

A matter of land:
explaining the
differences between
pioneers and a river
runs ...



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Much as the often-flooding rivers of Mesopotamia shaped their cultural beliefs in demons punishing humanity and the open grasslands and calm weather of central Asia shaped the Mongols' cultural beliefs in the afterlife being the eternal blue sky, the untamed Western landscapes shapes the culture of the American West with its emphasis on freedom and opportunity. Land can define cultures and it does so clearly in the art of the American West. Much of Western Art depicts the land and the ideals the land creates, as can be seen most obviously in cowboy movies, but more subtly in *O Pioneers!* and *A River Runs Through It*. Both these works express the ideals of freedom and opportunity in some form, yet the differences between Montana and Nebraska create differences in plots, themes, and voices, which can be explored by contrasting these two works. The differences between Nebraska in *O Pioneers!* and Montana in *A River Runs Through It* shape the main differences between the books and their major themes: surviving vs recreating, isolation vs community, and powerful vs. stereotypical women's roles.

A Rivers Runs Through It emphasizes the beauty and recreational opportunities of the land, whereas *O Pioneers!* emphasizes the struggles of farming and the difficulty of survival of the land. Characters in *O Pioneers!* dedicate themselves to learning to survive and have little time for recreation. " Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors" (Cather 9). Survival requires not only working the land but learning how to work it in the Bergsons spare time. On the other hand, characters in *A River Runs Through It* dedicate themselves to recreation through fly fishing. Norman Maclean, as the

narrator, describes the role fishing played in his childhood. "Every afternoon I was set free, untutored and untouched till supper, to learn on my own the natural side of God's order" (Redford). The basis of this fundamental difference between the two books is the land and the attitudes it creates. In *O Pioneers!* the characters learn to treat the land as something to be tamed. "In eleven long years John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame" (Cather 8). In *O Pioneers!*, the process of taming the land consumes the characters' lives. Yet, taming the land is necessary because without understanding and controlling the land, the Nebraska farmers couldn't survive. In *A River Runs Through It*, the characters learn to recognize the landscape's natural beauty. "In the afternoon we would walk with him, while he unwound between sermons. He almost always chose a path along the Big Blackfoot, which we considered our family river. It was there he felt his soul restored and his imagination stirred" (Redford). A combination of the beauty of the land, their family's spirituality, and not relying on the land, teaches the Macleans to appreciate the land. Their appreciation of the land has them use it for recreation, but not alter it, in the belief that its natural beauty is perfect.

Despite the different attitudes the two books hold about the land, they both spiritualize it. The land is so important to the Bergsons' well-being that it takes the form of a character and is personified in Cather's writing. "It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods; and no one knew when they were likely to come, or why" (Cather 8). The land is also treated spiritually by the Macleans in *A River Runs Through It*, but it is considered a creation of God rather than its own being. While standing beside the Blackfoot river the

Maclean's father describes his understanding of the river. "' Beneath the rocks are the words of God. Listen.' And if Paul and I listened for all our lives we might hear those words" (Redford). The Blackfoot is viewed as a way of connection with God. *A River Runs Through It* focuses on the land's beauty and recreation, while *O Pioneers!* focuses on land as a way of surviving, yet they both see land as spiritual.

The harshness and isolation of the land in *O Pioneers!* creates themes of loneliness and the beauty and unity of the land in *A River Runs Through It* creates themes of community and family. In *O Pioneers!*, characters are physically separated from neighbors, friends, and family by the land, especially during the winter, as described in the quote. " When the two neighbors went to see each other, they had to go around by the wagon-road which was twice as far" (Cather 65). This separation wears on the characters, making them lonely, which can be seen in Alexandra's voice in the story. "'I am tired,' she murmured. ' I have been very lonely, Carl'" (Cather 98). *A River Runs Through It* doesn't have the theme of loneliness because the Macleans are part of a community due to their proximity to Missoula. The Macleans live close to town and, in several scenes, drive into town to hang out with their friends. The community that forms from being close to town can be seen in the slogans that the Macleans and their friends create. "' The world is full of bastards, the number increasing rapidly the further one gets from Missoula, Montana!'" (Redford). These slogans show the Macleans' familiarity with their friends and illustrates the way their community unites by separating itself from those outside "' Missoula, Montana'" (Redford).

O Pioneers! lacks a common way of creating community that A River Runs Through It has: conventional thinking. In O Pioneers! success in farming goes against conventional thinking; successful farmers alienate themselves from the community. "I remembered you cried, Lou, when we put in the first big wheat-planting, and said everybody was laughing at us'" (Cather 56).

Alexandra's successes can be seen to be based on her decisions to carve her own path. For instance, Alexandra made the family rich by deciding to buy all the land they could on the divide while conventional thinking was to buy what you could by the river because old-fashioned farming techniques had failed to produce much on the divide. Yet, Alexandra's willingness to ignore popular beliefs alienates her from her brothers when she ignores her brothers' pleas for her not to marry Carl because the community thinks she's too old to marry. The best example of community thinking in A River Runs Through It is the belief that fly fishing is a true art and bait fishing isn't. Norman and Paul mock Neil because they believe he's going to be a bait fisherman. "He's going to show up with a coffee can full of worms, red can, Hills Brothers'" (Redford). The Macleans create a way for the group to think and those who fall outside it are ostracized. Yet, while following group thinking comes into conflict with success in O Pioneers!, success is possible when following group thinking in A River Runs Through It. Characters in A River Runs Through It can afford to succumb to group thinking because prospering or surviving doesn't depend on individualism because fly fishing's a sport and not their livelihood. O Pioneers! separates characters while A River Runs Through It fosters community due to differences in the land in both works.

A River Runs Through It focuses on women's relationships with men, whereas, in O Pioneers!, because the land is so harsh, the story focuses on women as individuals. O Pioneers! creates complicated female characters, such as Alexandra and Marie Tovesky. O Pioneers examines the female characters' thoughts and how they change over time. By contrast, almost all the women characters in A River Runs Through It fall into stereotypical categories: mothers, wives, and prostitutes. Their roles are defined by their relationships to the men in their lives. The focus on the thoughts of female characters in O Pioneers! versus the lack of focus in A River Runs Through It is, in part, because Willa Cather is a woman whereas Norman Maclean is a man, but the greater reason that O Pioneers! focuses on female characters is because the harsh landscape of Nebraska gave women a more important role in a family's livelihood. Characters such as Alexandra are instrumental to their family's well-being. Alexandra describes her contributions to the family as, "it [managing the farm] sometimes puts in the crop and it sometimes keeps the fields for corn to grow in" (Cather 56). In A River Runs Through It, the women play little part in the family's livelihood. No women characters appear to work to support a family. As a result of the lack of a role for women supporting the family through work in A River Runs Through It, women characters are less important to the story and rarely focused upon. While O Pioneers! focuses a lot on women's role in Nebraskan society, it shows romantic relationships as dysfunctional. "We're terribly practical people, and I guess we think a cross man can make a good manager" (Cather 73). Some romantic relationships fail because they're formed out of a survivalist necessity rather than based on affection. Others fail because the land changes the people in relationships by causing characters such as Frank

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Tovesky to hate their lives in Nebraska and the people in their lives. " He wanted his wife to resent that he was wasting his best years among these stupid and unappreciative people; but she had seemed to find the people quite good enough... he wanted her to feel that life was as ugly and as unjust as he felt it" (Cather 85). Frank Tovesky's evolution from a happy young man to a resentful farmer exemplifies what Nebraska does to characters in *O Pioneers!* It sets them against each other and alienates them, which in turn leads to a greater focus on individuals and especially individual woman in *O Pioneers!* In *A River Runs Through It*, relationships are more explored and women less so, because relationships are functional. Norman Maclean's wife and mother are explored through how he views them. *O Pioneers!* focuses on women as individuals, whereas, *A River Runs Through It* focuses on women's relationships with men.

O Pioneers! and *A River Runs Through It* are both period pieces reflecting the time in which they were written. The differences between the two books illustrates the differences between Montana and Nebraska during end of the 19th century to the beginning 20th century, yet they both show the huge role the land played in people's lives in the West's past. In the modern West, the land doesn't control people's lives, but geography does. This can be seen in the prosperity of Jackson, the fracking booms in Texas, and the decline of coal revenue in Eastern Wyoming. Modern Westerns, such as *Hell or High Water* and *Wind River*, better reflect the modern west. Despite that *O Pioneers!* and *A River Runs Through It* may not relate to the modern West, they still give us two different views of the old west. Through *O Pioneers!* and *A River Runs Through Its* differences, surviving vs recreating, isolation vs

community, and powerful vs. stereotypical women's roles, we can see the role the land played in people's lives and the differences between societies in Nebraska and Montana.

Work Cited

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