Human - Nature Relationship in Willa Cather's O Pioneers!

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Willa Cather was an American novelist noted for her portrayals of the settlers and frontier life on the American plains. O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, and My Ántonia (and also the first half of One of Ours) are linked by place, not by character. O Pioneers! begins with a long shot of a snowstorm and a young boy crying because his kitten has gotten away from him; it then homes in on Alexandra, the protagonist, who will eventually, and almost by herself, develop the family farm. The present paper is an attempt to analyze Human - Nature Relationship in Willa Cather's O Pioneers! Throughout the novel, one begins to understand that human beings are seen as second-order creatures in the presence of the vast, mighty land and thus it is impossible to forget that the human struggles represented in the text are only minor squabbles when viewed in the context of the land in which they take place.

[Keywords : Human - nature relationship, Natural landscape, Bergson family]

Willa Cather is one of the most powerful short story writers and novelists of America. Most of her stories and novels are based upon her personal experiences. She occupies a prominent place in the American Literary history for her never ending role in the areas of fictional writings.

Remembered for her depictions of pioneer life in Nebraska, Willa Cather established a reputation for giving breath to the landscape of her fiction. Sensitive to the mannerisms and phrases of the people who inhabited her spaces, she

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brought American regions to life through her loving portrayals of individuals within local cultures. Drawing from her childhood in Nebraska, Cather brought to national consciousness the beauty and vastness of the western plains. She was able to evoke this sense of place for other regions as well, including the Southwest, Virginia, France, and Quebec.

Nature in Cather’s novels is the description of not merely the natural landscape, but also the relationship between human and environment, human and landscape, and human attitudes to nature. In her novels, both the stories and characters express tremendous love for the land. Cather gives the land a force and presence of its own, utterly independent, even disdainful, of human settlement. She imbues the prairie with a vast inescapability and an undeniable power over those who attempt to exert their will upon it; the land itself is what matters, not the people who inhabit it. Cather writes that land wants and feels; it gives and it takes, leaving the pioneers to submit to its whim. In its vastness, the land seems beyond transformation, always holding individual pioneers in its grasp.

In her fiction, the natural world is often described in great detail, rendering it more significant than a mere setting against which the narrative unfolds. She establishes a reciprocal relationship between natural environment and humans. Cather’s narrative voice depicts the natural world in the same way the appearance of different individuals is described. This technique removes the sense of authority from human hands, placing humans within the natural world rather than ruling above it. Human forces are ultimately rendered inconsequential against the unseen powers of nature.

Cather’s classical American frontier novel O Pioneers!, published in 1913, depicts the life of the Bergson family, particularly the oldest child and only girl, Alexandra. Alexandra’s life is devoted to her calling as the leader of the farm, and she works to grow her holding and take care of her brothers. Alexandra deals with her struggles in the same manner that she deals with all other events that occur: with strength that speaks to her pioneering spirit and resolve. It’s her unwavering commitment to realizing her father’s dreams of a successful farm and happy family that, at least in part, makes her the novel’s obvious hero.

The story celebrates the immigrant farmers and their quest to cultivate the prairies. O Pioneers! is a classical narrative of the modern immigrant experience. A big part of that experience has to adjust your dreams, hopes and plans when you realize the New World.

Alexandra was the first child of Bergson’s four children together with three boys, Oscar, Lou, and Emil. She was a tall, strong girl, walking rapidly as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next. She wore a man’s long coat and had a serious, thoughtful face. Through the description of her dress and her appearance, Willa Cather presented us with an intelligent, powerful, and independent woman image that was totally different from the stereotyped
weak women images. Alexandra was bound to achieve her self-fulfillment in the taming of the wild land and bringing modern civilization to it with her unusual pioneering spirit.

One of Alexandra’s most obvious characteristics is her uncanny connection with the natural world:

When the road began to climb the first long swells of the Divide, Alexandra hummed an old Swedish hymn, and Emil wondered why his sister looked so happy. Her face was so radiant that he felt shy about asking her. For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman. O Pioneers! (17)

The beauty, power and restlessness of the Divide seem uniquely reflected in her. The Divide was full of natural scenery-landscapes, the flora, even the changing seasons.

Alexandra reads promise in the land, and sets her face towards it with love and yearning. The land is, for Alexandra, the means of recapturing youth, living the concentrated lifetime, and entering oneself in the chronicles of its. In Cather’s fiction the land frequently appears either as source of or as springboard to the recognition and realization of hopes and dreams; conversely, the land may also reflect disappointment or hopelessness futurity.

In this novel Cather advocates the possibility of triumph in life by means of accepting Nature’s truths as lesson and guide. Perhaps the simple discovery of her proper setting gave Cather the ability to show her Alexandra what her Alexandra could not see, the chance of creating her own future there of its materials. Nature gives her a vision of the law that justifies her great operations; she receives a sense of personal security, a new consciousness of the country, almost a new relationship to it. Personifying the land as a sleeping giant finally awakened, Alexandra credits it with having made her prosperous by working itself and giving her riches merely for sitting still upon it:

That the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness. O PIONEERS! (5)

John Bergson had the Old-World belief that land, in itself, is desirable. But this land was an enigma. It was like a horse that no one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces. He had an idea that no one understood how to farm it properly. O PIONEERS! (6)
It is the land itself rewarding those who work upon it with redemption from suffering. The land is not just the backdrop for the action, but it is symbolic and vital to the plot since it not only reflects the events of the characters but also drives the plot since it is the land that keeps Alexandra independent and dreaming—even if she is hopelessly tied to it for more fundamental and realistic reasons.

Alexandra Bergson’s relationship with the land epitomizes the grand struggle between human agency and the larger forces of nature. Alexandra exerts her will upon the land even as it bends and shapes her. Yet her relationship with the land goes deeper than mere control or influence. She is, to some extent, an incarnation of the land.

There are several events in the novel in which her relationship to the land is expressed by images of the earth and her own person. Unlike other characters, her connection with the land is as timeless as the earth itself and thus this connection is revealed through personification of the earth and nature. The essential factors to Alexandra’s success under the terrible circumstances include her adventurous spirit to experiment, her willingness to learn from others, and her strong will, passion, and desire. Finally Alexandra brought prosperity to her family and her community, and planted civilization to the wilderness.

Besides Alexandra, Crazy Ivar has lived a life of dedication to the land, loving it and understanding as she does. It is just that he takes it all to an extreme. The Divide is already a pretty isolated place, but Ivar seeks out even more isolation, settling in the rough country and rarely leaving his homestead. Claiming he dislikes the litter of human dwellings, he makes his home in a sod house that’s barely visible beneath the grassy plain. He literally lives in the land. And when Alexandra decides to take him in, when he faces financial ruin, he decides he’s more at home in her barn:

He dislikes human habitations, so Alexandra has fitted him up a room in the barn, where he is very comfortable, being near the horses and, as he says, further from temptations. O PIONEERS! (21)

Nature is all powerful; it has its own ruling system, its own ways of showing strength and its own ways of taking revenge. Emil and Marie Shabata episode clarifies this universal truth. As Ivar is close to nature, he is against the killing of animals, particularly wild birds but Emil shoots several wild ducks for food and fun, on this act Marie becomes distraught and bursts into tears, saying:

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. O PIONEERS! (31)

This idea is symbolic of the arc of Marie Shabata and Emil Bergson’s relationship, their youth, their wildness, their love, and their eventual deaths. Their love is like the wild birds that take flight, and they are shot down by Frank Shabata in the midst of believing nothing can really harm them.
Throughout the novel, one begins to understand that human beings are seen as second-order creatures in the presence of the vast, mighty land and thus it is impossible to forget that the human struggles represented in the text are only minor squabbles when viewed in the context of the land in which they take place.

The land is seen by Cather as a character in this description and is personified and given inner-thought more than many of the real characters are. The land is moody, inconsistent, and prone to unyielding fits of temperament and few characters aside from Alexandra and crazy Ivar seem to understand the meaning and beauty of such an inhospitable display of behavior. At once, the character of the land is seen as brooding and hardly enigmatic or sympathetic to the plights of her inhabitants.

References

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