

On Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* — The Meaning of Carl Linstrum's Return —

Shunji Tsunoda

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Willa Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* was an imitative work of Henry James' technique and, according to E.K. Brown, the severest critic of the work was its author. Her fame as a novelist was established by her second novel written under the influential advice of Sarah Orne Jewett to write "the thing that teases the mind over and over for years." *O Pioneers!*, the second novel, is one of the epochal works of American literature at the beginning of this century because it rendered the Western frontier in the days when the "novel of the soil had not come into fashion" as she says rather proudly:¹

I...searched for books telling the beauty of the country I lived, its romance, and heroism... and I did not find them. And so I wrote *O Pioneers!*.²

James Woodress, one of the leading Catherian critics, even compares her to F.J. Turner:

... in part of the mythology of the westward movement, she and Turner shared a common view of the poetry of the American history.³

As is well known, *O Pioneers!* was composed by fusing two short stories that were intended to have been written separately.⁴ As a result, its structural imperfection has often been pointed out by many critics including Willa Cather herself, who agreed that the novel had "no sharp skeleton" while she vindicated it saying "the land has no sculptural lines or features."⁵ Though the title, taken from a Whitman's poem, suggests the pioneers' heroic struggle against the wild land, the story of pioneering the soil lasts only in Part I. The rest of the novel appears, by a superficial reading, to be centralized for the most part on the melodramatic love story of the heroine's youngest brother and an attractive married woman named Marie. That is to say, Alexandra Bergson's story is, some critics insist, out of tune with the story concerning the two young couple. Also, Alexandra's marriage to Carl Linstrum at the final stage of the book, with whom she says she is only friends and no sign of romance is suggested, has given readers a sense of incongruity. Even after Carl's prolonged sojourn with Alexandra Bergson in Part II, the author describes her life as follows:

She had never been in love, she had never indulged in sentimental reveries. Even as a girl she had looked upon men as work fellows. (175)⁶

Despite the fact that there is no passion or desire existing between them, Alexandra gets married to

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1. Willa Cather, *On Writing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1949), P. 93.
 2. L. Brent Bohlke (ed.), *Willa Cather in Person* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), P. 37.
 3. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), P. 243.
 4. The two short stories were supposed to be "Alexandra" and "The White Mulberry Tree."
 5. Elizabeth S. Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1953), P. 57
 6. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Company, 1973). Reprinted from the original type of the Riverside Press, Massachusetts. The page references in the parentheses throughout are to this edition.

Carl Linstrum at the very end. This seemingly unnatural ending has dissatisfied such critics as David Daiches who, though he recognized the "moments of strange force and beauty," insisted that the final section is "less a resolution of the personal tragedy than an ignoring of it."⁷ Susie Thomas's remark represents one of the acrimonious critical reviews of those against this ending:

Their relationship is contrived, worked into the novel as a sop to the conventions, in deference to prevailing literary expectations.⁸

Carl Linstrum's role has been considered to be only supplementary in Alexandra Bergson's life, but, as it is, if we read carefully we realize he has been given a crucial part by the author in providing the theme. In this paper we will discuss how Carl Linstrum gives dominant effect on Alexandra's life and, by analyzing the meaning of his final return to Alexandra, illustrate his relevance to the central theme of *O Pioneers!*

O Pioneers! consists of five parts, but Alexandra Bergson's struggle-success story is depicted only in Part I, "the Wild Land", which covers such episodes as her father's death, the Bergsons' struggle in "the hard times" when many settlers including Carl Linstrum's family leave the frontier, her journey with the youngest brother to "the river country" and her revelation about their future prosperity. Part II leaps 16 years and we find Alexandra in one of the richest farms on the Divide. Thus, contrary to the readers expectation, the story of the pioneers' struggle and mastery over "the Wild Land" comes to an end only in Part I.

Carl appears in the first scene of this novel. Like many of the author's male protagonists, he lacks masculinity and physical build but is fertile of imagination and sensitivity. A "slight and narrow-chested, thin, frail boy," he is the only friend and sympathizer of Alexandra Bergson in Part I but there is not a sign of romance between them as far as the text is concerned. It is natural, therefore, for some readers to feel incongruous that these two protagonists get married regardless of "the discrepancy of their ages,"⁹ the heroine being over forty and Carl five years younger. As a matter of course, however, Willa Cather had her own intention in forming this plot.

He is 15 years old when the story begins, too young to be in love with the heroine who has an "Amazonian" strength, and here we see Willa Cather's contrivance. That is, the author must not allow them to be in love at this stage and, also, she needed the situation where Carl Linstrum is obliged to leave from the scene. Even his bent for art is opportunistic, because in the whole process of the story it produces no significant effect on his career nor gives any motivation or influence on his relationship with Alexandra, except that this aptitude is utilized by the author as the plausible reason for his leaving. In "the hard times" he leaves the frontier and goes to St. Louis to learn engraving, but, as it turns out, never becomes an artist.

On the other hand, Alexandra has every characteristic and virtue of an ideal pioneer, "a tall, strong girl," walking "rapidly and resolutely as if she knew exactly where she was going." She has "resourcefulness and judgement" and "the strength of will." Symbolically she wears a man's ulster "as if it

7. David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (Westport: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1971), P. 28.

8. Susie Thomas, *Willa Cather* (London: Macmillan, 1990), P. 67.

9. John J. Murphy (ed.), *Critical Essays on Willa Cather* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co.), P. 113.

were very comfortable and belonged to her." Thus Willa Cather is deliberate in contriving to hide her femininity in order to reduce the milieu that will produce romance or sexuality. Her most important characteristic is that she has imagination and intelligence to foresee the future potential, a trait her father could not find in his sons. It is because she has "more brains" to see ahead that she hits on the idea of going on a journey to "the river country," which becomes the turning point of her fortune. A pioneer should have imagination," the author says. If imagination and intelligence are the crucial conditions to make a successful pioneer, Carl possesses as much or more than the heroine. He might have acted in the same way as Alexandra and foreseen the same future of the frontier. But the author, for her own reason of proceeding with the plot, forces him to go away before they come to harbor romantic sentiment. In this connection, we see one apparently unrealistic episode in Book I about the relationship between Alexandra and Carl. In "the hard times" when most settlers choose to leave the frontier, she holds on, prevailing upon the brothers to stay. In the meantime she hits on the idea of going down to "the river country" to look over the condition there. Carl, who happens to be present when she talks about it, appears "interested" while her brothers, as usual, show strong doubt and amazement. Here, Carl is the only sympathizer with her plan. On her way home from the river country the revelation that changes not only their lives but also the history of the Nebraskan Divide occurs in her. Looking over the Divide with "love and yearning" she is convinced of her future success, though without any apparent reason that persuades her brothers:

"But how do you know that land is going to go up enough to pay the mortgages and —" ... "I don't explain that, Lou. You'll take my word for it. *I know*, that's all." (58)

The intensity of her words not only persuades the brothers but also convinces readers of her success. The unnatural thing in this episode is that, despite the fact that she does "know" that land is going up, she never tries to dissuade Carl and his family from leaving the frontier. If Alexandra and Carl are firmly united by their mutual love, it may be that she would have told him about her revelation and kept him in the Divide. Carl would have believed in her words. However, there is not a scene where they discuss the future Alexandra has foreseen. As it is, she proposes to her brothers quite to the contrary:

"The thing to do is to sell our cattle and what little old corn we have, and buy the Linstrum place. Then the next thing to do is to ... raise every dollar we can, and every acre we can." (56)

When Carl's family, like many other settlers, are brought to "the brink of despair" after years of drought and failure, Alexandra purchases their place and, consequently, it leads to Carl's first departure from the frontier and from Alexandra. In fact the author needs to force him away by any means, so that he may acquire proper experiences outside the frontier and, after coming back, fulfill his own role in relation to the heroine.

In Part II that is titled "Neighbouring Fields", Alexandra Bergson is already a woman of forty years old, unmarried, who owns a very rich farm. As it is, her suffering begins here. She is destined to make irrecoverable sacrifices for her success.

Willa Gather gives us no description about the lives Alexandra and her brothers are supposed to have lived during these 16 years except a few passages in her recollecting remark. And the plot gradually comes to comprise the story of her youngest brother Emil, for whom, she says, she worked

and built the farm. Emil is twenty-one and very scarcely remembers "the hard times," which means that, though they are siblings, he is one generation younger than his sister and his two elder brothers. Actually in Part II and Part III Emil Bergson and his lover Marie Shabata have a consequential role in the progress of the story and also, in Part IV, they are the central characters.

The story concerning Alexandra proper in Part II begins from Carl's visit to her house and ends with his second departure. He visits her after 16 years' absence with "urban appearance" on his way, he says, from New York to Alaska "to try the gold-fields." While she welcomes him in a rupture of joy, his visits produce discord between her and the two brothers. Worried by Carl's prolonged stay, they begin to suspect that, by marrying her, he will get hold of her property which, they insist, ought to be shared with them or to be bequeathed to their children. After a bitter dispute Alexandra and the two brothers are completely alienated. Thus her success only augments family disruption.

Carl calls himself a "fortune-hunter," but is not at all successful either as an artist or as a businessman. As a matter of course, Carl knows about himself.

"You see... measured by your standard here, I'm a failure. ... I've enjoyed a great many things, but I've got nothing to show for it all." (105)

Actually his materialistic success or failure does not matter either to the heroine or to the author. In spite of his words, Alexandra envies him for the life he has been living. She answers his confession:

"I'd rather have had your freedom than my land." (105)

This is one of the crucial remarks in discussing the theme of *O Pioneers!*, because here we see the essence of sacrifice she had to make. She believes she has sacrificed her own freedom in return for becoming the landowner, that is, at this stage, she is not aware of the essential value of the land. Significantly, she compares her land with Carl's free, unrestricted life, laying greater value on his freedom. Indeed, the word "free" or "freedom," appearing in this book more than ten times, is the key word in looking into the motif of this work. Alexandra means by "freedom" the freedom of mobility; namely, the freedom to go out into the world. She devotes all her youth to exploiting the soil, with the result that, as she puts it, she has been "tied to the plough." It is no wonder that she longs for Carl's freedom to go anywhere without any restraint.

In their conversation Carl Linstrum very cogently illustrates negative aspects of city life, calling himself "a rolling stone" without any "background" of his own.

"... All we have ever managed to do is to pay our rent, the exorbitant rent ... for a few square feet of space,..." (106)

Having heard his words and "understood what he meant," she nevertheless says:

"We pay a high rent, too, though we pay differently. We grow hard and heavy here. We don't move lightly and easily as you do, and our minds get stiff. If the world were no wider than my cornfields, if there were not something beside this, I wouldn't feel that it is much worth while to work. No, I would rather have Emil like you than like them." (106)

Having forfeited her freedom of moving "lightly and easily," she tries to compensate this sacrifice by putting her youngest brother Emil into the world that is "wider than [her] cornfield." To interpret Willa Cather's concept of this novel and of the American frontier itself, the following remark is to be noted.

"I really built it [the house] for Emil. ... He is so different from us! ... I'm sure it was to have sons like Emil and to give them a chance, that father left the old country ... he is going to have a chance, a whole chance; that's what I've worked for." (100)

She is a pioneer woman whose aim of life ought to be a rich, successful farmer by pioneering the soil. But, paradoxically enough, having become a successful landowner, she thinks one has no "chance" unless one goes out of the land. The above passage shows that Willa Cather's theme is not to recite the struggle and success of the pioneers.

Emil, the youngest brother, is Alexandra's pride and hope, and he nearly realizes her dream. He is thinking of leaving the frontier to force himself away from Marie Shabata, a married woman living in the farm which used to be the Linstrums'. On the same day that Emil tells her of his plan to leave for Mexico, Carl Linstrum, who has been staying with Alexandra for almost a month, tells her he will leave again. Though he shows contempt to Oscar and Lou, he still has enough intelligence and reason to make an objective view of himself, who, he admits, is "a failure", materialistically at least. He leaves Nebraska with the following statement, which barely implies that Carl and Alexandra are thinking of marriage.

"I cannot even ask you to give me a promise until I have something to offer you... I know that I am going away on my own account. I must have something to show for myself." (153)

He never shows up in Part III and Part IV. And his next and last appearance comes in the last ten pages of Part V named "Alexandra." At any rate, in a single day she is estranged from her brothers and, further, both Emil and Carl leave her house.

"I wonder why I have been permitted to prosper, if it is only to take my friends away." (154) In Part II her sorrow and repentance becomes so deep that she expresses a negative view of her struggle and success in America, harboring even doubts about their family's immigration from Europe to the new continent, for she hopes "her dead father is among the old people of his blood and country." (155) Part II ends with this pessimistic, heart-rending tone.

But in fact this hardship is small as compared to the one she goes through in the following chapters. The tragedy is that Emil for whom she insists she has worked, and Mari Shabata who is her only friend and sympathizer after Carl has left, are murdered by Marie's husband, Frank Shabata. Due to the kind of life she has lived, Alexandra, the author says, has a "blind side." She is an imaginative woman indeed, but her imagination is not the kind that is needed to guess what is going on in the minds of the two young couple. This "defect" also results from her life of devoting herself to the farm. Consequently she feels responsible for the death of Emil and Marie.

She often felt that she herself had been more to blame than poor Frank. (240-241)

She has put too much of her life and her personality into her farm to develop the kind of imagination for guessing what arises in young lovers' mind. She is not aware of Emil's frustrated mind nor Marie's secret sentiment to him, and, accordingly, cannot stop the "opportunity of throwing Marie and Emil together," which, she thinks, led to the disaster. The greatest tragedy she has to endure is the death of her youngest brother for whom she has struggled and for whom she has sacrificed her own personal life as a woman.

Some critics have insisted that the episode about Emil and Marie makes the whole structure of this

novel ambiguous because the main frame, the central figure of which is Alexandra, is not convincingly interwoven with the subplot regarding Emil and Marie. But the story of Emil and his death should be seen in the context of the heroine's life, that is to say, the story of the two young couple is not " a different kind of novel."¹⁰

Losing what she had worked for, she begins to feel "actually tired of life," and longs "to be free from her own body."

We should see here the illusion which occasionally appears in Alexandra since she was a young girl and which has puzzled the readers of *O Pioneers!*. The first appearance of it is in Book III:

... she used to have an illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by someone very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carried her. ... he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat. ... She could feel herself being carried swiftly off across the field. ... After such a reverie... she would stand in a tin tub and prosecute her bath with vigor, finishing it by pouring buckets of cold well-water over her gleaming white body which no man on the Divide could have carried very far.

... Then... she had the old sensation of being... carried by a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness. (175-176)

Many critics associate these passages with her sexuality. However, as is seen in the fact that in these short passages the word "carry" appears six times, the illusion suggests that the heroine always harbors the longing of being "carried away." While she cherishes the land, she always has the latent desire to be carried away from the bonds of it. This frustrated desire thus manifests itself in this illusion. It also appears when she is in total despair after Emil's death, and this fact suggests that this symbolization cannot be explained only by sexuality.

Now, her loneliness and despair are so great that she begins to feel that "what is left for life" seems unimportant. One interesting thing is that she comes to identify her plight with Frank Shabata, the killer of Emil and Marie. Meeting Frank at the Penitentiary and recognizing that she has "not much more left in her life than he" she feels she is confined in "a wider prison-house." A "disgust of life" weighs heavily upon her heart.

After she comes out "into the sunlight," however, she begins to realize that the land is where she wants to return and to be healed.

She wished she were back on the Divide. (253)

Seemingly, it is strange that the heroine in such a state of depression is invigorated by a single telegram that comes from Carl Linstrum, for, as is said before, Willa Cather has scarcely shown any sign of romance between them. Now that Emil is dead, she has nothing in life to live for. She must find something to live for or to live with. Rather, the author herself has to find the life that the heroine would live for the rest of her life. And Carl Linstrum is the one who brings what Alexandra longs for.

The author says Alexandra "had never been in love" and she is very deliberate in avoiding their

10. Susie Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

physical, or sexual side. Moreover, in this last stage he still has nothing "to show for himself" or nothing "to offer her." Then, what does Carl bring when he comes back for the last time?

All things considered, Carl's role in this novel is, after all, to offer freedom she has longed for since she was a young girl. He gives the heroine what she has tried to give Emil. He is the very person who ensures her the freedom to go out into the world. Carl is her salvation.

In this connection there is one small but actually very symbolical episode told by Alexandra concerning an attempted suicide named Carrie Jensen. Any reader will note that her name "Carrie" is symbolic. "Carrie" gets despondent to think that life in the frontier is "just the same thing over and over" and she cannot "see the use of it." However, being sent over to Iowa for a change of air by her folks, she becomes "perfectly cheerful," having known that she is living "in a world that's so big and interesting." Alexandra's yearning for freedom from the land into the outside world is so strong that she declares here in this stage: "I am like Carrie Jensen."

At the last section of *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra and Carl talk, rather casually, about going to Alaska where he has an enterprise of prospecting a mine. This conversation is to be noted in looking into the author's intention.

"I shall like to go up there [to Alaska] with you in the spring. I haven't been on the water since I crossed the ocean, when I was a little girl." (259)

Carl Linstrum is not the man who appears in her dream with the golden arms that lift her body up so lightly, but is the very person who carries Alexandra out of her farm to show the world that is "wider than [her] cornfield." That is, Alexandra is freed through Carl Linstrum. However, the following confirmation must be kept in mind.

"But you would never ask me to go away for good, could you?" (260)

She not only gains the pass to the outside world through Carl but also renews her love and domination over land on which she is firmly rooted. In Part II we have seen her attach greater value to Carl's freedom than to her land. But the ideal might be to obtain both if it is possible. Carl's final return to Alexandra changes the ideal into actuality. Even when he finally reappears in the scene, he remains a person without any success either as a businessman or as an artist. Though he talks to Alexandra about the enterprise he is undertaking in Alaska, we don't know whether it will go well or not. For the author, as well as for the heroine, it is of no concern at all whether he will be successful or not.

When she comes home to her land from the Penitentiary, Carl Linstrum, having just returned, is waiting for her.

"There is a great peace here, Carl, and freedom ... I thought when I came out of that prison, where poor Frank is, that I should never feel free again. But I do, here." (260)

Now that she comes to share Carl's freedom, she realized that freedom does exist in the land, too. Carl says to her:

"You belong to the land." (260)

And she says:

"The land belongs to the future." (261)

The land that "belongs to the future" gives freedom, which she desperately tried to give Emil. Thus the land also gives her salvation. When a mortal human being realizes and respects the eternity of the

land, he gains absolute freedom. In this way, she restores part of the sacrifices she has made. Willa Cather made the statement that in this work the land is the hero. The land is the place where people are muffled, protected and consoled. When she gains the freedom to the outside world through Carl and, also, stands up on the land she loves and belongs to, she is healed and given the complete salvation.