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Exploration of the relationship between women and nature in Willa Cather's 'O Pioneers!'

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Abstract

This paper explores the quest for identity among pioneer women through an eco-feminist lens in *O Pioneer!* (1913), written by Willa Cather, a prominent figure in American literature known for her contributions as a novelist, short story writer, poet, journalist, critic, and editor during the twentieth century. In works like *O Pioneers!* (1913), Cather depicted the experiences of immigrants from the Old World, particularly women, highlighting their survival challenges and unwavering spirit of resilience and independence on the American Midwestern frontier. Cather's prominence revolves around her homage to rural America during her era, particularly Nebraska, and her yearning for the values of pioneers. During the pioneer era, women confronted the challenges of survival on the prairie by venturing into traditionally male-dominated areas-the land-and ultimately realised their aspirations for self-identity. The protagonists in Cather's novels serve as a reflection of the authentic experiences of pioneer women in American history. In the formative era of American history, the untamed landscapes of the West and Midwest held an enchanting allure that drew numerous individuals to their vast expanses. Pioneer women maintain optimistic perspectives on their existence and attain personal fulfilment despite the challenging natural surroundings.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, pioneer women, self-seeking, self-identity, Willa Cather

Introduction

In 1923, Willa Cather, a prominent American novelist, short story writer, critic, and editor in the field of twentieth-century American literature, she has authored a total of two volumes of poetry, 62 short writings, 12 novels, and two collections of essays in her lifetime. In Cather's writings, the impression of traditional qualities vanishes, and instead, a feeling of anxious dissatisfaction, exasperation, and individual failure gradually penetrates. Therefore, Cather's writing progresses to the second phase. The piece *A Lost Lady* (1923) is emblematic of this pivotal moment. It explores the culmination of the heroic period of pioneering and the subsequent downfall of Western civilisation and its pioneering ethos. Since the inception of Cather's novel writing, she has been deeply preoccupied with its pioneering essence. Furthermore, Cather has a sentimental attachment to the era of pioneering.

Through her portrayal of women as the key figure of 'the pioneer', Cather challenges conventional notions of the rationality enterprise as masculine. In contrast to the male-dominated pioneering traditions produced by works such as Cooper's *Pioneers*, Willa Cather presents a 'Conscious mythology' of pioneering women who create a lasting heritage of pragmatism, dignity, and great bravery in work like *O Pioneers!* (1913). Nevertheless, Cather's decision to relinquish her marginalised status as a woman and a lesbian, and instead align herself with the prevailing ideology, adds complexity to the portrayal of female identity in her works of fiction. Paradoxically, while her lesbianism manifests as a love for women, her connection with the masculine and her rejection of the feminine imply sexist inclinations. Nevertheless, her depiction of women defies any efforts to categorise it into any one definitive classification.

Research Methodology

Analysing the connection between women and the environment in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) requires a comprehensive study methodology. Commence by conducting extensive literature research to gain a comprehensive understanding of the historical backdrop and current critical viewpoints of Cather's depiction of gender and environment. Utilise eco-critical and feminist theoretical frameworks to examine the impact of nature on the identities and roles of female characters. Undertake a meticulous analysis of the text, specifically examining the depictions and symbolic significance linked to nature in

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connection to female encounters. Thorough comparative and historical studies will provide more understanding, placing Cather's portrayal within the specific historical and wider literary movements of her day. The application of thematic and symbolic analysis will unveil how nature both mirrors and influences the personal development and social positions of the characters. In conclusion, the synthesis of findings serves to emphasise the novel's commentary on gender and environment, therefore enhancing comprehension of Cather's literary achievements and their significance in the current discourse on gender and nature.

Discussion

Both of Cather's notable prairie novels, *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918), depict the lives of accomplished female pioneers and exalt the values associated with pioneering. The main characters engage in a valiant and captivating battle against the earth, actively pursuing and discovering their ultimate life satisfaction in it. They represent specific enduring universalities of existence. They are juxtaposed with a subpar lot, mostly comprised of their own relatives. They are tormented by a poignant feeling of the past in which their origins are firmly established. Their European ancestry fills them with pride, and they nostalgically reflect upon it. Nevertheless, they adeptly acclimatise to the peculiar conditions of the New World.

In this novel, the main female protagonist face five distinct challenges: Destiny, Land, Family, Conformity, and Self. Their hardships provide them with a suitable perspective on life. They expose their aptitudes and limitations, preferences and aversions, and extract the underlying characteristics inside them. Although not intentionally choosing to fight in a foreign nation, the protagonists valiantly adjust to the unfamiliar and challenging conditions of the New World. Contrary to their longing for their own place, they strive to maximise the opportunities available to them. They are constructed from durable materials that do not readily deteriorate, and they are never lowered into an unrecoverable state of hopelessness and negative emotions. In her novels, Cather has delved into the past when she lived on the prairie and has evoked the fundamental frontier characteristics. The author's portrayal of pioneer life, especially in *O Pioneers!* (1913) strongly supports the notion that "her true loyalty was to the Old World and the New World." One can discern in Cather's writing a strong gravitational attraction between these two worlds. It is this driving force that adds emotional depth to her stories. Although she did not come from an agricultural background, she possessed direct experience of the challenges faced by the European farmers who had been transferred.

Cather's portrayal of her childhood experience with clear and genuine detail becomes inherently groundbreaking as it indicates her acknowledgement of "her own subject." The uniqueness of her contribution is evident in the way she approached this topic, which held great personal significance for her. Hence, she demonstrates a distinctive perspective in her interpretation of this often-documented subject matter, "*O Pioneers!* is the first of a group of novels in which the impact of a young country on the sad sensitivity of uprooted Europeans is presented with sympathy and an insight rare in American writers, even the most sophisticated of whom tend to regard the European immigrants as only too happy to leave the bad old world behind and settle down in the land of the free" (Daiches 17).

Beginning on a single January day in 1883, the narrative of *O Pioneers!* (1913) unfolds in the little prairie town of Hanover. Alexandra Bergson, around 20 years old, and her younger brother Emil are required to accompany their German neighbour, Carl Lindstrum, to town for work-related tasks. The narrative shifts to the Bergson farming estate on the Divide, where Alexandra's father, a Swedish immigrant, is nearing death after eleven years of valiant labour in cultivating the land. In his will, he leaves a complete portion of unencumbered land to his daughter and sons. As the eldest child, Alexandra is responsible for caring for her brothers and mother and diligently cultivating the land. Following the death of John Bergson, there are three years of excessive weight and three years of insufficient weight. Subsequently, Lou and Oscar, the two younger brothers of Alexandria, express a desire to abandon farming and vacate the property. Alexandra rejects Oscar's proposal and believes that it is now the opportune moment to secure a mortgage on their property and acquire further investments. In a decade, she anticipates that the agricultural land will reap great prosperity.

The introductory sequences of the literary work "the roads were but faint tracks in the grass, and the fields were scarcely noticeable" (Cather 19) presents a disheartening perspective on the nation. Furthermore, when the snowstorm, resembling a massive rubber, consumes all human landmarks along its trajectory, even the town of Hanover, which was firmly established on a windy Nebraska tableland, was attempting to avoid being swept away (3), suggests that only those who firmly hold onto a stable inner anchor will endure. This introduction functions as a contrast to Alexandra's subsequent portrayal as a robust and steadfast Earth mother. The novel *O Pioneers!* (1913) by Cather suggests that individuals should never relinquish their sense of self to a physical environment that poses a danger of obliterating their individuality.

Through the garden setting, Alexandra rediscovers her moral essence. Although the strong winds are blowing over the pasture, Alexandra calmly sleeps in the garden, "Standing perfectly still, with that serious ease so characteristic of her", She deliberately disengages herself from her environment with an unmistakable tranquility. All of these demonstrate Alexandra's determination to adhere to her goals in the face of rigid societal norms. To attain the realisation of her desires, she only has to maintain fidelity to the initial urge within her. As recounted by Cather,

Her face was so radiant that he felt shy about asking her. For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit that breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.

The climactic composition of this scene indicates that Alexandra intends to own the property exclusively. She imaginatively commandeers the country in order to reconstruct her soul, an act of self-aggrandizement rather than self-abnegation. The ruling function of the Divide is reduced as it descends to its lowest point ever by human will. This highlights the strength of Alexandra's character and also symbolises the aspirations of women who are determined to maintain their status in the biased society.

Indeed, Alexandra assimilates with her land, possesses a deep understanding of it, and is very concerned about its requirements.

In *O Pioneers!* (1913), Destiny is the driving force that compels Alexandra forward into the combat front. Her heart is riven with doubts about the new territory and longing for the old. She decides to embrace the challenge presented by the Divide. Her arduous and perilous battle that follows is her endeavour to honour her commitment to her terminally ill father. After resolving her early states of bewilderment, she firmly grasps the terrain. She cultivates a reverence for the earth. Through her arduous struggles and adept adaptability, she confronts the obstacles presented by Destiny. Initially, Alexandra harbours doubt regarding the benevolence of the land. Nevertheless, a journey across the rural landscape resolves all her uncertainties and misunderstandings. Upon spending five days in the valley with Emil and engaging in extensive discussions with the farmers, she concludes that the river valley lacks promising opportunities. Yet, a significant opportunity lies ahead of them at the Divide. "We must have faith in the high land, Emil," she declares, "I want to hold on harder than ever, and when you're a man you'll thank me".

On the return journey, Alexandra seemed very content. Her humming of an ancient Swedish song is a result of her profound affection for the Land,

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Alexandra confides in her hesitant brothers about her intention to acquire additional land on the Divide. They will achieve independence as landowners after a decade, no longer facing financial difficulties. Her newfound consciousness of the nation has engendered a fresh connection with it. To her, the country holds far greater significance than ever before. Her fascination extends to the auditory stimuli produced by insects, "She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring".

Alexandra's insight proved to be accurate. She establishes her farm as the most prosperous on the Divide, and her house is the largest outdoor structure. It is in the soil that she most effectively manifests her true nature. She forms an intense emotional bond and a feeling of possession towards the land. Her determination to achieve is unwavering. At times, she has a sensation of exuberant germination within her own body. Despite facing several frustrating events in her endeavour, she cannot resist feeling a deep and intimate connection to the land. In the latter part of the story, when Carl and Alexandra decide to separate, she advises Carl against requesting her departure, since he intends to permanently separate. While she will go with him overseas, she will undoubtedly be delighted to return and encounter the tranquillity and liberty of her homeland.

"You belong to the land," Carl murmured, "as you have always said. Now more than ever." ". The land belongs to the future, Carl; I might as well go to will the sunset over

there to my brothers' children. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it for a little while.

The groundbreaking works of Willa Cather can be most comprehended about a context that challenges the biases against which her female characters embody, therefore dispelling the notion of feminine fragility, "As a woman, Cather was perhaps more sensitive to the ironies of the American Dream ... Cather manipulates this accepted image, thus opening the male-dominated dream of individual success in a competitive world to woman" (Harvey 22). She achieves this by crafting formidable and dynamic female leads who attain success, not in spite of, but rather as a result of their femininity. Based on her physical characteristics, Alexandra appears to embody the prominent position that humans occupy in early agrarian societies. Akin to the ancient fertility deity, Alexandra's ability to embody both male and feminine traits is crucial to her divine function. Although she is associated with the feminine Earth mother through her association with the male plough, it is the tangible attributes of productivity, creativity, and humanity that ultimately have the most significance for her and the surrounding environment. In contrast to the man's vulnerability around her, Alexandra's robustness, both in terms of physical prowess and moral integrity, is exemplified in the initial depiction of her and the male members of her family. She moves swiftly and decisively as if she has a clear sense of direction and purpose for her future actions. Nevertheless, her brothers, Oscar and Lou, possess physical strength but lack the capacity for sound judgment and adopt a negative outlook on the future. Only Alexandra can comprehend the terrain. From her perspective, the land is a sentient entity with distinct personalities. Her identification with it was achieved by the fusion of her spirit with the soil, therefore facilitating fecundity. Alexandra's resemblance to a legendary Earth mother stems from her connection with the land, "she was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination in the soil" (Cather 24). Up to this point, the concept of "as one with nature" has achieved perfect execution. The territory relates to her, For the first time, perhaps, since the land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning, it seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before.

At the core of achieving success on the land is Alexandra's enigmatic intuition. As a deity associated with fertility, Alexandra relies on her unconscious mind as the driving force, enabling her to surpass the capabilities of typical farmers in several practical aspects. When others are selling their land to speculators, she strategically expands her acreage. Upon being questioned about her ability to predict the increase in the price of the land, she admits her inability to explain. The awareness of Alexandra's own existence is characterised as a subliminal phenomenon. As all her ideas are impersonal, her mind functions as a "white book" with explicit writing on topics such as weather, hearts, and growing things. Embodying goddesshood also enhances her aristocratic position on the Divide. While Cather does not explicitly depict Alexandra physically labouring on the field, we might interpret her monument indirectly as that of

a conqueror who cultivated the land and an Earth mother who bestows fertility and unifies with the soil.

Conclusion

O Pioneers! (1913) by Willa Cather offers a sophisticated examination of the interplay between women and the environment, demonstrating the significance of this bond in shaping individual identity and larger concepts of survival and metamorphosis. Through the figure of Alexandra Bergson, Cather demonstrates that the country is not only a background but a powerful and indispensable influence that both moulds and is moulded by its population. The symbiotic link between Alexandra and the land highlights her resilience and inventive energy, indicating that women's engagements with nature serve as a reservoir of strength and a driving force for transformation.

Cather's representation of nature in the novel defies conventional gender norms by showing women as engaged contributors in the cultivation and metamorphosis of the rural environment. Alexandra's profound familiarity with and reverence for the natural world underscore the ability of women to exert influence on and be impacted by their surroundings, implying a fairer and mutually beneficial connection between them. Ultimately, the novel argues that women's contributions to the land and to the formation of their own futures are crucial and that their close relationship with nature may redefine both individual and collective achievements. Hence, O Pioneers! not only commemorates the innovative essence of its female main character but also provides a deep analysis of the mutual reliance between women and the environment.

The female protagonists in Cather's works somewhat mirror the actual experiences of the pioneering women in American history. The uncultivated area in the American West and mid-west during the pioneering era of American history had a captivating allure that drew in numerous individuals. Pioneer women maintain optimistic perspectives on their existence and attain personal satisfaction in the challenging natural surroundings.

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