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## *O PIONEERS!* The Problem of Structure

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# O PIONEERS!

## THE PROBLEM OF STRUCTURE

BRUCE P. BAKER II

In her preface to the 1922 edition of *Alexander's Bridge* and in the 1931 essay "My First Novels: There Were Two," Willa Cather conveyed not only her dissatisfaction with *Alexander's Bridge* but also her awareness that with *O Pioneers!* she had touched matters closer to her "deepest experience," material that was distinctly derived from the Nebraska of her childhood.<sup>1</sup> She had written the book with genuine enthusiasm: "*O Pioneers!* interested me tremendously because it had to do with a kind of country I loved, because it was about old neighbours, once very dear, whom I had almost forgotten in the hurry and excitement of growing up and finding out what the world was like and trying to get on in it." The process of writing *O Pioneers!*, she says, was much different from her experience with *Alexander's Bridge*. The difference is conveyed in simple but effective similes: "This was like taking a ride through a familiar country on a horse that

knew the way, on a fine morning when you felt like riding. The other was like riding in a park, with someone not altogether congenial, to whom you had to be talking all the time." *O Pioneers!* was a departure from the material and technique of not only *Alexander's Bridge* but also the Jamesian novels of that day:

Since I wrote this book for myself, I ignored all the situations and accents that were then generally thought to be necessary. The "novel of the soil" had not then come into fashion in this country. The drawing-room was considered the proper setting for a novel, and the only characters worth reading about were smart people or clever people. . . . *O Pioneers!* was not only about Nebraska farmers; the farmers were Swedes! At that time, 1912, the Swede had never appeared on the printed page in this country except in broadly humorous sketches.

Thus Cather herself knew that *O Pioneers!* was clearly a departure from what she had tried to do in *Alexander's Bridge* as well as from what others were doing in the novel genre at the time.

What was "new" for Willa Cather in this novel was not its material and setting so much as its structure, which was an innovative departure

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from traditional form as well as content. *O Pioneers!* in fact comprises two major stories, not one, with Alexandra Bergson's development of the "wild land" into the settled and prosperous "neighboring fields" in the first part of the novel and the tragic love affair of Marie Shabata and Emil Bergson in the second. Such an apparent dichotomy has led some critics to disparage the novel's "inferior structure" and "unassimilated incidents."<sup>2</sup> Even Cather's good friend Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant commented, upon reading the manuscript, "the only flaw I could find in *O Pioneers!* was that it had no sharp skeleton."<sup>3</sup> Rene Rapin, in one of the earliest studies of Cather's work, calls *O Pioneers!* a "great book" but notes that it "lacks both unity of time and place . . . and unity of treatment and subject."<sup>4</sup> David Daiches some twenty years later was more explicit: "the first part of the novel seems to arise from a different impulse and to be built on different underlying rhythms than those later sections which deal with the love of Emil and Marie." Indeed, says Daiches, the latter narrative seems "like a feverish episode outside the main stream of events." In short, *O Pioneers!* contains "disparate elements . . . which are never wholly resolved into a unity," he concludes.<sup>5</sup>

Part of the problem may well have been the genesis of the novel; *O Pioneers!* was derived from two separate stories written by Cather at two separate times. As Elizabeth Sergeant and others have pointed out, Cather had written a story originally entitled "Alexandra" in the autumn of 1911, had laid it aside, and after returning from a visit to the Southwest in March of 1912, had written "The White Mulberry Tree." Moreover, Sergeant observes that Cather had first viewed these two stories as complete in themselves, but now, as she wrote *O Pioneers!*, "she had on her hands a two-part pastoral: the most foolish endeavor imaginable, she mourned."<sup>6</sup> The artistic problem was clear: how were the two stories to be made one, how was the novel to be shaped into an integrated whole?

In the opinion of some critics and readers that problem was never solved. How could any

novel seem unified when the protagonist, Alexandra Bergson, all but disappears from the pages of a major section of the novel, only to reemerge in the final short section, "Alexandra," in what seems to some to be an artificial and not altogether convincing attempt at unifying the novel's two major stories? For more than a few critics and readers, the structure of *O Pioneers!* remains troublesome and flaws an otherwise successful novel.

A number of scholars have attempted to reconcile the apparent dichotomy of *O Pioneers!* and thus to solve the problem of its structure. As early as 1933, in his article summarizing "The Case against Willa Cather," Granville Hicks rather surprisingly defends her from this particular criticism by insisting that "unity of tone rather than firmness of structure" characterize the novel.<sup>7</sup> E. K. Brown dismisses the whole matter by commenting that the "structure of *O Pioneers!* has a happy looseness," a phrase that tends to beg the question rather than provide insight.<sup>8</sup> Dorothy Van Ghent offers a somewhat fuller explanation, but it seems to contribute more by its aptness of phrase than by logical or concrete analysis of the novel's patterns: the two parts "are wrought into one form by an instinct as sure as the cycle of seasons, a cycle which itself seems to be the natural commanding form of the novel."<sup>9</sup>

More recently, Philip Gerber has argued that what some critics have called the "split" in the novel "is no more than a shift of emphasis," with Alexandra serving as the "unifying figure."<sup>10</sup> James Woodress has also spoken briefly of what he considers to be the thematic unity of *O Pioneers!*, a "theme of life everlasting" that is reminiscent of Walt Whitman.<sup>11</sup>

The clearest and most helpful comments on the problem of structure in the novel have come from John Randall and David Stouck. In his provocative book *The Landscape and the Looking Glass*, Randall suggests that Cather's poem "Prairie Spring," which appears in the preliminary pages of *O Pioneers!*, states "in explicit form" the two main themes of the novel: youth and the land. The poem not only

anticipates the plot and theme of *O Pioneers!* but also, Randall implies, suggests the relationship between the two seemingly disparate parts: the story of youth works itself out against the setting of the "great fact" of the land. Moreover, he argues that Cather explores the prevailing theme of "spontaneity" in both parts and thus succeeds in thematically unifying the book.<sup>12</sup>

David Stouck, in his study of *O Pioneers!* in the epic tradition, contributes at least two major ideas to our understanding of the problem. For one thing, Stouck's remark in a note prompts me to wonder if critics from Sergeant on have simply placed too much emphasis on what she called the "two-part pastoral" and have thus failed to recognize the obvious: that Cather has divided the novel into five parts. The first three sections develop major themes, the fourth deals with death, and the fifth concerns the cycle of "rebirth through revaluation."<sup>13</sup> Stouck also draws attention to the epic, thematic relationship of the Alexandra and Emil/Marie stories wherein, as in Genesis, the first is "the story of creation" and the second is the story of "lovers cast from the earth's garden through sin."<sup>14</sup>

My own work on symbol and image patterns in Cather's fiction suggests also that there are many other subtle ways in which the two parts of the novel are brought together into an unconventional but nevertheless cohesive work of art.<sup>15</sup> As we have seen, the poem "Prairie Spring" indicates the two major subjects of the novel: the land and youth. Cather's lines not only anticipate the plot and themes of *O Pioneers!* but also introduce the basic symbolic patterns of the novel. On the one hand, there is the pattern of the land—the story of Alexandra and her relationship to both the "Wild Land" of part one and the "Neighboring Fields" of part two; on the other, there is the pattern of youth—the story of Emil and Marie and their passionate though tragic love.

Even more significant, I believe, is the imagery of the poem, for in its lines are anticipated many of the image patterns that are explored more fully in the novel itself. There is,

for example, the personification of the land, a land that is "always silent," often "sombre," but nevertheless "rich." And there is the "fresh-plowed soil," part of the personified land, sharing in its ambiguous character: it is "full of strength" but also full of "harshness." "Toiling horses" and "tired men" struggle with their antagonist as they begin in the spring the process of subduing the land and bending it to their will.

"Against all this" is posed the personified abstraction "Youth," the second major symbolic pattern of the novel. The imagery associated with youth in the poem is also developed more extensively in the novel. In the poem, "flaming" is the first of those images of fire by which Cather suggests the passion and intensity of the young. The flame is associated with "wild roses," the first of numerous references to flowers as suggestive of vitality, beauty—and evanescence. Youth is "singing and singing," "singing like the larks over the plowed fields"; images of music and of birds are associated throughout the novel with the young, especially with Emil and Marie. "Prairie Spring" is a microcosm of the major symbol and image patterns that permeate the novel and thereby contribute to the underlying unity of *O Pioneers!*; the process of integrating the so-called two stories thus begins even before the first page of the narrative proper.

Another approach that may be helpful in appreciating the essential unity of *O Pioneers!* is to consider the title itself, obviously drawn from Whitman's poem "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" Like Whitman, Cather extols the pioneer experience, sometimes with the same rhapsodic exuberance of the poem. But Cather's account portrays more realistically the difficulties, indeed, the tragedies inherent in man's attempt to transform the "wild land" into patterned fields. John Bergson, Alexandra's father, had struggled with the land from the beginning and had lost his life just at the threshold of having "subdued" it; whereas Alexandra's foresight and imagination, coupled with hard work and faith in the land, result in her successful merger with the "great fact" and the prosperity that

follows. Had the novel concluded at the point of Alexandra's achievement, its portrayal of the pioneer experience would simply be a cliché account of triumph over land, weather, and circumstances. The Emil/Marie story, however, underlines the fact that Alexandra's life is one of tragedy as well as triumph, of success and failure, of joy and sorrow. Thus part three, "Winter Memories," provides a significant and evocative transition between the story of pioneer achievement in transforming the land into an abundant Garden of Eden and a reminder that within that Garden lurks death and despair.

The opening description in "Winter Memories" suggests through its images the interlude that this section provides: "Winter has settled down over the Divide again; the season in which Nature recuperates, in which she sinks to sleep between the fruitfulness of autumn and the passion of spring" (p. 187). The personifications of the seasons in this sentence seem to suggest the structure of *O Pioneers!*. That is, the section "Winter Memories" lies between "the fruitfulness of autumn" (the theme of "The Neighboring Fields") and "the passion of spring" (the thematic equivalent of part four, "The White Mulberry Tree"). Moreover, the metaphor of Nature sleeping prepares for the description that immediately follows, in which Cather explores the traditional association between winter and death: "The birds are gone. The teeming life that goes on down in the long grass is exterminated" (p. 187). Even the great land has given way to the devastation of winter: "The ground is frozen so hard that it bruises the foot to walk in the roads or in the ploughed fields. It is like an iron country, and the spirit is oppressed by its rigor and melancholy" (pp. 187-88). Just as Cather had used animal imagery to describe the "wild land" in section one and had employed what Randall calls "geometric" imagery in "Neighboring Fields," she now views the land as "frozen," "iron-like," and "melancholy."<sup>16</sup> It is, in fact, a place of death, and as such it symbolically forebodes the tragic deaths that occur in the next part of the novel.

The second chapter of "Winter Memories" is brief but significant. In it Cather returns to Alexandra and her relationship both to the land and to her brother Emil, again overtly bringing together the two major threads of the story. However, a more subtle unifying element emerges from the imagery of a significant passage describing Alexandra's relationship to the land; she reminisces about those "certain days in her life, outwardly uneventful, which [were] peculiarly happy; days when 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" (pp. 203-4). The procreative imagery of this passage clearly suggests that the affinity between Alexandra and the land is an intimate one, that the "germination" of the soil is an act that Alexandra symbolically shares. Just as the early version of her recurrent dream suggests a sublimated desire to be carried off by a lover, so this passage indicates that the so-called "Alexandra story" in *O Pioneers!* is in fact a love story, a story of the giving and sharing of oneself with the object of that love. In this sense, the Emil/Marie story is simply a continuation of the theme of love, this time resulting not in triumph but in tragedy; the fulfillment that Alexandra has enjoyed in her love is to be denied Emil and Marie; their love results not in new life but in death.<sup>17</sup>

The inclusion of the Emil/Marie story contributes significantly to Cather's characterization of Alexandra and our understanding of her role as a human being rather than a totally mythic figure. To be sure, the Alexandra of the first half of *O Pioneers!* is what Mildred Bennett has called a "mythical figure—the strong earth symbol"; David Daiches labeled "a kind of Earth Mother or Corn Goddess, a Ceres who presides over the fruitful land"; and Philip Gerber described as an "Amazonian figure."<sup>18</sup> However, the tragedy of Emil and Marie forces Alexandra to confront her own weakness: an unawareness of the "fierce necessity"<sup>19</sup> of human relationships, not to mention what Emil refers to as "her own realization of herself" (p. 203). After the death of Emil and Marie, Alexandra can no longer be the same; her

initiation has occurred upon seeing the dead lovers under the mulberry tree:

The moment she had reached them in the orchard that morning, everything was clear to her. There was something about those two lying in the grass, something in the way Marie had settled her cheek on Emil's shoulder, that told her everything. She wondered then how they could have helped loving each other; how she could have helped knowing that they must. [p. 285]

But now, as Cather's simple title of this last section of the book suggests, Alexandra is left alone. The closing of the novel with a return to Alexandra is not merely an attempt to unify *O Pioneers!* in a mechanical way but rather to complete the portrayal of a heroine who has become fully human, a real as well as a mythic figure. The story was hers all along, a woman sharing in the triumph and tragedy of the pioneer land.

*O Pioneers!* ends with the theme of the cycle of life as it returns to Alexandra, Carl Linstrum, and their relationship to that "great fact" with which the novel began. Carl, having finally received word of the death of Emil and Marie, has come back to the Divide and to Alexandra. Even though there is the suggestion that Carl and Alexandra will probably be married in the near future, Cather indicates that Alexandra's relationship to the land has in fact been her particular means to fulfillment. Carl murmurs, "You belong to the land, as you have always said. Now more than ever" (p. 307). His final observations also draw attention to the second major narrative of the novel. Carl feels that Marie's fate was almost inevitable, for she was "'too full of life and love.'" Marie's youth and warmth were irresistible, he suggests: "People come to [women like Marie] as people go to a warm fire in winter. I used to feel that in her when she was a little girl. Do you remember how all the Bohemians crowded round here in the store that day, when she gave Emil her candy? You remember those yellow sparks in her eyes?" (pp. 304-5). Thus for the last time in the novel Cather associates fire

imagery with Marie. But now the fire is extinguished.

A brief descriptive passage subtly suggests the final situation of the novel: "They paused on the last ridge of the pasture, overlooking the house and the windmill and the stables that marked the site of John Bergson's homestead. On every side, the brown waves of the earth rolled away to meet the sky" (p. 307). The compressed imagery of this last sentence combines three of the traditional basic elements: water, earth, and air. But fire is notably absent; Marie and Emil are dead. Thus *O Pioneers!* ends with the suggestion of a return to basic elements, to the land and sky, to what is always left.

Cather herself described to Elizabeth Sergeant what she felt had brought together the "elements that made the book" as a "sudden inner explosion and enlightenment."<sup>20</sup> It was not a particularly logical or conscious process, but rather a fusion of the two initial stories into a new whole, a result of what Coleridge called the imagination, that element of the creative process that could alone bring unity from "multeity." Cather's underlying image and symbol patterns reinforce the thematic unity of a novel that represents a significant experiment in structure. In my opinion, *O Pioneers!* may be considered as innovative, daring, and experimental in form as it is in content.

## NOTES

1. Willa Cather, *On Writing* (New York: Knopf, 1949), pp. 92-95, passim.
2. Rene Rapin, *Willa Cather* (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1930), p. 21; David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 23.
3. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), p. 97.
4. Rapin, *Willa Cather*, p. 22.
5. Daiches, *Willa Cather*, pp. 23, 27, 28.
6. See Sergeant, *Willa Cather*, pp. 86-91.
7. Granville Hicks, "The Case against Willa Cather," reprinted in *Willa Cather and Her*

*Critics*, ed. by James Schroeter (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 140.

8. E. K. Brown, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 179.

9. Dorothy Van Ghent, *Willa Cather* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), pp. 17-18.

10. Philip L. Gerber, *Willa Cather* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), p. 79.

11. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (New York: Pegasus, 1970), pp. 158-59.

12. John H. Randall III, *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 76.

13. David L. Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 110 n.

14. Stouck, *Cather's Imagination*, pp. 31-32.

15. *O Pioneers!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry, 1962), p. 187. Subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

16. Randall, *Landscape and Looking Glass*, p. 71 and pp. 110-11.

17. In contrast to these two love stories—of Alexandra and the land and of Emil and Marie—is the more conventional story of Amédée Chevalier and his bride. The latter relationship also ends in tragedy.

18. Mildred R. Bennett, ed., *Early Stories of Willa Cather* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1957), p. 66; Daiches, *Willa Cather*, p. 27; Gerber, *Willa Cather*, p. 101.

19. Willa Cather, "Prairie Spring," line 15, epigraph to *O Pioneers!*.

20. Sergeant, *Willa Cather*, p. 116.