

O Pioneers! Study Guide

O Pioneers! by Willa Cather

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Plot Summary

Alexandra, a tall, strong girl of twenty and her five-year-old brother Emil live on a farm. They are in the small town of Hanover, Nebraska, one blustery winter day. Alexandra has seen a doctor who says there is no hope for their father. Emil's kitten gets stuck up a tree and a teenage boy named Carl Linstrum gets him down. They amuse themselves by watching a beautiful little Bohemian girl named Marie.

Their father, John Bergson, is indeed dying at age forty-six. He calls together Alexandra and her three brothers (Lou, Oscar and Emil). Although Lou and Oscar are seventeen and nineteen years old, he is entrusting the farm to Alexandra.

Alexandra does well for three years until there is a bad drought. Many families in the area give up and move, including the Linstrums. In contrast, Alexandra decides to buy even more land while it is cheap. She is open-minded and plants new varieties of crops; she is the first to build a silo. She even takes advice on animals from Crazy Ivar, a local insane hermit who has magical curative powers.

Sixteen years later and partly because of her visionary ways, Alexandra has the largest, most prosperous farm in the Divide. She is devoted to Emil's care and education and makes sure he goes to college, against the advice of Lou and Oscar.

Meanwhile, Emil has fallen in love with the beautiful little girl of Chapter I. Marie is now married to Frank Shabata, a cruel, hot-tempered man who is jealous of her beauty and natural happiness. Marie and Alexandra are close friends but Marie does not confide that she is in love with Emil and Alexandra does not suspect.

Carl shows up unexpectedly and stays a month with Alexandra. Lou and Oscar confront their sister and later Carl. They think Carl is after the Bergson property and most of it is rightfully theirs. Carl leaves town because he is afraid that Alexandra is too strong and wealthy for him.

Emil celebrates the wedding of his best friend Amedee to Angelique. The joy of the newlyweds depresses Emil; to him, love is only torment. After his college graduation, he goes to Mexico for a year.

When he returns, the attraction between him and Marie is as strong as ever. At a church festival, they secretly share a kiss. Emil meets her privately and tells her that if she will not run away with him, he must leave: it is too much torment to be near her.

As Emil is about to leave again, Amedee dies suddenly. At his funeral Emil has an epiphany and seeks out Marie. He finds her asleep under a mulberry tree. They embrace and make love. Frank shoots and kills them both in a rage.



After the murders, Alexandra falls into despair. The person she has lived her life for is dead, as well as her best friend. She deliberately seeks out Frank Shabata and visits him in prison.

Soon afterwards Carl returns to the Divide. He realizes that Alexandra needs him and the novel ends with their union.



Part 1 Chapter 1

Part 1 Chapter 1 Summary

Willa Cather opens her book with a vivid word picture of the small town of Hanover, Nebraska, "trying not to be blown away" in a hard January snowstorm. The town is unusually quiet in the middle of the day: children are at school, there are no trains until evening, streets are empty except for a little five-year-old boy named Emil. The author draws a clear contrast between the town people and the farm people, who are only in town on business and lead their lives closer to the land.

Emil is crying because a dog chased his kitten up a telegraph pole. He is afraid the kitten will freeze to death. His older sister, Alexandra, returns from the doctor's office and scolds Emil for insisting that the kitten come to town with them in the first place. Alexandra is dressed in male clothing and described as a strong, tall girl. However, when she exposes her beautiful thick hair, a man flirts with her and tells her she's pretty. She gets rid of him with "Amazonian fierceness."

Alexandra asks a boy her age named Carl Linstrum to help with the kitten. Carl is described as thin and delicate and a boy who already has a sense of futility about him. He is not wearing a coat so he is more agile and climbs up the pole and rescues the cat.

Alexandra confides in Carl that she has seen the doctor and there is no hope for her father's health. Carl is sympathetic and offers to get Alexandra's horses ready for the ride back to their farm.

Alexandra and Emil wait in the store where a group of men are enchanted by a little girl named Marie Tovesky. She is very pretty and very well cared for. She is a lovely city child unlike farm children like Alexandra and Emil. Everyone in the store is drinking and enjoying themselves as the farm people get ready to go back home.

Riding back with Carl and Emil, Alexandra confides her fears that she does not know what will become of her family once her father dies. As they pass a graveyard, she says she wishes they were all in their graves with grass growing over them. Carl tries to cheer her up by offering to bring his magic lantern to show them pictures of Germany, cannibals and even Robinson Crusoe.

Carl then has to give her the reins to go home herself once they reach the Linstrum homestead. He watches the lantern held between her feet as she rides deeper into the dark countryside.

Part 1 Chapter 1 Analysis

The land is immediately important in the first chapter. The wind howls about the gray prairie in the snowstorm under a gray sky and the cold is so fierce that kittens freeze.



Whether or not you live on the land or in town makes a big difference in Nebraska. For example, townspeople appear strange to the little farm boy: "the town is a strange place where people have hard hearts and wear fine clothes."

Alexandra emerges as an androgynous girl who takes charge of situations such as the kitten's rescue. She is already taking a lot of responsibility in her mind for what will happen after her father dies.

People are clearly described by nationality such as Swede, Bohemian and so forth. This type of writing is no longer in style but it says something about the 1870s in Nebraska. The graveyard on a desolate winter night is an important symbol of death and despair.



Part 1 Chapter 2

Part 1 Chapter 2 Summary

This chapter is about John Bergson, Alexandra's father. As he lies dying at age forty-six, he reminisces about his life as a Nebraska farmer. He has been working the land for eleven years and getting nowhere. He goes over his many setbacks: cattle dying in a blizzard, cholera killing his cows, failed crops, two dead children. He spent five years in debt and now owns six hundred forty acres. He was never much of a farmer.

Bergson's father had been a successful shipbuilder of wealth in the Old Country, but he died in disgrace after making a bad marriage and wasting his money. Bergson, like many of the immigrants he came to America with, was not trained in farming when he took up his homestead. He had worked in a shipyard.

As he lies in bed, John Bergson thinks about what to do with his land and family. He has to acknowledge to himself that his daughter Alexandra is more intelligent and resourceful than his two sons, age nineteen and seventeen. Lou and Oscar are hard-working, but they don't always use their heads. Alexandra, on the other hand, inherited her grandfather's brains.

Bergson calls Alexandra to his side. He is impressed as usual by her strength and agility. But he thinks to himself if he had to do it all over again, he would not go back to being young and strong because he knows how badly things end. He tells Alexandra that everything "will come on you" after his death and that she must keep her brothers on the land.

Oscar and Lou come to their father's bedside with Alexandra. Bergson tells them that their sister will guide them and that the first few years will be the hardest. They must hold on to the land, which will be divided among them after they marry. Alexandra is making a lot of money with her butter and eggs so let her do that and hire male help if you need it. Let your mother keep her garden even in the busy season, because she is lonely and misses the Old Country.

Alexandra's mother was a good housewife who had managed to bring up her children with good morals. She had standards such as insisting on a log house instead of one made of dirt. If she were put on a desert island, she would thank God for delivering her and make do. She was always cleaning and canning food for the future and she was considered uppity by her neighbors.

Part 1 Chapter 2 Analysis

Again the point is made that the land in Nebraska is very harsh and that it is very hard to farm there. The land has a power of its own that humans cannot conquer. Even the



creek has a mind of its own; it "sometimes flowed, sometimes stood still." Bergson has tried so hard and so long that he has been driven to the point of despair.

It is interesting that when John Bergson is dying, he does not think about God or philosophical issues. Everything is practical with him: how to preserve their land, how to run the farm and so forth. He is very objective about his children's and wife's assets and limitations. It is interesting that he puts his daughter, not his wife, in charge of keeping things together after his death. It is clear that he believes that his wife belongs in the house and that his sons are not as sharp and trustworthy as his oldest child.



Part 1 Chapter 3

Part 1 Chapter 3 Summary

Six months after their father's death, Alexandra and her brothers are visiting "Crazy Ivar." First they stop at the Linstrum property, where they ask Carl if he wants to join them. Carl wants to go because he has never seen Ivar's pond. Emil admits that he is afraid of Ivar because he howls at night. Carl says that Ivar is good because he knows how to cure animals although he does not speak English. Alexandra notes that Ivar has clear days when you can learn a great deal from him. Once he cured one of their cows by sawing off her horn and daubing the spot with tar.

The road to Ivar's homestead is very rough; there are very few other homesteads nearby. Ivar likes it that way; he does not want to have a lot of neighbors. Still the ride feels creepy and Lou wishes he had brought his gun. As they approach Ivar's home, there is nothing indicating that it is a human dwelling except one stovepipe sticking up through the ground.

Ivar is an old man with shaggy white hair. He is barefoot but wears a clean white cotton shirt. Usually he stays home to read the Bible and make hammocks; occasionally, people come by and ask him to cure animals.

As the wagon approaches, Ivar calls out "No guns! No guns!" Alexandra says they don't have any; they only want to buy a hammock. Alexandra, translating for Carl, asks if it's true there is a sea gull in his pond. Ivar says there was one but she has flown away.

They go into his cave/house to look at hammocks. Emil is impressed with the cave, which has a stove, a table and chairs and a few books. It is very clean and well-kept.

The boys go down to the pond while Alexandra selects a hammock. She asks Ivar's advice about her hogs. She is afraid they will die like everyone else's. Ivar says hogs die because humans treat them badly by keeping them in dirty pens and feeding them garbage. He advises her to keep them clean and feed them grain like you do horses.

They ride home. Alexandra thinks that she will talk to Ivar again; next time she will advise him to work his land more. She will build a better corral for her pigs.

Part 1 Chapter 3 Analysis

Ivar is an interesting romantic character that seems to belong in a 1960s pro-environment book. He lives on the land without disturbing it and makes friends with animals. He does not leave garbage strewn around but lives "cleaner than a badger." Devoted to God and the Bible, Ivar speaks in a poetic way about birds and creatures. Everyone struggles and fights to make a living on the land; Ivar lives in harmony with it.

Lou, Oscar and Carl avoid talking with him but Alexandra asks him for advice and takes it. It is noteworthy that her brothers "do not mind hard work but hate experiments," unlike Alexandra, who is open to new ideas, even ones from people considered to be crazy. She is trying to survive in an impossible environment. She is flexible and takes wisdom wherever it comes from.



Part 1 Chapter 4

Part 1 Chapter 4 Summary

Three years pass uneventfully. The family prospers under the leadership of Alexandra. The hard times then come in the form of three years of drought. During the first year, the Bergsons manage because labor is cheap when crops fail. In the second year Lou and Oscar put in bigger crops than average and then lost everything.

As the second summer of drought was passing, Carl comes to visit Alexandra. He sees her standing alone in her garden; characteristically she is lost in thought. He tells her that his family has decided to give up and move to St. Louis. Carl's father is taking a job in a tobacco factory. Carl himself will learn engraving and take a job in Chicago.

Alexandra takes the news very hard. Carl insists that it will be one less drag on her. Even Carl's father depends on her. Since Alexandra was just a little girl, everyone has depended upon her as the person who knows the most about farming.

Alexandra says she does not wish to hold him back, but she does start to cry. Carl has been her best friend for ten years, now she will be lonely. The only person she has now is little Emil. She must go back to the farmhouse because it is getting dark. She will tell her family herself that the Linstrums are leaving.

There are a few long passages describing Lou and Oscar. Lou is smaller and more intelligent, but overly impulsive. He often makes poor choices. For example, he would mend fences in the middle of wheat harvest. Oscar has a big powerful body but a lazy mind. "His love of routine amounted to a vice." He always does the same thing over and over even if it is the wrong way to do it. The two brothers have always been inseparable and balance each other.

Lou announces that the Linstrums leaving is no surprise; everyone who can crawl is leaving and there is no use for the family to stick it out. Chris Arnson traded his homestead to Charley Fuller, the real estate man, for a place on the river. Everyone is trading, but yet the land may really be worth a lot of money one day if they hold on to it. Lou argues that is not true; land is depreciating.

Mrs. Bergson starts to cry. These discussions always depress her. She announces that she does not want to move again, just to land up in another Godforsaken place. Alexandra soothes her by saying they can't sell the farm out from under her because she owns a third of it under American law. The next day is a Sunday. Lou and Oscar are still upset with Alexandra for turning their mother loose on them. They stay in the barn all day and do not take the women to church. Carl comes by and plays cards with them in the barn.

Alexandra spends the day reading *Swiss Family Robinson*. When the boys come in for dinner, Alexandra announces that she wants to visit the farms by the river to see if they



do indeed have an advantage over the spreads on the high ground. Lou and Oscar are uncomfortable with her latest scheme. She says she will take Emil with her. After supper Lou goes courting his girlfriend Annie Lee. The other boys play checkers while Alexandra reads aloud to her mother and Emil.

Part 1 Chapter 4 Analysis

The decision of the Linstrums to leave the Hanover, Nebraska area has a big impact on their neighbors. Alexandra despairs of losing her only friend, Carl. Her brothers react by saying they should leave, too. Her mother becomes despondent.

It is interesting to note that Carl recognizes Alexandra as a leader in the community as well as her family. He tries to comfort her by saying the Linstrums, like everyone else, have been a drag in her life and it will be better when they leave. Alexandra says that losing Carl was as bad as anything that had happened so far. Does she imply that it is worse than losing her father?



Part 1 Chapter 5

Part 1 Chapter 5 Summary

Alexandra and Emil spend five days looking at the river farms. Alexandra interviews people and learns that there is very little river land for sale and it is probably overpriced. On the way home she seems unusually happy. She is one of the first people to really appreciate the land of her home.

At dinner that night Alexandra tells her brothers they must buy the Linstrum place, then Peter Crow's place and then every section they can get. She wants to borrow the money for six years by mortgaging their farm. She is not worried about the principal, because she is convinced that the land will appreciate, but she is worried about the taxes and interest.

Immediately her brothers react in a negative way. Lou is worried that people will think they are crazy. Oscar says there's no way he can work that much land. Alexandra replies that they must be one of the shrewd ones who buy up the land and hire others to work it for them. She says if they won't sign the mortgage papers, she'll do it alone. Oscar agrees to sign because they are in so deep; they may as well get in deeper.

Alexandra assures them that her vision will free them up from hard work. Emil will be able to go to college. Things will improve.

Part 1 Chapter 5 Analysis

Alexandra speaks almost like a hard-hearted, practical businessperson when she discusses buying land and taking out a big mortgage. Her relationship to the land, however, is almost a mystical one. She wants to remain in Nebraska and not only make the best of a bad situation, but turn it into a triumph. Once she makes her decision, she experiences a rare form of happiness.



Part 2 Chapter 1

Part 2 Chapter 1 Summary

Sixteen years later, Alexandra's plan has come to fruition. The Bergsons own hundreds of acres with a large farmhouse, sheds and other buildings set up like a little village. Yet the furnishing and such in the farmhouse seem unfinished, as if Alexandra's true home is outdoors, not inside.

All the farms in the area have become prosperous. The grain is so heavy it bends toward the blade. There is something "frank and joyous and young" in this country now. The hard times have passed. There is telephone service and other amenities.

Emil is now twenty-one years old. On this day he is mowing the graveyard where his parents are buried. He is now a strong young man who wins athletic awards at school. A girl named Marie Shabata stops to flirt with him. She tells him she is excited about a wedding between Angelique and Amedee. She chatters about a dance and tells Emil he must dance with her and the French girls, too. People think he is stuck-up.

Part 2 Chapter 1 Analysis

This short chapter does not seem to belong to Part 1. There are new names, such as Marie Shabata, Angelique, Amedee-people that have not been mentioned before. Emil is a totally different person now. The farmland seems like a different place than the arena of struggle described in Part 1. Emil with a scythe in a cemetery is a death image that contrasts with the graveyard image of the first chapter in Part 1.



Part 2 Chapter 2

Part 2 Chapter 2 Summary

This chapter describes the Bergson household as full of servants and new people. Lou and Oscar have married and left and Emil spends most of the year away at school. Alexandra has three young Swedish servant girls to keep her company. She has taken in Ivar and allows him to live in the barn where he is more comfortable than he would be in a regular house. Ivar lost his land through mismanagement.

At the dinner table Alexandra talks little but listens to her hired men. Barney Flinn is her foreman and has been with her for five years. They talk about how Alexandra put in the first silo in the region and farms in an innovative way. Even her brothers do not agree with her. Alexandra defends them by saying "it's bad if all family members think alike."

After dinner Ivar wants to speak to Alexandra privately. He tells her he is afraid that she will send him away to an asylum. People are saying that he could hurt her during one of his spells. She dismisses it as nonsense. Ivar explains that his spells come from God. He knows that he is despised because he is different; he does not cut his hair or wear shoes and he has visions. He states that he is protected from being taken to an asylum by Alexandra's great wealth and that he is trying to keep his feet clean for her.

Alexandra says that she is glad he has been with her for the past twelve years. His advice and caring for animals has been invaluable. She remarks that many people think she's weird because of her silo and other crazy ideas. Ivar confides that Lou has a bathtub at his house and that's a strange thing. They laugh together. As usual, Alexandra has made Ivar feel better and sent him away with a light heart.

Part 2 Chapter 2 Analysis

A picture emerges of Alexandra as being the one everyone counts on and the one in charge. Surrounded by people like Ivar and Signa who depend on her, she seems a little lonely.



Part 2 Chapter 3

Part 2 Chapter 3 Summary

Lou has married Annie Lee and now has three daughters and a son. The eldest, Milly, is Alexandra's favorite. Alexandra does not get along well with Oscar's wife, who is from Missouri and is ashamed of marrying "a foreigner." Oscar now has four sons aged five to twelve. He has prospered, making more money than his brother but much less than his sister.

At a family dinner Lou and Oscar and their families are all present; Emil is away at his friend Amedee's wedding. Alexandra's brothers pick on her for keeping Ivar. Lou says that when he was in Hastings, he spoke to a doctor about Ivar. The doctor says Ivar's case is of the most dangerous kind and that any day he could take an axe to Alexandra. Moreover the neighbors are afraid of Ivar and do not like that Alexandra keeps him at her farm. Alexandra firmly takes charge and says that she will get herself appointed Ivar's guardian, if necessary. He is totally harmless. She cleverly turns the conversation around to Milly's piano, which makes Oscar's wife angry and jealous.

After dinner Alexandra goes out to the garden with her nieces. To her surprise Carl Linstrum appears and asks if he can stay with her for a few days. He is planning to go to Alaska to try the goldfields because he is not making money at engraving. Alexandra is delighted to see him and says he has changed from a boy to a man with a beard. He compliments her on the farm and mentions his own failure of imagination to make something out of the Linstrum property. They go back to the house to visit with Lou and Oscar and their families.

Annie Lee, discerning that Carl is unmarried, pushes Milly on him as a prospective wife. Lou tries to match Carl's urban ways by talking politics with him. As her brothers leave, they complain that Carl should have contacted Alexandra instead of just showing up at her place. They describe him as a failure: "He never was of much account."

Part 2 Chapter 3 Analysis

Cather returns to her theme that Lou and Oscar care too much what other people think and that, on the other hand, Alexandra prospers by not caring. Lou and Oscar are even jealous of one another. They criticize Alexandra for being nice to Ivar and Carl under the lame excuse of what others think. Alexandra's sister-in-law insults her by implying Carl would be more interested in marrying a fifteen year-old girl than in the forty-year-old Alexandra.



Part 2 Chapter 4

Part 2 Chapter 4 Summary

Alexandra feels that Carl has not changed much and that he is still as sensitive and unhappy as he was as a boy. She and Carl spend a lot of time confiding in one another. Alexandra confesses her joy at the way Emil is turning out: urban and smart, perhaps he may become a lawyer. Emil is why her grandfather came to this country. She says she cannot take credit for the prosperity of her farm; she simply learned to let the land work itself and then prosperity came on its own.

She tells Carl that Marie Tovesky, the little city girl, has grown up and married Frank Shabata. They now live next door to her. She is very close to Marie, but Frank has a difficult personality. Carl confesses that he is ashamed of the way his life has turned out. He had planned to come and deceive Alexandra into thinking he was a success, but the truth is he is poor and drifting. Wood engraving has gone out of style and he is a failure in life. Alexandra replies that she would trade her land for his freedom.

Carl says that it is better to be on the farm in the prairie, to be part of a community, to be missed when you die. Alexandra, however, believes it is better if Emil turns out like Carl rather than Oscar and Lou. She expresses her own fear that she could become suicidal because her life is just the same thing over and over again.

Part 2 Chapter 4 Analysis

This is a short but interesting chapter that clarifies the values that Alexandra and Carl hold. It's as if both envy the other's choices in life and would prefer to trade places. It is also interesting to note that these two are so close to each other that sixteen years can pass by and yet they can have deep meaningful conversations as if no time had passed at all.



Part 2 Chapter 5

Part 2 Chapter 5 Summary

Carl and Alexandra spend their days walking around the farm together and their evenings in deep conversations. One morning Carl goes on a solitary walk at dawn and comes across Marie and Emil. Emil has just shot and killed a duck and Marie is despondent. She says Ivar is right: wild things are too happy to kill. Seeing these two young people together depresses Carl.

Part 2 Chapter 5 Analysis

The sight of Marie and Emil, young, beautiful and full of life and promise, depresses Carl, probably because it makes him realize what he missed out on with Alexandra.



Part 2 Chapter 6

Part 2 Chapter 6 Summary

That evening Carl and Alexandra make the time to visit Marie because Alexandra is concerned that she has waited too long between visits. Usually they see each other every three days or so. Carl is happy that his old house is well cared for by the Shabatas. He like everyone else is impressed by Marie's beauty and vitality; he asks Alexandra "Does she ever walk, or does she always run?"

As they talk, Marie remembers that she always thought Carl was a very romantic figure because he could draw and had big black eyes. They have a delightful time until Frank shows up. He is angry because old woman Hiller, a neighbor, can't get her fences mended. As a consequence, her hogs root up Frank's wheat. Alexandra and Marie try to reason with him. Marie says that Hiller does not mean to do this; she cries whenever the hogs get out. Alexandra suggests Frank fix her fence himself. But Frank is in a rage; there is no soothing him.

Part 2 Chapter 6 Analysis

Marie emerges as a delightful charming woman that everyone favors. Her husband, on the other hand, has a sour personality. People put up with Frank because they like Marie. The next chapter answers the question of why Marie ended up with Frank.



Part 2 Chapter 7

Part 2 Chapter 7 Summary

Marie's beauty and charm made her the apple of her father's eye. Albert Tovesky was an intelligent Bohemian who was a leader of his people in Omaha. Marie graduated from Omaha High School when she was only sixteen. That year Frank Shabata came to town from the Old Country and he was very sexy. All the Bohemian girls had a crush on him, but Frank chose the prettiest one: Marie.

Albert Tovesky could not stand Frank because he abandoned his mother. When Marie refused to stop seeing him, he sent her to convent school in St. Louis. There she pined away for Frank and made a shrine of his photographs. After her eighteenth birthday, she met Frank at Union Station in St. Louis and married him. Frank became a hard working farmer who felt sorry for himself.

Part 2 Chapter 7 Analysis

This brief three-page backstory explains why the prettiest and most charming girl Marie married the hot-headed Frank Shabata, when she could have made other choices. It implies that Marie was foolishly romantic and headstrong against her father, who had her best interests in mind.



Part 2 Chapter 8

Part 2 Chapter 8 Summary

The chapter opens with Frank continuing to act in an unpleasant manner. Newspaper articles about rich people make him furious and that evening is no exception. He is ranting about a rich man's divorce. He and Lou Bergson have similar political views.

Frank spends the next day at a saloon. Marie is churning butter when she hears the sound of Emil's scythe. She goes over to him and explains how beautiful the world is after a rain. He asks her why she is always so flighty.

They meet again under a mulberry tree. Marie talks about how the Bohemians were once tree worshippers and although she is a good Catholic, she still believes in lucky trees. Marie asks Emil if he thinks Alexandra is in love with Carl. Emil says that's crazy, Alexandra would never know how to go about being in love.

Emil suggests that one day he may want to go live in New York like Carl. Marie seems distressed by that idea. Surely Alexandra wants Emil to remain there in the prairie. Emil says sometimes he wants to pull up the corners of the Divide like a tablecloth and shake it out, he is so sick of it. Marie innocently asks him, "Why do I make you cross?" Emil clenches his hands and confesses that he is not a little boy anymore and they cannot play the way children do. She is not helping things by pretending.

Marie suggests he become a Catholic and pray for what he wants. Emil replies he won't pray for things he can't have and he won't pray not to have them. If he won't even try, Marie says, that means that all their good times are over. He leaves her crying bitterly: their good times are over.

Part 2 Chapter 8 Analysis

Emil is in love with Marie and it is torment for him to be around her. She pretends this is not true; and in this chapter, he wants an end to the pretense. He challenges her to be more grown-up about things. Cather has good guys and bad guys. The good guys appreciate nature and live in harmony with it. Marie is one of the good characters who loves and appreciates trees and the earth after a rain.



Part 2 Chapter 9

Part 2 Chapter 9 Summary

Carl has been at Alexandra's farm for a month. He and Emil ride up to the French country to visit Emil's newly married friends, Amedee and Angelique Chevalier. The young men play baseball and laugh and talk. Amedee and Angelique are very happy together. They are naturally in love and playful together. Amedee tells Emil he should find a pretty French girl and marry; marriage is definitely the way to go in life.

Emil is happy for Amedee, who has been his best friend since they were twelve. They went through university together. He hides his own misery. Love has given his friend the utmost happiness and Emil the utmost despair.

Part 2 Chapter 9 Analysis

Cather compares the two men's fates in love to two ears of corn that grown side by side. One shoots up joyfully to the light; the other rots. No one knows why.



Part 2 Chapter 10

Part 2 Chapter 10 Summary

Carl and Emil are gone when Alexandra's two brothers drive up to visit. Lou wants to know when Carl is leaving. Oscar says people are talking about her and Carl. Alexandra refuses their advice. Oscar pleads that she is making the whole family look ridiculous. Lou wants to know if she and Carl plan to marry. They express concerns that he is a gold digger after her property.

The fight escalates. Alexandra says she will do what she wants with her land. Lou and Oscar reply they are the ones who did all the work and she takes all the credit, even as they were only humoring her. It was a mistake to let a woman meddle in business. Men own property because they do all the work. Alexandra asks, "What about my work?" Lou says she never did any real work.

Alexandra reminds them that they were ready to give up the land for two thousand dollars. They have always opposed her ideas such as putting in alfalfa and wheat. They remind her they are the ones who actually put in the alfalfa and wheat. Then her brothers attack her as a woman. The man she wants is only after her money and he is five years younger. She will be done out of her property by this loafer. Alexandra rises and asks them to leave.

When they are alone, Lou says Oscar should not have hurt her feelings by bringing up her age. They both acknowledge that Alexandra is not like most women.

Part 2 Chapter 10 Analysis

Alexandra is way ahead of her time. She is operating in a culture where men's work is much more important than women's and men handle all business matters. Her brothers' comments must have been hurtful to her. She says only "I think I would rather not have lived to find out what I have today." Her brothers do not trust her to make good decisions when it comes to love and marrying and yet they have trusted her to make all the business decisions about the farm.



Part 2 Chapter 11

Part 2 Chapter 11 Summary

Emil takes Alexandra aside and tells her that Lou and Oscar are talking with Carl. He also tells her that he wants to take a year off before going to law school and prefers not to spend the winter with her. She is disappointed. Then they talk about Carl. Alexandra says that she is lonely and that the only two friends she has ever had are Marie and Carl. She expresses concern that if her brothers talk to Carl the way they talked to her, he may leave her. Emil is actually embarrassed that his sister even has the potential of a love life but he tries to be supportive, saying that his brothers are jealous of Carl's intelligence. Emil falls asleep, thinking about Marie. He wants her to care only for him.

Part 2 Chapter 11 Analysis

In this chapter Emil appears self-centered. He is embarrassed about his sister's attraction to a man and obsessed about Marie. He is as jealous as Frank in that he does not want her to like so many people, only him.



Part 2 Chapter 12

Part 2 Chapter 12 Summary

Carl tells Alexandra that she is in a hopeless position: her fate is to be surrounded by little men. He himself is one of the little men. If he were "a very large man or a very small one, I could take what you have to give me." But he cannot. He needs to go away and prove himself to both him and her. Alexandra says if he goes away, he will never come back. She does not understand why her prosperity has taken her friends away from her. She feels totally abandoned by him and by Emil.

Part 2 Chapter 12 Analysis

This chapter is only two pages. Alexandra and Carl are both very open and honest with each other. Carl does not understand that Alexandra needs him.



Part 3 Chapter 1

Part 3 Chapter 1 Summary

Winter has come to the Divide, it turns it into "iron country" and people feel depressed by the dead landscape. Alexandra has to content herself with letters from Emil and Carl. She goes to Catholic Church with Marie, but does not confide in her about Carl.

In December Annie Lee's mother visits. The old woman with only three teeth is a reminder of the Old Country and has funny ways. Old Mrs. Lee and Alexandra visit Marie. Alexandra remembers the first time she met Marie, when Emil lost his kitten. Marie is knitting Emil a scarf, which Alexandra will send to him in Mexico. Marie is sure that Emil is serenading women there.

When the three women eat apricot rolls, Marie seems to be crying. Alexandra comments that if light-hearted Marie is capable of getting depressed, what will that mean for the rest of us? The old lady takes a nap and the two younger women go upstairs to look for crochet patterns. They come across a yellow cane Frank used when he was courting Marie. The cane reminds Marie of how dapper and happy Frank used to be. Marie confesses that she thinks Frank would have been better off with a woman who absolutely adored him rather than her. Alexandra is uncomfortable with this kind of talk.

As Alexandra and old Mrs. Lee bundle up to leave, Alexandra gives Marie a package of Emil's letters to read. Marie knows very well they are written for her, not Alexandra. Left alone with her thoughts, Marie continues to think that Frank would have been better off with someone else. As time passes, Marie shrinks more into herself. She finds comfort in prayer and religion and tries to be patient with Frank. But she is brooding and unhappy and hopeful for spring.

Part 3 Chapter 1 Analysis

Part 3 like Part 1 is set in winter, a time of death with the potential of renewal. This time of year people get discouraged. In Part 1 Alexandra's father dies and she contemplates that it would be better to be dead herself. In this chapter Marie looks to the past and broods. Her thoughts that Frank would have been better off with a different wife seem like a classic projection: she would have been better off with a different husband.

It is interesting to note that Alexandra, who is open to new ideas about farming and business, is not open to discussing matters of the heart with her friend. She is blind to Emil and Marie's love for one another. She is close-minded about listening to a married woman complain about her husband.

Part 3 Chapter 2

Part 3 Chapter 2 Summary

Alexandra, too, is being reflective. Her personal life is mostly "underground" because she puts all her personality into her work. She can recall a few days of pure happiness. There was one perfect afternoon with Emil. They were near a pond and spotted a wild duck, so beautiful and free that they both kept it in mind even years later. Most of her memories are impersonal like that one.

However, Alexandra does have one fantasy about a very strong man, bigger and faster than she is, who lifts her up and carries her "as easily as a sheaf of wheat." The older she gets, the more this fantasy comes to her when she is tired.

Part 3 Chapter 2 Analysis

Part 3 is only eleven pages long. Not much happens except the reader gets to know Marie and Alexandra better. Alexandra is repressed in the Freudian sense. Her life force is sublimated into her work, as Freud would say. Even her sexual fantasies are pure.



Part 4 Chapter 1

Part 4 Chapter 1 Summary

Emil is back from Mexico. He is stunning in a Mexican costume with turquoise studs and a huge sombrero. He and Alexandra will attend a church supper and festival in Ste. Agnes. Everyone will be in costume. Marie will dress in native Bohemian costume to tell fortunes.

Emil is glad to see Amedee, who is now a father of a one-week-old boy. Amedee is expansively happy. Emil and Amedee enjoy the company of young men, as Marie waits desperately to see him. When Emil finally comes to her, Marie has a million questions about his adventures in the Southwest. They have to stop talking as the festival begins. Marie tells fortunes. Emil gives up a turquoise stud to auction. Although Marie wants it, Frank refuses to bid on it.

Frank feels angrier than ever, although he has no one in particular to begrudge. He knows if he could give up his grudge, Marie would come back to him. In some black place he wishes she were as unhappy as he is.

Father Duchesne signals that the lights can go out. Everyone will kiss their sweetheart in the dark. Emil has the task of extinguishing the candle by Marie's fortune-telling booth. They talk for a few minutes and he gives her a handful of turquoise studs. The lights go out. They kiss "like a sigh they breathe together." The lights come back on and Emil goes to the other side of the room to sing a Mexican song with his guitar. Alexandra notices that Marie has a high color and seems to be trembling, but she does not think about why.

Part 4 Chapter 1 Analysis

A year has passed but the attraction between Marie and Emil is as strong as ever. They are both fighting it, Emil by leaving Nebraska. He is the one who changed by going to college and traveling; she was always more charming and beautiful than anyone else. They seem to belong together.



Part 4 Chapter 2

Part 4 Chapter 2 Summary

Signa and Nelse, two of Alexandra's Swedish servants, get married. Afterwards Marie says Signa should not have married such a grumpy person. Marie takes a walk with Emil, who confides how miserable he is around her. He says she is the type who could love so many different men. She says maybe she is as shallow as he thinks she is. He demands to know why she married Frank. Marie replies she loved him then and now she is paying for it. Emil says he is paying for her mistake, too.

Emil asks her to run away with him, but she says she cannot. She wants him to go away from her. He demands to know if she loves him. If she truly loves him, he will go away. She says she loves him.

Part 4 Chapter 2 Analysis

Again Emil is stuck with the images of marriage and happiness among other people as he mourns his love for Marie. Marie is too religious to run away with him, so he is the one who must leave her.



Part 4 Chapter 3

Part 4 Chapter 3 Summary

Emil will move to Omaha to study law with a Swedish lawyer until October; then he will go to law school. He and Alexandra talk as he packs his things. He still cannot see his sister as a woman, only his sister. Emil asks if it is true that their grandfather was crooked. Alexandra says his grandfather was misled by a woman and became crooked.

Alexandra wants him to have a male relative role model with some intelligence. Lou and Oscar are "bigoted and self-satisfied" and never encourage Emil to pursue his education or dreams. She is very happy with the way Emil is turning out and believes he will soon stop wandering. She does not want him to be like the men in Nebraska. They remember the wild duck together.

Part 4 Chapter 3 Analysis

It is interesting to note that neither Emil nor Alexandra see the other clearly. They came together just one day, the day of the wild duck, which is why that memory is so sacred. Alexandra imagines Emil as the one who gets loose from the conventions of Nebraska; he sees her as a sexless old maid.



Part 4 Chapter 4

Part 4 Chapter 4 Summary

Emil goes to St. Agnes to visit his childhood friend, Amedee. He and Angelique are as happy as ever with their new baby and prosperous farm. However, as Emil talks to Amedee in the fields, he complains of terrible pain. Emil leaves and looks back to see Amedee staggering and supported by his two cousins. Emil helps take Amedee to his bed.

Part 4 Chapter 4 Analysis

The sentence "nothing bad can happen to a rich, energetic, handsome young man like Amedee" becomes ironic. It is not realistic that people can continue to have everything, including love and happiness and wealth. Some critics have wondered why Amedee and Angelique are even in the novel at all; is it to show that perfect happiness is not possible or to be a catalyst for Emil's next actions?



Part 4 Chapter 5

Part 4 Chapter 5 Summary

Amedee has a ruptured appendix; everyone is worried about his operation. Marie finds out that Emil was with him and thanks God it was Amedee and not Emil who is sick. She wishes he would have come to tell her himself. Not coming and confiding in her means he is truly gone. She walks alone by the pond where Emil shot the ducks. She considers and abandons the idea of suicide. She wants to live; even her pain is a treasure. That evening Alexandra has to tell Emil that Amedee died.

Part 4 Chapter 5 Analysis

The death of Amedee makes Marie thankful that Emil is still alive, as if there is some hope for their love. Emil reacts similarly in the next chapter.



Part 4 Chapter 6

Part 4 Chapter 6 Summary

Outside the church of Ste. Agnes, an old man is digging Amedee's grave. Mass is at eleven, followed later by a big confirmation service for children. The church is for the living.

Emil takes a seat and notes that Marie is not there. He wonders if she is ill. Conflicting emotions of sorrow and concern overwhelm him. He is taken up by the rapture of the religious music. He decides that people like Frank can never experience such rapture. The confirmation service is full of joy and young people.

At three o'clock, after spending most of the day in church, Emil leaves the sanctuary and rides to the graveyard. He looks at the deep hole that will contain Amedee's body. Then he rides to the Shabata farm. Marie is nowhere to be found. He walks everywhere until he finds her lying on her side under the white mulberry tree.

Part 4 Chapter 6 Analysis

Neither Marie nor Emil is thinking clearly. Both of them are overwhelmed by emotion, not only of love but also death. Emil goes to her farm "like an arrow shot from a bow." When he finds her, she is like a vision, beautiful and asleep and lit by golden light. When she sees him, she says, "I was dreaming this, don't take my dream away." The author masterfully foreshadows the murders with the sadness of a funeral.



Part 4 Chapter 7

Part 4 Chapter 7 Summary

Frank gets home after a day of drinking to find Emil's horse in his stable. He searches his house and then gets his rifle. He walks to the orchard and then the wheat field, with no real grievance or plan. Then he sees two people under the mulberry tree. At first he thinks it may be the Bergson's farm girl. Then he hears what's going on and shoots.

Frank discerns that the woman is still alive. He hears her cries and choking, but he goes back to the stable. He lets loose Emil's horse and saddles up his own.

As he rides to the train station, he has a terrible pang of conscience over the suffering woman he left behind. Then he gets angry at Marie, who probably cheated on him many times before this one. He always wanted her to be as unhappy as he was, but had not succeeded. She had brought this tragedy on herself. As he nears Hanover, he gets physically sick. He longs to be comforted by his wife.

Part 4 Chapter 7 Analysis

The murders were an act of impulse on Frank's part, just as Marie and Emil were not thinking clearly either when they went for their tryst. After Frank killed Emil and Marie, however, he blamed Marie for the tragedy. He does not take responsibility for his cruelty but believes it would have been better if his wife had become like him.



Part 4 Chapter 8

Part 4 Chapter 8 Summary

Crazy Ivar finds Emil's horse in bad shape outside the farm. He hurries across the fields and finds the bodies under the mulberry tree. Emil was shot through the heart; Marie died slowly and crawled her way back to Emil. Her cheek rests on Emil's shoulder; her expression is happy. Two butterflies soar above. When Alexandra wakes up, she finds Ivar completely agitated and yelling, "Sin and death for the young ones!"

Part 4 Chapter 8 Analysis

Ivar has an intuitive sense of what happened before he finds the bodies; the butterflies mean that Emil's and Marie's souls are free to be together. It is interesting that Alexandra does not assume Ivar murdered them.



Part 5 Chapter 1

Part 5 Chapter 1 Summary

Three months have passed since the murders. Ivar, Signa and Nelse are staying with Alexandra. Signa worries that Alexandra's grief is too deep and she is wandering graveyards. Ivar says the dead will comfort her. Ivar takes Emil's horse to the graveyard to find Alexandra. It is raining.

Alexandra says that the rain is her worst time for mourning and that it has helped her to be in the graveyard with Emil in the rain. It brings back the darkness before he was born. Ivar says the dead are in Paradise although secretly he does not think Emil is in Paradise. Back at her home, Alexandra lies alone in the dark. She has her fantasy of being lifted up by a strong man. This time she can see him in her doorway.

The next morning Alexandra wakes up with the idea that she will visit Frank in prison. She feels to blame for the murders because she had been naïve enough to keep Marie and Emil together all the time. In her mind Marie was married, Emil was a good boy who would not run around with married women, so she had no idea what was between them. When she saw their bodies, she felt "in awe" of them. She wrote to Carl Linstrum but he never responded. Her heart hardened against him.

Part 5 Chapter 1 Analysis

Alexandra actually identifies with Frank as an outsider. Even in the courtroom, she had felt sorry for him. She understands why he did what he did because of the kind of man he was. This is an extreme low point for Alexandra. She has lost her brother, the person she devoted much of her life and work to. She has lost Marie, her only friend. Carl seems to have abandoned her. She does not care what happens to her. She identifies with a murderer.



Part 5 Chapter 2

Part 5 Chapter 2 Summary

Alexandra arrives in Lincoln and stays at the Lindell Hotel, where she used to stay when she visited Emil at the university. She strolls around campus and it brings back memories of Emil, especially when she talks to a beautiful farm boy from Cherry County.

The prison is a horrible place. The warden, a cheerful German, brings Frank to Alexandra. Frank has changed much for the worse; he is almost no longer human. He tells Alexandra he did not mean to murder Emil and Marie. Alexandra says they were more to blame than Frank.

Alexandra asks him if he is mad at her. He says that he knew at least three years ago that Marie was no longer in love with him. Now he has grown to hate her because she made him kill a fine young man. Alexandra wonders what there was in Marie's warm-hearted nature that could bring so much sorrow to so many people. Then she promises to help Frank, because she can do no more for Emil.

Alexandra believes "she and Frank had been wrecked by the same storm." Neither of them have much reason to live anymore. When she gets back to her hotel, there is a telegram from Carl.

Part 5 Chapter 2 Analysis

This is a low point for Alexandra, but she will rise again. The telegram at the end of the chapter foreshadows her eventual resurrection from sorrow and despair. Frank, however, is doomed.

It is not in Alexandra's nature to sit by and do nothing. It gives her a feeling of control and mastery to do something, even if it is helping the man who murdered her brother and caused her sorrow. She would rather take the blame for what happened than to believe what happened was beyond her control.



Part 5 Chapter 3

Part 5 Chapter 3 Summary

Carl had come to Hanover on his own when he read about Frank's trial in the newspapers. Alexandra's letter never got to him. Alexandra says that Oscar and Lou are angrier with her now more than ever and blame her for the tragedy. She was the one who sent him to college. She confesses that she feels betrayed by Marie. Carl replies that Marie had tried hard to forget Emil and Emil had left the county to get away from her. Marie was too beautiful and full of life; women like that spread ruin around them. Carl says he had sensed something between them. Alexandra laments at why it couldn't have been someone besides Emil. Carl replies that it was Emil because he was the best and Marie was the best.

They talk about traveling someday, although Carl knows that Alexandra will never leave the Divide because she belongs to the land. Alexandra says it does not matter who owns the land, but rather who loves it. The land belongs only to those who love it. Alexandra says that she has been tired and lonely. She feels safe marrying him because when friends marry, they do not suffer like the young ones in love.

Part 5 Chapter 3 Analysis

Part 5 is entitled "Alexandra," and it traces Alexandra's change from despair to measured happiness. By allowing the two young couples to come to tragic endings, Cather is showing her distrust of romantic love and impulsive living.

Although this is considered one of the early feminist novels, Carl is not as evolved as Alexandra. He has to be in a male role of being needed to ask her to marry him. Alexandra gives up her fantasy of having a strong man to lift her and carry her through life when she marries her friend.



Characters

Alexandra Bergson

Alexandra is the main character in *O Pioneers!* When the novel opens, she is a young girl of twenty, but already overly serious and emotionally strong for her age. She is the eldest of four children; the others are male. Her father wants her to take over the management of the farm when he dies because he realizes she is the most intelligent and capable of his children, even though he would prefer to give the leadership role to one of his sons.

Alexandra is extremely logical and practical in her thought but she can be imaginative and innovative when it comes to business. She succeeds where others fail because she takes chances like putting in a new kind of crop and because she plunges ahead regardless of what people in her community think about her. Yet Alexandra has a mystical relationship with the land. Once she decides to love the land and embrace its natural ways, her struggle ends. She becomes wealthy "by just sitting still" and lets the land make her wealthy.

When it comes to love and personal affairs, however, Alexandra is limited by preconceived notions and a repression of feeling. For example, she cannot imagine that Marie and Emil could be in love because Marie is a married woman. She keeps her personal feelings and needs "underground" so that she can function as a businessperson and mother to Emil. She refuses to confide in her girlfriend about her love for Carl. When he does not show up at her time of need, she decides she can do without him. Her brother Emil cannot imagine Alexandra as being in love or even being a woman.

Alexandra is a person ahead of her time. Her brothers will not acknowledge her ability and want credit for making the farm a success because "women should not meddle in business." Her lover Carl cannot bring himself to marry her until she appears needy to him. By presenting these and other issues, *O Pioneers!* becomes a feminist novel.

Emil Bergson

Emil is only five years old when the novel starts, but he is already dependent upon his sister Alexandra, who will take care of him all his life. He is tenderhearted and romantic, good-looking and intelligent. In many ways he is more qualified for city life and adventure than his brothers and his friends from the Divide. Alexandra works her entire life to get Emil off the farm and in a profession like law. Emil will fulfill the dreams of this immigrant family.

Emil is hard working, but once he attends college in Lincoln, his heart is no longer on the farm, even as Alexandra encourages him to do something else. After college, he "wanders" for a few years in Mexico and elsewhere, partly because he is unsure about



law as a career and mostly to escape his passion for Marie Shabata, his married neighbor.

Emil tends to be self-centered and this leads to impulsiveness. His self-centeredness makes it impossible for him to see his sister as she really is and that she has needs, too. He has the capacity to outgrow this childish orientation, but does not live to do so.

Emil's fatal flaw is his love for Marie, which becomes an obsession. Even in a distant country, he cannot stop thinking about her and trying to impress her. Seeing his friend Amedee happily married only adds to his torture. In the long run, he cannot control his feelings and this costs him his life.

Marie Tovesky Shabata

Marie's first appearance in the book is as a delightful nurtured child who is the center of men's attention in a Hanover store. She is beautiful and charming. She betrays her loving family by marrying Frank Shabata, despite their heroic efforts to prevent this by sending her to convent school.

Once married, she regrets the decision. But Marie is one of those warm-hearted, impulsive individuals who can find happiness despite a bad situation. She enjoys nature and the beauty of the countryside; she is so loving that she makes sure her houseplants are kept warm at night. She is open about her marital problems with Alexandra, to the point that Alexandra becomes uncomfortable hearing about it. She understands what she has done to mess up her life, but she is willing to pay the price for her mistake.

Marie is Catholic and devoted to prayer. She will not leave her bad marriage although it is obvious that she could be happy with Emil. She continues to flirt with Emil even when it is a torment to him. When she finally realizes she is in love with him, she asks him to leave so as to preserve her marriage. The author seems to blame Marie for being too beautiful, too full of life and too happy; women like Marie cause sorrow and destruction for everyone around them.

Carl Linstrum

Carl is only fifteen years old when the novel begins. He is a sensitive and serious young man with the soul of an artist. His family gives up when times get hard, so he is away from the Divide through most of the novel.

He flits from job to job and place to place and never makes a success of anything. He takes up wood engraving just when the demand for it is fading. He tries to make his mark in the goldfields of Alaska. The conventional people of the Divide like Alexandra's brothers are disdainful of Carl and consider him of "no account."

Alexandra considers Carl her only friend outside of Marie and Emil. She mourns his departure almost as much as she mourns her father's death. They understand each



other and are very straightforward and honest when they converse. He is five years younger than Alexandra.

Carl comes in and out of Alexandra's life. He is too intimidated by her strength and success to marry her. Yet Alexandra is jealous of Carl's adventures and freedom to come and go from the Divide. Alexandra is well over forty when Carl finally marries her. He can only propose when he realizes that she needs him.

Crazy Ivar

Ivar is a hermit who lives in a cave near the largest pond in the Divide. He does not cut his hair or wear shoes. Many local people are afraid of him because he has crazy spells and howls in the graveyards at night. Some people, including Lou and Oscar, wish to have him committed to an institution before he harms someone.

Ivar loves animals and nature. He will not allow anyone to have guns on his property. He has magical curative powers when it comes to sick animals. Alexandra finds his approach useful and gives him a home when he loses his own property. She takes care of him and lets him be himself, despite protests from other people. It is Ivar who discovers that Emil and Marie were shot to death and comforts Alexandra in her loss.

Frank Shabata

Frank was a dashing handsome bachelor who became very sour on life. He is constantly angry about something and fighting with others. His wife Marie is constantly smoothing things over for him. He has a terrible temper and he drinks. He knows his wife does not love him and this makes him jealous and suspicious of her. He resents her happy attitude and friendships. His impulsiveness leads him to murder.

Amedee and Angelique Chevalier

Amedee is Emil's best friend from childhood. They attended university together. Amedee is wealthy, handsome and strong. He marries his sweetheart and they are deliriously happy. He encourages Emil to marry and be happy, but this choice is impossible because of Emil's love for Marie. Amedee makes everything look easy and joyful, yet he still meets a tragic end.

Lou and Oscar Bergson

Alexandra's two younger brothers are usually together in the book. They are conventional and worry constantly about what others think. They criticize Alexandra for keeping Ivar, for letting Carl stay in her house, for trying new crops, for sending Emil to college-for anything that is not tried and true. They are hard working and contribute to the farm's success as laborers, but they sabotage Alexandra's visionary approach.

When she wants to marry Carl, they become extremely nasty and care only about their inheritance and nothing about her happiness.



Objects/Places

Magic Lantern

A device used in the late nineteenth century to view pictures.

Ivar's Pond

Crazy Ivar lives alone in a cave near the largest pond on the Divide. He allows birds and animals to roam freely there and keeps hunters away.

Mrs. Bergson's Garden

Alexandra's mother misses the Old Country and spends a lot of time housekeeping and gardening. Many consider her garden a waste of time but she does grow fruits and vegetables.

Hanover, Nebraska

A small town in Nebraska based on Cather's hometown of Red Cloud, Hanover boasts a Main Street and a railroad station that serves the rural community.

Brigham

Brigham is the name of the Bergson's horse that leads their team.

Dragharmonika

This is a musical instrument like a small accordion.

Hastings

Hastings is a town larger and farther away than Hanover. It has a hospital for the mentally ill where Ivar fears he will be sent one day.

The Divide

Willa Cather sets her novels on "the Divide," a huge expanse of prairie land near Red Cloud, Nebraska, where her grandfather homesteaded.



Norway Creek

The Bergson farm is near this creek, a landmark on the Divide.

The White Mulberry Tree

This is a symbol of love and death associated with Marie. In one part of the novel, she is picking cherries and flirting with Emil. She is sleeping under the mulberry tree when Emil comes to her after Amedee's funeral. Emil dies under the tree and she crawls to him, to bleed to death and die next to him.

Frank's cane

A stylish yellow elastic cane is now the symbol of the man Frank was when Marie fell in love with him.

Convent of the Sacred Heart, St. Louis

Marie is sent away to this convent school in the hope that she will give up Frank.

Wild Duck

The image of a wild duck occurs several times in the novel. It is a symbol of perfect freedom, the happiness of the wild animal. Emil and Alexandra have their perfect day when they celebrate the sight of a wild duck. Marie begs Emil not to shoot any ducks. Ivar's duck pond is protected from hunters because Ivar does not believe in guns.

Penitentiary in Lincoln, Nebraska

Frank is sentenced to serve ten years there after the murders. Alexandra visits him.

Lincoln, Nebraska

A large city home to the University of Nebraska, which Emil attends.

Lindell Hotel

Alexandra stays in this Lincoln hotel when she visits Emil at the university and when she visits Frank in prison.



Sainte Agnes

Sainte Agnes is a French community where Angelique and Amedee live. The center of it is St. Agnes Church, where the festival takes place, as does Amedee's funeral.

Turquoise Stud

Emil gives one of his studs to auction off at the Ste. Agnes church festival. Marie wants it, but Frank will not bid on it. Later and in private, Emil gives Marie a handful of them.



Social Concerns And Themes

Set in Nebraska during the last decades of the nineteenth century, *O Pioneers!* portrays the growth of a new country and people, showing how during the course of sixteen years a harsh "iron" landscape became a vibrant and beautiful country. The action of the various immigrant groups who helped settle the plains of the Midwest — the Swedes, Norwegians, Bohemians, and French who came to Nebraska in the 1870s and the 1880s lured by the promise of cheap land and fertile soil — is placed in the larger context of the human desire to create civilization in a new landscape. Interwoven into the novel's celebration of the pioneer spirit is another story of very different tenor and tone about the tragic passion of star-crossed young lovers whose desire cannot be controlled by social convention. Although these two main plots were derived from "Alexandra" and "The White Mulberry Tree," stories written at different times, the novel is coherently structured in five parts, with the first three developing the major themes of the land and passion while the fourth deals with death and the fifth with the theme of cyclic rebirth.

"The Wild Land," the first book of the novel, begins at a time when the untamed prairie still overwhelms the beginnings of society — a few impermanent-looking dwellings, some feeble attempts at farming, and a tiny town that seems in danger of perishing. The pioneers are grappling with the land, the weather, and a burden of debt. In spite of the hardships and disillusionments of those early years, Alexandra Bergson, daughter of an immigrant Swedish farmer, faces the land with courage and seems willing to carry on the task of turning it into a place where life can flourish. In "Neighboring Fields," the second book, the story leaps ahead sixteen years to a time when the prairie has become a vast checkerboard of wheat and corn where roads run at right angles, telephone wires hum above the fences, and windmills harness the energy of nature.

Alexandra's struggle, carried out against the poorer judgement and weaker wills of her brothers, has been successful. Her holdings have increased by many acres, her land yields the best crops, and she owns the biggest house. More important, her foresight and imagination, coupled with hard work and faith in the soil, have resulted in her spiritual unification with the prairie, over which she presides aglow with health and prosperity.

Alive to nature but somewhat insensitive to human emotions, Alexandra fails to see that her youngest brother, Emil, and a young Bohemian neighbor, Marie Shabata, are becoming dangerously attracted to each other.

"Winter Memories," set between the fulfillment of harvest and the passion of spring, contrasts Marie and Alexandra as they ponder the directions their lives have taken. Marie, a sensual woman attempting to suppress her feelings for Emil and to resign herself to a loveless future with Frank, responds to the frozen winter landscape with a deadened spirit. Alexandra instead becomes even more intensely attached to nature and, when excited or exhausted by her daily routines, dreams of a "green-world lover" who smells of ripe cornfields and carries her across the landscape as if she were a



sheaf of wheat. In "The White Mulberry Tree," Alexandra's story recedes into the background as the narrative focuses on Emil and Marie, whose drama of secret desire is played out against the vibrant community life of their friends in the French Catholic district of Sainte Agnes. Emil and Marie's reenactment of the classical legend of Pyramus and Thisbe as recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* — the story of young illicit lovers who die under a white mulberry tree, their blood turning the berries to red — dramatizes the relationship between love and death, glorifying the unthinking desires of youth while warning about the consequences of impulsive passion.

The brief final book, named for Alexandra, performs the dual function of humanizing her, through her grief over Emil's death, and elevating her relationship to the land to mythic status.

As an ordinary woman, she needs to be cared for by Signa and Ivar, to reach out to Frank Shabata, and to confess her need for Carl. As a mythic figure, she awakens from her sorrow and projects her thoughts toward the land.

Like Whitman's persona, who at the end of "Song of Myself" bequeaths himself to the soil "to grow from the grass I love," Alexandra knows that when she dies her green-world lover will receive her to his bosom and she will be reborn as crops, flowers, and the spirit of youth.



Techniques

Cather's most important critical statement, useful as a guide to her fictional techniques, was the essay "The Novel Demeuble" (1922), where she asserted her admiration for the "unfurnished" novel by which she meant a work in which the author has eliminated everything that is not strictly necessary and has left the narrative as bare as the stage of a Greek theater.

Specifically, she criticized fiction which exhaustively describes physical and social realities or provides extensive details about the individual psychology of the characters. To a significant degree, *O Pioneers!* is a novel demeuble for it is made up of carefully selected incidents and details, is written in a clear yet allusive style, and centers on archetypal characters and story lines.

In this novel, she also expertly constructs a series of scenes of varying tone which seem to unfold almost casually when, in fact, they are carefully balanced in terms of theme and imagery. Particularly impressive are her images of the land which is compared to the ocean in its vastness and is seen as dichotomous: wild and tender, resistant and yielding, desolate and hospitable. Likewise enriching her seemingly simple style is her subtle and effective use of myth and literary allusion. This is exemplified by her characterization of Alexandra who, with her gold and white coloring, her association with crops and harvest, and her dream of union with a nature god, resembles Demeter, the Goddess of Corn and a central figure in an important vegetation myth about death and renewal as linked to the seasonal cycle.



Themes

The Sacredness of the Land

The main theme of *O Pioneers!* is man's relationship to the land, in particular, a land that is unforgiving. Some of the characters such as Lou and Oscar Bergson and their father set themselves up in an adversary relationship with the land. They don't love the land; they only own it. Everything about farming becomes a major struggle against nature. They may die young or eventually have to give up farming because the struggle becomes too difficult.

On the other hand, the characters that learn to love nature and live in harmony with the land are those who triumph in the story. Alexandra learns to let the land make her rich by not struggling against it. The climax of her story as a farmer comes the moment she realizes that she belongs to the land and not vice versa. She later says that there is no such thing as property; in the long view of history, people do not have possession of land. Likewise, Ivar lives in harmony with the land and animals as well. He has magical curative powers because he does not try to dominate and kill wildlife but rather to love and understand it.

Right Love, Wrong Love

O Pioneers! has three complete love stories. Through these stories Cather gives her point of view that romantic love is more likely to end badly than the love between two equal friends. It is a feminist point of view.

The love story of Carl and Alexandra begins in their childhood. They are two people who are very open with each other. After an absence of sixteen years, they can pick up where they left off, at a very deep level of understanding. Alexandra is free to ask Carl about his failures; Carl asks about her loneliness. Nothing is too embarrassing to talk about. When they marry, things are likely to last and only deepen between them because of their deep friendship.

Marie involves herself in two bad relationships by being impulsive and romantic. She goes against the advice of family and friends who know and love her to marry someone they don't like. The marriage turns out badly because of her husband's sour personality. She allows herself to fall in love while she is married. Emil is a romantic who becomes obsessed with Marie. There can never be any other woman for him no matter what. This kind of romantic impulsive thinking leads to their tragic ends.

Likewise, Cather implies that the perfect love and marriage of Amedee and Angelique was too good to be true from the onset. In the harsh environment of the prairie, no one can have it good forever. There has to be an element of reality in marriage and love relationships.



Pioneers Need to be Visionaries

The families in the book who are able to make a success of farming on the prairie are those who follow their own paths in life, who don't care so much what others think of them and who are willing to use their imaginations and risk new ways of doing things. Pioneers have to have imagination and vision, like Alexandra. She risks taking out big mortgages, building the first silo, planting the first crops of alfalfa and wheat. Her brothers are small-minded men who repeatedly close off their lives so that others will approve of them.

The Linstrum farm fails because the family gave up too soon, but also because of a lack of imagination. Carl Linstrum laments to Alexandra that she could see what could be done when people like his father could not.

Style

Points of View

One of the most compelling things about *O Pioneers!* is the way Cather can write from different characters' points of view. Although much of the novel is about Alexandra, the reader also comes to understand the others in the book just as well. Even Frank Shabata, the murderer, gets a chance to express his thinking and motivations. Cather delves so deeply into the thoughts of a dying farmer, a lovesick young man, a frustrated married woman, an insane hermit and others that all their points of view are recorded. The reader understands why the farmer trusts his daughter more than his sons with his property, why the young man risks everything for an impossible love, why a woman hates her own marriage and why a hermit won't wear shoes. If the author had not recorded the thoughts of her characters so deeply, their actions would not have been understandable at all.

Setting

The setting of the novel, the Nebraska prairie in the early 1900s, is the most important aspect of the book. If Cather believes that there are only two or three human stories, then *where* those stories take place is what makes them unique. Cather is writing about birth and death, love and hate, the very basic human stories, as they unfold on the Nebraska prairie. It is a harsh environment of bitter winters and hot summers. The people in the book are ill adapted to handle it. They have come from different sections of Europe with trades that have nothing to do with farming. They eke out a living from houses made of dirt. The harshness of the land and soil, the way the wind blows over the prairie in winter and the hot drought of summer all impact their lives because these things often mean the difference between survival or despair.

Because the people in the book live in such a harsh environment, relationships become very important. There are very few people to know in Hanover, Nebraska so when someone you like leaves, it is very traumatic. Everything that happens in *O Pioneers!* reflects this rural setting.

Language and Meaning

Willa Cather is known for her poetic passages about the beauty of Nebraska prairie. *O Pioneers!* is full of poetic pages about storms, crops, trees, the beauty of the sky, landscapes and other images of nature.

The characters tend to speak in flat country language except when they are speaking about nature. Marie can wax poetic when she talks about how her ancestors worshipped trees and why she finds comfort in them. Practical, businesslike Alexandra can speak in metaphor and images when she talks about her relationship with the land



and how it opened itself to her. Ivar can speak very flatly when he worries about being sent to an asylum, yet when he talks about his ducks and pond, his language can be ornate. Emil's transcendental experience in St. Agnes Church is written beautifully. If anything, many of her characters speak "out of character" and in Cather's voice when they talk about nature. The people Cather does not like, such as Lou and Oscar and Annie Lee, have no appreciation of the natural world.

Structure

O Pioneers! is divided into four parts. Three distinct love stories and Alexandra's personal story are intertwined with some parts emphasizing one story over another. The sections about death and decay are set in the winter; the sections in which a character finds renewal are set in the spring or summer.

Part 1 or "The Wild Land" is the story of how Alexandra's father puts her in charge of the farm after his death. After the farm almost fails, instead of giving up, Alexandra decides to buy even more land and risk a big mortgage.

Part 2 or "Neighboring Fields" begins sixteen years later. Alexandra is now a success, but she loses Carl a second time when he decides she is too strong and rich for him. This is the longest part of the novel.

Part 3 or "Winter Memories" is very short, only eleven pages and takes up Emil and Marie's love story. Part 4 or the "White Mulberry Tree" is about forty pages and covers Frank's murders and ends with Ivar finding the bodies. Part 5 or "Alexandra" is about how she puts her life back together and rediscovers Carl.



Quotes

But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its somber wastes. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness. Part 1 Chapter 1, pg 10

In eleven long years John Bergson had made but little impression on the wild land he had come to tame. It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods ... Mischance hung over it. Its Genius was unfriendly to man. Part 1 Chapter 2, pg 14

"You will be guided by your sister, boys and be good brothers to her and good sons to your mother." Part 1 Chapter 2, pg 18

Like most of their neighbors, Lou and Oscar were meant to follow in paths already marked out for them, not to break trails in a new country. ... It was no fault of theirs that they had been dragged into the wilderness ... A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves. Part 1 Chapter 4, pg 33

"It isn't as if we could really be of any help to you, Alexandra. We are only one more drag, one more thing for you to look out for and feel responsible for ... (Carl Linstrum speaking) Part 1 Chapter 4, pg 34

For the first time ... a human face was set toward this land with love and yearning. ... The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or woman. Part 1 Chapter 5, pg 44

Alexandra had never known before how much the country meant to her. ... Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring. Part 1 Chapter 5, pg 47

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. Part 2 Chapter 1, pg 57

I am despised because I do not wear shoes, because I do not cut my hair and because I have visions. In the old country there were many like me who had been touched by God, or who had seen things in the graveyard at night and were different afterward. We thought nothing of it and let them alone. (Ivar speaking) Part 2 Chapter 2, pg. 63

The land pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right: then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself; and it was so big, so rich that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still. Part 2 Chapter 4, pg 79



Isn't it queer that 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. (Carl speaking) Part 2 Chapter 4, pg 80

I like trees because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do. I feel as if this tree knows everything I ever think of when I sit here. When I come back, I never have to remind it of anything; I begin where I left off. (Marie speaking) Part 2 Chapter 8, pg 104

The property of a family belongs to the men of the family, because they are held responsible and because they do the work. (Oscar speaking) Part 2 Chapter 9, pg 113

The ground is frozen so hard that it bruises the foot to walk in the roads or in the ploughed fields. It is like an iron country and the spirit is oppressed by rigor and melancholy. One could easily believe that in that dead landscape the germs of life and fruitfulness were extinct forever. Part 3 Chapter 1, pg 125

Emil was the one who trembled, through all his frame. After he left Marie at her gate, he wandered about the fields all night till morning put out the fireflies and the stars. Part 4 Chapter 2, pg 155

It never occurred to Emil that his sister was a handsome woman ... Indeed, he never thought of her as being a woman at all, only a sister. Part 4 Chapter 3, pg 157

Only good things could happen to a rich, energetic, handsome young man like Amedee, with a new baby in the cradle and a new header in the field. Part 4 Chapter 4, pg 162

Marie must have dragged herself to Emil's body. Once there, she seemed not to have struggled any more. She had lifted her head to her lover's breast, taken his hand in both her own and bled quietly to death. Part 4 Chapter 8, pg.182

Alexandra's heart grew hard against Carl. She began to wonder whether she would not do better to finish her life alone. What was left of life seemed unimportant. Part 5 Chapter 1, pg 194

Alexandra blamed Marie. Why, with her happy affectionate nature, should Marie have brought destruction and sorrow to all who had loved her ... Was there something wrong in being warm-hearted and impulsive like that? Part 5 Chapter 2, pg 201

The moment I knew you were in trouble, the moment I thought you might need me, it all looked different. (Carl speaking) Part 5 Chapter 3, pg 205

There are women who spread ruin around them just by being too beautiful, too full of life and love. Part 5 Chapter 3, pg 207

We come and go but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it for a little while. (Alexandra speaking) Part 5
Chapter 3, pg 209



Topics for Discussion

Discuss Ivar's philosophy of life and how a human being should live. What does he mean about avoiding temptation by not having neighbors?

Alexandria is a very capable person who turns a failing farm into a success. Yet her brothers and many others in the book have a view of her based only on her gender. Discuss how she is not a stereotypical female of her times and yet she is still perceived as one.

What qualities must a person have to survive as a farmer in Nebraska in the 1870s? What qualities would hinder such survival in Cather's point of view?

Do you believe that Marie, by her beauty and vitality, caused her own tragedy? Do such women cause problems? If so, how?

Discuss Cather's view that romantic love can lead to tragedy and that it is better if friends marry one another. How does she illustrate this view with Marie and Emil, as well as Carl and Alexandra?

Do you think that the story of Amedee and Angelique was important to the book? Explain your point of view.

Why did Cather's view that you need to respect the land as something sacred come into style in the 1970s? What do you think of that view?

What passages of the book do you consider the most poetic? What do you think of Cather's writing style?

Literary Precedents

The title of Cather's novel quotes Walt Whitman's poem "O Pioneers!"

which speaks with confidence and praise of the conquerors of the American wilderness and all those who have led the human race in its evolutionary journey. In associating herself with Whitman, Cather declares that her book is not an isolated text but part of a shared endeavor by American writers to understand American history and culture. She also draws attention to more specific affinities between her book and Whitman's poetry. For example, on a thematic level, both suggest the oneness of all nature, where man, woman, and earth share the same spirit and a constant cycle of birth, death, and renewal. In terms of form, both are loosely structured and use a cyclic pattern.

O Pioneers! is dedicated to a female forerunner, Sarah Orne Jewett, who encouraged Cather to come to terms with her Nebraska material and to invent a mode of writing that would tell the story of the prairie with truth and artfulness. Jewett's masterpiece of American regionalism, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), also offered the example of a successful experiment with a narrative form suitable for writing about rural and small-town life and discovering universal significance in local experience.



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