“The History of Every Country Begins in the Heart of a...Woman”: Willa Cather’s Reclamation of the Female American Immigrant Through Edenic Western Narratives

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“THE HISTORY OF EVERY COUNTRY BEGINS IN THE HEART OF A…WOMAN”: WILLA CATHER’S RECLAMATION OF THE FEMALE AMERICAN IMMIGRANT THROUGH EDENIC WESTERN NARRATIVES

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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

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Brigham Young University
April 2024

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ABSTRACT

“THE HISTORY OF EVERY COUNTRY BEGINS IN THE HEART OF A...WOMAN”: WILLA CATHER’S RECLAMATION OF THE FEMALE AMERICAN IMMIGRANT THROUGH EDENIC WESTERN NARRATIVES

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Bachelor of Arts

This thesis analyzes Willa Cather’s Great Plains Trilogy—*O, Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918)—in the context of the immigration boom of the early 1900s and the myth of an “American Eden.” This concept was born of cultural portrayals of the West as dominated by white, male pioneers who subdued the landscape, but Cather’s novels, centered around immigrant families, significantly revise this popular myth. Nativists saw the West as the source of American virtues such as democracy and diligence and viewed sending immigrants West as an essential tool for “Americanization,” the process by which immigrants could work themselves into respectability. However, social and gender constraints in Cather’s novels show this promise of acceptance to be a fiction. Her novels also condemn immigrants who buy into the American commercial mindset and overvalue profit in an effort to fit into their new society. In response to these traditional ideas of Americanization and consumerism, she holds up the efforts of her immigrant heroines who create “new Edens” based on collaboration and harmony and ultimately find both success and fulfillment. In doing so, she offers a new, inclusive view of American identity that redefines the American project of creating one people out of many.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, my thanks to Dr. Kristin Matthews who has supported me through every stage of this project, helped me refine my scattered ideas into something I’m truly proud of, and without whom this thesis simply would not exist. I had no idea that reading *My Ántonia* in your class would change my life, but it undoubtedly has. My thanks as well to Dr. Aaron Eastley for his mentorship throughout my honors journey and his support of this project, and Dr. Dennis Cutchins, whose feedback has been invaluable. Special thanks to Kate Payne and Rachel Gouff, who have read far too many drafts of this thesis and yet somehow always manage to say something nice about it.
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In 1703, a Virginia planter named Robert Beverly was inspired to write a description of the new colony to combat what he saw as an inferior depiction in a London manuscript. Drawing on accounts from Captain Arthur Barlow and John Smith, Beverly painted an “image of America as a new Eden” for curious Londoners, describing the fertile lands and endless opportunities available there (Marx 49). Decades earlier, American ministers like John Winthrop and Cotton Mather had characterized the new colony as set apart or “chosen” by divine authority. Winthrop describes his people as “taken to be [God’s] after a most strict and peculiar manner” (102) and Mather similarly characterizes the people of New England as “a people of God settled in those which were once the Devil’s territories” (166). Building on the Edenic imagery and sense of divine favor, scholar Henry Nash Smith has described this myth of the American frontier as involving a “master symbol of the garden” that “[embraces] a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth” (Smith 123). This metaphor even extends to people who populated the frontier; R.W.B Lewis writes of an American history centering about the heroic figure…” of an “American Adam” who could live “…emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritance of family and race” (Lewis 5). Accounts like Beverly’s and the ones studied by Smith and Lewis lean heavily into the myth of the American frontier as an untamed, virgin land—a New Eden ready to be settled and civilized by “chosen” Anglo-Saxon Americans (of course, such writers blatantly ignored the presence of indigenous Americans that had lived there for centuries).
A variation on the “New Eden” theme emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as the American exceptionalist philosophy of Manifest Destiny captured the nation’s imagination. Not only were Americans a set apart and chosen people but they also had the divine responsibility to spread that “chosenness” to the ends of the earth—or at least the continent. Pioneers set out to tame the rough and Wild West, conquering what writers such as historian Fredrick Jackson Turner repeatedly characterized as a “new world” where “virgin land lay ever just beyond” the horizon (102). And yet, by the early twentieth century, the national belief was that the West was “closed” and with it the “first period of American history” (Turner 16). When there was nothing left in the West to civilize, “the unsettled area…so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there [could] hardly be said to be a frontier line,” American attention turned to the comparatively mundane concerns of social and economic expansion in settled territories, and the days of conquering the frontier began to acquire a mythical stance in many minds (Turner 6). In biblical fashion, Americans seemed to be “cast out” of the possibilities of untamed, unsettled West and into the harsher realities of defining an American identity. This nostalgia created a kind of “American Genesis” myth for the American frontier.

However, like all myths, the tale of an Anglo-Saxon American Adam conquering the frontier in obedience to God’s command was not the reality. Instead, it was primarily Eastern European immigrants who flocked to what we now call the Midwest, particularly those who felt constrained or trapped by city life or those who were looking for a place where “conditions were simple and free” (Turner 107). These immigrants made up nearly 15% of the population increase during this time (MPI). A 1910 census revealed that “in round numbers, there were about nine hundred thousand foreign Americans in [Nebraska] to three hundred thousand native stock,” and other Midwestern states showed similar proportions (“Nebraska”). These immigrants were
chasing their own kind of Eden, hoping to claim the centuries-old promise that writers like John
Smith set up of a new world “where one could “[plant] and [build] a foundation for his
posterity…by God’s blessing and his own industry” (Smith 66). **Public opinion was divided on
how to receive the new arrivals**—while some citizens saw them as a welcome boost to the
American economy, **nativists viewed immigrants as inferior unless they became
“Americanized” by adopting the traditions and norms of Anglo-Saxon settlers at the cost of
their original culture** (Ross 300). They were suspicious and fearful of immigrants’ “alien
sympathies and training,” Catholic or Orthodox backgrounds, and “whether the primal American
stock [was] to be vitiated by the inter-permeation of an inferior race” (“Big Crush”). These fears
of the influence of an “inferior race” covered religious, political, and social ground. In the midst
of them, a young America struggled to define herself against the ever-rising number of foreign
citizens. Many of these “not in my back yard” nativists argued that immigrants should be sent to
the “West, with its millions of acres of land” so that they were not taking up non-existent space
in cities or jobs that “belonged” by right to “established” Americans (Wallis).

Willa Cather’s Great Plains novels—*O, Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915),
and *My Ántonia* (1918)—offer a significant challenge to and revision of the popular myths about
America’s New Eden. Each novel is set in the Midwest and features a young immigrant woman
as its protagonist, providing an immediate contrast to the “American Adam” character many
pictured when they thought of the West. Alexandra Bergson and Ántonia Shimerda both
immigrate to Nebraska with their families as young girls, and Thea Kronborg is a second-
generation immigrant living in a more established community in Colorado. These young women
do follow the typical pioneer narrative, actively working to wrest prosperity from the frontier’s
harsh environment; however, the unique struggles and possibilities stemming from their
positionality as immigrants and women complicate the conventional frontier myth. It is Cather’s immigrant heroines who “[lend themselves] to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true” and are “a rich mine of life” at a time when many believed that “the very decency of the native [was] a handicap to success and to fecundity” (Cather 326; Ross 303). With “universal” attitudes, these young women push back against the idea of an American Adam pioneer and are held up as new Eves who reshape the American Genesis story and national identity.

Connecting Willa Cather to gendered stories of immigration is not new. However, scholarship looking at how Cather revisits and rewrites the myth of “American Adam” as “American Eve,” thereby presenting a fuller and more complex portrait of this time and place in American history, is lacking. Scholars such as Joseph Urgo and Harry F. Thompson have broadly conceptualized Cather’s impact on the American immigrant narrative as it played out in the West, particularly her belief that “on the American frontier, the historically marginal status of the [immigrant] is redefined on heroic terms” (Urgo 48). Her diverse spread of characters and her direct engagement with American myths about the frontier itself has been “hailed as a realistic representation of the European immigrants’ experience in settling the western plains” (Thompson 203). Other scholars, including David Laird, Jennifer Bailey, and Claudia Yukman specifically focus on the ways that Cather’s stories of new frontier and new heroines combined to tackle the gender norms of the early twentieth century. Reading Cather’s novels as complicating a key American origin tale invites a rethinking of America and Americanness at the turn of the twentieth century. Specifically, reading Cather’s work as a revision of both the American Adam and Genesis narratives allows for a more expansive view of American identity that positions female immigrants in all their complexity as triumphant Eve figures, the “material
out of which countries are made” (Ántonia 41). This new narrative positions these heroines as modeling the values of harmony and community that Cather contends will lead America to a fuller realization of its goal of E Pluribus Unum: out of many, one.

“And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden” 2

In the Biblical Genesis story, Eden is an idyllic garden where “every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food” grows spontaneously (Genesis 2:9). The American populace similarly saw the West as an idyll: the land perfect for exploring, planting, and harvesting—and Americanizing immigrants. When the lure of “Manifest Destiny” seemed to have run its course in regard to physical land, many embraced the effort to homogenize American newcomers as their new calling. Social scientists and politicians portrayed the process of “Americanization” as a crucial reform movement, joining the others (temperance, cleaning up cities, etc.) of the early twentieth century. Some reformers acknowledged the institutional struggles that necessitated these reforms; the default assumption among social advocates was that all immigrants would “speedily fill our workhouses, prison and other penal institutions” unless Americans could “improve the industrial and social conditions (“Social Worker”). But instead of pushing for a change in these conditions, more often reformers’ calls to “Americanize” immigrants filled papers and public policies. There were even Harvard college courses dedicated to this sort of well-meaning assimilationism, underscoring its importance in the American psyche (Haskin). These efforts were aimed particularly at the women who would be raising their children in the “new world.” The hope among these reformers was “not only to give the immigrant woman some knowledge of English, but to teach her American ideas on the bringing up of children, the preparation of foods, economy in buying provisions, and certain facts about community life” (Haskin). These domestic “American ideas” were seen as just as essential as the immigrants
adopting American political ideals. Advocates for Americanization believed that a concerted effort to educate the new immigrants would forestall any problems before they began.

Nativists offered another solution to the so-called “immigrant problem”—sending them West. Many writers and social scientists of the twentieth century contended that working the land of the frontier was the best way to inculcate immigrants into the American mindset, hearkening to Turner’s belief that “the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist” (6). If new immigrants were sent straight out West to do hard labor on farms, there would be no chance of them loitering around cities or “corrupting” other new immigrants with “lazy” mindsets. One writer advocated for offering the new immigrant “annual employment, a house and a few acres of his own so that he and his family could live together all the year where they could have some social life and give their children some advantages of education” (“Marshall”). Supporters of this policy asserted that immigrants would catch the democratic spirit that was supposedly omnipresent in the West and assimilate directly into American culture, freeing them from the curse of being “foreign.” They believed, as did Turner, that instead of the “old and fixed society” of the East, “[b]oth native settler and European immigrant saw in this free and competitive movement of the frontier the chance to break the bondage of social rank, and to rise to a higher plane of existence” (62). The malleable social situation of the West appeared to be a veritable Eden that would allow immigrant communities to flourish, as they did not need to fight against any established social structures. The subtext of this argument is that by taking advantage of this golden opportunity—new land, new society, new education—that immigrants would then be able to claim the promise inherent in the American myth: they could reap the fruits of the new Eden of the West and be accepted by American society. Of course, another way to frame this policy was that immigrants
were fine as long as they were not taking up jobs or space that belonged to “real Americans.” Thus, the promise offered immigrants was rooted in both nativist sentiments and a faith in the power of the land to make immigrants anew—to sanctify them into Americanness.

The immigrant characters in Cather’s trilogy are initially enticed by the promise that by working the land, they will prosper and be reborn. Advertisements from as far back as 1879 proclaimed to immigrants that “the country extending westward…offers more substantial inducements to those who wish to secure homes where industry and economy will ensure them a comfortable living, if not an independent competency, than any other section of the…United States” (“Northern Empire”) My Ántonia details the Shimerda family’s response to this promise that a “comfortable living” could be ensured through their industry. They come to America from Bohemia because it was promised to be a place where their sons could become rich “with many cattle” (108) and their family gain honor. Russian Peter similarly comments on America’s promise, saying that “any man could have [a cow] who would take care of her” and drawing a sharp contrast to his home country Poland, where a cow is something only the rich can afford (64). To these characters, America is a land literally flowing with milk and honey, a land that bears the potential for prosperity. The promise that through hard work they too can become American is one that motivates these characters to leave their homes and go west. In O, Pioneers!, Alexandra’s father, John Bergson, puts everything he can into the Divide, a stretch of seemingly infertile land in Nebraska. Despite his efforts, readers are informed that he “had spent his first five years on the Divide getting into debt, and the last six getting out…[ending] pretty much where he began” (35). One might expect this kind of setback to be discouraging or to produce skepticism about the American promise, but the success of neighboring farms and Bergson’s determination to adhere to the “Old-World belief that land, in itself, is desirable”
means that his final advice to his children is to stick with the land and make it as productive as possible (35). Bergson’s mindset sees potential deficiency as lying with the workers instead of the land in this case, meaning that it is up to each immigrant to succeed or fail at their ventures. John Bergson and other new immigrants represent a merging of these “Old-World belief” in the inherent value of land and the new American belief that this value goes much farther than mere economic prosperity—hard work is essential to claim the American promise.

This promise of prosperity is ultimately an assurance of personal and social gains—an immigrant can work themselves into acceptability. Thea, the protagonist of *The Song of the Lark*, grows up in a small Colorado town and is determined to become a famous singer. She is consistently praised for her “dogged industry” as well as her “imagination and…stubborn will, curiously balancing and interpenetrating each other” (136). Her stubborn desire to find success as an artist is what eventually gets her out of Moonstone and into the city as an opera singer, and it is a continuation of that work ethic that allows her to be successful in her later career. Others, like her sister or her fellow singers, do not have this single-minded devotion and are a mystery to Thea, who cannot understand not giving everything to her dream. She picks up this work ethic from those like Dr. Archie who encourage her, “to get about and see it all… do something with that fine voice of yours…[and] be a number one musician and make us proud of you” (192).

These charges fundamentally tie work and achievement to the promise of prosperity, leaving little room for luck or chance. If Thea is to succeed, it will be on her merits alone, a mindset that points to another piece of the American myth. Additionally, this work is not just a reflection of Thea’s ambition, it's a consolidation of her dreams and the hopes of her community. Their pride is attached to her success in the wider world, placing an even larger burden on Thea to make good on all that she has been given. If she can “do something” as Dr. Archie says, she will pave
the way for others to follow. Her success is another indication of the rewards of industry that the American story promises, and by buying into this promise, she is one step closer to being “chosen” and accepted.

*My Ántonia* also contends that those who have managed to beat the odds and thrive in their New Eden are the biggest proponents of this myth. For example, Jim’s grandmother plays the role of an ambassador of American culture “having come strange to a new country [herself]” (93). She encourages new immigrants to work hard and stick it out, promising Ántonia that if she labors, her family will “have a better house after while…and will forget these hard times” (97). Jim’s grandmother implies that it only takes time and hard work—that magical American formula—for prosperity to happen, encouraging the Shimerdas to buy into the American myths perpetuated by nativists that moved them West in the first place. Her ethos as one who has overcome similar hardships is encouraging to the Shimerdas, who take it as proof that they can do the same. In the success of those around them, they see that the American promise is one that they will have to work for, but one that is within their reach.

However, despite the story that these immigrants were told, institutional and social barriers complicated that promise of successfully earning their “Americanness” through diligence. All this generous rhetoric of sending immigrants out West to make their fortunes hid the truth that some immigrants, particularly those from Central Europe, were considered “a class that can be nothing more than parasites,” not fit to even be considered for the American promise (Wallis). Congress sought to “limit immigration by use of a literacy test” in order to only get the “best immigrants” (Schmitz). Clearly, the “promise” inherent in this American Eden was only applicable to those immigrants first deemed intelligent and hard-working enough to appreciate it. Even those who managed to make it into the country and make it out West found settling into
society more complicated than it initially seemed. Cather’s novels depict this reality, contending that “while the frontier may initially liberate, it soon sees the reenactment of those various constraints and limitations that characterize the social landscape of more settled, more traditional societies…bringing the enforcement of restricted gender and class divisions and discriminations” (Laird 246). The institutional constraints on full inclusion prove the West—and America by extension—to be a “false Eden” for immigrants.

The social challenges that Cather’s central characters face ultimately demonstrate that patriarchal structures and narratives—like those present in the original Genesis story—forestall an inclusive Eden. For example, though hard work is expected of immigrants, this work is gendered. As soon as Ántonia begins to “help make this land one good farm” Jim and his grandmother lament how she has “[lost] all her nice ways” (135, 137). Jim recounts she did “chores a girl ought not to do, and that the farm-hands around the country joked in a nasty way about it.” (138). The irony in this is the fact that Ántonia's previous "nice ways" did not contribute to her family's success or survival. Despite this, Jim refuses to acknowledge that her hard work is as valuable as her femininity. Women like Ántonia who break the social mold and go to work in the fields are looked down on by other characters, putting them in a precarious bind: they can choose to aid in the hard work that will supposedly lead to salvation and reject their femininity, or they can follow social conventions and avoid masculine work in an attempt to be accepted and be considered “lazy.” This struggle with femininity also plays out in O, Pioneers!. When Alexandra reminds her brothers, Lou and Oscar, that she is free to do “exactly as [she] pleases with [her] land”—the right guaranteed her by the American frontier narrative—Lou comments bitterly, “This is what comes of letting a woman meddle in business” (127). This connection between Alexandra’s gender and what Lou and Oscar see as her poor business sense
carries through the rest of the conversation and book, creating “anxieties for those like Lou and Oscar who define themselves by traditional masculine constructions of gender, which equated physical work with natural superiority” (Dyck 166). Even though Alexandra has ostensibly proven herself worthy of being taken seriously based on the production of her land, Lou and Oscar will never see it that way simply because she is a woman. These patriarchal views go against the idea of the West being freer for women and against a truly inclusive Eden.

Ultimately, the new Eden of the West is just as constrained as the old country. The narrow ideals of Americanization, which are supposed to be freeing and redeeming, instead turn out to be another excuse to expel immigrant women when they do not fit the mold. This is due in part to the stratification of “established” Americans and immigrant newcomers. For instance, well-respected and Americanized families like the Harlings have created expectations for other immigrants that fail to allow for individual expression or pioneering. They expect Ántonia to follow their strict guidelines, assuring Jim’s grandma that they will help Ántonia “learn new ways” and “forget those things” from her past (160). When Ántonia fails to live up to these expectations, they and the rest of the townspeople deem her a dangerous “other,” and she is “regarded with suspicion…revealing fears about American institutions” (McNall 25). She and the other “hired girls” are characterized by Black Hawk society as a “menace to the social order” (199). Thus, instead of an Eden in which they can flourish and grow, the city becomes a dangerous, false Eden for the hired girls, where one wrong move on their part will result in them being “cast out” by the judgmental townspeople who play God. This is not a new idea for Cather; in her novels, “femininity, which is a source of stability or moral responsibility in the masculine tradition, is transformed into a dangerous and sometimes destructive force”—perhaps not destructive in a physical sense, but potentially devastating to tightly held conceptions of gender
and femininity (Bailey 406). Anything popular—like Ántonia—that goes against the status quo immediately comes under suspicion, because it forces the dominant culture to question whether it is truly doing things the right way. What could be a place for Ántonia to continue learning and integrating herself into American society instead becomes a place where her foreignness is exacerbated and feared. And no matter what Ántonia does, she is trapped by the expectations of those around her and unable to truly move forward with her life.

Cather’s trilogy contends that although the American West was presented as a “new Eden” for immigrants—a place where they could find land to work, freedom from social pressures, and become accepted by American society—the reality was much more complicated. Cather’s heroines begin each of their stories fully invested in the American myth of work leading directly to prosperity, but are denied fruitfulness and growth by patriarchal, nativist ideas, ultimately revealing the West to be a “false Eden.”

“*In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread*” 3

Instead of a new Eden, Cather’s West was more akin to the harsh world into which Adam and Eve were expelled. In the Genesis story, Adam is cast out of the garden and God declares that “cursed is the ground for thy sake,” Adam’s bread will only come “by the sweat of his face,” and “in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life” (Genesis 3:17-19). Instead of living in a blessed garden that provides for his every need, Adam must now struggle. His views of the earth then turn to commodification and individualism, as it is only by “subduing” the land and making it work for him that he will be able to survive. This kind of work is tied to seeing the land only as a commodity, a view that many Americans shared about the West when Cather was writing. Sending immigrants out West and setting them up with their own farms was not only a supposed path to of Americanization, but it was also a practical solution to the agricultural crisis caused by the fact that “American farmers’ sons [were] forcing their way to the cities, and there
[was] no one left upon the farm to take their places” (“Dangers Confronting”). In the end, most Americans were primarily concerned with the West's economic value—and, by extension, the economic value of the immigrants who lived there, turning immigrants into another “resource” to be exploited.

The flaws of the new world focused on profit alienate characters from a healthy mindset about work and the land, causing immigrant characters specifically to be caught between two worlds. As Jim talks to Ántonia, Lena, and the other hired girls, a pattern emerges in their conversation that speaks to this kind of separation. Ántonia begins their conversations, telling Jim, “It makes me homesick…this flower, this smell” and reminiscing about memories of the “old country,” telling Jim how much she wants to go back (228). Later, when the rest of the girls have joined them, the conversation shifts to the work that they feel they need to do to keep their families afloat in the new world and how they have made their own place in it. They talk about their unique purpose: how their families who came from the Old Country “started behind…and never caught up” and how they as the oldest daughters have the responsibility to work in town to buy their families basic necessities and luxuries (231). This mindset positions these girls as the answer to national concerns about immigrant children, as it appears they have fully shed their old-world mindsets and are ready to buy into the American system of gain. However, the concern with the material present pulls Ántonia out of her reminiscing, shifting her focus to current struggles and alienates her from her previous memories; when she tries to ask Jim for a nostalgic story about the past, it ends with a Spaniard who “died in the wilderness of a broken heart,” referencing her father’s suicide and the truth that those who come to this new land may struggle more than they can bear (235). Ántonia and the other hired girls are unable to live with
both of these mindsets—longing for their homeland and working in the present—turning those memories into another kind of Eden that they can never return to.

Unable to guarantee that they and their families will be accepted by the townspeople, even through hard work, these girls are also often “cast out” of their current society when their circumstances do not match the ideal. After her husband leaves her, Ántonia is set up as an Eve figure by the townspeople and Jim, who view her as “an object of pity” due to her having “thrown herself away on…a cheap fellow” (281, 285). They blame her for her failed marriage and subsequent pregnancy, despite her having tried to do what was expected of her: work hard, marry a “respectable” man, and have children that she can raise properly in the new world. Social norms work against Ántonia because she is an immigrant. She is forced to return to the country, which is no longer a promised land, but a place of exile. Like Adam, she is condemned “to till the ground from whence [she] was taken” as “all that summer she did the work of a man on the farm” (Genesis 3:23, Ántonia 293). Thea, too, struggles to find her place in the world in parts of her narrative, even as she is ostensibly doing everything correctly. Having left her musical training in Chicago for a summer to visit her hometown, she is rebuffed by the fact that she does not seem to fit into her family the way she did before. Her new perspective and new ambitions reveal that “nothing that she would ever do in the world would seem important to them, and nothing they would ever do would seem important to her” (317). Thea’s subsequent interactions with people from Moonstone only happen when they seek her out, further alienating her from her past and her childhood.

In response to this alienation, many of Cather’s character turn to a “work for work’s sake” mindset—knowing that they will never be fully part of American society, they nonetheless embrace American capitalistic goals in an effort to find some sort of fulfillment. Cather’s novels
critique this mindset, contending that this view of land does not actually bring prosperity but instead increases characters’ selfishness, as they only work to fulfill their own needs. The text is dismissive of how Alexandra’s brothers approach running their farms; their father laments that “Lou and Oscar were industrious, but he could never teach them to use their heads about their work,” a fault that plays into his decision to leave Alexandra in charge after his death (Pioneers 35). Alexandra’s brothers seem to have not grasped the need for intelligence in running their farms, preferring the fulfillment of exertion to any sort of creativity that might make the work easier. Characters that work hard but do not pay attention to the needs of others are also condemned. While Ántonia’s brother Ambrosch is praised by other characters for his work ethic, he is still described as “a mean one” in the same breath, implying that his efforts are selfish instead of admirable (Ántonia 99). Ambrosch fulfills this prophecy; after his father’s death, he becomes “more than ever the head of the house” and begins to alienate other characters. He refuses to let Ántonia buy shoes with her wages and fights with Jake over the matter of a horse collar (138). All of these characters view work as something valuable but also as something that is a means in and of itself, primarily benefiting them. This short-sighted focus on their own needs evidences Americanization as a capitalist or consumptive ideology, and Cather critiques such characters in her novels, always depicting them as less admirable and more prone to inefficiency.

These texts condemn the mindset that privileges profit and aggressive individualism over harmony and community. In so doing, they argue that an obsession with profit actually leads to violence that diminishes possible gains to be had. For example, in O Pioneers! John Bergson calls the land “an enigma…a horse that no one knows how to break or to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces” (33). John’s view of the land as a problem to be solved or an animal “to break” plays into this dominating mindset. Another character, Carl Lindstrom, sees the land
in a similar way, describing it as “somber wastes” and a “vast hardness.” But as he focuses specifically on men’s relationship with the land, he muses 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, its uninterrupted mournfulness” (28). These adjectives of “fierce” “savage” and “mournful,” personify the land, moving the subjugation that both John and Carl consider necessary to prove their Americaness and find prosperity closer to the realm of violence. This aggressive approach is not rewarded; in fact, it leaves the two men broken and sterile—John Bergson dies frustrated, and Carl gives up on the land and floats from job to job without any roots. Ironically, by trying too hard to dominate the land they have been given, they both end up with less than that with which they started.

Another example of such sterility is the Cutters in My Ántonia. The Cutters care only about wealth accumulation. Not only are they literally sterile and unable to have children, they do not produce anything themselves, subsisting only off the fruits of others’ labor. Wick Cutter is “one of the ‘fast set’ of Black Hawk businessmen” who makes a living off of fleecing new immigrants, and he and his wife are known for their ability to fight about anything, large or small (206). Obsessed with which of them will end up inheriting the property, their “quarrels on this subject…were heard in the street by whoever wished to loiter and listen” (332). These quarrels escalate into outright murder when Cutter shoots his wife and then himself with the singular intention to outlive her and invalidate any “will she might secretly have made” (334). While Ántonia’s family is able to laugh over the dark retelling, it is in a home safe from destructive greed, where they pay almost no mind to the massive sum that the Cutters were fighting over. The inevitably of the tragedy remains as a warning of the real consequences of a fully profit-centered mindset.
Those characters who embrace a profit-centered mindset instead of communal growth are not only depicted as broken and sterile, but they are also shown to be trapped by the very mindset that is supposed to liberate them. Alexandra’s extended family, particularly her brothers and their wives, are completely focused on making sure they look the part of wealthy landowners. Lou’s wife Annie “wears her yellow hair in a high pompadour and is bedecked with rings and chains and ‘beauty pins.’ Her tight, high-heeled shoes give her an awkward walk, and she is always more or less preoccupied with her clothes” (83). Unlike Alexandra, who is neat and sensible and hardworking, Annie is obsessed with her image and the image of her daughters. Words like “chains” “pins” “tight” and “awkward” bring to mind the image of being restrained, which imply that Annie is forced into projecting this image in order to “prove” her worth. Her “preoccupation” with status is violent, and she is just as bound as the country her family tries to subdue. Eventually, she fades out of the narrative entirely, suggesting that the costs of a consumption mindset ultimately overpower any possible character development.

Such an end is perhaps best illustrated by My Ántonia’s Tiny Soderball. Jim recounts that “of all the girls and boys who grew up together in Black Hawk, Tiny Soderball [achieved] the most solid worldly success” by moving to Alaska and running a lodging house while also buying and selling claims from “discouraged miners” (282-283). Tiny’s economic endeavors pay off, but not without consequences. With so much success, “nothing interest[s] [Tiny] much but making money,” until eventually she ends up as “someone in whom the faculty of becoming interested is worn out” (283). Not only that, her greed physically consumes as she has “lost three toes” in her pursuit of gold and gain by the time Jim meets her again, a mutilation that she can “[mention] quite causally” (284). Giving her all to try to make as much money as possible does not fulfill Tiny; instead, it quite literally eats her up until there is nothing left of her to admire.
“Eve…the mother of all living”  

Cather’s novels contend that such destructive grasping is the exact opposite of the renewing strength that is supposed to come from the Edenic West. In contrast to these false or failed Edens, Cather’s Great Plains trilogy offers an alternate, “new Eden” based on the ideals of harmony and collaboration. As the older generation of John Bergsons and Mr. Shimerdas pass away, their young immigrant daughters emerge as new symbols for the American West—not Adams who must “[make] war against the rank fertility of the soil,” but instead new Eves who exemplify values of harmony and collaboration (Turner 102.) They view the land as a partner to be collaborated with, bringing harmony instead of competition and encapsulating what Cather asserts is (or should be) the true American spirit. Cather’s three female protagonists represent “how an early pioneering way of life at its best was able to combine and balance in a harmonious whole the primeval land and the civilized settlement” (Bailey 405). This balance allows immigrants to find lasting success and prosperity that moves beyond simple economic gains. They embody Cather’s new vision for the land and American culture itself.

In direct contrast to characters like the Bergson family, the Cutters, or Tiny, Alexandra’s view of working the land is one that emphasizes connection over profit and ultimately leads to sustainable increase. She sees the potential for growth and prosperity that her family has been searching for, not in subjugation and domination, but in collaborative work with those around them. Instead of the spirit of competition that characterizes her brothers’ approach to farming, Alexandra goes down to the river farms and “learn[s] a great deal” about how to make her own farm successful in the future (63). In this exchange of ideas, she prizes learning and growing in collaboration with her neighbors instead of seeing them as threats to her own prosperity. Economic gains are not as important to Alexandra as stewardship—helping the land to reach its full potential through whatever means she has access to. This stewardship leads to what scholar
Karen Ramirez calls a “feminized, ethical approach to the land as a place that challenges a paternalistic ideology of domination over the land” (110). With her search for new ideas, Alexandra presents a viable alternative to the patriarchal, capitalistic mindset that characterizes those around her. This new mindset also leads her to a new, cyclical view of ownership. “We come and go,” she tells Carl, “but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while” (Pioneers 212). Instead of ownership measured only by what the land produces, Alexandra sees ownership as being tied to understanding of the land’s potential, a forward-facing mindset that places emphasis on possibilities for growth rather than how the land can be exploited in the moment.

Key to this new vision is a reframing of the land as an agent to be worked with in harmony. Cather’s new Eves envision the land not as something to be dominated or subdued but as an equal partner in this American experiment. The text suggests that this kind of collaboration is not only ethical but also holy. It connects Alexandra to gardener Eve, as Alexandra’s connection with the Divide marks “the first time that a human face was set toward [the land] with love and yearning.” Cather asserts that such “love” and “yearning” invokes the “Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, [bending] lower than it ever bent to a human will before” (Pioneers 67). This holy spirit of sorts breathes life into the land, not unlike in the Genesis story when God “breathed into [Adam’s] nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7). Here Alexandra is both creator and created, a holy partner in the work of nation building that is figured as divine. The conclusion of Alexandra’s story could easily be read as painting the frontier as a traditional Eden—Emil and Maria die in a way that pointedly references the Fall and Alexandra decides to leave with Carl for Alaska, leaving the land she has worked so hard to cultivate. However, it is her holy collaboration that flips the idea on its head. Instead of an Eden
that can never be returned to, Alexandra sees the West—the good and the bad together—as a place that “belongs to the future” (212). The focus on who is to come after her instead of herself is what sets up Alexandra’s perspective. It is not just her future, but the American future, that will inherit the work Alexandra has done, and it is her deliberate collaboration with the land that sanctifies her offering into a true Eden. Such harmony is also evident in *Song of the Lark* when Cather characterizes the land as “friendly soil” and a “generous country that gave one its joyous force, its large-hearted, child-like power to love, just as it gave one its coarse, brilliant flowers” (293). “Friendly,” “generous,” “joyous,” “large-hearted,” and rooted in “love,” the land is personified in similar terms to those Eves—Ántonia and Alexandra—who embody ideals of harmony and community. All is one “creation” in Cather’s characterization. In the end, there is no selfish taking in this landscape, only mutually beneficial growth.

The new communitarian vision of Cather’s heroines ultimately rejects the idea of manifest destiny, inverting the narrative of dominion that justified pushing people out and embracing a narrative of stewardship that invites collaboration from all. While her characters certainly hold fast to the promise of new land and new opportunities, there does not seem to be a sense of entitlement with their work. The characters that throw themselves into economic ventures are, as discussed, never wholly satisfied and ultimately destroy themselves. However, characters like Ántonia and Alexandra not only manage to change their mindsets but also challenge the same divine mandate to which the Anglo-Saxon pioneers of earlier years clung. The idea of fate definitely plays into these views of Alexandra and Ántonia’s successes, but this fate does not favor the traditional American pioneer. In a twist of manifest destiny, it is immigrant women who are “destined to succeed while so many men broke their hearts and died,” (*Pioneers* 76). This favor comes as a result of their connective and stewardship mindset as
opposed to the conquering and dominating mindset that traditional manifest destiny demanded. The rewards of this kind of labor are not traditional either; instead of land that belongs to and benefits the “owner,” the fruits of the kind of work that this destiny invites are sweeping and all inclusive—“not the Shimerdas’ cornfields, or Mr. Bushy’s, but the world’s cornfields” (147). This view turns the idea of manifest destiny into a more inclusive venture—it is not race that gives one the tools to conquer but a new mindset.

Cather’s heroines embrace this mindset as they work in partnership with the landscape instead of working to subdue it. These characters are figurative and literal children of this new land, innocents who, like Eve, become informed as they have experiences with their “new Edens.” This informed innocence sets them up as ideal partners for the landscape. Even though they are each born in Europe, they have a far closer connection to the land of the West, having “been early awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to a new” (Ántonia 191). This young age of immigration acclimates them quickly to the ideas of the West, especially as they gain the burden of helping their families succeed in the new world. They learn to recognize the land as the source of security, as it allows them to provide for their families but they also acknowledge it as force that literally changes them. For instance, Alexandra feels “as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun” (Pioneers 67). This deep connection is what motivates her to take such a vested interest in the fate of the land, driving her character development for the rest of the novel. Ántonia and Jim both, at various points in their story, “[feel] the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields” (Ántonia 300). These moments are also connected to the nostalgia of their childhood, showing the power of the land to act as a connecting force. Thea, a second-generation immigrant, nonetheless
recognizes the earth as “young and fresh and kindly, a place where refugees from old, sad
countries were given another chance” (Lark 293), acknowledging that it is from the land that
another form of fecundity—artistic creation—arises. These characterizations reveal the deeply
rooted connections that these girls have to the land and the important shaping force it is in their
development instead of a static setting. Like Eve, they are then prepared to take to heart the
commandment “to dress [the land] and to keep it,” and to further become co-creators with the
country (Genesis 2:15).

Ántonia and her family are also characterized with deliberate references to the story of
Eve, connecting her prosperity born of collaboration to the salvation inherent in her children.
Naturally, as an Eve figure she is surrounded by fruit, having “two orchards: a cherry orchard,
with gooseberry and currant bushes between the rows, and an apple orchard” (314). Ántonia tells
Jim proudly about her husband’s expertise in grafting that means that “there ain’t one of our
neighbors has an orchard that bears like [theirs]” (315). Ántonia’s prosperity, like Alexandra’s,
comes from her collaboration with the land and with others, but it is not limited to just food. It is
her posterity that are the true fruits that will bring salvation. This is a deliberate rewriting of the
Adam and Eve story; as opposed to Adam’s curse of working the land, Eve is told that God “will
greatly multiply [her] sorrow and [her] conception; in sorrow [she] shalt bring forth children”
(Genesis 3:16). Immigrant women were viewed with suspicion by many Americans specifically
because people were worried that their children would not assimilate properly—they were
worried that the “curse” of being foreign would carry on into their posterity. But when Ántonia’s
children show off the literal fruits of their labor on the farm, “cherries and strawberries and
crabapples,” there is no sense of a curse (313). Instead, Ántonia’s posterity, “big and little, tow
heads and gold heads and brown…a veritable explosion of life,” come rushing out of the fruit
cellar, showing her as a triumphant Eve instead of the one that was rejected by the townspeople (314). This “explosion” directly contradicts the fears that many Americans had about immigrant women raising their children, presenting these new lives as shaping the future instead of destroying it.

Thea’s story of ultimately finding success in the East as an artist instead of a farmer could be read as an antithesis to that of Ántonia and Alexandra who find salvation in the land and their posterity. However, even Thea’s path is shaped in Edenic fashion by the west, as it is only by leaving that she is able to see the true “fruits” of her hometown of Moonstone. Her narrative emphasizes the necessity of her getting “out of a vague, easy-going world” in Moonstone “into a life of disciplined endeavor” in the East where she can maintain her craft as a successful opera singer (305). While she is committed to being the best that she can be, the romanticism of her childhood leads her to continue to chase “the old Moonstone feeling” (231). Her success, ironically, reshapes her memories into an “Eden” that she can never return to, making her a different kind of Eve from Ántonia and Alexandra. She is able to recapture old feelings by retreating to a ranch in Colorado, which brings back “light on the sand hills, of masses of prickly-pear blossoms she had found in the desert in early childhood, of the late afternoon sun pouring through the grape leaves and the mint bed in Mrs. Kohler’s garden” (192). These memories of the landscape make “everything…simple and definite” and help her fully commit to following her artistic vision (Lark 196). In memory, the landscape a backdrop for Thea's "fall" into her future pursuits, while also representing an idyllic past forever out of reach. This is not to say that she does not benefit from the fruits that she tasted in Moonstone; it is her complicated relationship with both the physical location and memories of her past that make her such an effective artist.
Conclusion

At a pivotal moment in *The Song of the Lark*, Thea reflects that, “she had often heard Mrs. Kronborg say that she ‘believed in immigration,’ and so did Thea believe in it” (293). It is clear from her novels that Cather, too, believes in immigration—in a multi-faceted, complex story of immigration that has room for the Theas, Alexandras, and Ántonias. In an essay entitled “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,” Cather offers a new way of envisioning the West that challenges the nostalgia and melancholy of Turner’s “closed” frontier. She writes, “it is in that great cosmopolitan country known as the Middle West that we may hope to see the hard molds of American provincialism broken up; that we may hope to find young talent which will challenge the pale properties, the insincere, conventional optimism of our art and thought” (“Nebraska”). Cather breaks down the dichotomies that characterized American thought in the early twentieth century with this claim. Instead of “provincialism,” which she makes synonymous with nativism and discrimination, Cather presents a west that is “cosmopolitan,” containing people of every race and background. Instead of a conventional narrative about the West—and by extension, and American identity—that focuses on a single domineering pioneer figure, she frames the descendants of immigrants as the hope for America’s future. Her vision is by no means perfect: she seems to deliberately ignore the expulsion of native peoples in her discussions of the frontier and glorifies European immigrants over those from other parts of the world. Her vision of the past is also highly romanticized, colored in the same ways as traditional stories about the American West. But it is Cather’s radical shift in subject that makes her work truly unique. Despite their limitations, her novels began the work of deconstructing the Western narrative that most Americans took for granted.

Cather’s Great Plains novels challenge “insincere, conventional optimism” by rewriting the American creation myth to be one of multiplicity. Instead of an Americanizing narrative that
would force all immigrants into one path, Cather envisions multiple journeys: they might be an Alexandra, working the land with a spirit of collaboration and harmony until it is time to pass it onto the next generation; they might be an Ántonia, triumphing over both physical and social trials to become “a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races” (Ántonia 326); or they might be a Thea, one who leaves the West for the acclaim of the East, but never escapes the shaping power of Eden. Whatever the journey, instead of the traditional Adam and Eve story of guilt and struggle, Cather gives her readers a triumphant narrative of redemption for individuals, communities, and ultimately the nation. These calls echo her contemporary, philosopher Randolph Bourne, who she admired for his advocacy for a “pluralistic” America instead of a melting-pot that would see all cultures absorbed into the Anglo-Saxon American tradition (Helstern 256). His article “Tran-national America” calls for a movement to “face realistically the America we have around us. Let us work with the forces that are at work. Let us make something of this trans-national spirit instead of outlawing it” (Bourne 97). Cather too draws a connection between both her immigrant heroines and America’s future with her “hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again. Something that will come out not only in sturdy traits of character, but in elasticity of mind, in an honest attitude toward the realities of life, in certain qualities of feeling and imagination” (Cather).
NOTES


2 Genesis 2:8

3 Genesis 3:19

4 Genesis 3:20

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