

In pursuit of the american dream: an analysis of willa cather's o pioneers essay

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O Pioneers, by Willa Cather, is set about a decade to the 19th century - 1880-1900. O Pioneers depicts the lives of the Bergsons - Joe and his wife, their daughter, Alexandra, and their sons, Lou, Oscar, and Emil, as they explore their lives and the vast Nebraskan land over a couple of decades.

The settlers into Nebraska, for instance, the Bergsons, mainly originated from European countries such as Sweden and Norway. The immigrants were farmers and ranchers whose aim was to obtain food for themselves and their families, as well as to rear animals in the farms for economic purposes.

John Bergson's struggle for survival as he endeavors to raise his family captures the life story of most of the early immigrants. He strives to establish himself economically in a tough and unforgiving environment: "In eleven years, John Bergson had made but little impression upon the land he had come to tame" (Cather 6).

The early immigrants, as illustrated by the Bergson's case, were in an invariant struggle for survival. Therefore, the immigrant experience was one of struggle and hardship in an effort to tame the wild Nebraskan land for their farming and habitation.

The weather patterns were also a contributing factor in making the immigrants' early experiences tough. John Bergson loses his entire flock in one winter as he tries to settle in Nebraska (Cather 6). Even after his death, his children have to contend with famines that make the life for the early immigrants almost unbearable.

Sixteen years after John Bergson's death, "...Came the hard times that brought everyone on the divide to the Brink of despair; three years of drought and failure..." (Cather 28). Therefore, the early immigrants were in a constant battle for survival against the vagaries of a harsh climate that usually dealt a heavy blow on their best-laid plans and actions.

The experiences of the characters in the novel portray the endeavors of the early immigrants' pursuit of the American dream. Primarily, the immigrants left their native countries to seek a better life (Veracini 110).

The instinct to forgo the comforts, which a home country offers by default and then sail across the oceans to a then wild and untamed America, was indicative of the immigrants' spirit of adventure and the search for a better life. At the time when *O Pioneers* is set (1890-1900), many immigrants from Europe were still moving to America in numbers.

The Bergson family is originally from Sweden, and The Divide - the location in Nebraska where the novel is set, has many other Swedes, Norwegians, Russians, and natives from other European countries. At the very core, these immigrants sought a better life for themselves and their families. The very act of moving such vast distances in search of a better life signifies the immigrant's pursuit of the American dream.

The experiences of these immigrants, for instance, John Bergson, speak a lot about the hard times they were willing to endure: " Bergson had spent his first five years on the Divide getting into debt, and the last six getting out" (Cather 34). The early immigrants, in their pursuit of the American dream,

gave their all; the harsh climate and the extreme hard work involved in taming the wild lands of Nebraska took a toll on their health and even lives.

Most of the early immigrants died early or were plagued by diseases in their middle ages; for instance, Bergson dies at a comparatively young age of forty-six years, having spent his entire life trying to better it.

Ivar, once a prosperous farmer on the Divide, eventually loses his farm and stock due to the harsh and unpredictable weather conditions, leaving out his last days as a helper at Alexandra's home. Therefore, for some characters like John Bergson and Ivar, the American dream is hardly realized in their lifetime; John Bergson's children are the ones who eventually get to live the stable and prosperous lifestyle that their father might have envisioned.

The American dream is also realized by the acts of various characters in the novel. The American dream encompasses acts of benevolence and humanity that make society better and Alexandra's actions portray this. From a young age, she shows a desire to make the lives of those around her better. She takes care of her younger brother, Emil, in the beginning of the novel and exhibits a leadership streak at an early age.

When their father dies, she is designated as the head of the family ahead of her brothers, Lou and Oscar. Subsequently, for nearly two decades, she leads the Bergson family towards prosperity. She is friendly and offers food and shelter to some members of the community at the Divide for whom the famine and draught has taken a huge toll.

Alexandra practices modern farming techniques that make her farm prosperous and she shares her fortunes with the less fortunate members of the society. Emil, her younger brother, also displays selfless attitudes by refusing to pursue a romantic interest in Marie Shabata. Actually, Emil moves away from the Divide in order to give Marie's marriage the respect that it deserves.

Although Marie's husband, Frank, in a fit of jealousy later shoots him, Emil does not fall into the temptation of courting another man's wife even though both he and Marie had a deep affection for each other. Furthermore, Alexandra's benevolence appears again when she pardons Frank even after he murders her brother, Emil.

Amongst the many reasons that immigrants had for immigrating to the US in the 1800s, the quest for a new life experience; a new start, was prominent.

By themselves, the immigrants were adventurers, ready for the challenge that new lands and climate offered. For instance, Alexandra describes her own mother's willingness and readiness for challenge aptly. She states that, if her mother " were cast upon a desert Island, she (the mother) would thank God for her deliverance, make a garden, and find something to preserve" (Cather 58).

Almost as an innate characteristic, most of the immigrants were adventurous and were always ready to take up any challenge that settlement in a new environment brought. Even in the settled lands of America, many of the immigrants were always moving from one locality to another in search of

better land for farming, better jobs, and better weather conditions (Post 460).

For instance, Carl Linstrum and his family move from the Divide when his father secures a better job at a cigar factory, and this almost nomadic nature of the early settlers drove them initially to move away from their European countries.

In conclusion, *O Pioneers* by Willa Cather is a fitting tribute to the adventurous spirit that immigrants to the US have always had. In search of a better life, many immigrants, as shown in the novel, made huge sacrifices in an attempt to live the American dream. One is tempted to believe that, the sense of adventure, sacrifice, and benevolence captured in the novel have run through the generations to this day, bequeathing to the US a characteristic that makes it the great nation that it is today.

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