



CONDEMNED TO BE FREE: ECOLOGICAL ANXIETY AND THE FREEDOM OF THE LAND IN WILLA CATHER'S *MY ÁNTONIA AND O PIONEERS!*

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*This article examines ecological anxiety and freedom in Willa Cather's **My Ántonia and O Pioneers!**, exploring how the American prairie is depicted not as a passive backdrop but as a volatile, shaping force in human experience. The frontier emerges as a space of contradiction, offering both promise and disorientation, where vastness and unpredictability evoke not only freedom, but vulnerability and unease. This ecological anxiety is intertwined with the emotional and psychological tensions of frontier life, challenging the myth of individual mastery over the land. Freedom, in Cather's work, is not marked by escape or conquest, but by endurance, rootedness, and negotiation with both environmental forces and social expectations. Through close textual analysis, the article highlights how both novels portray the prairie as a site where traditional ideals of self-determination and progress are complicated by natural resistance and existential doubt. Women's experiences are central to this vision, presenting alternative models of autonomy grounded in resilience and connection rather than domination. By reading Cather's prairie fiction through ecocritical and structural frameworks of anxiety, the article reveals how literary representations of the frontier resist romanticisation and instead foreground the uneasy interplay between land, identity, and belonging. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of how early twentieth-century American literature reflects the psychological and environmental dimensions of settler life.*

Keywords: Willa Cather, Ecological Anxiety, Women's Freedom, American Prairie Fiction, Frontier Narrative

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INTRODUCTION

In the landscapes of Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, the Nebraskan prairie is more than mere backdrop; it is an active presence that shapes the emotional and existential contours of her characters' lives (Martin, 1969, p. 485). *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* are both set on the Nebraskan prairie and chronicle the lives of immigrant communities as they navigate the challenges of frontier life. *O Pioneers!* follows Alexandra Bergson, the daughter of Swedish immigrants, who inherits her family's farm upon her father's death and transforms it into a thriving enterprise through her vision, determination, and deep connection to the land. The novel charts Alexandra's personal and emotional growth as she navigates the tensions between individual aspiration, familial duty, and societal expectations. *My Ántonia*, framed as a memoir by narrator Jim Burden, recounts his memories of Ántonia Shimerda, a spirited Bohemian girl whose life unfolds against the backdrop of hardship, migration, and rural labour. Through Jim's eyes, Ántonia emerges as a symbol of resilience and vitality, embodying the intimate bonds between people, memory, and landscape. Both novels, while differing in narrative structure and voice, explore the complexities of identity, endurance, and belonging in a world where freedom and struggle are deeply entwined with the land itself.

Drawing on her own childhood experience of living in Red Hawk, Nebraska, Cather's early life informs a great deal of her outlook on the environment and the development of her characters, and also helped to give her an appreciation of the prairie (Laegreid, 2007, pp. 101; Mullins, 2001, p. 124). Indeed, there is a suggestion that many early acquaintances served as the inspiration for characters in her novels (Stouck, 1982, p. 225). These novels, long

celebrated for their depiction of frontier life, offer not only a discursive window on settlement and memory but also a nuanced exploration of ecological fragility and the conditions of women's autonomy (Laird, 1992, p. 243). At a time when the American West was often mythologised as a site of masculine conquest and limitless promise through the taming of the wilderness, Cather's prairie fiction offers a strikingly different vision, distinct from the typical American dream narrative (Miller Jr., 1972, pp. 113-4; Smith, 1950). Hers is a depiction in which the land is both bountiful and brutal. Freedom is hard-won and often gendered, and the human relationship with nature is marked by unease as much as harmony.

The prairie's immensity, both its stark emptiness and sublime beauty, simultaneously promises and withholds freedom, inviting settlers to dream of prosperity while constantly reminding them of their insignificance and impermanence on the landscape. This paradox engenders a form of ecological anxiety, wherein the settler is caught between the mythic promise of dominion over nature and the reality of nature's enduring agency. The act of settlement, tied up within the history of migration, with its attempts to cultivate, demarcate, and master the land, is frequently depicted as tenuous and fragile (Mayblin & Turner, 2021; Paul, 2014, pp. 312-4). In the case of Cather's novels, Barnard (1994, p. 22) has commented that the wonder is how the frontier was tamed so quickly. In a broader sense, the frontier becomes less a stage for Manifest Destiny than a site of quiet existential struggle, where the overwhelming presence of the natural world undermines the myth of the self-made pioneer. Manifest destiny, in this reading, refers to the belief in nineteenth-century American exceptionalism, whereby it was believed Americans were divinely ordained to expand across North America and to tame





the wild frontier (Cunningham, 2021; Isenberg & Richards Jr., 2017). The land, far from being neutral, is shown to have its own agency that shapes and often constrains the very freedoms and opportunities that the settler-colonial project depends upon.

This uneasy relationship with the land is discussed through the gendered dynamics of Cather's fiction, particularly in her complex portrayals of women on the prairie. In *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, female characters often exhibit a form of grounded resilience that stems from their profound, embodied connection to the land and environment (Clasen, 2013, p. 93; Greenbaum, 1999, p. 98). Women like Alexandra Bergson and Ántonia Shimerda are marked not only by their strength and independence but also by their intimacy with the rhythms of the land, its seasons, labours, and silences. Indeed, the changing of seasons often foreshadows dramatic events in Cather's work (Feger, 1970, p. 776; Miller Jr., 1958, pp. 479-80). Their experiences build a unique kind of freedom that isn't based on mobility or detachment, but in the ability to remain, to endure, and to claim space in a world that often seeks to marginalise or domesticate them. This freedom, however, is always moderated by the constraints of patriarchal and societal expectations. These expectations are largely what direct Jim and the young men of Black Hawk society to be wary of the promiscuous immigrant women who offend with their sexuality and liberality (Fisher-Wirth, 2003, p. 188; Selzer, 1989, pp. 51-2). By foregrounding these tensions, Cather complicates the romanticised and mythical image of frontier life and resists a narrative of either victimhood or heroic self-assertion. Instead, she offers a nuanced vision of the prairie woman in which freedom is shaped as much by the land and ecological forces as by cultural and social structures (Forbes, 1995, p. 105). In doing so, Cather subtly reorients the

frontier myth, revealing it to be as much a story of constraint and survival as of possibility and reinvention.

This article argues that *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* can be read through the lens of ecological anxiety and women's freedom, offering a more nuanced discussion. These are frameworks that foreground the volatility of the environment and the possibilities for female self-determination within settler-colonial landscapes. In doing so, Cather's work invites reconsideration not only of frontier narratives but of how land, gender, and identity are braided together in the making of American literary tradition. This offers new insights into traditional perspectives on American pastoral and Western novels (Yukman, 1988, pp. 96-7). To adequately address these themes, it is necessary to understand the underlying concepts of anxiety and freedom. Anxiety, as understood through Lacanian theory, arises not from the threat or danger itself but from the sudden appearance of an object that signals potential disruption or unease to the subject (Lacan, 2016, pp. 75-6, 138). This fundamental structure of anxiety helps illuminate the emotional landscapes within Willa Cather's frontier narratives. Søren Kierkegaard's comparison between anxiety and dizziness offers a useful framework through which to understand the experiences of characters in *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*. Kierkegaard (2015) suggests that when one gazes into the imagined abyss of anxiety, one becomes dizzy. Thus, the disorientation stems as much from the abyss itself as from the individual confronting it (Teggin, 2021, p. 9). This dizziness, or anxiety, emerges in moments when characters are faced with the full weight of freedom and possibility, and it often limits their capacity for self-determination. Anxiety may thus be considered as a counterbalancing force to freedom.





Ecological anxiety reflects a growing cultural and psychological unease about humanity's fraught relationship with the natural environment. This is often a fear that ranges from apprehension to antagonism toward the forces of nature, as described in Simon Estok's (2018; 2009) concept of ecophobia. While the closely linked postcolonial field of colonial anxiety, relevant due to the colonial connotations of the settler-colonial process, traditionally centres on the disorientation experienced by settlers facing unfamiliar lands and peoples, this study approaches such anxiety as one facet of a broader human discomfort with place, freedom and belonging (Carver, 2019; Guha, 1997, pp. 483-4; Teggin, 2020, pp. 1-3). In this reading, the environment plays a significantly more prominent role. Recent scholarship in ecocriticism has emphasised how environmental fears and uncertainties shape literary representations, revealing tensions between human aspiration for freedom and the constraints imposed by nature (Caesarine et al, 2024; Ryan, 2020; Wulandari, 2017). By integrating insights from these discussions, this study examines how anxiety serves as a counterpoint to the promise of freedom on the American prairie, shaping characters' experiences and identities within the vast, often harsh landscapes they inhabit. This interdisciplinary approach enables a deeper understanding of how *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!* capture the uneasy balance between freedom and vulnerability on the frontier.

ECOLOGICAL ANXIETY AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE PRAIRIE

The prairie in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!* is, as above, more than a mere setting; it is a living presence that embodies both possibility and danger. This landscape, with its boundless horizons and harsh realities, evokes a deep

ecological anxiety; this is the sense of human vulnerability amid the overwhelming forces of nature (Estok, 2018). Unlike traditional frontier myths that celebrate settlement and mastery over the land, Cather's portrayal reveals the prairie as a space where human ambition, seen through her characters, is tempered by the land's enduring indifference and power (Steinhagen, 1999, p. 64). The settlers' attempts to impose order and cultivate the soil are persistently met with uncertainty, exposing the dichotomy between control and submission. This section explores how Cather's narrative captures this tension, revealing the prairie not only as a site of physical hardship but as a psychological and existential battleground where characters confront the limits of their freedom and agency. This is linked to what Frus and Corkin (1999, p. 37) have written about Cather's desire to present the realities of Nebraskan prairie life. Through close analysis of key passages, the interplay between ecological anxiety and the struggle for belonging emerges as central to understanding the novels' deeper engagement with landscape and identity.

Figure 1, below, is a good starting point for the discussion, as it illustrates ecological anxiety as it emerges in early twentieth-century prairie literature. Cather's language here emphasises the emotional and existential weight of the environment, foregrounding the landscape as a central force in the life of her characters. The description of the "little town" vanishing behind the "swell of the prairie" makes the reader reflect on people's insignificance, in which human presence is rendered as temporary. This is not a pastoral image of rural life nestled in harmony with the land, but rather a confrontation with terrain that appears fundamentally opposed to habitation. The land "received them into its bosom" is a phrase that might suggest comfort, but in this context, it reads as cold and engulfing.





This paradox between the metaphor of care and the reality of the land's harshness mirrors the larger emotional disconnect that characterises ecological anxiety. As previously discussed, this form of anxiety involves a disquieting awareness of nature's power, its volatility, and its refusal to conform to human desires (Estok, 2009). The "stern frozen country" and "sombre wastes" resist the settler's perceived dominance; they are not empty spaces waiting to be transformed, but wild landscapes that challenge human resilience.

"The little town behind them had vanished as if it had never been, had fallen behind the swell of the prairie, and the stern frozen country received them into its bosom. The homesteads were few and far apart; here and there a windmill gaunt against the sky, a sod house crouching in a hollow. But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty."

Figure 1, Willa Cather – O Pioneers!, p. 17.

What is particularly striking is the boy, Alexandra's brother Emil's, recognition of the futility of human endeavour in the face of this landscape. His resigned bitterness signals the embodied nature of ecological anxiety discussed by Estok (2018; 2009). It is not simply an awareness of vulnerability, but an acknowledgement of the land's power. This undermines the frontier myth, particularly the notions of progress through perseverance and Manifest Destiny, which posits the idea of overcoming rival powers (Smith, 1947, pp. 373-5). This portrayal strongly aligns with the theoretical framework of ecological anxiety. As per Lacan's notion of anxiety, what unsettles the subject is not an imminent threat, but the sudden appearance of a disturbing truth reality. For example, the truth of human fragility and environmental indifference. The abyss that

Kierkegaard associates with anxiety is viewed through the stripping away of comforting narratives surrounding settlement and home, and reinforces the transience of humanity. In this way, *Figure 1* stages an existential encounter with freedom through what Kierkegaard (2015, p. 75) discusses as dizziness, in which freedom is constrained by an environment that is too vast and too unyielding to be truly known or controlled. The "savage kind of beauty" referenced in *Figure 1* also echoes Estok's (2009) notion of ecophobia, wherein the natural world inspires not only reverence but fear, contempt, or avoidance. However, Cather does not demonise the land. Rather, she presents it as complex, beautiful, and formidable. In this way, ecological anxiety is not purely negative; it can inspire reverence and an opportunity for rethinking the human relationship with the natural world.

Figure 2, below, deepens Willa Cather's portrayal of ecological anxiety by drawing attention to the disorientation that arises when the natural environment resists human presence. The "absence of human landmarks" is described as "depressing and disheartening," indicating that the emotional experience of the frontier is one of hardship rather than triumph, leading to anxiety. The core of this anxiety lies in humanity's insignificance and the fruitlessness of their struggles, with the prairie exposing the limits of human agency and permanence. Homes are swallowed by the terrain, and the sod houses are "only the unescapable ground in another form." This picks up on a very important point made by Rachel Collins (2012, pp. 43, 48), in which the earth is linked to both strength and brutality, simultaneously offering both a home and danger. Of this, she has noted that the lack of trees or other topographical shelter on the prairie has necessitated the rapid erection of networks of sod houses and dugouts to house the immigrant population. This blurring of the



boundary between human architecture and nature destabilises the settler's sense of agency and home. Rather than remaking the land in their image, as Marin (1931, pp. 136-8) suggests, the settlers' homes were often engulfed by it, and their homes were rendered extensions of the soil rather than monuments to civilisation. This disintegration of the distinction between nature and culture undermines the ideological underpinnings of Manifest Destiny and challenges the notion of human advancement as a conquest of the wild (Paul, 2014, pp. 312-4).

"Of all the bewildering things about a new country, the absence of human landmarks is one of the most depressing and disheartening. The houses on the Divide were small and were usually tucked away in low places; you did not see them until you came directly upon them. Most of them were built of the sod itself, and were only the unescapable ground in another form. The roads were but faint tracks in the grass, and the fields were scarcely noticeable. The record of the plow was insignificant, like the feeble scratches on a stone left by prehistoric races, so indeterminate that they may, after all, be only the markings of a glacier, and not a record of human strivings."

Figure 2, Willa Cather – O Pioneers!, p. 20.

The thematic disorientation is reinforced by the imagery of the roads and fields being barely perceptible as "faint tracks in the grass" and "feeble scratches on a stone", evoking the idea that the human presence and impact on the prairie are ephemeral. The psychological effect of being aware of living in a world where the environment does not reflect one's desires is central to the experience of ecological anxiety, with vanishing environmental baselines a central part of this (Pihkala, 2021, pp. 120-4; Robbins & Moore, 2013, pp. 4-6). This form of anxiety is not rooted in immediate danger but in the deeper, more abstract, realisation that nature is indifferent to human strivings. As per Lacanian theory, anxiety arises when the subject is confronted with the sudden appearance of something that

disrupts the structure of their world (Lacan, 2016, pp. 75-6, 138). In this case, the challenge is creating a home and livelihood on the land. Ultimately, *Figure 2* captures a key dimension of ecological anxiety; not the fear of an active threat, but the lingering knowledge that human endeavours may be impermanent in the face of ecological scale. Cather's vision in *O Pioneers!* is one in which the prairie resists romanticisation and instead functions as a mirror for human vulnerability and, indeed, authenticity, in the colonial-migrational experience. The settlers are not triumphant agents of Turnerian civilisation, but transient figures in a landscape that remains largely indifferent to their presence (Carden, 1999, p. 279).

Figure 3 from Cather's *My Ántonia* highlights the tensions between human desire for home and permanence, as well as the broader challenge of homesteading and the settler-colonial order. The proposed burial of Mr. Shimerda "under the very stake that marked the corner" signals a desire for permanence and a profound emotional connection to a specific place on the land that resists displacement. However, this desire is immediately complicated by Jim's grandfather's prediction of future development, which involves the imposition of fences and roads, adding a grid-like logic of land commodification and state planning (Cather, 2023, pp. 81-5). This moment illustrates a form of ecological anxiety rooted in the conflict between emotional and spiritual attachment to the land and the encroachment of industrialisation that would typify early twentieth-century America (Conlogue, 2001, p. 3). The prairie, initially experienced as open and undefined, is here imagined as something that will soon be surveyed and divided, highlighting the transience of land ownership (Ramirez, 2010, p. 97). The anxiety emerges not from the land itself, but from what will be done to it, and, by extension, what will be erased in the process.



"They talked excitedly about where they should bury Mr. Shimerda; I gathered that the neighbors were all disturbed and shocked about something. It developed that Mrs. Shimerda and Ambrosch wanted the old man buried on the southwest corner of their own land; indeed, under the very stake that marked the corner. Grandfather had explained to Ambrosch that some day, when the country was put under fence and the roads were confined to section lines, two roads would cross exactly on that corner."

Figure 3, Willa Cather – *My Ántonia*, p. 81.

This passage also raises questions about settler-colonial relationships to land. The Shimerdas' desire to bury Mr. Shimerda on their homestead suggests an attempt to inscribe familial and cultural meaning onto the soil. However, the narrative reminds us that the prairie is already embedded in broader meanings and trajectories that disregard personal histories and cultural memory (Lucenti, 2000, p. 194). The ecological anxiety here lies in the awareness that land, though it may seem intimate and sacred, is never fully safe from the threat of expansion, regulation, and industrialisation. Ultimately, Cather critiques the dissonance between lived experience and imposed order, illustrating how ecological anxiety on the frontier is not only about natural forces, but also about human systems that threaten to displace even the most deeply felt connections to place. As Stouck (1982, p. 225) puts it, it is not so much a celebration of pioneer life as an elegy to its passing.

Figure 4 is one of the novel's most symbolically dense, capturing a moment where the natural and the manmade converge. The silhouetted plough, "black against the molten red" of the setting sun, briefly assumes a mythic stature. In this image, the plough becomes a monument, a testament to human labour and presence on the prairie, rendered timeless by the natural scene. However, this romanticisation is almost immediately undercut. Just as quickly as the vision appears, it vanishes. The sun drops, darkness rises, and

the "forgotten plough" sinks back to its own likeness somewhere on the prairie." What was once monumental becomes lost in the landscape. This extract stages a tension between the desire to inscribe meaning onto the land and the land's quiet resistance to that inscription, a key dynamic in the experience of ecological anxiety. Here, the plough operates as a symbol of human intervention in nature, its placement in the field signifying both abandonment and continuity. Its temporary transformation into an object of awe gestures toward the dream of control, permanence, and human legacy that is so closely associated with the American dream (Miller Jr., 1974, p. 115). The brevity of the scene evokes the anxiety that even acts of cultivation and settlement, central to the settler-colonial project, may ultimately leave no lasting trace. It is, as such, an emblem of the future and change to the prairie (Fisher, 1990, p. 35).

"Presently, we saw a curious thing; there were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disk rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared in the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment, we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share – black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun."

"Even while we whispered about it, our vision disappeared; the ball dropped and dropped until the red tip went beneath the earth. The fields below us were dark, the sky was growing pale, and that forgotten plough had sunk back to its own likeness somewhere on the prairie."

Figure 4, Willa Cather – *My Ántonia*, p. 169.

Furthermore, the plough's accidental framing by the sun reinforces the passivity of the moment; this was not a scene arranged by human hand, but a chance alignment witnessed by observers





briefly caught between wonder and melancholy. The land's "limpid, gold-washed sky" contrasts sharply with the "black figure," underscoring the visual and thematic dissonance between human artefact and natural world. In this contrast lies a subtle reminder of ecological anxiety. The land not only dwarfs human effort but also absorbs and effaces it. Cather uses this passage to gesture toward a deeper philosophical reflection on temporality, fragility, and the limits of human endeavour. This is very strongly linked to what Holmes (1999, p. 336) has written of the novel being one of both exile and freedom. The vision of the plough offers a momentary transcendence, but its impermanence undercuts it. The prairie, once again, asserts its vastness, not in hostility, but in quiet endurance, evoking a landscape where freedom and futility exist side by side.

THE COUNTRY GIRL, THE IMMIGRANT, AND THE WEIGHT OF FREEDOM

In *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*, the "country girl" emerges as an embodiment of the freedom afforded by the prairie. These immigrant women, shaped by both their cultural heritage and the hardship of the frontier, often display behaviours that challenge the restrictive social norms of urban American settings. These are behaviours that appeared scandalous or unsettling to the more conservative local communities (Cather, 2023, pp. 135-8; Yukman, 1988, p. 98). The land itself, with its openness and lack of structure, affords these women a kind of personal liberty that is unavailable in more traditional settings. This freedom enables them to assert independence, express physicality, and navigate their identities outside conventional expectations. However, this freedom is complex and double-edged. While the prairie fosters independence, it also imposes burdens of isolation, social scrutiny, domestic challenges, and the ongoing negotiation between

individual desire and communal belonging (Clasen, 2013, pp. 95-8; Quantic, 2002, pp. 103-5). This section examines how Cather associates the country girls' unconventional behaviour with the liberating yet demanding environment of the land. This is in contrast to their male counterparts, who often feel constrained or out of place. It becomes clear that the country girl's freedom is inseparable from the land's expansive possibilities and its harsh realities, positioning her at the heart of Cather's discussion of gender, culture, and identity on the frontier.

Figure 5, below, helps us to reflect on the dichotomy between freedom and anxiety, particularly when viewed through the lens of the immigrant experience. *Figure 5* opens the thoughts of Carl, Alexandra Bergson's love interest, into the reality of being an immigrant in American cities. Carl's experience was different from Alexandra's as he left the prairie to work in the city, whereas she remained to work the land. This passage articulates a condition of rootlessness, alienation, and emotional dislocation that closely parallels the psychological realities faced by immigrants, especially those who leave behind communal identities in search of opportunities, only to find themselves geographically coded and lost in an unfamiliar country (Wilhite, 2010, pp. 269-70). Carl's lament that "freedom so often means that one isn't needed anywhere" captures the paradox at the heart of immigrant freedom in the New World. For many, the journey to America was animated by the promise of liberty, mobility, and freedom from the old world's structure; the American dream, as per Miller Jr. (1974, pp. 112-5). However, as Carl articulates, this freedom often translates into anonymity, marginality, and dispossession. In the absence of a home or community, freedom slips away and instead becomes a source of anxiety. This is reminiscent of colonial anxiety and the loss of home in the empire (Guha, 1997, pp. 483-4). The immigrant,





Carl suggests, may attain formal liberty, but at the cost of social legibility and belonging.

“Freedom so often means that one isn’t needed anywhere. There you are, an individual, you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the cities, there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody, we own nothing. When one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him. Our landlady and the delicatessen man are our mourners, and we leave nothing behind us but a frockcoat and a fiddle, or an easel, or a typewriter, or whatever tool we got our living by. All we have ever managed to do is to pay our rent, the exorbitant rent that one has to pay for a few square feet of space near the heart of things. We have no house, no place, no people of our own. We live in the streets, in the parks, in the theatres. We sit in restaurants and concert halls and look at the hundreds of our own kind and shudder.”

Figure 5, Willa Cather – O Pioneers!, p. 80.

This is especially resonant in the context of settler-colonial landscapes such as those depicted in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, where immigrant settlers attempt to inscribe themselves on the land, building homes, farms, and communities in the face of environmental hardship and cultural estrangement. The prairie offers a unique kind of freedom through its vastness and the potential for prosperity, but it also generates anxiety through the fear of failure or being forgotten. The “feeble scratches” left by the plough, as noted above in Cather’s work, speak of how tenuous this human inscription can be (Martin, 1969, p. 314). In contrast to this rural struggle to belong, the city, as described in this passage, is a space where the immigrant is free from a fixed identity but is also thereby erased. In this reading, freedom is dehumanising rather than liberating, and anxiety emerges not from fear of repression, but from a disorienting absence of structure, ties, or purpose. The immigrants are thus caught between the harsh demands of carving out a permanent life in an alien land and the equally unsettling dislocation of urban modernity. The

country girls, such as Alexandra, however, retain a sense of identity and freedom because they are centred on the land. The freedom-anxiety dichotomy serves as a lens through which to understand the emotional and cultural costs of migration, and how the very promise of liberty can mask a deeper, often unspoken, instability (Teggin, 2021, p. 9).

Figure 6 also encapsulates the tensions between freedom and anxiety that permeate Willa Cather’s portrayal of life on the prairie, particularly for those like Alexandra’s brother, Emil, who are caught between the desire for autonomy and the weight of existential restlessness. It highlights the emotional ambiguity at the heart of the American frontier myth surrounding Manifest Destiny, with the promise of boundless opportunity shadowed by the burden of choice, the unpredictability of seasonal fortunes, and the repetitiveness of rural life (Reaver, 1968, p. 19). Emil’s desire to leave the prairie reflects a yearning for self-determination, which outwardly aligns with the desire for freedom. However, that freedom is complicated by an undercurrent of frustration and paralysis. Marie’s remark, “There are so many, many things you can do,” is meant to affirm the openness of possibility, yet Emil’s reply, “And there are so many, many things I can’t do”, undermines this optimism. His tone suggests that the vast range of choices does not translate into meaningful agency; rather, it contributes to a kind of Kierkegaardian dizziness in the face of the abyss of freedom. This reaction is emblematic of ecological anxiety not in the sense of direct environmental threat, but in the more profound psychological sense of dislocation and powerlessness in a landscape that seems indifferent. Emil’s comment about pulling “the four corners of the Divide together... like a tablecloth” expresses a desire to impose limits on the overwhelming prairie, to either contain it or erase aspects of it.





"What do I want to hang around here for? Alexandra can run the farm all right, without me. I don't want to stand around and look on. I want to be doing something on my own account."

"That's so," Marie sighed. "There are so many, many things you can do. Almost anything you choose."

"And there are so many, many things I can't do." Emil echoed her tone sarcastically. "Sometimes I don't want to do anything at all, and sometimes I want to pull the four corners of the Divide together," – he threw out his arm and brought it back with a jerk, – "So, like a table-cloth. I get tired of seeing men and horses go up and down, up and down."

Figure 6, Willa Cather – O Pioneers!, p. 99.

Within the broader immigrant-settler context of Cather's fiction, this passage also highlights a generational shift. Whereas the first wave of immigrants often contended with physical hardship and environmental resistance, characters like Emil face the more existential problem of freedom (Werden, 2002, p. 200). Unlike the early settlers who carved out a living from the land, Emil is lost, with the soil failing to offer him a true sense of belonging or identity. His alienation is not due to a lack of opportunity, but rather to the absence of societal ties. This is complicated by Marie and Emil being deeply in love, yet Marie, a country girl, is already married to the jealous Frank. Emil's ultimate decision to leave for Mexico is, as such, framed through this lack of freedom (Cather, 2011, pp. 110-2; Charles, 1965, pp. 145-7). Thus, this passage deepens Cather's ongoing meditation on the freedom-anxiety dichotomy. It is not simply that too little freedom constrains, but that too much freedom and, indeed, desire, can induce a paralysing emotional vertigo akin to Kierkegaard's abyss. Emil's restlessness captures this condition, as he is caught between action and inaction.

Figure 7 highlights the perceived threat country girls posed to normative ideals of femininity and class, positioning them at the crux of a cultural anxiety around freedom, sexuality, and social mobility. The country girls, embodied here by figures like Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball, are marked by their visible independence and sensuousness. They stand in sharp contrast to the idealised urban Black Hawk girls, whose association with domestic propriety and ornamental femininity is symbolised by their "best chairs that must not be sat upon" and "hand-painted china that must not be used" (Selzer, 1989, pp. 51-2). These domestic artefacts reflect a static ideal of womanhood which is contained, decorative, and not free. They are possessions rather than participants in life. In contrast, the country girls radiate a disruptive agency that unsettles the rigid social expectations of small-town respectability. While the country girls momentarily captivate the attention of the town's young men, they are simultaneously constructed as a "menace to the social order." Their boldness and the confidence with which they live their public lives challenge the moral codes that restrict women's mobility and expression. Cather succeeds in portraying the depth of internalised constraint not just among women, but among men as well, where social expectations override personal longing or emotional authenticity. Indeed, Jim Burden in *My Ántonia* had the opportunity to marry Lena Lingard, but he passed it by and instead married a socially acceptable wife, which ultimately led to an unhappy marriage (Cather, 2023, pp. 184-91; Miller Jr., 1974, p. 116). His foolish attempt to convert Ántonia into an idealised image of agrarian life, despite her resistance to this, embodies this failure (Stuckey, 1972, pp. 474-6).

"The Black Hawk Boys looked forward to marrying Black Hawk girls, and living in a brand-new little house with best chairs that must not be sat upon, and hand-painted china that must not be used. But sometimes a young fellow would look up from his ledger, or out through the grating of his father's bank, and let his eyes follow Lena Lingard,





as she passed the window with her slow, undulating walk, or Tiny Soderball tripping by in her short skirt and striped stockings.”

“The country girls were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background. But anxious mothers need have felt no alarm. They mistook the mettle of their sons. The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth.”

Figure 7, Willa Cather – *My Ántonia*, p. 139.

Figure 7 thus dramatises a central tension in *My Ántonia*, that is the juxtaposition of female freedom and male anxiety. The country girls are at once symbols of freedom and targets of moral scrutiny. Their presence triggers a collective social unease rooted in the fragility of gender norms and the fear of transgression in the social ecology. They do not conform to the image of women as passive homemakers. Instead, they engage with the world on their terms, through hard work, industry, and mobility. Lena and Tiny, both of whom have established successful businesses on their own, are a good example of this (Cather, 2023, pp. 181, 201; Stouck, 1982, p. 226). In this light, the country girls function as a challenge to patriarchal structures and assert a freedom grounded in lived experience rather than symbolic purity (Fox, 1964, p. 13). However, the social reaction to them in the anxiety of mothers and the restraint of sons underscores how deeply entrenched norms of respectability were in the settler-colonial West. Cather’s treatment of these figures is neither fully celebratory nor condemning. Instead, she uses them to reveal the uneasy balance between freedom and conformity. In doing so, she subtly critiques the cultural forces that domesticate desire and discipline deviance, demonstrating how the boundaries of respectability serve not only to define women but also to limit the emotional freedoms of an entire community (Wetzel, 2008, pp. 278-80).

Figure 8 returns to Cather’s recurring theme of the intimate, redemptive connection between the self and the land. Here, the land is not merely a geographic setting but a source of strength and belonging, and also that of life and death (Pratt, 1972, p. 485). It is through this rootedness that the idea of freedom, particularly for women, is redefined. Alexandra’s comparison between the prairie and the prison from which she has just emerged highlights the stark contrast between confinement and liberation. The prison, associated with judgment and oppression, embodied by Frank’s murder of Emil and Marie, signifies a life stripped of agency (Cather, 2011, pp. 160-2). In contrast, the land represents openness and the ability to inhabit one’s own experience without shame. The phrase “there is a great peace here, Carl, and freedom” is a declaration not of conquest over nature as per Manifest Destiny, but of reconciliation with it. This is a freedom that emerges not from domination, but from a sense of belonging. Carl’s affirmation, “You belong to the land... Now more than ever”, underlines this bond. His recognition affirms that the land does not merely serve as a backdrop to Alexandra’s life, but that it is a part of her identity. This return to the land is not regressive or nostalgic, but redemptive. It allows Alexandra to reconstitute her sense of self outside the constraints of gendered expectations and social pressure (Rosowski, 1989, p. 63).

“I should like to go up there with you in the Spring... But you would never ask me to go away for good, would you?”

“Of course not, my dearest. I think I know how you feel about this country as well as you do yourself.”

“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.”

“You belong to the land,” Carl murmured, “as you have always said. Now more than ever.”

Figure 8, Willa Cather – *O Pioneers!*, pp. 186-7.





Crucially, this vision of freedom is distinct from the traditional, often masculinised frontier ideal of expansion and individualistic assertion. Alexandra's relationship with the land is quiet and content rather than conflicting. It contrasts sharply with the earlier-expressed anxieties of characters like Emil, who feel entrapped by the prairie's endless repetition. Here, the land offers women not monotony but meaning (Gustafson, 1995, pp. 151-3). It reflects Cather's vision of the prairie as a site where female freedom can be rooted rather than restless. It is not freedom from place or responsibility, but freedom through acceptance, through being needed and known. The land, in this respect, becomes a space of healing and freedom, marking a profound moment of clarity within *O Pioneers!* and Cather's broader ecological and feminist sensibility.

CONCLUSION

In *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather presents the Nebraskan prairie as a living entity. It is an expansive and often unforgiving environment that challenges and shapes the lives of those who inhabit it. This landscape is never a passive backdrop; instead, it embodies a complex tension that generates profound ecological anxiety. This anxiety stems from the unpredictable forces of nature, the fragility of human settlement, and the persistent reminder of human vulnerability in the face of environmental power. It unsettles the myth of the frontier as a realm of boundless opportunity, revealing instead a place where freedom is fraught with uncertainty and where the land's agency always shadows the promise of dominion.

Within this fraught environment, however, Cather's works articulate a distinctive vision of freedom that is deeply rooted in place and

community, particularly through her portrayals of women and immigrant settlers. The freedom experienced by the country girls and pioneers is not the unrestrained mobility or individualism often celebrated in frontier mythology. Rather, it is a freedom born of endurance, relational strength, and a committed engagement with the land's rhythms and demands. This grounded freedom challenges conventional ideas about autonomy, suggesting that true agency often arises not from escape or conquest, but from the ability to remain, adapt, and cultivate meaningful connections to both the earth and others.

The women in Cather's novels negotiate a delicate balance between societal constraints and the opportunities offered by the prairie's vastness, carving out emotional sovereignty and self-determination. Their experiences reveal how freedom and anxiety are intertwined, with each shaping the other, and how the frontier's promise is as much about survival and resilience as it is about possibility and reinvention. Together, *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* invite readers to reconsider the frontier narrative by centring ecological anxiety and gendered freedom as key elements of the settler experience. They challenge simplistic triumphalist stories and instead offer a vision of the prairie as a site of ongoing negotiation between human ambition and environmental reality. In doing so, Cather's prairie fiction remains strikingly relevant today, prompting reflection on how our relationships with land, community, and identity continue to shape notions of freedom amid the uncertainties in an ever-changing world.





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