about them and in their own lives were devoted to order.

Harmony, beauty, co-ordination, and order point out orderly arrangement, which the pioneers discovered in nature. The orderly arrangement of forests, prairies, and mountains, the constellations overhead and their regularity proved the perfection of the works of a divine power which the pioneers recognized. Alexandra experienced a sense of personal security in reflecting upon the law behind the great operations of nature. She used to watch vastness, distance and the ordered march of the stars. The pioneers responded to the order they found in the universe and conferred it on the forms they created. They reaffirmed it in their routine life also. Their farms were symmetrical and wellordered. Alexandra's house was the big out-of-doors and it was only in the soil that she expressed herself best.
When the pioneer and the land merged their identities all distinctions vanished. The land where Alexandra is to live out her destiny and blend with the earth is fortunate. She blends with the land in death and is reborn in the form of wheat and corn as well as in the shining eyes of youth. This echoes the theme of everlasting life in "Song of Myself". Land belongs to future, although in the immediate future it will be held by the unworthy generation of Lou and Oscar. Thus a note of regret is implied but the authorial comment emphasizes hope. James E. Miller Jr. has pointed out that the failure of the novel lies in the authorial comment for sounding the note of affirmation which "might best have been evoked by the author in aroused responses to the strategies of the fiction. The author's direct intervention suggests a recognition of subtle failures in craft." 68

Ironically the homesteaders destroyed the frontier. Carl in O Pioneers! does not feel happy in spite of all the milk and honey and recalls with nostalgia the days when the land was a challenge to man's endeavour. Carl expresses his apprehensions about the future. Pioneer virtues were disappearing and the future was to be in the hands of an unworthy generation of men like Lou and Oscar in this novel. The old magic was already gone. In other novels like One of Ours and A Lost Lady we have Berylis wheeler and Ivy Peters, respectively, who represent the motiveless malignity, the worst kind of materialism and cruelty that made the idealism of the pioneers a thing of the past.
In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Latour prefers to die in exile for the sake of the peculiar air of the new country, which is utterly destroyed in course of time through repeated harvests. That peculiarity was there only on the "bright edges of the world, on the grass plains or the sage brush desert."  

Willa Cather's fictional characters desire to live in harmony with nature which is possible. In *Pioneers*, Alexandra's house is described as "The big out of doors" and she expresses herself best in the soil. In *One of Ours* Claude Wheeler wants to lie in the hot sun and gaze at the stainless blue of the autumn sky, hear the dry rustle of leaves and "let his imagination play with life."  

Prof. St. Peter in *The Professor's House* was interested only in earth, woods and water: "... He was of earth and would return to earth."  

Sebastian in *Lucy Gayheart* speaks for all of Cather's protagonists when he defines a relationship with the earth as the "deepest of all companionships" and goes on to say that it is always long, deliberate and unconscious and the most satisfying one.  

Whenever this contact with the earth is missed there is a lingering regret in the minds of Cather's protagonists. The reason is not that Cather was expressing a romantic nostalgia for the agrarian past, glorified through the populist folklore, but was expressing man's spiritual need to remain in harmony with earth and water. Man, or to be more exact, woman in her garden surrounding the home is Cather's symbol of harmony, fruition and order. Her
protagonists move towards this ideal. Winter and bad weather symbolize death and suspension of the vital principle of life, but not its end. There is affirmation even at the worst of moments. Vitality is always insisted upon, as for example, Alexandra in *O Pioneers!* feels that "The secret of life was still safe, warm as the blood in one's heart, and the spring would come again." 74

Cather shifted the geographical centre of literature from Boston to Nebraska and explored the unexploited materials in using the midwest for her early representative novels. Van Wyck Brooks said that she was the first writer to "convey the aesthetic potentialities of the multi-racial west and the tragedy and pathos of the frontier life." 75 She had the capacity to capture essences and to evoke the idyllic or elegiac mood through severe selectivity. If on one hand she broke from the artificiality of Boston, although she retained its suavity, she also rejected the primitiveness of the frontier, while retaining a zest for its life. She succeeded in bringing the very soil of the frontier to life and converting it into the protagonists of her tales. Herbert S. Gorman said that she brought about the marriage of the novel of the soil and the novel of character and this relationship of the

moment of spirit and environment is the high watermark of her art. 75 James Woodress has praised Willa Cather for creating "a saga of Nebraska extending from pioneering days to 1900 - Birth, ["
growth, love, death - it is all there."

Regionalism is the chief modern tendency of American literature which helped in escaping the English influence. Cather shared it with Edgar Lee Masters and Booth Tarkington. But she transcended the geographical limits through her concern for the fundamental issues of ideals in a materialistic world which is the reason for the universality of her appeal. Heinrich Straumann says that "the stress on regionalism is just another powerful symptom of that quest for a national tradition based on a profound love for the variety of its ethnographical aspects. What historical literature expresses in terms of time and age, regional literature reflects in terms of space and locality...." Willa Cather combined regional and period elements in a plausible and attractive way and was the first to reintroduce other forgotten metaphysical values into realistic fiction. She began with an analysis of immigrant surroundings and proceeded to a vision of generally valid ideas. Her success stemmed from the hidden strength of her beliefs and also from the quiet and unobtrusive way she set about it.

*O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* fascinated a whole generation of Americans because of their conformity to the Turner thesis. The depression belied the Turner thesis, but the charm of these novels has survived. The reason is that their strength does not stem from a romantic view of the Midwest. It flows from the intellectual content, the myth and symbolism, which are the result of the synthesis of the European culture, Cather brought to bear on the native
vitality. The elegiac note at the passing of the pioneer era is struck in the two early novels of affirmation considered in this chapter. Her later novels One of Ours to My Mortal Enemy deal with the disappearance of this significant era, but in spite of the predominantly elegiac mood, there persisted a note of affirmation.

Before describing the fulfilment of the pioneers in My Antonia, Willa Cather provided a different role for the pioneers—that of an artist. The difference was only of the medium, depending upon a change in the period of history. The Song of the Lark shows primarily Cather's concern for the artists' period of struggle. The next chapter is devoted to the theme of the "Artist and his environment".