

**ALEXANDRA, A PIONEER WOMAN IN WILLA CATHER'S *O PIONEERS!***

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It is accepted that Alexandra became the best pioneer woman in Cather's *O' Pioneer!*. It was not merely a matter of exciting but it was reassuring in the west to find in men of her own age. It was found in the company of some Latin Europeans in her trips abroad which was renewed as she responded to the gaiety and vitality in some of the simple folk. She felt in some of them a tragic and heroic quality. She had the courage, she was determined to live for a while in the present, which poured in on her more powerfully and with less resistance than, perhaps, at any other time in her mature life. In *O Pioneers!*, there is a conventional story parallel to this: Emil returns home; he wins Marie Shabata's love; they are killed by her husband. The style and structure in *O' Pioneers!* Contributes to bring the fullest effect.

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Alexandra is a pioneer character in the novel – O Pioneer! (1913). She becomes androgynous when she faces some problems at her home or farm. Though she maintains the best of relationship with her neighbors, she appreciates the Bohemian farmers more for their skill in family cattle and growing more crops on the farm. She says-

Bohemians certainly know how to make more kinds of bread than any other people in the O Pioneer (1913).

Willa Cather was exhilarated by the rough life and interested in the character and idioms of her brother's associates. One of them suggested many of the traits that went into the personality of Ray Kennedy. This was the frontier, and Willa Cather felt that once more she was among the pioneers, men who might have founded Red Cloud or put the first plows into the earth of the Divide. It was not merely exciting, it was reassuring in the west to find in men of her own age or younger than she, not the "tame lot" who had formed the second generation in Webster country, but the great hearted adventures" to whom only beginnings are stimulating. The vacation she had intended became a discovery- a discovery of the south west she had divided three years before in "The Enchanted Bluff." It was a discovery, and an enjoyment, of the land and the ancient people.

The colours and shapes of things were unlike anything she had seen before. How much she was affected by the joy the landscape of the southwest gave her will appear in the record of later and even more important stays in the country. It was not only by the land that the southwest charmed her: it was at least as much by the people, especially the Indians and the Mexicans, in whom she discovered survivals of Aztec beauty. The delight she had found in the company of some Latin Europeans in her trips abroad was renewed as she responded to the gaiety and vitality in some of these simple folk it was so easy to meet and, superficially at least, so easy to know. She felt in some of them a tragic and heroic quality, associated with the Aztec Strain which gave to their other traits an intensity that was quite new to her.

In 1906 Willa Cather had left Pittsburgh a high-school teacher; within two years she had become managing editor of a magazine that was successful to the point of the fabulous and during the next four she had exercised, with an inspired skill, a measure of power and earned a comfortable living. It had required courage to close the door on so much so quickly gained. She had the courage, and she was determined to live for a while in the present, which poured in on her more powerfully and with less resistance than, perhaps, at any other time in her mature life. "I did no writing down there." She has said, "But I recovered from the conventional editorial point of view."

In a new state of mind, very like Thea Kronborg's conscious of how she had grown as a person and eager to discover what the change might mean to her fiction, Willa Cather returned to the East by way of Red Cloud and the Divide, where she saw the wheat harvest and visited the Bohemian settlement, and Pittsburgh, where she stayed for some months with Isabella McClure's urgent wish, she kept a thread of connection with the magazine. She was to furnish two stories, and the business office as well as the proprietor hoped they would resemble "The Bohemian Girl". These stories were not written: instead Willa Cather went back to an old manuscript that became O Pioneers!

O Pioneers! had been written before the stay in the Southwest is not precisely known. The mark of that country is on the fourth section of the book, "The White Mulberry Tree", and to a less extent on the third, "Winter Memories", in the allusions to Emil Bergson's happiness in Mexico, his response to the happiness and expressiveness of a latin people so unlike the heavy, dour Scandinavian atmosphere in which he grew up. "the White Mulberry Tree" is known to have been written or perhaps expanded from earlier material after Willa Cather's return from the Southwest, and so presumably, was at least a part of "Winter Memories." It was originally intended to be a self-contained story of middle length. The first section of O Pioneers!, "The Wild Land", must have been expanded at a relatively late stage in the composition of the novel. No other hypothesis will, I believe, account for a repeated error in the time schedule

Alexandra is a



most unusual in an author who was meticulous in arranging this element in her fiction.

Willa Cather wrote a story shorter than "The Bohemian Girl" and called "Alexandra" after its heroine, who became the Alexandra Bergson of *O Pioneers!*. It is probable that the early story was a study in a single character, with the other members of the Bergson family and their neighbors drawn only as stimuli for her and factors in her life. The shift in title from "Alexandra" to *Pioneers!* –however much it may have been prompted by its similarity to the title of her first novel- pointed to a shift in interest: in the novel Alexandra remains the principal personage, but she is now presented as part of a study in the history of a family characteristic of a time and a place. All the additions that have been noticed build up the roles of other characters.

Listen ,... Don't talk wild. You say you ought to have taken things into your hands years ago... (page -126 , O pioneer!)

In *The White Mulberry Tree*, Alexandra is less important than Emil: in this section Willa Cather records his tragic love for Marie Shabata, which goes unperceived by Alexandra. The emphasis on Emil's Mexican adventures in this section and in *Winter Memories* adds to his importance. The changes that must have been made in the first section, whatever else they included, delayed the departure from the Divide of Carl Linsrum, who is in love with Alexandra's, but rendered with equal respect and almost equal sympathy.

In *O Pioneers!* there is a conventional story parallel to this: Emil returns home; he wins Marie Shabata's love ; they are killed by her husband. The unconventional element has its center in the portrayal of Alexandra. She too has her conventional story: Carl Linstrum returns to the Divide; he wins her love; they agree to go away for a while and then to live on the Bergson farm. But how small a part this story plays in the portrayal of Alexandra.

He equally is impressed upon us by a very emphatic passage that closes an early chapter. With her brothers and Carl, she drives out to crazy Ivar's to ask this strange old seer how to protect her hogs from the clora. Ivar, a delightful splotch of colour in the greatness of the first section, bursts out: I tell

you, sister; the hogs of this country are put upon! and bids her enclose sorghum patch for hers and allow them plenty of clean water and clean feed. On the return of the party to the Bergson farm the boys go swimming after supper, and Alexandra sits on the Kitchen doorstep. The old man sprang to the ground and shuffled toward the gate calling, "Mistress, mistress!" Alexandra hurried to meet him and put her hand on his shoulder.

Tyst! Ivar. There's nothing to be worried about. I'm sorry if I've scared you all. I didn't notice the storm till it was on me, and I couldn't walk against it. I'm glad you've come. I am so tired I didn't know how I'd ever get home. (Page-275; O Pioneer!)

Alexandra scarcely had a childhood; at twelve she was a help to her father's thinking about the land. She had no real youth, no religious elation, no romance, and no personal life of any definable kind. "Her personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence." When she has a falling out with her brothers Lou and Oscar late in the novel, lou complains that Oscar offended their sister quite unnecessarily by blurting out that she was forty and beyond the age for falling in love. He comforts himself with the rationalization: "of course, Alexandra ain't much like other women-folks. May be it won't make her sore. May be she'd as soon be forty as not!" To the misunderstanding of their sister is added this final failure in perception; Oscar is not capable of allowing her even those emotions which most persons, men and women, experience with the passage of their young age.

I want you to keep the land together and to be guided by your sister... Alexandra is the oldest and she knows my wishes... Alexandra will manage the best she can. (pp.20-21)

Alexandra requires to be stressed because, though it is essential to the emotional effect she has on a reader, it is overshadowed by her austere heroism. She was in her early twenties when her father died, and the responsibility for all decisions developed on her; though a series of years harder



than he had endured, she kept the land he had broken, imposing her will on her brothers, and forcing on their stupid to the soil. It was in the land that her impersonal nature expressed itself. The large house she had built for herself is a disappointment; but "you feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors." By the kind of feeling she has for the land she raises far out of the circle of strong, austere, vital Scandinavian women.

Willa Cather's fiction had even adumbrated. Early in the book *O Pioneer!* when she returns to Divide from few days spent on the farms in the valley, appreciation fairly flows through her fame. "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 breath of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before." Much later, after she has subdued the land, making it yield a succession of rich crops, its power to enchant her is not so strong. "I ever think", she admits to Carl Linstrum, "I liked the old country better. This is all very splendid in its way, but there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years. Now, when I come back to all this milk and honey, I fed like the old German song, *Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebtest land?*

The austerity and strength of the women are in unison with the austerity and strength of the land—"the wild land" as it is called in the title of the first section; and it is in unison that the poetic force of the novel has its center. Sometimes one wonders why Alexandra was never driven, like old Chapdelaine in Louis He`mon`s novel, to give up the acres she had tamed and begin again in a new frontier. He regret for the passing of the first phase in the development of Nebraska, the phase of hardship, heroism, and imagination, was to be echoed more and more deeply in the novels to come. Alexandra rises above the Scandinavian women in the earlier fiction by her appreciation of forms of life and character unlike her own.

Alexandra has none of the Scandinavian intolerance that is so strong in her brothers Lou and Oscar. Marie Shabata delights her; she is happy attending the services at the Catholic Church in the French settlement; and most striking, perhaps, of all, she draws from knowing how life goes on in other places a wider and more satisfying sense of its significance.

If the world were no wider than my cornfield, if there were not something besides this, I wouldn't feel that it was much worthwhile to work. (p- 111)

She does not believe that Carl Linstrum made a mistake in leaving the Divide, in being an artisan in big Eastern cities, in wanting to seek his fortune and much else in Klondike. She appreciates in him a sensitive nature, somewhat uncertain of its powers, and determined, above all, on freedom. The perfect test of her liberal judgement of the world outside, which she has never seen and does not wish to see, is in her attitude towards the one brother she really cares for, Emil, almost twenty years younger and rather her son than her brother.

Alexandra is a large woman. No man on the Divide, we are told, could have carried her gleaming white body very far. It is care of a large frame, large nature. Never for an instant does she seem in the least unreal; yet when the novel ends she is a personally of more than life-size. Her last act is the final proof of extraordinary largeness of her nature. Emil has begun a ten-year prison term. Alexandra visits him to say she will not rest till he has been pardoned. Unalterable fact, once more: "being what he was, she felt, Frank could not have acted otherwise".

The style and the structure in *O Pioneer!* are what they should be if the substance of the book is to have the fullest effect. There is nothing of the tightness of organization, the cold clearness of style that was so right for the story of Bartley Alexander. The structure of *O Pioneer!* Has a happy looseness and the style an easy strength that belong in a story where the great values are the land, the large nature of Alexandra, and the warm love of Emil. At last Cather was writing as a person writes when he is doing what he came into the world to do.

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