



Willa Cather

*photo courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society*

**DISCOVERING IMAGES OF AN AMERICAN WASTELAND:  
A STUDY OF WILLA CATHER'S MIDWESTERN  
LANDSCAPES**

by  
**Jami Huntsinger**

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water.

T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land"

When pioneers journeyed westward on foot, on horseback, in covered wagons, they sought Edenic gardens reportedly flourishing within the vast interior. Armed with a belief in the American pastoral, these newcomers thought that possibilities existed, that some place beyond the next horizon offered them bounties that they had never before possessed. What they searched for in the American landscape was, as Annette Kolodny writes, "Eden, Paradise, the Golden Age, and the idyllic garden, in short, all the backdrops for European literary pastoral."<sup>1</sup> In her writings, Willa Cather depicts settlers searching the American frontier for this earthly paradise, a garden that will nurture and sustain them. Her characters, like actual pioneers, seek sacred landscapes of abundance. In many passages, Cather gives them glimpses of such gardens, which generate the hope of obtaining the promises of the mythology of the frontier. "The garden image," according to John H. Randall, III, in *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value*, "is present in the minds of both Willa Cather and some of her characters."<sup>2</sup>

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However, many of Cather's characters do not find the promised Eden; instead, they find waste land images in this frontier.

In much of her work, Cather embraces the garden, a popular notion in her day. In *My Ántonia*, she writes that, "July came on with that breathless, brilliant heat which makes the plains of Kansas and Nebraska the best corn country in the world."<sup>3</sup> For Cather, the Midwestern landscape is ideal for growing crops. She mentions the soil and climate, dramatizing clearly that Nebraska is part of this mythic, lush garden. Crops flourish. For example, her characters even "hear the corn growing in the night."<sup>4</sup> She partners this image of growing crops with a sweet smell, a metaphor early explorers often used to identify Edenic gardens: "under the stars one caught a faint crackling in the dewy, heavy-odoured cornfields where the feathered stalks stood so juicy and green."<sup>5</sup> The odoriferous flowers of the Midwest, the corn, are full of life. For Cather,

If all the great plain from the Missouri to the Rocky Mountains had been under glass, and the heat regulated by a thermometer, it could not have been better for the yellow tassels that were ripening and fertilizing the silk day by day.<sup>6</sup>

The "brilliant heat" encourages growth of corn, and the garden flourishes in the fields of Kansas and Nebraska, yielding some of the best produce in the world. The idealism in these passages is as bountiful as the crops. Cather celebrates the pastoral, the earthly paradise that sustains gardens and that nurtures her pioneers, her Garden of the World.

Cather then asserts that the potential of the frontier garden has not yet been realized, writing that, "The cornfields were far apart in those times, with miles of wild grazing land between."<sup>7</sup> There was much room for expansion. Only with the pioneering spirit, its vision, can her characters see its potential. Cather writes that, "It took a clear, meditative eye like [Burden's] grandfather's to foresee that they would enlarge and multiply until they would be . . . the world's cornfields."<sup>8</sup> As Randall posits, Cather insists that "The settlement of America was considered to be a part of a divine plan," which included feeding many as well as reaping the profits.<sup>9</sup> This point is clearly addressed when Cather writes, "their

yield would be one of the great economic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war.”<sup>10</sup> In this passage, her vision has no boundaries, and obviously, it illustrates the romanticism, the idealism, she has about agricultural life.

In *O Pioneers!*, similar passages indicate that idyllic gardens exist. When Cather writes of her beloved Nebraska in “The Wild Land” section of this novel, she describes how Alexandra sees the land she cultivates. Alexandra has spent an entire day with other farmers, talking to them about how to produce thriving crops. On the way back home, tired but invigorated, Alexandra sees the land, perhaps for the first time, as an idyllic garden: “Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before.”<sup>11</sup> Here, Cather personifies the garden—it breathes, it bends to human will. Moreover, in keeping with the frontier mythology, the plains represent the potential of promised transformation. Asserting her authority, bending the landscape to her will, and reaping its riches, Alexandra does transform the “Divide,” which then fulfills the myth’s promise for her. As she does in *My Ántonia*, Cather refers to the divine plan in *O Pioneers!* For Alexandra, “The history of every country,” especially what she sees as her paradisiacal home, “begins in the heart of a man or a woman.”<sup>12</sup>

Cather enlarges this image of the landscape transformed later in *O Pioneers!* There, the wild, barren land gives way to a thriving community through years of the settlers’ attention and hard labor. The author describes a flourishing community just as the myth predicts. It is an American paradise:

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 green and brown and yellow fields. The light steel windmills tremble throughout their frames and tug at their moorings . . . <sup>13</sup>

This passage seems to be a tribute to the pastoral. In *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction*, Diane Quantic explains why some critics see this passage as identifying Eden in Cather's texts. She postulates that "Not only has the garden been realized but those who tend it have created the necessary community: roads and telephone wires indicate a network."<sup>14</sup> Quantic also asserts that, "Alexandra's success [as well as the community's] is the result of . . . intense preoccupation with the land itself, but [that] the awakening of the land has not occurred in isolation."<sup>15</sup> Because the occupants cultivate civilization, this garden indicates that a paradise exists in Cather's western landscapes. Quantic even theorizes that, "The graveyard reveals the past," indicating many have survived, lived and died in this newly formed community.<sup>16</sup> To her, Cather illustrates that settlers acquired bounties when living on the prairie.

In this passage, however, in which Quantic sees a tribute to productivity, Cather hints that it may be only the product of hopeful imaginations, the wealth and leisure nothing more than pioneers' learning how to cultivate an inhospitable environment. Cather herself names this section "The Wild Land," implying that the western interior must be tamed. In addition, she checkerboards the land with shades of darkness. Then, the author alludes to the hours of work that it took to bring civilization to this country: fields had to be cleared; farmhouses and barns needed to be built; water, which was not plentiful, had to be found; windmills needed to be constructed to bring this water to the surface; and communication networks were installed. Importantly, her gardenly passage includes a description of the graveyard. Even though the pioneers rest now, the plains, filled with images of backbreaking labor that had previously consumed their lives, surround them. Living in the Nebraska Divide, these pioneers truly learn that,

Cursed *is* the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat *of* it All  
the days of your life . . . In the sweat of your face you shall eat  
bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken;  
For dust you *are*, And to dust you shall return.<sup>17</sup>

Eudora Welty explains the disparity in these passages marked as tribute to the frontier mythology. In “The House of Willa Cather,” Welty writes that “History awed and stirred Willa Cather; and the absence of a history as far as she could see around her, in her growing up, only made her look farther, gave her the clues to discover a deeper past.”<sup>18</sup> This awareness of history, this awe for the universal, helps Cather assert that the promise of the Edenic garden is often unfulfilled. Because of this awareness, Cather’s characters face a vanishing hope of a great harvest of grain or the reaping of riches. Instead, they battle with drought, pestilence, wind, and most devastatingly, with the loss of human spirit and fortitude. In *O Pioneers!*, for example, “the record of the plough was insignificant, like the feeble scratchings on stone left by prehistoric races, so indeterminate that they may after all be only the markings of glaciers, and not a record of human strivings.”<sup>19</sup>

In the same novel, Cather points to the vanishing hope of some settlers. In contrast to Alexandra’s discovery of the potential of the land, John Bergson illustrates the negative reality of farm life. In the beginning, he too has romantic notions. Cather tells us that, “John Bergson had the Old-World belief that land, in itself, is desirable.”<sup>20</sup> Because the frontier mythology originated in the Old World belief system, Cather dramatizes Bergson’s faith that the land could be an Edenic paradise. However, in the same passage, Cather indicates that Bergson cannot find this garden in the wild, untamed frontier. After he farms the land and tries to make a profit, Bergson begins to see the “land . . . [as] an enigma,” comparing the Great Divide to “a horse that no one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces.”<sup>21</sup> The landscape that is supposed to bend to human will is wild and at times unyielding, like the horse which is unwilling to yield to the harness. From his experience, Bergson discovers that the “idyllic garden” is a place that destroys dreams, that breaks the human spirit. Like the horse that “kicks things to pieces,” the reality that he finds after living in Nebraska literally “kicks” the mythology “to pieces.” Bergson, like Cather, discovers a deeper past, a universal truth about the Divide that Alexandra has yet to discover. He learns that the garden may never have existed in western landscapes.

Many of Cather's characters find the frontier filled with twentieth-century waste land images, often barren, wild, arid, dangerous, and alienating. In fact, Cather's characters frequently discover that the lands are unproductive. Annette Kolodny, in *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*, demonstrates how Cather's characters react in discovering inhospitable lands when she discusses the settlers' reactions. According to Kolodny, "Until there were no more regions upon which to project the fantasy, the characteristic gesture in the face of its frustration was simply to displace the garden westward."<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, even as they travel westward, Cather's characters find infertile plains that bring the bitter realization of failure and hardship; the life they so wished to escape by journeying into the promised paradise eludes them. Venturing further into the interior, these fictional characters settle the lands west of the Mississippi. There, they find, as did actual settlers, that "Eden could not be recaptured by fervent prayers and incantations . . . ."<sup>23</sup>

In *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith explains why Cather's American frontier lacks Edenic qualities. Discussing theories about the Great American Desert, he writes that by the "middle 1870's, lands were being taken up in areas where rainfall was likely to decline every few years below the level necessary for the traditional type of farming on which the myth of the garden had been based."<sup>24</sup> The lack of vegetation, the lack of trees, in the lands west of the Mississippi, Smith argues, account for much of their disillusionment and often settlers found "the vast treeless plains," a "sterile waste" which served as an impressive warning as to the infertility of the land.<sup>25</sup> As might be expected, Cather's "sterile waste" originates from difficulties many of her characters have when trying to find or create the garden within the type of landscapes Smith describes. Instead of a leisurely life in a New World Eden, these characters often have difficulty surviving and many times do "battle with drought and dust and wind and grasshoppers."<sup>26</sup> In her fiction, these difficulties, these desolate lands, create despair and disillusionment, alienation as dark and forbidding as the barren fields.

Even when writing about her beloved Nebraska, Cather exchanges the myth of the Edenic garden for the images of an unproductive prairie. In *My Ántonia*, vast treeless plains serve as one of Cather's waste land images. Cather writes that during the first autumn, Jim Burden takes his pony Otto for a ride through the countryside. During these rides, Burden goes to visit trees, "to admire" a "catalpa grove" or "to see the big elm tree that grew up out of a deep crack in the earth and had a hawk's nest in its branches."<sup>27</sup> While there, Burden notes that, "Trees were so rare in that country" that "they had to make . . . a hard fight to grow."<sup>28</sup> Here, Cather stresses that the soil is unable to encourage their growth, and when trees do take root, they fight to survive. Their scarcity suggests that the promised garden may not exist and that it may instead be, as Smith posits, a Great American Desert. In this same passage, Cather also stresses another aspect of the trees – they were like people. Burden tells us this when describing his own feelings about these trees: "we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons."<sup>29</sup> For Cather, these trees are symbols of the pioneers, who also wage a valiant fight to survive on the plains that Burden and his pony traveled. Like the trees, many of them failed because the land did not provide for them.

The scarcity of trees, however, was not the only sign of infertile landscapes confronting Cather's pioneers. In "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional," published in 1901 in *The New England Magazine*, Cather creates the sterile waste.<sup>30</sup> The story opens when Colonel Josiah Bywaters, whom unscrupulous promoters entice into buying land in Kansas, realizes that he is living in a place where "rattlesnakes and sunflowers found it hard to exist."<sup>31</sup> Describing this countryside in which Bywaters finds himself, Cather writes that,

Although it was late in the autumn, the corn was not three feet high. The leaves were seared and yellow, and as for the tassels, there were none. Nature always dispenses with superfluous appendages; and what use had Solomon Valley corn for tassels? Ears were only a tradition there.<sup>32</sup>



Cather includes a much different version of the cornfields in Kansas than she does in *My Ántonia*, in which she writes about the garden of the world. In this passage, autumn is not the time for abundant harvest. Growth is stunted. For example, the corn is only half as tall as it should be, and the leaves are already dead and dry-- the crops are growing on sterile ground. Next, she refers to the tassels as “superfluous appendages.” Importantly, tassels pollinate the plants so that they produce fruit. But here, Cather points out that the tassels are unnecessary because the soil is so unproductive it can’t even support the parent plant. When stunted plants do grow, they are incapable of reproducing, which is an essential element in a paradise. Finally, desecrating the image of the garden, Cather asserts that, “ears are only a tradition.” Through this phrase, she implies that harvesting is not productive. Corn was never intended to grow here. For the agrarians, the harvest is nonexistent and the plants produce no fruit; consequently, the value of this custom is lost. The Kansas farmers merely repeat the planting because that is what they should do, because it is expected of them. Moreover, as Cather points out, they adhere to this meaningless tradition of trying to create a garden out of a waste land. They continue to go through the motions even though they know their actions are futile. For Cather, the corn becomes the symbol of unproductive lands that exist in the interior where crop failure is a reality and the frontier mythology, a farce.

In the short story “Neighbor Rosicky,” corn again measures the infertility of the plains. Cather tells us that because of the drought, “there had been a crop failure all over the country.”<sup>33</sup> Cather then points out that this failure is not a new problem, but one that has plagued the Rosicky family for years. While living on the farm, Rosicky’s battle has been a grueling one that Mary, his wife, remembers vividly. She tells the story of devastation, reminding her boys of past failures, of past barren landscapes: “‘Maybe you boys can’t hardly remember the year we had that terrible hot wind, that burned everything up on the Fourth of July? All the corn an’ the gardens.’”<sup>34</sup> Mary likewise recalls that on that day, all the corn “roasted” in the fields, as if it had been roasted in an oven.<sup>35</sup> The intense heat of the sun had turned the countryside into an inferno, baking a barren image into the terrain.

These characters, working in an area in which rains are unpredictable and poor harvests inevitable, fear that another bad year is forthcoming. The disaster is then realized when Cather dramatizes this year's crop failure:

The spring came warm, with blue skies, – but dry, dry as a bone. The boys began ploughing up the wheat-fields to plant them over in corn. Rosicky would stand at the fence corner and watch them, and the earth was so dry it blew up in clouds of brown dust that hid the horses and the sulky plough and the driver. It was a bad outlook.

The big alfalfa-field that lay between the home place and Rudolph's came up green, but Rosicky was worried because during that open windy winter a great many Russian thistle plants had blown in there and lodged.<sup>36</sup>

Spring, supposedly the time of birth in the New World "garden," brings instead a barren, unproductive waste land. On Cather's Nebraska Divide, the land dries up, taking with it the hope of a prosperous winter wheat crop. This family's only hope for a productive year is to replant the field to corn, a vain attempt to reclaim the garden. Amidst the swirls of dust, the characters, armed with their ploughs, battle with the elements, trying to plant corn, Cather's flourishing flowers in the New World paradise. Blowing away their hope, the winds bring another blight—noxious Russian thistles,<sup>37</sup> which are obnoxious weeds, difficult to get rid of. In the alfalfa, the only abundant crop, weeds also grow, making harvest difficult. In this postlapsarian land "born of thorns and thistles,"<sup>38</sup> Cather illustrates the futility of fighting against what Smith calls the "sterile waste" when Rosicky suffers a heart attack and dies, the result of trying to rake up thistles gathering in the field. He has lost the "battle drawn," dying in his fight against the elements. In "Neighbor Rosicky," Cather's promised land turns instead into "A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / and the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water."<sup>39</sup>

In the midst of this unproductive country, Cather then provides a surprising image of Rosicky. He is buried in a “beautiful graveyard,” unlike the city cemeteries “so arranged and lonely and unlike anything in the living world.”<sup>40</sup> His friend Doctor Ed, who goes to visit Rosicky’s grave, comments that “Nothing could be more right for a man who had helped to do the work of great cities and had always longed for the open country and had got to it at last.”<sup>41</sup> Here, the surroundings are idyllic. It is “open and free,” and the sky is blue.<sup>42</sup> Neighbors passed his grave on their way to town, and “Rosicky’s own cattle would be eating fodder as winter came on.”<sup>43</sup> To his friend, “Rosicky’s life seemed . . . complete and beautiful.”<sup>44</sup> Although this reference may seem as if Rosicky has found a lush garden and may seem to discredit the concept that a sterile waste does indeed exist in the land, even in this seemingly positive passage about his death, Cather emphasizes the devastation. For Rosicky, who “longed for the open country,” that dream comes to him only after he dies. He finds his paradise in a graveyard; he “had got to it at last.”<sup>45</sup> The irony is clear. Rosicky achieves in death what the other characters do not achieve in life. Like all those who descended from Adam and Eve, the escape from toil and hardship comes at death. Tragically, life has not provided Rosicky with the sought-after garden.

Alienation, which affects the Rosickys, also plagues the protagonist in “On the Divide.” Cather opens her story by giving her readers sterile images. Near Rattlesnake Creek, where Canute Canuteson’s shanty is located, the Nebraska prairie stretches endlessly as far as the eye can see, fostering feelings of disillusionment in Canuteson. Cather writes that if not “for the few stunted cottonwoods and elms that grew along [the muddy stream’s] banks, Canute would have shot himself years ago.”<sup>46</sup> Like Burden, in *My Ántonia*, who sees trees as precious commodities, Canuteson holds on to his sanity by viewing the few meager trees growing near his house. They evoke for him images of his beloved Norway, a country covered with timber, as well as images of the garden, images he had hoped to find in the frontier. Even though Canuteson recognizes that the cottonwoods are his link to sanity, he also realizes that the scarcity of them is a constant reminder of his despair. This treeless waste land brings anguish to this “timber-loving” man.<sup>47</sup> Cather expands

the alienation that Canuteson feels by writing about his relationship to the Nebraska Divide. Canuteson, she explains,

was mad, mad from the eternal treachery of the plains, which every spring stretch green and rustle with the promises of Eden, showing long grassy lagoons full of clear water and cattle whose hoofs are stained with wild roses. Before autumn the lagoons are dried up, and the ground is burnt dry and hard until it blisters and cracks open.<sup>48</sup>

In this passage, Cather shows a man not only homesick for the timber lands of Norway, but also driven mad by the “treachery” he finds on the plains. Although spring brings the “promises of Eden” of inexhaustible bounties, by fall, these possibilities have “dried up,” just as Canuteson’s hopes have dried up. Crop failures abound when the ground is “burnt dry and hard,” destroying bountiful harvests. The earth “cracks open”; the rains have not come. During this growing season, the fields become a sterile waste, a landscape of drought.

During his tenure on the Nebraska Divide, Canuteson has witnessed both droughts and plagues. These plagues also contribute to the disillusionment that he feels:

He knew [the landscape] in all the deceitful loveliness of its early summer, in all the bitter barrenness of its autumn. He had seen it smitten by all the plagues of Egypt. He had seen it parched by drought, and sogged by rain, beaten by hail, and swept by fire, and in the grasshopper years he had seen it eaten as bare and clean as bones that vultures have left. After the great fires he had seen it stretch for miles and miles, black and smoking as the floor of hell.<sup>49</sup>

Again, Cather, in addition to referring to the conflicting images of the Edenic garden and the waste land, writes about the “deceitful” loveliness of early summer. Canuteson has hopes of a bountiful harvest, but by autumn, the promise is lost. He finds a barren landscape very similar to

the one in “Neighbor Rosicky,” which Mary Rosicky remembers so vividly. However, the unproductive growing season, which may not indicate in itself a waste land, is not the only reference that Cather makes to the despair that Canuteson feels. In Eliotesque style, Cather uses Biblical references to a postlapsarian world to illustrate his suffering. Just as an avenging God sends plagues to the Egyptians in Judeo-Christian mythology, so does he send drought, excessive rain, hail, fire, and grasshoppers. Just as darkness fell over all of Egypt,<sup>50</sup> so darkness falls over the American landscape, the great fires leaving the land blackened for miles, “smoking as the floors of hell.” The absence of the prelapsarian conditions and the presence of sterile images appear in the failure of the plains upon which Canuteson lives to provide him ample harvest, safe haven, or peace of mind. The waste land in Cather’s “On the Divide” encroaches upon the pioneer like the plagues of Egypt, bringing the scourges of destruction to both Canuteson’s new homeland and his sense of well-being.

Cather reveals another type of disaster that afflicts her pioneers. In the New World, the settlers were supposed to find unlimited opportunity. Although unlimited opportunity includes ample bounties such as good harvests and monetary gain, it also includes a commodity much more important to the psychological well-being of the pioneer—hope. However, in her fictional world, Cather “is both direct and, apparently, embittered, seeing the prairie landscape as destroying its homesteaders’ spirits through its very vastness and the loneliness it occasions.”<sup>51</sup> In *O Pioneers!*, the disaster that strikes John Bergson is his loss of hope and the loss of the unlimited opportunities that he seeks, both of which he believes exist in the western interior. Bergson experiences many of the aspects of the waste land in the American frontier that Cather’s other characters face. Like Rosicky in “Neighbor Rosicky” and Canuteson in “On the Divide,” whose farms do not prosper, Bergson, during the eleven years on the Nebraska Divide, has “made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame.”<sup>52</sup> Instead of the mythic garden, which could be molded into a moneymaking, life-sustaining farm, he finds a landscape that is “still a wild thing that [has] its ugly moods.”<sup>53</sup> According to Bergson, these moods, which limited the productivity of the

soil, struck often, “and no one knew when they were likely to come, or why.”<sup>54</sup> After the eleven years that he had spent working the land, the garden never emerges, just as it had not for Rosicky nor Canuteson. As a result, Bergson’s hopes diminish with each passing day.

In this land of “broken images,” Bergson experiences pestilence and failure, similar to those Canuteson records in “On the Divide.” On Bergson’s Nebraska farm, “mischance hung over” the frontier landscapes, “Its Genius . . . unfriendly to man.”<sup>55</sup> Dark images appear as Cather gives the readers a litany of scourges that he faces:

Bergson went over in his mind the things that had held him back. One winter his cattle had perished in a blizzard. The next summer one of his plow horses broke its leg in a prairie-dog hole and had to be shot. Another summer he lost his hogs from cholera, and a valuable stallion died from a rattlesnake bite. Time and again his crops had failed. He had lost two children, boys, that came between Lou and Emil, and there had been the cost of sickness and death.<sup>56</sup>

Like Canuteson, Bergson suffers the plights found in a postlapsarian world, in an American waste land. The prairie then delivers its final blow: “Now, when he had at last struggled out of debt, he was going to die himself. He was only forty-six, and had, of course, counted upon more time.”<sup>57</sup> His time has run out, and so have his hopes. He has little money to show for his efforts, and now he has not the *time* to reap the promised bounties. His life becomes the symbol of those who have searched for but have not found the success the prophets of the frontier mythology promised. Bergson is a broken man, alienated; his hope of finding an Edenic paradise on earth perishes with his last breaths of life. Even though his children are able to make a living on the farm that he leaves them, Bergson himself faces failure and loss of hope. With this desolate picture, Cather ends *his* world: “Not with a bang but a whimper.”<sup>58</sup>

Another aspect of the mythology that Cather addresses is renewed life. As might be expected, the hopes of Cather’s pioneers diminish when they do not find a renewed life, a mythic regeneration of will and

determination. Smith defines what renewed life is. For the actual pioneers, Smith proposes that the West is a place where supposedly “grandly and abstractly . . . afflicted humanity raises her drooping head.”<sup>59</sup> In the hinterlands of Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, and the Dakotas, settlers were promised a life not offered in Old World communities. They would find hope. On such renewed life, the pioneers placed aspirations, in the vain attempt to capture something not theirs in the past.

In Cather’s works about the Plains, the promises of renewed life vanish. In “Willa Cather’s Unfinished Avignon Story,” George Kates explains that throughout her works, her characters look “grim fates boldly in the eye, competently grasping with both hands the tragedies of human destiny.”<sup>60</sup> Kates argues that her readers “watch shadows fall on further lives,” and that “There is no escape from pessimism, or at least from the first grasp on the realities of time and human destiny.”<sup>61</sup> Cather’s is a world in which “every device that can be used presses the one inescapable conclusion: we are mortal, we must die.”<sup>62</sup> Instead of finding renewed life, Cather’s characters face the inevitable fact that they must suffer in the frontier. Often, the landscape only offers them a heritage of pain, suffering, illness, and death. They hold onto the hope for a better life, for both mind and body, but discover that their destiny is tied inextricably to the grim realities of pioneer existence.

Georgiana Carpenter’s experiences in “A Wagner Matinée” illustrate the loss of renewed life. Georgiana, a young woman of thirty, falls in love with Howard Carpenter, elopes with him, and amidst much criticism from family members, moves with him from the east coast to the Nebraska frontier. Drawn here with the hope of establishing a thriving farm, they homestead in Red Willow County, in the Nebraska heartland. There, they measure “off their quarter section themselves by driving across the prairie in a wagon.”<sup>63</sup> In their bold venture into farm country, they bring with them the hopes of many pioneers. This young couple, searching for a better life, a happier life than the one they had known in the East, finds instead a life of backbreaking toil and hardship.

When Georgiana emerges from the “garden” several years later to visit her nephew, her body reveals the story of the type of life she lived all those years in Nebraska. Cather reveals the difficulties through the

nephew's description of this pioneering woman who steps back into Bostonian society. He says that he, "saw [his] aunt's misshapen figure with that feeling of awe and respect with which we behold explorers who have left their ears and fingers north of Franz-Joseph-Land, or their health somewhere along the Upper Congo."<sup>64</sup> Her nephew knows she has lived a hard life, similar to explorers, and he respects the rigors that she has survived. He then points out that even though her shoulders were "originally stooped," they "were now almost bent together over her sunken chest."<sup>65</sup> He adds "she wore ill-fitting false teeth, and her skin was as yellow as a Mongolian's from constant exposure to a pitiless wind and to the alkaline water."<sup>66</sup> This is not the image of a woman living in nurturing abundance. Malnutrition causes these maladies, the consequences of hard work and an arduous life in the Midwest. In his description, the image of renewed life wanes as the shadow of this once vibrant woman appears.

Cather then connects Georgiana's physical countenance to the frontier. Her nephew again explains:

. . .there came to me an overwhelming sense of waste and wear we are so powerless to combat; and I saw again the tall, naked house on the prairie, black and grim as a wooden fortress; the black pond where I had learned to swim, its margin pitted with sun-dried cattle tracks; the rain gullied clay banks about the naked house, the four dwarf ash seedlings where the dishcloths were always hung to dry before the kitchen door. The world there was the flat world of the ancients; to the east, a cornfield that stretched to daybreak; to the west, a corral that reached to sunset; between the conquests of peace, dearer bought than those of war.<sup>67</sup>

As in her other stories, waste land images appear. The water is unfit to drink, there is a lack of trees, and the sun has blistered the earth. This time, however, Cather writes of a home in this country. It is a forbidding place. The house is grim and a lack of any activity and few signs of life are present in the yard. Instead, there are only traces of it. In this description, cattle tracks are evident, but no cows are in sight. Someone



has built the corral and has planted corn, but he or she is nowhere around. The home place is empty and desolate. Furthermore, no people pass by—there are no roads, and this pioneering family is isolated. For this little bit of land, Cather writes that the price is higher—dearer, she states, than that of war. Although they have not died, they have given up their lives. For Georgiana, the myth promising renewed life has been as much a mockery as the myth promising ample bounties has been for Canuteson in “On the Divide” or the Russians in *My Ántonia*. Her physical body and her lifestyle are testimony to both the loss of renewed life and the existence of Cather’s American waste land.

In much of her fiction, Cather highlights the pioneers’ desires to find lush American landscapes. As Smith points out when writing of pioneer experience, the garden is an important symbol for Cather’s characters: “The image of this vast and constantly growing agricultural society became one of the dominant symbols of the nineteenth-century American society—a collective representation, a poetic idea . . . that defined the promise of American life.”<sup>68</sup> In addition, Cather’s characters come to the interior West hoping to find this promise. However, in the fictional world Cather creates, the American frontier dispossesses many of her characters, their dreams left unfulfilled because they are unable to find these mythical gardens. Instead, her characters often live in a harsh and unrelenting waste land. Recognizing the effect of unrealized mythic promises, Cather exposes the struggle many have when trying to create a garden in this alien environment. The land in Cather’s western frontier is often unproductive, barren; it is a place where dreams disappear. For these pioneers, the myth of the garden and the accompanying waste land images are often catalysts for despair and disillusionment.

## NOTES

1. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 6.
2. John H. Randall, III, *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather’s Search for Value* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1973), 138.
3. Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), 88.

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Randall III, 138.
10. Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*, 88.
11. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* in *Willa Cather: Early Novels and Stories*, ed. Sharon O'Brien (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 170.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 174.
14. Diana Dufva Quantic, *The Nature of Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 59.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Genesis 3:17, 19.
18. Eudora Welty, "The House of Willa Cather in *Modern Critical Views: Willa Cather*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), 149.
19. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 147.
20. Ibid., 148.
21. Ibid.
22. Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 4.
23. David M. Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 197.
24. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 174.
25. Ibid., 175.
26. Ibid.
27. Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*, 21.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 149.
31. Willa Cather, "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional." in *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912*, ed. Virginia Fulkner, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 295.
32. Ibid., 294.
33. Willa Cather, "Neighbor Rosicky," in *Willa Cather: Collected Stories*, (New York: Vintage Books Classic Edition, 1992), 247.
34. Ibid., 250.
35. Ibid., 251.

36. *Ibid.*, 257.
37. The Russian thistle is a troublesome weed, particularly in grain fields. It is a bushy annual with prickly leaves that attains the height of two feet. When it dies, it is carried in the wind as a tumbleweed.
38. Genesis 3:18.
39. T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land" in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971), 38.
40. Willa Cather, "Neighbor Rosicky," 261.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. Willa Cather, "On the Divide," in *Willa Cather: Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, ed. Sharon O'Brien, (New York: The Library of America, 1992), 8.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*, 12.
49. *Ibid.*, 9.
50. Exodus 10:21-29.
51. Robert Thacker, *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 148.
52. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 147.
53. *Ibid.*
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*, 147-48.
57. *Ibid.*, 148.
58. T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971), 59.
59. Smith, 129.
60. George Kates, "Willa Cather's Unfinished Avignon Story" in *Collected Stories*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 468.
61. *Ibid.*, 473.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Willa Cather, "A Wagner Matinee," in *Willa Cather: Early Novels and Stories*, ed. Sharon O'Brien, (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 103.
64. *Ibid.*, 104.
65. *Ibid.*, 105.
66. *Ibid.*, 104.
67. *Ibid.*, 107.
68. Smith, 123.