

The fascination of  
flight: symbols of  
liberation in 'o  
pioneers!'



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Life is full of restrictions and rules that can often impede one's personal pursuit of happiness. In *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather, explores the idea of limitations. The characters in Cather's novel are restricted to the Nebraska prairie, but seek a more fulfilling life. Although Alexandra and Emil do not get a chance to achieve complete liberation, other creatures on the Homestead do. The recurring imagery of flying creatures, such as butterflies and birds, represent the missed opportunities of both Alexandra and Emil. Cather uses the motif of these creatures at key points to illustrate Alexandra's desire for independence and Emil's longing for freedom.

Using birds and ducks as a metaphor for Alexandra's life highlights her yearning for independence. During a conversation with Ivar, he recalls the story of a seagull that came to him, and explains that, "she was in trouble of some sort, but I could not understand her. She was going over to the other ocean, maybe, and did not know how far it was. She was afraid of never getting there" (16). Both the seagull and Alexandra long to experience a new environment. Though there is nothing physically holding the seagull back from reaching the ocean, the lack of knowledge of the distance to the ocean results in fear and apprehension. As the seagull aspires to journey to the ocean, Alexandra seeks to assert her independence from her brothers and do as she pleases with Carl. Achieving independence is more attainable for the seagull because as it has the ability to roam and settle where it desires. Alexandra, on the other hand, feels confined to the prairie, obligated to carry out her father's wishes, and cannot abruptly uproot her life and venture out into the world. The fear of the unknown is apparent in Alexandra as well, as her future is just as abstract as the seagull's distance to the ocean.

Regardless of her fear, like the seagull, Alexandra needs to find the courage to become an independent woman.

In the same manner, Cather chooses a lone duck as an illustration of Alexandra's desire for independence. Reminiscing on an afternoon spent with Emil, Alexandra remembers how they saw " a single duck was swimming and diving and preening her feathers, disporting herself very happily in the flickering light and shade. They [watched] the solitary bird take its pleasure. No living thing had ever seemed to Alexandra as beautiful as that wild duck" (80). Alexandra admires how comfortable the duck is with its independence. It exudes confidence in its solitude, seemingly without care for the surrounding environment. In contrast to the duck, Alexandra is both uncomfortable alone and craves the company and comfort that Emil and Carl provide to her. She is envious of the duck's ability to be independent, but has difficulty achieving the confidence necessary to be so herself. Without such self-confidence, Alexandra is unable to take a leap into the realm of a truly emotionally self-sufficient life. Alexandra eventually must learn to embrace an independent life without her loved ones around her, just as the duck does.

As the seagull and duck represent Alexandra's life, similarly, Cather places birds and butterflies at key moments in Emil's life, intensifying his craving for freedom. After Emil shoots and kills some birds, Marie explains to him that " Ivar's right about wild things. They're too happy to kill. You can tell just how they felt when they flew up. They were scared, but they didn't really think anything could hurt them" (50). The birds have a sense of invincibility. They are free to soar and do as they wish without a care in the world that

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anything, or anyone, could potentially hurt them. Emil, however, does not have this same luxury. He believes that he can interact and be friendly with a married woman without any consequences. Like the birds, Marie and Emil do not feel they are in any danger, but they unfortunately do not possess the same freedom as the birds. The birds epitomize what Emil lacks in his life, which is the freedom and ability to live carefree and happy with Marie.

Cather continues to use creatures that fly to symbolize Emil's internal longing for freedom by strategically placing two butterflies over his lifeless body. After the fatal shooting, "above Marie and Emil, two white butterflies from Frank's alfalfa-field were fluttering in and out among the interlacing shadows; diving and soaring, now close together" (106). The butterflies are an exemplification of Marie and Emil in the afterlife. The two lovers now have the freedom, like butterflies do, to dive and soar through their existence with ease and beauty. Marie and Emil now at last have the freedom to love. Using white as the color of the butterflies, Cather also illustrates the pureness of the love the two can now share, as they are free from society's judgment and restrictions. For Emil, the white butterflies are an embodiment of the freedom he wishes to encounter in the afterlife. As Alexandra longs for independence and Emil freedom, Cather places winged creatures at certain stages in each character's existence in order to emphasize their desires.

Butterflies and various birds maintain a continuous presence throughout *O Pioneers!* as reminders of what Alexandra and Emil long for. The ideas of independence and freedom are easy to see in creatures such as these, as wings allow a being the ability to venture and assert themselves where they wish. These winged creatures do not encounter the same restrictions as <https://assignbuster.com/the-fascination-of-flight-symbols-of-liberation-in-o-pioneers/>

Alexandra and Emil. Unfortunately, Alexandra and Emil are bound to the land and the standards that society has set for them. For anyone, it is nearly impossible to discover a path with no restrictions or limitations. Obstacles are common in life, unless one possess the wings needed to rise above and disregard them all.