Willa Cather's Love Stories and the Land: The Interconnection of Human Emotion and Environmental Consciousness in O Pioneers!, the Song of the Lark, and My Ántonia

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A Thesis in the Field of English Literature

For the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

March 2018

Abstract

Willa Cather is well known as a writer whose early novels' narrative subtexts are environmentally focused. However, these interpretations of Cather's Prairie Trilogy (*O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918)) don't fully explore her use of love stories as a conscious narrative device that not only connects individual characters with each other but also with the land itself. This thesis will explore how Cather's Prairie Trilogy interweaves love stories among people and with the land to create commonly identifiable access for readers to begin developing a deeper understanding and relationship with nature. By doing so, Cather takes the love stories far past their basic capacity to trigger readers' emotion or depict a metaphorical representation of the American landscape's intense alteration during the 1910s. Rather, her use of love stories as narrative device actually assists the reader in identifying with environmental changes as an interpersonal experience and at a human level. Furthermore—and more importantly, I'll argue—this potential to encourage the reader to increase her or his own environmental awareness and, quite possibly, change future behavior, may be potentially transferable, and highly effective, as a literary approach in contemporary discourse on environmental issues. Not only creating bridges between people of multiple backgrounds, but also between nature as "other" and nature as related to oneself, I argue that these bridges are built on one of the most basic tenets of the human psyche: the common experience of love and the common experience of loss, and that this operates in Cather's Prairie Trilogy to cross the divide to a true identification with, respect for, and sustainably improved relationship between humans and the land.

Dedications

For my mother, Elizabeth, who gives me my love for literature.

For my pop, Mark, who gives me my love for humor.

For my son, Samuel, who shows me what boundless joy looks like.

For my great-great-grandmother and namesake, Missouri,

who set off by covered wagon to the American West.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

What does it mean for something to be a love story? Basic human emotions of love and loss, whether romantic, platonic, familial, companionate, or spiritual, unify people. Even when love and loss end up being culturally, socially, or personally divisive, they still unify. By their very nature, they are unavoidable in life—every single human being has experienced or will experience both.

Yet, what do love stories have to do with the natural environment; with the land?

In this thesis I will argue that Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918) use love stories as a narrative device not only to create bridges among people of multiple backgrounds, but also to transform our sense of nature as an "other." Building on one of the most basic tenets of the human psyche: the common experience of love and the common experience of loss, Cather's novels can help us to cross the divide to an internal identification with, respect for, and sustainably improved relationship with the natural world.

Focusing on *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*, I will explore how Cather employs overlapping and interweaving love stories of characters with each other and with the earth. I will argue that for readers of these three novels, Cather's narrative strategy of linking human love stories and attachment to the natural environment creates commonly identifiable access across time and place to an understanding of, and eventually enhancement of, one's own relationship with nature. With this premise, I will suggest that Cather's nuanced and multi-

dimensional use of love stories in these three novels can be highly effective as a literary approach in contemporary discourse on environmental issues.

Certainly, inferring the psychological impact of any literature on readers is inherently problematic as the effect of a text on its audience cannot be reasonably tested or proved. Instead, the application of a critical reading to these particular novels will serve to contrast previous interpretations, which do not explore the love story as its own narrative device, with an interpretation that *does* explore the love story as a narrative device. Such an interpretation allows readers to access, identify with, and appreciate the interdependent relationship we all have with the natural world. Furthermore, this argument takes into consideration some of the psychological processes involved in feelings of love and loss, and how those feelings can affect attitudes and actions in relation with the natural world.

Criticism focused on love stories and criticism focused on the natural environment in *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia* are well established. In an early review of *O Pioneers!*, Frederick Cooper laments that the novel disappoints because the narrative about the main character, Alexandra Bergson, is not a love story. Another more recent reviewer, John Murphy, takes the approach that the novel's love stories range from romantic to platonic, but Alexandra must repress her lust in order to focus her energy on achieving material success, which is why she has visions of the "Golden Man" who lifts, soothes, excites, and protects her. Murphy says: "This channeling of passion through the extension of self to land defines the Alexandra [that] Carl [Linstrum] meets when he returns" (Murphy 121-22). Overall, Murphy reads love stories in *O Pioneers!* in two distinct manners: as both "the quiet companionship shared by Alexandra and Carl," and a love which "blazes like the flaming wild roses among the

bunchgrass" between young lovers Marie Shabata and Emil Bergson (122). Murphy sees passionate relationships such as Marie and Emil's and their peers Angélique and Amédéé Chevalier's as, respectively, fraught with "hazards" and "perhaps too perfect to survive in this world" (123). Similarly, modern scholar Mark Noe, in his article "Cather's *O Pioneers!"* reads the passionate love of Marie for Emil as "essentially [a condemnation] . . . destined to bring others down with her, if not to death (Emil), then to heartache at least (Frank and Alexandra)" (Noe 151). In addition to discussing love stories between human beings, critics do sometimes consider love that is familial, love of people for the land, and love of people for animals. V. Shoba and P. Nagaraj, for instance, observe that land-respecting "Crazy" Ivar "communing with the animals . . . has a close relationship with animals and heals them," even to the extent that "one could find Ivar sensing the pains of the animals as if he has the pain himself" (Shoba 641).

Love stories in *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia* attract less attention in Cather criticism but nevertheless are remarked upon. In a discussion of *The Song of the Lark*, Sharon O'Brien maintains that *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* "contain the most passionate male-female relationships in her fiction" (O'Brien 414). In one of the best known essays about *My Ántonia*, Blanche Gelfant argues that it is about unrealized love, specifically repressed sexual desire. She maintains that the novel is primarily about Jim Burden, the narrator, and that it shows his tragic fear of adult sexual passion. Providing a perspective that finds the novel much more positive and uplifting, Randolph Bourne in a review of *My Ántonia* upon its release in 1918 stated: "*My Ántonia* has the indestructible fragrance of youth. . . the rich flowered prairie, with its drowsy heats and stinging colds. . . . But this story lives with the hopefulness of the West. It is poignant and beautiful, but it is not sad" (Bourne 146). While Bourne is not talking about literal love

stories here, he does speak to the centrality and importance of emotion and human relationships.

Just as there is critical analysis of the love stories in all three novels, so too there are critical readings of environmental issues in each. Critics discussing *O Pioneers!* often focus on how the once wild prairie is eventually conquered and tamed. John Murphy, for example, says: "Alexandra Bergson . . . is the creative force bringing wild land to productive order" (Murphy 127). Similarly, in his 1913 review of the novel, Frederick Cooper asserts: "It is a study of the struggles and privations of the foreign emigrant in the herculean task of subduing the untamed prairie land of the Far West and making it yield something more than a starvation income" (Cooper 112). Offering an explicitly feminist analysis, Beth Rundstrom joins this discussion but emphasizes imagination rather that might. "Cather rejected gender-related stereotypes in fiction," and "[a]lthough she was not the first or only writer to do so, Cather portrayed women as active shapers of the environment. The women in Cather's writings have an inner strength and are connected with the land. . . . Physical strength did not ensure success on her plains; characteristics such as imagination and understanding did. . . . There is no defeat for Alexandra, because there never was competition" (Rundstorm 1-2).

Like *O Pioneers!,* environmental topics in *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia* have also attracted critical attention. Writing about Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark*, Richard Giannone states: "From people she learns a great deal, but it is small in comparison with the tidings in the naked vigor of the earth" (Giannone 132); and Janis P. Stout notes that Thea, to restore herself, returns to the Southwest, which is "always, for Cather, a site of invigoration" (Stout 111). Sharon O'Brien likewise emphasizes the healing powers of the land in *The Song of*

the Lark, noting that Thea "is concealed and enclosed in her cave/room [in Panther Cañon] yet simultaneously open to the sun, just as the cañon is open to the sky" (O'Brien 409). Shoba and Nagaraj, comparing *Á*ntonia to Cather's earlier protagonist Alexandra, say: "The same gentle approach towards nature is also found in the protagonist, *Á*ntonia. . . . She loves the landscape with undaunted cheerfulness, and resiliency" (Shoba 640). James Cody, grouping *My Ántonia* with other first-person narratives by Cather, says there ". . . is an urgent call to maintain a symbiotic relationship with the natural world in order to preserve what it means to be human" (Cody iv). And Guy Reynolds points out that "Cather, for a writer of westward settlement, had a remarkably non-anthropocentric model of the interconnections between the human and the natural. . . " (Reynolds 180).

As this overview illustrates, some of the love stories in *O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark,* and *My Ántonia* are discussed by reviewers and scholars, along with environmental topics in the three novels having received attention. However, in addition to not taking into consideration the diverse types of love stories in the novels, plus the intensity in each of these love stories, critics do not examine the novels' use of a deep and inseparable interconnection between love stories and environmental issues. This interconnection is important, my thesis will argue, because it has the potential to affect the reader in ways that encourage a greater respect for and relationship with the land.

Even Cather critics who *do* tease apart and bring to light her rhetorical strategies as a writer of environmental literature tend to overlook the importance of her central use of certain characters to actually embody the land on which they live and derive their sustenance. Likewise, these critics do not fully explore the psychological power this may potentially elicit by

encouraging a fundamental identification with environmental issues on the part of her readers. Writing decades later, but setting her three novels in the late Nineteenth Century, Cather depicts and develops her characters to embody and critique the American tendency to romanticize the Western states as limitless in their bounty of natural resources, and the belief that the land exists only for human use and development. Because Cather's love stories are not necessarily one-on-one but often include multiple players across generations and time and are interdependent on narratives which create, uphold, or alter each of the novels' overall stories, they mirror the processes seen in nature. Her love stories serve to represent fundamental values and perspectives on environmental issues, such as the importance of interacting with the earth as a living being. The reader is encouraged to understand that even if we act disrespectfully toward the land we are doing so with the mental, emotional, and spiritual understanding that the interaction is affecting a living being. And though subtle, this may be the first step toward finding basic common ground on which increased respect and positively altered behavior can be built. Cather's characters, and especially their varied love stories, allow for our identification with the earth.

When we *do* bring together Cather's use of love stories with her writing about humans' relationship with the land, we can see that it is these love stories which may actually create one of the strongest platforms upon which we rightly regard Cather as a writer of environmental literature, and perhaps even a radical one for her time. Her love stories—sometimes harmonious and gentle, sometimes blustery and deadly—serve to affect the reader on the level of love and loss, a level that all people are naturally programmed to feel. By doing so, Cather takes the love story as narrative device far past its basic capacity to incite an emotional response to the

landscape's alteration during a time of irreversible change. I will argue that this technique assists the reader in identifying with environmental changes at a human level, potentially encouraging the reader to increase her or his own environmental awareness and, quite possibly, change future human behavior.

Chapter one, which focuses on *O Pioneers!*, examines the companionate love relationship between Alexandra Bergson and Carl Linstrum, the passionate love affair between Marie Shabata and Emil Bergson, and the deep love that "Crazy" Ivar has for animals. I argue that these three relationships illustrate the breadth of Cather's definition of love stories. Alexandra and Carl's relationship shows the personal peace available in companionate love, and Marie and Emil's affair demonstrates Cather's belief that passionate love relationships can consume, and even end, lives. Perhaps most importantly, it is the love relationship of "Crazy" Ivar for the land which Cather shows is not "crazy" at all. Ivar's symbiotic relationship with the land reveals the possibility of the human spirit's advancement when truly connecting with nature, and how that specific type of love translates into the potential for greater compassion for other living creatures.

In Chapter two I discuss Cather's second novel in her Prairie Trilogy, *The Song of the Lark*, and investigate the unrequited love of Ray Kennedy for Thea Kronborg along with Thea's deep connection with and transformative experience during her time in Panther Cañon. Because *The Song of the Lark* represents a departure from Cather's concentration on the prairie as setting, I look at it primarily as a transitional work between *O Pioneers!* and her last novel in her Prairie Trilogy, *My Ántonia*. I show that, although the intersection between love stories and the land in this novel are not as pronounced as in either *O Pioneers!* or *My Ántonia*, the book does use

Thea's summer in Panther Cañon to reveal the permanent alteration that the land can have on a human spirit and life.

My final chapter concentrates on *My Ántonia* and returns to a strong emphasis on the connection between love stories and the natural world. I argue that it is primarily the love relationships that Ántonia creates—companionate with Jim, familial with both the community of her childhood and her own large family, and inseparable with the land—that carry the novel's message that it is the land which offers Ántonia the opportunity to form other love relationships of enduring depth and hardiness. In the relationship between Ántonia and Jim, Cather demonstrates what it means to see the indelible beauty in a woman even as she loses her youth. In the love relationship between Ántonia and both her childhood and adult-created families, we see what it means to possess a genuine internal drive to maintain and fully devote oneself to community. And in the foundational love story between Ántonia and the land, we are shown the source of all Cather's love stories—true inspiration, commitment, and care for other beings.

As each of these novels shows, Cather serves as a foremost environmental writer long before the issue of irreversible environmental shifts at the hands of humans appeared center stage in American culture. By using love stories to personalize and personify natural limitations that were distinctly emerging in the 1910s (a time in history when the American West's landscape was rapidly changing), these three novels' characters' interdependent relationships exemplify the unprecedented environmental changes at the turn of the Twentieth Century.

Certainly, Cather's Prairie Trilogy has captured the imagination of readers for over a century because of their artistry, her skill for story-telling, and her creation of characters who are unique yet sympathetic and familiar-feeling to the reader. Beyond that, however, I posit that Cather's

three Prairie Trilogy novels—*O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark,* and *My Ántonia*—have captured the human imagination for two relatively unexplored and specifically important reasons. First, they reside in a natural environment greater than most people's day-to-day reality and this literary connection to the earth subconsciously grounds the reader in nature, and therefore connects us with our own fundamental psychological and spiritual needs. Second, from an environmental literature perspective, Cather's characters' love stories capture the reader on an intimate level of emotion, that of love and loss. Recognizable to all humans across all of life's divides, it is the inescapable experience of love and loss that life insists upon which makes us feel a sense of identification, unity, and potentially increased responsibility which may extend beyond ourselves and our human relations to the land itself.

Chapter II.

O Pioneers!

"A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves." – Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (28)

Love is an approach to ourselves and the world around us. It is a disposition, an act of faith. It is a relationship with the whole of our experience—a relationship we hold with not only another individual, but also with our environments at large. In his extensive discussion on the subject of love, the psychologist Erich Fromm defines one such manifestation of the experience: "Love is not primarily a relationship to a specific person; it is an *attitude*, an *orientation* of *character* which determines the relatedness of the person to the world as a whole, not toward one 'object' of love" (Fromm 43). And more than twenty years before Fromm defined love as such, it was something that Willa Cather intimately understood. As Cather critic Guy Reynolds notes, "Cather's fiction is often concerned with the representation of the psychological processes of the self as it connects with and interacts with environment. . ." (Reynolds 174). In *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather explores this very definition of love in her character creation—these "psychological processes of the self" in relation "to the world as a whole" (Fromm 43).

Whether romantic, companionate, familial, spiritual, or passionate, Cather's use of love stories to connect her characters with each other is overt. However, her use of love stories to connect her entire body of characters with the land is revolutionary. It is revolutionary because

she exceeds the socially accepted bounds of love's definition to include its greater meaning: that of creating unification. Her incorporation of love stories is also revolutionary because she uses her characters' symbiosis with the land to cause her readers, through identification with her characters, to experience the natural environment as something inseparable from human bonds. These concepts, Cather suggests, were born from her own experience of writing *O Pioneers!* As Mildred Bennett notes, "When Miss Cather sent a gift copy of *O Pioneers!* to [her friend] Carrie Miner, she wrote on the fly-leaf: 'This was the first time I walked off on my own feet—everything before was half real and half an imitation of writers whom I admired. In this one I hit the home pasture'" (Bennett 200-201). And that, Cather certainly did.

In each of *O Pioneers!*'s indelibly strong-minded characters, there exists a heart seeking wholeness. Although *O Pioneers!* has many love stories, I will speak about three of the most diverse and significant ones: the companionate love story between Alexandra Bergson and Carl Linstrum, the passionate love story between Marie Shabata and Emil Bergson, and the radical love story between "Crazy" Ivar and the natural world. Finally, I will seek to show that criticism, such as Mark Noe's, which stresses that "Cather's novel tells the story. . . of the hardship involved in breaking the prairie and carving a life out of harsh environmental extremes. . ." (Noe 33), presents only a partial picture. Cather's true goal—and radical feat—is better expressed in the latter half of Noe's description: his statement that Cather "places the land at the center, [as] a full-fledged character in its own right" (Noe 33). Far more central than being a mere backdrop for her narrative, the land is actually an active player. Cather's definition of the land as a character affecting other characters is a conscious narrative choice in which, as Shoba states, "Cather's intention is to point out that love and ethical responsibility towards the land are the

prerequisites for a reciprocal and sustainable relationship" (Shoba 640). For Cather, the land contains a narrative message which she makes accessible through the device of her love stories.

At the outset of *O Pioneers!* we are introduced to Alexandra Bergson and Carl Linstrum. Young at that time, they have both been uprooted from their homes of origin and carried to the vast and foreign prairie of Nebraska. We are made quite aware that they are just children; that they are vulnerable, that they are disassociated from the lives they've known, and that they are afraid. Yet they must begin to find this wide and alienating open space to be their new homes. And so, they quickly befriend each other. From this initial circumstance, then, their love is a companionate one. Even, as John Murphy points out "when Alexandra contemplates marrying Carl [many years later] her love for him is still essentially Platonic" (Murphy 122). Companionate and interdependent, their eventual marriage is one of mutuality and care, not of passion.

As a grown woman, Alexandra says to her brother, "'I've had a pretty lonely life, Emil'" (Cather, *Pioneers!* 103). Leaving Alexandra on the Divide by her own choice, Carl goes away to prove himself in the world. When he returns, Alexandra confides in him: "'I don't need money. But I have needed you for a great many years. I wonder why I have been permitted to prosper, if it is only to take my friends away from me. . . . People have to snatch at happiness when they can, in this world. It is always easier to lose than to find'" (105-106). Though heartfelt and intimate, Alexandra's love for her childhood friend, Carl, is not one of sexual intensity. It is, instead, a deep companionate relationship.

This need over desire defines Alexandra and Carl's love. Even as her brothers, Lou and Oscar, condemn Alexandra for her relationship with Carl—due to their fears of society's perception of them—and even as Oscar caustically states to her that "'everybody's laughing to see you get

took in. . .'" (100), Alexandra stops both Oscar and Lou short, responding clearly that "'All that doesn't concern anybody but Carl and me'" (100).

Of utmost importance, Cather's story informs us that this is all occurring even as Alexandra knows that her true love is the man of her imagination, the "Golden Man." She knows that all she will ever have with Carl is a deep, abiding, yet only companionate love. The Golden Man, whom she has envisioned as her true love since she was a young girl, is the "man" who truly speaks to her soul, and binds her to the land. Returning to her Nebraska house, where she warms up from a grueling, yet common, day of farming, Alexandra again envisions the Golden Man: "As she lay with her eyes closed, she had again, more vividly than for many years, the old illusion of her girlhood, of being lifted and carried lightly by some one very strong. . . . And, for the first time in her life, she saw him, saw him clearly, though the room was dark. . . . His shoulders seemed as strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm, bared from the elbow, was dark and gleaming, like bronze, and she knew at once that it was the arm of the mightiest of all lovers" (165-167). As critic John Murphy correctly says, using Cather's own words: ". . . this male figure is 'yellow like the sunlight, and [has] the smell of ripe cornfields about him'. . . . During her happiest days she feels 'close to the flat, fallow world about her, and [feels], as it were, in her own body the joyous germination in the soil'" ([Cather, *Pioneers!* 204] Murphy 121-122). Though Carl will ultimately be her human companion, her passionate love resides in the Golden Man who is, for her, a visceral and physical manifestation of the land.

Yet, in line with Fromm's definition of love, Alexandra can still feel tenderness and genuine companionate love for Carl. Upon Carl's return, Alexandra warmly notices that he ". . . had not become a trim, self-satisfied city man. There was still something homely and wayward and

definitely personal about him. . . . He seemed to shrink into himself as he used to do; to hold himself away from things, as if he were afraid of being hurt. . . . His face was intelligent, sensitive, unhappy" (Cather, *Pioneers!* 68). For Alexandra, Carl serves as a stabilizing and permanent force. The Golden Man, according to Sharon O'Brien, stands in distinct contrast: ". . . constructed by Alexandra, [the Golden Man] is a character whose manifestation and meaning depend on her psychological and emotional state. . ." (O'Brien 438). "Yet," continues O'Brien, "Alexandra does not yield in the final version of her fantasy; when Carl Linstrum returns she begins to express her suppressed needs for support, companionship, and tenderness with him. . . . A childhood friend rather than an imaginary love, Carl will live on Alexandra's land instead of carrying her away from it . . . . Alexandra finds in Carl a human version of her mythic bond with the Divide" (438). Not flesh and blood, the Golden Man is a conduit for the natural world—which Alexandra requires for spiritual sustenance, but which cannot entirely fill her human needs for companionship. Says Murphy, "This channeling of passion through the extension of self to land defines the Alexandra Carl meets when he returns" (Murphy 121-122). Though defined by nature, as envisioned through the Golden Man, Alexandra is of flesh and blood and so needs the connection of flesh and blood in order to be whole. She finds this connection in Carl.

Carl, too, feels tenderness and a genuine companionate love for Alexandra. Even after two-decades, Carl sees that Alexandra has kept her vigor and beauty—is still an image of wild nature—and that her aging actually seems to have been enhanced by time: "Alexandra herself has changed very little. Her figure is fuller, and she has more color. She seems sunnier and more vigorous than she did as a young girl. But she still has the same calmness and deliberation of manner, the same clear eyes. . ." (Cather, *Pioneers!* 52-53). This reunion brings Carl to a place of

remembering the past, a past which informs and will become his future with Alexandra. Back at Alexandra's farm, which is by now fully established, Carl watches the prairie sunrise and has vivid recollections of his youth with Alexandra. This memory, the basis of their companionate love, elicits in Carl another fond memory and a quiet yearning for the moment in time before the prairie changed to become the farmlands he now sees. For Carl, that lost prairie land remains intact in Alexandra as its conduit: "Carl got up before it was light. . . and hurried up the draw. . . . The dawn in the east looked like the light from some great fire that was burning under the edge of the world. . . . It was just there that he and Alexandra used to do their milking together. . . . He could remember exactly how she looked. . . . Even as a boy he used to feel, when he saw her coming with her free step, her upright head and calm shoulders, that she looked as if she had walked straight out of the morning itself" (74-75). For Carl, Alexandra and the land as he experiences them are inseparable: his experience with one depends on the other.

Carl extends this remembering even farther back in time to what he and Alexandra shared as children of being suddenly thrust onto the prairie. He remembers the wagon ride through the dark landscape to their yet unknown new homes. He recalls their "two sad young faces" as "the stern frozen country received them into its bosom. . ." (9), and remembers that "the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes. . . the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness" (9). As Carl first arrives at his new home and steps off of the wagon and Alexandra rides on to hers, in which "the rattle of her wagon was lost in the howling of the wind," still, "her lantern. . . made a moving point of light along the highway, going deeper and deeper into the dark country" (11). Although

a physical parting at this moment, Alexandra and Carl, through their mutual struggle to understand and feel safe in what seems to be an alien wilderness, remain unified as underscored by Alexandra's lamp light connecting them through the darkness.

As an adult, Carl acknowledges his wanting that past as a present. His internal drive to have a real home is not merely for a house or a family, but also for a connection to the natural world. He admits to Alexandra that he preferred the land when it was a "wild old beast" (70) and confides in her his feelings about the now changed landscape: "'. . . if you can keep a secret. . .'", he says, "'I even think I liked the old country better. This is all very splendid in its way, but there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years'" (70). The prairie as he knew it is forever changed, but the prairie as he remembers it is realized in Alexandra continuing to embody what it used to be.

Contemplating the repetitive nature of human experience, the philosophical and spiritual impact of his realizations hits Carl as he relays to Alexandra, "Isn't it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years" (70). As Carl continues, he explains his need to stay in the prairie and not return to the city: "Here you are an individual, you have a background of your own, and you would be missed. But off there in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me. . . . When one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him. . . . We have no house, no place, no people of our own.' Alexandra was silent. . . . He knew that she understood what he meant" (71-73). It is Alexandra's understanding of Carl, rooted in the land that comforts him and allows him

to know that he has found the real home he desired, which is the one he always had—even as he left for two decades and thought he had lost it.

Yet it is not just Carl who needs this embrace of nature to define home. Alexandra, too, needs the land not only as a past but, like Carl, as a present—and as a lifelong home. In addition, Alexandra not only needs the embrace of nature to define her sense of home, but she also explicitly requires it to grant her access to genuinely connecting with another human being and to feeling love. Though "Alexandra considers the land a personality arousing in her all the feelings which another human being could arouse. . ." (Shoba 647), and while her connection with the land is so strong that "[i]t fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature [in which]. . . she felt a sense of personal security" (Cather, *Pioneers!* 40), it takes Carl's return to allow her heart to reside in it. It is Carl's return that enables Alexandra to feel the power of the land once again: "She had never known before how much the country meant to her" (41), writes Cather of Alexandra's realization.

So while though the Nebraska prairie is unforgiving, untamable, and unknowable, Carl and Alexandra are at home with the land and with each other. Says Alexandra, "'There is great peace here, Carl, and freedom. . . .' Alexandra took a deep breath and looked off into the red west. 'You belong to the land,' Carl murmured. . . . 'We come and go, but the land is always here.' . . . The level rays of the sinking sun shone in her clear eyes. . . . She took Carl's arm and they walked toward the gate. 'How many times we have walked this path together, Carl. . . . Does it seem to you like coming back to your own place?'. . . . She leaned heavily on his shoulder. 'I am tired,' she murmured. . . . They went into the house together, leaving the Divide behind them, under

the evening star" (177-80). Because of the land they come together in a union which would not exist without it.

Also on the Divide, but in juxtaposition with Alexandra and Carl's companionate love story, Cather presents the passionate love story between Marie Shabata and Emil Bergson. Murphy states, "In sharp contrast to the quiet companionship shared by Alexandra and Carl, Marie and Emil's love blazes like the flaming wild roses among the bunchgrass in the Shabata orchard. . ." (Murphy 122). Yet Marie and Emil attempt to repress their mutual passion: "For months, Emil and Marie have done their best to deny, even to themselves, their deep attraction to one another, and it smolders beneath the surface of their interactions" (Noe 35). Even though the companionate love between Alexandra and Carl and the passionate love between Marie and Emil create entirely different types of love stories, Alexandra and Emil feel them in quite similar ways. Emil's passionate love for Marie is based in his own relationship with the land and his association of Marie with it: "Emil's true love seems to be for the old, wild country—now in the form of Marie. . ." (Cather, *Pioneers!* 47). And, much as Alexandra imagines the Golden Man, so too does Emil's love of Marie include fantastical elements. Alone at night and on the Divide, Emil evokes images of Marie similar to the ones that Alexandra conjures of the Golden Man: "In the darkness and silence. . . [e]very image slipped away but one. . . . In that dream he could lie for hours, as if in a trance. His spirit went out of his body and crossed the fields to Marie Shabata" (104). Though a different type of love—one experience being companionate and the other being passionate—both of these love stories are rooted in and sustained by their natural environment they share in common.

Marie's love for Emil is similarly based in the natural world. Marie, so deeply unhappy when living without Emil, reembraces life as she identifies herself with the land. Writes Cather, "The years seemed to stretch before her like the land; spring, summer, autumn, winter, spring; always the same patient fields, the patient little trees, the patient lives; always the same yearning, the same pulling at the chain. . . . How terrible it was to love people when you could not really share their lives! . . . She left the path and went across the pasture. . . . She had scarcely thought about where she was going when the pond glittered before her. . . . She stopped and looked at it. . . . She felt as the pond must feel when it held the moon like that; when it encircled and swelled with that image of gold" (144-145). Visceral and passionate, Marie's love for Emil is also presented as being a love of nature—a nature which brings her understanding, even as she experiences feelings of unbearable grief in not being able to be with her lover.

In her relationship with trees, Marie finds a special solace for her own unrequited love of Emil. Connecting her homeland's Bohemian tree worshipers with the importance of the very few trees on the prairie, she converts the meaning and sorrow of not being able to spend her life with Emil into a sense of being embraced and understood. "'The Bohemians, you know, were tree worshippers. . .'", she tells Emil. "'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 to it, I never have to remind it of anything; I begin just where I left off'" (89-90). For Marie, love, grief, identification, and therefore a type of peace, live in the land.

Similarly, Emil feels the land in which he lives—the land he so closely associates with Marie—to be a metaphor for both love and grief. As he considers the meaning of the death of his young friend, Amédéé, and how that transforms his own deep-seated desires in life, Emil cannot help

but relate nature with the two extremes of love and loss: “It seemed strange [to Emil] . . . that the feeling [of love] which gave [Amédéé] such happiness should bring [Emil] such despair. . . . [F]rom two ears of corn that had grown side by side, the grains of one shot up joyfully into the light, projecting themselves into the future, and the grains from the other lay still in the earth and rotted. . .” (95). The connection between Marie and Emil is human love rooted in the land.

Yet Cather uproots Marie and Emil’s love when they are found intertwined in the orchard by their murderer, Marie’s husband, Frank Shabata. Of love and the young Cather writes, “. . . very young people. . . cannot feel that the heart lives at all unless it is still at the mercy of storms; unless its strings can scream to the touch of pain” (131). Frank, as a depiction of society, fate, and disconnection with the natural environment, kills Marie and Emil. “When Frank Shabata got home. . .” writes Cather, “[he] went slowly down to the orchard gate. . . . [H]e parted the mulberry leaves softly with his fingers and peered through the hedge at the dark figures [of Marie and Emil] on the grass, in the shadow of the mulberry tree. . . . He began to act, just as a man who falls into the fire begins to act. The gun sprang to his shoulder. . . . He did not see anything while he was firing. He peered again through the hedge, at the two dark figures under the tree. They had fallen a little apart from each other. . . . a man’s hand was plucking spasmodically at the grass. . . . A woman, mutilated and bleeding in his orchard” (151-154). Cather presents us with the notion that, because of its intensity, the essence of passionate love is invariably loss. Ironically, she locates Marie and Emil’s murder in the very place that Marie feels most at home: in her orchard, among the white mulberry trees.

One early critic, Frederick Cooper, felt that “The book does have its one big moment. . .”—Marie and Emil’s love affair, and the final scene in which they are murdered—but that this love

story ". . . lies outside the main story. . . . And for that matter, the whole volume is loosely constructed, a series of separate scenes with so slight cohesion that a rude touch might almost be expected to shatter it" (Cooper 113). However, in opposition to this analysis, it is this exact love story which depicts complete integration between lovers and the land.

Upon their murders, "Crazy" Ivar is the one who finds them dead. Along with shock and sorrow, Ivar sees integration between these lovers and the location of their death: "The story of what had happened was written plainly on the orchard grass, and on the white mulberries that had fallen in the night and were covered with dark stain. . ." yet, "Above Marie and Emil, two white butterflies. . . were fluttering in and out among the interlacing shadows; diving and soaring, now close together, now far apart; and in the long grass by the fence the last wild roses of the year opened their pink hearts to die" (Cather, *Pioneers!* 156-57). Although the land cannot save passionate love from its own intensity, it can create a bond with the passionate love story in a way that actually tells that very love story. While their murderer is taken to prison and held away from the natural world, Marie and Emil's shed blood, their love for each other, is soaked up by the land.

It is significant that it is Ivar who finds the dead lovers, for Ivar's connection with the land is inseparable from himself. The land is Ivar's essence, his identity, his spirit, and his purpose. States O'Brien, "Ivar, the hermit and mystic who views nature as sacred. . . prohibits guns on his land, and unites himself so fully with nature that his home is indistinguishable from the landscape. . . . Dissolving the boundaries between himself and the natural world. . ." (O'Brien 435), Ivar represents complete union with his natural environment.

Indeed, in Ivar's character "Cather celebrates total symbiosis between the human and the natural" (Reynolds 176). He is so deeply rooted in the land, both literally in his home which is built into the sod and figuratively in his philosophy, that his house is described by Cather as part of the land itself: "At one end of the pond was an earthen dam… and above it a door and a single window were set into the hillside. . . . And that was all you saw [of Ivar's house] . . . . But for the piece of rusty stove pipe sticking up through the sod, you could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation" (Cather, *Pioneers!* 22-23). This house is of Ivar's creation, a conscious choice, and represents what he seeks in and what gives him life. Cather explains: "Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done. . . . He disliked the litter of human dwellings. . . . He preferred the cleanness and tidiness of the wild sod. . . . If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land. . . . One understood what Ivar meant" (22-23). Wishing to merge with the land and to be part of it, Ivar does so wholly.

Along with his "total symbiosis between the human and the natural" (Reynolds 176), so too is Ivar's inseparable connection to animals a symbiotic one. Notes Shoba, "Ivar doctors sick animals. . . . He serves as a veterinarian and maintains a wild life refuge on the Divide. When others are busy plowing the land around, he is communing with the animals. . . . [A]nd heals them. One could find Ivar sensing the pains of the animals as if he has the pain himself" (Shoba 641). In a conversation with Emil, Alexandra says: "'[Ivar] understands animals. . . . The moment he got to [a hurt cow] she was quiet and let him [help her]'" (Cather, *Pioneers!* 20-21). Just as

Ivar identifies himself with the land, he similarly sees no boundary between himself and other creatures.

Specifically, Ivar creates his own world based on nature because he wants to preserve its own inherent peace, the sense of peace it brings to him, and to improve the relationship between society and the natural world. On the subject of guns, for example, Ivar shouts to visitors, such as Alexandra and the Bergson family: "'No guns, no guns!' . . . waving his arms distractedly. 'No, Ivar, no guns,' Alexandra called reassuringly. . ." (24-26). Reassured, Ivar relaxes and explains, "'I have many strange birds stop with me here. They come from very far away and are great company. . . . 'Do the birds know you will be kind to them, Ivar? [asks Emil] Is that why so many come?' . . . 'See, little brother, they have come from a long way. . . . They must have water to drink and to bathe in before they can go on with their journey. . . . They look this way and that, and far below them they see something shining. . . . That is my pond. They come to it and are not disturbed. They tell the other birds, and next year more come this way'" (24-26). As Shoba and Nagaraj correctly assert, "Ivar [is] practicing species egalitarianism with the animals" (Shoba 650). He does not believe in a hierarchy of species, but rather in integration among them.

Some, though, such as Alexandra's brothers, Lou and Oscar, see nature only as a realm for humans to control. They disbelieve in Ivar's connection with the land. While Lou and Oscar are proved right regarding Ivar's losing his land due to not developing it into a farm, their definition of how humans should interact with the land and other creatures is sorely limited. Even though Ivar's healing of fellow animals not only serves those animals but also serves to help people—such as Lou and Oscar by maintaining the health of their livestock—Ivar has, nonetheless, gained

the name of "Crazy" Ivar from these very same people. Lou and Oscar, as quintessential disbelievers of Ivar's special connection with the wild, and in the majesty of wild nature itself, ". . . joked about Ivar and his birds. . . . They agreed that he was crazier than ever, and would never be able to prove up on his land because he worked it so little" (Cather, *Pioneers!* 27). But unlike Lou and Oscar, Alexandra and Carl are able to value Ivar, and to know that Ivar is not "crazy" at all.

Alexandra understands that Ivar's reality is a human love story with the land. Promising to protect Ivar from the possibility of being sent to the asylum by those who disbelieve in his ways, Alexandra supports him both emotionally and literally. As Ivar speaks to Alexandra about animals, his interpretation of God, and his mental "episodes," he describes why he feels that asylums exist in American culture: "'You know,'" he says to Alexandra, "'the way [in this society] is for all to do alike. I am despised because I do not wear shoes, because I do not cut my hair, and because I have visions. . . . Here, if a man is different in his feet or in his head, they put him in the asylum. . . . They have built the asylum for people who are different, and they will not even let us live in the holes with the badgers" (55).

With mutual understanding, and therefore empathy, Alexandra adopts Ivar into her home and shows him love, respect, and protection. Cather explains, "When Ivar lost his land through mismanagement a dozen years ago, Alexandra took him in, and he has been a member of her household ever since. . ." (52). Simultaneously, Alexandra does not try to change Ivar. She respects Ivar's need to remain one with the land, and sets him up on her farm accordingly: "He dislikes human habitations, so Alexandra has fitted him up a room in the barn, where he is very comfortable. . ." (52). Cather intentionally creates this relationship between Alexandra and Ivar

as a symbiosis. As Cody recognizes about Cather's view of the relationship between humans and nature, "Our relationship with the natural environment is much more than a physical one in Cather, so the care and respect we give it becomes a crucial linchpin to maintaining the part of us that we call human" (Cody 18-19). In fact, the Ivar-Nature love story is Cather's most radical one in *O Pioneers!* Using the common vehicle of the love story in a socially divergent and radical way, Cather elicits a core identification with environmental issues on the part of the reader by making Ivar a sympathetic and admirable character.

And so it is that "Crazy" Ivar proves not to be at all crazy. Cather, knowing this, challenges our assumptions in considering him so, and succeeds in allowing us to see him otherwise. For Cather, "[o]ur feet touching natural ground really matters to our wellbeing. And [she], who said, 'Let your fiction grow out of the land beneath your feet,' seemed to be aware of not only the physical rewards of the sensation sparked by human contact with nature. She has Ivar in *O Pioneers!* aware of something more than just the physical when our feet are in touch with nature. . . . Ivar maintains a relationship with nature to preserve his humanity" (Cody 21). Conscious of her narrative choices, Cather convinces us of her vantage point in a light-handed way. In Ivar, she covertly undermines common human preconceptions, and replaces them with the conception that humans are truly one with our natural environments and that we can, in turn, only be complete in our humanity by being one with it.

When reading *O Pioneers!* and allowing oneself to understand Cather's use of a variety of love stories deeply connected to the land—such as Alexandra and Carl's companionate one, Marie and Emil's passionate one, and Ivar's symbiotic one with the land—the reader can, ideally, grasp the importance of respecting and loving the natural world. Even in her own experience of

writing the novel, notes Janis Stout, "Cather always spoke of *O Pioneers!* in terms of ease and naturalness. . . . About its being like 'taking a ride through a familiar country on a horse that knew the way'" ([Tennant 92-93] Stout 105). However, the familiarity of feeling and the naturalness of writing that Cather exhibits reflect a conscious narrative choice, an investment in seeking to reach her readers on a very deep level, while in a seemingly simple manner. Continues Stout, "She told an interviewer that she has 'simply' decided to 'give [herself] up to the pleasure of recapturing in memory people and places [she] had believed forgotten'. . . . But the appearance of simplicity in *O Pioneers!* is just that: an appearance" ([Bohlke 21] Stout 105).

Simple only in surface appearance, Cather chooses to create the novel's love stories to ground the reader in the natural world in order to create an intimate connection between the reader and the land. Although *O Pioneers!* is fiction, Cather "[f]rom her own experience. . . was aware of the emotional impact the natural environment's depletion can have on human beings" (Cody 2). Furthermore, continues Cody, "She also ties nature to the lives of people, suggesting the psychological disorientation caused by over-development" (2). Writing *O Pioneers!* in 1913, yet setting it almost twenty years earlier, Cather places the narrative during a time of massive and irreversible changes to the landscape caused by human hands: "The shaggy coat of the prairie. . . has vanished forever. From the Norwegian graveyard one looked 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. . . . The Divide is now thickly populated" (Cather, *Pioneers!* 45-46). Cather does not entirely bemoan this change. In fact, she writes that while the prairie has vanished into fields, the land's fertility and abundant growth allow the soul of the prairie to remain.

But even in her balanced view of environmental changes, Cather still has a strong focus on the psychological effects that those changes have on people. As Cody observes, "If a character has experienced the kind of blending into nature that makes them feel complete, severing or removal of that place, in Cather, results in a broken life" (Cody 22). Given the fact that all of Cather's characters in *O Pioneers!* are "blend[ed] into nature," and it is this which makes people "feel complete," the novel suggests that it is the essence of nature which holds them all. For those characters whose "severing or removal of that place. . . results in a broken life" (22), Cather establishes the land as a living being which can bring peace, a sense of identification, and of purpose. This interdependence between our natural environment and human experience defines *O Pioneers!* And Cather's conscious use of love stories—humans with humans, and humans with the land—offers an imagination-provoking and emotionally identifiable way for readers to connect with, and possibly even change, our relationship with environmental issues.

Chapter III.

The Song of the Lark

"At night, when Thea dreamed about the cañon. . . her conception of it was of yellow rocks baking in sunlight, the swallows, the cedar smell, and that peculiar sadness—a voice out of the past, not very loud, that went on saying a few simple things to the solitude eternally."
– Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (271)

Unlike *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather's second novel in her Prairie Trilogy, *The Song of the Lark*, took a notable departure from the prairie. In *The Song of the Lark*, we don't actually see the prairie at all. Instead, this novel is set in Moonstone, Colorado; Chicago; Panther Cañon, Arizona; and Europe. Cather stepped away from her source of inspiration, her own love story with the prairie, and was to a great degree lost in her writing of *The Song of the Lark*. As Randolph Bourne observes "Her digression into *The Song of the Lark* took her into a field that neither her style nor her enthusiasm really fitted her for" (Bourne 145). And many of Cather's other contemporaries agreed: "Miss Cather's imagination seems acceleratedly to miss fire . . . [as if] the author is really bored with her story" (Anonymous 129). Not only did the novel seem to disappoint readers and critics, but it also disappointed Cather herself. According to Mildred Bennett, ". . . [*The*] *Song of the Lark,* did not completely suit her. She said that she had included too much material—had not stripped it thoroughly . . ." (Bennett 201). Even Cather herself felt she had not accomplished what she had set out to do.

Yet while many criticized the novel, people also saw what Cather was attempting: to find the new American frontier—which she managed to find in the Southwest. Though she did receive some inspiration from this new frontier, it still could not provide her with what the prairie had. It was not her true love. And this is what readers and critics sensed, that Cather was not one with this new environment, and therefore she could not write *The Song of the Lark* with the same authenticity of her previous novel, *O Pioneers!* As one critic of her time notes, "Miss Cather would perhaps be shocked to know how sharp were the contrasts between those parts of her book which are built out of her own experience and those which are imagined. Her defects are almost wholly those of unassimilated experience" (Anonymous 129).

Yet while *The Song of Lark* did not succeed in its entirety, it did succeed in creating some very important love stories that were fully integrated with the land. Of the novel's love stories, I will focus on the two that are the most powerful: Ray Kennedy's unconditional love for Thea Kronborg and Thea's love for the transformative land of the Southwest. But first I will explore Cather's own love for the land of the frontier. I will emphasize that Cather's attempt in *The Song of the Lark* was not unlike her aim in *O Pioneers!*—to intertwine love stories with the land, and thereby carry her readers to a place of deeper assimilation with it.

This idea of assimilation, though not expressed in *The Song of the Lark* through Cather's love for the prairie, did manage to present itself in her overarching spiritual love for the idea of the frontier. This assimilation seemed to grow from what Carl Jung defined as "individuation." For Jung, individuation was defined by the human experiences that tend to come later in life when individuals "find themselves facing an unknown vista or some unforeseen upheaval. Sometimes this turning point takes the form of crisis. . . . Sometimes this experience assumes the form of a

profound self-doubt. . . . Sometimes it presents itself as a deep yearning or a call to change direction" (Min 3). So even while many of *The Song of the Lark*'s "miss fire[s]" were indeed due to Cather basing her novel in "unassimilated experience," they were also due to Cather being in the middle of a personal transformation: a search for the frontier—in both herself and her writing.

Initially this frontier came to Cather in the form of the prairie when her family moved to Nebraska in 1883. But when she returned to the prairie in the 1910s, the face of the country had changed so drastically that the Nebraska plains no longer offered the frontier she had known and loved: "In the spring of 1912," explains *Willa Cather: The Road is All*'s narrator, David Strathairn, "Cather traveled home to Nebraska. . . but the small town of her memories was no longer there. She continued West to Arizona and to New Mexico, looking for the frontier of her imagination" (*Willa Cather* Film). After she experienced firsthand that her love for Nebraska was a love for how it once had been, not what it had become, Cather needed to find a way to cope with this loss.

On this matter, poet Tony Mares says, "I think any writer is trying to work his or her way out of darkness. There is this eternal battle between lightness and darkness, and these two are the continuing forces. And, darkness wins every time: death. But it's overcome, ultimately, by defining light" (*Willa Cather* Film). It was in the Southwest that Cather found her "defining light," at least in part: "The Southwest . . . extended [Cather's] boundaries in time as well as spaces . . . . Communal, ritualistic, mystic, the Southwest Indians' culture seemed a healthy counterpoint to the aggressive individualism, spiritual emptiness, and corrupt materialism of modern American life, where getting and spending were the only sacred enterprises" (O'Brien 414). In writing *The*

Song of the Lark, the Southwest would become Cather's new prairie. For it was in the Southwest that she encountered a land that could still speak to her as the prairie had and that left her ". . . feeling whole and integrated" (418).

Therefore, her triumph in *The Song of the Lark* was less in the novel itself, and more in her own search for the new frontier of her imagination: of America in the 1910s, and of characters who were as well searching for meaning, place, and a sense of home; who were, in essence, searching for love. States Susan Rosowski, "Cather in her writing shows the loneliness of characters who can't find someone to love. . . the terrible, aching loneliness of longing for connection, for relationship, for love. . ." (*Willa Cather* Film). The reason that Cather's love stories of Ray for Thea and Thea for the land are so powerful is because it is in these stories that Cather mirrored her own experience. It is in these stories that Cather expresses the "longing for connection" that Rosowski discusses. And, it is in these stories that Cather truly assimilates her own experiences of love and loss.

Ray Kennedy is a railroad man. Described by Cather, Ray "was an aggressive idealist, a free-thinker, and, like most railroad men, deeply sentimental" (Cather, *Song* 42). These are the same traits that Ray recognizes in Thea, and the same ones that made him love her. As "an aggressive idealist," Ray ". . . always told himself, when he accepted a cigar from a newly married railroad man, that he knew enough not to marry until he had found his ideal, and could keep her like a queen" (48). In Thea he finds this ideal.

Ray's love for Thea is genuine and unconditional. He loves her even though she doesn't love similarly him in return. Cather writes, "Ray Kennedy, on his way from the depot to his boardinghouse, often looked up and saw Thea's light burning when the rest of the house was

dark, and felt cheered as by a friendly greeting" (53). "He was, of course," continues Cather, "living for Thea" (98). And though his livelihood came from the railroad that now crisscrossed and would forever change the natural landscape, the essence of his sentimentality and love grew from the land: "He was a faithful soul, and many disappointments had not changed his nature. He was still, at heart, the same boy who, when he was sixteen, had settled down to freeze with his sheep in a Wyoming blizzard. . ." (53). Though Ray is a strong man, he is not at all hardened of heart.

Just as his willingness to die with his sheep in a blizzard out of loyalty and compassion for the animals in his care, Ray's love for Thea is so devoted, so deep, and so unconditional, that he chooses not to marry unless he can marry her—which he knows in his heart will never happen. So when he is tragically crushed by a train due to the self-involved carelessness of his caboose man, and slowly dies an agonizing death in which his body is entirely broken, he still asks for Thea. Yet instead of requesting that she comfort him, he comforts her. After his death, Thea learns that Ray has left her $500 (a sum of over $11,000 today). He offers it selflessly, his only wish being that she use it to leave Moonstone and go to Chicago to realize her dream of being a singer. He knows that Moonstone cannot provide her with the realization of her dream, and he knows—through his own experience of unrequited love for Thea—the pain of not having one's dreams realized. Ray loves Thea so deeply, and so passionately wants her to fulfill her potential, that he creates for her the opportunity for self-realization—or what Jung termed individuation—not only in affording her the chance to go to Chicago but, even more importantly, in giving her the means to have the profoundly enlightening experience that she has in Panther Cañon. It is his belief in and devotion to Thea, a love that he initially learned from the land and his other

creatures, which allows Thea truly to find herself and to be one with her own essence through her time in Panther Cañon.

Writes Richard Giannone, it is "Ray Kennedy, a railroader romancer, [who] brings the young artist to other beginnings. . ." (Giannone 134). He brings her to new beginnings physically by funding her departure from Moonstone, yet he had actually already planted the seed of the Southwest in Thea many years earlier. In an almost prophetic statement about the Southwest, Ray tells Thea when she is only a young teenager, "'You begin to feel what the human race has been up against from the beginning. There's something mighty elevating about those old habitations'" (Cather, *Song* 149). Writes Giannone, "The meaning of the human story is his gift to Thea" (Giannone 134). More than the money he leaves her, it is the healing attributes that the Southwest will give Thea which are Ray's true gift to her.

And so it is that after a year in Chicago, Thea spends the summer at Panther Cañon in Arizona among the abandoned habitations of the Navajo, "the Ancient People." Here she experiences the feeling of returning to the freedom, awe, and safety of childhood: "The personality of which she was so tired seemed to let go of her. The high, sparkling air drank it up like blotting-paper . . . . She was getting back to the earliest sources of gladness that she could remember . . . . [S]he felt completely released from the enslaving desire to get on in the world. Darkness had once again the sweet wonder that it had in childhood" (Cather, *Song* 266). This gift that Ray gives her lasts far beyond her actual summer in the Cañon. It stays with her for, and changes her, life. More than a decade later when Thea has moved to Europe and realized her professional dreams, she still attributes the realization of her dreams to the transformative power of her time in the Cañon: "'I don't know if I'd ever have got anywhere without Panther Cañon,'" Thea says. "'Do

you know what [the Ancient People] really taught me? . . . . They taught me the inevitable hardness of human life. . . . You have to realize it in your body, somehow; deep. It's an animal sort of feeling'" (397-398). Ray's love for Thea and his gift to her are, in essence, the transformative powers one can find in the natural world.

And so it is that Ray's love for Thea opens the door for Thea's love of nature, a love which she already holds inside herself from her girlhood in Moonstone. The childhood effect of the Moonstone landscape is an external life force activating an internal one: "[Thea] used to drag her mattress beside her low window and lie awake for a long while, vibrating with excitement. . . . Life rushed in upon her through that window—or so it seemed. In reality, of course, life rushes from within, not from without" (127). It is the natural landscape of Moonstone that ". . . tantalize[s] Thea with a message of freedom, courage, and aspiration . . . . From people she learn[ed] a great deal, but it is small in comparison with the tidings of the naked vigor of the earth" (Giannone 132). Significantly, when she leaves Moonstone for Chicago, away from the "vigor of the earth," Thea becomes emotionally and spiritually beaten down to the point where she becomes physically ill.

This idea of physical illness created by psychological despair is not a unique experience, but rather one common to humanity: "Jung's essay, 'The Study in the Process of Individuation,' found that despite the fact that the unconscious really is unconscious, there still appears an intelligence and a purpose in its unsolicited intrusions. . . . Much as our bodies instinctively strive to maintain a certain range of body temperature. . . so do our psyches, again instinctively, attempt to self-regulate and balance our psychological state of being" (Min 7). At a deep, unconscious level Thea knows that she must return to the land.

As a first attempt to return to the natural world, she returns to Moonstone after her year in Chicago: “Thea felt that she was coming back to her own land. . . . This earth seemed to her young and fresh and kindly. . . . [The] absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range . . . . It was over flat lands like this, stretching out to drink the sun, that the larks sang—and one’s heart sang there, too. . . . It was hard to tell about it, for it had nothing to do with words; it was like the light of the desert at noon, or the smell of the sagebrush after rain; intangible but powerful. She had the sense of going back to a friendly soil, whose friendship was somehow going to strengthen her” (Cather, *Song* 199). Yet Thea needs more than Moonstone. She needs a land that is far away from her family and her past. And she needs the communion with nature to be solely between her and the land.

Upon arriving at Panther Cañon, Thea experiences it as a place that offers her a rebirth and nascence of the soul only found in nature: “Here were the sand hills, the grasshoppers and locusts, all the things that wakened and chirped in the early morning; the reaching and reaching of high plains, the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands. . . . [F]irst memories, first mornings long ago; the amazement of a new soul in a new world; a soul new and yet old, that had dreamed something despairing, something glorious, in the dark before it was born . . . (Cather, *Song* 181-183). This feeling directly contrasts with Thea’s experience in Chicago, which debilitates her to the point that it evokes a sense of hell:

> [A] furious gale was beating over the city from Lake Michigan . . . . [T]he congestion of life all about her. . . the brutality and power . . . threatening to drive one under . . . . The cars passed, screaming as they rounded curves, but either they were full to the doors, or were bound for places where she did not want to go . . . . A young man came out of the saloon and stood eyeing her questioningly while he lit a cigarette. ‘Looking for a friend to-night?’ he asked . . . . An old man approached her . . . . He kept thrusting his face up near hers . . . . [Then] he vanished, disappeared like the Devil in a play. . . . A cloud of dust blew in her face

> and blinded her. . . . [T]he world became one's enemy; people, buildings, wagons, cars, rushed at one to crush her under. . . " (181-183).

It is at this moment that Thea realizes she must return to the natural world and that it cannot be to Moonstone.

While the dark, cold, dirty world of Chicago had made her ill, her time in Panther Cañon restores her. In Panther Cañon, Thea lives "fully by the natural pull of things in the Southwest—actually immersed in the life-water of the earth. . . (Giannone 134). This experience, continues Giannone, is in actuality "an enlargement of Ray's idealism" (134). In Panther Cañon, "[t]ransformation is brought about. . . She is able to divine the daily tone of the Cliff-Dwellers' life, and this empathy helps her to shed the Chicago bitterness and to enjoy immersion in 'the earliest sources of gladness'" ([Cather, *Song* 266] 140). After a lifetime of seeking, Thea is finally able to feel alive and present—and it takes the land to show her this.

Thea's stay in Panther Cañon is restorative for her spirit, and she is once again integrated with the natural world and with a people and community, though long gone, the Navajo:

> Panther Cañon was like a thousand others—one of those abrupt fissures with which the earth in the Southwest is riddled. . . . In this hollow (like a great fold in the rock) the Ancient People had built their houses of yellowish stone and mortar . . . . [A]nd [the houses] all smelled of the tough little cedars that twisted themselves into the very doorways. . . . All her life she had been hurrying and sputtering, as if she had been born behind time and had been trying to catch up. Now, she reflected . . . it was as if she were waiting for something to catch up with her. She had got to a place where she was out of the stream of meaningless activity and undirected effort. Here she could lie for half a day undistracted, holding pleasant and incomplete conceptions in her mind—almost in her hands . . . . [H]er power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation. She could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a color, like the bright lizards that darted about on the hot stones outside her door; or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas. . ." (Cather, *Song* 267-270).

After so much fruitless effort to become a singer and to become herself, Thea learns to stop of pushing up against life and, instead, to be in partnership with the land in the form of Panther Cañon.

The Cañon allows Thea to experience what the frontier of the Southwest offered at the time, an environment in which ". . . human beings had marked the land by adapting to its requirements rather than by imposing their wills upon it" (O'Brien 415). Likewise, it was Willa Cather's own time in The Southwest which allowed her to write about it as a truly assimilated experience. As Guy Reynolds states, "The ancient landscapes of the Southwest produce, above all, states of consciousness that balance the drive to master the environment and the desire to drift through the natural world" (Reynolds 186). This new frontier that Cather writes about provides, at least in part, what the prairie once afforded her before all the grass was gone and it was cut across by train tracks, powerlines, and endless farm fields. Similarly, it provides Thea with a bond to the earth, and a deep love relationship that heals and restores her.

Therefore, even as *The Song of the Lark* did not fully succeed as the novel that Willa Cather strove to write, the true power of *The Song of the Lark* lies in Cather's own experience as a person and a writer. It lies in her creation of Ray who shows Thea unconditional love and has a strong connection with the natural world, and in Thea's rediscovered love of nature and for the transformation and sense of wholeness that it brings.

Chapter IV.

My Ántonia

"We were talking about what it is like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate. . . . We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it."
– Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (i)

After *O Pioneers!* (1913), which placed the reader in the Nebraska prairie, and then *The Song of the Lark* (1915), which moved the reader to Cather's new frontier of the Southwest, Willa Cather once again returned to the prairie in *My Ántonia* (1918). This return to the prairie stands as what many critics hail as the strongest in her Prairie Trilogy.

My Ántonia has been praised as the most powerful of the three novels because Cather had finally found her voice and honed her writing to a perfection of sorts. The novel has also been considered the strongest because in it Cather had returned to the truly assimilated world of her roots and fully individuated herself from attempts at recreating efforts of other authors she admired. In addition, the novel has been regarded as her most complex because Cather succeeded in producing a storyline that took on the difficulty of using a male narrator to tell a woman's story. While all of these things are true and, indeed, twenty years after its publication Cather herself announced that "'[t]he best thing I've done is *My Ántonia*'" ([Cather] Bennett 203), in my opinion the success of *My Ántonia* is primarily due to the integration of self-assimilation with her story and her dedication to the abiding love between her characters and

the land. This may be why Cather spoke of *My Ántonia* not only as "the best thing" she had written, but also as the best thing she'd "done" (203).

To a greater extent than *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, *My Ántonia* was "Willa's own, and in many ways is autobiographical" (Bennett 201). Furthermore, much of the novel's capacity to resonate with readers sprang from her ability to tell a story that fully immersed her reader in the power of the land and the deep effect that it can have on people. As Alex Ross notes about Cather, "[t]he Nebraskan was first a Virginian. . ." (Ross 5), but it was her childhood move to the Nebraska prairie that made her the woman and writer that she became. Cather herself stated: "'You can't write imaginary things. To have universal appeal, they must be true!'" ([Cather] Bennett 201). And so it was that in Nebraska, Cather became more of a prairie woman than a Virginian. Therefore, in writing about the prairie, she didn't need to invent or contrive in her storytelling.

Yet the truth that Cather so powerfully offers her reader wasn't, for her, a gently learned one. Writes Ross, "The transfer west came as an enormous shock: Cather felt as if she had been cast out of civilization. . . . Yet [she] soon made peace with this strange new life; erasure permitted self-invention" (Ross 5). In the telling of *My Ántonia*, Cather, through her narrator, Jim Burden, creates a similar experience of "enormous shock" in moving to the prairie. Jim's childhood loss of his parents sets the stage for his journey to the plains: "I was ten years old then;" he narrates, "I had lost both my father and mother within a year, and my Virginia relatives were sending me out to my grandparents, who lived in Nebraska" (Cather, *Ántonia* 5). As William Barilla observes, "Jim's first impression of Nebraska reflects Cather's own early experiences on the prairie. . . . In his train voyage west, Jim experiences the same dislocation Cather felt"

(Barillas 71). Reasonably, Jim, like Cather, is initially terrified after disembarking from what would have been a strange and exhausting train ride from Virginia. In a wagon heading through the dark prairie toward his grandparents, Jim describes his new and completely foreign world:

> There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. . . . I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it. . . . [I] looked up at the sky. . . . [T]his was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it. I did not believe that my dead father and mother were watching me from up there. . . . I had left even their spirits behind me. . . . If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be. (Cather, *Ántonia* 7-8)

Yet, Jim does begin to have positive experiences with this new land as it becomes less unknown and starts to show him its embracing power: the same embracing power that he will come to know in the companionate love between himself and Ántonia Shimerda. Regarding his first full day at the farm he writes, "Everywhere, as far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but rough, shaggy, red grass, most of it as tall as I. . . . As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. . . . And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running. . . . [M]ore than anything else I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping. . ." (12-13). Marking the first time Jim begins to feel bonded to, and at home in, this new land, his first impression of the prairie, where he felt he could fall "over the edge of the world" (14), is not at all a wish for death on his part. The very next day, he goes on to say, "[t]he earth was warm under me, and warm as I crumbled it through my fingers. Queer little red bugs came out and moved in slow squadrons around me. . . . I kept as still as I could. . . . I was something that lay

under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire . . . . At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep" (14). Far from an expression of morbidity, Jim starts to experience a sense of rebirth in the prairie.

This sense of rebirth—both Cather's and Jim's—touches on the previously discussed Jungian concept of individuation. As D. Min explains, it was a woman named Jolande Jacobi, a Jungian, who ". . . talks about individuation as a natural process which is the ordinary course of human life. . ." (Min 4). Min summarizes Jacobi's concept of individuation as being ". . . the result of a gradual development consisting of many little transformations, or a sudden transformation brought about by a shattering or mystical experience. . . . [U]ntil at some point. . . the unconscious reappears. . . as if to reclaim its rightful place within the totality of the human psyche. . ." (6). And this is exactly the experience of Jim, the character Cather loosely models on her own experience—a feeling of rebirth; a need for individuation. According to James Cody, "Jim Burden is a case study of the multiplicity of dimensions brought on by a broken life. The complexity of his yearnings reflects a range of conflict within, so large that it can only be released onto the vastness of open spaces. . ." (Cody 27-28). Jim's childhood losses and gains are so great that his unconscious can only identify with something equally great: the land.

The land for Jim becomes a birthing place and a place of freedom. What the land gives him he will carry with him throughout his life: "The new country lay open before me: there were no fences in those days, and I could choose my own way over the grass uplands, trusting the pony to get me home again. Sometimes I followed the sunflower-bordered roads. . . . And [the]

sunflower-bordered roads always seem to me the roads to freedom" (Cather, *Ántonia* 20-21). Continuing, he says, "I used to love to drift along the pale yellow cornfields. . . . [T]o 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. Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons" (20-21). Jim's connection with the earth, the freedom of feeling it affords him, and the sense of unity between—for example—a tree and a person give him a sense of belonging: a feeling of love, of being held and having something to hold. In human form, this love, sense of safety, and development of wholeness and connection, comes in the form of Ántonia.

Upon his return twenty years after Ántonia and he are grown, Ántonia is no longer the beautiful young girl of her youth, but she still retains her internal beauty, her essence: "Before I could sit down. . ." writes Jim, "the miracle happened. . . . Ántonia came in and stood before me; a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled. It was a shock, of course. It always is, to meet people after long years, especially if they have lived as much and as hard as this woman had. We stood looking at each other. The eyes that peered anxiously at me were—simply Ántonia's eyes. I had seen no others like them since I looked into them last. . . . As I confronted her, the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger" (213-216). Like the land itself, Ántonia remains strong and essentially unchanged. "She was there, in the full vigor of her personality, battered but not diminished, looking at me, speaking to me in the husky, breathy voice I remembered so well. . . . I was thinking, as I watched her, how little it mattered—about her [missing] teeth, for instance. I know so many women who have kept all the things that

she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, Ántonia had not lost the fire of life" (213-216).

The reunion between Ántonia and Jim shows the strong companionate love between the two, held by and offered to them through the land they share in common. During a return to the prairie after a year at university, Jim says "As we walked homeward across the fields, the sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe in the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose in the east, as big as a cartwheel. . . . For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world. In that singular light every little tree and shock of wheat, every sunflower stalk and clump of snow-on-the-mountain, drew itself up high and pointed. . . . I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall" (206-207). Though grown and having taken separate paths, Ántonia and Jim remain like those "two luminaries confront[ing] each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world." Continues Jim,

> I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there. We reached the edge of the field, where our ways parted. I took her hands and held them against my breast, feeling once more how strong and warm and good they were, those brown hands, and remembering how many kind things they had done for me. I held them now a long while, over my heart. About us it was growing darker and darker, and I had to look hard to see her face, which I meant always to carry with me; the closest, realest face, under all the shadows of women's faces, at the very bottom of my memory. . . . As I went back alone over that familiar road, I could almost believe that a boy and girl ran along beside me, as our shadows used to do, laughing and whispering to each other in the grass. (206-207)

Rooted in the land, the bond between the two is vital and undiminished despite the years they have spent apart and the very different lives they have lived.

Even as two decades have passed, Jim has not lost his love for Ántonia. To her older sons he says: "'You see I was very much in love with your mother once, and I know there's nobody like her'" (222). Though more mature due to time, the nature of Jim's love for Ántonia remains the same—eternal. Moreover, what Ántonia means to Jim, both her human meaning and her oneness with the land, makes him grow over his lifetime to love the prairie in its own right. For a place that initially felt so empty to Jim as a child, Ántonia is able to embody and offer one of the greatest gifts a person can find in life: a place that serves as a home for his spirit—even after he has left, and will leave again, to live elsewhere.

Though one critic describes "[t]he central theme of *My Ántonia* [as Jim's] nostalgic (and tragically futile) desire to recapture the innocence of childhood when material and social success has not fulfilled spiritual and emotional needs" (Barillas 70), this analysis seems simplistic. Rather, Cather's central theme demonstrates the opposite of nostalgia and futility: where the "innocence of childhood" doesn't need to be "recaptured" because it remains in us, as it remains in the earth, even when time alters the face of people and of the land.

Ántonia stands as an embodiment of the land—an unromanticized essence of love and beauty, endurance and feeling. Jim remembers their childhood as he beds down in the barn with Ántonia's older children:

> I lay awake for a long while, until the slow-moving moon passed my window on its way up the heavens. I was thinking about Ántonia and her children. . . . That moment, when they all came tumbling out of the cave into the light, was a sight any man might have come far to see. Ántonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time. In my memory there was a succession of such pictures: . . . Ántonia kicking her bare legs against the sides of my pony when we came home in triumph with our snake; Ántonia in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood by her father's grave in the snowstorm; Ántonia coming in with her work-team along the evening sky-line.

> She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. . . . (Cather, *Ántonia* 226-227)

To be sure, Cather does present an offshoot of nostalgia, but instead of being an overindulgent sentimentality, it is an ingrained recollection of transformative moments and memories from the past.

As Jim says of the Ántonia he returns to, "She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. . . . She was a rich mine of life. . ." (226-227). Instead of loss, Ántonia conversely represents vitality. In the end and along the way ". . . Ántonia inspires in Jim an enthusiasm for life and the glory of nature" (Barillas 72). The natural world, embodying the world of spirit, sense of home, and feelings of peace, is for Jim palpable not only in the land itself, but correspondingly in Ántonia: "The 'something complete and great,' that Jim desires to dissolve into, in the context of his memoir of Ántonia, is the natural environment. . . . Jim's authentic self is found in Jim's version of Ántonia's life. . ." ([Cather, *Ántonia* 14] Cody 35).

Therefore the "My" which Cather chooses for Jim to include in his titling of his narrative is not a signal of Jim attempting to own Ántonia. Rather, "My," for Jim, gives him a home not only in the landscape and in his spirit, but as well in the deep comfort and sense of connecting with another human being that love affords. In titling the manuscript, Cather narrates that Jim ". . . went into the next room, sat down at [his] desk and wrote across the face of the portfolio *Ántonia*. He frowned at this moment, then prefixed another word, making it *My Ántonia*. That

seemed to satisfy him" (Cather, *Ántonia* 2). Jim attributing "My" to Ántonia is because of his love for her, and her love for him. It is also an acknowledgement of her love for her community. Simultaneously, she is Jim's, just as she is her own and as well a guide for her larger community.

This theme of Ántonia creating and maintaining family and community runs throughout the entire novel. The book opens with Ántonia's large, closely bonded family, and for Ántonia it is her father, especially, who serves as one of her strongest examples and teachers of love. The love of Mr. Shimerda for his daughter is so great that, even at the expense of assisting him with the overwhelming work of homesteading a farm, he wants her to learn English for her own sake and wellbeing in her new world. Jim recalls: "I heard a mournful voice calling, 'Án-tonia, Án-tonia!' She sprang up like a hare. 'Tatinek, Tatinek!' she shouted, and we ran to meet the old man who was coming toward us. Ántonia reached him first, took his hand and kissed it. When I came up, he touched my shoulder and looked searchingly down into my face for several seconds. . . . [H]e took a book out of his pocket, opened it, and showed me a page with two alphabets, one English and the other Bohemian. He placed this book in my grandmother's hands, looked at her entreatingly, and said with an earnestness which I shall never forget, 'Te-e-ach, te-e-ach my Án-tonia!'" (20). Not only does her father's request that Jim teach English to Ántonia allow her to flourish in her new land, but it is also the impetus for her being able to communicate with and thereby carry her father's sense of acceptance and giving to her larger community.

It is not that Mr. Shimerda wants Ántonia to learn English in order to abandon her heritage, but rather to integrate her heritage with her new world and to carry it forward by creating community out of what could otherwise be for so many on the prairie a life of isolation. Remembering when Mr. Shimerda visits their home for Christmas, Jim says:

> [W]e sat about the stove, enjoying the deepening gray of the winter afternoon and the atmosphere of comfort and security in my grandfather's house. This feeling seemed completely to take possession of Mr. Shimerda. . . . As it grew dark, I asked whether I might light the Christmas tree. . . . When the candle ends sent up their conical yellow flames. . . . Mr. Shimerda rose, crossed himself, and quietly knelt down before the tree, his head sunk forward. . . . There had been nothing strange about the tree before, but now, with some one kneeling before it—images, candles. . . . When he took grandmother's hand, he bent over it as he always did, and said slowly, 'Good wo-man!' He made the sign of the cross over me. . . . As we turned back to the sitting-room, grandfather looked at me searchingly. 'The prayers of all good people are good,' he said quietly. (56-58)

Yet tragically, Ántonia's father's artistic soul and his capacity to love are so great that he can no longer go on living in this world where those qualities can so often be crushed by the difficulty of prairie life. Though having passed to Ántonia the hope he once held, sadly, Mr. Shimerda commits suicide.

Traumatizing for Ántonia and her family, which Jim certainly understands and respects, Mr. Shimerda's suicide is also a release of his spirit: "I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda," writes Jim, "and I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country. . . . Surely, his exhausted spirit, so tired of cold and crowding and the struggle with the ever-falling snow, was resting now in this quiet house. . . . Outside I could hear the wind singing over hundreds of miles of snow. . . . Mr. Shimerda had not been rich and selfish; he had only been so unhappy that he could not live any longer" (66-67). With this death, we are introduced to Ántonia's first major loss of a person she adores, her father. Feeling Ántonia's anguish, Jim states: "It seemed to me that I could feel her heart breaking as she clung to me" (74). Still, she does not become jaded or bitter but instead embraces the world even more closely, creates community, and becomes even more one with the land.

It is not only Ántonia's father who teaches love in his community, even as he himself could not withstand the pain of life. Jim's family, too, serve as models of acceptance and love. Together with Ántonia's, and other families in this vast, isolating and alienating landscape, his grandmother creates a sense of an integrated, indelibly strong, and largely united community. Upon Mr. Shimerda's death, Jim's grandmother's love of innocence and youth serves as a protection for Mrs. Shimerda's youngest child, Yulka, when she is being forced to touch her dead father before his coffin is closed: "Yulka hung back," Jim writes, yet "Her mother pushed her forward, and kept saying something to her over and over. Yulka knelt down, shut her eyes, and put out her hand a little way, but she drew it back and began to cry wildly. . . . [her mother] caught her by the shoulders and pushed her toward the coffin, but [Jim's] grandmother interfered. 'No, Mrs. Shimerda,' she said firmly, 'I won't stand by and see that child frightened into spasms. She is too little to understand what you want of her. Let her alone'" (75). Mrs. Shimerda, though tough on her children and ungrateful toward her helpful neighbors, serves as an unintentional (and certainly unsentimental) model of love for others. That Mrs. Shimerda wants what other people have is actually an expression of desperate love and worry for the suffering of her children and reflects her strong desire to protect them. Jim's grandmother says to Jim, after an especially unpleasant visit from Mrs. Shimerda, "'No, I wouldn't mourn if she never came again. But, you see, a body never knows what traits poverty might bring out in 'em. It makes a woman grasping to see her children want for things'" (60).

This fostering and maintaining of community is also shown in the characters of Otto Fuchs and Jake Marpole: young, itinerant, and weathered farmhands who live with the Burdens and are treated by them as their own children. Considered brothers by Jim, they embody a particular

type of rough-hewn tenderness that presents yet another unsentimental form of love in *My Ántonia*. "I can still see those two men sitting on the bench," recalls Jim, "I can see the sag of their tired shoulders against the whitewashed wall. What good fellows they were, how much they knew, and how many things they had kept faith with!" (44-45). In Cather's refusal to dip into sentimentality, or into the illusion that the world consists of moral or emotional blacks and whites she shows, through Jim, the world as grey—both in her characters and in the overarching theme of what it means to love both other people and the earth itself.

Even when Jake and Otto leave the prairie to continue their wandering lives, they remain part of the community bond in memory. "Jake and Otto served us to the last," writes Jim, "They moved us into town, put down the carpets in our new house, made shelves and cupboards for grandmother's kitchen, and seemed loath to leave us. But at last they went, without warning. Those two fellows had been faithful to us through sun and storm, had given us things that cannot be bought in any market in the world. With me they had been like older brothers; had. . . given me so much good comradeship. Now they got on the west-bound train one morning. . . and I never saw them again" (94). Long after they are gone, Jim continues to remember the two men clearly: "I can see them now, exactly as they looked, working about the table in the lamplight: Jake with his heavy features, so rudely moulded that his face seemed, somehow, unfinished; Otto with his half-ear and the savage scar that made his upper lip curl so ferociously under his twisted mustache" (55). Remembering them almost as embodiments of nature itself, Jims continues, "As I remember them, what unprotected faces they were; their very roughness and violence made them defenceless. These boys had no practiced manner behind which they could retreat and hold people at a distance. They had only their hard fists to batter at the world

with. Otto was already one of those drifting, case-hardened laborers who never marry or have children of their own. Yet he was so fond of children!" (55).

But it is primarily Ántonia who stands as a cornerstone of family and community. Even as others disappear into modern individualism, Ántonia remains strong in her connection to them—exactly like the land, and the values she's learned from it. When she is abandoned by the father of her first child while still pregnant, she refuses to allow society to pity her and raises her daughter with great love, devotion, and pride. After a year or two at university, Jim returns to the prairie and, visiting a photography shop, writes, "I noticed, in a heavy frame. . . . a round-eyed baby in short dresses. The photographer came out and gave a constrained, apologetic laugh. 'That's Tony [Ántonia] Shimerda's baby. . . . She seems proud of the baby, though; wouldn't hear to a cheap frame for the picture. . . . Another girl would have kept her baby out of sight, but Tony, of course, must have its picture on exhibition at the town photographer's, in a great gilt frame" (195). Speaking for herself, Ántonia says to Jim "'I stand here a witness that this baby has come into the world sound and strong, and I intend to keep an eye on what befalls it'" (204). So impressed by her strength in the face of social ridicule, Jim writes, "She loved [her baby] from the first as dearly as if she'd had a ring on her finger, and was never ashamed of it. . . no baby was ever better cared-for" (204).

Ántonia goes on to create a large family of her own and, as a mother of twelve children, the love among them all is obvious. Writes Jim when he visits them later in life, "As Ántonia turned over the pictures [from her past] the young Cuzaks stood behind her chair, looking over her shoulder with interested faces. [They] stood close together, looking. . . . In the group about Ántonia I was conscious of a kind of physical harmony" (224). Feeling completely and

immediately at home with Ántonia's family, Jim finally finds a sense of family he'd lost in his adult life and is afforded the opportunity to feel fatherly love for the many children. Ántonia's creation and fierce upholding of family and community, despite the unfathomable work that involved, are what allow her to give Jim, along with her happy brood of children, Cuzak, and the larger community, a sense of a permanent home—not only literally, but also for their spirits. And among all of Ántonia's human teachers, it is her own symbiotic relationship with the natural world that is her truest teacher.

For Jim, his first introduction to the idea of loving the land comes from his grandmother's appreciation for it and its creatures. On their first day together in her garden, his grandmother speaks to Jim of her unique love for animals: "'In a new country a body feels friendly to the animals. I like to have him [the badger] come out and watch me when I'm at work'" (14). Yet, over time, it is Ántonia's oneness with the land that most affects Jim. Her unity between nature and human emotion is clear. Animals, even the tiniest, a bug, elicit memories and so hold and interpret meaning for her, and therefore for Jim:

> It was a day of amber sunlight, but there was a shiver of coming winter in the air. . . . While we were lying there against the warm bank, a little insect of the palest, frailest green hopped painfully out of the buffalo grass and tried to leap into a bunch of bluestem. He missed it, fell back, and sat with his head sunk between his long legs, his antennae quivering, as if he were waiting for something to come and finish him. Tony [Ántonia] made a warm nest for him in her hands; talked to him gaily and indulgently in Bohemian. Presently he began to sing for us. . . . [A] chill came on quickly when the sun got low. . . . What were we to do with the frail little creature we had lured back to life by false pretenses? I offered my pockets, but Tony shook her head and carefully put the green insect in her hair, tying her big handkerchief down loosely over her curls. (27-28)

For his entire time knowing her, Jim remembers her care for the suffering cricket as one of the ways in which Ántonia was uncannily one with the natural environment. "[Ántonia] loved

children and animals and music, and rough play and digging in the earth. . . . [She] ridiculed conceited people and [was] quick to help unfortunate ones. Deep down in [Ántonia] there was a kind of hearty joviality, a relish of life, not over-delicate, but very invigorating. I never tried to define it, but I was distinctly conscious of it" (116). Not only was Jim conscious of it, he could not help but adopt it, to some degree, like one cannot sit in the heat of the sun without becoming warm oneself, or in the rain without becoming wet.

Strikingly, Ántonia's father's death brings her into even greater communion with the land—not only out of necessity, because she must take on the responsibilities of the family farm in order to survive, but also out of love for the peace and purpose which the land offers her. After her father's death, she becomes more and more like the land. Though many, along with Jim, interpret this as her becoming more masculine than feminine, it actually represents a state of becoming one with the dually-gendered, or perhaps genderless, nature of the land. Just as the land is changing—becoming harder as it is surveyed and segmented—so Ántonia, too, as she works it, becomes stronger, tougher. "'Oh, better I like to work out-of-doors than in a house!' she used to sing joyfully. . . . She would toss her head and ask me to feel the muscles swell in her brown arm. . . . She was so gay and responsive that one did not mind her heavy, running step, or her clattery way with pans" (89). Ántonia's strength grows out of, communes with, and mirrors the land.

When Jim returns after two decades, the Nebraska prairie is virtually unrecognizable. Farmland, roads, and powerlines crisscross and carve the prairie. Jim sees that "[t]he old pasture land was now being broken up into wheatfields and cornfields, the red grass was disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing." Yet, continues Jim, "I found that I remembered

the conformation of the land as one remembers the modeling of human faces" (197). In comparison to his return to the land, Jim feels that his ". . . day in [the town of] Black Hawk was disappointing. Most of my old friends were dead or had moved away. Strange children, who meant nothing to me, were playing in the Harlings' big yard when I passed; the mountain ash had been cut down, and only a sprouting stump was left of the tall Lombardy poplar that used to guard the gate. I hurried on. . . . After that, I scarcely knew how to put in the time until the night express was due" (237-238). Though feeling desolate in returning to his childhood town and experiencing it as a foreign place, Jim then finds Mr. Shimerda's grave which stands alone in the remaining prairie.

Amidst this rapidly changing landscape, Mr. Shimerda's grave remains an almost magically preserved space. As a sort of mystical tribute to the human capacity for love, and as a small but notable preservation of the open landscape which is otherwise gone, the remaining spot of prairie which holds Mr. Shimerda's grave remains, even after years go by and so much of the land has been segmented. Writes Jim:

> Years afterward, when the open-grazing days were over, and the red grass had been ploughed under and under until it had almost disappeared from the prairie; when all the fields were under fence, and the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed the surveyed section-lines, Mr. Shimerda's grave was still there, with a sagging wire fence around it, and an unpainted wooden cross. . . . The road from the north curved a little to the east just there, and the road from the west swung out a little to the south; so that the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island. . . . I never came upon the place without emotion. . . the error from the surveyed lines, the clemency of the soft earth roads along which the home-coming wagons rattled after sunset. Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, I am sure, without wishing well to the sleeper. (77)

The gravesite which retains the original nature of the prairie is what, for Jim, allows him to live up to Ántonia's plea that he never forget her father. It also shows the important effect that

nature has on the human psyche. As Barillas notes, "the converging roads curve slightly in order to avoid Mr. Shimerda's grave. Surrounded by native prairie grass, the grave becomes a sacred place in several senses: religious, psychological, and ecological" (Barillas 74). The entire community recognizes that something eternal abides in the landscape itself.

But it is Ántonia who truly makes the land immortal. As she and Jim walk in the orchard, Jim writes, ". . . Ántonia kept stopping to tell me about one tree and another. 'I love them as if they were people,' she said, rubbing her hand over the bark. . . '[I] used to carry water for them, too—after we'd been working in the fields all day. . . . I couldn't feel so tired that I wouldn't fret about these trees when there was a dry time. They were on my mind like children'. . . . There was the deepest peace in that orchard. . . . The orchard seemed full of sun, like a cup, and we could smell the ripe apples on the trees" (Cather, *Ántonia* 219-220). Even while Jim initially feels that the changes to Black Hawk and the prairie are alienating and strip him of his sense of home, it is Ántonia—remaining a part of him—that enables him to live in the place as it once was. Despite its original face being gone, Jim's description allows us as readers to live in it as well:

> I took a long walk north of the town, out into the pastures where the land was so rough that it had never been ploughed up, and the long red grass of early times still grew shaggy over the draws and hillocks. Out there I felt at home again. . . . I had escaped from the curious depression that hangs over little towns, and my mind was full of pleasant things. . . . As I wandered over those rough pastures, I had the good luck to stumble upon a bit of the first road that went from Black Hawk out to the north country. . . . Everywhere else it had been ploughed under when the highways were surveyed; this half-mile or so within the pasture fence was all that was left of that old road which used to run like a wild thing across the open prairie. . . . This was the road over which Ántonia and I came on that night when we got off the train at Black Hawk and were bedded down in the straw, wondering children, being taken we knew not whither. I had only to close my eyes to hear the rumbling of the wagons in the dark, and to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness. The feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand. I had the sense of coming home to myself. . . . (237-238)

In these moments that Jim spends alone, he is not in actuality alone. Memory, human bonds of love, and the land unite, making him whole.

As Cody writes of *My Ántonia*, "[i]t's really what the whole book becomes—for current times, a defense against the forces that make our world endangered and a resistance to what Cather saw coming in the time she wrote this book. . . . Without the land, Cather via Jim, via Ántonia, seems to be saying, we will deprive ourselves of a past worth reliving to restore our broken lives" (Cody 63-64). Cather's depictions of a harsh yet almost indescribably beautiful and nurturing landscape, and the effect it has on humans who open themselves to it, show us how to live permanently in our awareness of difficulty and beauty, in our sense of loss and love. Writes Randolph Bourne, ". . . this story lives with the hopefulness of the West. It is poignant and beautiful, but it is not sad. . . . In her work the stiff moral molds are fortunately broken, and she writes what we can wholly understand" (Bourne 146). *My Ántonia*, therefore, ends the Prairie Trilogy by returning us to the prairie. Though a very different prairie than the one of Cather's and her characters' childhood, its power to influence the physical, emotional, and spiritual lives of the people who live there remains intact and unchanged. So too for the readers of *My Ántonia*, we are offered this same source of natural power and are able to identify with Cather's message of the interdependence of human love and the land even a century later.

Chapter V.

Conclusion

"You park at the top of a hill and follow a path down to a gulch, where a creek widens into a pond. At the bottom, you no longer see traces of modern civilization. . . . The land here was never plowed, and with careful cultivation it preserves the prairie as Cather roamed it, in the eighteen-eighties—an immemorial zone of grass, trees, birds, water, and wind."
— Alex Ross on the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie in Nebraska, 1

Each novel in Willa Cather's Prairie Trilogy, *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*, contains both stories of love and stories of the land. Given that the human experience of love and of loss is inescapable and universal, Cather's use of romantic, familial, companionate, and spiritual love stories as narrative device to connect readers with the land was, and remains, both easily accessible and radical.

As Richard Giannone states in *Willa Cather: The Road is All*, readers of these novels ". . . enter into that world [of nature]," which Cather so richly imbues with a life of its own, and "the rhythm of her prose becomes the rhythm in which you live for that moment" (*Willa Cather* Film). Continues Guy Reynolds, Cather's "ability to create through light, through texture, through color, through sight—through sound, through smell. . ." (*Willa Cather* Film) was and continues to be remarkable. Not only is it Cather's descriptive and novelistic capacities that make her Prairie Trilogy so powerful, but it is also what Alex Ross describes as where her "true romance lies" (Ross 9) that makes these novels unique. "True romance," for Cather, lies in her "characters' relationships with work, art, nature, and the land" (9). It lies in her assimilation with, and

therefore authentic telling of, what it means for people to live not just on the land but *with* the land.

Even more to the heart of these novels' power, is what James Cody calls "an urgent call to maintain a symbiotic relationship with the natural world in order to preserve what it means to be human" (Cody Abstract). And so it is that in the characters of Cather's prairie novels we are introduced to people who are ". . . equipped with environmental imaginations of their own that help [them] endure and survive when they find their lives broken due to oppression, adverse circumstances, and dehumanizing influences" (Abstract). As well, these novels "provide readers with access to the interior lives [of her characters who are] . . . restored by emotional and psychological journeys to places in their past when they felt complete" (Abstract). It is very few of us in modern society who can genuinely understand what frontier life looked like, what it felt like, and what it required to exist in on a day-to-day basis. Symbiosis with the land was not an option; it was a necessity.

Yet even as the face of the landscape has changed, is the necessity of a symbiotic human relationship with the earth any less physically, emotionally, and spiritually necessary today? With all the luxuries that industrialized society offers in order to ease the strain of our daily lives—many of which certainly do: washers and dryers, refrigerators, flush toilets, and the list goes on—do any of these really ease the strain that we as humans have for a sense of belonging and connection? Do any of these things really ease the strain that people feel in wanting to be complete in spirit?

"[O]ften concerned with the representation of the psychological processes of the self as it connects with and interacts with the environment," writes Reynolds (174), Willa Cather's Prairie

Trilogy may, indeed, have the capacity not only to change readers' conception of relating to the earth, but also to broaden our human understanding of what it means to love in a larger way.

Cather, knowing what it meant truly to need, strive for, and find one's own deep connection with the land—with our human source of life—opens her novel *O Pioneers!* (and therefore sets the stage for her subsequent novels in the trilogy, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*) with her poem "Prairie Song." In part, the poem reads:

> "Evening and the flat land,
> Rich and sombre and always silent. . . .
> full of strength and harshness. . . .
> The long empty roads,
> Sullen fires of sunset, fading,
> The eternal, unresponsive sky.
> Against all this, Youth,
> Flaming like the wild roses. . . .
> Youth with its insupportable sweetness. . . .
> Singing and singing,
> Out of the lips of silence,
> Out of the earthy dusk."

Not only does the poem create the tenor of *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*, but it speaks to what we as humans actually *feel* in relation to love as expressed through the images of land: "youth, flaming like the wild rose," richness, silence, "strength," "harshness," eternity, "unsupportable sweetness," earthiness, and "dusk" are all parts the essence of love, loss—of the human experience—and of the land.

Cather, who created the stories and characters in *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*, was not only given inspiration for her narratives by her own life and experience. She was also expressly inspired by the natural world itself. In her Prairie Trilogy Cather teaches us

through her love stories, which are accessible to all, to be connected with the land and embrace it, and to thereby connect with and embrace our fellow creatures, each other, and ourselves.

And it is this inspiration—from the earth and human beings' relationship with it—which creates her writing: writing that could not have existed without the meaning that the land held in her own life, in her characters' lives, and potentially, and hopefully, in ours. So that, even down to the cricket in his last days in the grass before the cold sets in, we might now in a new way feel compassion and hold an element of the land safe next to our bodies as the land simultaneously holds us. So that, perhaps, we might even broaden our interpretation of what it means to love and what it means to live symbiotically with each other and with the earth.

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