

WILLA CATHER'S TREATMENT OF  
NEBRASKA SOCIAL LIFE.

by

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Carrying you  
Willa Cather

This is a copy of a photograph sent  
the author by Miss Cather during the  
work on this thesis.

**TO**

**MOTHER AND FATHER.**

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Miss Willa Cather, Professor S. L. Whitcomb, Professor Josephine Burnham, and Professor J. H. Nelson for the kindness, and invaluable help and advice they have so sympathetically given.

Gladys Louise French.

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## **PART I**

## CHAPTER I.

### Introduction.

#### A. Comment on the Term "Social Life."

In this study the term "social life" will be considered to mean the sum total of the relationships, the many intimate ties and friendly intercourses of individuals thrown together. It will be concerned with life in a community - in a word, with all the problems and difficulties which arise among a group of people trying to live peacefully and happily together. Social life is the result of living in a civilized society, and in such a society, problems of human adjustment are not wholly absent from the life of the most unfriendly person.

In considering Miss Cather's works, we will review a large segment of Nebraska life, because she has given us a series of pictures extending from the time of the early pioneer to the present -- a period which not only involves the lives of Americans but also those of many types of non-English immigrants.

In this study the comments will be general, not technical, psychological, or scientific. There will be no attempt to trace the social history of Nebraska,

but rather to discern what Miss Cather has to say regarding certain people and communities she has known. The efforts of these people to make a living, to educate themselves, to better their conditions in life; their love-making, the record of their sorrows and joys, the conflict between the older and newer immigrants - - on all this there is abundant commentary, giving Miss Cather's works a certain value as history. Essentially, however, she regarded life from the point of view of the individual; and it will be from her own point of view that the present investigation will be conducted.

B. Willa Cather's Preparation and Fitness  
for Writing of Nebraska Life.

In her very delightful book, My Ántonia, Willa Cather undoubtedly has one of the characters express her own sentiments concerning her coming to Nebraska: "All the years that have passed have not dimmed my memory of that first glorious autumn."<sup>1</sup> She spent her early childhood, the most impressionable years of her life, on the Nebraska prairies, learning to know pioneer life and the pioneers; so we know that these first few years in the

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1. My Ántonia, p. 31.

Middle West were important, and they were certainly unforgettable years, if we are to judge from the influence they produced on her literary work in later years.

Her childhood gave her an unusual preparation for writing of Nebraska life, and fortunately she has given us some of her early impressions:

When I was about nine, father took me from our place near Winchester, Virginia, to a ranch in Nebraska. Few of our neighbors were Americans -- most of them were Danes, Swedes, Norwegians and Bohemians. I grew fond of some of these immigrants -- particularly the old women, who used to tell me of their home country. I used to think them underrated and wanted to explain them to their neighbors. Their stories used to go round and round in my head.<sup>2</sup>

I have never found any intellectual excitement more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of these pioneer women at her baking or butter-making. I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement; I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said -- as if I had actually got inside another person's skin.<sup>3</sup>

We see Willa Cather, a little nine-year-old girl, riding about the country on her pony, visiting the Norwegian and Bohemian settlements, talking to the old women, listening to their conversations, fascinated by

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2. Quoted from Bookman, 53: 212.

3. Quoted from Overton, G. M. The Women Who Make Our Novels, p. 258.

their personalities. Sometimes she rode with her grandmother in a farm wagon drawn by heavy work horses. They often went miles to visit friends or to attend church. Each immigrant community had its own little church, and Willa Cather tells us that

On Sunday we could drive to a Norwegian church and listen to a sermon in that language, or to a Danish or a Swedish church. We could go to the French Catholic settlement in the next county and hear a sermon in French, or into the Bohemian township and hear one in Czech, or we could go to church with the German Lutherans. There were, of course, American congregations also.<sup>4</sup>

No doubt Miss Cather attended at one time and another several of these church services, and she was always eager to find out more and more about these people who were "different" from her American neighbors. She felt that they were underrated, and spent much of her time in finding out all she could about them. She tells us, for instance, that the Czech immigrants were people of a very superior type and that their settlements were large and very prosperous.

I have walked about the streets of Wilber, the county seat of Saline County, for a whole day without hearing a word of English spoken. In Wilber, in the old days, behind the

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4. Nation 117: 237.

big, friendly brick saloon-- it was not a "saloon" properly speaking, but a beer garden, where the farmers ate their lunch when they came to town -- there was a pleasant little theater where the boys and girls were trained to give the masterpieces of Czech drama in the Czech language.

And Willa Cather also visited the Czech's bakery shops, where you could "buy better pastry than is to be had anywhere except in the best pastry shops of Prague or Vienna."<sup>6</sup> She knew these immigrants in their work and in their play; she studied them and learned to know them intimately. She enjoyed their friendships.

These early, stimulating experiences, so foreign to her quiet, well ordered life back in Virginia, made lasting impressions upon her susceptible mind, so that when she came to write about them, she dealt with first hand material, still fresh in her mind, after many years; and she worked as a painter with a model.

We have proof of the bodily incorporation of persons and places she knew intimately into her books.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes Miss Cather retains the actual names of her people; at other times not. The little town which

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5. Nation 117: 237.

6. Ibid.

7. The information given here unless otherwise designated has been adapted or taken directly from the manuscript, "Willa Sibert Cather, An Informal Sketch," by Frances H. Arganbright, written for Professor Nelson's class in American Literature, at the University of Kansas, July 9, 1928.

figures so prominently in her Nebraska books is always Red Cloud -- her home for so many years -- although she gives it different names. In My Ántonia, "The experiences attributed to Jim Burden were in reality those of Miss Cather herself, although Mr. Burden did know Ántonia, having grown up in the same town with her and Miss Cather." The account of the Burden family moving to town is an accurate account of the Cather family leaving the farm to go to Red Cloud. Ántonia -- that is not her true name -- really had the experiences in life attributed to her in the story. "She is living with her husband and large family on the farm which is accurately described by Jim Burden in Book V of the story. It is north of Red Cloud, nearer, I believe, to Hastings." Miss Cather herself gives us the following explanation concerning Ántonia:

She was a Bohemian girl, who was good to me when I was a child. I saw a great deal of her from the time I was eight until I was twelve. She was big-hearted and essentially romantic.<sup>8</sup>

And in her Introduction to My Ántonia, Miss Cather explains that,

more than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the

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8. Quoted from Bookman 53: 215.

country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood. To speak her name was to call up pictures of people and places, to set a quiet drama going in one's brain.

The story of O Pioneers! is also a true one. In the story, One of Ours, Claude Wheeler was Miss Cather's cousin, and exactly such a boy and man as she shows him to be. His married life was a disappointment to him and to his many friends. I have heard my sister remark that it was the general sentiment around Red Cloud that Claude Wheeler's wife 'ought to have her fool neck broken.' She really did go away to take care of her sister, leaving Claude alone on the farm. Miss Cather's account of Claude's going to France is accurate. Many of his experiences in France were related by him in letters to his mother. Others, Miss Cather got from his 'buddies,' in America and France. She went to France and visited all the places, the battle fields, towns and villages, where he had been, getting information by means of which, with the aid of his letters, she was able to weave that part of the story." A Lost Lady is a simple, true story, and the world does not know, (though Webster County knows and resents it) that Captain Forrester was ex-Governor Garber of Nebraska and that the character

portrayed in Marion Forrester was actually that of Mrs. Garber. Neil, the young man who adored Mrs. Forrester, was Willa Cather herself. Sweetwater is, of course, Red Cloud. The Blum boys, Chub and Rhein, still live in Red Cloud, and those are their real names. I stopped at their house one day last summer, inquiring for watermelons. I do not know which of the brothers came to the door, but he was a rough, grizzled old man. They still sell fish in Red Cloud, and do some truck farming. My brother-in-law, Jim Burden's son, says that Miss Cather adhered quite closely to the truth throughout the story, with the exception of the character of Captain Forrester. 'For,' he said, 'many a Saturday night at nearly midnight, I used to take the old fellow home, dead drunk, in my delivery wagon, when I was a kid.' The old Garber house burned down about two years ago but I drove out to the place last summer. The trees and shrubs are very much as Miss Cather describes them, though now they are neglected and becoming over-grown and choked by undergrowth. The little stream, that could go on such a rampage was quite low, but I was assured that it could swell to astonishing width, within a very short time."

How could a talented author resist the impulse to write of those who had been so much a part of her own life, had so influenced her life?

Then again we come upon such characters as Mr. Shimerda<sup>9</sup> and John Bergson<sup>10</sup> and we class them with the "fine old men I used to know."<sup>11</sup> These aristocrats from Europe interested her and no doubt exerted a great influence in her life. At least we know that their characters were stamped upon her mind so thoroughly that she only needed to remember them in later years to make us see the full significance and value of her early friendships and acquaintances.

It is worth noting here that Miss Cather knew several noted men of the Northwest: Camille, Saint-Saëns's cousin, who lived just over the line in Kansas, and Knut Hamsun -- the Norwegian writer and winner of the Nobel Prize for 1920 -- who worked as a "hired hand" on a Dakota farm to the north of her home.

In these foreign born, in fact, lay her chief interest, although she of course knew the American families. From her few intimate remarks about the people she knew, we learn that she understood and studied and was well prepared to write about their lives. Because

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9. In My Ántonia.

10. In O Pioneers!

11. Nation, 117: 237.

of her thorough knowledge of their lives and characters and her sympathetic treatment in telling their stories, she has been able to create her most artistic work.

Willa Cather's restless, creative nature has been seeking in all her life's experiences the beautiful in characters, in ideas, in actions, and in works. To her it was very significant and beautiful that the first telegraph message which flashed across the Missouri River into Nebraska "was not a market report, but a line of poetry: 'Westward the course of empire takes its way'."<sup>12</sup> She was but a child when she heard ex-Governor Furness relate the story, but even at that early date she was unconsciously formulating the basis for her future ideals. Already she was being influenced to tread the path where Beauty leads and to acknowledge the supremacy of things spiritual and good.

Miss Cather has been richly endowed for her work. Her writings reveal a strong, independent personality, an intuitive mind which looks through outward appearances and sees the realities, and an appreciative soul which interprets adequately and sincerely. Her instinctive interest in people, combined with her gifts of mind, have made it possible for her to depict the unusual life pictures which she chose to portray.

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12. Nation, 117: 236.

Certainly, one of Willa Cather's most valuable aids in writing is her remarkable memory. This gift has enabled her to give us a graphic record of the persons she had known so well in childhood. Their conduct, conversation, and physical appearance made lasting impressions on her mind, and she had only to 'remember' them to make them live for us. She herself tells us of this power:

I've always had a habit of remembering mannerisms, turns of speech ... When I sit down to write, turns of phrases I've forgotten for years come back like white ink before fire.<sup>13</sup>

According to Miss Cather, all the material for her writing had been collected before she was twenty years old.

I have had nothing really new since that time. Every story I have written since then has been a recollection of some childhood experience, of something that touched me while a youngster. You must know a subject as a child, before you ever had any idea of writing, to instill into it, in a story, the true feeling. After you grow up, impressions don't come so easily. And it is for the purpose of recalling the old feelings I had in my youth that I come West every summer. The West has for me that something which excites me, and gives me what I want and need to write a story.<sup>14</sup>

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13. Quoted from Bookman, 53: 212.

14. Quoted from Overton, G. M., The Women Who Make Our Novels, p. 261.

To sum up, Miss Cather acquired a vast amount of material during her early impressionable years in Nebraska, and because of her special fitness she has been able to give us the life she knew in almost photographic minuteness and clearness.

#### C. Periods of Nebraska Life Treated.

Miss Cather has very adequately written of the different periods of Nebraska life from the beginning of its history down to the present day. She has given us pictures of Nebraska life more convincing and lifelike than will ever be written by more strictly historical writers or by later novelists who will not have felt the spirit of the peoples and the times.

The first period -- the early seventies on a Nebraska Divide -- is represented by My Antonia. For the beginning of this novel, Miss Cather got her material from her elders who had known the life of those early days; the story continues, however, into a later day when Miss Cather as a young girl was familiar with life in Red Cloud, the pioneer town which superseded the "Divide" in her experiences.

O Pioneers! pictures rather closely the prevailing conditions in Nebraska in the later eighties. It tells of life on the prairies at the time Willa Cather was spending her early childhood with her grandparents. We learn from her story that a frame house was at that time a luxury. Sod houses and underground cave houses were still very common.

A Lost Lady shows us the Red Cloud region in the nineties,<sup>15</sup> the time of the great expansion of the Burlington railroad. It pictures the life of the aristocracy who prospered in that enterprise.

The first half of One of Ours recounts the life of the Nebraska farmer of the World War generation. This period is one of wealth and prosperity but also of dullness and materialism. Machinery has replaced hand labor, and the practical business man has superseded the adventuresome pioneer.

In her Nebraska novels Willa Cather has unfolded for us the various stages of Nebraska life, and has, indeed, covered a field almost epic in its duration of time. She has given us this history from a novelist's point of view; she has exhibited her characters to show .....

15. See A Lost Lady, p. 9.

more truly the pioneer's struggles and hardships, and the modern farmer's accomplishments and discouragements. Surely the truest history is a story of the inner lives of those who make history, and Willa Cather has given us such a story for the most important periods of Nebraska life. The whole Middle West as well as Nebraska ought to feel proud that in her handshistory, no less important or romantic than the old Roman and Greek legends, has been turned into literature.

D. Nationalities Concerned.

In her stories of Nebraska life, Miss Cather writes entertainingly of the Bohemians, the Swedes, the Norwegians, the Danes, the Germans, the French, the Russians, and the old American stock. She writes with intimate knowledge and accuracy of the lives and characters of these peoples. Critics maintain that her foreigners are true to type, and August Brunius says that in her books the Swedes are presented with true insight and art.<sup>16</sup>

Miss Cather is particularly interested in giving the story of the later non-English pioneers in

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16. From Bookman, 53: 215.

Nebraska, and she does it with great discrimination and zeal. But although these foreigners hold the front rank, we might say, in her works about Nebraska, still she does not forget the settlers of English and Scotch ancestry. However, it is only in her World War novel, One of Ours, and in her novel dealing with the aristocracy, A Lost Lady, that the American of the old-stock finds himself in the limelight; usually he is secondary to the more interesting Swede or Bohemian neighbor.

## CHAPTER II.

## The Non-English Immigrants.

## A. Inheritance From the Old Country.

Probably few of us have ever heard stories of Swedish and Bohemian pioneers. In fact, not until Willa Cather gave us the stories of the foreign immigrants did the large reading public realize that Bohemians and Scandinavians played a very important part in subduing and building up the West. They, more than the settlers who came out from New England, brought to this country a new moral freshness. They stood out against the grosser forces of materialism and clung to such things spiritual and cultural as they were able to retain. They courageously fostered their idealism as they cultivated the soil.

These immigrant pioneers were numerous. In fact, during the early years in the state of Nebraska, the population was largely composed of foreigners who lived together in communities, each settlement having its own characteristic earmarks. Only twelve miles from Willa Cather's girlhood home was a whole township settled by Bohemians. Bohemians usually lived in

rather compact and neighborly groups. On the other hand, the Swedes were prone to scatter out. Several families would settle together within a few miles of each other, but their community life was not so vital to them as it was to the Bohemians. The Swedes were friendly with Swedes, Bohemians, French, and Americans alike. However, the immigrants from their sister country, the Norwegians, liked to feel themselves somewhat isolated. They were interested in the Americans, but were unfriendly toward their French neighbors. Probably the most admirable group of people described by Willa Cather is a French settlement - - "The French Country," it was called by their neighbors. The members of this community were held closely together by their little Catholic Church. The French usually preferred to stay near their own kindred, but to a certain extent they were friendly with their neighbors; as a rule they were more congenial with the American families than with their sister immigrants.

The social life of the immigrant pioneers was profoundly affected by their inheritance from the old country, for even though they had come to a land foreign in every respect to them, they were not destined to

change entirely the life which had been ingrained in them for centuries. In spite of new and adverse conditions, they retained many of their old habits, enjoyed their old pleasures, and lived over again old associations. The memories of these immigrant pioneers were very active; they enjoyed talking over "old times," telling their children about their grandparents, and deprecating the prairies while remembering with joy the Continental shipping wharfs, pastry shops, and singing schools.

Willa Cather represents a number of Bohemian and Swedish immigrants as being, on the whole, superior people. They were not of the low, peasant classes in their respective countries, but were the most progressive and industrious, the most honorable and respected citizens. They knew their own worth and were independent as to what people thought about them. Alexandra Bergson, one of the characters in O Pioneers!, says,

"Why are we better fixed than any of our neighbors? Because father had more brains. Our people were better people than these in the old country. We ought to do more than they do, and see further ahead."<sup>1</sup>

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1. O Pioneers!, p. 68.

Many of them did see "further ahead," and much of the present prosperity of the state of Nebraska is due to the thrift and intelligence of its early European pioneers.

One part of this Old World inheritance was undoubtedly physical and mental fitness. Many of the immigrants, especially the Scandinavians, had robust and unusually strong physiques. The old Norse blood coursed through their veins, and the descendants of sea-roving, fisher families were no more afraid of battling against unwieldy soil than their grandfathers had been of combating the ice and giant waves on the oceans. We may think of Eric, a character in one of Willa Cather's short stories,<sup>2</sup> as a typical example of Scandinavian stock which was transplanted on the Nebraska prairies. He was eighteen, "handsome as young Siegfried, a giant in stature... He had in those days a certain pride of bearing, a certain confidence of approach, that usually accompanies physical perfection."<sup>3</sup> The girls were also exceedingly strong, and often took a father's or a brother's place in the fields. This physical strength was usually accompanied by a firmness and richness of mind. The people possessed,

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2. "Eric Hermannson's Soul."

3. Cosmopolitan, 28: 638.

in a marked degree, that splendid virtue, self-reliance. They seemed to inherit the skill and foresight of their shipbuilding ancestors and faced their new life with their old strength of will and fortitude which had been ingrained in them for centuries.

The immigrants came from almost every walk of life. There were weavers, workers in tapestries, and upholsterers; many were shippers; some were sheep-herders, cabinet makers, and musicians. To many of them, farming was indeed a new occupation; they knew very little about it. The soil was an enigma, and to follow the plow and plant the seed was a new and strange experience to the majority of the immigrants. But they had come to the Nebraska prairies with great trust in the land; they had the Old World belief that land in itself is desirable; and if one possessed enough of it that was all one needed.

Besides inheriting desirable mental and physical qualities and a love of land, the immigrants also inherited many European beliefs and customs which they never outgrew and which affected in one way or another their new social life in Nebraska. In the field of religion we find pagan, Protestant, and Roman Catholic beliefs. Some held as strongly to the old belief that

everyone's fortune is written out in the stars as the Catholics held to their teachings and doctrines. A majority of the immigrants, especially the Bohemians, adhered to their old custom of drinking wine and other beverages. This was one of their habitual enjoyments, but the settlers from New England thought of them as drunkards and disagreeable neighbors. The readers of Willa Cather's books, however, assume a different attitude and feel the friendly, jovial atmosphere of a Bohemian home when they read that an old Bohemian father "carried one of the glasses" of golden old wine "to his daughter and presented it with great gallantry... 'You drink him slow, dis wine. He very soft, but he go down hot. You see!'"<sup>4</sup> For the Bohemians, drinking was an Old World custom which even their pioneer life and the disgust of their American neighbors could not eradicate.

The immigrant mothers brought with them another typical European custom; they retained their love for knitting. Once the house work was done they took up a bit of knitting, not even stopping to give full attention to their neighbors' gossip or their childrens' quarrels. This was especially true of the Scandinavian mothers. While talking to members of their families,

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4. McClure, 39: 436.

or to their friends, they always sat and knitted; one never saw them with idle hands.

Nor did the foreigners forget their Continental manners. They were usually very independent and often presented a rather distant attitude toward their neighbors, but if some one gave them something or did them a favor, they were deeply touched and displayed their thanks effusively. For instance, the character who relates the story, My Ántonia, tells us of a Bohemian lady who, after finding out that she did not have to pay her American neighbor the full amount for her cow, "dropped the rope, ran after us, and crouching down beside [the man], she took his hand and kissed it.... Somehow, that seemed to bring the Old World very close."<sup>5</sup>

Usually the immigrants had a genuine love for their old country. Many went back, and others stayed here only because of their land. But if they could not go back, at least they could make the Old Country seem very near to them by the help of their splendid memories. Even those who had left their native land when they were but children held it in reverence, and loved to recall it. We get this spirit in Ántonia's speech when she is telling her friend about Bohemia:

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5. My Ántonia, p. 154.

"Jim, ... if I was put down there in the middle of the night, I could find my way all over that little town; and along the river to the next town, where my grandmother lived. My feet remember all the little paths through the woods, and where the big roots stick out to trip you. I ain't never forgot my own country."<sup>6</sup>

But in addition to the scenery, the woods, the towns, and the shipping wharfs, the immigrants longed for their old food stuffs. Their beer, rye bread, strong cheeses, and dried mushrooms were all held as the best delicacies obtainable. A Bohemian lady, thinking she was being generous and neighborly, offered an American lady some dried mushrooms which she kept in a feather bed away from all moisture.

"For cook," she announced. "Little now; be very much when cook," spreading out her hands as if to indicate that the pint would swell to a gallon. "Very good. You no have in this country. All things for eat better in my country."<sup>7</sup>

The Americans could not appreciate some of the foreigners "freakish" dishes and often turned away in disgust, but the immigrants paid dear for them and enjoyed them as luxuries.

Perhaps it is in the field of art, more than any other, that the influence of Europe showed itself

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6. My Ántonia, p. 271.

7. Ibid, p. 88.

in the most marked degree in the lives of the immigrants. The foreigners who came to Nebraska had lived for years, and their ancestors before them, in countries where even the peasants knew and appreciated the arts-- especially music. Music had played such a large part in their daily lives that when they were transplanted to a new and barren country, they could at least find comfort in their old songs, dances, and legends. The Bohemians, in particular, seemed to be very aesthetic in their thoughts and were quick to sense a difference of attitude in the American neighbors of their adopted country. In My Ántonia, Willa Cather repeatedly brings out this contrast in her characters. She is very sympathetic with the foreigner in this respect and makes her American reader realize how much richer his life could be if he but possessed more of the old continent traditions. The little Bohemian girl, Ántonia, told her friend about her father who was a violinist in Bohemia. Her father and his friends used to sit on a bench under the elder trees and talk and play their music -- "beautiful talk, like what I never hear in this country. ...About music, and the woods, and about God, and when they were young."<sup>8</sup>

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8. My Ántonia, p. 269.

The Bohemians talked with enthusiasm when any news reached them about their favorite artists. They would scan a roll of Bohemian papers for news of a singer or pianist, as most Americans would hunt for word of the foremost boxer or baseball player. Most of the Bohemians had very deep and rich, melodious voices and loved to sing. They sang as their moods dictated, either very sad, doleful songs or else lively and joyful ones. As we read "The Bohemian Girl" we can almost hear Clara sing, accompanied by a flute, the old Bohemian songs, "When Other Lips and Other Hearts," "The Heart Bowed Down" -- and then "Oh, Evelina, Sweet Evelina;"<sup>9</sup> and her father crying out in between songs, "'Oh - h - h das - a fine music!'"<sup>10</sup>

While music was perhaps not as essential to the hearts of the Norwegians and Swedes as it was to the Bohemians, nevertheless it had always been native to them, and they indulged in it as a relief from their lives of labor drudgery, and unhappiness. Music for the Norwegians meant dancing, freedom, joy; it provided an outlet for their spirits, habitually encased in gloom, ignorance, and despair. Their music was characteristic -- it was

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9. McClure, 39: 436.

10. Ibid.

rude, half mournful music, made up of the folk-songs of the North, that the villagers sing through the long night in hamlets by the sea, when they are thinking of the sun, and the spring,<sup>11</sup> and the fishermen so long away.

The Swedes loved the folk-songs of their old country and were diligent in teaching them to their children. They liked to recall the songs sung by the sailors down in the shipyards near their former homes. Some of the Swedes, too, were excellent singers. Alexandra, in O Pioneers!, says,

"I can remember father when he was quite a young man. He belonged to some kind of a musical society, a male chorus, in Stockholm. I can remember going with mother to hear them sing. There must have been a hundred of them, and they all wore long black coats and white neckties."<sup>12</sup>

And side by side with their folk-songs, and old Swedish hymns, they placed the legends and stories of their old beloved country. Some of the Swedes in Nebraska still read and memorize portions of the "Frithjof Saga" and "Swiss Family Robinson."

Willa Cather has made much of the immigrants' inheritance from the Old Country. She has realized that to tell their story accurately she must take into account their former life -- what they did, what they

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11. Cosmopolitan, 28: 642.

12. O Pioneers!, p. 238.

loved, what they experienced. And by showing what they have retained of their Old World customs, beliefs, and enjoyments, and how these various phases of their old life affected and modified the usual life on the prairie, she has not only been successful in presenting them as pioneers but also as immigrant pioneers. And because of her ability to understand these immigrants and "get next to them" she has made her novels artistic. Her novels are not compositions of any intangible imaginings; she has descended to the very sod, and into the hearts of living characters for her material. And when a certain phase of their old life crept to the surface she acknowledged it and treated it as a part of the whole - - not in a European fashion but in the way it presented itself in the light of pioneer American life. By doing this thing well she has made her work distinctive and given a truthful emphasis to her stories.

#### B. America's Toll.

The immigrants had come to the Nebraska prairies, believing that the possession of land would in itself make them prosperous, wealthy, and happy. They never dreamed until confronted by the great unyielding prairie that it too was stanch and headstrong. The immigrants

could outwardly possess it, but it in turn could take hold of their innermost spirit and vitality and drag them into despair. Miss Cather makes us realize the importance of the land in the lives of the immigrants when she says that "the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes."<sup>13</sup>

She is very sensitive to the tragedy of the dashing, carefree, intensely alive Norwegians, transplanted to the arid Nebraska soil where they lived under a scorching sun. A character portrait of Eric Hermannson, a typical Norwegian, makes us understand the difference and the terribleness this country produced in many immigrants lives:

"He used to be the flower of the Norwegian youth in my day, and he's rather an exception, even now. He has retrograded though. The bonds of the soil have tightened on him, I fancy." ...Toil and isolation had sobered him, and he grew more and more like the clods among which he labored. It was as though some red-hot instrument had touched for a moment those delicate fibers of the brain which respond to acute pain or pleasure, in which lies the power of exquisite sensation, and had seared them quite away. It is a painful thing to watch the light die out of the eyes of these Norsemen, leaving an expression of impenetrable sadness, quite passive, quite hopeless, a shadow that is never lifted.<sup>14</sup>

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13. O Pioneers!, p. 15.

14. Cosmopolitan, 28: 636-9.

Miss Cather hinges her story O Pioneers! on the words of the dying father who had finally given up the fight against the sod.

John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame. It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods, and no one knew when they were likely to come, or why.<sup>15</sup>

He had fought eleven long years for prosperity, for comfort, for life. His crops had failed, year in and year out; his cattle had perished in the blizzard; his hogs had died from cholera; his prize stallion had been poisoned by a rattlesnake; he had lost two children; and now when he was in the prime of life he had to acknowledge his defeat; he had to surrender and die, leaving three children to carry on his fight against the land and the elements. And his children wished that they might die with him and "let the grass grow back over everything."<sup>16</sup>

But it was not only in a material sense that the new country brought sorrow to its immigrants; it was not always the stubborn land which defeated them; often it was the lack of inspiration, grieving for old friends and associations -- joys and sorrows dear to

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15. O Pioneers!, p. 20.

16. Ibid., p. 16.

the heart which the much prized Nebraska land could not yield to them.

One of Miss Cather's most interesting characters is Antonia's father, Mr. Shimerda.<sup>17</sup> He was a Bohemian to the very last inch of his sensitive nature. Bringing him to the prairies was like transplanting a gladiola into a potato patch. He was very unhappy in Nebraska and longed for his old country and old companions. His misery became unbearable, and to seek relief he shot himself. We cannot but wonder, with Miss Cather, "whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country."<sup>18</sup> Ántonia, in her naïve conversation with her childhood companion, gives us a description of Mr. Shimerda which reveals a character impossible to forget:

"My papa sad for the old country. He not look good. He never make music any more. At home he play violin all the time; for weddings and for dance. Here never. When I beg him for play, he shake his head no. Some days he take his violin out of his box and make with his fingers on the strings, like this, but never he make the music. He don't like this kawn-tree... He not want to come, nev-er! ... My mamenka make him come. All the time she say: 'America big country;

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17. In My Ántonia.

18. Ibid., p. 115.

much money, much land for my boys,  
much husband for my girls.' My  
papa, he cry for leave his old friends  
what make music with him. He love  
very much the man what play the long  
horn like this" - - she indicated a  
slide trombone. "They go to school  
together and are friends from boys.  
But my mama, she want Ambrosch for  
be rich, with many cattle."<sup>19</sup>

Mr. Shimerda was driven to death by homesickness,  
and many another early immigrant lost his love of life  
and capacity for delight out on the bleak grass prairies  
away from familiar haunts and loved ones.

Many of these foreigners had been genteel, re-  
fined, and talented people in the Old Country; they knew  
nothing of the hardships of manual labor such as they en-  
countered on the Nebraska prairies; they knew nothing  
of what it would mean to them to leave their old homes,  
old joys, and old associations. They were quickly  
influenced by poverty and environment. The country  
they had chosen in which to make their fortunes was new  
to them in every respect, and it exacted its toll from  
many of them, in sundry ways, killing some and breaking  
the spirit of others. Miss Cather is quick to sense the  
tragedies which the great Nebraska prairie brought to the  
lives of the energetic immigrants, and we see them struggle  
in their life dramas as we read her books.

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19. My Ántonia, p. 102.

## CHAPTER III.

## Native Americans.

A. Old American Stock.

The families of old American stock in Nebraska which Miss Cather writes about came from New England and the South. They came, for the most part, from Maine, Vermont, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. They settled here and there among the transatlantic colonies in Nebraska, and, of course, lacked the family solidarity of those in the immigrant communities.

Some of Miss Cather's works of Nebraska life are definitely concerned with the old New England and Southern people. The hero in One of Ours, the most "American" of her books dealing with Nebraska life, is a son of pioneers who came West from Maine. He is a young farmer, an idealist, a seeker; he longs for fulness of expression and completeness of life, but he is hemmed in by materialism of all kinds -- materialism of America during the World War period. "Platitudes, littleness, falseness ... His life was chokind him and he hadn't the courage to break with it."<sup>1</sup> He finds life satisfactory only when in fighting for his ideals in France, where he dies before he is disillusioned -- dies not

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1. One of Ours, p. 220.

for the old life he experienced in America but for the new life he discovered on the battlefields.

In A Lost Lady we read of pretty, life-loving Marion Forrester, her genteel, aristocratic husband, and their hospitable home. He seemed to be a favorite with many, and after his death "Old settlers and farmer folk came from all over the county to follow the pioneer's body to the grave."<sup>2</sup>

In "The Treasure of Far Island," one of Willa Cather's short stories, we see another typical American character returning to his home on the Nebraska prairie after having won fame as a playwright. He, too, was an idealist and had come to dig up the treasure of Far Island -- his buried childhood: "To people who live by imagination at all, that is the only life that goes deep enough to leave memories."<sup>3</sup>

The American of the old stock leads, primarily, an individual existence; complex social life is secondary, and sometimes quite foreign, to his mode of living. We do not see him as one of a community; he avoids community life as much as possible, and as Willa Cather finds him in his individual walk of life, it is there that she treats of his story. He has not interested Miss Cather .....

2. A Lost Lady, p. 145.

3. New England Magazine, 27: 247.

as much as have the non-English peoples, and we find much less about him in her books.

#### B. Old American Stock Versus Non-English Immigrants.

Many of these Easterners brought with them their dignity, their aloofness, and their snobbishness. They were distant towards their non-English neighbors; they wished to be isolated from them in every way possible; they felt that they lived in a higher station of society, and treated the immigrants as ignorant and "low down" foreigners. In One of Ours, Miss Cather introduces Claude's Bohemian companion and shows through their relationship the kind of reception ordinarily given the Bohemians by the Americans. Claude entered his brother's store and asked Bayliss if he had seen his Bohemian friend, Ernest Havel. "Bayliss swung round in his swivel chair to return a plough catalogue to the shelf. 'What would he be in here for? Better look for him in the saloon.'"<sup>4</sup> The New Englanders thought the Bohemians drunken loafers because they habitually had a glass of beer beside them, when in reality they were more sober and thoughtful than the ordinary native American.

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4. One of Ours, p. 9.

The Americans resented the foreigners' non-conformance to their established order of things -- to their strict, New England conventions. We read of the social situation in Black Hawk and learn that

The country girls (the Bohemian and Swedish "hired girls") were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background.<sup>5</sup>

The American farmer might be as hard pressed as his Norwegian neighbor, but no matter in what straits a Pennsylvanian or a Virginian found himself, he would not let his daughters become "hired girls." If they could not teach a country school, they would sit at home.<sup>6</sup>

On the part of many of the Americans there seems to have been no appreciation of the Europeans, no recognition of their merit and talent, no understanding of their older traditions; and Willa Cather points out that this was a decided loss to the Americans. She found great delight in contrasting the non-English immigrants and the old-stock Americans, and because one people threw the other into relief she had an unusual opportunity for studying their differences, their reactions upon one another

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5. From My Ántonia, p. 229.

6. Ibid, p. 227.

in their social relations. It is chiefly, then, as a means of contrast that Miss Cather introduces American characters into her stories of Nebraska life, and rarely do they hold prominent positions. Save in the two books definitely dealing with the old-stock Americans,<sup>7</sup> Miss Cather's strongest and most interesting characters are transatlantic people. It is their lives that have attracted her most; it is their experiences that she has studied so minutely; and it is their stories that she seeks most ardently to tell. She does not neglect the older Americans and their struggles, joys, and heartaches, but they are noticeably in the background of her works about Nebraska life.

**PART III.**

## CHAPTER I.

## Community Life.

A. Community Gatherings.

Willa Cather makes much of the settlement communities. They are essentially the backbones of her greatest Nebraska stories; they give background; they furnish environment and furnish definite footing for individualized characters; they establish elements of local color and realism; they afford excellent fields for displaying the social spirit and customs of different peoples. We know that Miss Cather has definite knowledge of community life as it has existed in Nebraska, and we feel as we read her stories that she has been faithful to particular, known circumstances as well as true to impassioned art when she tells of the settlement people.

Miss Cather's usual method of presenting the life of a community as a whole is to give the reader some broad, general information as to its location, its general condition, its esprit de corps, its outstanding, typical characters; then she realizes some community gathering - a dance seems to be a distinctive symbol for bringing her people together - - definitely to

impress on the mind of her reader the community's prominent characteristics. At such times she presents her striking, memorable characters and throws them in relief against the community as a background. But even though the community holds only second place when the individual, leading characters are concerned, nevertheless it holds an important second place, and Willa Cather never neglects its significance. If she uses a social gathering to introduce us to some of the striking qualities of her hero, or to present an important scene which may be a crisis in his life, the reader is doubly pleased because he perceives not only the characteristics of an individual and perhaps a dominant force in his life, but also the distinctive traits of the community of which the leader is an intimate part. Miss Cather makes us feel the spirit of a small crowd -- its freedom, grace, its boisterous revelry-making. She gives much space in her novels and short stories to crowds, and it is here that we may definitely and closely study her treatment of social life in Nebraska.

Whether we are thinking of Miss Cather's portrayal of life in Nebraska or whether we are thinking of pioneer life in Nebraska, or whether we are thinking

of the general topic, community life in the United States, we inevitably remember the same parts of certain stories given us by this author of genuine, everyday life. We at once muse on the scene in the Black Hawk dancing pavilion,<sup>1</sup> watch preparations for the Norwegians' Dance for Miss Elliot,<sup>2</sup> go to the Church supper and fair at Sainte-Agnes,<sup>3</sup> attend the Reception for Douglass in Empire City,<sup>4</sup> or join the hilarious crowd at Ericson's barn-raising cèlebration.<sup>5</sup>

We do not presume to say that these scenes of community life represent life universal or even all of life in the United States; they emphatically do not. They represent life in Nebraska. They are typical in their own way, but they also represent particular, small groups of people. Miss Cather is perhaps the greatest American author of community life, and it is to her works that we turn whenever we have this topic in mind. Hamlin Garland also writes of the Middle Western peoples, but he gives us "mignon" pictures of life -- not the solid pictures of social gatherings that Miss Cather portrays.

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1. My Antonia, p. 223 ff.
2. Cosmopolitan, 88: 642.
3. O Pioneers!, p. 159 ff.
4. New England Mag., 27: 239.
5. McClure, 39: 437 ff.

Undoubtedly one of the most interesting and colorful pictures of a Nebraska community gathering which Miss Cather has given us is that of the Church supper at Sainte-Agnes which was followed by a fair with charades and an auction.<sup>6</sup> All the shops in the little French Village closed at eight o'clock so that the merchants and their clerks could attend the Fair. Many of the young people wore fancy costumes, and everyone entered into the social spirit of the occasion. The pretty French girls presided over the fair booths, where they attracted more attention than did the wares they were selling. One of the stunts of the evening was the turning off of the lights. The boys were to find their French sweethearts before Father Duchesne could find the switch. They all played charades and had their fortunes told. Many found entertainment outside on the lawn. Some jumped; some wrestled; some threw the discus; others took part in a lively baseball game. Some of the participants were intimate friends, and all were cordial and enjoyed the friendly rivalry which the occasion presented. Most of them were of French descent, but they gave a warm welcome to the two or three Swedish and Bohemian families in their midst.

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6. O. Pioneers!, p. 159 ff.

Miss Cather pictures the scene clearly and makes it attractive. She makes the reader feel the hilarious happiness of the group, the community spirit, and the power of friendliness. She makes him see the gay costumes, the smiling faces, and the enthusiastic players. Here, as in other stories, she has been truly successful in describing a social gathering.

Another very entertaining account of community life centers around the dramatic, passionate Bohemian girl, Clara Vavrika. Her husband, Olaf Ericson, was giving a barn-raising party. Everyone in the large farming community had his threshing done, and there was nothing to keep him away from the widely advertised supper and dance.

By four o'clock in the afternoon buggies and wagons began to arrive at the big, unpainted building in front of Olaf's house ... On the ground floor stood six long tables, set with crockery of seven flourishing Ericson families, lent for the occasion ... There was a great chattering from the stall where Johanna Vavrika exhibited to the admiring women her platters heaped with fried chicken, her roasts of beef, boiled tongues, and baked hams with cloves stuck in the crisp brown fat and garnished with tansy and parsley. The older women having assured themselves that there were

twenty kinds of cakes, not counting the cookies, and three dozen fat pies, repaired to the corner behind the pile of watermelons, put on their white aprons and fell to their knitting and fancy work ... There were fat, rosy old women who looked hot in their best black dresses; spare, alert old women with brown, dark-veined hands; and several of almost heroic frame not less massive than old Mrs. Ericson herself. Few of them wore glasses, and old Mrs. Svendsen, a Danish woman, who was quite bald, wore the only cap among them... Nils, leaning against Hilda's lemonade-stand, watched them as they sat chattering in four languages, their fingers never lagging behind their tongues.<sup>7</sup>

What a picture! We see the new barn take on a festive appearance; each stall is filled with choice drinks and delicacies, and the long tables are weighed down with a substantial supper. The old women, who are an important part of the gay scene, have satisfied themselves as to the plentiful preparations for the party.

Soon the supper began and lasted for two hilarious hours. Vense Nelson had made a wager that he could eat two whole fried chickens and he did. Eli Swanson stowed away two whole custard pies, and Nick Hermanson ate a chocolate layer cake to the last crumb. There was even a cookie contest among the children, and one thin, slablike Bohemian boy consumed sixteen and won the prize, a gingerbread pig

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7. McClure, 39: 437-438.

which Johanna Vavrika had carefully decorated with red candies and burnt sugar. Fritz Sweiheart, the German carpenter, won in the pickle contest, but he disappeared soon after supper and was not seen for the rest of the evening. Joe Vavrika said that Fritz could have managed the pickles all right, but he had sampled the demijohn in his buggy too often <sup>8</sup> before sitting down to the table.

As soon as the supper was cleared away, the fiddlers tuned up for the dance. "Olaf, in a frock-coat and a solemn-made-u-necktie, led the grand march with his mother."<sup>9</sup> Then followed their favorite dances, the polka, waltz, and schottische, but they all stopped to watch Clara Vavrika and her father give an old Bohemian dance.

The deep salmon color in her cheeks burned vividly and her eyes were full of life. She gave the piano over to the fat Swedish heiress, pulled her father away from the corner where he sat gossiping with his cronies, and made him dance a Bohemian dance with her.... The old ladies were particularly delighted, and made them go through the dance again. From their corner where they watched and commented, the old women kept time with their feet and hands and whenever the fiddles struck up a new air old Mrs. Svendsen's white cap would begin to bob.<sup>10</sup>

Miss Cather seems to enjoy spreading for us a large canvas, a settlement gathering, which is varied,

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8. McClure, 39: 438.

9. Ibid., 39: 439.

10. Ibid.

rich and colorful. Such is the one from which we have just quoted. The picture presented is, primarily, a Swedish community; however a few Bohemian, German, and Danish families joyfully mingle with the Swedes at the big-barn-raising party. They come together as one people with a common bond -- seeking diversion, laughter, freedom of self. They come together as one age -- the age of youth and joyfulness of heart, and gain strength of spirit for toiling many days in the fields. Miss Cather has truly touched the mood of these people, and by her vivid descriptions almost makes it infectious. She not only knows and sympathetically understands their modes of life, their passionate natures, their love of fun and their devotion to music, but she also interprets their many characteristics so we may perceive them as they appeared in actual flesh and blood. The canvas is a living one, and we do not tire in reading its messages.

#### B. Friendships.

Friendship must be a precious relationship in the mind of Willa Cather, for she treats it in a very sincere manner and does not hesitate to voice the intimate words of a friendly attachment.

She reveals to us many types of friendships. We become acquainted with the Swedish playmates, Carl and Alexandra, and watch their companionship grow with the years;<sup>11</sup> we view the picture of the young Swede, Emil, sorrowing over the sudden death of his French comrade, Amédée;<sup>12</sup> we read understandingly of the ardent affection of Emil for the attractive and unhappily married Bohemian girl, Marie;<sup>13</sup> we comprehend the friendship which existed between Jim and the Bohemian girl, Ántonia, and are glad for their lifetime devotion;<sup>14</sup> we enjoy reading of the fellowship between Claude, the restless American, and Ernest, the satisfied Bohemian.<sup>15</sup>

In O Pioneers! we are made to see a picture of drouth and failure. The people had struggled with the wild soil, but now many had to give up their property. Alexandra could hardly endure the sorrow which came to her when friends and neighbors on all sides of her farm left their homes, but it was harder still to bear the departure of Carl, her closest friend since the time they were mere children. In one of their talks together we find out how truly was their friendship a part of them. Alexandra realized that Carl had not only helped her in a material way there on the farm, but that he

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11. In O Pioneers!

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. In My Ántonia.

15. In One of Ours.

had also given her moral strength. She said to him,

"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."<sup>16</sup>

Carl replied:

..."You remember how homesick I used to get, and what long talks we used to have coming from school? We've somehow always felt alike about things."

"Yes, that's it; we've liked the same things and we've liked them together, without anybody else knowing. And we've had good times, hunting for Christmas trees and going for ducks and making our plum wine together every year."<sup>17</sup>

Miss Cather shows us that the light of this friendship was never extinguished even though the following years brought long periods of separation. And much later, after Carl heard of the death of Alexandra's youngest and favorite brother, he came from Alaska to be with her. The hardness which had come into her heart vanished upon seeing him -- it was like old times. They talked of their friends, her brother, of the country, and old reminiscences they both loved. Then Alexandra quietly said, "'I think we shall be very happy...I think when friends marry, they are safe.'"<sup>18</sup>

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16. O Pioneers!, p. 51.

17. Ibid., p. 52.

18. Ibid., p. 308.

In O Pioneers! we again come upon a very wholesome friendship which linked the lives of two boys, Emil and Amédée. They "had ridden and wrestled and larked together since they were lads of twelve. On Sundays and holidays they were always arm in arm."<sup>19</sup> This intimate relationship prevailed in their lives, and later we see Amédée the proud and happy young father exclaiming to his friend: "Oh, Emil! ...why ain't you been up to see my boy?"<sup>20</sup> Here, we see Amédée holding true to his nationality; he does not curb his French emotion even though he is on the prairie of Nebraska. But the last picture we see in this comradeship brings grief to the young, life-loving Swedish boy. Amédée, in the height of his married happiness, took a severe attack of appendicitis and lived but a few hours. Emil helped to carry him out of the field and came home sick and worn out. He brooded for days over the death of his friend and pondered over the meaning of life and what it held in store for one. He could see no justice in the Power that took his friend just at the happiest period of his life, and sorrowed over his own personal loss.

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19. O Pioneers!, p. 163.

20. Ibid., p. 213.

O Pioneers! seems to be particularly rich in recorded friendships. But Willa Cather points out that even between the closest of friends there is not absolute harmony. She thinks it very unfortunate that friends do not understand to the full and make life easier for one another, and that it is a lack of sympathetic imagination that they do not. Miss Cather dwells on this theme, which is a very human one, and in her story concerning the friendships of Alexandra, Emil, Amedee and Marie, makes us realize that her point is well taken.

Perhaps the most absorbing account of intimate friends which we find in O Pioneers! is the story of Emil and Marie. They had always been friends, but while Emil was away at the University, Marie married one of her own nationality. Emil took this as a part of the course events had taken in his life; nevertheless the affection in his heart for Marie never dimmed, and he enjoyed seeing her more than anyone else. Early one beautiful late spring morning the two approached a pond where they expected to find ducks.

There was a sharp crack from the gun, and five of the birds fell to the ground. Emil and his companion laughed delightedly, and Emil ran to pick them up. When he came back, dangling the ducks by their

feet, Marie held her apron and he dropped them into it. As she stood looking down at them, her face changed. She took up one of the birds, a rumpled ball of feathers with the blood dripping slowly from its mouth, and looked at the live color that still burned on its plumage.

As she let it fall, she cried in distress, "Oh, Emil, why did you?"

"I like that!" the boy exclaimed indignantly. "Why, Marie, you asked me to come yourself."

"Yes, yes, I know," she said tearfully, "but I didn't think. I hate to see them when they are first shot. They were having such a good time, and we've spoiled it all for them."\*\*\*

"Don't be cross, Emil. Only... they're too happy to kill... No, we won't do that any more."

"All right," Emil assented.<sup>20</sup>  
"I'm sorry I made you feel bad."<sup>20</sup>

These friends loved very passionately, but they had to face tragedy because their understanding of each other had not been profound enough at the time when it might have brought them happiness.

One of the most delightful and sympathetic friendships which Willa Cather has revealed to us is that between Ántonia and Jim.<sup>21</sup> In the words of Miss Cather, Jim has told the intimate life story of the Bohemian girl, and at the end of his narrative we learn of the influence of that long friendship and actually feel its .....

20. O Pioneers! pp. 127-128.

21. In My Ántonia.

power. And just as there is beauty in truth - - in every perfect thing - - so was there beauty in their complete friendship.

The two had been close friends and companions since they had been children, but time and circumstances soon separated them. Jim went away to Harvard, and when he returned to his home in Nebraska for a summer vacation before entering the Law School he heard his old friends speaking indulgently and pityingly of Ántonia. She had thrown herself away on a man who had spent her money and then deserted her. Jim, though deeply disappointed in Ántonia, resolved to see her. They talked of his hopes, his mode of living, her baby, and how much their friendship had meant to them:

"Do you know, Ántonia, since I've been away, I think of you more often than anyone else in this part of the world. I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister - - anything that a woman can be to a man. The idea of you is a part of my mind; and you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don't realize it. You really are a part of me." ...

"Ain't it wonderful, Jim, how much people can mean to each other. I'm so glad we had each other when we were little... You'll always remember me when you think about old

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times, won't you? And I guess everybody thinks about old times, even the happiest people."...

"I'll come back," I said earnestly through the soft, intrusive darkness.

"Perhaps you will" -- I felt rather than saw her smile. "But even if you don't, you're here, like my father [who had been dead for years]. So I won't be lonesome."<sup>22</sup>

Jim did keep his promise to "come back," but twenty years had intervened before the friends saw each other again. Antonia had married and had a large devoted family. They enjoyed a long visit together -- talking over old times and recalling the boys and girls they used to know. Later, Jim visited the scenes of their childhood and found the road over which they had both traveled when they first came to Nebraska -- he from Virginia, she from Bohemia.

I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is. For Antonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incomunicable past.<sup>23</sup>

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22. My Antonia, p. 363-365.

23. Ibid., p. 419.

In One of Ours, Willa Cather has portrayed the friendship of a restless American and an adaptable, satisfied Bohemian. Clause, the spiritual seeker, contrasted sharply with the foreigner, who, though he thought deeply, took life as it presented itself to him. "Claude felt that his friend lived in an atmosphere of mental liberty to which he himself could never hope to attain."<sup>24</sup> Claude was always striving for peace of mind, for beauty, for the ultimate good; yet he saw in his Bohemian companion desirable qualities and an appreciative understanding which he failed to find in others about him. The two liked to go off on long hikes or take their lunch and lie on the bank of "Lovely Creek" and talk about the meaning of life and the future. In the late fall they loved to make their way through the timber along the stream and gather bittersweet vines. This was a boyhood friendship, but it was significant in the life of Claude Wheeler and enables the reader more adequately to interpret his character.

Miss Cather's characters always ring true, so to speak; they are consistent with their nationalities in thought, speech, and action. There is no exaggeration of sentiment displayed in their communion with each other;

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24. One of Ours, p. 11.

they are sincere in all their expressions; which facts lend to Miss Cather's books a certain beauty of portraiture and diction and make her works real to us. Her characters are veritable individual people living their lives, forming their attachments, and are as life-like as those we see around us at the present day. So realistic is Miss Cather's treatment of these people that we see them, hear their conversations, and know their hopes and misgivings.

#### C. Neighbors.

An important and a significant phase of community life is neighborliness, and Miss Cather dwells a great deal on this relationship between the peoples she presents to her reader. She gives concrete, definite accounts of their doings, their friendly visits, their jealousies, their kindnesses. We read entertaining accounts of the hospitality of the Burden, the Vavrika, the Harling, and the Forrester families; and we read of the true neighborliness of the Shabata, the Ericson, and the Shimerda families.

The Burden family is the outstanding example, in Miss Cather's books about Nebraska life, of the very few New England families who were interested in their

non-English neighbors and tried to do what they could to help them. We see the Burden family hurrying around, preparing to go and make the acquaintance of their new Bohemian neighbors, the Shimerdas, who lived in a cave with very little to eat. They took with them a great quantity of food -- potatoes, cured pork, bread, butter, and pumpkin pies. Jim Burden, who tells the story, My Ántonia, relates for us the scene which took place when the Burden wagon drove up<sup>25</sup> the Shimerda dwelling:

She [speaking of his grandmother] made Mrs. Shimerda understand the friendly intention of our visit, and the Bohemian woman handled the loaves of bread and even smelled them, and examined the pies with lively curiosity, exclaiming, "Much good, much thank!" -- and again she wrung my grandmother's hand.<sup>25</sup>

Years later Jim Burden's grandparents retired to town and rented out their farm. Here again we read of the genuine hospitality of that family:

We saw more of our country neighbors now than when we lived on the farm. Our house was a convenient stopping place for them. We had a big barn where the farmers could put up their teams, and their women-folk more often accompanied them, now that they could stay with us for dinner and rest and set their bonnets right before they went shopping.<sup>26</sup>

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25. My Ántonia, p. 25.

26. Ibid., p. 166.

The Burden family from Maine were indeed ideal neighbors; they had more of the foreigner's genuine friendliness for people and less of the staid New England attitude of other pioneers from the East.

The Forrester home<sup>27</sup> contrasts strongly with the Burden home. While the Forrester home was noted from Omaha to Denver for its hospitality, it was primarily known to the aristocracy who made their fortunes in connection with the Burlington railroad. The Swedish, Norwegian, and Bohemian farmers did not stop there to "put up their teams" and "set their bonnets right." But although of a limited type, it truly was a hospitable home. It was known for a certain charm of atmosphere, and Miss Cather tells us that the people who lived there made it seem larger and finer than it was. The guests at the Forrester home - - and there were many - - enjoyed picnics, dances in the grove on moonlight nights, dinner parties, and whist games. After the death of Captain Forrester, the young boys in the neighborhood were often invited in for a social evening under the direction and inspiration of vivacious Mrs. Forrester.

The Harlings' home was always a cheerful place. The neighborhood children loved to congregate there and

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27. A Lost Lady.

and play. And besides the freedom which they enjoyed there, they were always sure of being treated to candy and cookies.

We acted charades, or had a costume ball in the back parlor, with Sally always dressed like a boy Frances taught us to dance.... On Saturday nights, Mrs. Harling used to play the old operas for us, "Martha," "Norma," "Rigoletto" -- telling us the whole story while she played. Every Saturday night was like a party.<sup>28</sup>

In "The Bohemian Girl," one of Miss Cather's short stories, we read of the delightful family, the Vavrikas. They were hospitable, friendly people who enjoyed life and who wanted those around them to be cheerful and happy. Nils, a Swede who had enjoyed going to his neighbor's home when he was a boy, had just returned to his old Nebraska home for a visit. He gives a clear account of the hospitality of the Vavrika home in one of his conversations with his mother:

"Of course I liked to go there, Mother, and you were always cross about it. You never took the trouble to find out that it was the one jolly house in this country for a boy to go to. All the rest of you were working yourselves to death.... Now, Vavrika's was always jolly. He played the violin, and I used to take my flute, and Clara played the piano,

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28. My Ántonia, p. 199.

and Johanna used to sing Bohemian songs. She always had a big supper for us -- herrings and pickles and poppy-seed bread, and lots of cake and preserves. Old Joe had been in the army in the old country, and he could tell lots of good stories... . . . I don't know what I'd have done when I was a kid if it hadn't been for the Vavrikas, really."<sup>29</sup>

Miss Cather pictures the Bohemians as being fond of life, entertainment, music, dancing -- anything that brought a smile to the lips, and joy to the heart. They had sensitive, loving hearts; they were passionate and craved friendly intercourse; and when the Bohemians were on good terms with those around them, they made, indeed, sociable neighbors. The Shimerdas, the Bohemian family in My Ántonia, are to be admired for their neighborliness -- their friendliness, their generosity, their trusting nature, their eagerness to learn.. Their neighbors loved them and were genuinely interested in their welfare. And when Mr. Shimerda sought death by his own hand, neighbors, came from miles around through a heavy snow to help the family. One of their own countrymen rode horseback a great distance, and Germans and Norwegians arrived from all directions. The Shimerdas, who had been good neighbors, were amply repaid, in time of need for their friendliness.

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29. McClure, 39: 433.

Another very entertaining account of neighbors throws much light on what seems to be Miss Cather's general conception, that the Swedes and Bohemians were, as a rule, very congenial. Some of the Swedes seemed to find much that was attractive in the personalities of the Bohemians, and were irresistably drawn to them. For instance Alexandra Bergson<sup>30</sup> felt that she could hardly do without her pretty, animated, little Bohemian neighbor, Marie Shabata. The responsive, impulsive nature of Marie attracted the somewhat stolid and phlegmatic Alexandra. They telephoned to each other almost daily and often had lunch together. At one time Marie asked Alexandra and Mrs. Lee, a Swedish lady who was visiting her, to come over for coffee in the afternoon. Although it was winter, the windows in Marie's house were full of flowers, and everything looked cheery and smelled good. It was an ideal time to invite her neighbors in for a cordial chat and a cup of coffee.

Upon arriving at Marie's the old Swedish lady immediately shook out a new apron and tied it round Marie's waist. When Marie exclaimed over it and questioned her about it,

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30. In O Pioneers!

The old woman giggled and ducked her head. "No, yust las' night I ma-aka. See dis tread; verra strong, no wa-ash out, no fade. My sister send from Sweden. I yust-a ta-anke you like dis."<sup>31</sup>

Soon, Marie prepared to serve her guests; she took out of the oven a pan of delicate little rolls, stuffed with stewed apricots and dusted them with powdered sugar. Mrs. Lee held up one of the apricot rolls between her brown thumb and forefinger and weighed it critically. "Yust like a-fedders," she pronounced with satisfaction. "My, a-an't dis nice!" she exclaimed as she stirred her coffee. "I yust ta-ake a liddle yelly now, too, I ta-anke."<sup>32</sup>

We enjoy reading of these sincere neighborly acts; we like the stimulating, characteristic conversation; we feel at home in the friendly, domestic atmosphere of Marie's hospitality. The presentation is interesting and convincing.

But all neighbors do not get on so well together. Occasionally poverty and jealousy bring out bad traits in the dispositions of some of the Bohemians. For example, we become acquainted with the jealousy and other qualities of Frank Shabata which disturbed his neighbors.

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<sup>31.</sup> O Pioneers!, p. 191.

<sup>32.</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

"Most Bohemians are good-natured, but Frank thinks we don't appreciate him here, I guess. He's jealous about everything, his farm and his horses and his pretty wife... Frank's not a bad neighbor, but to get on with him you've got to make a fuss over him and act as if you thought he was a very important person all the time, and different from other people."<sup>33</sup>

On the least provocation, Frank would fly into a rage and quarrel hot-headedly with his neighbors. His wife "was perfectly aware that the neighbors had a good deal to put up with, and that they bore with Frank for her sake."<sup>34</sup>

Neighbors are known not only for their tasty breads, their agreeable natures, or their jealous dispositions, but also for their candid advice. Alexandra,<sup>35</sup> the eldest of the Bergson children, had taken over the management of the farm after the death of her father. She had a neighbor known as Crazy Ivar who made hammocks but who was known also as "the animal man." Alexandra and her brothers drove over to Crazy Ivar's to buy a hammock and to get his advice about their hogs. People around her were losing their hogs, and Alexandra wanted to find out how she could best take care of hers.

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33. O Pioneers!, p. 120.

34. Ibid., p. 142.

35. In O Pioneers!

Miss Cather reveals the true attributes of neighborliness; she senses the essential circumstances that bring neighbors together, and then depicts each situation in detail. Here again we find that her people are true to their characters and nationalities, and that the events are natural and realistic and conform to ordinary experience. Miss Cather is accurate in her descriptions and writes entertainingly of Nebraska neighbors because she is describing life at first hand - - she herself has felt the neighborly spirit of these people.

#### D. Education.

In reading Miss Cather's books we find that she neglects no institution of society, no established form of social life - - no subject connected with human life and civilized living. She treats of education just as she writes of all other themes which concern the human race in its struggle truly to live. In her books about Nebraska life she has written of the rather primitive early attempts at education as well as the more complicated and advanced efforts; of the pioneer sod schoolhouse, and University of Nebraska of the present day. She has given us an insight into the education of the

non-English people as well as the older-stock Americans.

Jim Burden, who relates the story, My Antonia, tells us of the little sod schoolhouse he attended in pioneer days. Jim had descended from the older American stock, who believed in sending children to school, and even though he was living on the Nebraska prairie, he took advantage of what schooling was offered. There were sixteen students at the sod schoolhouse the year Jim started, and he rode horseback and took his dinner. Jim was interested in school, and tried to persuade his Bohemian friend, Antonia, to attend also:

"Grandmother wants to know if you can't go to the term of school that begins next week over at the sod schoolhouse. She says there's a good teacher and you'd learn a lot"....

"I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now."<sup>36</sup>

Antonia had been plowing in the fields and helping her brother since their father's death, and she knew that there was no time in her life for school work. At first she was very "sassy" and indignant to think that Jim would broach the subject, but she soon began to realize what she would miss, and wept:

"Sometime you will tell me all those nice things you learn at the school, won't you Jimmy?" she asked with a sudden rush of feeling in her

36. My Antonia, pp. 140 - 141.

voice. "My father, he went much to school. He know a great deal; how to make the fine cloth like what you not got here. He play horn and violin, and he read so many books that the priests in Bohemie come to talk to him."<sup>37</sup>

In "A Wagner Matinee," one of Miss Cather's short stories which deal with Nebraska life, we have presented to us another picture of early hardships and school life.

I owed to this woman most of the good that ever came my way in my boyhood; one had a reverential affection for her. During the years when I was riding herd for my uncle, my aunt, after cooking the three meals - - the first of which was ready at six o'clock in the morning - - and putting the six children to bed, would often stand until midnight at her ironing-board, with me at the kitchen table beside her, hearing me recite Latin declensions and conjugations, gently shaking me when my drowsy head sank down over a page of irregular verbs. It was to her, at her ironing or mending, that I read my first Shakespeare, and her old text-book of mythology was the first that ever came into my empty hands.<sup>38</sup>

These people, too, were of the old-stock Americans. Most of the characters in Miss Cather's stories who were intensely concerned with getting an education were native Americans; the pioneer foreigners .....

37. My Antonia, pp. 142.

38. "Youth and the Bright Medusa," p. 237.

were too much taken up with the desire to make good! Elsewhere in this study we have pointed out that many of the early non-English immigrants were talented and educated people, but their children reared on the Nebraska prairie had little chance for a formal education. The non-English children, for the most part, plowed up the sod, or hired themselves out as "hands"; however there were some exceptions, especially in the later generations. Emil, one of the exceptions, calls for a fuller study.

The story of O Pioneers! deals primarily with the fortunes of the Bergson children. Alexandra, the only girl and the eldest of the children, was particularly fond of Emil, her youngest brother. She insisted that he go to the University and learn a new approach toward life; she did not wish him to follow in the footsteps of her other brothers and become a drudge. After his years away at college, Alexandra was quite satisfied with her brother;

both Emil and the country had become what she had hoped for. 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.<sup>39</sup>

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39. O Pioneers!, p. 213.

He was different from his brothers; he was different in action, in feeling, in his way of looking at life. He was a Swede, but he was spirited, and he had more friends among the French and Bohemians than he had among his own people.

The French and Bohemian boys were spirited and jolly, liked variety, and were as much predisposed to favor anything new as the Scandinavian boys were to reject it. The Norwegian and Swedish lads were much more self-centered, apt to be egotistical and jealous. They were cautious and reserved with Emil because he had been away to college, and were prepared to take him down if he should try to put on airs with them. The French boys liked a bit of swagger, and they were always delighted to hear about anything new: new clothes, new games, new songs, new dances.<sup>40</sup>

It was Emil's university education that had changed his life, that had made it different from his brothers' lives; it had steered him into new channels of thought, and had found for him various types of friendships.

In "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," Miss Cather gives us an interesting account of a young Nebraskan in college. A professor at the University of Nebraska spoke to Miss Cather one day "about a boy in one of his Greek classes who had a very unusual taste for the classics - intuitions and perceptions in literature."<sup>41</sup> The professor was particularly puzzled because the boy's parents .....

40. O Pioneers!, p. 214.

41. Nation, 117: 238.

took no interest in such things. Miss Cather, however, was not puzzled:

I knew what the professor did not: that, though this boy had an American name, his grandfather was a Norwegian, a musician of high attainment, a fellow-student and life-long friend of Edvard Grieg.<sup>42</sup>

We see that even though the first generation of non-English people had a hard struggle and applied themselves to attaining material prosperity only, nevertheless marked ability and a love of the finer things of life were ingrained in the minds and characters of many, and they passed these gifts on to their posterity. And if we think with Willa Cather we shall believe that:

It is in that great cosmopolitan country known as the Middle West that we may hope to see the hard molds of American provincialism broken up; that we may hope to find young talent which will challenge the pale proprieties, the insincere, conventional optimism of our art and thought.<sup>43</sup>

Jim Burden, in My Ántonia, had given a very entertaining account of his life when he was pursuing his studies beyond the sod schoolhouse and the little high school where he had delivered his much applauded oration at the Commencement Exercises.

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42. Nation, 117: 238.

43. Ibid.

At the University I had the good fortune to come immediately under the influence of a brilliant and inspiring young scholar ... We played tennis, read, and took long walks together. I shall always look back on that time of mental awakening as one of the happiest in my life. Gaston Cleric introduced me to the world of ideas; when one first enters that world everything else fades for a time, and all that went before is as if it had not been.<sup>44</sup>

Jim was an idealist, viewing life sincerely and questioningly. His teacher, a veritable genius, was at times moody, tempermental, or sarcastic; nevertheless he opened a new field for Jim to cultivate -- the field of ideas. Jim says that sometimes "he would sit until nearly midnight, talking about Latin and English poetry, or telling me about his long stay in Italy."<sup>45</sup> This teacher-friend gave Jim the inspiration to continue his studies at Harvard, where he afterward attended Law School and became a great legal counselor. During those years -- in the nineties -- when Jim was attending the University of Nebraska, many other serious young men from the farms and little towns over the state formed an important part of the student body. They had but little money, and most of them worked to pay their expenses. Many were

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44. My Ántonia, p. 291.

45. Ibid., p. 294.

underfed and shabby, but they heroically faced self-sacrifice so that they might obtain the knowledge and inspiration they coveted.

The next generation, the World War generation of students, found conditions considerably changed. Miss Cather protests against the mechanical life of Nebraska of these years. There is material prosperity and physical well being, but there is no devotion to the old classics, to the world of inspiration, or to any of the finer and nobler things of life. The men in control encourage their sons and daughters to "study machines, mercantile processes, 'the principles of business' -- everything that has to do with the game of getting on in this world -- and nothing else."<sup>46</sup> But Miss Cather is optimistic and hopes that the generations to come "will revolt against all the heaped-up, machine-made materialism about them."<sup>47</sup>

We again hear Miss Cather denounce the artificial life of the World War generation through Claude Wheeler, her hero in One of Ours, who was an idealist, a quester after truth and inspiration. All about Claude were fastened the bands of materialism. He found no escape, not even when he went away to school, for his .....

46. Nation, 117: 238.

47. Ibid.

mother and father insisted that he attend a denominational college where he met with no stimulus for work or thought, no devotion to ideas or earnestness of mind. Everything at the Temple was "cut and dried." Claude spent two unhappy and unprofitable years, it seemed to him, at this struggling college; then he asked for permission to go to the State University, a request which was not granted by his parents. However, when Claude arrived at Lincoln to continue his studies at Temple Place, he matriculated at the University for special work in the History Department under the professor he had heard lecture and whom he admired. Claude enjoyed his class work, enjoyed his long hours of reading in the University Library, enjoyed the new books and friends that this course gave him.

Claude usually came out from these lectures with the feeling that the world was full of stimulating things, and that one was fortunate to be alive and to be able to find out about them. His reading that autumn actually made the future look brighter to him;<sup>48</sup> seemed to promise him something.

But these inspirations did not continue into a senior year for Claude; his father had another plan -- that Claude should work the home farm. This decision brought to an abrupt end the school life which had seemed to

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48. One of Ours, pp. 37 - 38.

Claude invaluable and of which his parents knew nothing. Claude, who could find satisfaction only in the world of ideas and philosophies, was forced to take up a life on the farm, to make and to spend money.

Miss Cather has given us pictures of the educational conditions for different periods in Nebraska life. She had not tried to survey the whole educational field, but she has given concrete examples of interesting situations as they entered the lives of her characters. She has treated a rather prosaic but important topic in an interesting way; has given her ideas life and vitality by identifying them with the intimate lives of those she has written about. We see little Ántonia and Claude longing for the inspiration which is beyond, where they cannot reach; we see Jim taking advantage of the promises which are his; we see Emil broadening his character by his university experiences; we see the Norwegian boy devoting himself to a fuller knowledge of the studies he loves. Miss Cather has presented different attitudes toward education and has given evidence of the delight one knows who possesses it, and the meagerness and dullness one experiences who lacks it.

### E. Religion.

To religion as a phase of community life, Miss Cather has given much attention. She is interested in different beliefs -- pagan, Protestant, Catholic -- and she unfolds the religious lives of her characters to express them. The joyous pagans, the religious ascetic, the contented universalist, the questioning thinker, the trusting Protestants, the devout Catholics -- we find them all in the books on Nebraska life. Miss Cather gives ample, impartial accounts of their expressions and convictions; she herself is a revealer of the religious life she has encountered in Nebraska and not an advocate for any group.

Seeing that Miss Cather has written much of the transatlantic peoples, we are not surprised to find some comment on remnants of pagan beliefs; and we find these ideas among the Bohemians -- just where we would expect to find them.

Marie, a beautiful Bohemian girl, and her friend were discussing the beauties of nature, especially trees, when Marie remembered the beliefs of her ancestors:

"The Bohemians, you know, were tree worshipers before the missionaries came. Father says the people in the mountains still do queer things, sometimes, -- they believe that trees bring good or bad luck ... the old people in the mountains plant lindens to purify the forest, and to do away with the spells that come from the old trees they say have lasted from heathen times ... I'm a good Catholic, but I think I could get along with caring for trees, if I hadn't anything else."<sup>49</sup>

The pagan spirit in the broader sense is expressed in the character of a young Norwegian boy. Eric Hermannson<sup>50</sup> was a handsome, strong, joyous lad who had a real pagan delight in life; he followed the care-free ways of youth, fiddling on his violin, which to him meant all the manifestations of art. Then came the Free Gospellers' revival meeting at the Lone Star Schoolhouse. Eric was singled out and prayed for. He crushed his violin "to splinters across his knee"<sup>51</sup> and resolved to dance, sing, or drink no more. After Eric's conversion

the gloom of his people settled down upon him, and the gospel of maceration began its work ... The pagan smile that once hovered about his lips was gone, and he was one with sorrow.<sup>52</sup>

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49. O Pioneers!, pp. 152-153.

50. In "Eric Hermannson's Soul."

51. Cosmopolitan, 28: 635.

52. Ibid., 28: 639.

Crazy Ivar<sup>53</sup> was a religious ascetic; he committed chapters of his Norwegian Bible to memory. He had but two or three friends because he did not "get on" with any of the denominations. He enjoyed solitude, liked the cleanness of the wild sod, and loved birds and studied their habits. The neighbors criticized Alexandra for keeping him as a hired-hand; they said his presence made it hard for her to get other "hands" to work for her, people disliked him so and were afraid of him. When Ivar heard something of their censure, he turned to Alexandra to defend himself:

"You know that my spells come from God, and that I would not harm any living creature. You believe that everyone should worship God in the way revealed to him. But that is not the way of this country. The way here is for all to do alike. I am despised because I do not wear shoes, because I do not cut my hair, and because I have visions. At home, in the old country, there were many like me, who had been touched by God, or who had seen things in the graveyard at night and were different afterward. We thought nothing of it, and let them alone. But here, if a man is different in his feet or in his head they put him in the asylum."<sup>54</sup>

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53. In O Pioneers!

54. Ibid., pp. 92 - 93.

Perhaps children sense the omnipresence of God more than do older people; perhaps they realize a greatness, a oneness which seems beautiful and awe-inspiring more truly than can the grown-up. At all events, in My Ántonia, we have the simple, childlike, yet philosophical reflections of Jim:

...I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.<sup>55</sup>

The questioning thinker is Claude Wheeler in One of Ours.

Claude had gone through a painful time of doubt and fear when he thought a great deal about religion. For several years, from fourteen to eighteen, he believed that he would be lost if he did not repent and undergo that mysterious change called conversion. ...He felt condemned, but he did not want to renounce a world he as yet knew nothing of. He would like to go into life with all his vigour, with all his faculties free.<sup>56</sup>

A rather narrow denominational college cured Claude of his morbid religious fears, and we soon find him unfalteringly stating his convictions. At one time Claude and his Bohemian friend, Ernest, were

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55. My Ántonia, p. 20.

56. One of Ours, p. 49.

arguing about life and the ability to find satisfaction in living. Ernest proffered the idea that

"The martyrs must have found something outside themselves. Otherwise they could have made themselves comfortable with little things."

"Why I should say they were the ones who had nothing but their ideal! It would be ridiculous to get burned at the stake for the sensation. Sometimes I think the martyrs had a good deal of vanity to help them along, too."<sup>57</sup>

At another time we hear more of Claude's individual religious ideas. He and his mother had been reading Paradise Lost together:

"That's fine," Claude commented from the couch. "But Milton couldn't have got along without the wicked, could he?"

Mrs. Wheeler looked up. "Is that a joke?" she asked shyly.

"Oh no, not at all! It just struck me that this part is so much more interesting than the books about perfect innocence in Eden."

"And yet I suppose it shouldn't be so"...

... "The fact remains that it is, dear Mother. And if you took all the great sinners out of the Bible, you'd take out all the interesting characters, wouldn't you?"

"Except Christ"...

"Yes, except Christ. But I suppose the Jews were honest when they thought him the most dangerous kind of criminal."

"Are you trying to tangle me up"...

"I only mean that even in the Bible the people who were merely free from blame didn't amount to much."<sup>58</sup>

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57. One of Ours, p. 53.

58. Ibid., pp. 86 - 87.

The Burdens in My Ántonia were an unpretentious, God-fearing family, and perhaps best illustrate the Protestant spirit. The evening following Jim's arrival in Nebraska to stay with his grandparents, he was impressed by his grandfather's offering up family prayers.

Before we went to bed Jake and Otto [hired hands] were called up to the living room for prayers. Grandfather put on silverrimmed spectacles and read several Psalms.<sup>59</sup>

On Christmas, Jim tells us,

Morning prayers were longer than usual. He read the chapters from St Matthew about the birth of Christ, and as we listened it all seemed like something that had happened lately, and near at hand. In his prayer he thanked the Lord for the first Christmas, and for all it had meant to the world ever since. He gave thanks for our food and comfort, and prayed for the poor and destitute in great cities, where the struggle for life was harder than it was here with us.<sup>60</sup>

Miss Cather has much to say about the Roman Catholics, perhaps because she is writing primarily of the Continental peoples, and their religion is fundamentally an important part of most of their lives. The Catholics respond to the dictates of their consciences and the laws of their church.

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59. My Ántonia, p. 14.

60. Ibid., p. 96.

Ambrosch

After the death of Mr. Shimerda,<sup>61</sup> his son,

did not say a word all morning, but sat with his rosary in his hands, praying, now silently, now aloud. He never looked away from his beads, nor lifted his hands except to cross himself.<sup>62</sup>

The Shimerda family were extremely disquieted because their father had taken his own life. Ambrosch was chiefly concerned about getting a priest, and about his father's soul, which he believed was in a place of torment and would remain there until his family and the priest had profited a great deal for him.<sup>63</sup>

Ambrosch even went so far as to turn over his brother's wages to the priest at Black Hawk to say masses for his father's soul. Jim, the narrator of My Ántonia, said:

Grandmother thought Antonia needed shoes more than Mr. Shimerda needed prayers, but grandfather said tolerantly, "If he can spare six dollars, pinched as he is, it shows he believes what he professes."<sup>64</sup>

Many in the little French town of Sainte-Agnes mourned the sudden death of the young and happy Amédée. He had played, wrestled, sung and, courted under the shadow of his church. Three weeks before his death he

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61. My Ántonia, p. 96.

62. Ibid., p. 114.

63. Ibid., p. 118.

64. Ibid., p. 152.

had carried his baby there to be christened. Amédée's comrades were bowed down with sadness, but they resorted to their faith for comfort:

They could not doubt that that invisible arm was still about Amédée; that through the church on earth he had passed to the church triumphant, the goal of the hopes and faith of so many hundred years.<sup>65</sup>

While one half the little French community, Sainte-Agnes, was sorrowing for Amédée, the other half was busily preparing for a beautiful confirmation service. There was a class of one hundred boys and girls to be confirmed.

When all the pews were full the old men and boys packed the open space at the back of the church, kneeling on the floor. There was scarcely a family in town that was not represented in the confirmation class by a cousin, at least. The new communicants, with their clear reverent faces, were beautiful to look upon as they entered in a body and took the front benches reserved for them. Even before the mass began, the air was charged with feeling. The choir had never sung so well and Raoul Marcel, in the "Gloria," drew even the bishop's eyes to the organ loft. For the offertory he sang Gounod's 'Ave Maria', -- always spoken of in Sainte-Agnes as "the Ave Maria."<sup>66</sup>

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65. O Pioneers!, p. 252.

66. Ibid., p. 254.

It is not only for glorious and special occasions that the Catholic Church serves its people, but for all the time. Day after day it gives strength where help is needed. We hear Marie say, in conversation with her friend:

"I wish you were a Catholic. The Church helps people, indeed it does. I pray for you but that's not the same as if you prayed yourself."<sup>67</sup>

Marie found much consolation in her church and wished its influence might extend to more people who needed comfort.

...she went to the French Church, whatever the weather. ...She prayed for herself and for Frank and for Emil, among the temptations of that gay, corrupt old city. She found more comfort in the Church that winter than ever before. It seemed to come closer to her and fill an emptiness that ached in her heart.<sup>68</sup>

Miss Cather's presentation of the religious life of her characters is as felicitous and as well done as her accounts of the neighborly chats or the more pretentious community gatherings. She has caught the spirit of the different religious groups, and has presented this religious consciousness by revealing the inner lives of the people. She has understood the

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67. O Pioneers!, p. 157.

68. Ibid., p. 201.

hearts of the people and their religious inheritance; she has comprehended the true nature of human reactions and has made them manifest. She has done this without personal prejudice entering into her work, and has, for the most part, let her characters express themselves. Miss Cather's material concerning the religious lives of her people is not only authentic and true to the lives of living peoples, but it engages the attention of the reader and increases his interest and knowledge of the characters in her books.

#### F. Conventions.

In her writings of Nebraska life, Miss Cather has been keenly awake to all the rules regulating society and has discussed frankly the many different conventions, traditions, and forces of public opinion and unadulterated gossip. Whenever these matters presented themselves in the lives of her characters, she recognized them as she recognized all other affairs of interest and incorporated them into her accounts.

But although she writes of the conventions which surround people in a civilized society, we hear a negative tone ring out vindictively in her criticisms.

She realizes and rejoices in the fact that convention can never rule over and definitely thwart the underlying dictates of nature. Margaret Elliot,<sup>69</sup> a New York girl, engaged to be married in a few months, came to visit in a Norwegian settlement in Nebraska. In the light of Eric Hermannson's passionate love for her, she finds an awakening of life, a wealth in herself, of music and love -- finds them in reality for the first time.

She sat still and waited for the traditions in which she had always believed to speak and save her. But they were dumb. She belonged to an ultra-refined civilization which tries to cheat nature with elegant sophistries. Cheat nature? Bah! One generation may do it, perhaps two, but the third -- Can we ever rise above nature or sink below her? ... Does she not always cry in brutal triumph. "I am here still; at the bottom of things, wamring the roots of life; you cannot starve me nor tame me nor thwart me; I made the world, I rule it, and I am its destiny."<sup>70</sup>

We imagine the return of Margaret to her "ultra refined civilization," but all that she was to know of love she had left upon his (Eric's) lips.<sup>71</sup> Was she sorry she had cheated convention just once?

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69. In "Eric Hermannson's Soul."

70. Cosmopolitan, 28: 643 - 644.

71. Ibid.

Many, just as Alexandra did, look upon a married couple as belonging completely and solely to each other, as being incapable of disturbing the life of another because they are married. For Alexandra, Marie was a married woman, her friend and congenial neighbor; she never sensed the love which existed between Marie and her youngest brother, Emil, simply because such a thought would be far from her ideas of the established order of things.

If Marie had been unmarried, -- oh, yes! Then she would have kept her eyes open. But the mere fact that she was Shabata's wife, for Alexandra, settled everything. That she was beautiful, impulsive, barely two years older than Emil, these facts had had no weight with Alexandra. Emil was a good boy, and only bad boys ran after married women.<sup>72</sup>

Not until Marie's husband shot the lovers did Alexandra realize that the two could not have helped loving each other.

Claude Wheeler<sup>73</sup> had his face cut by barb-wire and erysipelas set in. His face was bandaged, and he, very sick and unhappy, was lying flat on his back in bed in a darkened room. Enid, a girl, a young neighbor of Claude came to see him.

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<sup>72.</sup> O Pioneers!, p. 284.

<sup>73.</sup> In One of Ours.

She began to tell Claude about her father's several attacks of erysipelas. He listened but absently. He would never have believed that Enid, with her severe notions of decorum, would come into his room and sit with him like this.<sup>74</sup>

At times, even for the strongest, there is no incentive to counteract the pressure from the crowd; it is easier to follow the inspirations of the general public than it is to obey one's own judgments. Clara Vavrika,<sup>75</sup> a daring, animated Bohemian girl, had become the second wife of Olaf Ericson, a farmer politician, devoted to money making and office seeking. Nils, Olaf's spirited brother, who had long been away and had returned to his prairie home for a visit and to claim Clara for his wife, spoke to her of her marriage:

"You were the last girl in the country I'd have picked for a wife for Olaf. What made you do it, Clara?"

"I suppose I really did it to oblige the neighbors. ... I've discovered that most girls marry out of consideration for the neighborhood."<sup>76</sup>

What a force is neighborhood-gossip! One succumbs to it almost visibly and yet unknowingly. Mrs. Burden drooped under it noticeably; so much so in fact, that her grandson questioned her:

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74. One of Ours, p. 141.

75. In "The Bohemian Girl."

76. McClure, 39: 434.

"...What are you fretting about, grandmother? Has grandfather lost any money?"

"No, it ain't money. I wish it was. But I've heard things. You must 'a' known it would come back to me sometime."

"What is it, grandmother? Is it the Firements dances?"

She nodded.

"I'm sorry I sneaked off like that. But there's nothing wrong about the dances, and I haven't done anything wrong."

... "But it ain't right to deceive us, son, and it brings blame on us. People say you are growing up to be a bad boy, and that ain't just to us."

"I don't care what they say about me, but if it hurts you, that settles it. I won't go to the Firemen's Hall again."<sup>77</sup>

Miss Cather also presents the one who is not bowed down by her neighbor's gossip -- Mrs. Forrester,<sup>78</sup> the exact opposite of Mrs. Burden. After her husband's death Mrs. Forrester was much talked about because Ivy Peters, who had taken over the management of her affairs, was at her home so often. "But I can't bother about their talk,"<sup>79</sup> she exclaimed light-heartedly. She had no sensitive feelings to be hurt by neighbors' talk of the "Merry Widow."

Just as we find different types of conventions and various kinds of gossip, so we also meet with numerous

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77. My Ántonia, pp. 258-259.

78. In A Lost Lady.

79. A Lost Lady, p. 153.

classes of people who react toward these social forms in sundry ways. The people in Miss Cather's books are no exceptions; some are gossips, others are steeped in old traditions; some are not annoyed by public opinion, and others give way before its attacks. Miss Cather's characters have to face these experiences, these sometimes disturbing social forms, but most of her strong people rise above them and do as their consciences and will powers direct. Again we maintain that Miss Cather has made it obvious in her works that she realizes convention can never entirely rule nature.

This subject of conventions and its relative forms, although perhaps not so absorbing as other phases of social life which we discover in Miss Cather's books, is nevertheless truly interesting from the standpoint of the study of characterization and social intercourse.

#### G. Position of Women.

As we study Miss Cather's books about life in Nebraska, we are interested in the position her women characters occupy in relation to the modes of living in which they find themselves. Miss Cather makes it obvious that the position of women depends much upon nationality

and upon financial conditions. The women from the Eastern American families represented by the outstanding characters, Mrs. Wheeler<sup>80</sup> and Mrs. Burden<sup>81</sup>, live the conventional life of the home-maker. They cook meals, clean house, mend clothes, read books, gossip with their neighbors, and in general, watch over the physical, moral, and spiritual well-being of those for whose welfare they are especially solicitous. Their daughters help with the general housework or teach school. And to be sure, it matters but little whether they live in thrift or in comparative poverty; the spirit - - perhaps we should say lack of spirit - - of their lives is essentially the same. Their husbands, sons, and brothers, undemonstratively affectionate, provide for their needs; their neighbors in the community hold them in esteem, consider them pillars of decorum, and speak of their well-ordered households. Their lives have not been particularly colorful nor interesting, and Miss Cather has given but little space to them in her stories.

On the other hand, in the lives of the foreigners, we find much interesting and varied material bearing upon the position of women. And it will be of the Norwegian, the Swedish, and the Bohemian women that we will speak in

detail. It was their position in life that afforded a social problem; the position of the old-stock American women in the home and in the community was one of long standing in which transplanting from the East to the West made no difference. But it was different with the non-English women who could not teach school, and who were willing to, and sometimes were commanded to, work in the fields or to become "hired girls."

Ántonia, a young Bohemian girl who had been deserted by her lover, came back home where her morose brother dictated his commands to the family. Her neighbors soon saw her out in the fields plowing corn.

"All that spring and summer she did the work of a man on the farm; it seemed to be an understood thing. Ambrosch didn't get any other hand to help him."<sup>82</sup>

Mrs. Steavens, one of Ántonia's kind neighbors, was anxious for the girl's health because she knew she was carrying her child.

"Once I told him (Ambrosch, Ántonia's brother) he ought not to let Antonia work so hard and pull herself down. He said, 'If you put that in her head, you better stay home!'"<sup>83</sup>

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82. My Ántonia, p. 355.

83. Ibid., p. 356.

Ántonia helped with the planting, cultivating, harvesting, and thrashing, and in the fall and early winter she herded the cattle in all kinds of weather. Mrs. Steavens says:

"After the winter begun she wore a man's long overcoat and boots, and a man's felt hat with a wide brim."<sup>84</sup>

Later, after Ántonia was married and was having her large family, she still worked in the fields, with the true pioneer spirit, so that she might encourage her husband in the work, and help subdue the land, and raise the food they needed; she worked so that her daughters would not have to work out in the fields or in other peoples' kitchens.

"We'd never have got through if I hadn't been so strong. I've always had good health, thank God, and I was able to help him (her husband) in the fields until right up to the time before my babies came."<sup>85</sup>

From the Bergson family we have the opportunity to learn something of the position of some Swedish women. Carl,<sup>86</sup> an old friend of Alexandra's, had been visiting her for many days. Her married brothers, Lou and Oscar, who owned their own homes, and in many respects were her most unfriendly neighbors, felt it their duty to make her realize that they did not approve of his long stay and

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84. My Ántonia, p. 357.

85. Ibid., p. 386.

86. In O Pioneers!

that "people have begun to talk."<sup>87</sup> "People think you're getting taken in,"<sup>88</sup> they told her. By this latter remark they meant that probably she would want to marry him, and in doing so would undoubtedly lose some of her land -- that it was property and money he was after -- and they did not intend he should have any. They practically told her that she was too old to marry; and they were not going "to sit like stumps," and watch her "done out of the property"<sup>89</sup> and made ridiculous. They laid claim to her property, and told her:

"The property of a family really belongs to the men of the family, no matter about the title."<sup>90</sup>

... "It makes women conceited to meddle in business."<sup>91</sup>

We see more of the attitude of the Swedish men toward the position they believe women should take in a little episode immediately following a Swedish marriage. Signa and Nelse, one of Alexandra's maids and one of her "hired hands," had married. The wedding supper was over, and the guests, with the exception of Marie, a close friend of Alexandra's, had gone. Alexandra went to bid Signa good-bye.

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87. In D Pioneers!, p. 166.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid., p. 172.

90. Ibid., p. 169.

91. Ibid., p. 171.

She was surprised to find that the bride had changed her slippers for heavy shoes and was pinning up her skirts. At that moment Nelse appeared at the gate with the two milk cows that Alexandra had given Signa for a wedding present.

Alexandra began to laugh.  
"Why Signa, you and Nelse are to ride home. I'll send Ivar over with the cows in the morning."

Signa hesitated and looked perplexed. When her husband called her, she pinned her hat on resolutely. "I' ta-anck I better do yust like he say," she murmured in confusion.<sup>92</sup>

The wedding party set off with old Ivar taking the presents in the wagon and the bride and groom walking behind, each leading a cow.

Marie had no patience with Signa for marrying a grumpy Nelse, and could not understand why she had not married another boy whom she was quite sure Signa had liked. Alexandra explained matters thus:

"I suppose she was too much afraid of Nelse to marry anyone else. Now that I think of it, most of my girls (Swedish hired girls) have married men they were afraid of. I believe there is a good deal of the cow in most Swedish girls. You high-strung Bohemians can't understand us. We're a terribly practical people, and I guess we think a cross man makes a good manager."<sup>93</sup>.....

92. O Pioneers!, p. 227.

93. Ibid., pp. 228 - 229.

According to these two accounts, Miss Cather would evidently have us believe that in general the Swedish men consider the women their inferiors and would like them to have no will power of their own, and that the women, in most cases, are willing to bow to the dictates of their men-folk.

In My Antonia, Miss Cather has given over a whole chapter to "The Hired Girls." The hired girls were the Norwegian, Swedish, and Bohemian country girls who came to town to work out; but we will hear some of the story in Miss Cather's own words as she has put them into the mouth of Jim Burden.

There was a curious social situation in Black Hawk. All the young men felt the attraction of the fine, well-set-up- country girls who had come to town to earn a living, and, in nearly every case, to help the father struggle out of debt, or to make it possible for the younger children of the family to go to school... Physically they were almost a race apart, and out-of-door work had given them a vigor which, when they got over their first shyness on coming to town, developed into a positive carriage and freedom of movement, and made them conspicuous among Black Hawk women.

That was before the day of High-School athletics. Girls who had to walk more than half a mile to school were pitied. There was

not a tennis court in the town; physical exercise was thought rather inelegant for the daughters of well-to-do families. Some of the High-School girls were jolly and pretty, but they stayed indoors in winter because of the cold, and in summer because of the heat. ...

The daughters of the Black Hawk merchants had a confident, uninquiring belief that they were "refined," and that the country girls, who "worked out," were not. ... I thought the attitude of the town people toward these girls very stupid. If I told my schoolmates that Lena Lingard's grandfather was a clergyman, and much respected in Norway, they looked at me blankly. What did it matter? All foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English. There was not a man in Black Hawk who had the intelligence or cultivation, much less the personal distinction, of Antonia's father.<sup>94</sup>

Many of the mothers of these young men were terribly upset to think that their sons would even so much as look at hired girls. But they need not have worried.

They mistook the mettle of their sons. The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth.<sup>95</sup>

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94. My Antonia, pp. 225-28.

95. Ibid., p. 229.

One of the hired girls whom Miss Gather tells us about in detail was Lena Lingard. Lena, a Norwegian girl, had come to town to make money at dress-making to send to her poverty-stricken family, and like the other girls from the country, she too attracted the attention of the young men of the town.

The Vannis' tent brought the town boys and the country girls together on neutral ground. Sylvester Lovett, who was cashier in his father's bank, always found his way to the tent on Saturday night. He took all the dances Lena Lingard would give him and even grew bold enough to walk home with her. If his sisters or their friends happened to be among the onlookers on "popular nights," Sylvester stood back in the shadow under the cotton-wood trees, smoking and watching Lena with a harassed expression... Later in the summer, when Lena went home for a week to visit, her mother, (Jim Burden is speaking) heard from Antonia that young Lovett drove all the way out there to see her, and took her buggy-riding. In my ingenuousness I hoped that Sylvester would marry Lena, and thus give all the country girls a better position in the town.

Sylvester dallied about Lena until he began to make mistakes in his work; had to stay at the bank until after dark to make his books balance. He was daft about her and everyone knew it. To escape from his predicament he ran away with a widow six years older than himself, who owned a half-section ...

So that was what they were like, I thought, these white-handed, high-collared clerks and bookkeepers! I used to glare at young Lovett from a distance and only wished I had some way of showing my contempt for him.<sup>96</sup>

We see from this study that the intelligent, non-English woman's position was often that of the pioneer sod-breaker, and that usually circumstances placed her in the position of servant where she was ridiculed and looked askance; in some instances she was considered inferior to one of the opposite sex and was ruled by masculine commands. But it was often such a woman who was the true pioneer, who was a leader, who possessed an unconquerable spirit, and who was the instigator of new methods; it was she who had the insight to look into the beyond and the faith to "hold on" -- the woman with nobleness of character and mind unfalterable in the face of rigid traditions and unmerited scorn.

We have studied here the position of the early non-English immigrant women in Nebraska, but time was to bring its changes, and the next generation was to know new conditions and hold different ideas:

...The girls who once worked in Black Hawk kitchens are today managing big farms and fine families of their own; their children are better off than the children of the townwomen

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96. My Antonia, p. 231 - 232.

they used to serve. . . . Today the best that a harassed Black Hawk merchant can hope for is to sell provisions and farm machinery and automobiles to the rich farms where that first crop of stalwart Bohemian and Scandinavian girls are now the mistresses.<sup>97</sup>

The subject of the immigrant girls who were not appreciated has interested Miss Cather immensely, and she has dealt with it at length. She has taken her most memorable heroines from this group of women and has shown us that their lives have been full of deep, rich living, proving that the failure on the part of many to appreciate them did not signify that they had no worth. Miss Cather was not one of the dim-sighted ones; she was a discerning reader of character, and chose to put into novelistic form her interpretations - - for which we are signally glad.

#### H. Problems of Marriage.

In studying the problems of marriage which we find in Miss Cather's books on Nebraska life, we will consider love-relationships which are not concerned with home-making. These affairs provide great climaxes, plot material, realistic scenes, tragic effects, sympathetic .....

97. My Ántonia, pp. 228 - 229.

appeals, a profusion of ideas, delusions -- but never happiness -- in Miss Cather's stories. The deluded bridegroom, Claude Wheeler, the too-late-awakened Margaret, Antonia, destined for motherhood, gay Mrs. Forrester living life recklessly, lovable Marie doomed to tragedy -- we read all their genuine and compelling stories in Miss Cather's frank expressive medium. Miss Cather is wide awake to these problems in the life she describes, and because of her sympathetic imagination she is able to treat them adequately and without sentimentality.

Miss Cather has put into the mouth of Jim Burden this thought:

I wondered whether the life that was right for one was ever right for two!<sup>98</sup>

Perhaps that is a fundamental maxim for life, and only the contented few have realized it and adapted themselves accordingly. At least it is obviously one of the ideas Miss Cather wishes to convey to her readers. If we keep this conception in mind as we review some of the life dramas she has given us, perhaps we shall realize more fully their beauty and value.

Claude asked Mr. Royce if he had any objection to his marrying his daughter, Enid. Mr. Royce had none,

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98. My Ántonia, p. 413.

but he did so want to warn Claude in some way of what his future might be; he wanted to explain something of his own married life with Enid's mother; he wanted to tell him about Enid's missionary ideas and her views opposed to marriage, but he could only say:

"You'll find out that pretty nearly everything you believe about life -- about marriage, especially \* - is lies. I don't know why people prefer to live in that sort of a world but they do."<sup>99</sup>

Claude and Enid were married, but even the first hours of their married life brought bitter disappointment and chagrin to Claude;

he had looked forward to being wonderfully happy in love, and to deserving his happiness.<sup>100</sup>

But Claude had never known truly the distant, cold, unaffectionate nature of Enid.

Everything about a man's embrace was distasteful to Enid; something inflicted upon women, like the pain of childbirth, -- for Eve's transgression, perhaps<sup>101</sup>

Claude had lavished upon her all the love of his ardent nature but had failed to realize how little she warmed to his tender passion for her.

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99. One of Ours, p. 150.

100. Ibid., p. 210.

101. Ibid.

Margaret<sup>102</sup> had come west from New York to enjoy uncompromisingly the few months of freedom left to her, and had met Eric. Her thoughts turned from the conventional, intellectual, politely civilized Easterner whom she was to marry in a few months to the picturesque, impulsive Norwegian who had cried out to her passionately:

"I love you more than Christ who died for me!"<sup>103</sup>

Unconsciously she contrasted the Norwegian and her betrothed. She saw

the blue eyes that flashed above her, felt only the warmth of that throbbing hand which held hers and which the blood of his heart fed. Dimly as in a dream, she saw the drooping shoulders, high white forehead and tight, cynical mouth of the man she was to marry in December.<sup>104</sup>

Margaret had run her "whole soul's length out to the wind just once,"<sup>105</sup> but because of circumstances she was to return to a conventional marriage minus the spirited love she had experienced "just once." Why was it? Why was marriage so problematical?

Ántonia, a trusting, affectionate Bohemian girl who loved deeply and sincerely, left her home to marry Larry Donovan, a railroad conductor. He deceived her,

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102. In "Eric Hermannson's Soul."

103. Cosmopolitan, 28: 642.

104. Ibid.

105. My Ántonia, pp. 352 - 3.

spent her money and deserted her; he never married her. She came back to her farm-home, crushed and quiet and humbled; and proceeded to do a man's work in the field -- to be her brother's drudge. A neighbor, Mrs. Steavens, who was very solicitous for Ántonia's happiness, tells us her story as the broken-hearted girl told it to her:

"I'm not married, Mrs. Steavens," she says to me very quiet and natural-like, "and I ought to be ... He's run away from me," she said. "I don't know if he ever meant to marry me ... He didn't have any job. He'd been fired; blacklisted for knocking down fares ... He lived with me till my money gave out, and afterwards I found <sup>he</sup> hadn't been hunting work at all."<sup>105</sup>

When the baby came "She loved it from the first as dearly as if she'd had a ring on her finger, and was never ashamed of it."<sup>106</sup> Ántonia was a born mother. She loved children, and her friends had felt that her mission in life would be to bring many happy, healthy children into the world. What a tragedy for her young spirit that she had not loved wisely but too profoundly.

Ántonia could never believe harm of anyone she loved. Some of her friends tried to tell her what they had heard against Larry Donovan's character, but she would

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105. My Ántonia, pp. 352 - 3.

106. Ibid., p. 359.

not listen to them. The whole community was greatly concerned over Ántonia's happiness, and when her plans for marriage proved to be so disastrous, they talked, to be sure, but they felt for her in her humbled state of life. Ántonia's happiness had been destroyed.

Captain Forrester<sup>107</sup> had saved Marion's life, and upon her recovery from her terrible fall in the canyon, she married him. But he was twenty-five years her senior and was always "Mr. Forrester" to Marion; they were ill-suited to each other, unfortunately mated. She was gay, craved attention, and the Captain was always pleased when he saw her greet their many guests; they frankly admired her, and he liked to see it. But the Captain interested Marion much less than the least of their guests; he lacked the fire of youth; so she loved other men; she stooped to unworthy lovers, and became indeed "A Lost Lady." One Christmas time when the Forresters were having a house-party, Mrs. Forrester went sleigh-riding with their guest, Frank Ellinger. One of the Blum boys saw them emerge from a cedar thicket carrying buffalo robes.

They walked slowly, wholly absorbed by what they were saying to each other. When they came up to the sleigh, the man spread the robes

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107. In A Lost Lady.

on the seat and put his hands under Mrs. Forrester's arms to lift her in. But he did not lift her; he stood for a long while holding her crushed up against his breast, her face hidden in his black over-coat.

"What about those damned cedar boughs?" he asked, after he had put her in and covered her up. "Shall I go back and cut some?"

"It doens't matter," she murmured.<sup>108</sup>

But her secrets were safe with the neighbor boy, Adolph Blum. "She bought game of him in the closed season, and didn't give him away."<sup>109</sup>

A tragic story of stolen love is unfolded in the fortunes of Marie, Frank, and Emil -- the old, old triangle. Marie, young and impulsive, loved Frank, a dashing, handsome Bohemian just over from the old country. Marie's father opposed a hasty marriage on the part of his young daughter and sent her away to a convent school until she should become more sensible. After a year, when she was only eighteen, she ran away and married Frank. At first she was his "devoted slave," and they were happy together. But five years have passed, and her husband's hot temper and rough, surly manner with Marie have long since killed her love for him.

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108. A Lost Lady, p. 66 - 67.

109. Ibid., p. 68.

One day Marie talked very frankly and earnestly about her husband to her beloved neighbor and friend Alexandra, sister of Emil.

"I could pick out exactly the right sort of woman for Frank -- now. The trouble is you almost have to marry a man before you can find out the sort of wife he needs; and usually it's exactly the sort you are not. Then what are you going to do about it?"<sup>110</sup>

But Marie had found out too late. She now faced a loveless existence, and she was a passionate little Bohemian girl who required love in her life.

Then Emil, her girlhood friend and companion, came home from the University. They loved for over a year without even so much as letting each other know it.

How terrible it was to love people when you could not really share their lives!<sup>111</sup>

It was at a Church fair in the French Country that they first acknowledged their love for each other. One of the boys pulled the light switch in the church basement so that the French boys might have the chance to kiss their sweethearts. Emil, although a Swede among his French friends, followed their example and kissed pretty Marie Shabata.

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110. O Pioneers!, p. 197.

111. Ibid., p. 243.

A little later, on a beautiful afternoon in late summer, Marie's husband, drunk and desperate, saw and shot the lovers under Marie's favorite white mulberry tree in the orchard. Crazy Ivar, Alexandra's "hired hand;" found them early the next morning and came running to her.

"Mistress, mistress," he sobbed, "it has fallen! Sin and death for the young ones! God have mercy upon us."<sup>112</sup>

In portraying these scenes, Miss Cather is indeed the dramatic artist. She has revealed, in a convincing manner, some supreme moments of earnest living -- most of them in graphic detail. But in describing these interesting, actual stories, she has not forgotten the ideas, the problems which were the seeds either in the making or in the completion of the tragic situations. She realizes that these difficult matters are not for individuals alone to bear and to solve; such unhappy conditions reflect their sadness upon the lives of whole families, of whole communities. And when we wonder why such misunderstanding, such unhappiness, such suffering should come to some people, we cannot but think, with Carl<sup>113</sup> who replied to Alexandra's question, "Why did it have to be my boy?"

"Because he was the best there was, I suppose. They were both the best you had here."<sup>114</sup>

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112. O Pioneers!, p. 305.

113. Ibid.

114. Ibid.

## CHAPTER II.

## Home Life.

A. Husband and Wife.

In Miss Cather's books about life in Nebraska, the material we find on home life, while perhaps not so picturesque nor so dramatic as that about community life, is nevertheless significant and interesting. It is in the home that we find the beginnings of social life, and although it is there that many think they find life dull and irksome, we find nothing tedious or dry about the home life recorded by Miss Cather. Moreover, the life-studies she gives lack nothing to persuade us of their genuineness.

We shall discuss the home as a center of social, domestic life established by husband and wife, and we shall consider first their relationships, their trials and joys. We shall speak of the happy couple, of those who find their greatest diversion in quarreling, of the good provider and his devoted helpmate, of the consoling wife and her quick-tempered husband, of the woman who is the inspirational home-maker, and of the man who succeeds under encouragement.

Amédée Chevalier, a prosperous French farmer, was proud of his home and rejoiced in the good fortune that gave him such a wife as Angélique. They were young, and their love for each other was spontaneous and beautiful. For them, married life was very sweet. At one time Amédée cried out to his friend:

"Oh, Emil, you wanna get married right off quick! It's the greatest thing ever."<sup>1</sup>

And Emil "liked to see and to think about Amédée's sunny, natural, happy love."<sup>2</sup> Amédée took a great interest in buying new machinery and harvesting his wheat; his wife, as happily, cooked for the men. They had no worries; they were secure in their happiness -- in their work and in their devotion to each other.

We next enter a household which contrasts remarkably with that of Amédée. Many believed the Cutters really enjoyed quarreling; if they did not, they rarely had any amusement whatsoever. They wrangled about everything -- about household expenses, about chopping down the cedar trees, about the bequeathing of property. But they seemed to find their relations to each other interesting and stimulating -- as did their neighbors.

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1. O Pioneers!, p. 160.

2. Ibid., p. 163.

Wick Cutter had a bad business reputation and a worse social one. He not only deceived his wife and played tricks on her, but he was dissolute with women and planned disgrace for their "hired girl."

Certainly Cutter liked to have his wife think him a devil. In some way he depended upon the excitement he could arouse in her hysterical nature... His zest in debauchery might want but never Mrs. Cutter's belief in it. The reckoning with his wife at the end of an escapade was something he counted on -- like the last powerful liquors after a long dinner. The one excitement he really couldn't do without was quarreling with Mrs. Cutter.<sup>3</sup>

The Harling family, though not an ideal one, is admirable. Mrs. Harling, in the midst of everyday household cares, always found time to practice diligently at her piano. Mr. Harling was very methodical and went about his work in the manner of the strict business man. Each had well recognized duties and did not interfere with the other's established routine. But under all this seeming reserve and quiet dignity, the Harlings had a deep-rooted devotion to each other. Mr. Harling demanded much attention, but his wife enjoyed giving it to him and doing little services to make his life one of contentment.

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3. My Antonia, p. 288.

...He demanded all his wife's attention. He used to take her away to their room in the west ell, and talk over his business with her all evening... Mrs. Harling paid no heed to anyone else if he was there. Before he went to bed she always got him a lunch of smoked salmon or anchovies and beer. He kept an alcohol lamp in his room, and a French coffee-pot, and his wife made coffee for him at any hour of the night he happened to want it.<sup>4</sup>

Although Marie and Frank Shabata were not truly happy in their home, there was practically no quarreling between them, simply because Marie would not talk back to her husband. Frank was rough and hot-headed, and he sometimes worked himself into a veritable rage. One day -- and this was illustrative of his usual disposition -- when his neighbor's hogs got into his wheat, he chased them until he was hot and very angry. Marie took his insults and outrageous talk and tried to calm her husband. As he lay on the couch, she stroked back his hair and endeavored to comfort him.

"Poor Frank! You've run until you've made your headache, now haven't you? Let me make you some coffee."

"What else am I to do?" he cried hotly in Bohemian. "Am I to let any

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4. My Ántonia, p. 178-179.

old woman's hogs root up my wheat?  
Is that what I work myself to death  
for?"

"Don't worry about it, Frank.  
I'll speak to Mrs. Hiller again.  
But really, she almost cried last  
time they got out, she was so  
sorry"....

"That's it; you always side  
with them against me."<sup>5</sup>

But however unappreciative of Marie's soothing ways Frank appeared to be, at heart he must have felt the influence of her kindness. After he had shot his wife and her lover,<sup>6</sup> he was crazy with the horror of what he had done, and to make matters worse for him, he was sick and nauseated from drink. He wanted Marie.

...He could think of nothing except his physical weakness and his desire to be comforted by his wife. He wanted to get into his own bed. And had his wife been at home, he would have turned and gone back to her weekly enough.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship existing between Antonia and her husband was one of mutual understanding and companionship.

The two seemed to be on terms of easy friendliness, touched with humor. Clearly, she was the impulse, and he the corrective.<sup>8</sup>

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5. O Pioneers!. p. 141.

6. Ibid., p. 196.

7. Ibid., p. 267.

8. My Ántonia, p. 403.

Her husband and his eldest son had been away on a two day pleasure trip to Wilber, a Bohemian town, where they had attended a street fair with its merry-go-round, its Ferris wheel, and its dance.

Ántonia came running down from the house and hugged the two men as if they had been away for months.<sup>9</sup>

Ever since they were married -- and they now had a dozen children -- Ántonia had been the real homemaker. It had been she who had laid plans for making the farm pay, who kindly showed her city-bred husband the best and easiest way to succeed, who showered him with affection and kindness. And he in turn profited by her insight and appreciated her ability and thoughtfulness.

"Yes, she is a good wife for a poor man. She ain't always so strict with me, neither. Sometimes maybe I drink a little too much beer in town, and when I come home she don't say nothing. She don't ask me no questions. We always get along fine, her and me, like at first. The children don't make trouble between us, like sometimes happens." He lit another <sup>10</sup> pipe and pulled on it contentedly.

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9. My Ántonia, p. 401.

10. Ibid., p. 412.

Miss Cather has set down happy, intimate delineations of married life. Usually she has chosen to show the ordinary relationship which exists between a husband and wife rather than to give the exciting or melodramatic. She has given a number of different combinations of characters and has portrayed them and their reactions to each other in a realistic and interesting manner. We sense the conditions under which these people live, and know their troubles and exultations.

#### B. Parents and Children.

Concerning the relationships between parents and children, Miss Cather's treatment is particularly sympathetic and comprehensive. Her interpretations of family associations are at once accurate and sensitive, and in them we discover some of her finest pathos and some of her most subtle character portraits. Miss Cather takes us into many different types of homes and reveals to us the family life she finds there in the hearts and thoughts and deeds of parents and children. She usually takes us into the farm homes, but we also visit with her in city homes. We see the small families and the large ones; we become acquainted with those who are indifferent and those who are happy.

We enthusiastically accompany Chris Lingard, the little twelve-year-old Norwegian farm lad, to do his Christmas shopping. He had earned his money by sweeping out the Church and building the fires, and had now come to town to buy handkerchiefs for his mother's Christmas present. He consulted his sister about his purchase:

"Sister, you know mother's name is Berthe. I don't know if I ought to get B for Berthe, or M for Mother."<sup>11</sup>

We hear Ántonia, still just a girl, speaking of her father, who had been and still was a comforting, stimulating influence in her life.

"Look at my papa here; he's been dead all these years, and yet he is more real to me than almost anybody else. He never goes out of my life. I talk to him and consult him all the time. The older I grow, the better I know him and the more I understand him."<sup>12</sup>

In "The Bohemian Girl," Miss Cather has written a most touching and realistic account of a child's brooding over his unpleasant existence in a life of routine work, and of his joy upon his realization that he was appreciated. Little Eric, who had been consistently unhappy at home since the departure of his big brother, the only one who had ever openly expressed his love for

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11. My Ántonia, p. 195.

12. Ibid., p. 362.

had decided to leave home and work for his brother, who had gone back to the old country. But Eric did not get far on his long journey before he asked the conductor to let him off at the next station.

He set his telescope down softly in the kitchen shed, and slipped noiselessly along the path to the front porch. He sat down on the step --

"I've come back, Mother."

"Very, well," said Mrs. Ericson ...

"How about the milking?" he faltered.

"That's been done, hours ago."

"Who did you get?"

"Get? I did it myself. I can milk as good as any of you."

Eric slid along the step nearer to her. "Oh, Mother, why did you?" he asked sorrowfully. "Why didn't you get one of Otto's boys?"

"I didn't want anybody to know I was in need of a boy," said Mrs. Ericson bitterly. She looked straight in front of her and her mouth tightened: "I always meant to give you the home farm," she added.

The boy started and slid closer. "Oh Mother," he faltered, "I don't care about the farm. I came back because I thought you might be needing me, maybe." He hung his head and got no further.

"Very well," said Mrs. Ericson. Her hand went out from her suddenly and rested on his head. Her fingers twined themselves in his soft, pale hair. His tears splashed down on the boards; happiness filled his heart.<sup>13</sup>

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In Douglass<sup>14</sup> home-coming we miss the dramatic restraint of the preceding scene, but are introduced to a new type of motherly love and a contrasting, a more conventional environment. Douglass was coming back to his Nebraska home after having won fame as a playwright in New York.

His mother was waiting for him under the bitter-sweet vines on the porch, just where she had always stood to greet him when he came home for his college vacations.<sup>15</sup>

Everything was in the best order; the atmosphere of the home seemed to catch the spirit of expectancy from the mother. The table was set just as it had always been when Douglass came home from college.

There were all his favorite viands and the old family silver spread on the white cloth with the maiden-hair fern pattern, under the soft lamp light.<sup>16</sup>

We leave the home where all is devotion and praise, and enter another where one dare not have sensitive feelings. Claude, the hero of One of Ours, recoiled visibly under his father's blunt, unkind humor. On one memorable occasion -- it was circus day -- Claude washed the car and planned to start for town soon after breakfast. But at the table his father took the joy

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14. In "The Treasure of Far Island."

15. New England Mag., 27: 236.

16. Ibid., 27: 237.

out of the trip by demanding in his jocular fashion that Claude drive the team to town, take two hired men with him, and sell some greasy, smelly, old hides that had been lying around for months.

"Can't we have the car? I've washed it on purpose"...

"I don't mind about you washing the car; mud preserves the paint, they say, but it'll be all right this time, Claude" ... Probably his father had looked out of the window and seen him washing the car, and had put this up on him while he dressed. It was like his father's idea of a joke.<sup>17</sup>

Claude's mother was sympathetic, felt his disappointment, and hurried to assure him of her interest.

"If you want I should do up your linent coat, Claude, I can iron it while you're hitching," she said

"You needn't mind, mother. ... I'd better wear my old clothes if I have to take the hides" ...

"Don't bother about it. Put me out a clean coloured shirt, if you want to. That's all right." She was so plucky and so stooped, his dear mother! He guessed if she could stand having these men about, could cook and wash for them, he could drive them to town!<sup>18</sup>

Of all the many scenes in which we see something of the relationship existing between parents and children, there are none so complete or so graphic as the one which pictures Antonia and her large, congenial

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17. One of Ours, p. 4.

18. Ibid., p. 5.

family. We see this picture through the eyes of Jim Burden, a visitor in Ántonia's home, and it will be from his point of view that we will present it here.

Ántonia called her family to her; they came from all corners of the house, from the spacious farm-yard -- from everywhere they came tumbling in; there were about twelve of them.

Clearly they were proud of each other, and of being so many. When they had all been introduced, Anna, the eldest daughter, who had met me at the door, scattered them gently, and came bringing a white apron which she tied around her mother's waist.

"Now, mother, sit down and talk to Mr. Burden. We'll finish the dishes quietly and not disturb you."<sup>19</sup>

Soon after Jim had arrived and while he and Ántonia were still talking about her children, the little boy whom they called Jan came in to tell his mother about their dog they had found dead.

He stood by her chair, leaning his elbows on her knees and twisting her apron strings in his slender fingers, while he told her his story softly in Bohemian, and the tears brimmed over and hung on his long lashes. His mother listened, spoke soothingly to him, and in a whisper promised him something that made him give her a quick, teary smile.<sup>20</sup>

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19. My Ántonia, pp. 376-7.

20. Ibid., pp. 379-80.

While Ántonia and her older daughters were cooking supper, Jim joined the two boys who were starting out with their milk pails. Ambrosch told how happy his mother had been when she received the pictures Jim had sent from the old country.

I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Your mother, you know, was very much loved by all of us. She was a beautiful girl."

"Oh, we know!" They both spoke together; seemed a little surprised that I should think it necessary to mention this. "Everybody liked her, didn't they? The Harlings and your grandmother, and all the town people."

"Sometimes," I ventured, "it doesn't occur to boys that their mother was ever young and pretty."

"Oh, we know!" they said again, warmly. "She's not very old now," Ambrosch added.<sup>21</sup>

After the milking and feeding had been done, they all gathered in the house for supper.

What a tableful we were at supper; two long rows of restless heads in the lamp-light, and so many eyes fastened excitedly upon Ántonia as she sat at the head of the table, filling the plates and starting the dishes on their way. The children were seated according to a system; a little one next an older one, who was to watch over his behavior and to see that he got his food. Anna and Wulka

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21. My Ántonia, pp. 389-90.

left their chairs from time to time to bring fresh plates of kolaches, and pitchers of milk.<sup>22</sup>

Later, in the parlor, Ántonia brought out a big boxful of photographs to show Jim. The children were excited and exclaimed over familiar faces; they knew all about the people who had known their mother when she was a girl.

In the group about Ántonia I was conscious of a kind of physical harmony. They leaned this way and that, and were not afraid to touch each other. They contemplated the photographs with pleased recognition; looked at some admiringly, as if these characters in their mother's girlhood had been remarkable people.<sup>23</sup>

Even if we did not know that Miss Cather has written of the life and people she knew intimately in Nebraska, we could surely guess, after having read about Ántonia and her children, that that is a truth. She gives us a picture in words, more lifelike, more understandable than any photographer could take, because she expresses in her account the descriptions, the conversations, and the actions which make people interesting and memorable.

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22. My Ántonia, p. 391.

23. Ibid., p. 394.

In this series of family scenes we find either pathetic or happy elements and sometimes both; in all we find the true spirit of parenthood and childhood. Miss Cather is an exact interpreter of family life and always engages the attention of her reader no matter how trivial may seem the matter at hand.

#### C. Brothers and Sisters.

Miss Cather has neglected no phase of family life; we find intimate relationships between brothers and sisters just as we found them between parents and children. We come upon an idyllic companionship between brothers; we rejoice with an unselfish sister; we meet the brother who is a friend in need; we learn of the understanding and affection existing between brother and sister; we watch a balanced Fellowship between brothers; we hear quarrels between brothers and sisters. Here again Miss Cather has presented different types and combinations of associations; we will study a few in greater detail.

Nils<sup>24</sup> had been away from home, working in the old country, for several years, and when he came back for a visit it was his little brother, Eric, whom he was most glad to see.

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24. In "The Bohemian Girl."

He had a fair, gentle face and big gray eyes, and wisps of soft yellow hair hung down under his cap. Nils sprang up and pulled him into the kitchen, hugging him and slapping him on the shoulders. "Well, if it isn't my kid! Look at the size of him! Don't you know me, Eric?"<sup>25</sup>

The brothers had been good pals when Nils was at home, and now that he had come back for an indefinite visit, they at once renewed their companionship where it had been interrupted years before.

Nils put his hand on Eric's shoulder, and the two tramped down the hill and across the sand creek into the dusty high-road beyond. Neither spoke. They swung along at an even gait. ... The brothers followed the road for a mile or more without finding a place to sit down. Finally Nils perched on a stile over the wire fence, and Eric sat on the lower step.<sup>26</sup>

The two sat in companionable silence or talked as they felt like it. They were happy just being together, and they liked the black night. Presently Nils remarked:

"You remember how we always said the leaves were whispering when they rustled at night? Well, they always whispered to me about the sea. Sometimes they said names out of the geography books. In a high wind they had a desperate sound, like something trying to tear loose"...

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25. McClure's, 39: 423.

26. Ibid., 39: 424.

They sat a while longer, watching the stars. At last Eric whispered anxiously: "Hadn't we better go back now? Mother will get tired waiting for us." They rose and took a short cut home, through the pasture.<sup>27</sup>

Months later something occurred which again brought to the surface that spirit of tacit understanding which made these brothers so close to one another. Nils was again back in Bergan, and Eric was on the train, running away from home where everything was unpleasant for him. Eric was trying to keep up his courage and not disappoint Nils, but he was also thinking seriously of getting off the train at the next station.

The train stopped. Suddenly he remembered his brother's kind, twinkling eyes, -- that always looked at you as if from far away. The lump in his throat softened.

"Oh, but Nils, Nils would understand!" he thought. "That's just it about Nils; he always understands."<sup>28</sup>

Lena, a Norwegian girl, was brought up on a farm, but she was now doing dressmaking in town and sending money home to her family. She not only bought clothes for her younger brothers and sisters, but she also helped pay for the machinery needed to cultivate

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27. McClure's, 39: 426.

28. Ibid., 39: 443.

and harvest the crops. On one occasion she said to her friends;

"I'm going to get Mary a new coat this fall, if the sulky plough's never paid for!"<sup>29</sup>

Lena was unselfishly looking out for the needs of her younger sister.

Claude had married; and Ralph, his brother, had been both usher and best man. In filling the latter office he had indeed been helpful and busy; now his last duty was to take his brother and his bride to the train.

The express whistled just as he pulled up at the station. He and Claude caught up the four pieces of hand luggage and put them in the state-room. Leaving Enid there with the bags, the two boys went to the rear platform of the observation car to talk until the last moment. Ralph checked off on his fingers the list of things he had promised Claude to attend to. Claude thanked him feelingly. He felt that without Ralph he could never have got married at all. They had never been such good friends as during the last fortnight.<sup>30</sup>

From the time they were children -- she was considerably older than he -- Alexandra and Emil had understood and enjoyed each other's company. From the

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29. My Ántonia, p. 274.

30. One of Ours, p. 194.

time she had wrapped her veil about his throat because he had left his comforter behind, Emil's sister had watched over him, counseled him, and taken a devoted interest in his doings.

When they were older they liked to talk of their quiet, sensitive, intelligent father, who had died when Emil was still a small boy; they discussed their brothers, who were jealous, bigoted, and self-satisfied; and they loved to recall experiences dear to them both. Alexandra and Emil always discussed together any plans for new adventures or new undertakings. One day they spoke of Alexandra's probable marriage to Carl. Emil could hardly see why Alexandra wanted to marry him, but he said: "You ought to do whatever you want to. I'll always back you."<sup>31</sup> That was the spirit in which the two always approached each other.

Lou and Oscar, the older brothers of Alexandra, were also pals, but for different reasons. One was a positive drudge; he felt that "there was a sovereign virtue in mere bodily toil,"<sup>32</sup> and he enjoyed doing things the hardest way possible. The other was flighty, attended too much to details, and was easily overworked.

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31. O Pioneers!, p. 177.

32. Ibid., p. 55.

The two boys balanced each other, and they pulled well together. They had been good friends since they were children. One seldom went anywhere, even to town, without the other.<sup>35</sup>

With these two factions in the same family, each congenial within itself, we would not expect to find one group friendly towards the other; and that was always the exact state of affairs. The two older boys had always been jealous of Emil, and had been particularly unfriendly ever since Alexandra had sent Emil off to college. The brothers and sister often had small disputes; but we will speak here of the big climactic quarrel of their lives. Carl, an old friend of the Bergson family and a particular friend to Alexandra, had come back, after many years, for a visit. He had already stayed longer than her brothers thought he should; so one Saturday when Emil and Carl were at a church fair up in "the French country," Lou and Oscar left their farming to come and talk to Alexandra. They told her that at her age -- forty -- she ought to have more sense than to marry or to cause talk among the neighbors by allowing Carl to prolong his stay. They also quarreled over how Alexandra should dispose of her land. The boys said cutting and hateful

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things to Alexandra. In her reaction of anger towards them she resolved that only through law would her brothers ever be able to exert any influence over her again. When the storm of wrangling was over, Alexandra, weak from emotional excitement, said quietly:

"I think I would rather not have <sup>34</sup> lived to find out what I have today!"

The scene to which we have just alluded is one of intense dramatic qualities when one reads it in Miss Cather's own presentation.

We see from this short study that Miss Cather has the power and ability to present angry disputes between brothers and sisters, and she has the sensitive understanding which makes it possible for her to depict the most ideal companionships.

#### D. Hired Help.

No commentary on the Nebraska social life which Miss Cather has treated would be complete without mention of "hired help." There were both "hired men" and "hired girls" -- Bohemians and Scandinavians for the most part; Miss Cather makes it clear that those from the Atlantic States did not "work out." In many instances servants

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34. O Pioneers!, p. 172.

figured quite prominently in the home life of their employers, and it is from this point of view that we will present them.

In Alexandra's household we look in upon a very interesting domestic scene.

"Alexandra was already seated at the head of the long table, having dinner with her men, as she always did unless there were visitors ... The three pretty young Swedish girls who did Alexandra's housework were 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. To be sure they always wasted a good deal of time getting in each other's way and giggling at each other's mistakes... These girls, with their long letters from home, their finery, and their love-affairs, afforded her a great deal of entertainment..."

Of the youngest girl, Signa, who has a pretty figure, mottled pink cheeks, and yellow hair, Alexandra is very fond, though she keeps a sharp eye on her. Signa is apt to be skittish at meal time, 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, though he has been so careful not to commit himself that no one in the house, least of all Signa, can tell just how far the matter has progressed. ...

At Alexandra's left sat a very old man, barefoot and wearing a long blue blouse, open at the neck ... When Ivar lost his land through mismanagement a dozen years ago, Alexandra took him in, and he has been a member of her household ever since. He is too old to work in the fields, but he hitches and unhitches the workteams and looks after the health of the stock. Sometimes of a winter evening Alexandra calls him into the sittingroom to read the Bible aloud to her for he still reads very well.<sup>35</sup>

The conversation centered around the silo which Alexandra had just built -- the first on the Divide. There was a difference of opinion among the men as to its merits.

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.<sup>36</sup>

At another time we see little Signa waiting on the table in the dining room where Alexandra is having a family dinner for her brothers and their families.

After dinner, Alexandra's sister-in-law

went down to gossip with Alexandra's kitchen girls while they washed the dishes. She could always find out more about Alexandra's domestic economy from the prattling maids than from Alexandra herself ... On the Divide, farmers' daughters no longer went out into service, so Alexandra got her girls from Sweden by paying

35. O Pioneers!, pp. 85-87.

36. Ibid., p. 88.

their fare over. They stayed with her until they married, and were replaced by sisters or cousins from the old country.<sup>37</sup>

Again we see Signa, although married and living on one of Alexandra's farms, coming back to stay for several months to give personal service and comfort to Alexandra in time of sorrow.

Ántonia left the farm to work in the Harlings' kitchen. "There was a basic harmony between Ántonia and her mistress."<sup>38</sup> They liked the same things. Mrs. Harling talked to Ántonia as she did to her own daughters, and Ántonia loved the Harling children and their neighbor friends, and was never too tired any evening to make popcorn balls, taffy, or chocolate, or tell them stories of the old country.

In the Burden household, we find two "hired men," Otto and Jake, who were faithful workers and were devoted to the family. Otto, an Austrian, who had been a cowboy, a stage driver, a bartender, a miner, had many experiences to tell and many keepsakes to show young Jim Burden. Jim said:

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37. O Pioneers!, pp. 104-105.

38. My Ántonia., p. 205.

Every Saturday night we popped corn or made taffy, and Otto Fuchs used to sing, "For I am a Cowboy and Know I've Done Wrong," or "Bury me Not on the Lone Prairie."<sup>39</sup>

At Christmas time Otto rode horseback for miles through a heavy snow to find a cedar tree for a surprise for Jim. The men helped decorate it with strings of popcorn, gingerbread animals, home-made candles;

Its real splendors, however, came from the most unlikely place in the world -- from Otto's cowboy trunk... From under the lining he now produced a collection of brilliantly colored paper figures, several inches high and stiff enough to stand alone. They had been sent to him year after year, by his old mother in Austria. There was a bleeding heart, in tufts of paper lace; there were the three kings, gorgeously appareled and the ox and the ass and the shepherds; there was the Baby in the manger and a group of angels, singing; there were camels and leopards, held by the black slaves of the three kings. ... We put sheets of cotton wool under it [the tree] for a snow-field and Jake's pocket-mirror for a frozen lake.<sup>40</sup>

On Christmas day, the "hired men" joined in the family worship and in general were happy, contented members of the Burden household. Jim said that after the odd jobs were done about the barn,

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39. My Ántonia, p. 75.

40. Ibid., p. 94.

Jake and I played dominoes, while Otto wrote a long letter home to his mother.<sup>41</sup>

When the Burden family moved to town, Otto and Jake decided that they were tired of farming and would go out to the "Wild West." Jim said of them:

Those two fellows had been faithful to us through sun and storm, had given us things that cannot be bought in any market in the world. With me they had been like older brothers; had restrained their speech and manners out of care for me and given me so much good comradeship.<sup>42</sup>

Miss Cather has portrayed the natural attitude of good, honest farmer-folk toward their "hired help," who in some instances seemed like members of their own families. Undoubtedly Miss Cather had only to remember the "hired help" employed by her father<sup>43</sup> to write realistically and sympathetically of these people. They were interesting in themselves, and certainly they held an important place in the great schemem of social life which we find recorded in Miss Cather's Nebraska stories.

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41. My Ántonia, p. 97.

42. Ibid., p. 164.

43. From a paper by Frances H. Arganbright.

## CHAPTER III.

Conclusion.

Among contemporary American authors who have written of the Middle West, Willa Cather deserves most attention. She has not only described Mid-Western life more fully, but she has also dealt with it more understandingly than any of her fellow novelists. Unlike Sinclair Lewis, who sees only a shallow layer of life and that the most ugly, Miss Cather delves into the heart of life and finds it beautiful. She has not chosen to denounce the manners and customs she finds there; rather she has desired to penetrate these trappings and set before us genuine pictures of actual life. Her method of presentation, then, takes a definite swing away from the path most of her contemporaries have followed; she is practically alone in her attitude of approach toward her material.

Hamlin Garland is an able writer on Mid-Western life, but he too must yield the palm to Miss Cather. The work of the two authors, although dealing with practically the same section of American life, must be weighed in

different scales. Their literary methods are not so very dissimilar -- both use the novel and short story forms -- but their purposes in writing, and their ways of viewing life, are quite unlike, and of course, the results of their efforts are as much so. Willa Cather purposes to write primarily of the non-English pioneers, while Hamlin Garland is interested first of all in the Anglo-Saxons. In that respect their works might be said to complement each other; both write of the old stock American families and of the foreigners, but in the proportion intimated. Miss Cather writes because she loves people and is unreservedly interested in them; her only wish is to paint adequate, sincere pictures pictures of actual lives. On the other hand, Hamlin Garland first develops some idea, some thesis that he wishes to evolve; then he brings his characters for concrete illustration. Perhaps it is this limitation -- this hankering for the idea -- that narrows the pictures he presents. Miss Cather lays down a wide, beautifully colored canvas upon which she has painted in relief a whole community tableau; not so Hamlin Garland. She surpasses him in the breadth and scope of the life she

describes, in richness of portraiture, in finding the dramas in life, in choosing the most colorful and significant material, in originality of thought. It makes no difference from what point nor in what light one views Mr. Garland's accomplishments in depicting life in the Middle West; they all fall short when put side by side with the successes of Miss Cather. So far she is the supreme revealer of that life, and as an interpreter of immigrant pioneer life in the Middle West perhaps she will never be surpassed.

Miss Cather is, first of all, an interpreter. She does not attempt to teach a lesson; she does not seek to amuse her reader; she does not try to develop some intricate philosophical thought; she merely records on paper the life which has come within range of her perception. She describes people of many different nationalities, and their characters carry the stamp of racial individuality. She shows people in their various conditions and moods - - the humble and wretched, the gay and delighted; the lonely and disgraced, the stolid and thoughtful; those who are struggling, and those who are dwelling at ease; those who are seeking, and those who are satisfied. She presents her people in their right-

ful environments, and in a realistic manner lays bare their actual life stories, revealing their heartaches and joys. But she stops here; she does not hold them up as examples of good or evil. And certainly it is this simple, straightforward presentation of experiences that make her books such enjoyable reading. Miss Cather has made of language a mirror which reflects for us the life she has known and observed so closely.

Certainly the most interesting episodes in Nebraska which Miss Cather has lovingly and truly presented are those concerning the immigrant pioneers. Even if she had done nothing more to make her name great, Willa Cather should always be considered important for her interpretations of these peoples. She was able to portray accurately their dramatic personalities, their heroic struggles, their intrinsic experiences, because she knew them first hand. That is what makes her material valuable; she has been faithful to reality; has set down what was true; she has indeed been the chronicler of the foreign immigrants in Nebraska.

These foreign peoples and their few neighbors who had come out from the East were, for the most part, rural people; and it is from among these farmers who sub-

duced the prairie and made it profitable that Willa Cather chooses most of her characters. Now and then a few of them move to town to send their children to school or to "work out" for a living; but they all remain essentially farmer-folk at heart. In consistently finding in these country peoples something worth recording, Miss Cather has launched boldly and happily into an unconventional, slightly used field of American literary endeavor. But in so doing she has produced something native, something true to American life, something beautiful and lasting.

It is one thing to say that Miss Cather lived among those peoples and therefore the characters and situations must be genuine; it is quite another thing to be able to say that most of them -- the essential ones at least -- are real people and actual experiences. We are fortunate to have this information; it is always interesting to know definitely whether or not an author has used "real" people and cited true situations. The fact that, in a large sense at least, Miss Cather has done so makes her books about Nebraska life more interesting and certainly invaluable as a correct record of the lives of these people.

After studying the life Willa Cather describes, we realize that the most significant material is revealed through the conduct of her heroines, its effect upon themselves and upon others, and its consequences. It is manifest that she is best in her portraiture of women. Her men characters -- perhaps with the exception of Captain Forrester -- are markedly inferior. <sup>1</sup> Antonia, <sup>1</sup> Alexandra, <sup>2</sup> Marion Forrester, <sup>3</sup> Clara Vavrika<sup>4</sup> -- all are memorable characters.

In that Miss Cather has portrayed both pathetic and laughable scenes, we may speak of her as following the elemental secrets of nature. Her interpretations strike a note of the universal which many authors strive in vain to attain. She knows what interests the human heart, and even though her settings are localized, and her stories concern certain types of peoples and their experiences, some of which are brought about by definite conditions, nevertheless most of these experiences are fundamentally true to human life wherever it exists. All can find truth in Miss Cather's books. The fact that they concern life in Nebraska -- that they record experiences of Scandinavians and Bohemians -- does not lessen their universal appeal.

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1. In My Antonia,

2. In O Pioneers!

3. In A Lost Lady.

4. In "The Bohemian Girl."

In her presentation of decisive experiences -- of the most profound universal problems of life -- Miss Cather is the dramatic artist. She senses the supreme moment and vitalizes it. In such treatment she makes her reader realize a spirit of inevitableness concerning conduct, action and the results -- the spirit which is so abundant in stories by Russian writers.

Miss Cather's books are written in clear, beautiful English. It is not too much to say that she has the economy and accuracy of her favorite French authors, and the restraint of the frugal Russians. The freshness and naturalness of her diction add charm to her distinctly colorful subject matter. She frequently employs the colloquial speech of the peoples to aid her in suggestiveness, and her Nebraska books might be studied from the standpoint of local color. But we cannot here consider in detail Miss Cather's style of writing or her work as a literary artist. Manner of expression and form are both essential to superior writing, and Miss Cather is not wanting in these attributes, but surely these considerations were not foremost in the mind of Miss Cather when she wrote her Nebraska books. She was primarily intent upon recording the life she knew there -- making it interesting, real, and natural; and it is from this point of view -- as an interpreter of Nebraska social life -- that we have been especially interested in Miss Cather.

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