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'Lovers of Nature' in Willa Sibert Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* – An Ecocritical Analysis

V. Shoba, M.A., M. Phil., Ph.D. Scholar
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Willa Cather (1873-1947)

Courtesy: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/sites/cather/>

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Abstract

Nature has always been an evergreen source for Willa Sibert Cather, the American Novelist. Being a lover of nature, Cather has presented characters longing to live with nature. In the novels, *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918), we have characters loving the ecosystem and protecting it; we also see characters loving the ecosystem but unable to protect it due to unfortunate reasons.

In *O Pioneers!* (1913), Alexandra loves and yearns for the wild lands. She approaches the land in a gentle manner and in turn the land showers her with wealth. The same gentle approach towards nature is also found in Antonia, in *My Antonia* (1918). Antonia has the pioneer spirit at its best. Being a lover of the landscape, having undaunted cheerfulness and resiliency, Antonia climbs up the ladder of fortune and becomes a successful owner of a larger and fertile farm.

Male characters also equally love nature. Ivar, in *O Pioneers!* (1913), is the only character of Willa Cather practicing species egalitarianism. He relates easily to animals and takes care of them. Jim Burden in *My Antonia* (1918) adores nature and finds himself overjoyed when he is in nature's bosom. In *O Pioneers!* (1913), Alexandra's father, John Bergson, loves the land and faces many trials to withstand the onslaught of ruin, but his perseverance is all in vain.

Key Words: Eco-consciousness, eco-criticism, lover of nature, tamer, natural resource is trustworthy.

Growing Interest in Eco-friendly Life

These days, almost all people have turned their attention towards the planet of life, the earth. The ecosystem which accommodates human beings acts reflexively. A sudden attraction towards the ecosystem came about when scientists found a hole in the ozone layer. Then people

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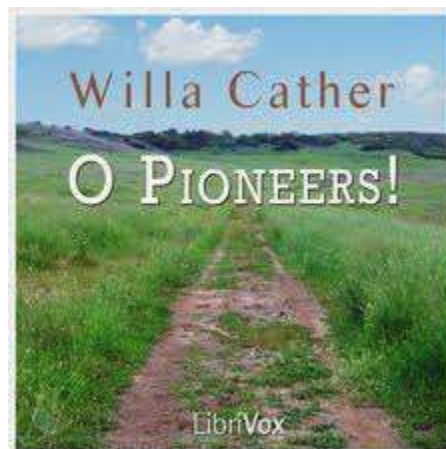
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began probing the planet more and more. They became more conscious of the environment in which they live.

When people began slowly understanding what is happening to the ecosystem within which they live, they started intensive ecological study which focused on the ecological problems like pollution, global warming, etc. Their concern and love for Nature began getting reflected in creative literature and literary criticism. There has emerged a new field of study over the last three decades. The literary people named it “Eco-criticism” or “Environmental Literary Criticism”. This study addresses how humans relate to non-human nature.

Relationship between Man and Nature

The relationship between man and nature is indistinguishable. It is a universally acknowledged fact that man has to depend on nature. Literary eco-scholars started writing about nature and the environment around. Nature is represented in literature as “virgin land, Eden, Arcadia, howling wilderness” (Glotfelty xv). One can understand Willa Sibert Cather as a lover of nature. Willa Cather talks about joy, mirth, defeat, failure and success through her novels. She uses her characters as mouthpiece for expressing her feelings for nature. This is transparent in her novels. Probing through her works, undoubtedly one can put her writings under the literary field of eco-criticism.



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Willa Cather's novels *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918) are being analyzed ecocritically in this article.

Alexandra in *O Pioneers!*

Alexandra, the protagonist in *O Pioneers!*, loves and yearns for the wild land in spite of its adversity. Even though she knows well how fragile the plight of the pioneers was, she respects and adores the land. The Land was “still a wild thing that had its ugly moods, and no one knew when they were likely to come, or why. Its Genius was unfriendly to man.” (20) Unlike her brothers and neighbours, Alexandra believes in the natural world and relishes the enjoyment of the world. It is not a wonder that she “buys up” (59) the lands of her bankrupt neighbours and plows for profit and prosperity. Alexandra approaches the land in a gentle manner and in return the land showers her with wealth.

Faith in the Land

Alexandra believes that having faith in the land will never deprive her in anyway. The land and she are inseparable. She revels in collaborating with the land rather than imposing her will upon it. These features of the story put forth deep ecological thinking. The same gentle approach towards nature is also found in the protagonist, Antonia, in *My Antonia* (1918). Antonia, the main character around whom the story rotates, has the pioneer spirit at its best. She loves the landscape with undaunted cheerfulness, and resiliency. The Shimerdas were the first Bohemian family to immigrate to the Nebraska. They “live on a wild place [Nebraska] where there was no garden or chicken house, and very little broken land” (Cather *My Antonia* 19).

Love and Ethical and Aesthetic Considerations

The land usage cannot be based on economic expediency alone, but must involve ethical and aesthetic considerations. Cather's intention is to point out that love and ethical responsibility towards the land are the prerequisites for a reciprocal and sustainable relationship. Antonia and Alexandra Bergson love the land and have ethical responsibility towards it. This idea of the

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usage of land is later advocated in Aldo Leopold's "The Land Ethic" published posthumously as the last part of *A Sand Country Almanac* (1949).

Willa Cather asserts the importance of conserving natural sites. Her nature-loving characters seem to follow both land ethics and deep ecology. The wild life refuge of Ivar is an eccentric place in *O Pioneers!* (1913). That is the symptomatic representation of modern violent America, considering nature a disposable resource. Both Ivar and Alexandra Bergson stand as sure testimony to different degrees of eco-conscious living in *O Pioneers!* (1913).

Eco-Friendly Ivar, a Dwarflike Man

Ivar is a powerful dwarflike man, saintly simple Old Norwegian and eco-friendly. People named him "Crazy Ivar" which Cather likes to pun on. Ivar doctors sick animals. When he is at home he makes hammocks out of twine and commits chapters of the Bible to memory. Ivar seems to be an eccentric hermit finding contentment in solitude, which he has sought out for himself. 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. Ivar has a close relationship with animals and heals them. One could find Ivar sensing the pains of the animals as if he has the pain himself. Through the words of Alexandra, one finds how Ivar "understands animals" (33) and how the animals cooperate with him in the treatment.

Banning Guns in Gun Culture

Ivar protects life by banning guns and caring for animals. Matthias Schubnell finds Ivar to be one of the central tenets of Deep Ecology in his essay "Willa Cather: An Eco-critical Approach" (2001). Stephan Bodian claims in the essay "Simple in means, Rich in Ends: An Interview with Arne Naess" about Arne Naess' view:

Every life form has in principle a right to live and blossom. As the world is made of course, we have to kill in order to eat, but there is a basic intuition in deep

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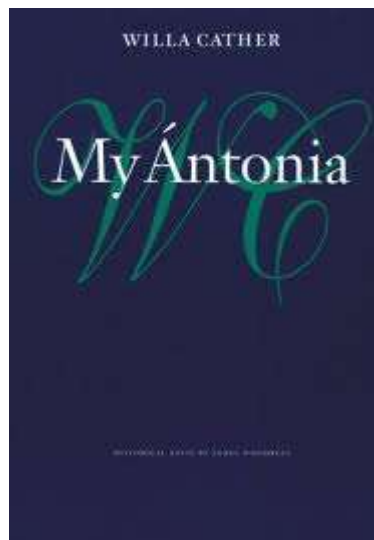
ecology that we have no right to destroy other living beings without sufficient reason. (Bodian 28-29)

This is one of the basic norms of deep ecology. Ivar cries “no guns, no guns!” (*O Pioneers!* 39), which indicates a prophetic plea for non-violence among the human beings and other forms of life.

God Speaks through Nature

The nature loving characters like Ivar and Alexandra in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and Antonia in *My Antonia* (1918), can be brought under the followers of the Natural theology of the Greek. The Natural theory of the Greek advocates that nature is a symbolic system through which God speaks to man. Cather too seems to advocate this theory through her characters.

My Antonia



My Antonia (1918) is often considered to be the best of Cather’s twelve novels. In this novel, Cather has given a transcendent vision of the remote folk of the western farmlands. These farm lands are very real. This is Cather’s most ardently remembered and best loved novel with her outstanding prose style. Cather’s critics have identified *My Antonia* as a classic work of Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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American Literature. *O Pioneers!* (1913), the other novel, is a “two-part Pastoral” developed from two stories with the earlier one titled “Alexandra” and the latter “The White Mulberry Tree”.

The idea of precariousness is found in Carl Linstrum, the neighbour of Alexandra in *O Pioneers!*. Carl’s father too, later, gives up the struggle with the inhospitable environment and returns to his old factory job in St. Louis. John Bergson, Alexandra’s father also is pessimistic about the land. He dies at an early age of forty six before his farm could have any chance in proving it a success. Land and nature had been unfavourable and unfriendly to the Bergsons. The Bergsons are Swedish immigrants in the farm country near Hanover, Nebraska, of the 20th century.

The Shimerdas in *My Antonia* (1918) undergo struggle like the Bergsons. The struggle is too severe for them on the stubborn, hostile and indifferent foreign soil to recreate and assert one’s existence. The Shimerdas had migrated from the East, from Czechoslovakia and their neighbor, Jim Burden, from Virginia. Czechoslovakia and Virginia, both lands are highly cultured. The people from these two countries are comparatively sophisticated, compelled to live under primitive shelters, while battling with the land. Immense strength is being used by the newly arrived pioneers on the prairie’s stubborn soil.

Prairie’s Stubborn Soil

Agriculture is the Number One industry of the state of Nebraska. Nebraska was once a “vast, nearly treeless expanse of grass. ... Nebraska was once known as the Great American Desert”. The first pioneers who traveled west for new land ... came to carve a new way of life, just as their plows carved up the thick sod for their shelter and crops” (http://www.agr.state.ne.us/publications/ne_ag_facts_brochure.pdf)

The Nebraskan soil had caused some pioneers lose their lives, spirit and the memories of the gentle civilization which they brought from the East. Mr. Shimerda, Antonia’s father,

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commits suicide in retrospect and “sad for the old country” (89). The land is undesirable to John Bergson in *O Pioneers!* (1913). John Bergson had toiled on it for eleven long years trying to tame the land, but in vain. He dies in defeat.

Antonia and Alexandra

Antonia and Alexandra, in the novels *My Antonia* (1918) and *O Pioneers!* (1913) are more molded to the Nebraskan soil. Antonia loves “to be like a man.”(*My Antonia* 1918 138) For Alexandra, “the land in itself, is desirable” (Cather *O Pioneers!* 21). A few of the Nebraskan pioneers experienced sensations as Jim Burden experienced in *My Antonia* (1918) “between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out”(*My Antonia* 8).

The characters lose the influences of their softening civilization in their desire to live with and tame the land.

In *My Antonia*, Antonia is an eager and Bohemian girl of fourteen. The narrator of the novel Jim Burden describes Antonia as a girl with eyes “big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood” (23) in her first arrival at Nebraska. “Her skin was brown, too and in her cheeks she had a glow of rich dark colour. Her brown hair was curly and wild-looking”(23). After her father’s death, she is totally changed. She works “like mans now” (123). She loses “all her nice ways and get rough ones” (25) and she becomes coarse and crude like her brother Ambrosch. “Antonia ate so noisily now, like a man, and she yawned often at the table and kept stretching her arms over her head, as if they ached” (125). Jim’s grandmother says “Heavy field work’ll spoil that girl” (125).

Alexandra Bergson is introduced in the first chapter of *O Pioneers!* (1913) as “a tall, strong girl” (6) walking “rapidly and resolutely”, wearing “a man’s long ulster (not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her; carried it like a young soldier)”. She had “a serious thoughtful face” and “clear, deep blue eyes” (6), having “a glance

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of Amazonian fierceness – most unnecessary severity.” (8). She inherits the family farmland when her father dies. When other immigrant families are giving up and leaving the prairie, Alexandra devotes her life to making the farm a viable and prosperous enterprise. Alexandra becomes a strong-willed, “sunnier and more vigorous than she did as a young girl” (87) splendid, intelligent and dauntless Amazon daughter who struggles and dedicates her strength, youth and beauty to hopeless drudgery of carrying the task of her father. She has to take the responsibility of bringing up her stolid, incompetent and unimaginative brothers Oscar and Lou. Her brothers “neither of them had the patience to grow an orchard of their own” (140) and find their farm a place for making their livelihood.

The Land

The land in “*O Pioneers!*” is sometimes “an enigma” (22). Patrick K. Dooley in his critical essay “Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*” states “once the key is found and the puzzle solved, the land submits to the human hand that develops, tames, subdues, orders, masters, controls, and improves (all Cather’s terms) it” (Dooley 71).

Seasons and Climatic Changes - The Shimerdas

Seasons and climatic changes have a great impact on humans. In “The Shimerdas” the first book of *My Antonia* (1918), Cather introduces the shifting of seasons and vivid changes which happen to the prairie. This book tells the story of one year on the Nebraskan land. Autumn indicates arrival of the Shimerdas and the Burdens on the Nebraskan prairie. Winter portrays terrible struggle for mere existence in the plains. Return of life is indicated with the arrival of the spring and ending of the year promising rich harvest in the summer heat of the prairies. In *O Pioneers!* (1913), Alexandra expresses to Carl how pioneers have to depend on the climatic conditions, labour and nature through the lines: “Our lives are like the years, all made up of weather and crops and cows” (131).

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Seasons in *My Antonia* (1918) have symbolic representations on human life. The arrival of “glorious autumn” (28) on the treeless prairie shows that “the world was left behind” (7) and that they “had got over the edge of it” (7). Vast autumn indicates approach of death and descent of winter snows. Beauty of the undisturbed plains is described as “the sky was brilliantly blue, and the sunlight on the glittering white stretches of prairie was almost blinding” (63). The whiteness not only blinds but brings despair and death. After the first primitive struggle, Antonia cries out to Jim in the midst of summer, “I wish no winter ever come again” (140).



Nebraska agriculture



Malleable Nature

Nature stands malleable to humans. It tolerates and welcomes the human touch. Willam James puts the same idea in his *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907). In *O Pioneers!* (1913), Cather calls the prairie “wild land” (20), “dark country” (18)

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“wild soil” (47) and “raw place” (59). After trials and struggles, the prairie readily seems to tune up with humanity. The land does not hesitate to yield for the one who sowed. It favours mankind once humanized. Sixteen years after the death of John Bergson, Alexandra, her brothers and her mother have turned a homestead into an estate.

One has to feel sorry for the wasteful and abusive farming. Once nature is not cared for and allowed to be vigorous and resilient, it becomes a wilderness. But a little effort could make it recover soon from that. For example, the narrator in *O Pioneers!*, explains that in “summer the rains had been so many and opportune that it was almost more and Shabata and his man could do to keep up with the corn; [so] the orchard...[became] a neglected wilderness” (151).

Cather’s Characters and the Land

Cather’s characters are depicted as they actually are. The good ones are the characters loving and protecting nature. They yield to the land’s spell. The Shimerdas and the Burdens in *My Antonia* (1918) live with nature and are part of the scenic beauty. Alexandra, in *O Pioneers!*, describes herself to be a part of nature. She says practically, “if you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard, like a tree” (171).

The land tutors Alexandra, in many ways, in the novel *O Pioneers!* (1913). Alexandra considers the land a personality arousing in her all the feelings which another human being could arouse. She does not sell but buys more instead. The land is tamed out of her love and hard work. Nature responds to true love and Cather declares that “the history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman” (65).

Jim Burden, in *My Antonia* (1918), adores nature. He finds himself overjoyed and rejoices with “the goodness of planting and tending and harvestings” (353). Lying in his grandmother’s garden under a warm autumn sun, Jim listens to the wind, feels the warm earth under him and watches the insects. Jim surrenders to nature. With ripe pumpkins in his garden, he has a feeling of immersion and appreciation for the prairie in a personal way. The seasons in

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the prairie are described as: “All the years that have passed have not dimmed my memory of that first glorious autumn.”(28) Jim celebrates the prairie’s splendor in the late afternoon hour.

Jim is all praise for the prairie. Sunlight ripens the prairie. The spring season with its light delights Jim: “if I had been tossed down blindfold on that red prairie, I should have known that it was spring” (120). July brings the “breathless, brilliant heat which makes the prairies of Kansas and Nebraska the best corn country in the world. It seemed as if we could hear the corn growing in the night; under the stars one caught a faint crackling in the dewy, heavy-odored cornfields where the feathered stalk stood so juicy and green”(137). Antonia tells Jim about her love for the trees. Jim finds Antonia proud of her orchard planted painstakingly. Antonia waters every tree after the toil in the fields and has apple crop every year. Alexandra, in *O Pioneers!* (1913), has mystic faith in the land like Antonia. Her prophecy comes true. The wild land has been made fertile and nature has been tamed to order by the human hand.

Deriving Strength from the Land – Physical, Psychological, Moral and Economic

The characters like Alexandra Bergson and Antonia derive strength from the land. In *O Pioneers!* (1913), when Alexandra becomes tired, she feels some spiritual force “carried by a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness.” (207) This kind of feeling is also experienced by Willa Cather, who identifies herself with her carefully and skillfully created character, Alexandra. Thirteen years later, Alexandra, being a willful and resourceful woman having faith in land, derives spiritual support. Alexandra has the most prosperous farm in the area. She experiments with new farming methods. Having the first silo on the Divide, she is seated at the head of a long table, having dinner with her men. Being industrious, Alexandra becomes a boss lady, a successful business woman settling into the ample physical proportions of middle age.

In *My Antonia* (1918), Antonia obtains financial support from the farm and fields. She has become the mistress of a larger and fertile farm. Having a happy family by marrying Cuzak, a farmer, and then with a dozen delightful children, Antonia has transformed the barren Nebraska

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prairie into a rich and fruitful one. The farm is big and fertile. It is adorned with orchards, hedges and a grape arbor. Antonia had worked hard, worn herself out to accomplish her goal. She is “battered” but not “let down”. When Antonia makes her last appearance, as a middle aged woman, she is “still there in the full vigour of her personality” showing this is how one should have lived. Antonia recognizes in her the quality of persistence, which she had, when Jim Burden and she roamed the prairie as boy and girl. In the end of the novel she is “battered but not diminished” (332). Antonia has “not lost the fire of life” (336), and Jim even though he has “kept so young” (335), he is less battered but more diminished.

Equating Nature and Land to Our Lives



A Wild Prairie Dog in Nebraska



Antonia could have a happy life in the end involving herself in farming and maintaining good family relationships. When there are characters who do not want any natural resources to be destroyed, they go one step higher, and they are rare characters, like Ivar, in *O Pioneers!*

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(1913), practicing species egalitarianism with the animals. Being a vegetarian, Ivar never allows guns near his big pond saying, “I have many strange birds stop with me here. They come from very far away and are great company. I hope you boys never shoot wild birds?” (40) Ivar says to Alexandra’s youngest brother Emil about the migrations of birds: “They have their roads up there, as we have down here... Never any confusion; just like soldiers who have been drilled.” (43) He is solicitous about the shooting of birds and warns the boys that “these wild things are God’s birds. He watches over them and counts them...” (41) Representing the Bible character Noah, Ivar protects “all wild animals on earth” and “all birds of heaven” at the time of flood by God. (*The New English Bible with the Apocrypha* Genesis 8-9) A covenant with God is to the effect that there will be no eating of meat. Ivar, in *O Pioneers!*, also follows the same and he “never ate meat, fish or salt” (43).

Alexandra and Ivar, in *O Pioneers!* (1913) trust the land and nature equating them to their own lives. She could transform wilderness in which “the wind answered...like an echo” (18) and the entire town found vanishing “as if it had never been” (15) into a prosperous and fertile prairie. Alexandra says to Emil, “Down there they have a little certainty, but up with us there is a big chance. We must have faith in the highland, Emil” (64). Alexandra has more lands through her visits to the prosperous river farms. She tells Emil, “I want to hold on harder than ever, and when you’re a man you’ll thank me.”(64) Alexandra tames the wilderness and reconfigures nature, but Ivar, is being tamed by nature. Ivar finally seeks refuge with Alexandra.

Another woman character, placed next to Alexandra, in *O Pioneers!*, is Marie Shabata. She is the wife of Frank, a shrewd farmer, who, towards the end of the novel, shoots Marie and kills her, when he sees her relationship with Emil, Alexandra’s brother. Marie loves the plants and the trees. With nurture and care, she grows a garden of flowering plants.

Some Fail to Protect Nature

There are Willa Cather’s characters loving the eco-system, but failing to protect it due to unfortunate reasons. Through the words of Carl, in *O Pioneers!* (1913), Willa Cather presents Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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the restlessness of the pioneers in search of quick wealth. Carl says to Alexandra, “engraving’s a very interesting profession, but a man never makes any money at it. So I’m going to try the gold fields” (108-109). Carl apprentices as an engraver, failing in that field goes to Alaska fruitlessly in search of gold. Later realizes how he had lost his identity. He confesses, “I’ve enjoyed a great many things, but I’ve got nothing to show for it all” (122) and adds “here you are an individual, you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me” (123) not depending on land, which is more fruit-bearing than anything else. The line towards the end states “there are always dreamers on the frontier” (301) is apt for Carl’s life. Carl is not good enough to be a painter. He finds his art work a false imitation in contrast to the work of Alexandra on the wilderness. Having faith in natural resource is more trustworthy than in material resources. Carl compares his work with Alexandra’s: “I’ve been always engraving other men’s pictures, and you’ve stayed at home and made your own” (116).

The character Carl represents the modern Americans. Lou and Oscar, Alexandra’s brothers can also be categorized with Carl’s notions. They do not have “the patience to grow an orchard of their own” (104), but are ready to take any risk in a foreign land. They could not commit the wrong deed of selling the land and leaving in search of city jobs by the strict instructions of Alexandra.

From Wild Land to Virgin Prairie to a Farm

Willa Cather in her article “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle” puts forth the view that “the wild land” is being subdued and “the virgin prairie” is made into “a farm”. This statement proves that both happiness and curse are interrelated. “Too much prosperity” has resulted in “the ugly crest of materialism” (238). This line of Alexandra echoes the conclusion of Whitman’s great poem “Song of Myself” in the collection of *Leaves of Grass* (1855):

“I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,

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If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles”

(Whitman 1339-40)

Willa Cather, being an “ecological” writer, represents the interconnection between humans and nature. She opines that human relationships have a great impact on nature. Nature has thus a crucial influence on human beings and in the end, the country has become as stated in *O Pioneers!* (1913), a “Fortunate country...to receive hearts like Alexandra’s into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth” (309).

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