

O Pioneers!
Book Club Discussion Questions



1. Walt Whitman "Pioneers! O Pioneers!"
<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/99>

(excerpt)

See my children, resolute children,
By those swarms upon our rear we must never yield or falter,
Ages back in ghostly millions frowning there behind us urging,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

On and on the compact ranks,
With accessions ever waiting, with the places of the dead quickly fill'd,
Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

O to die advancing on!
Are there some of us to droop and die? has the hour come?
Then upon the march we fittest die, soon and sure the gap is fill'd,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

All the pulses of the world,
Falling in they beat for us, with the Western movement beat,
Holding single or together, steady moving to the front, all for us,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

This passage is reflected in the scene in which Ivar tells Emil about the migration of the ducks: "The point of the wedge gets the worst of it; they cut the wind. They can only stand it there a little while--half an hour, maybe. Then they fall back and the wedge splits a little, while the rear ones come up the middle to the front Never any confusion; just like soldiers who have been drilled."

What do you think attracted Willa Cather to this poem by Walt Whitman? What emotions or thoughts do the titles of the poem and the book evoke?

2.
"Prairie Spring":
Evening and the flat land,
Rich and sombre and always silent;
the miles of fresh-plowed soil,
Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness;

The growing wheat, the growing weeds,
The toiling horses, the tired men;
The long empty roads,
Sullen fires of sunset, fading,
The eternal, unresponsive sky.
Against all this, Youth,
Flaming like the wild roses,
Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
Flashing like a star out of the twilight;
Youth with its insupportable sweetness,
Its fierce necessity,
Its sharp desire,
Singing and singing,
Out of the lips of silence,
Out of the earthy dusk.

“Prairie Spring” was a poem published in Cather’s collection *April Twilights*. Why do you think Cather wanted to use it as an epigraph? Do you see any connections to Walt Whitman’s “Pioneers! O Pioneers!”? How does it connect to *O Pioneers!*?

3. Hanover is a much newer prairie town. Cather uses words like "haphazard," "straying," "straggled," "trampled," "coarse," to describe the area, giving it a feeling of impermanence. Blackhawk, though boring to Jim Burden from *My Ántonia*, and Frankfort, the hometown of Claude Wheeler of *One of Ours*, are reasonably settled and permanent. Why does Cather write about Hanover in such a way as opposed to her later works?
4. What are the different perspectives throughout the book on wild land versus farmland? What perspective does Alexandra have on the land and environment? What about in comparison to her brothers Lou and Oscar?
5. What does the character of Ivar symbolize? How does his relationship with Alexandra change as the novel progresses? How does he view the land?
6. How do the methods and ideas about farming in the book relate to modern farming techniques? Do the characters reflect Cather’s own opinions on farming and nature? If so, what is her message?
7. Women pioneers and their stories were not written about extensively. How does Willa Cather approach gender on the Great Plains in *O Pioneers!*? How would the story be different with a male protagonist? How do the characters challenge or affirm the gendered roles of the time?

8. How are different plants, native or non-native, portrayed throughout the book? How are they important to the characters and their motivations?
9. What is the function of Carl Linstrum's character? Why does Cather choose to have him leave the narrative only to return and eventually end up marrying Alexandra? What does he represent in relation to the land?

10. One of the most famous quotes from *O Pioneers!* is Carl's mention of the lark upon his return to Nebraska:

"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."

How is this quote explained and developed throughout the course of the novel?

11. Cather was a wide and varied reader of her contemporaries' work. A particularly influential mentor of Cather's was Sarah Orne Jewett, a relationship mentioned in the following interview:

"But [*Alexander's Bridge*] did bring her to the attention of a knowing writer, Sarah Orne Jewett, who gave her the following excellent advice:

"Write it as it is, don't try to make it like this or that. You can't do it in anybody's else way—you will have to make it your own. If the way happens to be new, don't let that frighten you. Don't try to write the kind of stories that this or that magazine wants—write the truth and let them take it or leave it." (60)

"*O Pioneers!* was the result of Miss Jewett's urging, and there began the upward career of our foremost American woman novelist." Chicago Daily News, 12 March 1919. (Source: <http://cather.unl.edu/bohlke.i.07.html>)

Did Willa Cather follow Sarah Orne Jewett's advice? Does *O Pioneers!* feel like the "truth"?

12. What is Cather saying when she writes in the death of Emil and Marie? How does the death of this young couple reflect themes of death, love, the passage of time and the interruption of the natural cycle of life in the land?

13. The first section of the novel is entitled "The Wild Land". In it, we see the first instance of Alexandra's connection to the land:

"For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning" (33).

However, despite being a new and growing community of Homesteading allotments, those portions of land were likely taken from the Indigenous Peoples previously living there. Is Cather contributing to the narrative of the land as “wild” and “untouched” and the erasure of Indigenous Peoples through her portrayal of the great plains?

14. Does Cather give an accurate representation of homesteading, farming and life in a developing rural town in *O Pioneers!*?
15. How is the prairie landscape personified in the novel? Which characters view the land as something to be respected and protected and which characters view it as an adversary?