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Book Club Leaders

1. Walt Whitman "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" text:

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/99>

Will Geer ("Grandpa Walton") reading the poem, which was later used in a Levi's commercial:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUPU03998yE>

(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."

Whitman, though he never ventured to homestead himself, was enthusiastic about the prospects for pioneers. Scholar Emory Holloway wrote, "When . . . the 'mania for owning things' (as Whitman called it) lured thousands of adventurous or disgruntled Easterners to take ship or caravan for the California eldorado, he remained untempted, content to enjoy the newest national enterprise in his fancy alone. In the West he pictured the 'average man' in his true glory. 'Radical, true, far-scoped, and thorough-going

Democracy may expect . . . great things from the West!" he announced," in an editorial (10). (Source: Holloway, Emory. *Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative*. New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969.)

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.

Readers might point out the enthusiasm of the pioneer prior to leaving (in Whitman), versus the tired men and tired animals present in Cather's poem. Readers may also recognize the language of the soldier in Whitman's poem, absent in Cather's.

3. Answers will vary, but may include that Hanover is a much newer prairie town. Cather uses words like "haphazard," "straying," "straggled," "trampled," "coarse," and gives a feeling of impermanence. Blackhawk, though boring to Jim Burden, and Frankfort, Claude Wheeler's hometown, are reasonably settled and permanent. Marcus Klein of Barnard College wrote, in an introduction to *My Mortal Enemy*:

"Her companions in the village were the old men and women, anyone whose real life had been elsewhere. Her allegiances were to the Europeans scattered among the populations, whose lives hinted a substantial and ancient and nonproscriptive culture. The village in all her Nebraska novels was to be the source of all corruptions, its dominant Anglo-Saxon inhabitants narrow, ignorant, imposing, convention-ridden . . ."

4. When Alexandra looks at the land with "love and yearning," she displays an affection for the land that is quite a departure from the general population of the novel. Her brothers, Lou and Oscar, focus on the work involved. This may be a fair argument, to suggest that the boys did the bulk of physical labor; however, it reminds us of the phrase "working smarter, not harder." Cather tells us in "The Wild Land" that Oscar "worked like an insect, always doing the same thing over in the same way, regardless of whether it was best or no. He felt that there was a sovereign virtue in mere bodily toil, and he rather liked to do things in the hardest way." Lou, however, "always planned to get through two days' work in

one, and often got only the least important things done." Even Carl, when presented with the fully grown and bountiful orchard, remembers first the buckets of water his father required him to carry. Alexandra recognizes that her brothers and neighbors are skeptical of science and research that brings innovation to the Divide, but she recognizes too that new ideas will allow them to flourish by working with the land, instead of working against it. "We come and go," Alexandra says, "but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it--for a little while."

This sentiment is echoed in a later quote from Aldo Leopold: "Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

Alexandra's land ethic might also be considered a type of Christian environmentalism or stewardship, though she does not explicitly mention God or scripture.

5. Alexandra and her father believe that their family's background better suits them to success on the Divide. It is interesting that Alexandra's grandfather--whom Alexandra is said to take after--was disgraced by a poor marriage, much as Oscar and Lou fear Alexandra will be. One parallel between sailing and homesteading is that both rely on the weather and skillful adaptation to the elements. The sea is uncontrollable, and sailors change course and method to accommodate. Alexandra behaves similarly regarding the prairie, which is often said to resemble "a sea of grass." This approach is in stark contrast to agricultural methods that initially tried to raise incompatible crops on the Plains, and might even be tied to today's modern agriculture that relies so heavily on irrigation, resulting in draw-down of the Ogallala Aquifer.

6. Regarding women homesteaders and farmers, the following links contain interviews, historical information, and a few photographs. The last link is an extended discussion on gender on the Great Plains.

<http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.040>

<http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.041>

<http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.001>

Dr. Reg Dyck, publishing in *Great Plains Quarterly*, writes:

Written at a time of rapid industrialization and urbanization, Cather's first Nebraska novel reflects the uneasiness its readers felt toward changing U.S. culture. Stories of the pioneer past were reassuring to them. However, Cather's pioneer was not typical. Her protagonist is a woman, not a farmwife but a farm manager. Along with her rural attachment to the land, Alexandra shared with her author many qualities of the economically independent, professional New Woman emerging in the urban East. While threatening to her brothers and their wives, Alexandra gains the readers' sympathy. Yet the conflicts between competing definitions of gender roles and Alexandra's relationship to the land are not comfortably reconciled for Cather's reluctant New Woman pioneer, whose farming success is balanced by her personal losses.

The complete article can be read here:

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3415&context=greatplainsquarterly>

7. Some native species mentioned: snow-on-the-mountain, wild larkspur, bunchgrasses, wild roses, plums, ground cherries, buffalo-pea, red mulberry

Some non-native species mentioned: bluegrass, white mulberry, apple, apricot, fuschia, alfalfa, castor bean, wheat, corn

The most obvious answer is that the non-native plants mirror the homesteaders themselves, coming from elsewhere. However, Alexandra highlights that certain non-native plants are more fit for service on the Great Plains than others--alfalfa, for example, has deep roots that "fix" nitrogen, or capture nitrogen in its tissues and form storage nodules on its roots. In other words, this plant actually improves soil quality. Alfalfa is also a long-lived plant, capable of growing 10-20 years. Corn, on the other hand, is considered one of the heaviest nutrient feeders that could be chosen and requires a tremendous amount of water for success, making it a dubious choice for the high tablelands of the prairie. This opens the door for a great deal of conversation regarding Cather's position on the Great Plow-Up and the move toward industrialized agriculture that falls within the same time line of the novel. Ken Burns' recent documentary *The Dust Bowl* gives a great historical accounting of those times and the catastrophic results.

<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/about/episode-guide/>

Like most fruit trees (excepting the native plum), the white mulberry is not native to the Great Plains. It is traditionally an Asian species but was planted elsewhere because of its use as a host for silkworms. It is known for being a fast growing and short-lived species, tying in nicely with the Emil/Marie storyline. Today, it is considered a problem because it hybridizes with the native red mulberry; in some areas it is considered an invasive species. Cather likely would not have known all this, yet it creates an interesting topic when applied to Cather's use of cultural generalizations in the novel, the "American melting pot" mythology, and the xenophobia sometimes said to be characteristic of the Great Plains.

8. See reference to white mulberries above, but aside from the horticultural considerations, the white mulberry is also a nod to Ovid's tale of Pyramus and Thisbe.

http://www.pantheon.org/articles/p/pyramus_and_thisbe.html

The orchard setting is also rather Edenic--the site of picnics, quiet reflection, conversation, pleasant physical exertion--though the white mulberry doesn't correlate directly to the Tree of Knowledge. Emil and Marie's knowledge--knowledge of each other and (finally!) recognition of their feelings for each other--lead directly to their fall.

9. The owl:

<http://www.owlpages.com/articles.php?section=owl+mythology&title=myth+and+culture>

Though the appearance of an owl can mean other things, generally, hearing the hooting of an owl means a death is imminent. Cather uses the hooting owl twice in rapid succession--Marie hears the owl as she wanders in the night before going to the orchard, where she will eventually meet Emil a final time, and Frank hears the hooting of an owl in the distance as he approaches the orchard just before firing the fatal shots.

The ducks:

<http://www.ittybittyurl.com/327w>

The duck plays an important role in *O Pioneers!* In the art world, the duck is considered a liminal figure, signifying a transition or a boundary, because it is equally at home in the water, in the air, and on the land. For these reasons, ducks were used extensively in funerary art. Ducks are also symbolic of migration, of course, and that too makes sense in context of the homesteading era. In *O Pioneers!*, the ducks, especially on the water, seem to be safe. Alexandra and Emil remember them often, with Alexandra noting, "It always seems to me she's there still, just like we saw her." We know, however, that

Emil has hunted and killed when they left the safety of the pond and took to the air. The ducks that flew from Ivar's pond were not killed, but only because Ivar did not allow guns. The ducks might also be considered representative of Emil and Marie and their freedom to love. They might have continued their friendship with the undercurrent of passion (staying safe in the pond), but to openly declare their love caused calamity (taking wing and being killed).

The lark:

<http://www.ittybittyurl.com/3281>

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."

The lark typically represents daybreak, because of the bird's propensity for singing at dawn and dusk. It is also said to signify "youthful enthusiasm . . . and the human desire for happiness." Carl notes that most human stories are repeated, just as the lark repeats its song. Nebraska boasts several larks, two of which are ubiquitous, as well as some migrant species.

http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Western_Meadowlark/id

http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Meadowlark/id

Though the more common of the two in Red Cloud, Nebraska, is the Western Meadowlark, the song of the Eastern Meadowlark perhaps matches Carl's description much better. If this is the case, what is Cather doing with the larks here?

10. Cather was a wide and varied reader of her contemporaries' work. Merrill Skaggs of Drew University compiled a list of authors that Cather was known to have read over the years, and that document can be found here:

<http://www.willacather.org/education/teachers-a-students/140-cather-a-her-contemporaries>

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."

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>)

Further resources:

An extended biography of Cather: <http://www.willacather.org/about-willa-cather/willa-cather>

The University of Nebraska Cather Project: <http://cather.unl.edu/>

Texts available online:

<http://www.willacather.org/about-willa-cather/online-texts>

The Willa Cather Memorial Prairie:

<http://www.willacather.org/cather-prairie/about-the-prairie>

Visit Red Cloud and tour the Cather sites:

<http://www.willacather.org/cather-tours>