


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Andra Laura Taur for the Master of Arts in English presented on November 26, 2001,

Title: Taming the Wilderness in *O Pioneers!*: Willa Cather's Homage to the Nebraska Pioneer.

Abstract approved: _____


(Thesis Advisor Signature)

When discussing the importance of the European settler in the formation of the American character, literary and social historians such as Perry Miller, Frederick Jackson Turner, and David Williams, to name a few, choose to focus on the strife of the New England settler. Historically, though, the Puritans have been followed by waves of immigrants who were also European but who were not English and did not share the Puritan beliefs. Willa Cather's fictional characters were inspired by the pioneers who moved westward and who settled on the Great Plains, specifically in Nebraska.

In *O Pioneers!* Willa Cather portrays the struggle of the Nebraska pioneer and does it from the biblical perspective of the wilderness tradition. The strife of her pioneers can be regarded as a reiteration of the conquest of the wilderness of Sinai by the Israelites in the Old Testament. The stories of the successful pioneer Alexandra Bergson and of the deaths of Emil and Marie Shabata are tailored after the Book of Genesis, namely after the stories of creation and destruction and of finding God's grace by conquering the wilderness. By using such timeless themes, Willa Cather draws one's attention to the people who inspired her. Cather's novel becomes thus a legacy for the place that the Nebraska pioneer has earned in the physical landscape of North America and in the landscape of the American consciousness.

TAMING THE WILDERNESS IN *O PIONEERS!*:
WILLA CATHER'S HOMAGE TO THE NEBRASKA PIONEER

A Thesis

Presented to

The Department of English

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

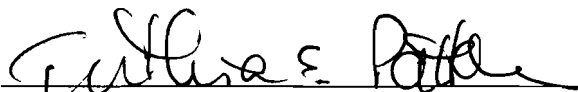
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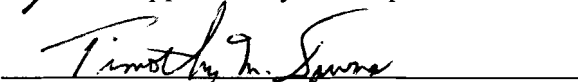
by

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December 2001

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Approved by the Department Chair


Approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis chair, Dr. Richard Keller, without whose tremendous help and unlimited patience this project would have been a dreary and humorless experience. His understanding of the subject matter as well as his ability to organize my thoughts have shown me what it means to be a teacher. For all their help with putting together this thesis, I would like to also thank my readers, Dr. Jim Hoy and Dr. Mel Storm.

Additionally, I would not have been able to make it so far away from home without my dear friends whom I will love and respect forever. Thank you Daniel Baldwin, Becky and John Miller, Sandy and Mike Brunson, and Glenna and Lloyd Baldwin.

Foremost, all my love and appreciation go to my family who have supported and encouraged me every step of the way that led me here. My parents Doina and Adrian and my brother Dani have always been my standards of excellence that I have yet to reach. This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather Ioan Hrisov and also to my precious grandparents Cornelia Hrisov, Mama Nuta and Tata B. I love you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
APPROVAL SHEET.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
<u>CHAPTER</u>	
1 PREFACE.....	1
2 INTRODUCTION.....	5
3 PART ONE: THE WILDERNESS AS MIDWESTERN REALITY.....	10
4 PART TWO: WILDERNESS AS TRADITION AND WILDERNESS AS FICTION IN <i>O PIONEERS!</i>	29
5 CONCLUSION.....	45
WORKS CITED.....	47
MAP OF THE GREAT PLAINS.....	50

Preface

As an undergraduate at the American University in Bulgaria, I read Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* during my senior year in a course titled "West of Everything." Other works included on the reading and discussion list were *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *On the Road*, and *The Day of the Locust*. The professor's intentions were clear: reconstructing the westward migration with which authors and people were and still are greatly preoccupied. I remember becoming totally engrossed in Cather's prose. The relationship between the apparently impenetrable landscape and the struggle of the characters to settle there fascinated me. Prior to reading the novel, my knowledge of the pioneers' pursuit of happiness was limited to the eastern coast of the United States. Nebraska and the whole Midwest were blurry notions, both geographically and culturally. I immediately became curious to discover more about Cather's homesteaders, her characters and the real people that must have inspired her. Before the semester was over I had already read her collected short stories, and two other "pioneer" novels, *Alexander's Bridge*, and *O Pioneers!* Of the two, I found *O Pioneers!* to be the most satisfying in terms of Cather's ability to vividly portray her characters and their strife. It is the novel in which one can see clearly the attraction that nature exercises over the pioneers, as well as the transformation that takes place in both before the land becomes the pioneer's home. Cather captures the reverence and the fascination felt by the pioneer. As Edward and Lillian Bloom observe in their major Cather study, *Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy*,

From beginning to end in her frontier novels, no matter how disparate her characters may be in time and culture, she joins them in a common aspiration that wipes out finite considerations. She consistently

emphasizes their attraction to nature—sometimes sentimental, always devotional—which gives them mystic insights. In *O Pioneers!* she compresses this notion brilliantly. (18)

When, after graduation, I was given the opportunity to study at a university in the Midwest, I did not hesitate to start my own migration towards the West. Four years prior to that I had moved south of Romania, to Bulgaria, to get my undergraduate degree from a hybrid university that taught American curriculum juxtaposed on European values. I knew it was time to change direction and join thousands of westbound Europeans because I needed to find out why friends and former colleagues, once in America, were not eager to return home. Not only that, but I was going straight to Cather's land. All I could think was that I could very well be one of her pioneers. During the late-night ride from the Wichita airport to Emporia, I could tell the highway passed by only a few towns. The beginning of *O Pioneers!* came to my mind and, for the first time, I was afraid of what I had brought upon myself. In a way, I was grateful it was a warm August evening and the vastness of the land was swallowed by the darkness.

Less than a month after my arrival, I chose to pack the bulk of my belongings and to store them in the closet, just in case I decided to make a sudden departure. I had unpacked in the first place because I longed to be surrounded by familiar objects, but Kansas was different from anything I had experienced up until then. To my European sensibility, it seemed barren. The little town of Emporia was one tenth the size of my hometown back in Romania. The tallest building was five stories high. Nobody seemed to walk anywhere. There was no theater or opera house. Even the churches looked nondescript. Other than the school, nothing stood out. Staying did not seem to be a great

prospect, but I finally decided that I was going to sacrifice two years in order to achieve my goal of obtaining a Master's degree.

Three years later, I am still in Kansas. I have seen other Europeans go east, and I have seen some move to big cities because they were looking to settle somewhere with more people and more hustle. It was not resignation that made me stay, it was discovering that Kansas was a lot more than just wheat and cattle. I have not been assimilated or Americanized, although my family keeps teasing me about a certain "American" trace when I speak my language. My ethnicity and nationality are still Romanian, but I consider myself enriched by the culture that I have been observing since my arrival. I do not celebrate Halloween and Thanksgiving, but I have eaten sweet potatoes at Christmas and I occasionally enjoy pancakes (which I consider dessert) for breakfast.

Given my personal reaction to Kansas, I felt and continue to feel a certain degree of compassion for Cather's characters, knowing that her inspiration was fueled by real nineteenth century European immigrants. I believe that, in order to understand Cather's fictional characters, it is important to examine the success of the real immigrants. At the same time, it is essential to discover the source of the immigrants' adaptive power contained by and expressed through their affinity to the land.

Cather intended *O Pioneers!* to be a testimony for the struggle of the early immigrants. As Maxwell Geismar observes in his essay "Willa Cather: Lady in the Wilderness," *O Pioneers!* expresses Cather's affection for those who inspired her to create her fiction (177). Carl Linstrum, upon coming back Nebraska, talks about the fact that the prairie allows people to know themselves and to know each other because one's

background is not lost. The following passage expresses Cather's intentions of being faithful to the historical aspect of her fiction by preserving it:

“Here you are an individual, you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody, we own nothing. When one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him. Our landlady and the delicatessen man are our mourners, and we leave nothing behind us but a frock-coat and a fiddle, or an easel or a typewriter, or whatever tool we got our living by. All we have ever managed to do is pay our rent, the exorbitant rent that one has to pay for a few square feet of space near the heart of things. We have no house, no place, no people of our own. We live in the streets, in the parks, in the theatres. We sit in restaurants and concert halls and look about at the hundreds of our own kind and shudder.” (*O Pioneers!* 47)

O Pioneers! is thus Cather's legacy. It is something that she leaves behind to speak of her own existence. However, the novel also “delineates the background of the first settlers on the windy Nebraska tableland—of those earlier immigrants who owned the land for a little while because they loved it” (Geismar 177).

Introduction

Willa Cather's portrayal of European immigrants at the beginning of the nineteenth century and, more specifically, of their strife to homestead in Nebraska's wild lands, a part of the Great Plains, or the Great American Desert, has captured the attention of many literary critics. Ever since the publication of *Alexander's Bridge*, Willa Cather's first novel, critics have been quick to point out her attention for detail, as well as her ability to recreate both the unwelcoming landscape of the Great Plains and its inhabitants' unyielding desire to plant their roots in the hard and wild ground.

Some of the European settlers were successful and some were less successful in trying to adapt in Nebraska, the latter group being the one that often packed up and went to the big cities, such as St. Louis and Chicago in order to join other members of their families. Such reaction is surprising considering that upon one's arrival to the Great Plains, the fact that homesteading was going to be a long and demanding process became apparent. They brought with them different social and cultural backgrounds often dictated by their varied countries of origin. Cather's immigrants came from all over central, northern, eastern and southern Europe, bringing along Slovakian, Swedish, Norwegian, Bohemian, Dutch, French, Italian, German, and Russian customs and systems of beliefs. In addition to their speaking different languages, their expectations of their new home were equally different.

The prairie was not a welcoming sight and the first impression did not portray adequately the extent of the land's lack of warmth. Like many other Europeans, whether travelers, explorers or simply tourists, who had happened upon the Midwest centuries before, Cather's "huddled masses" (Kraut) were simply discouraged. Some could not

cope with lacking the elements required by a simple life, such as roof above their heads or a supply of water, all of which they had taken for granted in the Old Country. Most of the immigrants, some way past their youth, were faced with starting a new life in a strange place surrounded by people with whom they might not have associated at home or could not because of geographical constraints.

In *O Pioneers!*, Cather's first novel in which she focuses primarily on the immigrants' fight to make Nebraska their home, the Bergsons are the epitome of the struggling pioneer family. The family knows its fair share of trouble before, under Alexandra's command, the Bergson farm becomes a flourishing enterprise. However, parallel to and without losing sight of Alexandra's success, Cather records the not-so-lucky Linstrum family, which is forced to leave because of financial loss.

A question then begs to be asked. What are the determining factors according to which some immigrants are successful and others are not? A closer analysis of this issue reveals that successful pioneers, such as Alexandra Bergson, transform the landscape according to their innate propensity for structure, aided by their imagination. Patiently, after the initial shock of coming in contact with the unfamiliar prairie wears off, the homesteaders start to adapt their surroundings to their cultural and religious expectations. Of course, this is not a one-way adaptive process because the pioneers need to learn to function in an environment which will probably never be European, even after changes are brought to it. Therefore, they will change as the landscape changes. A new people emerges, and it will be an addition to the existing American society.

For Cather, there exists a process of natural selection. Unlike the Darwinian idea, the successful pioneers did not have to be physically fit to adapt to the conditions on the

Great Plains. Examples of this rationale abound in Cather's novels, where women are the ones who adapt easier to the conditions that literally kill the men. People like Alexandra Bergson prove to be emotionally and psychologically suited to make their mark on the soil because they have the pioneer character: "A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves" (*O Pioneers!* 19). Ultimately, the pioneer's task was to create an organized environment, without destroying what nature had already provided, but working alongside what Cather labels "the Genius of the Divide," or the natural, albeit divine, characteristics of the environment. Without emphasizing the religious beliefs of her pioneers, Cather nevertheless is well aware of the tradition according to which one is faced with wilderness as a way to enter God's grace.

In *O Pioneers!*, the act of taming the land and, therefore, of living in the wilderness is obvious. The names of the first two parts, in particular, "The Wild Land" and "The Neighboring Fields," support this opinion. Consistent with the historical perspective, Cather describes first the reaction of the pioneers to the wilderness and then she shows the successful outcome of their attempts to settle there. Furthermore, by proving that she knows of this success she validates the importance of these pioneers for the development of American culture and civilization. When talking to Alexandra about the great few stories in the world, as a character easily associated with the person Cather, *O Pioneers!*'s Carl Linstrum expresses his belief in the place of the Nebraska pioneers in the world at large, and in the American society:

"And now the old story has begun to write itself over there," said Carl softly. "Isn't it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened

before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years.” (46)

These “two or three human stories” can be found in *O Pioneers!*. They are the story of Genesis, the story of the Fall of Man, and the story of man’s redeeming, or conquering the wilderness as another attempt to earn God’s support. Thus the novel becomes whole and the seemingly disparate parts unite to recreate the history of mankind.

As a researcher of Cather’s work, I feel that previous scholars, among whom Perry Miller, David Williams, Roderick Nash, and Richard Slotkin, have committed an injustice when their analyses of wilderness and American society and literature have mainly focused on wilderness and the east coast of the United States. According to them, the pioneers that encountered wilderness that had to be tamed were the Puritans who arrived in New England in the seventeenth century, and their success had the greatest impact on the American consciousness. Although the Puritans earned their place in the American society, so did the westbound immigrants of the nineteenth century who came from continental Europe. The pioneers who homesteaded in Nebraska were, for the most part, unrelated to the Puritans. However, they had to tame the wilderness before they could settle on the land and the details of their enterprise have been immortalized in letters written by the pioneers themselves and by other witnesses. Willa Cather was herself a witness. Perry Miller and Willa Cather seem to share the same idea concerning the importance of man’s response to the environment. Cather’s often-quoted “The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman” (26) is echoed almost verbatim by Perry when he assumes that “the mind of man is the basic factor in human history” (*Errand into the Wilderness* 206). The difference between the two quotes resides with the

words “heart” and “mind.” However, this points to the fact that for Cather the pioneers are more than just another study. Instead, she recognizes their relationship to the land and she answers it with just as much love.

Thus, at the core of this thesis stands the exploration of man’s attempt to last on the land, both as a historical reality and as Willa Cather’s literary fiction in *O Pioneers!* The first part delineates the pioneers’ first reaction to the wilderness and the second part is an analysis in the tradition of the wilderness and the expression this tradition achieved in Cather’s novel.

Part One

The Wilderness as Midwestern Reality

In order to understand Cather's characters, their successes and their failures, one needs to truly become aware of the existence of European pioneers who inspired her fictional works. In addition to this, Cather's reader has to understand the relationship of the pioneer to the land that was to become his home. The pioneer of Cather's novels and short stories is not the European traveler who began traversing the Great American Prairie from the sixteenth century onwards. The major difference between the Spanish gold-seekers and the Bergsons in *O Pioneers!* is the desire to stay. Although their reactions to the land are similar in that they elicit a grim picture of the future, the Bergsons manage to create a living space on the hard prairie soil. The purpose of recapitulating the history of the Europeans who traveled to the Great Prairie before Cather's pioneers is to observe their immediate reaction to the land. With the exception of the French Jesuits in the seventeenth century, the Spanish of the sixteenth century as well as the British explorers of the eighteenth and nineteenth century were struck by the realization that they found themselves in the wilderness. If the Spanish turned around and went back to Spain, the nineteenth century observer Washington Irving advanced the hypothesis that the territory that is now Nebraska will be inhabited by a mutant race because the conditions of the environment are too harsh for any other people to inhabit it.

The familiar landscape of Cather's fiction is the little settlement of Red Cloud, Nebraska. In *The World of Willa Cather*, Mildred Bennett claims that Red Cloud "has probably been described more often in literature than any other village its size"(94). This may very well be a legitimate observation, considering how popular and prominent a

place is Red Cloud in Cather's fiction. Its essence is the same regardless of the names it was given throughout Cather's works: Hanover in *O Pioneers!*, Moonstone in *The Song of the Lark*, Black Hawk in *My Antonia*, Frankfort in *One of Ours*, Sweetwater in *A Lost Lady*, and Haverford in *Lucy Gayheart*. It fulfills the same function in all of the novels: it is the stage on which the early European settlers play the roles of their lives.

In addition to Red Cloud, which is usually the merchant center where the pioneers get their supplies, yet another essential place in Willa Cather's fiction was the Divide. The Divide was a space between the Little Blue and Republican Rivers, located sixteen miles northwest of Red Cloud (Ambrose 12). The nature of the Divide was different from that of the town because it was uninhabited when most of Cather's characters or their parents first came in contact with the Great Prairie, in the 1850s. The Divide was also Cather's first home in 1883 when, as a nine-year old child, she moved to Nebraska from Virginia. Unlike the majority of her characters, Cather moved into town in less than a year because her family did not need to rely on agriculture to make a living.

Wallace Stegner, writing in the early 1960s, described the North American Prairie as a territory "notable primarily for its weather, which is violent and prolonged; its emptiness, which is almost frighteningly total; and its wind, which blows all the time in a way to stiffen your hair and rattle the eyes in your head" (*Wolf Willow* 3). Frank Julian Warne quotes John Bach McMaster, according to whom the Great Plains are those "unknown regions which lay along the waters of the Mississippi" (qtd. in Warne 69). Furthermore, one finds out that at the end of the eighteenth century

[...] less was known of the country than of the heart of China. There the Indians hunted the buffalo and the deer, and the trappers, unmolested laid

snare for the beaver and the mink. The great valley of the Ohio was little better than a wilderness. It was infested by roving bands of Indians. It swarmed with wild beasts. (qtd. in Warne 69)

Probably a better and geographically more detailed characterization of where Nebraska is located was written by Robert Thacker:

The prairie, a phenomenon quite unique to North America, is defined as that area of generally level unforested farmland—formerly grassland—between the Ohio River and the plateaus of the West that extends north into Canada to include portions of the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, and south to include the area extending to the gulf coast of Texas. (6)

Prior to their arrival to the Midwest, the majority of the European immigrants had never seen land that stretched as far as the eye could see. The worst part about this encounter of the pioneer with the Great Plains had to be the fact that they were unprepared for it. As Thacker reasons, during their journey towards the prairie the immigrants saw the forests on the Atlantic seaboard and the Appalachian Mountains, both of which resembled the landscape of Europe: “The North American prairie, however, was another matter altogether”(6).

This was the territory which other Europeans came to visit before the publication of Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!*, and before the literary world made the acquaintance of pioneer characters such as Alexandra Bergson, Crazy Ivar, Antonia Shimerda, Anton Rosicky, and Canute Canuteson. According to Robert Thacker’s study entitled *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*, the first European account of the North American

Prairie lands was due to a mistake. In 1534, Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca got lost and literally stumbled across the Midwest. His account together with other ones pertaining to future Spanish explorations constitute what Thacker calls “a crucial first assessment of European man’s initial prairie experiences” (16).

A little over half a decade later, another one of Cabeza de Vaca’s co-nationals, Coronado, started looking for gold in a place known by the Spanish as Quivira, or the Kansas of today. As the scribe of the expedition, Pedro de Castañeda writes that one of the groups sent to explore the territory came back only to report that “in the twenty leagues they had been over they had seen nothing but cows and the sky” (qtd. in Thacker 13). “The cows,” of course, were the buffalo, another unknown element of the environment which becomes the lens through which the land is perceived in another passage:

The country they [the buffalo] traveled over was so level and smooth that if one looked at them the sky could be seen between their legs, so that if some of them were at a distance they looked like smooth-trunked pines whose tops joined, and if there was only one bull it looked as if it were four pines. When one was near them, it was impossible to see the ground on the other side of them. The reason for all this was that the country seemed as round as if a man should imagine himself in a three-pint measure, and could see the sky at the edge of it, about a crossbow shot from him, and even if a man only lsy down on his back he lost sight of the ground. (qtd. in Thacker 16)

Castañeda's and the other explorers' problems stemmed mainly from a lack of perceivable landmarks. The lands of the Great Prairie were wild and, for the most part, without noticeable human habitation. To the Europeans they appeared to be truly foreign. Given the landscape in most European countries, with the exception of the Russian Steppes, those who traveled to the midwest in the sixteenth century experienced feelings of abandonment and frustration similar to the pioneers in Cather's novels. The following is the prairie seen through the eyes of the dying John Bergson:

Of all the bewildering things about a new country, the absence of human landmarks is one of the most depressing and disheartening. The houses on the divide were small and were usually tucked away in low places; you did not see them until you came directly upon them. Most of them were built of the sod itself, and were only the unescapable ground in another form. (*O Pioneers!* 7)

A letter written by Coronado to the Spanish king on October 20th, 1541, expresses the same kind of discouragement and frustration regarding the unfamiliar prairie topography:

I traveled five more days as the guides wished to lead me, until I reached some plains, with no more landmarks than as if we had been swallowed up in the sea, where they [the guides] strayed about , because there was not a stone, not a bit of rising ground, nor a tree, nor a scrub, nor anything to go by. There is so much fine pasture land, with good grass.[...] we were lost in these plains.... (qtd. in Thacker 17)

His attitude cost Coronado the success of his expedition. He eventually gives up the prospects of finding any gold in Kansas and he returns to Spain where he is considered a failure.

Coronado's lack of success baffled literary historians such as Bernard DeVoto. In a study titled *The Course of Empire*, he is concerned with the idea of the first European impressions of the North American Midwest. He exposes Coronado's lack of judgment in deciding to return to Spain because the corn supplies were depleting quickly and he was afraid for the fate of his men and horses. DeVoto, after writing that "[F]or the horses there was only buffalo grass, the most nutritious grass in the New World, and for the men only buffalo meat, the most complete single food that mankind has ever known," concludes by naming Coronado's decision "the paradox of minds that were as logical as any today and, further, were here working not with myth but with the most concrete realities but were betrayed by sheer strangeness" (qtd. in Thacker 17).

Three centuries later, the attitudes of the European immigrants were not unlike those of the Spanish travelers and of the people that followed them. An important idea that constitutes the core of the present research and which can be observed even in the earliest accounts, is the European inability to adapt quickly to the conditions offered by the landscape. Due to harsh economic and financial conditions, few had the option to return to the Old World.

The overwhelming feeling experienced by the newcomer who came in contact with the vastness of the prairie was "a sense of exile from society" (Thacker 17). Indeed, such an idea is entirely credible, given the recurrent imagery of the land as an immensity in which insignificant people cannot help but drown or simply get lost.

In his book *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier*, Richard Slotkin posits that the Europeans' response was conditioned by "the psychological terrors of the wilderness" (18). He develops the thought by writing that, upon their arrival to the New World, the pioneers had to experience "the psychological anxieties attendant on tearing up of home roots for wide wandering outward in space and, apparently, backward in time" (18). To maintain the connection between them and their countries of origin, they "felt impelled to maintain traditions of religious order and social custom" (18). To be able to experience a feeling of security, the pioneers had to transform the wild land surrounding them into a tamer one, or the "Great American Desert" (Dick 6) into a beautiful, fertile garden, not unlike the Garden of Eden. One can easily see this transformation take place on the Divide where, over the course of sixteen years, the landscape is no longer wild and clearly delineated gardens, orchards and crop fields abound.

The pioneer success is worthy of admiration, considering that those who homesteaded had to battle the elements as well as their own and their fellow immigrants' notions about the possible outcomes of their efforts. Sometimes, justifying these efforts to oneself or to other members of one's family proved most difficult. Upon asked why she was willing to risk everything and how it was possible to predict what will happen, Alexandra Bergson does not have a logical answer: "I can't explain that, Lou. You'll have to take my word for it. I know, that's all. When you drive about the country you can feel it coming" (*O Pioneers!* 26). When analyzing Alexandra's attitude, Edward and Lillian Bloom describe it as "mystic insight into divine causes" (*Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy* 18).

Discussing wilderness in conjunction to the impression it made on the American mind, Roderick Nash calls it “early man’s [...] greatest evil” (*Wilderness and the American Mind* 9). Furthermore, according to Nash, the early European settlers view the new world as “the antipode of paradise” (25). Their objective was simple: to transform the wilderness into a livable territory, or, into a “rural and useful” stretch of land (31). If such an enterprise had quickly taken form on the East coast, the Midwest posed additional problems because the wilderness appeared to be much more demanding.

The major difference between the Puritans and the continental Europeans on the Great Prairie was the fact that for the former the wilderness was mostly a proof of God’s desire to test his people, not unlike the Israelites’ exodus into Sinai. According to David Williams’s *Wilderness Lost*, “Those first settlers understood that the experience was spiritual and that their sojourn in the literal wilderness was but a symbol of a spiritual state” (15). Most of the Puritans, then, had a common purpose and they welcomed the challenge. For the pioneers that inspired Cather, sometimes the natural wilderness proved to be too serious of a burden for their psychological state. Since the communities were small and far apart, and one’s neighbors could very well be speaking a different language, it is easy to argue that the pioneers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries knew wilderness in its purest and exhaustive state.

The story “On the Divide” published by Cather in 1896, almost twenty years before *O Pioneers!*, is illustrative in this respect because it reflects the theme that characterizes Cather’s earliest fiction. The main character of “On the Divide” is Canute Canuteson, a Norwegian who is seven-feet tall. After a prolonged solitary and mainly drunken existence on the Divide, he finally decides to seek companionship in the person

of a girl who he, more or less, forcefully marries. The giant Canute finds himself torn between taking advantage of his new wife during their wedding night or sleeping outside on the ground to prevent it from happening. His good nature prevails and he decides to spend the night outside his cabin on the hard ground. The story ends as Canute, surprised by his wife's display of affection when she invites him in, breaks down and falls to his knees crying in front of her. Although the story is not about the pioneer's struggle to subdue the land, it does portray the effect that living in those harsh conditions had on the people. Ultimately, the people become hardened and estranged from other human beings to such an extent that a possible union seems to be unnatural.

John Randall believes that Cather's literary beginnings were marked by an utter "loathing here [in "On the Divide"] displayed towards the Nebraska land" (22). In support of his affirmation Randall quotes a passage from the story:

Insanity and suicide are very common things on the Divide. They come on like an epidemic in the hot wind season. Those scorching dusty winds that blow up over the bluffs from Kansas seem to dry up the blood in men's veins as they do the sap in the corn leaves. Whenever the yellow scorch creeps down over the tender inside leaves about the ear, then the coroners prepare for active duty; for the oil in the country is burned out and it does not take long for the flame to eat up the wick. It causes no great sensation there when a Dane is found swinging in his own windmill tower, and most of the Poles after they have become too careless and discouraged to shave themselves keep their razors to cut their throats with.

The feeling that the young Cather successfully portrays is that of helpless desolation. She names only two nationalities, the Poles and the Danes, but her readers know that her observations apply most pioneers, regardless of their country of origin. Virtually any of the pioneers toiling on the Divide are at the mercy of the territory. The windowsills of Canute's shabby cabin on the Divide are carved in such a manner that they tell the stories of all the Europeans who attempted to make a living on the Nebraska plains. The people in the carvings seem to be controlled by devilish figures that drain the life out of them:

There were men plowing with little horned imps sitting on their shoulders and on their horses' heads. There were men praying with a skull hanging over their heads and little demons behind them mocking their attitudes.

There were men fighting big serpents, and skeletons dancing together. All about these pictures were blooming vines and foliage such as never grew in this world, and coiled among the branches of the vines there was always the scaly body of a serpent, and behind every flower there was a serpent's head. It was a veritable Dance of Death by one who had felt its sting.

[...]It would sometimes have been hard to distinguish the men from their evil geniuses but for one fact, the men were always grave and were either toiling or praying, while the devils were always smiling and dancing.

In this passage, Cather likens the Divide to a place that comes close to hell. In a similar manner, almost four centuries before, in the letter to his king Coronado talks about the Great Prairie as a swallowing sea. In both cases man's inability to control the environment is apparent.

Two centuries after the Spanish explored the North American prairie, the French conducted their incursion in the Mississippi basin towards the end of the seventeenth century. It is thus surprising to read some of the letters written by the Jesuit missionaries during their travels on the river. Their perception of the prairie was that of a luscious landscape heavily populated by buffalo herds:

We proceeded, continuing always to coast along the great prairies, which extended farther than the eye can reach. Trees are met with from time to time, but they are so placed that they seem to have been planted with design, in order to make avenues more pleasing to the eye than those of orchards. The base of these trees is watered by little streamlets, at which are seen large herds of stags and hinds refreshing themselves, and peacefully feeding upon the short grass. We followed these vast plains for 20 leagues and repeated many times, "Benedicite opera Domini Domino."

(qtd. in Thacker 18)

Fr. Allouez writes the description of a beautiful painting of a paradisiac landscape in which everything is organized and exudes a cosmic balance. This is, nevertheless, a natural order, not one created by man. Although it is true that the prairie visited by the Jesuits was not the prairie in which Coronado was looking for gold, that is not the reason for such a different outlook.

Thacker believes that the contrasting accounts of virtually the same territory are due to a difference in the "purpose, direction, and expectations" of the travelers' expeditions. Whereas Coronado traveled to Quivira to pillage and was disconcerted when he could not find any gold, the French were merely passing through, with no reason to

stop and attempt to subsist among the buffalo herds (18). A similar opinion is advanced by Roderick Nash, who simply states that the New World was a wilderness for those Europeans who “considered” it to be a wilderness: “They [the Europeans] recognized that the control and order their civilization imposed on the natural world was absent and that man was an alien presence” (*Wilderness and the American Mind* 7).

A few fur traders, all of them British, were the writers of a journals and narratives spanning the period in between the Jesuit exploration and Lewis and Clark’s expedition into the western North America in 1804-1806. Their accounts of the midwestern territory are laconic, often reminding the reader about all the “level land” around them without going into detail about what they perceived as an absence of everything they were used to. Clark’s recordings during his and Lewis’ trip include information about prairie land which is, similarly to the French perception, viewed as a fruitful garden (qtd. in Thacker 25). During the latter part of the trip to Missouri, though, Lewis writes that there is “nothing remarkable in the appearance of the country” (qtd. in Thacker 26).

At about the same time, immigrants moving west were probably able to read or to become otherwise familiar with Maj, Stephen H. Long’s account of Nebraska:

In regard to this extensive section of the country, I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence. Although tracts of fertile land considerably extensive are occasionally to be met with, yet the scarcity of wood and water, almost uniformly prevalent, will prove an insuperable obstacle in the way of settling the country. (qtd. in Dick 6)

And yet, the pioneers proved him, and others including Zebulon Pike and even President Thomas Jefferson, wrong.

At the time Lewis and Clark were journeying towards the Pacific, the first European settlers were already on the plains and more were arriving daily. For Washington Irving, John Jacob Astor's historian, this was nothing else but an opportunity to speculate as to the fate of those who ventured into the "desert," postulating that the none of the civilized people in the East could possibly live in that region. His conclusion was that it would take a mutant race to make do on the Nebraska prairie:

But it is to be feared that a great part of it will form a lawless interval between the abodes of civilized man, like the wastes of the ocean or the deserts of Arabia; and like them, be subject to depredations of the marauder. Here may spring up new and mongrel races, like new formations in geology, the amalgamation of the 'debris' and 'abrasions' of former races, civilized and savage; the remains of broken and almost extinguished tribes; and the descendants of wandering hunters and trappers; of fugitives from the Spanish and American frontiers; of adventurers and desperadoes of every class and country, yearly ejected from the bosom of society into the wilderness. (qtd. in Dick 8).

The pioneers proved Irving wrong as well.

Records show that by 1850, "migration westward had been in such numbers that it seriously threatened at times to depopulate the Eastern states" (Warne 69). Michigan's increase in population from eighty-seven hundred in 1821 to more than one hundred

thousand by 1836, fact which led to its transformation from frontier territory into state, supports Warne's claim (71).

Although the beginnings were perilous and sometimes unsuccessful for some Europeans, in 1852 Hans Mattson, a Swedish immigrant, had to say the following about Minnesota:

[...] the red man chased his game in the woods where our churches and schoolhouses now stand; the country west of us was an unknown wilderness, Minnesota did not exist as a state, and many of our western cities, which now contain millions of happy inhabitants, were not even projected. Now, on the contrary, our state alone is a mighty empire. (qtd. in Warne 74)

This profile of the happy pioneer does not resemble that of the early immigrant, "the despised, the persecuted, the disinherited" (Warne 9). For Joseph Urgo, "[T]he United States was founded and has always been populated by ambitious malcontents, incurable optimists, and restless failures (*Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* 40). Warne calls the migratory patterns of the European immigrants an invasion that brought to the United States more than twenty-eight million people during the time between 1820 and 1910 (*The Immigrant Invasion* 9).

A closer look at the immigrants' nationality reveals the fact that out of the twenty-eight million more than five million came from Germany, four million from Ireland, more than three million from Austria-Hungary, Italy, England, Scotland and Wales, almost two and a half million came from Russia, Norway, Denmark and Sweden, and about half a

million from France (Warne 10). Taking in these numbers and in tune with the prose typical for the turn of the century, Warne cannot help but exclaim,

Truly a wonderful invasion! A stupendous army! An army that has been marching continually all these years—an army whose ranks, although changing racially, have not been depleted but have steadily and at times alarmingly increased in numbers as the decades have gone by. Here is a phenomenon before which we must stand in awe and amazement when contemplating its consequences to the human race! (11)

By associating the pioneers' migration towards the west with “an invasion” not unlike a military one, Warne recognizes the spirit of the pioneer, that desire to subdue the land and to make it their own. The resilience and even the stubbornness of the European immigrant when meeting with adversity is also recognized and celebrated by Warne.

It is worth pointing out that at the beginning of *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra is described as a soldier, and her resolute character can be easily ascertained by the reader:

[Alexandra] was a tall, strong girl, and she walked rapidly and resolutely, as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next. She wore a man's long ulster (not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her; carried it like a young soldier)... (*O Pioneers!* 2)

Willa Cather starts publishing her work at the turn of the century, and given her interest in the portrayal of the European immigrants, she must have been one to stand in amazement and observe the continuous influx of immigrants into the Nebraska plains. Although she used the immigrants as sources for her fictional characters early on in her

work, the first novel about the pioneer life on the Divide is *O Pioneers!*, published in 1913. Compared to her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, published in 1912, the former displays a much more positive attitude. Even on a surface level, its message resembles that of the Swedish immigrant Hans Mattson because the opening chapters, the ones primarily concerned with pioneering, are unequivocally titled “The Wild Land” and “The Neighboring Fields,” suggesting a progression from an unwelcoming land to land that the pioneers could call home.

After her family moved to the Divide in 1883, a young and inquisitive Cather came in contact with some of the local homesteaders, most of them from Bohemia, Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway, France, and even Russia. She felt an immediate desire to know them and, to a certain extent, she even identified with them spiritually. Her first impressions of the land are the ones of Jim Burden in *My Ántonia*. These impressions will last her a lifetime and her readers are safe to assume that most of her pioneers shared Jim’s feelings as they approached the Divide: “There was nothing but land ... Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out” (*My Ántonia* 8). For the skeptical reader, Cather herself recounts a nine-year old’s fear of having reached the end of the world:

I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon, holding on to the side of the wagon box to steady myself ... As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything – it was a kind of erasure of personality. I would not know how much a child’s life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows

around it, if I had not been jerked away from all these and thrown into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron. (*Willa Cather in Person* 10)

Her account mirrors the experiences of the earlier European travelers to the Nebraska prairie.

The major difference between Coronado or the Jesuits and the Nebraska frontier families was the fact that the former did not have to think about the land as their new home. They had the option to either go back home or they were en-route to other regions. To that initial feeling of incredulity due to their surroundings, the pioneers soon added the reality of their inability to function in such an environment. Many of the immigrants had little, if any, knowledge about farming or any other type of agricultural enterprise. In *O Pioneers!*, John Bergson, Alexandra's father, is the first to admit that farming was not the pioneer's strongest suit:

John Bergson had the Old-World belief that land, in itself, is desirable. But this land was an enigma. It was like a horse that no one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces. He had an idea that no one understood how to farm it properly, and this he often discussed with Alexandra. Their neighbors, certainly, knew even less about farming than he did. Many of them had never worked on a farm until they took up their homesteads. They had been *handworkers* at home; tailors, locksmiths, joiners, cigar-makers, etc. Bergson himself had worked in a shipyard. (8)

In spite of logical reasons that indicated that life in Nebraska was not going to be easy, people such as John Bergson were lured there by the possibility to own land.

Owning land was certainly more alluring than the precarious conditions in the post-Napoleonic wars-Europe. Although by 1815 the European nations were no longer at war, the wars caused economic depression. If a farmer in Ireland or England, for example, wanted to buy land, the taxes would have exceeded the yearly family income (Warne 28).

Unlike the situation in Europe, the state and federal governments in America were passing legislation that made it fairly easy for the newcomers to obtain precisely what was out of reach in the Old Country. The Homestead Act of 1862 is an example of such legislation designed to regulate the allotment and distribution of land to the settlers (Warne 35). According to this act, any citizen who was head of a family and was twenty-one years old or older could “enter” one hundred and sixty acres of land that belonged to the public domain, and obtain ownership after a period of five years during which the land had to be improved (Bartlett 113).

There is evidence to believe that the government’s promises were not the ultimate deciding factor for the west-bound pioneer. Equally, and for some even more important were the letters that friends and family were sending. They often contained information about the availability of land, its location, the local weather, even the mention of guaranteed happiness. At the same time, a few admitted that the west was not all that it had promised to be. The following is an excerpt from a letter written by a young German immigrant to his mother in Europe which shows the resilience proved by some pioneers:

God bless you at home, while we are happy, though heart sick in the new land....You need not fear about the land. It is not likely in this country that the land be taken away. The government wants that we shall stay and improve the land. They fear that we will become rich and move to another

place. It is not so, however.... I now have one hundred acres of land by a paper and it is all mine. Some of it is still full of water but we are working fast to get the ditches in.... When I am plowing I can shut my eyes and smell the dear land under me and say it is mine, mine, all mine. No one can take it away. I am king as you said. (qtd. in Salamon 18)

As if in opposition to this passage, the next is written by a pioneer woman to her family members who decided to stay back east. Her opinion of the new home is more gloomy and less hopeful than that of the young German man. However, the same resilience comes through. One knows that she and her family are survivors and they will continue to be so. Both writers mention the influence of their elders, their advice to keep trying in order to succeed:

Mother, you said in your letter for us to keep a stiff upper lip, that would get some fruit this fall. Well that is no trouble for us any more for we have had to keep a stiff upper lip so much since we have been here that they have about grown stiff. (qtd. in Clark 118)

In spite of the obvious hardship to which both of these passages attest, the duty of the pioneer to overcome such hardship is also an essential element of the accounts.

The same idea is iterated by Alexandra during a conversation with Carl. Outlining the differences between the Divide and city life, Alexandra argues that, contrary to Carl's romanticized view, living on the Divide takes its toll on people: "'We pay a high rent, too, though we pay differently. We grow hard and heavy here. We don't move lightly and easily as you do, and our minds get stiff' (48).

Part Two

Wilderness as Tradition and Wilderness as Fiction in *O Pioneers!*

The first in the series of “pioneer” novels, which includes *My Ántonia* and *The Song of the Lark*, *O Pioneers!* was published in 1913 by a mature Willa Cather. It is no coincidence that the main character of the novel, Alexandra Bergson, is about forty years old, the same as Cather herself at the time of the novel’s publication. The novel is a narrative about the hardships and the eventual success of Alexandra Bergson in settling in Nebraska and it spans a period of thirty years. At the beginning of the novel, one learns that John Bergson, Alexandra’s father, is prematurely dying because of the hard life on the Divide and he decides to entrust his only daughter with carrying on the family business. Alexandra’s two older brothers, Lou and Oscar, are unhappy about their father’s decision, but they grudgingly accept to obey. A younger brother, Emil, never seems interested in pursuing farming, and he will be the only one that will leave for college.

Emil’s return to the Divide for a summer vacation marks the beginning of a different line of narrative. Upon his return, he falls deeply in love with Marie Shabata, a Bohemian woman, who is married to a violent man, Frank. Marie and Emil develop a relationship which is facilitated by the fact that Alexandra proves to be oblivious to the attraction between the two. The love story ends tragically when Emil and Marie are shot by Frank.

Alexandra is left to pick up the pieces of her life and she comes out victorious with the help of two characters, Ivar and Carl Linstrum. Ivar is a mystic used to living in the wilderness. She takes him in after he loses his land because of cunning land prospectors. Their friendship seems odd to other characters in the novel, but Ivar provides

the strength and fatherly love that Alexandra missed from an early age. Alexandra is also helped by Carl Linstrum, a former inhabitant of the Divide whose family moved to St. Louis when his father decided that life on the Divide would be impossible. Carl returns, though, and reestablishes a connection with his childhood friend, Alexandra. After the death of Emil, Carl and Alexandra get married as two friends who love each other, a moment which marks the end of the novel.

In spite of the existence of more than just one narrative, the message of *O Pioneers!* is one: an homage to the pioneer and the spirit that made life on the Divide possible. The spirit of the pioneer, the ability to enjoy the idea of something rather than the material aspect of life, is Alexandra Bergson's mark of character. It is not a surprise that she occupies the central place in Cather's *O Pioneers!* Alexandra is given the chance to be the embodiment of the homesteader in the midst of adverse conditions. The novel's pattern of transforming the wilderness into fruitful land is, in effect, a pattern of creation and destruction, modeled after the biblical stories of the Genesis and the fall of man. It runs alongside to the pattern of the man's quest for self and for God's grace in the wilderness, another biblical theme that originates in the Old Testament. The successful pioneer, then, is someone that seeks sanctuary in an unwelcoming land and finds refuge by recreating a replica of the garden of Eden and by coming to terms with one's purpose on God's earth. This garden is a dual symbol because in addition to representing a tame version of the land, it is also an environment in which destruction takes place. In the bible, mankind loses its privileges because Adam and Eve sin in the garden. In the narrative of *O Pioneers!*, Adam and Eve are replaced by Emil, Alexandra's younger brother, and Marie Shabata, a married woman. By looking at the strife of the pioneer in

Nebraska from the biblical perspective, Willa Cather places the pioneer in the context of this tradition. Her accomplishment deserves attention because researchers refer to the tradition of the wilderness when regarding the New England settlers. *O Pioneers!*, then, exemplifies Cather's desire to earn the respect that the pioneer in Nebraska deserves. For Cather, the Nebraska pioneer has contributed to the formation of the American character and her novel describes the pioneer's rite of passage from being an uprooted European to being part of a new society in the New World.

The struggle of the pioneer in Nebraska was not unlike the struggle of the New England Puritan, since both had to transfer their European sensibility onto a land that seemed unresponsive at first. Commenting on the pioneers' desire to live in the midst of an organized environment, Edward and Lillian Bloom write that "The natural order and harmony of the pioneer's world, [...], is based on an ancient thesis which she [Cather] may well have drawn from classical Stoicism or the Bible" (34). Natural order, whether pertaining to forests, prairies or mountains, is analogous to "the perfect workings of a divine power" (34). The fact that this order translates into security, the ultimate goal of the frontier pioneer, is made clear in the character Alexandra. The Blooms call her "the instrument of her [Cather's] belief," something apparent when she contemplates the stars:

[Alexandra] always loved to watch [the stars], to think of their vastness and distance, and of their ordered march. It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security. (*O Pioneers!* 44)

Under Alexandra's command, the Bergson farm grows and takes root in the land. Similarly, all of the Divide begins to respond to the pioneers' efforts. It is fascinating to

observe the transformation of the land in *O Pioneers!* Taming the land is, in fact, a projection of the pioneer's "unconscious oblation" (Bloom 35). Material possessions are inconsequential since one's focus is on nature. After sixteen hard years on the Divide, Alexandra manages to achieve a feeling of security, but it resides in the familiarity of the land, not of her house:

If you go up the hill and enter Alexandra's big house, you will find that it is curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort. One room is papered, carpeted, over-furnished; the next is almost bare. [...] When you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; [...] You feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best. (*O Pioneers!* 32)

The very beginning of *O Pioneers!* reminds one of earlier descriptions of the Nebraska plains. It even fits the metaphor of the sea, used first by the Spanish gold-seekers in the sixteenth century because in both descriptions one gets a sense of an all-encompassing natural order where man, as a presence, is obliterated. Everything about the "little town of Hanover" is precarious: the landscape, grey and cold, is desolate, and the human dwellings are so scattered that "none of them had any appearance of permanence" (1). Even the buildings that should appear sturdy and trustworthy, such as the shops, the post-office, the banks, and the saloon, "straggle" in an uneven fashion. The weather itself stresses the absence that characterizes the place because the wind, "howling," is free to blow in every direction, given that no building was sturdy enough to stop it.

On the Divide the landscape is even wilder. Man-made landmarks are fewer than in Hanover, and sometimes they are easily overlooked because they blend in with the environment. Most of the dwellings are sod houses, buried in the ground, and “here and there a windmill gaunt against the sky” is like a desperate cry against the elements (*O Pioneers!* 5). This is where Cather begins to assert the reality that becomes evident as the novel progresses. She acknowledges that “the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes” (5). This is Alexandra’s wilderness.

The novel’s second part, “Neighboring Fields,” is set in contrast to the opening of the novel. Over a period of sixteen years, the wild land was transformed into an organized environment. The Divide is characterized by geometric patterns that suggest an intrinsic harmony:

From the Norwegian graveyard one looks out over a vast checker-board, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light. Telephone wires hum along the white roads, which always run at right angles. From the graveyard gate one can count a dozen gayly painted farmhouses; the gilded weather-vanes on the big red barns wink at each other across the green and brown and yellow fields. The light steel windmills tremble throughout their frames and tug at their moorings, as they vibrate in the wind that often blows from one week’s end to another across that high, active, resolute stretch of country. (29)

The fact that the Divide is “thickly populated” is also a reality that cannot be ignored

(*O Pioneers!* 29). The grey Divide has acquired color as a definite sign that it is inhabited. The noise is not solely that of the “howling” wind but the “hum” of the telephone wires, a proof of communication among people. Finally, the wind is no longer a destructive element. Instead, it has become a necessity and it contributes to the pioneers’ well-being. The wilderness has been tamed.

If Alexandra’s is the story of civilizing the wild land, “of civilization being shaped out of a land as flat and formless as the sea,” the third, fourth and fifth parts of the novel since they are tailored after the story of the fall of Adam and Eve, complete what John Murphy calls the novel’s “Genesis dimension” (Murphy 114). The opening of the novel reminds one of the opening of Genesis: “The earth was empty, a formless mass cloaked in darkness” (Genesis 1:2). Similarly, at the end of the first chapter, the description of Alexandra’s wagon light “going deeper and deeper into the dark country” (7) echoes God’s decision to start creating order by separating light from darkness: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that it was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:3, 4).

The dying John Bergson, as Murphy observes, is the biblical Isaac. His decision is different from that of Isaac because he assigns the responsibility of carrying on his fight to Alexandra, not to Oscar, his oldest son. Nevertheless, the outcome of his action is the same, since Oscar and Lou, Alexandra’s other brother, will not look kindly upon Alexandra from that moment on, in spite of the promise made to their father. In the bible, Esau’s attitude towards Jacob is reminiscent of this episode.

In the second part of the novel, the effects of creation are visible. However, one is under the impression that a bond has been created between the land and its inhabitants:

There are a few scenes more gratifying than a spring plowing in that country, where the furrows of a single field lie a mile in length, and the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness. The wheat-cutting sometimes goes on all night as well as day, and in good season there are scarcely men and horses enough to do the harvesting. (*O Pioneers!* 29)

This picture of abundant crops and limitless fruitfulness appears in Genesis as well:

Then God said, ‘Let the land burst forth with every sort of grass and seed-bearing plant. And let there be trees that grow seed-bearing fruit. The seeds will then produce the kinds of plants and trees from which they came.’ (Genesis 1:11)

The novel’s fourth part, “The White Mulberry Tree,” reiterates the story of Adam and Eve. Since the beginning of the novel, Marie Shabata (as Eve), a beautiful Bohemian, is portrayed as privileged. She has the best clothes, and she already has men paying attention to her. Emil Bergson, as Adam, is also someone with a brilliant future. Alexandra is overly-protective of him, but she is happy when he decides to leave the Divide and get a university degree. Upon his return, he falls in love with Marie and the two of them are shot by Marie’s jealous husband.

As Murphy observes, “The Genesis implications of this story are simple and obvious—the lovers sin beneath a tree in an orchard [...]” (117). Their death in the

garden brings an end to the Paradise envisioned by Alexandra. In the end, her conquest is reinstated after she confronts the destruction in her own soul.

However, the two seemingly separate aspects of the novel come together only to prove Carl's theory about the two or three human stories that keep repeating themselves. These stories are the basis of human consciousness and Cather uses them to establish the pioneer legacy. As she writes in "Joseph and His Brothers," the story of Genesis saturates the human mind: "The Book of Genesis lies like a faded tapestry deep in the consciousness of almost every individual [...]" (102). Although the Nebraska pioneer was not overtly religious such as the New England settler, his success was governed by the same rules and therefore it deserves an equal amount of attention. Cather uses, thus, two narratives to make this point.

This observation is important, given that one of the criticisms brought to *O, Pioneers!* often refers to an inconsistency of theme. In one review published in August of 1913, only two months after the publication of *O Pioneers!*, Frederick Taber Cooper points out that the novel's "one big moment" is due "to an incident that lies outside of the main thread of the story," namely the tragic demise of Alexandra's brother Emil and of Marie Shabata, with whom he has an adulterous relationship (Cooper 113). Other than this, Cooper argues, "the whole volume is loosely constructed, a series of separate scenes with so slight cohesion that a rude touch might almost be expected to shatter it" (113). Probably the most disturbing comment made by this critic is the fact that the reader, bored to tears, cannot help but care less about the fate of Alexandra, of the land, and of her farm. Cooper compares reading the novel to "something like the voluntary pinch that you give yourself in church during an especially somnolent sermon" (113). I believe this is

precisely the attitude that Cather wanted to alter by raising awareness about the role of the Nebraska pioneer in the development of American civilization. In a 1923 interview, Cather expresses her desire to capture the story of the pioneer in Nebraska: “In Nebraska, as in so many States, we must face the fact that the splendid story of the pioneers is finished, and no new story worthy to take its place has yet begun” (qtd. in Bloom 43).

Cather relies on tradition to relate this “splendid story.” Since tradition for Cather means the result of an individual’s “unconscious response to a continuing pattern of customs and beliefs,” the pioneers’ answer to wilderness can be approached by understanding the tradition of the taming of the wilderness (qtd. in Bloom 44). As David Williams rightfully argues in *Wilderness Lost*, this tradition is rooted in religion and the imagery associated with it has developed throughout Christianity (25). Out of the approximately two hundred and fifty references to the wilderness in both the Old and the New Testament, the “model” for the wilderness imagery is the Exodus of the Israelites into the desert of Sinai. In the Old Testament, the children of Israel reached the promised land, the Canaan, only after a forty year stay in the desert (Williams 25). Although Cather’s temporal references are not very well defined, at the end of the sixteen years during which the farm became successful, Alexandra is nearing forty years of age. One can draw a parallel between the length of her stay in the wilderness and that of the Israelites. For Cather, the age of forty represents an important moment in someone’s life. One can argue that she became a mature writer at forty, with the publication of *O Pioneers!* It is as if Cather believes that forty years is a normal maturation period. In a biblical sense, this belief is exemplified by the Israelites wandering through the wilderness for forty years before God allowed them to reach Canaan.

In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Nash defines and timelines the religious aspect of the wilderness. In the Old Testament, the Hebrews perceived the wilderness to be “a cursed land,” of “forbidding character” owed for the most part to lack of water. For God, there was no other more suitable punishment for an unruly people than sending them into the wilderness. In Isaiah 5:6 the wilderness is a formerly lush vineyard where God’s people disobeyed him. As a consequence, a few changes ensue:

I will make it a wild place.

I will not prune the vines or hoe the ground.

I will let it be overgrown with briars and thorns.

I will command the clouds

to drop no more rain on it.

Similarly, in Isaiah 42:15, the wilderness is an inhospitable land:

I will level the mountains and hills

and bring a blight on all their greenery.

I will turn the rivers into dry land

and will dry up all the pools.

Sometimes too much water, such as an ocean, could represent wilderness because of the chaos that it implied. The early Jews often depicted the earth as a tiny shell floating on a turbulent ocean, the latter being “a still awesome reminder of the primordial chaos ... which lies lurking under the world of man and which like the desert is the haunt of serpents and dragons” (Williams 27).

Citing George Williams’ *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought*, David Williams contends that the three-fold wilderness of the desert, of death and of the sea was

“a symbol of the uncreated order” (27). The reference to order is important in this passage. However, man is not able to order the wilderness by relying only on himself. When the wilderness appears to open itself to human habitation it can be assumed that God’s wrath has passed and the sinners have been forgiven.

God’s forgiveness in the Old Testament was a blessing or a gift to the people. Illustrative in this respect is the redemption passages in Isaiah 35:1, 6. Here the land becomes hospitable again and the desert gives way to an irrigated and lush landscape: “Even the wilderness will rejoice in those days. The desert will blossom with flowers. [...] Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the desert. The parched ground will become a pool, and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land. Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish where desert jackals once lived.”

The Exodus of the Hebrews into the desert of Sinai is God’s punishment and blessing. During the years spent in the desert, the Israelites led by Moses received the Ten Commandments. God also promised to protect Israel and, provided that its people remained faithful, he would lead them to Canaan, “the land of milk and honey” (Nash 16). This episode in human history also delineated wilderness in terms of its meaning. The wilderness came to represent both “a sanctuary from a sinful and persecuting society,” and “an environment in which to find and draw close to God” (Nash 16).

Cather’s *O Pioneers!* abounds with imagery that brings to mind the tradition of the wilderness. Nebraska’s landscape is portrayed as a desert. Although the reader is not told which years the narrative spans, given the constant references to droughts one can assume that the events in “The Wild Land” take during the period starting with the 1850s. According to Everett Dick’s *Conquering the Great American Desert: Nebraska*, from

June of 1859 until November of 1860 there was no rainfall. Even though drought periods were not as lengthy afterwards, the climate in Nebraska coupled with natural calamities such as the grasshopper invasion of 1874 made it difficult for immigrants to settle there (326-27). John Bergson must have arrived in Nebraska in the 1850s and spent the first eleven years trying to tame the land. Alexandra's success becomes apparent sixteen years after his death, which means that it is consistent with the reports that mention the richness of the crops in Nebraska starting in the 1880s. When Alexandra becomes head of the household and her brothers are unwilling to follow her orders, Mrs. Bergson reminds them of the adverse conditions of previous years and in a way gives them hope for a better future. For her, the beginning was "Oh, worse! Much worse [...] Drouth, chinch-bugs, hail, everything! My garden all cut to pieces like sauerkraut. No grapes on the creek, no nothing. The people all lived like coyotes" (*O Pioneers!* 23).

Mrs. Bergson sets her garden in opposition to the wilderness surrounding it. This image evokes that of the creation and the loss of the Garden of Eden. In the wilderness, order cannot be created unless there is a divine will. However, even that order is fragile and man can fail without spiritual guidance. The reason behind Mrs. Bergson's resoluteness to create order on the prairie was the hope to find and maintain God's grace. Unfortunately, she dies before she can see her dream realized, but Alexandra is successful:

For eleven years she had worthily striven to maintain some semblance of household order amid conditions that made order very difficult. Habit was very strong with Mrs. Bergson, and her unremitting efforts to repeat the routine of her old life among new surroundings had done a great deal to

keep the family from disintegrating morally and getting careless in their ways. (*O Pioneers!* 11)

Cather's belief in order as an instrument for spiritual growth is evident. Her use of the tradition of wilderness is stronger as she continues Mrs. Bergson's description:

"Alexandra often said that if her mother was cast upon a desert island, she would thank God for her deliverance, make a garden and find something to preserve" (11). It is important to mention that as one of his deathbed wishes, John Bergson makes sure that Mrs. Bergson will be allowed to have a garden and an orchard: "Don't grudge your mother a little time for plowing her garden and setting out fruit trees [...]" (11).

Orchards and gardens are the outward expressions of the pioneers' desire to achieve a sense of security. Cather recognizes this aspect of the immigrants' existence on the prairie and uses the orchard and garden motifs repeatedly in her novel. Mostly she stresses the relationship that her characters have with the plants that they make grow (*Cather's Kitchens* 127). In *O Pioneers!*, even the immigrants that choose to move far away from the Divide, such as the Linstrums, plant trees and care for them to the extreme. Marie Shabata goes as far as thinking that her admiration for trees is almost sacrilegious.

Crazy Ivar is set in opposition to the other characters in the novel. He is everything but sacrilegious. Ivar wants to preserve the natural order and his abode is nature. His wants his existence to leave the slightest possible trace:

At one end of the pond was an earthen dam, planted with green willow bushes, and above it a door and a single window were set into the hillside. You would not have seen them at all but for the reflection of the sunlight upon the four panes of window-glass. And that was all you saw. Not a

shed, not a corral, not a well, not even a path broken in the curly grass. But for the piece of rusty stovepipe sticking up through the sod, you could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near human habitation. Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done. (*O Pioneers!* 14)

When Alexandra and her brothers visit Ivar to buy a hammock and to ask for advice about animal husbandry, he lives in perfect communion with nature, in the middle of what is actually a bird sanctuary. He has specific rules against shooting the birds and the idea of fire guns disturbs him. As John Murphy observes, "a powerful dwarflike man with a face shining with happiness as he contemplates Psalm 104, Ivar resembles Noah" (115). Even his sod cabin looks like an arch that birds might mistake for a boat (*O, Pioneers!* 16). Ultimately, Ivar's birds can easily become a metaphor for the people who come to the plains to look for refuge and to start anew: "I have many strange birds stop with me here. They come from very far away and are great company" (16). Ivar's story is strongly connected to the story of Marie and Emil, since his aversion towards killing birds prefigures the shooting of the two lovers in the fourth part of the book.

Sixteen years later, Ivar lives in Alexandra's household. He is still untamed and he prefers to live in the barn, but Alexandra reveres him in a way that seems strange to her brothers. Since the landscape is now changed, Ivar's desire to cling to the wild side is interpreted as madness or old-age dementia. He describes himself more like a visionary that has been "touched" by God (36). Alexandra appreciates his genuine, disciplined character and one can assume that she sees a mentor in him, someone to fill in gap left by

her father's early death. In the second half of the novel, Ivar is the one that announces that "it has fallen! Sin and death for the young ones! God have mercy upon us!," or the culmination of the story of the fall of man, but he is there to witness Alexandra's successful adaptation to living without Emil.

After having tamed the land, Alexandra has to tame the wilderness in her soul left in the wake of the death of her beloved brother Emil. The reader is aware of Alexandra's life-long dream of "being lifted and carried by a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness" (*O Pioneers!* 81). Although critics have dwelled on the sexual aspect of her dream and John Murphy claims that this being, "the mightiest of all lovers," is Death, I believe that this entity is in fact God, synonymous with the "Genius of the Divide." Alexandra comes out victorious when she finally achieves inner harmony after she takes time to fully understand that Emil is gone but her love for the land goes on. At home, under the hot blankets after spending a rainy night at her brother's grave, her dream gains definition:

As she lay with her eyes closed, she had again, more vividly than for many years, the old illusion of her girlhood, of being lifted and carried lightly by some one [sic] very strong. He was with her a long while this time, and carried her very far, and in his arms she felt free from pain. When he laid her down on her bed again, she opened her eyes, and, for the first time in her life, she saw him, saw him clearly, though the room was dark, and his face was covered. He was standing in the doorway of her room. His white cloak was thrown over his face, and his head was bent a little forward. His shoulders seemed as strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm,

bared from the elbow, was dark and gleaming, like bronze, and she knew at once it was the arm of the mightiest of all lovers. She knew at last for whom it was she had waited, and where he would carry her. (112)

Ultimately, Alexandra understands herself in the context of the New World.. She understands her fate and she understands that her and her fellow immigrants' strife on the prairie has not been in vain. After being faced with the wilderness around her, she needs to focus on the wilderness inside of her, and she comes out victorious.

Conclusion

In her essay entitled “The Novel D meubl ,” Willa Cather writes about the depth of her fiction and about how such an aspect can be easily overlooked:

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself.

(*Not Under Forty* 47)

Her usage of the tradition of taming the wilderness fits this view. In *O Pioneers!* Cather writes about the pioneers who settled in Nebraska in the nineteenth century and employs the wilderness motif without calling the reader’s attention to it. Her treatment of the biblical stories of Genesis and of the Israelites’ Exodus into the desert of Sinai is subtle, but the novel nevertheless puts the pioneers’ strife into perspective. Although critics such as Edward and Lillian Bloom have recognized the recurrence of the theme of order and security in Cather’s work, her love of the land and of the people who inhabited it is just as present.

O Pioneers! is Cather’s homage to those who were courageous enough to travel west and who kept pushing the frontier towards the Pacific. Alexandra Bergson embodies the spirit of the west-bound pioneer because she has the imagination to see past the surrounding wilderness and towards the future. Centuries before, the Spanish decided to leave the prairie behind even if that brought disgrace, a currency harder than the gold they

were seeking but could not find. Cather's pioneers exemplify the love for the land, a commendable quality given that the land itself was not loving at the beginning.

Discussions about the hardships of the pioneers and the pioneers' role in the formation of the American culture and civilization often focus on the Puritans and the east coast. Cather's work proves that the roots of the American society and of the consciousness of the American people did not begin and end New England. Her portrayal of the European pioneers who settled in Nebraska is proof that, as she writes in *O Pioneers!*, there were "little beginnings of human society" on the prairie. The Nebraska settlers were, for the most part, unrelated to the Puritans who traveled on the Mayflower and even to the ones that followed them. Cather's pioneers came from countries in Europe other than England. In this respect, Frederick Jackson Turner was right to conclude that "In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics" (qtd. in Conzen 3).

The society of which Cather writes lent itself to the same rules dictated by the same few universal stories, and Cather uses this to show that the little community on the Divide has fully earned its place in history.

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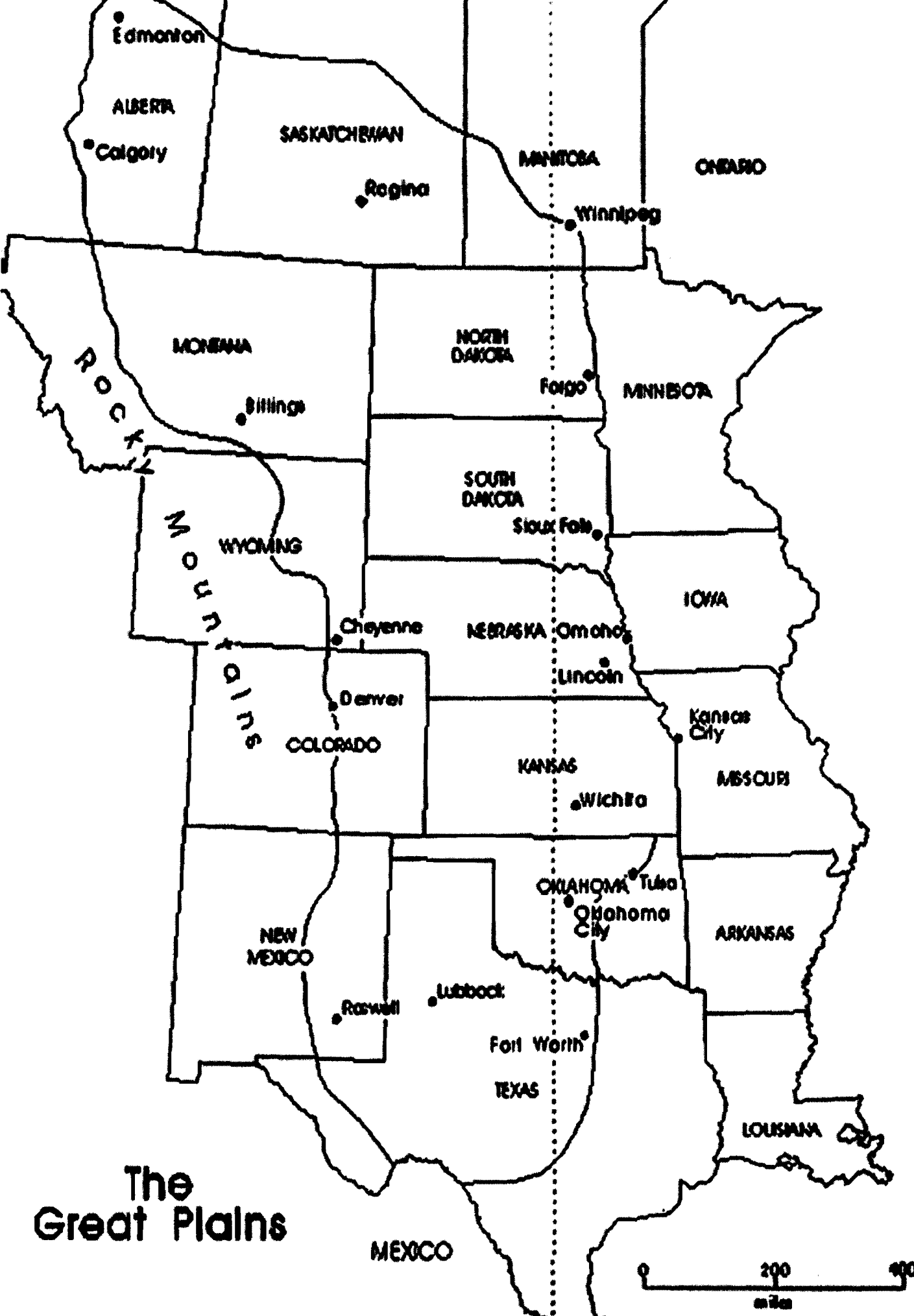
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The Great Plains

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