

Breaking new ground:  
passion and love in  
willa cather's o'  
pioneers!



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Pioneering, or the act of breaking new ground, is what has established the United States as the enormous international presence it is today. From ideals represented by manifest destiny, the Declaration of Independence, institutions such as Wellesley College, and the Second Amendment, the United States has created a home for pioneers such as Frederick Douglass, Amy Tan, and Ellen De Generes, to flourish and create life in areas of society that were previously dormant. Willa Cather gained fame writing about a group of pioneers who gave life to the Midwest in her prairie novels, including her novel, "O Pioneers!"; therefore it is no surprise she is revered as a pioneer herself. "When O Pioneers! was first published in 1913, reviewers praised Willa Cather for having created 'a totally new kind of fiction'. Cather had mined 'a new vein of material', and 'broken new ground'", (Gelfant 1). Cather was a pioneer with her prairie novels in several ways. For example, she was the first to give immigrants heroic stature in serious American literature (Rosowski 45). And more surprisingly, the heroine of her novel is a woman. In "O Pioneers!", the heroine, Alexandra Bergson is seen as the most capable child in her family and inherits the family estate at the death of her father. When the novel was published in 1913 it was uncommon for pastorals to be written centralizing on women having influence and sometimes control over men as is the case in "O Pioneers!". Alexandra triumphs over the intractable prairie amassing a fortune and stabilizing the future for her three brothers. She proves herself a capable woman and most of the novel, including "The Wild Land, "Neighboring Fields", and "Alexandra" is dedicated to her story. However, "O Pioneers!" includes two other portions, titled "Winter Memories" and "The White Mulberry Tree", that do not focus on Alexandra at all, but rather on the <https://assignbuster.com/breaking-new-ground-passion-and-love-in-willa-cathers-o-pioneers/>

relationship between two other characters, Marie and Emil. Alexandra, the undeniable heroine of the story is pushed into the background for two-fifths of the narrative. The fact a considerable quantity, of “ O Pioneers!” is dedicated to Marie and Emil should be taken into careful consideration because it is obvious Cather wished her audience to interpret these two characters with importance. What was Cather’s purpose in giving significance to the relationship of Marie and Emil? Why are they an important aspect in the whole denotation of “ O Pioneers!”? The recorded account of Marie and Emil contributes to the novel in several ways. First of all, the love story of Marie and Emil provides an alternative to the conventional love story depicted in the prairie novels of Cather’s time. Additionally, they work as examples of two helpless characters who are victims of their own situations and places in society. And importantly, Marie and Emil provide a valuable contrast to Alexandra’s own situation and character. Cather employs the emphasis on Marie and Emil to support her protagonist and in effect creates another reason to be designated as a pioneer with a new dark twist on romance in the prairie. The love story between Marie and Emil is untypical of romance contained in prairie novels in the early 1900’s. Often characterized as a pastoral, Cather’s “ O Pioneers!” has frequently been compared to by critics with other works of its genre such as: Virgil’s “ Eclogues”, Spenser’s “ Shepherd’s Calendar”, and Sannazaro’s “ Arcadia”, characterized as “ the most elaborate pastoral romance” (Rosowski 46). “ O Pioneers!” remains unique from these works because it differs from the typical pastoral which critic Leo Marx asserts is largely about “ love sick swains.” The typical pastoral includes “ a primary impulse to find happiness in love” and traditionally “ brings together farmers and their lovers.” However, in the <https://assignbuster.com/breaking-new-ground-passion-and-love-in-willa-cathers-o-pioneers/>

case of Marie and Emil, happiness is definitely not found through their love. In fact, their story is the complete opposite of a perfect romance and ends in tragedy. Cather foreshadows the love story between Emil and Marie right from the first chapter (8-9), when Marie and Emil are first introduced as toddlers and Marie is seen offering Emil some candy. Cather heats up their romance in the second part as they are the opening characters of “Neighboring Fields”, affectionately conversing with each other as grown adults (53-57), and closes the section of the narrative with a confrontation between the two lovers when Emil asserts in a frustrated tone “ I can’t play with you like a little boy anymore – sometimes you seem to understand perfectly, and then sometimes you pretend you don’t” (104). The tragedy of their affections for each other become apparent when Emil acknowledges there are “ so, many, many” things he cannot have (104), referring to his love for Marie. He realizes he will never own Marie because she is a married woman. Trying to repress his passion, Emil forces himself to leave for Mexico in order to forget about Marie. Efforts are made by both characters to overcome the passion for the other. “ Although deeply infatuated with Emil, Marie tries to make him understand that their feeling for each other ‘ won’t last. It will go away and things will be as they used to” (157), (Murphy 123). However, it is evident Marie and Emil cannot control their emotions. They show unreasonable jealousy towards each other. Emil resents Marie’s light mood at the Sainte Agnes fair when he himself is agonizing over the pain caused by their love. He accuses Marie of being flippant and flirting with other men (230). Marie in turn, is also jealous, even though she is married to another man and has no justification to feel possessive towards Emil. “ She gets angry when Emil teases Angelique and stops with the French boys

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instead of rushing to her at the church supper. She admits to being spoiled, of getting everything she ever wanted, from the Turkish lady toy to Frank Shabata, and becomes petulant when Emil allows one of his turquoise shirt studs to be auctioned off instead of giving it to her (Murphy 123).” The strong, powerful, and uncontrollable passion that Emil and Marie feel for each other becomes dangerous. “ The passion of Marie and Emil become so strong it resembles witch craft”(Rosowski 48). The deeply exaggerated and heated romance between Marie and Emil is embellished by Cather, who dramatizes their encounters. The setting involved with the meeting of the two lovers are often very romantic: among flaming roses, beneath the white mulberry tree, in costume (as a gypsy and a Mexican), at dances, or in the wheat fields with fireflies twinkling in the background. The description of their first kiss, which happens violently as the lights go out at the Sainte Agnes Church fair, is over-dramatized, “ it was like a sigh which they had breathed together; almost sorrowful, as if each were afraid of wakening something in the other” (149). In the midst of the drama and uncontrollable desire, the love story between Marie and Emil is extremely ironic. “ Marie tells Emil if he ‘ had any eyes’ he would see Alexandra’s fondness for Carl – true enough, but Marie fails to see the more immediate truth of Emil’s love for her (154)”, (Rosowki 57). After both characters have undergone emotional suffering brought on by their passion and undergone pains to control their emotions, their desire explodes in a tumultuous scene in the Shabata orchard, where they were first seen playing with a childlike innocence. Their innocence is destroyed with adulterous excitement as, “ Emil threw himself besides (Marie) and took her into his arms. The blood came back into her cheeks, her amber eyes opened slowly, and in them Emil

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saw his own face and the orchard and the sun. ' I was dreaming this,' she whispered, hiding her face against him, ' don't take my dream way!'" (259). The two lovers are previously depicted in this setting shooting ducks that look " too happy to kill", foreshadowing the death of the lovers. The tragedy climaxes as they are shot to death as soon as they allow their hearts to fully love each other. " Emil and Marie die beneath a mulberry tree, their blood staining the white berries red" (Rosowski 54), stressing the ironic and tragic orientation of their love story. Undoubtedly, the love story between Marie and Emil is an ironic tragedy. They are found in situations where they cannot freely love each other. As soon as they surrender to their emotions, they are murdered. Uncharacteristic of the typical pastoral romance where " happiness is found in love", Emil and Marie find suffering and ultimately death through their love. Literary critic Shanon O' Brien condemns the love story of Emil and Marie as " an unlawful and adulterous relationship", for which they are punished (O'Brien 443). To view their story scornfully, would be misinterpreting the denotation of the novel and is clearly not what Cather intended. In " O Pioneers!" the deaths of Marie and Emil are not treated as their deserved punishment, but rather a horrible tragedy. The immediate response of Frank Shabata to his murder of the two lovers is sympathy for Marie. He cries, " not to suffer! She was a good girl - not to suffer!" (178). Alexandra blames neither of the characters, but herself for not realizing their hidden feelings (193). Cather relates the lovers' story with empathy and compassion. Marie and Emil, in their story of uncontrollable desire and death, are portrayed as victims of social structures and conventions. Emil is a victim of his social situation because he is in love with a married woman, unacceptable in society. He is also a helpless victim of himself, he cannot

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repress his desire for Marie, which is the cause of his death. Marie fails to repress her feelings like Emil, and is further trapped by social convention because although she loves him, she cannot leave her husband. She is a Catholic (105), and divorce is shunned by the Catholic church. Furthermore, society during the early 1900's was intolerant of adultery. Rather than rebel against the social structure in which the characters are trapped, they choose to conform and consequently suffer emotionally. In effect, they are murdered because they lack self-control, and courage to attempt to escape from social convention. In "O Pioneers!", it is obvious Cather expresses disapproval with adultery. Ivar refers to it as a "sin" (183). However, through Alexandra's grief, the audience is forced to feel sympathy and regret for these two characters. Perhaps if they had an option of freely announcing their love, if Marie had a realistic option of leaving her husband, the tragedy could have been prevented. Because these options were not relevant in realistic prairie life, the love story is tragic. However, Cather indicates tight social conventions, without room for change can be detrimental to peoples' happiness. Through the depiction of Marie and Emil, Cather indirectly implies the need for social change. However, this is not the only intention Cather has in mind when concentrating on Marie and Emil. "Although she tells the lovers' story with empathy and compassion, Cather wants to subordinate the narrative to the other narrative she was writing: not only that of Alexandra's personal triumph but also her unconventional relationship with Carl, the friend she will someday marry" (O' Brien 443). By contrasting the relationship between Marie and Emil to Alexandra's own situation, Cather is supporting her main character and persuading audiences to agree with Alexandra's actions. Although, Alexandra is condemned by her brothers

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about her relationship with Carl (111-113), and is informed that “ people have begun to talk” (111), she defends her actions. Although it is not considered appropriate for a woman of “ almost forty” to marry someone “ five years younger”, Alexander shuns social convention and is more concerned with her own happiness. By contrast, Marie is more afraid of what other people will think and forgoes her own happiness to exist in a socially accepted role. In effect, Alexandra outlives Marie, indicating Alexandra has made the wiser choice. There are many contradictions which can be made between Marie and Alexandra in the novel. While “ Cather admires Marie’s spontaneity, vitality, and warmth, she is critical of the ways in which her imagination is structured by the social and narrative conventions. Like the self-limited Edna Pontellier, Marie is unable to envision a life-story for a woman outside of the romantic plot” (O’ Brien 443). It is true that Marie’s role, both in life and in the narrative, is defined by the men she has romantic encounters with. From the beginning of “ O’ Pioneers!” Marie is seen admired by men. The men in the general store are commanding her to “ choose one of them for a sweetheart”. She finally turns to her uncle and says, “ here is my sweetheart” (11-12). The only choice it seems bestowed to Marie is her ability to choose her “ sweetheart”: first Frank, and then Emil. However, Alexandra has many choices in her life. In “ The Wild Land”, she refuses to sell the family farm and persuades her brothers to take on a mortgage. By exercising her influence over men, she breaks gender codes. She is also characterized as appearing rebellious to social convention (5): His sister was a tall, strong girl, and she walked rapidly and resolutely, as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next. She wore a man’s long ulster (Not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very

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comfortable and belonged to her; carried it like a young soldier), and a round plush cap, tied down with a thick veil. She had a serious, thoughtful face, and her clear, deep blue eyes were fixed intently on the distance, without seeming to see anything, as if she were in trouble. But in the same portion of the book Marie is portrayed as a follower of social convention, very different to Alexandra. Marie has “ brown curly hair like a brunette doll’s”, and dresses in the “ Kate Greenway” fashion, already eager to fit in to society (10). While Alexandra’s dreams and hopes are involved with the cultivation of her land and caring of her family, Marie’s dreams are centered on the typical romantic narrative. “ Cather demonstrates Marie’s continuing imaginative preoccupation with romantic narrative in the fortune telling scene. Dressed in a Bohemian costume at the church fair, Marie entertains the crowd by telling them the stories they want to hear, all tales of love and marriage - much like the popular women writers Cather had once wanted to disown” (O’Brien 443). Marie is also dissimilar to Alexandra, because she has no individual accomplishments defining herself. She runs away from a convent after a city education with Frank Shabata. Although she has been to school in the city she decides to marry against her father’s wishes at a young age because she has no control over her emotions, in effect wasting her education. The most important thing in her life is romance. The farm she lives on with Frank was not earned with her hard work, it was a present from her father. And after five years of marriage, Marie does not even have a child. Alexandra in contrast follows her father’s wishes and works on the farm to support her family. In “ Neighboring Fields”, Alexandra has proven her success and her strength by bringing fortune to the family and acquiring land enough for her three brothers. She has made individual

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accomplishments and a staff under her employ. In effect, Alexandra has more power than Marie. Alexandra also has more control over her private life and authority to stand up for herself as apparent in the confrontation between her and her two older brothers, " All that doesn't concern anybody but me and Carl. Go to town and ask your lawyers what you can do to restrain me; for the authority you can exert me by the law is the only influence you will have over me again" (115). Unlike the spontaneous Marie who marries at a young age only to be trapped in a disappointing marriage and murdered when committing adultery, Alexandra only commits herself to romance after she has stacked up individual accomplishments. And even after Carl and Alexandra bond with each other, neither conforms to the expected gender role. Their relationship is based on their shared history and fond memories of each other, rather than burning desire. " In contrast to the blazing love shared by Marie and Emil, Alexandra and Carl share a quiet companionship" (Murphy 123). Unlike Marie, Alexandra marries in midlife after her and Carl experiences life on their separate turfs. Alexandra marries for different reasons than Marie. " When friend marry they are safe," Alexandra tells Carl at the end of the novel. She says, " I think we shall be very happy" (308). Unlike Marie and Emil, Carl and Alexandra do not lose themselves in their romance. Carl recalls how he and Alexandra " used to do their milking together, he on his side of the fence and she on theirs" (126). This setting is distinguished by the fence separating the couple, symbolic of their union, how they love each other but still treasure their individuality. The tone surrounding the exit of the two feminine characters are also very dissimilar. The scene of the discovery of Marie's exit to the narrative is tainted by death and infortune. When Ivar discovers the murdered lovers in <https://assignbuster.com/breaking-new-ground-passion-and-love-in-willa-cathers-o-pioneers/>

the orchard, the narrator asserts, “ The story of what happened was written plainly in the orchard grass, on the white mulberries that had fallen in the night and were covered with stain” (268). Whereas, Alexandra makes a permanent mark on the land with her crops and the creation of her property, Marie’s mark is a stain of blood that can be washed away. The scene where Alexandra leaves the narrative at it’s closing has a contrasting effect which emphasizes timelessness. “ The narrator drawing back, joins age and youth, life and death, the present and the universal: ‘ They went into the house together, leaving the Divide behind them, under the evening star. Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra’s into it’s bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, and the shining eyes of youth!’ (308)” (Rosowski 60). This passage indicates that the work and dedication Alexandra has invested in the prairie land has made her immortal. By elaborating the love story between Emil and Marie, the only other relationship focused on in “ O Pioneers!” besides the one between Alexandra and Carl, Cather builds a compare and contrast relationship relating the two couples. Marie and Emil’s story represents one spurred by uncontrollable desire and romance that leads to tragic death. Carl and Alexandra represent a union that is more of a partnership spurred by friendship and compacted only after thoughtful consideration. In contrast to Marie and Emil, Carl and Alexandra are happy and satisfied in the end. By comparison of their dissimilar choices in romance and their characteristics, Marie more reliant on social convention, and Alexandra focusing on her individualism, Cather pits a typical woman stereotype against a new unsterotypical heroine. Through the story of Marie and Emil as well as the remaining portions of “ O Pioneers!”, Cather indicates a need for change.

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She displays reality through the character of Marie and the tragic deaths of the lovers. Women being defined by their relationships with men and people being trapped in unhappy situations due to social circumstance was clearly a realistic portrayal of life in the early 1900's. However, due to Cather's glorification of Alexandra, and her account of a contemporary lifestyle proven by her protagonist, "O Pioneers!" provides an alternative to the traditional social conformities of American life. Because of these qualities, "O Pioneers!" breaks new ground in its own right. The story of Emil and Marie is untypical of traditional love stories because of its adulterous nature and tragic ending involving people of separate racial and cultural backgrounds. The love story of Carl and Alexandra is also a pioneering work because of its advocacy of marriage in midlife for partnership and friendship. The contrast offered between the two relationships demonstrates, how a woman can find happiness without passion and romance through her own achievements and carefully thought out decisions. With these assertions, the narrative implies a mood for social change and acceptance of strong female figures similar to Alexandra. Pioneers are not only people who explore new physical territory like the settlers of the Midwest Cather writes about. Pioneers can also be figures who try to influence people to think in different directions, and consider new options. Authors, painters, rappers, teachers, and children can act as pioneers if they can create social acceptance or awareness of controversial issues. Presently, hundreds of pioneers are present in society active in causes such as AIDS prevention, same-sex relationships, and feminism. Because of pioneers women can apply for the same jobs as men. It is owed to pioneers Koreans, Americans, Spaniards, and Africans can attend the same university and sleep in the same dormitories. Pioneers are

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frequently present in literature. Because of the affect certain novels such as “O Pioneers!” can take, it is important to pay close attention to the work presented in literature. Literature is a tool that can affect the most powerful aspect of our lifestyles; our state of minds.