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# THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE IGNORED IMMIGRANTS IN WILLA CATHER'S *O PIONEERS!*

RENEE M. LAEGREID

Will a Cather's move to Nebraska as a child, the people she met there, and the seemingly endless prairie around her captured her imagination and became the inspiration for her novel *O Pioneers!* In this work, Cather introduces her readers to the diversity of immigrants who settled in the area around her home in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Cather's novel represents the age-old appeal of the West—hope, optimism, mystery—as well as the Janus-face dilemma of acculturation: the longing to partake in all

that the new land has to offer and the reluctance to give up a rich and comforting cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup>

While this novel is often read as an example of America's welcoming acceptance of immigrants, *O Pioneers!* opens a door into exploring nativist attitudes toward the influx of immigrants into the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this era the subject of race—its definitions and implications for the continuing success of American culture—permeated discussions among politicians, educators, anthropologists, and reformers.<sup>2</sup> *O Pioneers!* fits within the nativist discourse of the early twentieth century, as Cather's novel illuminates assumptions about these immigrants and their ability to acculturate not only to society in the Great Plains but to American society at large. Unlike current trends, which place all western-bound immigrants under the singular heading "Euro-American," newcomers to the United States in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were judged according to racial origins. This historical perspective sheds light on assimilation issues at the local, regional, and national levels. The language Cather uses in *O Pioneers!*

Key Words: Bohemians, French-Canadians, German-Russians, nativism, New Immigrants, Swedes, Victorianism

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reveals a racial hierarchy among the settlers. Though Cather was not a racist—rather, she had what Mike Fischer called the “cultural limitations” of her era—her depictions of characters in the novel would have resonated with educated, middle- to upper-class old-stock Americans as they grappled with the perceived threat of so many newcomers.<sup>3</sup> In this context the novel provides a means to explore nativist views of four of the groups found on the Great Plains—Swedes, French Canadians, Bohemians, and German Russians—by characterizing them as good immigrants, bad immigrants, or immigrants one could quite easily ignore.

#### NEW IMMIGRANTS AND THE AMERICANIZATION MOVEMENT

Born in Back Creek, Virginia, Cather moved to Nebraska with her family in 1883 at the age of nine. The Cathers originally lived outside town, her father helping manage the farm her paternal grandfather started in 1877.<sup>4</sup> Their experiment with rural living did not last long; after eighteen months the family moved to Red Cloud, a bustling town of two thousand inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> The Cather family's move to Nebraska was part of a general flood of immigrants who made their way to the Great Plains between 1870 and the early 1900s. The combination of confining Native Americans to reservations and the aggressive promotion of the land by railroad companies, both in the United States and abroad, attracted both old-stock settlers (those who had lived in the United States for a generation or more), as well as newly arrived immigrants.

The population boom in the Plains coincided with a new wave of immigration into the United States. Between 1880 and 1920, 23 million people entered the United States, which in 1900 had a population of only 76 million.<sup>6</sup> After 1896 the majority of these newcomers came from southern and eastern Europe—Italy, Poland, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Austria-Hungary, Greece, Turkey, and Syria.<sup>7</sup> Although three-quarters of these so-called

New Immigrants remained in urban areas along the eastern seaboard, they created intense anxiety among old-stock Americans all across the United States, who considered them a threat to American culture and its system of democracy. Ellwood P. Cubberley, Stanford University's dean of the School of Education, argued in 1919 that these New Immigrants, “‘largely illiterate, docile, lacking in initiative, and almost wholly without the Anglo-Saxon conceptions of righteousness, liberty, law, order, public decency, and government’ had diluted the nation's racial stock, corrupted politics, undermined social conditions, and disrupted public education.”<sup>8</sup> Cubberley was not alone in his belief that the survival of the American way of life rested in conscientious programs to counter the negative impact of New Immigrants. The Americanization movement (1910-1929) signaled an all-out effort to facilitate assimilation and expedite naturalization, but earlier reformers shared similar goals and assumptions. As the movement toward Americanization gained strength, the concern over the potential impact of the “lower races” of immigrants could be found in literature, the arts newspapers, and other aspects of popular culture.<sup>9</sup> The new social sciences also contributed to concern over the immigrants. Troubled by the number of eastern European immigrants, and arguing that the “true racial status” of immigrants was “imperfectly understood,” the Immigration Commission authorized research for the *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*. Using cutting-edge scientific methods of the day, the dictionary analyzed distinctions among peoples in each of the major racial categories and ranked them on a hierarchical scale according to levels of civilization. The scientific nature of the study helped legitimize contemporary concepts of race.<sup>10</sup>

#### AMERICAN VICTORIANISM

The dominant culture that Cubberley and others sought to protect during this era is commonly referred to as American Victorianism. The term acknowledges shared characteristics

with English culture and society—the rapid transition to an industrial, urban society, the explosion of knowledge, the focus on the future, and importantly for this discussion, the concepts of race—while still admitting to traits that developed within a uniquely American context, such as settling large expanses of land, population growth, and immigration.<sup>11</sup> This diversity of population is one reason Daniel Walker Howe writes, “American Victorianism was not without its own rivals and adversaries: the presence of so many ethnic minority groups gave the United States a cultural diversity wider than anything known in Great Britain.”<sup>12</sup> But American Victorianism, based on white, Protestant, northern European culture, predominated, and with the support of a growing middle class, it set the standard by which all immigrants were evaluated and acculturation measured.

Walter E. Houghton provides an excellent framework for understanding the basis of Victorian standards, or what he terms the Victorian frame of mind. His analysis was based on understanding a system of relationships, based on characteristics so internalized by middle- and upper-class Victorians that they “would have breathed [them] in with the air.”<sup>13</sup> In particular, four characteristics, or cultural motifs, signaled one’s belonging to the “right crowd,” and all of these motifs play a prominent role in *O Pioneers!* Perhaps the most important to Victorians were wealth and respectability, essentially two sides of the same coin. In order to gain wealth, one needed to restrain oneself from distractions, and the accumulation of wealth did not ensure respectability unless one demonstrated an acceptable level of personal restraint in their actions and behavior. Another important characteristic involved embracing technology, which indicated the ability to let go of traditional, Old World practices and follow new scientific methods. The third cultural motif involved integration into a new community. The willingness to forgo ethnic clustering and become a part of the larger society became a marker of successful acculturation. And last but not least,

American Victorianism demanded—as did its English counterpart—a visible commitment to middle-class culture through consumption patterns. Immigrants who conformed to these values experienced an easier transition into their new communities. Those who did not, found themselves marginalized if not considered outright dangerous.

Until roughly the 1870s, Americans felt confident in the “resilience and homogeneity of American society.”<sup>14</sup> The influx of immigrants shook that faith, as first the Irish, then southern and eastern Europeans, poured into the country. Maintaining cultural and political control of the country by encouraging assimilation became increasingly important.<sup>15</sup> “Americanizing” the New Immigrants became a matter of pressing concern throughout all regions of the United States as established groups sought to “guide and hasten the process of acculturation by which they might embrace the values and behavior of mainstream America.”<sup>16</sup> Newly developing towns in the rural West were no less prone to acculturating immigrants into the prevailing Victorian society than were the major urban centers.

In the decades after Nebraska achieved statehood in 1867, the area around Red Cloud grew at a rapid rate (see Table 1). The first census for Webster County listed only sixteen residents; thirty years later the population had increased to 11,610. Of the residents in the county, approximately 13 percent had emigrated from a foreign country. Table 2 shows the country of origin for the immigrants who settled in Webster County. In *O Pioneers!* Cather focuses on Bohemians, French Canadians, and Swedes, which rank third, fifth, and sixth, respectively, in terms of population. German Russians represent the tenth largest of the sixteen listed foreign-born ethnic groups.

Although the census reports are organized by county, this format can be deceptive. For example, Russians and French Canadians made up a larger part of the overall population in Cather’s world than the Webster County numbers indicate. These two ethnic groups lived in clusters that crossed the invisible county

TABLE 1  
POPULATION GROWTH  
IN WEBSTER COUNTY, 1870-1900

Census year	Population in county	Number of foreign born	Percentage of foreign born
1870	16	3	19
1880	7,104	990	14
1890	11,210	1,468	13
1900	11,610	1,350	12

TABLE 2  
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN  
FOR FOREIGN-BORN IMMIGRANTS  
TO WEBSTER COUNTY  
U.S. Census 1900

Country of origin	Number of immigrants
Germany	590
England	151
Bohemia	93
Canada (British)	81
Canada (French)	71
Sweden	70
Denmark	68
Switzerland	60
Ireland	49
Russia	42
Scotland	12
Austria	12
France	13
Wales	5
Hungary	2
Holland	1

line; if the number of French Canadians and German Russians living on the Webster-Franklin County border are included, the overall population number of both groups rises significantly and changes their numerical standings (see Table 3). German immigrants clearly made up the overwhelming majority of the population, although their identification with the Anglo-Saxon race set them apart from

TABLE 3  
IMMIGRANT POPULATION  
ACCORDING TO ETHNIC CLUSTERING  
U.S. Census, 1900

Ethnic group	Population
German	590
French Canadian	191
German Russian	130
Bohemian	93
Swedish	70

other immigrant groups.<sup>17</sup> If one examines groups clustered around a community rather than strictly adhering to county divisions, the French Canadians become the second-largest immigrant group in the area, followed by the German Russians. Bohemians drop in the overall ranking, as do Swedes.

#### GOOD IMMIGRANTS, THE BAD, AND THE IGNORED

Population statistics give one kind of information—the actual number of people who lived in the county. But they give no clue as to how the people behind the numbers fit into the community. Who were the good immigrants, the bad, and the ignored? Consciously or not, Cather reinforces the prevailing racial attitudes of her day through the construction of the characters in her novel. As Matthew Frye Jacobson notes, the prevailing attitude at the time was to rank “human differences by degree—people who are ‘entirely’ different and those are ‘somewhat’ different and those who exhibit approved behaviors.” Jacobson continues by noting that “even if painted in ‘shades’ rather than in stark, black-and-white polarities, the importation of ‘different’ peoples posed a terrible threat to the well-being of the republic.”<sup>18</sup> Throughout her novel, Cather’s immigrants follow closely the prevailing view of racial hierarchy and the advantages or threats to the dominant Victorian society that each group presents.

## THE GOOD IMMIGRANT

The protagonist in *O Pioneers!* is Alexandra Bergson, a young Swedish woman from one of the smaller racial groups. Through her description of Alexandra and the Bergson family, Cather projects the image of "good" immigrants. These are solid, sturdy people, and although part of the wave of immigrants entering the United States, they were western European in origin and falling well within the parameters of acceptable Victorian characteristics: industrious, anti-intellectual yet interested in new technology, restrained in actions and emotions, and good consumers.

The descriptions that Cather gives of Alexandra and her brothers do not focus on their brilliant accomplishments or artistic taste but rather on their hard work, dogged persistence, and practical nature. Cather's description of one of Alexandra's brothers exemplifies these traits:

[Oscar] was a man of powerful body and unusual endurance; the sort of man you could attach to a corn-sheller as you would an engine. He would turn it all day, without hurrying, without slowing down. But he was as indolent of mind as he was unsparing of body. (32)

Although Cather's narrator chastises Oscar's character for his "love of routine," through her description the reader is reminded of the importance of the Protestant work ethic. Hard work and moral discipline might make Oscar a dull boy, but he would be a successful boy. He works like a machine, constant and steady, exhibiting none of the disconcerting premodern ways associated with the New Immigrants: Blue Mondays, inconsistent attendance at work, and indulgence in seemingly endless Catholic religious holidays.<sup>19</sup> Working with the regularity of a clock in an era when the dominant culture embraced the idea that time was money was indeed a virtue.

Alexandra, too, embodies positive qualities and characteristics that encourage her success.

While literary critics often discuss the importance of a female protagonist, her metaphorical relationship to the land, or her defiance of contemporary gender roles, from a cultural perspective Cather describes Alexandra in prose that captures the essential characteristics of a Victorian woman.<sup>20</sup> In one passage Cather writes, "Her body was in an attitude of perfect repose, such as it was apt to take when she was thinking earnestly. Her mind was slow, truthful, steadfast. She had not the least spark of cleverness" (35). Although brief, the passage is illuminating because it highlights a number of key words and attitudes that held important meaning for this era. The opening phrase, "her body was in an attitude of perfect repose," conjures an image of tranquility and composure. A female in repose was a familiar form of artistic representation, capitalizing on the upper-class and upper-middle-class women as "creatures of cultivated leisure."<sup>21</sup> Cather's narrator juxtaposes the middle-class female ideal with a sense of mission. The words "truthful" and "steadfast" dovetail with the Victorian concept of earnestness, a characteristic that Walter Houghton writes was perhaps the defining characteristic of the era.<sup>22</sup> Earnestness, Thomas Carlyle writes, directs one's life, which was

no pilgrimage of pleasure, but a scene of toil, of effort, of appointed work—of grand purposes to be striven for—of vast ends to be achieved—of fearful evils to be uprooted or trampled down—of sacred and mighty principles to be asserted and carried out.<sup>23</sup>

While it is tempting to see Alexandra's ability to step outside normative gender activities, such as running the farm, as undermining womanly stereotypes, Alexandra is successful because she never loses her feminine appearance or demeanor. Warren Motley's essay on *O Pioneers!* analyzes the emotional cost Alexandra suffers by "possessing a female self while acting in a male world."<sup>24</sup> Yet it is precisely because she does not cross the line into unacceptable "mannish" appearance

or behavior that she is able to succeed.<sup>25</sup> Alexandra dresses in a manner appropriate to her sex, and her demeanor is gentle, caring, and soft-spoken. These are traditional feminine qualities that mitigate her business savvy, allowing her to fulfill her mission of civilizing the land around her and operating a market-oriented commercial enterprise. By contrast, the Bohemian protagonist in *My Ántonia* does cross a line into unacceptable behavior. Whereas Alexandra intuitively knows the importance of feminine behavior, Ántonia must seek out and consciously learn it. At one point she takes too much pleasure in her physical strength, boasting that "I like to be like a man." The narrator, Jim Burden, describes Ántonia working in the fields. Her sleeves rolled up and dress open at the neck, "one sees that draught-horse neck among the peasant women in all Old Countries." Because of Ántonia's mannish demeanor, "farm hands around the country [were] joking in a nasty way about it."<sup>26</sup> Only by leaving her family (literally and symbolically) on the farm, and putting herself under the influence of more "civilized" women in town, does she learn the feminine attributes that lead to her success at the end of the novel.

The concluding line of the excerpt, "She had not the least spark of cleverness," speaks directly to the anti-intellectualism of the era. English author Samuel Smiles wrote a popular work, *Self-Help*, first published in 1859, in which genius, native talent, and intellect were minimized, and the moral qualities of hard work and persistence were emphasized.<sup>27</sup> An example of the cultural sharing between England and the United States, it asserted that practical knowledge, not highfalutin theories or the liberal arts, would lead to success. People who are too sensitive, artistic, and intellectual—even good people like Alexandra's Swedish friend Carl Lindstrom—generally did not end up successful.

And yet being anti-intellectual did not imply turning away from all learning. Gaining information that could lead to more efficient and therefore more profitable market production

was a virtue. Cather reinforces these qualities when she constructs Alexandra's reconnaissance mission to the lower valley, writing, "Alexandra talked to the men about their crops and to the women about their poultry. She spent a whole day with one young farmer who had been away at school, and who was experimenting with a new kind of clover hay" (37). When the protagonist returns home she applies what she has learned to her own fields. By the end of the novel her efforts have paid off, representing a success story not only for this particular immigrant family but also for the Victorian ideal of progress. Her land, once an untamed wilderness, has been transformed into a civilized garden. Hard work, earnestness, and her application of new technology and practical knowledge to cash in on the developing market economy have made her a respected and wealthy woman, welcome among the various ethnic communities in her area.

Alexandra represents one immigrant from an exemplary group, but Cather avoids creating a stereotypical phenotype for Swedes. Her brothers Lou and Oscar serve as a useful device to show the diversity of individuals within the larger racial category. Walter Benn Michaels notes that in nativist literature of this era, family became the metaphor for nation, with distinct races as individual familial units within the overarching national family.<sup>28</sup> For progressive-minded Victorians, criticizing "family members" served an important function in their efforts to improve society. "It's bad if all the members of the family think alike," Alexandra says. "They never get anywhere. Lou can learn by my mistakes and I can learn by his" (53). The Victorian characteristic of self-criticism and pointing out flaws in others served their "endless concern for self-improvement," helping at both the individual and societal level to stay focused and achieve success.<sup>29</sup>

Along with the Swedes, the French also fall into the "good immigrant" category. Cather calls them French, although French Canadian is a more accurate term; only sixteen people emigrated from France to Webster County between 1870 and 1900.<sup>30</sup> The French did

have a long history in Canada, and a number of French Canadians began migrating south to the Plains in the late 1870s and 1880s. They settled in the area that spans the border of Webster and Franklin counties, with most of the population in Franklin County centered around the town of Campbell.<sup>31</sup> The Catholic Church and the cemetery described in Cather's novel are both located in Campbell.<sup>32</sup>

The French Canadians provide an example of how immigrant groups negotiated cultural acceptance in their new homeland. The French were wilder than most proper Victorians would have approved of. In the novel the French boys "liked a bit of swagger" and enjoyed showing off (125). They liked to hold dances, big parties, and ride their horses fast. They were also Catholic, a disconcerting detail to old-stock Protestants, although perhaps less threatening to Cather, who until late in her life rebelled against all conventional religion.<sup>33</sup> The Catholic Church, its priests and traditions, appear in a number of her novels. Janis Stout writes that Cather's respect for Catholicism did not imply "an acceptance of that vision or set of beliefs."<sup>34</sup> Her lack of overt commitment to any religion, and perhaps the fact that Episcopal ritual and church hierarchy, familiar from her childhood in Virginia, closely resembles that of the Catholic Church, allowed her to have a more tolerant attitude toward Catholics.<sup>35</sup>

Despite their Catholicism and more unrestrained attitude, the French in *O Pioneers!* fit easily within the "good immigrant" category. Perhaps most importantly, the French, like the Swedes, had the advantage of belonging to what would be considered part of the "old" immigrant group—northern and western Europeans. From the beginning they were considered less threatening, and enjoyed a cultural familiarity and acceptance that New Immigrants did not. This is illustrated in the novel by showing how the French conform to ideas of gender roles consistent with Victorian ideals of separate spheres. Indeed, Kathleen Danker's essay on the influence of the French Canadians in two of Cather's other

novels reveals that a real-life acquaintance of Cather's, the French Canadian immigrant Eliza Chartier, impressed Cather by her ability to use "the tools of domesticity to create civilized family life on the frontier."<sup>36</sup>

The young French bride, Angélique Chevalier, in *O Pioneers!* exemplifies civilized domesticity among this group of settlers in the Plains. In the following passage, Alexandra's younger brother, Emil, rides to the French settlement to visit Amédée and Angélique Chevalier. Assisted by her mother-in-law, Angélique is baking pies for the threshing crew. "Between the mixing-board and the stove," Cather's narrator writes, "stood the old cradle that had been Amédée's, and in it was his black-eyed son. . . . Angélique, flushed and excited, with flour on her hands, stopped to smile at the baby" (140). Angélique tells Emil that Amédée "begins to cut his wheat today; the first wheat ready to cut anywhere about here. He bought a new header, you know, because all the wheat's so short this year. . . . I watched it an hour this morning, busy as I am with all the men to feed" (140). Angélique fits the definition of a Victorian "Angel in the House," working within the proscribed sphere of domesticity. Although worried about the cost of the new machine, she is proud of her husband and his business savvy and concerns herself with her domestic responsibilities—caring for her new baby and making supper for the field workers.<sup>37</sup>

While Angélique represents the womanly Victorian norms of piety, purity, submission, and domesticity, her husband, Amédée, exemplifies a good Victorian businessman, implementing the latest technologies to help make his farm more productive and profitable. A hardworking farmer, Amédée, like Alexandra Bergson, embraces the technological revolution. He has joined the wave of new agricultural capitalists in the Great Plains, running "an efficient, profitable business supporting an increasingly consolidating industrial order."<sup>38</sup> Voluntarily accepting modern, market-oriented farm practices, so important to the Victorian concept of progress, helped immigrants speed the process



of upward social mobility and allowed immigrants to integrate more quickly into social groups outside their own.<sup>39</sup> As Richard D. Brown notes, for some immigrants with rural backgrounds, owning their land and embracing the “entrepreneurial, time-thrifty spirit . . . made their ‘Americanization’ a comparatively easy process.”<sup>40</sup> An additional benefit was that by accepting culturally important ideas, such as concepts of gender roles and adopting new technology, allowed them to retain some of their old ways. Accepting modern cultural traits seemed to assure Victorians that they would not regress back to their traditional, premodern ways.<sup>41</sup>

#### BAD IMMIGRANTS

In contrast to the good Swedes and French, the Bohemians who play a large role in *O Pioneers!* fall into the bad immigrant camp. In Cather’s novel this group tended to live beyond the pale of Victorian standards, exhibiting regressive, antisocial qualities that to the uninitiated might seem harmless but nevertheless pose a threat to society. In particular, their passion, or rather the unrestrained nature of this passion, epitomized what old-stock Americans saw as the threat of eastern and southern European immigrant groups, whose cultural and biological “backwardness” could pull American society down.

The attractive-yet-dangerous nature of unrestrained passion is delineated in Cather’s portrait of Alexandra’s young Bohemian friend, Marie Tovesky. Marie’s most charming features—her love of excitement and her impulsive behavior—are what ultimately put her and the other Bohemians in the bad immigrant group. Victorians were nervous about too much activity, which, as Benjamin Rader writes, “might not only jeopardize one’s chances for material success . . . but such experiences also placed in harm’s way the nation’s entire social order.” Concern with self-control, Rader continues, and “expressively condemn[ing] drinking, loud talking, extravagant gesturing” heightened the contrast between behavior that could contribute to the forward

progress of civilization and that which could undermine it.<sup>42</sup>

Cather introduces the Bohemians early in the novel when young Alexandra enters the general store in Hanover, Nebraska. There, among the other customers, she finds a group of men

drinking raw alcohol, tintured with oil of cinnamon . . . smack[ing] their lips after each pull at the flask. Their volubility drowned every other noise in the place, and the overheated store sounded of their spirited language as it reeked of pipe smoke, damp woolens, and kerosene. (8)

This is the antithesis of good behavior: noisy, smelly Bohemian men hanging around the general store, drinking and being loud. The name Bohemian did not help their image, either. Rose Rosicky, writing in the late 1920s, argues that

in more modern times the word Bohemian is used also to describe artist life in its irresponsible and even immoral phases. It has its origin in the French word *bohème* (gypsy), and uninformed people even look upon Bohemians (Czechs) as possible gypsies.<sup>43</sup>

It is also in these first pages that Cather introduces Marie, one of the central figures of the novel. She is depicted as an exotic child, a jewel amid the rough, uncultured people around her. In the novel, Marie and her family had settled in the city of Omaha. In language that is not exactly a ringing endorsement for Bohemian intelligence as a whole, Cather’s narrator describes Marie’s father, Albert Tovesky, as “one of the more intelligent Bohemians who came out West in the early seventies. He settled in Omaha and became a leader and advisor among his people there” (84). When Frank Shabata, a handsome young man from the Old Country, arrives in Omaha, the young women vie for his attention, but Marie wins his heart. After just an afternoon together, the

two decide to get married. "When he [Albert Toveski] heard of his daughter's announcement, he first prudently corked his beer bottle and then leaped to his feet and had a turn of temper" (85). But passion begets passion; Marie is wild and impulsive, a common trait among Bohemians throughout the novel, and the father cannot control his child. Despite his efforts to prevent the marriage by sending Maria to a convent, "When she was eighteen she ran away from the convent school and got married, crazy child" (70). During their courtship Frank Shabata dressed in expensive clothes and displayed elegant manners, but this is just a thin veneer of respectability. Cather's narrator notes, "Even in his agitation he was handsome, but he looked a rash and violent man" (82). Indeed, throughout the novel Frank exhibits a brooding and unpredictable side.

Despite their running off and getting married, Albert Tovesky bought the young couple a farm next to Alexandra Bergson's. But Frank Shabata resents his life on the farm and the effort it took to make the land productive. In his work habits, his unrestrained nature shows through: "He had flung himself at the soil with a savage energy. Once a year he went to Hastings or to Omaha, on a spree. He stayed away for a week or two, and then came home and worked like a demon" (86). Frank exhibited characteristics that one could describe as wild, irrational, and decidedly unsteady; his inability to master his emotions and his lack of self-restraint detract from what good qualities he might have had. His behavior is especially egregious when compared to the work habits of the good immigrants: Alexandra, her brothers, or Amédée.

#### GOOD VS. BAD IMMIGRANT BEHAVIOR

Comparing good vs. bad immigrant behavior brings up the difficult concept of Victorian attitudes toward race. While contemporary scholarship has moved away from the term "race," choosing to discuss differences among different groups as ethnic differences based on cultural heritage, the Victorians discussed

differences specifically in terms of race, with implications of biological uniqueness—good and bad—based on environmental, cultural, and physical peculiarities. While the discussion of whiteness and race had begun with the influx of Irish in the 1840s, the post-Civil War years became a crucial point for old-stock Americans as they justified restricting Native Americans to reservations, ventured into Imperialism, and debated Reconstruction programs for the South. African Americans had always represented the polar opposite of Anglo-Saxons, both in terms of color and assumed ability for civilization, but as the flood of immigration that began in the 1870s rose, the designation "white" became the subject of increasing concern.<sup>44</sup>

The 1910 publication of the *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, the Dillingham Commission's Report on Immigration, codified a hierarchy of races among Europeans who, until the middle of the past century, had all been considered white.<sup>45</sup> The dictionary, fundamentally a "hierarchical scale of human development and worth," gave each race an assigned place on the scale.<sup>46</sup> Northern and western Europeans, especially the Nordic races, received positions at the top of the scale, and as skin color and level of civilization declined—according to Victorian assumptions of civilization and morality—so too did their place within the hierarchy.

In the novel *O Pioneers!* the contrast of darkness and lightness in skin color reinforced the contemporary notions of racial hierarchy. The Swedish women are described as having light-colored hair and fair complexions, as is Angélique, the young French Canadian woman. The following passage describing Alexandra and Marie in the garden exemplifies this Victorian perception of race, with its representation of the passionate, darker-skinned beauty and the angelic nature of the light-skinned, restrained woman. Cather's narrator writes,

[T]he Swedish woman so white and gold, kindly and amused, but armored in calm,

and the alert brown one, her full lips parted, points of yellow light dancing in her eyes as she laughed and chattered. . . . She seemed so easily excited, to kindle with a fierce little flame if one but breathed upon her. (80)

Concepts of “civilized” and “uncivilized” had moved beyond distinctions between Europeans and “Other”—African American, Native American, Asian, and Mexican—and now involved varying degrees of whiteness among Europeans. The dark/light dichotomy reflected beliefs not only on the level of culture and civilization of each immigrant group but also on their potential for elevating themselves.<sup>47</sup>

Nineteenth-century ideas on race, loosely and inaccurately drawn from Darwin’s theory of evolution, centered on the idea that organisms adapted to their environment by acquiring physical and behavioral characteristics. “Given the assumption that acquired characteristics are heritable,” Diane Paul writes,

it follows that poor environments, whether natural or cultural, are almost inexorably bound to be reflected biologically. “Backward” peoples, whatever the original reason for their failure to develop, must after centuries of living in deprived environments become biologically degenerate.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the admitted “good nature” of most Bohemians in her novel (and their being listed in the *Dictionary of Races or Peoples* as the “most advanced of all the Slavs”), the Victorian hierarchy placed them on a lower rung of the racial ladder; their designation indicating an undercurrent of instability and latent volatility.<sup>49</sup>

This potential danger is shown in the relationship between Marie and Alexandra’s youngest brother, Emil. When Frank Shabata discovers Emil and Marie under the mulberry tree, he displays the characteristic “bad” impulsive passion of the “Slav.” Without stopping to think, his blood acting “quicker than his brain,” Frank shoots and kills Marie and Emil (152). In an era when theories of competition

between races and the “interconnected history of rising and falling ‘civilizations’” had been embraced by educated old-stock Americans, this tragedy was one that could move easily from the personal to the universal.<sup>50</sup> Emil, an intelligent young lad embodying hope for the future, had been exposed to Bohemians, a less civilized group of immigrants. He had let their exotic ways blind him. He let down his guard, and predictably, tragedy ensued. Lack of restraint and attraction to the wild, albeit tempting ways of these New Immigrants could wreak havoc on the national level—destroy the stability of American civilization—just as easily as it destroyed the promising young man in the novel.

#### THE IGNORED

Finally, the ignored group, the German Russians, is represented in *O Pioneers!* by a description in inverse proportion to their actual numbers. Cather would have been acquainted with the German Russian immigrants who lived nearby her grandfather’s farm and aware that they comprised the third largest immigrant group in Webster and Franklin counties. Yet this ethnic group garnered only the slightest reference in the novel.

Erroneously called Russians by Cather and the census takers in the late nineteenth century, they were descendants of Germans who had immigrated to Russia between 1764 and 1768. In 1761, during a period of relative stability in Europe, the new empress Catherine the Great put out a call across Europe for farmers to settle in the remote region along the Volga River. She sought peasants to do the backbreaking work of starting new farms in this harsh and remote region, to teach the Russian serfs, by example, good farming techniques, and to act as a human shield against Asian marauders who attacked with some regularity. Her first request did not bring in many takers.<sup>51</sup> The 1763 Manifesto had better luck. In addition to the other benefits, Catherine promised travel money, freedom of religion, freedom from Russian military service, and freedom to maintain their language

and culture. This attracted the attention of Germans who lived in areas heavily damaged by years of war—Hesse, the Rhineland, and the Palatinate—and within four years all the mother colonies along the Volga had been established.<sup>52</sup>

For over one hundred years, the privileges and benefits granted to the Volga Germans allowed them to maintain their ethnic culture and premodern way of life, until Czar Alexander II, who reigned from 1855 to 1881, rescinded their special status. As German Russian scholar Hatti Plum Williams writes,

Nowhere else in the world were the dialects and customs of Germany of the 18th century more faithfully preserved. *Moreover, no other group of Germans so large as this has been so far removed from the progress of the world and has shared so little in the past century's onward sweep of civilization* [emphasis mine].<sup>53</sup>

When Volga Germans came to the United States, they did not come to join this onward sweep of civilization. Rather, they intended to reestablish their old-country culture by reconstructing communities in their new homeland.

German Russians settled in Webster and Franklin counties, and as the census indicates, had a strong presence in the area. Yet as mentioned earlier, Cather's narrator gives only a cursory, and somewhat disdainful, description of this group in the novel: "[Ivar] had settled in the rough country across the county line, where no one lived but some Russians,—half a dozen families who dwelt together in one long house, divided off like barracks" (21).<sup>54</sup> Why was this group so ignored, considering that they represented the third largest ethnic group in the area? In her next novel as well, *My Ántonia*, only two German Russians are mentioned. Guy Reynolds writes that Cather's pre-1922 novels sought out idealized, progressive communities.<sup>55</sup> The German Russians in both novels do not fit the description of idealized, progressive communities, but neither do they pose a threat to society. The German Russians exhibited un-Victorian behavior in a

benign sort of way. Although not as geographically isolated as Cather suggests in her novels, they did tend to cluster together and keep to themselves rather than integrating into communities and becoming attractive nuisances like the Bohemians.

The German Russian living arrangements, too, would have been considered backward by Victorian standards. A number of families living together countered the ideal of a nuclear family, and Cather's narrator's description of the quarters, "divided off like barracks," hardly meets the Victorian image of a cozy and welcoming home. The German Russians did not embrace the Victorian "cult of domesticity," which gave women unprecedented authority in the household, but instead remained firmly patriarchal. And they still looked to their traditions of the past as a guide to behavior, whereas Victorians had shifted their orientation, focusing on the future.<sup>56</sup>

In terms of acculturation to the modernizing world, the German Russians did not adopt the consumer patterns of the Victorians. In his study on the symbolic meaning of goods in the nineteenth century, Grant McCracken writes, "They [Victorians] used the meaning of consumer goods to express cultural categories and principles, cultivate ideals, create and sustain lifestyles, construct notions of the self, and create and survive social change."<sup>57</sup> Unquestionably hard workers, the German Russians did not focus their efforts on moving up the social ladder into the ranks of the middle class. They did not buy goods to improve their image, to fit into the mainstream, or to improve comfort and sanitation. Rather, for the first generation and a half, the main concern for this group centered on maintaining their Old World ways while earning money to survive and get as many family members out of Russia as possible.

The German Russian adherence to pre-modern ways, then, ran headlong into the acquisitive, modern constructs and values of the dominant Victorian culture. As mentioned earlier, the highly self-conscious Victorians evaluated how well a person or group of people

had adjusted to modernizing society by the set of cultural motifs represented in *O Pioneers!*—wealth, respectability, embracing new technology, forgoing ethnic clustering, and adopting consumer patterns. If one worked hard, followed the rules, and showed “club-ability” through acceptable behavior and consumption of appropriate goods, then assimilation into the mainstream of society was possible, even if that mainstream was simply a small town in Nebraska.

But the German Russians in Cather’s novels did not adopt any of the cultural motifs. Unlike the Bohemians, their behavior was not overtly threatening, but backwards and insular. Both these characteristics are reinforced in the description of Pavel and Peter in *My Ántonia*. As Cather’s narrator notes, “of all the strange, uprooted people among the first settlers, these two men were the strangest and most aloof.”<sup>58</sup> By comparison, Ivar, the Norwegian, is unremittably different, but because he interacts with people in the community, he lives in fear someone will commit him to the insane asylum (54-55). Her relative silence about German Russians speaks volumes as to their acceptance by modern society. Apparently, Cather chose to include this ethnic group in *O Pioneers!* just enough to say that they were there, they did not fit in, and they could be ignored.

#### CONCLUSION

In light of the concern over the number of immigrants entering the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *O Pioneers!* provides a window on nativist attitudes toward the newcomers. The concern about the impact the immigrants would have on the country led to intense discussions on the concept of race, and in Cather’s novel as well, positive and negative characteristics are ascribed to each group of settlers. For the past thirty years scholarly focus has shifted away from the European immigrants that Cather found so vital to the history of Nebraska and the Great Plains to “multiple stories of people arriving in the West from all pos-

sible directions, and from every possible point of origin.”<sup>59</sup> While this approach has truly enriched our understanding of the West by giving a voice to Native Americans, Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians, who until then had been long neglected, it does have its downside. One unfortunate side effect was to conceptualize all immigrants from Europe into one ubiquitous group called Euro-Americans.<sup>60</sup>

When trying to understand the complexities of cultural assimilation in the Great Plains, creating a singular heading for immigrants limits rather than broadens our understanding of the region. Ethnic background helped determine the degree or ease of assimilation into new societies on the Plains, determining relationships with non-Europeans, as well as contributing to the development of a unique Plains culture. This is a lesson well worth remembering, as communities in the Great Plains grapple with issues surrounding a new wave of immigration. The newcomers—Hispanics, Asians, and Sudanese—are also categorized under a reductive heading, “Fourth Wave,” belying the diversity of their motivations, legal standing, and level of acceptance into their communities. The immigrants in Cather’s *O Pioneers!* have now become the old-stock Americans, the Victorian concern over newcomers resurfacing as the “the primary source of the modern mind,” which is wary, if not outright fearful, of the impact these immigrants will have on the Plains, and by extension, American culture and society.<sup>61</sup>

The discussion of race among old-stock Americans at the time Cather wrote *O Pioneers!* had shifted beyond the generalized categories of white, black, yellow, brown, and red to a complex system of racial hierarchy. The monolithic conception of a single European white race had been exploded, and the people on the lower rungs of the white hierarchy, whom the novelist Owen Wister had once described as “dingy whites,” were seen as a threat to the stability of American society.<sup>62</sup> Understanding that each race had been evaluated independently, *O Pioneers!* highlights nativist, middle-class assumptions about immigrants and their ability

to acculturate at the turn of the twentieth century. In doing so, Cather reminded readers not only of the diversity of settlers who moved to the Great Plains but also that in the climate of her era, not all immigrants were considered equal.

## NOTES

My thanks to Antje Anderson and Anne Fairbanks (Hastings College) and the peer-review readers for *Great Plains Quarterly* for commenting on drafts of this article.

1. Throughout the novel, first-generation immigrants struggled with trying to maintain Old World traditions. As Ivar laments, "The way here [in the United States] is for all to do alike." Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* Foreword by Doris Grumbach. (1913; New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 55. Further citations to *O Pioneers!* are given in parentheses in the text.

2. Joseph Urgo laments that literary critics have left determining the influence of immigration to historians and sociologists. Joseph R. Urgo, *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 3.

3. Mike Fischer, "Pastoralism and Its Discontent: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Comparative Study of Literature* 21, no. 1 (1990): 32. For a discussion on immigrants and threat, see Brian N. Fry, *Responding to Immigration: Perceptions of Promise and Threat* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2001).

4. Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 13-14. The farm, located closer to the Franklin County line and the town of Campbell than to Red Cloud in Webster County, was close to the German Russian settlement.

5. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistics of Population* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior Census Office, 1890), 388. The population for the entire Red Cloud precinct is listed as 2,263.

6. Gary Gerstle "Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of America," *Journal of American History* 84, no. 2 (1997): 525.

7. John Higham, *Send These to Me: Immigrants in Urban America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 43.

8. Frank Van Nuys, *Americanizing the West: Race, Immigrants, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 17, 33.

9. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy*

*of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 41.

10. Daniel Folkmar and Elnora C. Folkmar, *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, vol. 5 of *Reports of the U.S. Immigration Commission, 1907-1910*, presented by William P. Dillingham, 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1911). Available at <http://books.google.com/books?id=8OsyWOpOsKAC&pg=PP5&ots=IEqfJpoHx7&dq=dictionary+of+races+or+people> (accessed July 22, 2006).

11. Daniel Walker Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," in "Victorian Culture in America," special issue, *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (1975): 507-32.

12. *Ibid.*, 508-9.

13. Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957, 1985), xiv.

14. Higham, *Send These to Me*, 33.

15. T. J. Jackson Lears notes that dominant capitalist-cultural groups had to "develop a world view that appeal[ed] to a wide range of other groups within the society and they must be able to claim with at least some plausibility that their particular interests are those of society at large." Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (1985): 571.

16. James R. Barrett, "Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880-1930," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 3 (1992): 997.

17. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 41-43. Jacobson argues that by the 1850s, Germans had been categorized as belonging to the "superior" Anglo-Saxon race, part of a new concept of "variegated" whiteness distinguishing "civilized" northern and western Europeans from the influx of southern and eastern Europeans (see 47-49). Howe argues that Victorianism came under increasing German influence, both as a consequence of German immigration and as a deliberate imitation of "high" German culture ("American Victorianism as a Culture," 513).

18. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 42.

19. Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 15.

20. For example, see O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*; Douglas W. Werden, "'She Had Never Humbled Herself': Alexandra Bergson and Marie Shabata as the 'Real' Pioneers of *O Pioneers!*" *Great Plains Quarterly* 22 (Summer 2002): 199-215; and Reginald Dyck, "Willa Cather's Reluctant New Woman Pioneer," *Great Plains Quarterly* 23 (Spring 2003): 161-73.

21. Janis P. Stout, *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 138.
22. Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*, 218-20.
23. Thomas Carlyle, quoted in Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*, 221.
24. Warren Motley, "The Unfinished Self: Willa Cather's O Pioneers! and the Psychic Cost of a Woman's Success," *Women's Studies* 12 (1986): 153.
25. On the subject of mannish women as threats to society, see Laura L. Behling, *The Masculine Woman in America, 1890-1935* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
26. Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 79, 81, 89.
27. Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (London: John Murray, 1882).
28. Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nationalism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 8-11.
29. Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*, 237.
30. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistics of Population*. (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior Census Office, 1900). The number of immigrants who came directly from France to Webster County: 0 in 1870, 3 in 1880, 6 in 1890, and 7 in 1900. United States Census Data. Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh, and Twelfth census of the United States, respectively.
31. Mrs. Guy Danker, "A History of Campbell," in *Historical Highlights of Franklin County Nebraska*, ed. Barbara Bonham, 34 (Campbell, NE: C&L Publishers, 1967). Mrs. Danker writes of family migration from the province of Quebec, primarily from villages around Quebec (*ibid.*, 36).
32. *Ibid.*
33. Janis Stout, "Faith Sentiments in Cather's Letters," in *Willa Cather and the Culture of Belief*, ed. John J. Murphy (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 9.
34. *Ibid.*, 18. Later in her life, Cather rejected the Baptist religion of her family and joined the Episcopal Church. Her mother's family in Virginia were members of the Episcopal Church, and as Stout notes, "Reared a Baptist, Cather seems likely to have had from early on a sense of social distinctions between the various Protestant dominions, specifically between the Baptist Church and the Episcopal. . . . It is at least plausible that the affiliation with Grace [Episcopal] Church was prompted as much by a sense of social status as by religious convictions" (22).
35. The Episcopal Church had its origins in the United States as the Anglican Church. The first church, established in the Jamestown colony in Virginia, 1607, was associated with the elite class of the Chesapeake Bay region. See David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), for a discussion of the persistence of English culture in America.
36. Kathleen Danker, "The Influence of Willa Cather's French-Canadian Neighbors in Nebraska in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*," *Great Plains Quarterly* 20 (Winter 2000): 45.
37. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," in *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, ed. Lucy Maddox, 44 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
38. William Conlogue, "Managing the Farm, Educating the Farmer: O Pioneers! and the New Agriculture" *Great Plains Quarterly* 21 (Winter 2001): 4.
39. Howe, "American Victorianism as a Culture," 515.
40. Richard D. Brown, "Modernization: A Victorian Climax," in *Victorian America*, ed. Geoffrey Blodgett, 38 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976).
41. *Ibid.*
42. Benjamin Rader, *A Brief History of American Cultures* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001), 192.
43. Rose Rosicky, "A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska" (1929), in *Understanding O Pioneers! and My Ántonia*, ed. Sheryl L. Meyering (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 98.
44. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 43-44.
45. Folkmar and Folkmar, *Dictionary of Races and Peoples*.
46. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 78-79.
47. For examples on the concept of whiteness and race, see Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class, Politics, and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Rutledge, 1995); and Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *Are Italians White?: How Race Is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
48. Diane Paul, "In the Interests of Civilization: Marxist Views of Race and Culture in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42 (January-March 1981): 117.
49. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 79.
50. Mathew Pratt Guterl, *The Color of Race in America, 1900-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 17.
51. Hatti Plum Williams, *The Czar's Germans* (Lincoln, NE: American Historical Society Germans from Russia, 1975), 97.

52. Ibid., 4. It is difficult to find an English translation of the entire 1763 Manifesto. However, various benefits are described in Williams (ibid.). See Fred C. Koch, *The Volga Germans in Russia and the Americas from 1763 to the Present* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press); and Karl Stumpp, *The German-Russians: Two Centuries of Pioneering* (1967; Lincoln, NE: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1978).

53. Williams, *The Czar's Germans*, 97.

54. Pauline Dudek, telephone interview with author, 1999. The actual Russian settlement house that Cather probably had in mind was a temporary structure used during their first winter in Nebraska. Dudek, whose husband and his family belonged to the German Russian community in Campbell, Nebraska, recalled that the German Russian immigrants lived in town and traveled back and forth to work farmland, similar to the living and working arrangement in Russia. Later, the French Canadians

bought the German Russian house and used it as a church.

55. Guy Reynolds, "Willia Cather as Progressive: Politics and the Writer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*, ed. Marilee Lindemann, 22 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

56. Brown, "Modernization: A Victorian Climax," 36-37.

57. Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

58. Cather, *My Ántonia*, 24.

59. Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Has 'Minority' History Transformed the Historical Debate?" *Perspectives* 35 (November 1987): 31-36.

60. Several works, especially those by Fred Luebke, stand as exceptions to the broad generalization.

61. Houghton, *Victorian Frame of Mind*, xiv.

62. Guterl, *Color of Race in America*, 6