INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.
Getting Back to Their Texts:
A Reconsideration of the Attitudes of Willa Cather
and Hamlin Garland Toward Pioneer Life
on the Midwestern Agricultural Frontier

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
ENGLISH
AUGUST 1995

By
Neil Gustafson

Dissertation Committee:
Mark K. Wilson, Chair
LaRene Despain
Joseph Maltby
Jonathan Morse
Richard L. Rapson
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank John Ahouse of the Doheny Library at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles for his assistance in working with their Hamlin Garland collection. I also thank the several staff members at Love Library at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who helped me access materials from their collection of Willa Cather materials. I am grateful to Susan Rosowski of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for her help in deciphering Cather's handwriting in two letters she wrote to Garland, which are located in the Garland collection at USC-Doheny. I am indebted to Kathleen Gustafson for having played the roles of sounding board and copy editor. My greatest debt, however, is that which I owe my chair, Mark K. Wilson, whose persistent encouragement and patience buoyed me as I wrote. I express my sincere gratitude, also, to Joseph Maltby for straigtening out at least two chapters and for helping me to envision the entire paper, to LaRene Despain for helping me better organize Chapters V and VI, to Richard L. Rapson for approving my history chapter, and to Jonathan Morse for occasionally asking, at the right times, "so what?"

Part of Chapter VI of this dissertation appears, in slightly altered form, in the August 1995 edition of Western American Literature.
Abstract

Hamlin Garland and Willa Cather, pioneers themselves, recorded the life of the Midwestern pioneer farmers throughout their lengthy writing careers. Each has come to represent, in the general critical view, a particular attitude toward that life: Garland is thought to have hated his farm experience and has become known as the debunker of the myth of the rural idyll; Cather, who strove to escape the desolation of the Nebraska prairie, has become famed as the singer of paeans to life on the prairie.

This study challenges those generalized views on several bases. It suggests that each maintained a life-long attachment to rural roots and that each wrote about farm life on the frontier in a largely realistic vein, portraying it as a "hard pastoral" existence, somewhat after Carl Van Doren's phrase. Critics often underestimate the impact on Cather and Garland of growing up in the political, economic, and social turmoil of the late nineteenth century which led farmers to organize politically. Also not adequately considered is the importance of several natural disasters which exacerbated the plight of the Midwestern farmer. In addition, many critics and biographers have misunderstood the early lives of Garland and Cather--perhaps out of unfamiliarity with the realities of life on a farm or in a small town--and have incorrectly characterized their
childhoods as stained by educational, social, and cultural impoverishment.

Another cause of misunderstanding about Garland's and Cather's attitudes toward pioneer farm life stems from basing opinions on limited samplings of their works. This evaluation, of most of Garland's farm writings and all of Cather's, illustrates that each passed through various stages of development in recording that life and that each wrote both positively and negatively about the agricultural pioneer experience throughout their careers. Garland is not the vilifier of farm life; Cather is not its blind champion. Together, the two writers have given us a realistic picture of both the hardships and the pleasures of pioneer life on the Midwestern agricultural frontier.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ....................................... iv
Abstract ................................................. v
List of Abbreviations ................................... ix

Chapter I: Introduction .................................. 1

Chapter II: Turmoil on the Prairie in the Late
Nineteenth Century ...................................... 15
  Part 1: Three Decades of Progress ................. 18
  Part 2: Thirty Years of Poverty .................... 23
  Part 3: Farmers in Revolt ............................ 31

Chapter III: Biographical Parallels .................. 51
  Part 1: Early Safe Havens ............................ 52
  Part 2: Life on the Middle Border and the Divide. 68
  Part 3: The Myth of Social, Cultural, and
  Intellectual Impoverishment ....................... 75
  Part 4: Finding Literary Careers ................... 87

Chapter IV: Generalized Critical Interpretations of the
Midwestern Writings of Garland and Cather ........ 102
  Part 1: General Critical Opinions of Garland's
  Midwestern Fiction ................................ 103
  Part 2: General Critical Opinions of Cather's
  Midwestern Fiction ................................ 112

Chapter V: The Stages of Garland's Prairie
  Representations .................................... 124
  Part 1: Early Local Color and Realism ............ 126
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Reform Impulse in Garland's 1888-1891 Short Stories</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The 1892 Novels of Reform</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Balance in <em>Rose of Dutcher's Cooly</em> and <em>Boy Life on the Prairie</em></td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>The Stages of Cather's Prairie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Representations</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Early Naturalistic Stories</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Struggle Between East and West</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Prairie Novels: Hardship and Triumph, and Deteriorating Values</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Final Statements: Stay on the Land</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Abbreviations

Cather Works

KOA The Kingdom of Art
MA My Ántonia
OP O Pioneers!
WP The World and the Parish

Garland Works

M-TR Main-Travelled Roads
PF Prairie Folks
RM Roadside Meetings
SMB A Son of the Middle Border
WC Wayside Courtships

Others

EV Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice, O'Brien
WWC The World of Willa Cather, Bennett
Chapter I: Introduction

Hamlin Garland and Willa Cather both spent the last half of their childhoods on prairie homesteads and in the small towns near them. Garland, born in 1860, moved to the edge of the agricultural frontier in Iowa in 1870 (Hill 13); Cather, who was born thirteen years later than Garland, arrived in 1883 at her grandparents' Nebraska farm, which they had homesteaded some six years earlier (Robinson 14). Both Garland and Cather wrote extensively about this life on the prairie and in small country towns during the period in American history when the West was being opened to the farmer.

In 1893, ten years after Cather arrived on the prairie, Frederick Jackson Turner delivered a paper to the American Historical Association which was meeting during the Columbian Exposition in Chicago as part of the World's Fair (Simonson 1). His paper, *The Significance of the Frontier in America*, begins with the announcement that the great American frontier is gone. Though others had said it before, which he acknowledges, his paper has come to represent the requiem for the passing of the frontier. Only thirty years after the enactment of the Homestead Act in 1862, the free land had disappeared; in fact, only pockets of unsettled land had remained even in 1880, according to a U.S. Census report that Turner cites (Turner 27).
Turner's main point in presenting his speech, however, was not to announce the closing of the frontier; rather, his presentation posits a theory which ignited a heated controversy over how historians would view—and try to explain—the entire history of our country. Turner says: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" (27). It is not within the scope of this paper to recount the long-standing debate that ensued over the merit of Turner's hypothesis.¹ But it can be stated, whether Turner was right or not, that it was in fact that free land which enticed Garland's father (in 1870) and Cather's uncle George (1873) and her Cather grandparents (1877)—whom her parents were to follow (1883)—to the agricultural frontier.

By the time Turner presented his paper in Chicago, both Hamlin Garland and Willa Cather had already left their frontier homes. Cather was about to enter her third year at the University of Nebraska.² By 1893, Garland—though, like Turner himself, only thirty-two years old—was already a major literary figure; he was also in attendance at the Chicago Fair. And while there is no evidence that he knew about or attended Turner's presentation (Holloway 83), he did "read a paper to the Congress of Literature of the World's Columbian Exposition . . . entitled 'Local Color in Fiction'" (Bray 337).
This phenomenon of the frontier that Turner pronounced dead is particularly significant to this study. The historian acknowledged the passing of an era that was never to be repeated on any similar scale, an era that was defined by the purposeful uprooting of multitudes of families that, in many cases, had been already established in acceptable circumstances. Such a phenomenon is perhaps difficult to comprehend; but it can be explained quite simply: "free land." These two magic words lured legions of native-born Americans and legions more of immigrants to the mystical and mythical edge of nowhere. Yet one does wonder at the courage or blindness that must have been required to take that step, and at the deplorable existing circumstances that made taking that step, often into the absolutely unknown, a better alternative for certain oppressed peoples than staying where they were. Perhaps only those who lived the experience of pioneering, as Garland and Cather had, could possibly explain that particular fever.

For nearly thirty years after the Homestead Act, the line of the agricultural frontier steadily moved westward, like the unrolling of a great human carpet with the recent arrivals staking out or buying claims just beyond those who came a year or a month or a day earlier. Some were to succeed in the face of this mad and magnificent challenge; others would not. Cather's own father would stick it out for only a year and a half before selling out and relocating
to the nearby village of Red Cloud (Woodress 43). Others, like Garland’s father, would settle a claim, live and work on it for a period of years, and then move on farther west to homestead again, always in search of land that was flatter and more fertile, or that was less infested with crop-destroying insects, or that was less susceptible to drought or violent weather. The year Garland left home at the age of twenty-one in hopes of becoming a teacher, his father, then in his fifties, moved on from Iowa to South Dakota to homestead once again (SMB 228-30).

Two years after his father had relocated, Garland himself, in April 1883—the very month in which Willa Cather arrived in Nebraska (Woodress 34)—staked a claim in South Dakota, measuring off his quarter section by counting revolutions of the wagon wheel (SMB 304), just as Cather’s Uncle George and Aunt Franc had done in Nebraska some ten years earlier when trying to locate their own homestead (Bennett, WWW 12).

In the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, thousands of children found themselves suddenly displaced from a familiar home and transplanted to a strange land; but the experience would prove particularly important to young Hamlin and Willa, for their years on the frontier were to form the bases of most of Garland’s and much of Cather’s best literature. Their pioneering experiences would also prove to be important to American literature and American
social history, for, as Roy Meyer has written, they were the only two writers whose fiction was "not negligible" to record that life (667-68).

The focus of this study is the investigation of the writings of these two pioneers which specifically concern the depiction of farm life on the agricultural frontier, even to the exclusion of their fiction about life in small country towns. To that end, only about the first ten years of Garland's writings are pertinent. With one exception, only his works written before 1900 will be considered. The applicable works include Main-Travelled Roads (1891), Jason Edwards (1892), A Spoil of Office (1892), Prairie Folks (1893), Rose of Dutcher's Coolly (1895), Wayside Courtships (1987), and Boy Life on the Prairie (1899). The single exception is the autobiographical A Son of the Middle Border (1917), included because it concerns those years which Garland spent on the frontier.

According to Donald Pizer, a better date for cutting off Garland's frontier writing is 1895, the year in which he published Rose (Early Work vii). After this, Garland turns to other pursuits, particularly the production of a life of Ulysses S. Grant, begun at the suggestion of magazine publisher S.S. McClure (Holloway 128). (Coincidentally, Willa Cather would work on McClure's magazine from 1906 to 1912). Then he began a new career as a writer of Western
romances, travelled to the gold rush in Alaska, and fell in love with his future wife (144-55). Though published after 1895, Boy Life is included because much of its content is based on some of his earliest published material, a six-part series which appeared in American Magazine in 1888. Similarly, several of the stories collected in Wayside Courtships in 1897 were written as early as 1888, when Garland was in his pioneer period (314).

In Cather's case, to look at her strictly prairie fiction is to consider in particular three novels and a number of short stories. The applicable novels are among her earliest: O Pioneers! (1913), My Ántonia (1918), and One of Ours (1922). The pertinent short stories, on the other hand, were produced throughout her career, beginning with her very first published story, "Peter" (1892), and ending with her last, the posthumously published "The Best Years" (1948). Several long stories, some almost novelettes, are included in her rural writings: "Eric Hermanson's Soul," "The Bohemian Girl," "Neighbor Rosicky," and "The Best Years." These are supplemented by seven shorter stories which deal specifically with life in the pioneer environment.

In studying the farm fiction of the two writers and the analyses of that work by a hundred years of critics, I have come to the realization that both Garland and Cather, in the majority of critics' minds, have come to represent
particular attitudes toward the pioneer farm experience. Garland is seen as the pioneer of truth telling about that life, which, so the critics conclude, Garland generally presented as being miserable. Cather, on the other hand, is widely known as the idealizer of farm life, particularly as experienced by immigrants. Chapter IV presents an overview of the critical commentary that has resulted in the development of these stertotypical labels.

In fact, neither stereotype is accurate. Throughout their farm fiction careers, both Garland and Cather wrote positive as well as negative accounts of farm life on the frontier; that is what will be established in this study. Through an extensive investigation of the texts of most of Garland’s (in Chapter V) and all of Cather’s (in Chapter VI) fiction set on prairie farms, I will illustrate that neither is deserving of their popular labels. A better generalization about the farm fiction of both writers is that it is exemplary of what Carl Van Doren has called the "hard pastoral" (American Novel 225). In my specific use of the term "hard pastoral"—which does not exactly mirror Van Doren’s—I am suggesting that pioneer farm life was a mixture of hardship and reward. The hardships were numerous and daunting; the rewards, as John H. Randall has written, deeply satisfying (105).

In my efforts to understand how the two writers could have come to be so miscast, I determined that three factors
are often missing in critical evaluations of their fiction. First, as Bernice Slote writes about Cather's critics specifically, critics have "handicapped" themselves "by [their] own ignorance of the nineteenth-century milieu in which Cather developed" ("Exploration" 211). The same seems to hold true for critics of Garland's work. The last two decades of the nineteenth century were marked by political, social, and economic upheaval in the rural West. While some commentators pay lip service to "the agrarian revolt" of the 1890s, the ten-year drought of the 1880s and 1890s, and other events and circumstances of this period, most critics seem guilty as charged by Bernice Slote.

For that precise reason, a short chapter of this study is devoted to detailing that historical period. Chapter II discusses the great economic surge America experienced after the Civil War as well as how the Western farmer felt he had been, to a great extent, preempted from sharing the bounty of the period by the actions of both the power brokers from the East and the speculators in his own midst. The chapter on "the nineteenth-century milieu" in which the two writers "developed" sheds considerable light on the forces at work behind their presentations of pioneer farm life.

A second source of critical confusion about the writers' farm fiction emanates from inaccurate characterizations and assessments of their own experiences as pioneer children. In fact, both Garland and Cather are
occasionally guilty of contributing to this inaccuracy. Chapter III is therefore devoted to forcing a reconsideration of the character and value of their personal pioneer experiences. In general, critics have portrayed the childhoods of Garland and Cather as isolated and deprived, and these conclusions have resulted in misunderstandings about the writers' portrayals of life on the prairie. Another interesting facet of the biographical material is the fact that Garland's and Cather's childhood experiences closely parallel one another in many details; to a significant extent, these similarities account for what I shall establish as their essentially similar attitudes toward farm life and toward the country of the Great Plains in general.

A third source of critical confusion about how Cather and Garland depict pioneer farm life derives from the fact that critics have arrived at conclusions on the basis of a limited number of works. This is particularly true of Garland's works, many writers apparently being familiar with only a few of his best-known stories, most likely those in *Main-Travelled Roads*. But many critics of Cather are similarly guilty, as her last farm novel, *One of Ours*, and most of her farm short stories are often ignored. Another problem in Cather criticism is that she is constantly being placed into critical categories that are inappropriate and that result in a distortion of interpretation. Most
recently she has been adopted by feminist critics as a "woman" writer. These issues are discussed in depth in Chapters IV, V, and VI.

The central intention of this study, then, is to investigate the often confusing evaluations of just what, exactly, these two most important chroniclers of pioneer farm life thought of that existence. As noted, Garland is remembered by most critics only as the man who told the cold, hard truth about farm life, the man who exposed the naive, primarily Eastern view of the idyllic farm family reaping constantly bountiful harvests and living in pastoral bliss. Yet, in fact, much of his early fiction—as well as his later recollections—clearly glorifies the rural existence. If one reads "Sim Burns's Wife," "Up the Cooley," and "Under the Lion's Paw," stories in which Garland does present a negative view of pioneer life, and reads no other works, then one might honestly conclude that Garland's view of rural life was generally negative. But Garland wrote much more that is not negative; and what is generally inadequately considered is what it was exactly that Garland found deplorable about rural life when he did write in that negative vein.

Cather's Nebraska fiction is often seen as a paean to life on the prairie, yet one critic writes: "Despite her reputation for romantic descriptions of nature—especially of the Great Plains—more often than not the picture Cather
gives us of the prairie is of a place of exile, barren, bleak, soul-destroying" (Donovan 85). Not many agree with this assessment. Yet, in her early stories, Cather does present a primarily "naturalistic" view of rural life, this while she herself constantly denigrated what she saw as Garland's gloomy fiction.

The bulk of this study, then, is devoted to a reconsideration of most of the farm fiction of the two, the purpose being to rectify the common misperception that each writer can be correctly characterized as primarily presenting either a positive (Cather) or negative (Garland) view of life on the agricultural frontier. Chapter V evaluates Garland's work; Chapter VI, Cather's. But the correction of these errant generalizations begins with a better understanding "of the late nineteenth century milieu" in which the two writers grew to maturity on the Midwestern agricultural frontier. In was a time and place characterized by social, political, and economic tumult that would distinctly affect how Garland and Cather would portray farm life.
Notes

1. Some recent arguments are less concerned about how Turner "explain[ed] American development" than about how he defined "frontier." Patricia Nelson Limerick, in The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West, for example, asserts that Turner's definition is far too limited and, further, that the frontier is yet alive on several fronts, as her subtitle suggests. She does say, though, that "[o]n a solely agrarian frontier, Turner's definition might make some sense" (23).

2. Cather spent five years on the University of Nebraska campus, the first in a preparatory program; this would have been her second year in the University (Woodress 70).

3. A case could be made for Ole Rölvaag's fiction; but Rölvaag, a Norwegian immigrant, began writing of this era nearly forty years after Garland and thirty years after Cather had done so. Also, Rölvaag did not arrive in the United States until 1896 (at age twenty), near the end of the tumultuous era through which Garland and Cather lived as children and young adults.

4. Their attitude toward small-town life is another topic and a complex one; it deserves attention that cannot be given here. Garland's writings suggest both a longing for the greater opportunities available in the small town and a sense that human virtue is more likely found in the farm
environment, as his reform novels, *Jason Edwards* and *A Spoil of Office*, manifest. Cather's comments on small-town life are generally negative. In *My Ántonia* the farm girls—particularly the immigrants—are portrayed as superior to the town girls. In several other works, village life is portrayed as confining and petty, farm life as free and meaningful. In her latest farm novel, *One of Ours*, however, she would also find that many of the faults of the town had infested the farm.

5. Van Doren states that Garland, though he saw frontier life mostly in terms of its hardships, maintained a "patriotism for his province" and believed that one could "find glory in the most difficult existence" (220, 221). Hermione Lee also applies the term "hard pastoral" to Cather's work. Lee's hard pastoral "admits that rural life is 'hard'; it is a realist narrative of labour and endurance." She believes that Cather, like Virgil, "manages to blend the idyllic with the realistic, to reconcile the soft and the hard pastoral" (94). Again, in my specific use of "hard pastoral," I mean it to represent the pioneer existence as Garland and Cather experienced it and wrote about it. Cather's view of farm life is not a mixture of two pastorals, of the idyllic (soft) and realistic (hard), as it is to Lee; rather, it is an essentially realistic mixture of hard work and satisfying reward, of struggle and
achievement, and this is specifically what I mean by "hard pastoral." As both writers tell us in their work, the land taxes and it compensates; farm life is both—and simultaneously—difficult and magnificent.

6. It is my contention, as discussed in Chapter V, that even in these stories Garland's view of farm life is not entirely negative. In fact, the Haskins family of "Under the Lion's Paw," his most famous story, experiences, if only temporarily, the fulfillment of the agrarian idyll.
Chapter II: Turmoil on the Prairie
in the Late Nineteenth Century

In the summer of 1890, shortly after Willa Cather had graduated from high school in Red Cloud, "1,600 teams converged on Hastings, Nebraska, in one day" (Billington 739). Certainly the sixteen-year-old Cather would have been aware of such a mass pilgrimage, since Hastings is only forty miles north of Red Cloud and fewer than thirty miles from Catherton, where her own relatives were still farming. And this event was a farmer's event. It was no county fair, though; it was a regional meeting of the Farmers' Alliance that was organizing across the West and South to prepare for the coming election. How many people were transported by those teams can only be speculated upon, perhaps five to ten thousand or more; but crowds of up to 25,000 were reported to be attending similar meetings just south of Red Cloud in the hotbed of agrarian revolt--the state of Kansas.

Apparently in the same year, Hamlin Garland's father had joined the Alliance (SMB 421-22); Richard, who now lived in Dakota, had been active in the Grange movement--something of a precursor of the Alliance--while Hamlin was a teenager in the mid-to-late 1870s in Osage, Iowa. Hamlin himself had earlier shown a reformist streak; in the fall of 1887, shortly after returning from his pivotal trip to Iowa and the Dakotas that summer, he and his brother Frank began
attending meetings of the Boston Anti-Poverty Society. They listened to the lectures and then heard the chairman of the organization say after one meeting, that due to a lack of speakers, the meetings would have to cease. Frank turned to Hamlin and said, "Here's your 'call'; volunteer to speak for them." Thus was a reformer born (378-80).

Two and one-half years later, by the time those 1,600 teams had converged on Hastings in the summer of 1890, Garland had already written several of the stories that would go into *Main-Travelled Roads* and *Prairie Folks*, some of which would become anthems for the Alliance and Populist movements. By 1891, he had put himself into the hands of the Iowa Alliance (People's Party) and was "speaking almost every day for a period of six weeks" (Holloway 67). In February 1992, Garland attended the St. Louis meeting in which the southern and northern alliance groups joined to form the Populist Party.

Hamlin Garland knew he was at the forefront of what he considered to be a great and just political movement and that he would become its foremost literary spokesman. Cather, on the other hand, never spoke of her interest in this or any other social movement other than to say that art and reform do not mix. Yet, in 1892, she published "Peter," a short story much in what is often called the Garland mode; it would be followed by other bleak narratives of life on the Divide. No doubt, though not a reformer at heart,
Cather was very aware of the plight of the farmer at the time and of the political movement that their plight fomented, for she was reaching maturity at a time of widespread and intense political revolt in the Midwest.

What brought those thousands of farmers to pastures in Nebraska and Kansas in 1890 to listen to men like James B. Weaver and William Jennings Bryan, the Populist presidential candidates of 1892 and 1896 respectively? Why would American industry experience nearly fifty thousand labor strikes between the period including the four years before and after 1890? Though in the late nineteenth century America seemed a country destined for greatness, a land of plenty and promise for everyone, many would be disappointed.

Americans had been trained to see themselves as rugged individualists who might expect, through hard work and diligence, to achieve a level of financial independence previously unknown to the working class. The Homestead Act of 1862 told native-born Americans and immigrants alike that they were entitled to a piece of the coming prosperity. It urged Garland's father to uproot his family four times in a dozen years in search of opportunity on the frontier; it lured Cather's sheep-farmer father one thousand miles from the tranquility of his ancestral home in Virginia to the bare plains of Nebraska. It was the impulse that drew the characters in Garland's and Cather's fiction to the West and that, finally, often destroyed them.
The country did take huge strides between the Civil War and the end of the century, so what had gone wrong? Why was the progress and promise of the era not shared by all? A brief recounting of the economic and political developments of the times—and the dramatic "acts of God" that occurred—will illustrate what happened between the proffering of the promise and the breaking of it. The failure of this particular American dream to come to fruition will inform the plights of the Haskins family in Garland's "Under the Lion's Paw" and Lou in Cather's "Lou, the Prophet," as well as the troubles of many other characters from their farm fiction.

Part 1: Three Decades of Progress

At the very moment that the 5,000 arc lights and the more than 100,000 incandescent lamps were turned on to light the fairgrounds of the Chicago World's Fair in the summer of 1893 (Blake 351), America was, ironically, at the beginning of a great depression that would darken the lives of most Americans for another four or five years. This was also the year of the Panic of 1893, a year marked by widespread collapse of financial institutions. For nearly thirty years, America had been in the midst of a wondrous industrial expansion that had completely changed the character of the nation. To a significant extent, the railroad industry would seem to have made this expansion
possible; ironically, it would be the too-rapid construction of fiscally unsound railroads that would contribute substantially to the great depression of 1893. Two years later, as illustration, "one-fifth of the mileage of the country...was in the hands of receivers" (346).

The beginnings of the period of rapid industrialization in America can be traced, to a great extent, back to the Civil War, when demand for the products of industry to feed the war effort exploded, leading to booms in every aspect of the American economy from the clothing and shoe industries to agricultural production. The secession of the South also meant that agrarian control of the government was lost. This led to the passage of laws to aid the growth in industry needed to supply the war effort. To a considerable extent those laws were responsible for turning small-business America into monopolistic America (Taylor, Economic Novel 25-26). War needs also led to a more rapid development and refinement of recently discovered technologies such as those in the steel, communication, coal mining, and other industries (Blake 311). Commercialized agriculture was practically the norm even before the war, but most remaining vestiges of the "yeoman farmer" agricultural economy disappeared during the war (Hofstadter, Reform 38). The American farmer had become a businessman. It was from this war and into this atmosphere that Private Smith, a thinly veiled portrait of Garland's father, would
wander in "The Return of the Private." He would begin, like thousands of his fellow soldiers, to seek his fortune in Western lands.

In the years that followed the war, the industrial boom would continue nearly unabated to the end of the century and beyond. By 1861 the communication industry had already accomplished its first great achievement, as the east and west coasts had been linked by the telegraph wire (Blake 181); by 1866, a transatlantic cable had been laid. In the late 1870s and early 1880s, the telephone industry blossomed, New York and Boston being "connected" by 1884 (the year in which Garland arrived in Boston to begin his literary studies and career). By 1882, Thomas Edison was lighting the offices and residences of lower Manhattan with electricity. Electricity was put to other uses as well. In 1888, the city of Richmond, Virginia, had an electric transportation system (350-51).

In the 1870s, the oil and steel industries exploded, making incredible fortunes for famous names like Rockefeller and Carnegie (353, 357). With the development of (and the expanded capability to produce) steel rails and the standardization of railroad track widths, railroad building expanded at an even faster pace. The first transcontinental line was completed in 1869; within fifteen years it would be complemented by several other lines linking the coasts (332).
The Homestead Act of 1862 eventually attracted millions of people—Americans and immigrants—to the agricultural states of the prairies and plains. Impressive developments in agricultural equipment—including the chilled-iron plow (1877), the Marsh harvester (1868), the twine binder (1878), and the James Buchanan blower threshing machine (1884)—led to astounding increases in agricultural productivity. "By the old methods an acre of wheat had demanded over 61 hours of labor from plowing to threshing; by the new methods 3-1/3 hours sufficed" (380-81).

But this rapid development of American industry and technology did not benefit everyone financially. Toward the end of the century, a troublesome pattern was developing in American business: Western Union monopolized the telegraph business; the Bell system dominated the telephone system through its control of long-distance capability; Rockefeller and a few others controlled the oil industry; Carnegie and a few others, the steel industry; even the railroad industry was experiencing massive consolidation. When laws were enacted to stem the power of the monopolies and the trust system, the concept of the holding company was developed whereby the industrialist held an even tighter grip on the consumer (350-58). "Price fixing, trusts, and monopolies were already gaining headway. A Missouri editor noted in 1888 that as soon as the plow trust was organized the price of plows doubled" (Shannon 313).
The laboring class had not been gilded by the age of industrialism. As Garland describes in *Jason Edwards: An Average Man*, the plight of the working man or woman in the cities, native-born or immigrant, deteriorated dramatically at this time. Lars Ahnebrink notes that the era "gave rise to a new hierarchy of financial giants and ... created an industrial proletariat made up of individuals who were mere cogs in a machine ..." (2).

In the 1880s and 1890s, labor was at war with ownership. Various labor groups organized, struck against numerous industries, and, for the most part, failed to achieve any sort of fair deal for their memberships. Strikes were frequent and very often violent. Between 1886 and 1894, nearly 6,000 strikes occurred per year (Taylor, *Economic Novel* 32). Generally speaking, there was at least one important difference between the violent strike actions of the laborers and the industrialists' vicious retaliations against these labor movements: the industrial giants were supported by local police, state militia, hired Pinkerton guards, federal troops, and, of course, widespread political corruption (Blake 373-77, 363-64).

The American agricultural pioneer fared no better economically during this era. "There is a time-hallowed tradition that the years between 1866 and 1896 were years of almost unalloyed agricultural depression in the United States. There is certainly evidence to support such a
Hofstadter explains the thoroughness of the devastation this era brought to the entire country and, in particular, to the farmer:

Toward the end of the [nineteenth] century it became increasingly evident that all this material growth had been achieved at a terrible cost in human values and in the waste of natural resources. The land and the people had both been plundered. The farmers, whose products had not only fed the expanding national work force but had also paid abroad for much of the foreign capital that financed American industrialization, had received pathetic returns for their toil. They had little or no protection against an unjust burden of taxation. (Progressive Movement 2)

To understand the atmosphere in which Willa Cather and Hamlin Garland grew to adulthood and the era and its people about which they were to write, a more extensive look at the plight of the rural Midwest during the last quarter of the century is necessary.

Part 2: Thirty Years of Poverty

Albert Richardson, in writing an 1867 travelogue about his journey from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean and back again during the years 1857 to 1867 (with the four
war years excepted), exclaims in his preface about the vast resources and unique attractions of the American West:

Its mines, forests and prairies await the capitalist. Its dusky races, earth-monuments and ancient cities importune the antiquarian. Its cataracts, canyons and crest woo the painter. Its mountains, minerals and stupendous vegetable productions challenge the naturalist. Its air invites the invalid, healing the system wounded by ruder climates. Its society welcomes the immigrant, offering high interest upon his investment of money, brains or skill; and if need be, generous obliviousness of errors past—a clean page to begin anew the record of his life. (i-ii)

This America of 1867 is still a land of all possibilities for all peoples; it is a rich land where anyone can come—hide, if necessary—and prosper. Well into the book, Richardson anticipates the completion of the transcontinental railroad: "The summer of 1867 opens with twenty-five thousand men employed on the main stem of the Pacific Railway: and the California and Nebraska companies expect to meet in the vicinity of Salt Lake early in 1870. Speed the day!" (569). As if to illustrate how anxious America was to begin what Hofstadter has called the plundering of the country, the railroad men beat Richardson's prediction by the better part of a year. And,
it's probably a good bet that this rather remarkable early completion surprised no one.

No doubt the numerous accounts like this one lured many to the West, but promoters of the frontier--particularly the railroad companies--left nothing so important as this to travelogues or chance. "Both natives and foreigners who peopled the Great Plains were attracted by the most effective advertising campaign ever to influence world migrations." It was this somewhat manufactured promise of the West that drew Cather's Rosickys, Bergsons, Shimerdas, and other immigrant families from Scandinavia and Bohemia to Nebraska. Involved in this campaign, in addition to the railroads, were steamship companies and the states themselves, which opened "immigration bureaus in the East and Europe" as early as 1867 (Minnesota) to attract new residents (Billington 706).

But the railroads took all honors in the campaign. After all, they stood to gain twice by the settling of the West. First, they could sell the settlers the land the federal government had granted them; and, second, these newcomers would eventually "create way traffic previously lacking in the sparsely settled region" (706). Needless to say, the picture painted by all the agents of each of the recruiting groups was greatly lacking in realism. A homestead on the frontier, the recruits were told, meant the assurance of freedom, wealth, and happiness (707). But as
Garland tells us best in *Jason Edwards* and as Cather relates with bitter irony in "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional," the promise of free land in a booming economy was often a purposely perpetuated hoax.

The Easterners and the Europeans who swallowed this advertising campaign were, perhaps, not to be blamed for their naïveté. Hofstadter traces a century or more of myth making that had "softened up" the newcomers so that by 1865 what he calls the "agrarian myth" had widespread acceptance in both America and Europe.

Like any complex of ideas, the agrarian myth cannot be defined in a phrase, but its component themes form a clear pattern. Its hero was the yeoman farmer, its central conception the notion that he is the ideal man and the ideal citizen. . . . The yeoman who owned a small farm and worked it with the aid of his family, was the incarnation of the simple, honest, independent, healthy, happy human being. . . . His well-being was not merely physical, it was moral; . . . he was held to be the best and most reliable sort of citizen.

*(Reform 24-25)*

It is not impossible to see in Ántonia and her family or in the second chance of the Haskins family of "Under the Lion's Paw" (before the landlord destroyed their dream) fictional manifestations of this myth.
To Hofstadter, though, it is not as important that these new pioneers believed the myth as it is that the men who created the famous Homestead Act of 1862 did. They are to blame for not understanding the disaster they were giving birth to. Their own acceptance of the myth prevented them from anticipating the widespread corruption and abuse of the act that would foul the actual settlement of the "free lands" (57). It has been estimated that for every one instance of true homesteading as intended by the act between 1860 and 1890, there were approximately nine other farm purchased from speculators, the railroads, or the government itself (54).

The Homestead Act promised the adventurer 160 acres of land for only the cost of registration fees if the land were worked five years.

But the free land which the Homestead Act promised was usually not the land which the migrating farmer actually acquired. The free land was all too often far from the railroads, away from the river valleys, or lacking in fertility. The better land was usually in the hands of individuals or corporations eager to sell it at a profit. The railroads were tremendous landowners, having received over 180 million acres in grants from federal and state governments—an area larger than Texas. (Blake 339)
So, typically, the Midwestern farmer went into debt to obtain his free land. He did not even get a fair shake at the bank; in 1868, for example, "[t]hough agricultural loans were hard to get at 10 per cent, . . . the rate was down to 4 in the East . . ." (Shannon 304).

Money was a problem for farmers for many other reasons. First, there was the same amount of money in circulation in 1890 as in 1865, and—as a result of that quarter decade of unsurpassed economic growth—each dollar in 1890 was worth much more than it had been in 1865 (Billington 734). In other words, cheap dollars borrowed had to be repaid with expensive dollars. And since from 1870 to 1897 prices for agricultural products declined steadily, if the farmer borrowed money equivalent to one hundred bushels of corn on a particular date, it might take the equivalent of two hundred bushels of corn or more to repay the debt years later when it was due (John Hicks 55, 88-89). This is why, when the great drought began in 1887, many farmers—like Alexandra Bergson’s neighbors in O Pioneers!—lost their land or were forced to sell out. Farmers had been lured into debt by a boom economy, and when either crops failed or prices for those crops collapsed, their situation became untenable because their debt remained intact.

Getting his crop to market presented another problem. First there were railroad shipping costs. "When the farmers of Iowa, Nebraska, or Kansas complained that it took the
value of one bushel of corn to pay the freight on another bushel... often this was no exaggeration and sometimes it was an understatement" (Shannon 295-98). Shipping rates varied greatly in different areas of the Midwest. In 1877, for example, the ton-mile shipping rate was $4.80 west of the Missouri River and $.95 east of Chicago (Billington 726).

Much of the problem resulted from the fact that railroads were in financial trouble themselves as a result of massive overbuilding into areas which could not support their services; and it did, after all, cost more to operate in the West where often cars arrived at Western destinations empty so that there was a paying customer only one way. In their attempt to attain solvency, Midwestern lines consolidated rapidly. In 1881 in Minnesota, for example, there were one-third the number of railroad companies as there had been only three years earlier. But, even taking these problems into consideration, rates were extraordinarily high in the West and the railroads did set up practices that were completely unfair, particularly in their arrangements with grain elevators (John Hicks 62-63).

The rapid rise of the grain-elevator business was another problem. Agreements between these enterprises and the railroads meant, essentially, that the farmer had to sell his grain to an elevator to get it to market (75). And since the railroads "refused to lay sidings for more than
one [elevator] in each community," the resulting mini-monopolies resulted in the elimination of competition; the farmer either sold his crop to the elevator at whatever price offered, or he sold it not at all (Billington 727). It was for this reason that men like Garland's father became active in the Grange movement in the 1870s. Farmers established their own cooperative elevators to assure themselves of fairer treatment. In Garland's *A Spoil of Office*, supposedly nonpolitical Granger meetings erupt in controversy over the unfair practices of non-Granger elevators.

Further adding to the grievances of the farmer was the practice of grading grain. Since the known price of the commodity at its destination--Minneapolis or Chicago, for example--was known, and since the railroad freight rates were also published, the elevator operators devised a scheme whereby they could skim off additional money. The grain was graded according to its moisture content and freedom from refuse. The elevator operator simply and fraudulently graded the grain incorrectly so that he could pay the farmer for a lower grade of grain. At market destination, then, the grade of the grain shipment was upgraded and the elevator was paid, for example, for number-one grain when he had paid the farmer for number-two grain (John Hicks 77). The farmer, with no other outlet to market, was trapped. He "got only a small portion of the wholesale prices quoted at
the exchanges. The reasons were that the charges made by middlemen and the railroads come out of the producers' pockets . . . " (Shannon 295).

The farmer also complained frequently about the fact that he sold his product on an open market and then had to turn around and buy his necessities, including equipment, on a closed market, one protected by tariffs (Taylor, *Economic Novel* 30). The development of equipment trusts, which effectively eliminated competition in that industry, was particularly damaging to farmers. He could not farm without equipment, and he could not buy in an open, competition-driven market, though he must sell his own products on the free-market (John Hicks 79-80). These unfair conditions drove farmers to political action and Garland back to the Midwest to collect data for the muckraking magazine, *McClure's*. Eventually he would drop the guise of journalist and actively join the Populist effort.

Part 3: Farmers in Revolt

The earliest important farmers' organization was the Grange, which was founded in 1867 primarily to provide "farmers all over the country" with "a social life that would give them a broader social vision" (Shannon 329). In fact, the Grange specifically "prohibited political action," though "there was no restriction on individual
participation" in political activities (309). But by the early 1870s, the original social and educational features of the Grange were taking second place to the attacks on middlemen and railroads. The fundamentals were not ignored, but farmers joined primarily for economic benefits, and they intended to get them. (330)

They felt by then that they were suffering many abuses at the hands of both government and industry.

In 1874, at the Grange National Convention, the decision was made to establish a system of agents who would negotiate directly with manufacturers, thereby eliminating the cost of a middleman equipment dealer and giving them strength of numbers at the bargaining table. The results were amazing: "reapers were purchased for $175 rather than $275, wagons for $90 instead of $150, sewing machines for half their usual cost of $100." Grangers were group-buying even before 1874, as Montgomery Ward was formed in 1872 for the express purpose of dealing with members of the Grange. In these same years Granges established their own "grain elevators, packing plants, flour mills, banks, insurance companies, and other small businesses catering to the farmer" (Billington 729). By 1875 Garland's father would be so involved in this movement that he would accept a
position running the Grange elevator in Osage, Iowa, and move his family from the farm a year later (SMB 173).

No doubt a topic of great interest at the 1874 convention was the Panic of 1873 which was precipitated in part by overbuilding of the very railroads that the farmers felt had been cheating them for years (Blake 332-33). The Grangers in Illinois decided to take action. They understood that in thinly settled areas, free competition was not a viable answer; they wanted laws passed to control rates. But even the mere idea of government regulation of any aspect of the economy was shocking to a country that, during this period of explosive expansion, knelt at the altar of laissez faire economics (Billington 729-30).

Yet in the fall of 1873, the farmer-controlled Illinois legislature passed laws that "set maximum rates on both freight and passenger traffic." Soon other Midwestern states followed so that "the issue of public welfare versus private enterprise was before the people by 1874." At first the railroads ignored the laws, even raising rates higher, but the Illinois "law was too well drawn to be attacked, [so] the railroads sought to avoid regulation by appealing to the courts" (730).

This action led eventually to an 1876 ruling of the United States Supreme Court in *Mumm vs. Illinois* in which the court ruled that states were allowed to regulate the setting of rates. This was the same year in which Garland's
family moved from their farm to Osage, his father having begun to run the Grange elevator there the year before. With this victory over the railroad, membership and interest in the Grange began to wane, partially because the bank failures that followed the Panic of 1873 meant that prices of all goods were depressed. Temporarily, at least, the farmer was somewhat better off in relation to his Eastern countrymen than he had been for some time (Shannon 294-95).

In addition, the Midwest was edging toward an era of incredible expansion that began in about 1880. Eastern money interests, distrusting Eastern investments after the 1873 banking and market debacle, felt that the West—Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas—was the place to make money. "Agents roamed the prairie states in horse and buggy, pleading with Westerners to accept a loan. Never in the memory of pioneers was cash so plentiful. Few farmers could resist the pressure," a fact which would soon haunt the many who borrowed heavily (Billington 732). In addition to easy credit,

For eight years before 1887 there was an unusual amount of rainfall in Colorado and in western Kansas and Nebraska. . . . People were led to believe that tree planting and irrigation had caused this change, and that heavy settlement would bring a permanent change of weather on the Great Plains. (Shannon 306)
As the money flowed to the Midwest, so did homesteaders. "The most spectacular burst of settlement occurred in the 'Great Dakota Land Boom' between 1881 and 1885, when 67,000 settlers took up homesteads in the territory" (Bogue, "An Agricultural Empire" 290).

It was in 1881 that Richard Garland sold out in Iowa and headed for Ordway, South Dakota. In 1883, Hamlin himself would also homestead several miles east of his father's site. And in that same year the excitement of the Western land boom would even lure a gentle sheep farmer from his northern Virginia home to Nebraska. His entourage included his oldest child, Willa Cather. The last great rush to populate the middle section of the country was underway, making railroad companies, Eastern investors, and pioneers very happy.

And then the pretty bubble was pricked. Ten years of almost perpetual drouth began at that time [1887], with only two crops in the decade. Hot winds and chinch bugs . . . finished what dry weather alone could not accomplish. Early frosts came in Dakota. In the lower parts of the Plains and bordering Prairies the drying-out process began even in 1886. Then the disastrous winter of 1886-1887 finished the cattle corporations' paradise on the higher plains. (Shannon 307)
When it became apparent early in the fall of 1887 that a crop failure was inevitable, the result was panic selling of mortgages on the market along with widespread mortgage foreclosure (308-09). It was during this hot, dry summer that Garland made his first trip back to Dakota since leaving for Boston in 1884 (McCullough 17).

Half of the people who had settled western Kansas left between 1888 and 1892 for parts east, giving rise to their saying, "In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted" (Shannon 308). It was in Kansas that the Haskins family in Garland's "Under the Lion's Paw" had fallen into bankruptcy; they, like many other Kansans as well as Dakotans and Nebraskans, retreated to Iowa and other points east which had been less harshly hit by the drought. It was in this dried-out, boom-busted, western Kansas that Colonel Bywater languishes in Cather's "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional."

Once again, the farmers began to organize. The farmer had long complained about his situation, but he continued to put up with a number of apparent injustices. As long as he could survive, he had kept quiet. He had not risen to political action for more than a decade.

In the South as long as the price of cotton continued high and in the West as long as the flow of eastern capital remained uninterrupted, the grievances against the railroads, the middlemen, and the tariff-protected trusts merely smoldered.
But when the bottom dropped out of the cotton market and the western boom collapsed, then the weight of debt was keenly felt and frenzied agitation began. (John Hicks 81).

Several alliances of farmers formed independently in various states. They were unable to unite physically into a single group in time for the 1890 elections, but they were distinctly united philosophically in terms of their political goals and their "pent-up resentment against low prices, crushing debts, and burdensome taxes." It was in the midst of this "holy cause" that those "1,600 teams converged on Hastings, Nebraska, in one day" (Billington 738). Working with the same political goals, but independent of one another, the various alliances scored impressive gains in the elections, seating governors in four states, obtaining control of eight legislatures, and sending forty-four congressmen and three senators to Washington, DC (739).

With zeal, the alliances looked forward to the 1892 election; the same zeal carried Hamlin Garland to the meeting in St. Louis in February 12, 1892 (called the Washington’s Birthday Industrial Congress), where the Populist Party was formed and then to Omaha on the Fourth of July to attend the Populist Party nominating convention. Their grievances are well represented by their "Omaha Platform" demands (Shannon 318):
--free silver coinage at a 16 to 1 ratio
--a graduated income
--economy and honesty in government
--governmental ownership of railroads, and telegraph and telephone systems
--abolition of land ownership by railroads and corporations beyond the actual needs of operation
--initiative and referendum
--single term for president and vice-president
--direct election of United States senators.

In the election, the Populist presidential candidate, James B. Weaver of Iowa, carried Kansas, Nevada, Colorado, and Idaho. Interestingly, he carried neither Garland's Iowa nor Cather's Nebraska; but Iowa, a prairie state, and Nebraska, whose eastern end is also tall-grass country, though affected, had not been hit as hard by the drought. It was the less-populated plains section of Nebraska, much of Kansas and the Dakotas, as well as states farther west, which had suffered most (Billington 740).

One year after the election, the Panic of 1893 created economic and social havoc throughout America: "Fear swept the nation. Industrialists cut payrolls, merchants ended purchases, brokers dumped stocks, banks closed to escape runs, workers marched on Washington demanding relief" (741). For the Midwest farmer, it meant corn prices below $.15 per bushel.10 As might be expected, the panic and continued
drought conditions in the Midwest added fuel to the Populist fire in the years leading up to the 1896 elections.

The Populists delayed their own nominating convention in order to see what the other parties would offer. They assumed that both the Republicans and Democrats would declare their allegiance to a gold standard,\[1\] which would then allow the People’s Party to unite all who favored the free and unlimited coinage of silver behind their own candidate. The Republican Platform, as expected, featured a solid, gold-standard-only plank (742).

But, to the dismay of many Populists, the Democrats included a "free silver" plank in their platform; then the delegates were mesmerized by a young Nebraskan’s glorification of that plank. William Jennings Bryan, who lived in Lincoln while Cather was in college and received Cather into his private library on numerous occasions, was to win the nomination. Cather came to admire Bryan and see him as symbolizing the entire Midwest region. The 1896 campaign issues served as the basis of a ruinous debate in her story, "Two Friends" (Woodress 101-02). In Bryan’s speech to the Democratic convention, he said, "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold" (743). The Populists then were cornered into endorsing Bryan, but they "could not stomach the conservative Maine banker, shipbuilder, and railroad president, Arthur Sewall, for Vice
President," so they nominated one of their own, Thomas E. Watson, for that office. The confusion that resulted may have given the victory to William McKinley (Shannon 325).\(^{12}\)

The lost election essentially ended the political clout of the Populist Party, though as late as 1908 it was still nominating candidates (326). There is no doubt that many of the reforms called for by the Populists were warranted, but some believe that a certain self-righteous, holy-cause attitude manifested itself in the movement and that this attitude stemmed from an old agrarian sense of the moral supremacy of farmers. Hofstadter's is such a stance; he believed that the farmer had a split personality: he was a businessman, and, when things got really tough, he was "the injured little yeoman" (Reform 47). He exclaims against the hypocrisy of this self-proclaimed virtue:

In Populist thought the farmer is not a speculating businessman, victimized by the risk economy of which he is a part, but rather a wounded yeoman, preyed upon by those who are alien to the life of folkish virtue. (73)

But there is reason to believe that Hamlin Garland and other activists had genuine grievances and that they acted not out of self-pity as victims, but on principle. Some historians disagree with Hofstadter and applaud the efforts of the Populists as just and necessary considering the financial and political corruption of the era: "Often in
these years of unblushing governmental manipulation, economic interests unabashedly manhandled the political process." They accuse Hofstadter of bias:

The renowned Richard Hofstadter, projecting an urban-eastern bias, countered that they were poorly informed cranks and xenophobes who simply lashed out at a system they only vaguely comprehended. (Malone and Peterson 502, 505)

They support their claim of bias against Hofstadter by their assessment that most "contemporary historians . . . conclude that the Populists were in fact cogent and determined regionalists and reformers" (505). 13

Both sides, however, agree that Populism had far-reaching effects in the years after the party disappeared, even Hofstadter:

Populism was the first modern political movement of practical importance in the United States to insist that the federal government has some responsibility for the common weal; indeed, it was the first such movement to attack seriously the problems created by industrialism. (Reform 61)

Most historians agree with Billington that "Even in defeat the Populists triumphed, for their decline was hastened by a gradual realization of their demands" (744). The reform attitude they initiated was adopted and built upon by the
Progressive movement that blossomed during the next twenty years. 14

Perhaps some support for Hofstadter's "injured little yeoman" position is found in considering what happened to the Populist party after the 1896 defeat.

The reason for the collapse of the Populist revolt was that a number of the chief causes for discontent were removed by a revival of general prosperity. By 1897, the effects of the panic had worn off for business, and farm prosperity came later. As business improved, credit grew more plentiful for farmers as well as for industry, and the interest rates were no longer so oppressive. Also, the prices of farm products began to rise, and the hope of clearing off debts was again felt. (Shannon 326)

As long as the game allowed them some participation, the message seems to be, the "injured little yeoman" jumped off the stump and onto his planter.

Conditions in the Midwest were difficult in the years that Garland and Cather grew to maturity. There were the hardships one might expect on the frontier: shoving a plow into a sod that had never been broken; building a home on a timberless land; trying to survive in a strange new world, as the immigrants did, without speaking English. But added to these expected hardships were numerous factors which
exacerbated the trial of the pioneer: a prolonged drought, hordes of crop-devouring insects, the harshest winter on record, and, on top of it all, political and economic chicanery. When Cather and Garland wrote negatively of farm life in the West, it was usually these last uncommon acts of nature and these human-contrived disasters that informed their presentations. The life itself, unencumbered by these impediments, in the minds of both Cather and Garland, was a life of great freedom and satisfaction. Chapter III details their own experiences on and reactions to the agricultural frontier.
Notes

1. The term "Farmers' Alliance" is often used to designate any one of a number of farmers' groups created for purposes of political action. The original Farmers' Alliance was founded in Texas in 1874; in 1887 it merged with two other farmers' groups to form the Farmers' and Laborers' Union, which essentially served Southwestern and Southern farmers. A Northwest Alliance, which served the upper plains states, was formed in 1880. In December 1889, the two groups met for the purpose of merger but failed to do so, though, being united in cause if not in organization, they did support similar political ends in the 1890 election (Billington 737).

2. It was on July 4, 1887, that Garland dedicated himself to put the realities about the harsh circumstances of the farmer into fictional form, at least as he recalls in Son of the Middle Border published thirty years later (358).

3. The Panic of 1893 is not to be confused with the Panic of 1873, though both involved tightened money supplies, caused particular hardships for farmers, and resulted in political action by farmer groups—the Grangers in 1873, the Populists in 1893.

4. Taylor discusses measures taken to aid industrialization which proved to be harmful to agriculture and labor: "[A] series of laws were passed which committed the nation to an
industrial policy. A national banking system was established; the immigration laws were relaxed to permit the wholesale importation of labor under contract; the tariff was more than doubled. These laws, moreover, continued in effect after the war, and joined with other forces, such as the continued rapid expansion of the country, to act as powerful stimulants to industrial growth" (25).

5. The raising of a crop for cash is what is meant, broadly, by "commercial agriculture." Specifically, it contrasts with the once more prevalent practice of "yeoman" farming, wherein the farmer raised what he needed to feed his own family and to barter for other goods that he could not produce. The commercial farmer farmed for profit, not for subsistence; therefore, he raised a much larger crop than necessary to feed his own and sold it on the market. Hofstadter states that the transformation of American farmers from yeoman to commercial practices began in 1815 and was complete by the end of the Civil War (Reform 38).

6. Cather shows in "Neighbor Rosicky" that she, too, was aware of horrid conditions in the city. Rosicky had nearly starved to death in London, though he came to America and fared well in New York where he worked as a tailor, apparently, shortly after the Civil War. This was before massive immigration, encouraged by industrialists,
dramatically reduced the working man's leverage in wage negotiations, driving many into poverty.

7. Bogue is speaking here in the general sense, for he also says "that a great many farmers in Illinois and Iowa prospered exceedingly in the years after the Civil War" (283). He also notes that times were hardest for farmers in different areas at different times: "Clearly the 1870s were the years of the greatest tribulation for prairie farmers. Midwestern farm protest in the late 1880s and early 1890s emanated from the plains states rather than from the prairies" (284). Loosely speaking, Illinois and Iowa are prairie states and the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas are plains states, though the eastern portions of the latter states are also tall grassland areas and, thus, more "prairie" in soil type and precipitation patterns than "plains" (Billington 408). The terms "Great Plains" and "Midwest," however, are often used to encompass all the above states as well as Minnesota, Indiana, Missouri, and Wisconsin. Billington himself uses Great Plains to describe the entire area (706).

8. Though Richardson does not explicitly say so, I would assume that he is not including "the dusky races," nor the other non-whites, in his list of the beneficiaries of this great opportunity.

9. The Haskinses had already experienced failure on a Kansas
homestead. As they travelled back east through Iowa, they were given a second chance which also ended disastrously.

10. As Billington explains, it is difficult to know exactly what farmers were paid for their crops at any particular date because they were not paid the stated wholesale prices. In the years 1890–1893, corn sold for an average of $.41.7 per bushel; in the following three years, for $.29.7 per bushel. But this was price at market destination, and the elevator and railroad had already taken a huge chunk out of this price. The cost of raising a bushel of corn was put at $.20, so the farmer was losing money by raising a crop when paid $.15 (725).

11. For twenty-three years, since the panic of 1873, most Westerners supported a bi-metallic monetary standard with silver valued at a ratio of 16 to 1 with gold. In that year, however, Congress had demonetized silver which limited the supply of money in the country to existing gold reserves and gold-backed greenbacks. Farmers and miners believed that this limited money supply was always at the bottom of their money problems, though the truth or falsity of that belief is still debated. Partially in response to the agitated miners and farmers, the government had agreed in 1890 (Sherman Silver Purchase Act) to buy a fixed amount of silver monthly. In 1893, the panic year, Cleveland convinced Congress to repeal Sherman, believing that it was partially responsible for the continued erosion of faith in
the American dollar overseas which had resulted in a severe depletion of the government’s gold supply when European bond holders demanded payment in gold (Blake 391-92, et al.) These events created an uproar in the West and "free silver" became a rallying cry for the Populists, though most observers feel that it was badly overplayed in the election and that the concentration on it by Bryan had a negative effect in that it limited emphasis on more important Populist issues and reform demands.

12. As Shannon explains, "Separate electoral slates would mean a division of the vote just as much as if no fusion at all had been achieved. So a device was worked out whereby the Populist electors alone would appear on the ballot in the states where they were strongest, and Democratic electors only in the rest of the states." He suggests that this may have discouraged many Populists from voting at all (325).

13. Malone and Peterson are reacting to the general negativity of Hofstadter’s evaluation of the Populist movement. Hofstadter says that Populism was characterized by provincialism, nativism and nationalism, and anti-Semitism. He even traces the remnants of modern day (1955) American anti-Semitism to them. He also accuses the Populists of looking backward, not forward. But Hofstadter is not debating that the reforms were warranted; he seems, rather, to be suggesting that good came out of their reform
efforts even though he does not particularly admire their motives. Particularly, of course, he finds that much of the sanctimonious pontificating of the Populists stems from their belief in the old agrarian myth which "established" them as naturally morally superior to the denizens of the corrupt cities. While Hofstadter's arguments are certainly well-presented and in most aspects insightful, to this writer his refusal to acknowledge the Populists' attempts to cooperate with the abused labor union members of those same cities as legitimate is curious and begins to sound a little like pontification itself. He calls this belief in a natural synergism between the "productive classes" part of the folklore of the Populists, another of their numerous and insupportable misinformed myths (Reform 64). Malone and Peterson seem to be pointing toward something of a regional and class bias (just another man's different myth?) in Hofstadter's own position. It should be noted that Vernon Parrington agrees, at least partially, with Hofstadter's analysis, saying that the farmer never adjusted himself "to the new capitalistic order. The simple agrarian mind had not learned to play the new game" (296). In Parrington's time, such stereotyping was still possible. In any case, there seems to be no doubt that this particular game contained rules that guaranteed victory to the farmers' antagonists; and it would further seem, since most of the
Populists' demands are now part of our present political and social reality, that the "simple agrarian mind" at least knew a monopoly when it saw one even if it was powerless to dismantle it.

14. See Groman xii-xiii; Billington 744; Shannon 328.
Chapter III: Biographical Parallels

As is detailed in later chapters, critics often point to Hamlin Garland's "hatred" of his isolated childhood on the prairie as one source of his presumed bitterness about the Midwest that led him to write negatively about that life. Similarly, critics often blame Cather's supposed original rejection of Nebraska as a literary setting or--those who even acknowledge them, that is--her own early bleak narratives of Nebraska life on a petulant dismissal of her backwoods rearing in a desolate country. The theory is that each was raised in an unstimulating, culturally starved environment that led to a rebellion against their childhood homes and, in each case, an early escape to the East.

In fact, while Cather and Garland did feel compelled to leave the Midwest to pursue careers and experience the world, they did not hate their rural childhood homes. And while they were not reared in an Eastern cultural center and did not attend an exclusive Eastern academy, they did have some--in Cather's case, considerable--exposure to the world of culture. Much of this misinformation upon which critics have based other misinformed conclusions is curious in origin. In many cases, even scholarly biographers seem to ignore their own data, as will be illustrated. It may be that they are working from a vantage point so foreign to the existence that Cather and Garland lived that they cannot but
label it as limiting and deprived. In fact, it is my opinion that this is a major factor in how the authors' lives have been represented. Is it not likely that these critics and biographers are so handicapped by their twentieth-century, urban backgrounds and sensitivities that they are rendered incapable of characterizing Garland's and Cather's life objectively? Few Americans have a farm background; few prominent writers have come from such a background, as have, perhaps, even fewer biographers and critics of major literary figures.

This chapter also points out a number of parallels between the lives of the two writers: they spent their early childhoods in secure emotional and physical surroundings; they were torn from that security and displaced to a land of seeming desolation which each grew to love; as they matured, they became individuals of driving ambition with penchants for education and for careers away from their prairie homes; finally, they were to find literary fame through reinventing their own pioneer environments in fiction.

Part 1: Early Safe Havens

Hamlin Garland and Willa Cather are the most important and prolific fictional chroniclers of the agricultural pioneer experience. Many of Garland's writings on this subject are recollections of his experiences as a boy and
young man in northeastern and north-central Iowa, though he writes as well of Wisconsin and the Dakotas, the latter being an area also included in what he would label "the Middle Border," that westwardly moving line which marked the advance of the farmer upon the frontier. Cather's "middle border" was in Nebraska, specifically that area which she labeled "the Divide," the flat country in extreme southern Nebraska which separates the Republican and Little Blue rivers, some 170 miles west of the Missouri River.

Garland's Osage, Iowa, would become the Rock River of Boy Life on the Prairie, Prairie Folks, A Spoil of Office, and "A Branch Road" and "Under the Lion's Paw" in his Main-Travelled Roads, while Cather's Red Cloud, Nebraska, would be renamed in numerous works: Hanover in O Pioneers!, Black Hawk in My Ántonia, Moonstone in The Song of the Lark, and Sweet Water in A Lost Lady, for example. These small towns and, often more particularly, the countrysides surrounding them would provide the two writers with the settings of their most acclaimed works. But this shared rural heritage is only one of numerous parallels between the stimulating early lives of Garland and Cather. The following accounts are intended specifically to dispel the misconceptions about their lives that have led to critical misreadings and distortions of their literature.

Garland's Early Life
Hannibal Hamlin Garland—named after Hannibal Hamlin, Lincoln’s first vice-president and a former governor of Maine, where the Garland family had its American origins—was born September 14, 1860, in West Salem, Wisconsin, to Richard and Isabelle ("Belle") Garland. The following spring, the family moved a few miles west to a farm in Green’s Coulee between West Salem and Onalaska near the western border of the state and only a few miles from La Crosse and the Mississippi River (Hill 6-7, 1-2). His early boyhood was a comfortable, almost carefree one in what was by then a relatively stable area of the Old Northwest somewhat insulated from the edge of the agricultural frontier, which lay to the west across the Mississippi in Minnesota and Iowa. In *A Son of the Middle Border*, an autobiographical recounting of approximately his first thirty-five years, Garland writes of spending part of his youth "in the midst of a charming [Wisconsin] landscape":

The earliest dim scene in my memory is that of a soft warm evening. I am cradled in the lap of my sister Harriet who is sitting on the doorstep beneath a low roof. It is mid-summer and at our feet lies a mat of dark-green grass from which a frog is croaking. The stars are out, and above the high hills to the east a mysterious glow is glorifying the sky. (5)

Our farm lay well up in what is called Green’s
[C]oulee, in a little valley. . . . It contained one hundred and sixty acres of land which crumpled against the wooded hills on the east and lay well upon a ridge to the west. (12)

Hamlin's first nine years were spent in this charming and secure Wisconsin setting.

He also grew up surrounded by relatives. Garland's paternal grandparents lived a few miles west of the farm in Onalaska, "an interesting place in those days," for it was a "boom town" which supplied the area with raw timber as well as lumber products (Hill 8). Here, too, Hamlin was introduced to literature by Grandmother Garland, whose home was "a serene small sanctuary" in that bustling little town (SMB 37). It was she who "taught him to enjoy the New England poets" (Hill 10), a first taste of the world of words which was to serve as the beginning of what Hamlin called his "hunger for print" (SMB 35).

Only a few miles east of Green's Coulee, in Salem, lived his maternal grandparents, the McClintocks, a family--in contrast to the more reserved grandparents Garland--of unusual vitality, as Hamlin explains:

[Grandmother McClintock] was the mother of seven sons, each a splendid type of sturdy manhood, and six daughters almost equally gifted in physical beauty. Four of the sons stood over six feet in height and were of unusual strength.
All of them--men and women alike--were musicians by inheritance, and I never think of them without hearing the sound of singing or the voice of the violin. (18)

The McClintocks maintained a boisterous enthusiasm for life even in the face of the apocalyptic obsessions of the gloomy, devoutly religious patriarch of the family who, since his mind was "filled with visions of angel messengers with trumpets at their lips announcing 'The Day of Wrath,'" could hardly be expected to "concern himself with the ordinary affairs of human life" (20).1

Hamlin wrote of spending pleasant hours with his McClintock cousins, as they "climbed the slender leafy trees and swayed and swung on their tip-tops like bobolinks," and then "scrambling up the bank" to answer "[t]he blast of the bugle call[ing] us to dinner" (16). But, like any farm boy, Hamlin had daily chores to do, including collecting firewood, feeding livestock, and carrying water to the field laborers. Generally, though, life--and even work, which is always part of farm life--brought pleasure.

Haying was a delightful season to us, for the scythes of the men occasionally tossed up clusters of beautiful strawberries, which we joyfully gathered. . . .

Harvest time also brought a pleasing excitement . . . which compensated for the extra work
demanded of us. The neighbors usually came in to help and life was a feast. (31-32)

There were, of course, the innumerable pleasures and dangers of nature to attract a boy in the late 1860s in rural Wisconsin. In the pages of A Son of the Middle Border, Garland records several encounters with fearsome rattlesnakes and with the merely interesting garter, blue racer, and black snakes. Other wildlife, including wildcats, bear, and deer, populated the area (33-34).

But, though "Green's Coulee was a delightful place for boys" (42), it was a hard place to make a living.

[All the joys which the people and scenes and activities of the coulee brought were not enough to bind Richard Garland to it. . . . In 1868 he sold his 160-acre tract in the coulee, loaded up his family and belongings on a bobsled, and moved across the Mississippi over into Winnesheik County, Iowa. (Hill 12)²

Hamlin's father had become disenchanted with the difficulty of farming the less-than-fertile, heavily wooded, and hilly land of the coulees. Hamlin also suggests that his father was by constitution a pioneer: he had left his Maine home first for Boston and then for Wisconsin; he had explored the flat, fertile lands of Minnesota before enlisting, as a married man with three young children, in the Civil War (SMB 42). He--unlike Hamlin's mother, who "was content with the
pleasant slopes, the kindly neighbors of Green's Coulee"--was ready for change, even found it "alluring" (43). This was a man who had worked as a teamster in Boston (8) and as a "woodsman and riverman" for six years in the Wisconsin woods (Hill 3).

In February 1869, Hamlin's life in Wisconsin came to an end; gone was the stimulating, yet secure, milieu of snug valleys peopled by relatives and childhood friends (SMB 71). Richard Garland, having sold his farm in the previous year, first took his family to a farm just outside of Hesper, Iowa, which is located some twenty-five miles into the state and on the Minnesota border. This farm, Garland explains, "immediately won our love" (73).

All my memories of this farm are of the fiber of poetry. The silence of the snowy aisles of the forest, the whirring flight of partridges, the impudent bark of squirrels, the quavering voices of owls and coons, the music of the winds in the high tree,—all these impressions unite in my mind like parts of a woodland symphony. (74)

But this idyllic spot was to be a mere one-year stopover in a continuing movement westward, as Richard Garland soon sold this land and moved the family to a rented farm six miles west in Burr Oak township in March 1870. No sooner had they harvested a single crop at this second place than they again moved some forty miles farther west to
another purchased farm near Osage, Iowa, in Mitchell County (80-81). The trip itself was a powerful experience.

Late in August [1870] my father again loaded our household goods into wagons, and with our small herd of cattle following, set out toward the west, bound once again to overtake the actual line of the middle border.

This journey has an unforgettable epic charm as I look back upon it. Each mile took us farther and farther into the unsettled prairie until in the afternoon of the second day, we came to a meadow so wide that its western rim touched the sky without revealing a sign of man's habitation other than the road in which we travelled. (81-82)

Here a wonder-struck Hamlin, just short of his tenth birthday, "felt for the first time the poetry of the unplowed spaces" (82). But they were not to reach their own farm until nightfall. Next morning, Hamlin stood outside his cabin and viewed a seemingly limitless and treeless plain. "To the north, as far as I could see, the land billowed like a russet ocean, with scarcely a roof to fleck its lonely spread.--I cannot say that I liked or disliked it. I merely marvelled at it . . ." (83). He was now upon the very edge of the agricultural frontier, upon the Middle
Border that he was to make both famous and infamous in his early fiction.

Cather's Early Life

Cather biographer Sharon O'Brien comments on what she saw as the uniqueness of Cather's move from Virginia to Nebraska in the spring of 1883 when she was nine.

Cather had an experience no other writer of her generation, male or female, shared. No other writer moved West at the same crucial age: old enough to remember the past, young enough to adapt quickly to the new world. (EV 74)

But as we know, O'Brien is mistaken; Hamlin Garland, Cather's contemporary, experienced this same displacement. One of the major themes of her Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice is that Cather's removal from the comfortable, pastoral, "maternal world" of Virginia and her shocking displacement to the West, specifically to the barren frontier prairie of Nebraska, was central to her development as a writer (73-74).

But Garland also moved from an established area to the frontier prairie; he too left a comfortable "maternal world" at the same "crucial age" (Garland was eight and a half) and was also "old enough to remember the past, young enough to adapt quickly to the new world." Certainly, the social and cultural environments of Wisconsin and Virginia differed
then as they do now, but it is more important to note that both Cather and Garland were raised on working farms, far distant from any cultural centers. Garland's grandparents migrated to Wisconsin about ten years before he was born, the Garlands from Maine, the McClintocks from Ohio; so all were of distinctly "Yankee" stock (Hill 1-3).

Cather's family had lived in Virginia for nearly one hundred years when she was born, and certainly she was raised by a Southern-gentleman father and a somewhat haughty Southern-belle mother (O'Brien, EV 12, 14, 37). But as Edward and Lillian Bloom write, "Of the influences which shaped the creative genius of this novelist her Southern background is perhaps the least notable" because "[s]he left her Virginia home while yet a child, too young to absorb deeply the Southern tradition." They further contend that her "pronounced individualism" even in youth "might have made her socially intolerable had she remained in Virginia." It is their stance that the move represented a relief from "the binding artificiality of the South": "At the outset, after the static complacency of Virginia, she was undoubtedly sensitive to the brawling confusion of pioneer life" (3-4).³

It is true that Cather's relocation entailed a move of some one thousand miles; Garland's, perhaps only one hundred miles. But distance is not the point of O'Brien's statement; emotional and psychological upheaval and shock
are. And in some ways, Garland's dislocation was even more complete because while Cather's family joined existing family in Nebraska, including her paternal grandparents and the family of her uncle (George Cather), who had moved there a decade earlier to establish Catherton (Gerber 19), Garland's family joined only Belle's brother David who had himself just arrived on the Middle Border (SMB 80). Hamlin wrote of the first prairie impressions of a young boy much like himself in *Boy Life on the Prairie*.

Lincoln rustled along through the tall grass, and clambering up the wagon wheel, stood silently beside his mother. Tired as he was, the scene made an indelible impression on him. It was as though he had suddenly been transported into another world, a world where time did not exist; where snow never fell, and the grass waved forever under a cloudless sky. A great awe fell upon him as he looked, and he could not utter a word. (2) Cather's own recollection of her arrival at the edge of the prairie rings of the same sense of displacement, even shock.

I shall never forget my introduction to it. . . . I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon, holding on to the side of the wagon box to steady myself--the roads were mostly faint trails over the bunch grass in those days. The land was open range and there was almost no
fencing. As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality.

I would not know how much a child's life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows around it, if I had not been jerked away from all these and thrown out into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron. (KOA 448)

What an investigation of the two childhoods establishes is that, while both did experience this displacement at this early age, both also had grown up in somewhat similar circumstances prior to their moves west.

Wilella Cather was born December 7, 1873, to Charles and Virginia Cather in her maternal grandmother's home in the village of Back Creek, which was located just outside the upper Shenandoah Valley town of Winchester in extreme northern Virginia, some sixty-five miles west-northwest of Washington, DC. As an infant, she moved to nearby Willow Shade, her paternal grandfather's farm (Gerber 19).

Cather's biographers all acknowledge the tranquility of her early years which were spent in stable, comfortable, and beautiful surroundings.

The Shenandoah Valley near the Blue Ridge mountains and the border with West Virginia, though not very rich farming country, was a
sympathetic, picturesque landscape of willows and
dogwood and azaleas, sheepfolds and streams and
winding, wooded hill roads. (Lee 24)

Like Garland's coulee, Cather's childhood home was not the
best farmland, but it was a great place to grow up. "The
first nine years [of Cather's life] were passed in a society
of extraordinary stability" (Brown 4). "Life at Willow
Shade was orderly, comfortable, and continuously
interesting. It was a stable world for a child to grow up
in" (Woodress 25). And it may have been the perfect place,
according to one biographer, for the development of an
artist's sensibility.

Her Virginia life was one of great richness,
tranquil and ordered and serene. With its freedom
from all tension and nervous strain, it may have
helped to give her that deep store of vitality
which underlay her work. (Edith Lewis 12)

It was this hilly, wooded haven that Willa would soon
contrast to the endless, treeless space of Nebraska.

Since the Virginia farm was not well-suited to crop
raising, Charles Cather was mostly engaged in sheep farming.
He often took his first-born with him when he drove the
sheep, "carrying her on his shoulder" (Edith Lewis 7).
Charles has been described variously by Cather' biographers,
but in consensus he seems to have been a pleasant,
sensitive, supportive man who lacked the strength of will that his own father and other male ancestors had displayed.

The real power in the Cather family lay in the hands of the women. Willa’s mother, Virginia, was a proud, domineering woman who controlled her husband and occasionally whipped her seven children (Lee 28). She was a Southern beauty with a taste for finery in dress and an abiding concern, even obsession, with her personal appearance, an obsession that she maintained even in the prairie town of Red Cloud, Nebraska. But to a significant extent, it was Virginia’s own widowed mother, Rachel Boak, who raised Willa and the other three children born in Virginia and who followed the family to Nebraska to raise the additional three who would be born there, the birth of the last Cather child occurring in 1892, only one year before Grandmother Boak’s death (Lee 27-28).

The Cather side of the family also provided strong matriarchal figures, Grandmother Caroline, for example, becoming the type for Jim Burden’s efficient and effective grandmother in My Ántonia (27). Strong women were to be forever a part of Cather’s life, as Lee explains:

Cather owed a great deal to the women who brought her up; . . . And those strong nurturing female figures with, at the centre, the difficult mother whose approval was hard to gain must in part have shaped Cather’s lifelong emotional dependency on,
and affectionate comradeship with women. Above all, her childhood gave her a sense of possibilities for women. (29)

It must have been this strong matriarchal legacy that allowed Cather to create her Alexandra Bergson, Ántonia Shimerda, and Thea Kronborg.

Willa Cather’s life was to change dramatically in 1883 when, at the age of nine, she left the comfortable surroundings of Willow Shade and moved with her parents, siblings, Grandmother Boak, and a cousin to her paternal grandparent’s homestead a dozen or so miles north-northwest of Red Cloud, Nebraska (Edith Lewis 12-13), a prairie town some one hundred seventy miles west-southwest of Omaha, very near the Kansas border. In My Ántonia, Cather describes the journey of Jim Burden out onto the open prairie. The orphaned ten-year-old Jim had been sent from Virginia to live with his grandparents in Nebraska.

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. . . . There was nothing but the land: . . . I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction. I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. . . . Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. (718)
As Hamlin Garland's Lincoln Stewart had arrived on the open prairie and was "suddenly transported into another world," so Willa Cather's Jim Burden, upon his arrival, felt "that the world was left behind." As Garland himself had ridden the family wagon into "this sheltered sweep of prairie," a "land melted into blackness, silent and without boundary" (SMB 82, 83), so Cather had jostled in her own family's wagon "to the end of everything" and onto her "piece of sheet iron," some three hundred fifty miles to the southwest (KOA 448).

Cather's own arrival at the edge of the agricultural frontier took place some fourteen years after Garland stopped temporarily at his first Iowa farm in Hesper and some thirteen years after his arrival at the Middle Border near Osage, the line of farm settlement having gradually moved westward into Nebraska in those intervening years. But for each, regardless of the difference in time, theirs was a barren new world, a shock to the senses, a displacement; the move represented a loss of security. For though both had been raised on farms, those earlier farms had been within established communities where each lived in close proximity to extended families and friends. Now these lives and these places were behind them; they found themselves confronted not with the secure, confined spaces defined by hills and valleys and rivulets, but with a horizon that did not seem to end at all, with one which,
instead, merely disappeared somewhere in the distance, a horizon almost as unmarked and far away as that on an empty sea.

They were, essentially, to experience a death upon leaving a secure old world and a rebirth in a wondrous new one. The experience would shock and toughen them and prepare them well, perhaps at a critical impressionable age, to see with fresh eyes the massive prairie lands they were to immortalize.

Part 2: Life on the Middle Border and the Divide

Neither Garland nor Cather was to mourn the loss of their old, more comfortable habitations for long. Cather admits that "For the first week or two on the homestead I had that kind of contraction of the stomach which comes from homesickness" (KOA 448). This reaction was to be short-lived, for though she lived on the Divide for less than two years, she made an extraordinarily full use of the time. A merchant in Red Cloud who met her during her first years in the state described her to his daughter as "a young curiosity shop." It was the best kind of curiosity, the omnivorous artist's, that took her out delivering mail on horseback, with a pretext for entering many a lonely sod farmhouse
in which few native Americans even cared to set foot. (Brown 25)

The image of Willa riding freely about the countryside visiting the homes of the Scandinavian, Bohemian, German, French, and Spanish immigrants and absorbing their cultures is essentially a correct one (Thomas 6; Robinson 20). These eighteen months, from April 1883 through September 1884, were pivotal to the stimulation and development of a new kind of sensitivity and intellect in Cather; during this time she would be introduced to the cultures that the immigrants brought with them, as she explained:

I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of those old [immigrant] women at her baking or butter making. I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement . . . . (KOA 449)

It was during these visits that Cather would learn to get "inside another person's skin" (449) and that she would develop her first attachments to European culture which became so important in her personal life and in her art.

To O'Brien, the freedom Cather found on the prairie was significant also in that it served as a release from the female restrictiveness she had experienced in her matriarchal Virginia life (EV 69). René Rapin also comments
in his 1930 study of Cather's works on the importance of the Divide experience, just as she was about to leave it:

Willa Cather was soon to exchange the prairie for the schoolroom. Whatever she lost or gained in the exchange, the prairie and the pioneers had given her what no school had given and no school could take: the first priceless experience of life in the open in a vast untamed country. . . . (10)

During those eighteen months on the Divide, the seeds for *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* were planted.

Like Cather, Garland was quick to recognize the wonder of his frontier home and quick to accept it. The day after Garland arrived at his prairie home, he and brother Frank "were on the roof of the house with intent to peer 'over the edge of the prairie'" when a herd of wild horses dashed across the open prairie grasses, thus making clear testimony to the fact that they were now truly in a wilderness (SMB 84).

A boy's life on a farm, after he passes a certain age, is mostly a life of work. That first fall, having just turned ten, Hamlin was out on the Middle Border prairie behind a team and plow breaking the prairie sod, a grueling and boring job, though it does leave the mind free to wander and wonder. The boy "studied the clouds," "counted the prairie chickens," examined lizards and mice during
occasional breaks, and watched free, soaring hawks--with great envy (86-88).

"Yet the boy found time to range the prairies like an untamed colt . . ." (Hill 13). Some of the work was not work at all, particularly that which allowed him to race wild across the open range on their ponies; bringing the cattle in at evening was one such task that Hamlin found "delightful" (SMB 131). He writes of times spent on horseback with his siblings and friends "chasing rabbits, killing rattlesnakes, watching the battles of the bulls, racing the half-wild colts and pursuing the prowling wolves" (135). When they were not at work, they knew a kind of exhilarating freedom that, as Carol Fairbanks writes, only a child on an open range can know (220). There were even occasional adventures: Hamlin once rode several miles through the night in a rainstorm to retrieve a doctor for his ailing father (SMB 141).

The fact that Garland spent much more time on the homestead than did Cather would be reflected in their fiction about country life. Cather's portrayal of farm life is not particularly elucidating in terms of a daily existence on a homestead; in contrast, the more than four hundred pages of Garland's Boy Life are fairly brimming with details about every aspect of the pioneer farming experience, making it a work of sociological and historical significance. Chapters are titled "The Fall's Ploughing,"

These chapters not only record a boy's and a young man's experience of each task, they also describe the tools and machinery used as well as the techniques employed in each task. His *Prairie Folks* and, of course, *Main-Travelled Roads* also provide similar insights to farm life in the late nineteenth century.

This attention to detail, often attributed to his intention to write in the mode of realism or "veritism,"10 was also the production of one specifically interested in capturing and thus memorializing a way of life, particularly that as experienced by a male on the farm. As a female and as one whose time on the prairie had been limited, Cather would never know this life as fully.

Garland spent eight of his eleven years in the Osage area on his Middle Border farm. One year, from spring 1876 to spring 1877, the family lived in Osage while his father ran the Grange elevator (SMB 173).11 This temporary relocation to town allowed Hamlin to attend Cedar Valley Seminary. Though he returned to the farm one year later, he boarded in Osage during the school terms from fall 1877 through spring 1881 so that he could attend the school, from which he graduated in June 1881 (SMB 210; Hill 27).

As noted, Cather's tenure on the farm was much shorter; her year and a half on the high ground of the Divide came to
an end in fall 1884 when her father sold his livestock and machinery and moved south to the Republican River, to the then bustling railroad town of Red Cloud, population about 2,500, "where he opened an office, made farm loans, wrote abstracts, and sold insurance" (Bennett, WWC 19). This first move to town, as it had for Hamlin, allowed Willa to attend a full-term school for the first time, since the prairie-school term lasted only three months each year. Virginia Cather's poor health and Charles Cather's unsuitability to pioneer farming may also have contributed to the decision to move off the Divide (Bennett, WWC 19; Gerber 22).

But for the "young curiosity shop," the eighteen months had obviously been enough. The experience never left her; not only did she immortalize those prairie immigrants in her fiction, she also remained loyal throughout her lifetime to those farm families she had met near Catherton, sending gifts to them regularly and even providing money for seed and other necessities during the Great Depression (Edith Lewis 14; Robinson 230).¹² Neither would the prairie ever relinquish its hold on Garland; the very act of leaving it in 1881 to make his way in the world was difficult:

As I looked back up the lane at the tall Lombardy poplar trees bent like sabres in the warm western wind, the landscape I was leaving seemed suddenly very beautiful, and the old home very peaceful and
very desirable. Nevertheless I went on. (SMB 239)

Seven years later he would begin to record this life; the January 1888 issue of American Magazine, contained "Boy Life on the Prairie: I. The Husking," the first in a series of articles which would eventually serve as the basis of his 1899 book, Boy Life on the Prairie (Holloway 314). Though thirteen years younger, Cather would begin her Midwestern work almost contemporaneously with Garland, as she published her first "Divide" story only four years later. "Peter" appeared in the May 21, 1992, issue of The Mahogany Tree (Robinson 45).

O'Brien, Gerber, Lee, Woodress, Edith Lewis, and others have hypothesized about the significance of Cather's displacement at a critical age from the quiet comfortable life at Willow Shade to the stark vigor of the prairie. And Garland's own displacement at the same age from Green's Coulee to the edge of the wilderness was, no doubt, equally disturbing. As Cather and Garland have written, each felt an erasure of self upon first arriving at the prairie, but each was soon to develop exceedingly strong attachments to these new homes. It would appear to be an unavoidable conclusion that this sudden awakening in new worlds was responsible for the particularly deep imprint the prairie would make on their minds—and for their memorable recreations of it in their writings.
Part 3: The Myth of Social, Cultural, and Intellectual Impoverishment

Cather biographer Hermione Lee begins her recounting of Cather's life by writing about her own visit to Red Cloud as part of her research effort. She overhears and then quotes a person whom she would have us assume, apparently, to be an average Red Cloud citizen, a "very old lady with no teeth," as follows: "I'd have given him a piece of my mind cepn I wouldn have had none left" (2). Then the London-raised, Oxford-educated English professor at the University of York chooses to characterize the citizenry as obese, pizza-eating, completely ignorant yahoos, apparently all of whom generally say things like, "Do you have nigras in England?" She summarizes:

I couldn't help feeling the extraordinary contrast between the immense landscape and the little, claustrophobic, provincial town, or noticing, even at a glance, the signs of cultural assimilation and stagnation Cather had anticipated. (3)

No doubt Lee herself had found upon her arrival just what she had anticipated. Even in this text, which I found to be one of the most broadly satisfactory and insightful of all the Cather biographies, the assumption is still that Cather came from a social, cultural, educational pig sty.13

Garland biographer Eldon Hill describes Osage, Iowa, as "not a place to satisfy aesthetic hungers. Though it may
have seemed like a shining metropolis to the farm boy, it was in truth a dull little hamlet of board walks and dirt streets" whose buildings were "architectural abominations" (23). One is exceedingly grateful that no one told Hamlin that his "shining metropolis" was really "a dull little hamlet." The school he attended, says Hill, "was a borderland institution, built for the sons and daughters of pioneers," and it "was understaffed" (23). Holloway comments that Garland "enrolled in the local seminary in pursuit of the will-o'-the-wisp of culture" (9), though she does not comment on why the acquisition of culture and education should be a delusive goal for the farm boy, unless one is to assume that culture can be desired or obtained only in certain parts of the country, late nineteenth-century Iowa not being among them. Yet Hamlin himself, while admitting that the Cedar Valley "was hardly more than a high school" (SMB 197), says that "my years at the Seminary were the happiest of my life" (221) and that he found in his time there "all the essential elements of an education" (221, 224).

In writing about Garland's eventual departure from Osage and the prairie in 1881, Hill says that in leaving, "He would escape from the restrictive conditions of the Middle Border" (30); this without acknowledging the obvious facts: first, that conditions were not particularly "restrictive," as will be illustrated; and, second, that the
conditions of and the experiences gained from the frontier were precisely the elements that were responsible for his success as a writer and artist.

It is difficult to understand or explain why biographers place such emphasis on the supposed intellectual and cultural poverty of these writers' early homes. Much more sensible would be to take the stance that Willa Cather and Hamlin Garland had exactly the background necessary to become what they did. But this would seem obvious; and if these commentators' point is in some way to express pity for the writers' sterile young lives, their sympathy would seem misplaced and unnecessary. Are the biographers trying to establish a basis for some of the negative attitudes Garland and Cather expressed concerning frontier life by superimposing this negativism over the artists' own lives? But, as has been discussed, their individual experiences--positive or negative--on the sparsely occupied, open prairies of Nebraska and Iowa allowed them to record an era in American history that perhaps no other individual has portrayed as well. I further contend, contrary to what the biographers have written, that their personal experiences were primarily positive and that their fictional accounts are also.

Growing up in Red Cloud
Yet the perceptions of their origins, particularly of Cather's, are pervasively in the negative vein. E.K. Brown says that "Willa Cather was under the spell of the Nebraska countryside, and she was under the spell of philosophy, science, history, and the arts. The town was not a place where either spell could work" (48). Philip Gerber alludes to Red Cloud as "no more than an unpromising crossroads" (82). Susie Thomas says Cather "grew up in a crude frontier society" (6). Edith Lewis, her companion of forty years, describes Red Cloud as part of a country that was "isolated, forgotten by the rest of the world," and as a place "cut off from all the great currents of life and thought" (17), and this from a woman who grew up in Nebraska. A closer look at the Red Cloud of Willa Cather's youth suggests something quite different.

Paradoxically, it is Brown himself who perhaps first suggests that Red Cloud was not the intellectual sink hole that he and others have maintained. He explains that Willa had three excellent teachers "of remarkable gifts"—with whom she maintained relationships until their deaths—as well as a talented old-world music teacher (32-33). She had been introduced to classical music by a neighbor, Mrs. Julia Miner, who was also the mother of her two close friends, Mary and Carrie Miner. Mrs. Miner was the immigrant daughter "of the oboe soloist in Ole Bull's Royal Norwegian Orchestra," and she played often for Willa and
shared "her musical childhood in Norway" with her (Woodress 53). Another neighbor was a "brilliant Frenchwoman" named Mrs. Charles Wiener who spoke French and German to her German husband with whom she had collected a large library "extraordinary both in size and quality" to which Willa had an open invitation (Brown 33). According to Bennett, Mrs. Wiener introduced Willa to French novels, "reading them to her and translating as she went along" (119).

Willa also befriended a number of adult men, including one William Drucker,15 a store-clerk and lover of the classics, who tutored her in Greek and Latin literature (Brown 34). Willa cultivated the friendship of the founder of Red Cloud, Silas Garber, and his wife (36), who served as models for the Forresters in A Lost Lady (Lee 194). Garber was also a former state legislator and a former governor of Nebraska (Brown 36). Willa also developed friendships with two local physicians, Dr. McKeeby, the family physician, and Dr. Robert Damerell, for whom she once "administered chloroform while the doctor amputated a boy's leg." It was her practice to ride out into the countryside on calls with the latter, and it was due to the influence of these two doctors that Willa first intended to study medicine at the University of Nebraska (Woodress 52).

As Lee discusses, Red Cloud also had an opera house where Cather had the opportunity to attend productions of The Corsican Brothers, The Count of Monte Cristo, The
Mikado, and The Bohemian Girl (37). Brown states that the travelling companies played six times a year in Red Cloud and that Cather "affirmed that [the plays and operas] were one of the great imaginative elements in her youth" (39). Lee lists a sampling of the books Cather read, many of them, no doubt, borrowed from the Garbers' extensive library: Huckleberry Finn, Swiss Family Robinson, The Pilgrim's Progress, Paradise Lost, the Iliad, Sartor Resartus, and Anna Karenina (37). Brown states that she had access to Parkman, George Eliot, Hardy, Stevenson, Kipling, Tennyson, Byron, Carlyle, Twain, and a number of other authors (39-40). It is also clear that Willa had, after moving to town, a room of her own in which to read these books and, perhaps, to dream of others.

The freedom to roam and be her own person was a given during her time in Red Cloud. Willa and her brothers spent hours exploring and playing on the Republican River which ran just south of town (Woodress 59). She was also much involved in amateur theatrical productions from the age of thirteen and even wrote and produced her own plays with her friends, the Miner children, and others (57-59).

Cather left for college less than six years after she moved to the village of Red Cloud. The diverse experiences, friends, and encounters with culture delineated above would suggest that Willa's life was full and exciting and, further, that her little town was anything but "an
unpromising crossroads," "a crude frontier society," or "a place cut off from all the great currents of life and thought." In fact, Bennett's assessment, that "the lusty Red Cloud of the '80's [sic] afforded plenty for her to absorb" (WWC 92), would seem to be much more accurate. Yet some biographers and critics, such as Lee, prefer to paint a picture which contradicts the facts. Lee chooses, for some reason, to be negative; she refers to the present Cather Museum as "a tall ugly red building" (32), for example, as if that were pertinent to anything whatsoever. What appears to be the case is that she desperately wants to ensconce Cather permanently among a group of "American writers growing up in the mid-West in the '80s and '90s" who were suffocating in small towns. Included in Lee's sufferers' club are Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, and Sherwood Anderson (38). Yet Cather herself, in conversation with Elizabeth Sergeant, attacked Lewis' presentation of small town life. Sergeant says, "She hotly asserted that [Lewis] had been satisfied to get an external view of the small prairie center" (166). It appears that Lee has chosen to characterize Cather's life in a way which available biographical information would seem to contradict and that, further, based on this first error, she is placing Cather in a category which Cather herself has rejected.¹⁶

Growing up in and Around Osage
Hamlin Garland's life in Mitchell County was not unlike Cather's in that it was characterized by a freedom to explore and experience one's surroundings, though Hamlin's free time in which such explorations must take place was limited by the necessity of his fulfilling the role of a grown man on the homestead. But as Hill explains, the large families of the pioneer community in which Hamlin lived provided the circumstances for "a social life active and pleasant, if at times crude and boisterous . . ." (14). In an unpublished manuscript, on which Garland has written "about 1886," he discusses the school house as the intellectual center of the community. There the people flocked on winter nights to the Singing School, Lyceums, spelling bees and protracted meetings. There the peripatetic lecturer held forth with his magic lantern for a very small consideration. (14)

The manuscript continues with a description of several of the memorable characters who frequented meetings of the lyceum (15).

In a May 29, 1877, unpublished diary entry, Hamlin writes: "pleasant but Windy. got up at [?] o'clock. Washed our faces and then turned our eyes [sic] to the blue Waters of the lake and feasted on its glories for a time and then to Brek." Below this passage, which is indicative of an early interest in literary language, is written, "took a
sail." Though Garland does not detail this experience in *A Son of the Middle Border*, the entry, apparently dealing with a camping trip to a lake with friends, would seem to have been the source of a chapter titled "A Camping Trip" in *Boy Life*, in which Lincoln Stewart and three neighborhood farm boys take a fifty-mile, horse-and-wagon trip to Clear Lake to camp and sail, with the blessing of their parents (253-270). Hamlin would have been sixteen at the time he made this diary entry, illustrating that he and his friends, like Lincoln and his, were allowed great freedom to roam the open countryside, even in their teenage years.

In a chapter in his *Middle Border* titled "Boy Life on the Prairie," Garland details many favorite activities that he and his siblings and neighborhood friends enjoyed, including herding cattle on the open range, ice skating, attending the circus, romping about the countryside on horseback after animals both wild and tame, playing baseball; even riding through the storm to fetch a doctor for his father, an exhilarating, though no doubt worrisome, experience (125-143). His brother Franklin, in a letter written shortly after Hamlin's death to his biographer, Eldon C. Hill, discusses Hamlin's prowess as a baseball player:

During the years from fourteen to seventeen in Hamlin's life, we both belonged to a baseball team composed of farm boys. Hamlin was our star
pitcher. He threw curves and had a particularly effective sinker that had the big boys swinging wildly and missing. He was so effective that we beat the county seat more often than they did us. (Hill 14)

In terms of pleasure and adventure, in terms of a variety of experiences, Hamlin indeed seemed to have a full and unrestricted boy's life on the prairie lands of Mitchell County.

But there was more to his life than work, camping trips, and curve balls. From his first introduction to literature, provided by Grandmother Garland back in Wisconsin, Hamlin was an insatiable reader. The family library was sparse: included were *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin; Paradise Lost; Ivanhoe*, perhaps his early favorite; *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, by Edward Eggleston; and *Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp*, another early favorite (Hill 16-17). But Hamlin found other sources: "From kindly neighbors on the prairie young Hamlin borrowed books to allay--he could not satisfy--the hunger left after the meagre store of books in his father's library was exhausted" (17). At school he read everything available: "I soon knew not only my own [McGuffey's] reader, the fourth, but all the selections in the fifth and sixth as well" (SMB 112). At one point he became so interested in dime novels that he read "nearly one hundred" of them in one year (186).
Once he entered Cedar Valley Seminary in 1876, his reading options increased; Shakespeare, Thackeray, Dickens, Scott, Joachim Miller, and others attracted his attention. But most important was his discovery of Nathaniel Hawthorne, "who laid his spell upon [him] everlastingly," and created in him "a worshipful admiration" (219). After Hawthorne, he said, he could not longer stomach dime novels and other lesser books (220). While at Cedar Valley, Garland also obtained "a reading knowledge of French" (Holloway 9).

Though Hamlin now attended the seminary, most of his farm friends still attended public schools in the country; so, to keep in touch with them, he maintained his membership in the Adelphian Society which met every Monday evening (212). Through this society he participated, as Cather would in Red Cloud, in theatrical productions, serving as director of and actor in a play which was so successful in their home town that they took it "on tour" to two local villages. There the presentation was less well-received: "That night we played with 'artistic success'--that is to say, we lost some eighteen dollars," thus ending the "tour" before it reached the second village (214).

Both Willa Cather and Hamlin Garland concluded their experiences in their pioneer communities with graduation addresses. Cather presented a somewhat controversial oration entitled "Superstition versus Investigation" in
which she defended the practice of vivisection as an experience necessary to learning (Robinson 38). Garland spoke, appropriately, on "Going West" (SMB 230-31). Three months after their speeches, each left home on a train, Hamlin to Minnesota in search of a teaching position (243), and Willa to Lincoln and the University (Robinson 39).

The contentions of biographers and critics of Cather and Garland that each lived in a cultural and experiential backwoods would seem substantially incorrect. Ironically, the truer picture is also found in bits and pieces in most of these same books; so, again, it is curious that the generalized summaries of their early lives should be so primarily negative. It suggests that the evaluators lack any intimate knowledge of rural life in general, and, furthermore, that they seem unwilling to let the obvious positive aspects of the writers' childhoods affect their evaluations of it.

It is true, of course, that Cather and Garland did not grow up in upper-middle-class Boston or New York City homes which might have afforded them earlier and more substantial encounters with the world of the mind and art. But neither were they slum dwellers in those great cities with access to nothing, not even the open spaces in their rural homes which they roamed, physically and mentally, to great advantage. The demeaning, even appalling, life of the poor in the cities is presented in detail in Garland's Jason Edwards and
is important in his *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* and is glimpsed in Cather's "Neighbor Rosicky," *The Song of the Lark*, and *Lucy Gayheart*. They did not live the life of a young Henry James, certainly; but their youthful days were spent in stimulating and diverse conditions rather than in places "cut off from all the great currents of life and thought."

**Part 4: Finding Literary Careers**

Garland and Cather left their frontier home with goals in mind, one hoping to be a teacher, the other a doctor. And though Garland did teach at a country school near Mansfield, Ohio, during the 1882-1883 school year (SMB 297) and in a Boston school in 1885 and 1886 (341-47), by this time, some five years out of the seminary, he was determined to be a writer. In 1886 he published two poems. In January 1887, he published a review of a Howells novel, *The Minister's Charge* (Holloway 18), which was followed by other reviews that year, as well as four more poems. In 1888, several articles and stories, including several that would be included in *Boy Life*, *Main-Travelled Roads*, and *Wayside Courtships*, as well as a long poem about frontier life, appeared in a variety of magazines. In that year, which marked the beginning of his rapid rise into the literary limelight, he would have a total of fourteen articles, stories, and poems published (314, 328).
Within four years, by 1892, Garland would have fifty more items appearing in magazines ranging from the reform publication, Arena, to a leading literary publication, Century, to mainstream publications such as Harper's Weekly, Cosmopolitan, and Ladies' Home Journal. Also by 1892 he would have published five books: Main-Travelled Roads in 1891 and Jason Edwards, A Member of the Third House, A Little Norsk: Ol' Pap's Flaxen, and A Spoil of Office, all in 1892 (Holloway 315-16, 328). He was a hot property and, at thirty-two, well on his way to becoming "the Dean of American Literature" (Sinclair Lewis 15), a title he would earn, at least partly, by promoting a genuine literature of the West. As Henry Nash Smith explains in Virgin Land, Garland's destruction, in his early writings, of "the high-sounding clichés" that depicted rural life as edenic would make it possible, finally, "to deal with the Western farmer in literature as a human being"; this was a big step towards the creation of a legitimate Western literature (193, 249).

Certainly Garland deserves credit for dismantling the false, idyllic view of the Western farmer; it is possibly his major contribution to American letters. But readers--selecting from a small sample of Garland's work and being unfamiliar with the nature of a farm existence--have incorrectly interpreted his farm literature. They have transformed Garland's realistic portrayals in the vein of what I have
chosen to call the "hard pastoral" into narratives of rural deprivation and bestiality. This is certainly unwarranted.

While Garland did for a while, at least, practice his planned profession of teaching, Cather dropped her ambition to be a doctor quite quickly and unceremoniously once she saw her name and her thoughts in print. On March 1, 1891, six months after arriving at the University of Nebraska as a preparatory student (Woodress 71) and four months after her seventeenth birthday, her essay "Concerning Thomas Carlyle" appeared in the Lincoln newspaper, the *Nebraska State Journal*, and in the student magazine, the *Hesperian* (KOA 421). It had been placed without Cather's knowledge; when she saw it in the Sunday morning paper, "the effect she later said was hypnotic" (Robinson 45); medicine thus lost one practitioner. A year later, "Peter" appeared in the literary magazine, *The Mahogany Tree*, and, it would seem, a literary career had been launched (Brown 57).

Yet it would be twenty years before Cather would publish her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912). Though she would publish numerous stories, articles, and columns in those twenty intervening years, she would never fully devote herself to being a professional fiction writer until after the publication of this first novel. Cather graduated from college in 1895; worked as editor of *Home Monthly* from 1896 to 1897 and as reviewer and critic for the *Leader*, from 1897 to 1900 (both Pittsburgh magazines); translated French
documents in Washington, DC, from 1900 to 1901; taught high-
school English in Pittsburgh from 1901 to 1906; and worked
both full- and part-time as a journalist on McClure's
Magazine in New York City from 1906 to 1912, the year
Alexander's Bridge was published by Houghton Mifflin and
serialized by McClure's, which, coincidentally, published
many of Garland's stories and articles--twenty-one before
Cather's tenure, none during, and one after (Holloway 316-
21, 325).

The next year, Cather's fortieth, would mark the
publication of her first universally recognized great work,
O Pioneers!, and mark the beginning of her rise to being
what many critics called America's greatest novelist. James
Schroeter cites a 1929 survey in which "Cather was ranked
first in 'general literary merit'" (xiii). She was also a
popular writer by then. In 1922 she had published One of
Ours; ironically, though this World War I book received
perhaps the harshest criticism of any of her novels, it "was
the book that made Cather, at fifty, famous and well off,"
selling 30,000 copies in its first two months on the shelves
and earning her $19,000 in royalties in 1923 (Lee 167).

One of Ours won for Cather the 1923 Pulitzer prize for
fiction; most thought it far inferior to her previous novel,
My Ántonia, published four years earlier (167). The year
before, Hamlin Garland had won the 1922 Pulitzer in
biography for A Daughter of the Middle Border (1921), a book
most thought far inferior to a book published four years earlier, *A Son of the Middle Border* (Holloway 257). Garland was a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters by 1899 and was elected to membership in the more prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1918; this select organization had and has only fifty members (156, 242). Cather was elected to membership in the National Institute in 1929 and in the American Academy in 1938. In 1944, she was awarded the Institute's Gold Medal for Fiction, America's "highest award for creative achievement in the arts"; the fiction award is presented only once each decade (Robinson 1-2).

If Garland's fame came earlier in life, Cather's has been more sustained. Garland wrote, with the exception of *Middle Border* (1917), most of his important works before 1895; Cather, at the same age of thirty-five, had not yet published a single novel; she was in fact four years from her first. If Garland's oeuvre is much the larger—he wrote more than forty books—Cather's is the more enduring, as her works continue to be published and anthologized, while Garland's do not. While several Cather biographies and critical texts on her work have been published in the last decade, relatively little has been written in English about Garland or his work since the early sixties.20

Warren French's 1970 article "What Shall We Do About Hamlin Garland?" seems to encapsulate a literary dilemma:
what happens when the critical world forgets the one-time Dean of American Literature? The relative silence that has followed that question in the ensuing twenty-five years apparently suggests the answer of most contemporary critics. He continues to function for most as merely as a symbol of a type of presentation about farm life in the late nineteenth century, as the following chapter illustrates. My contention is that even in this role he is miscast.

Indeed, the differences between the professional lives of Cather and Garland are more notable and far more numerous than are the similarities. But those similarities are still of interest. These two children of the prairie died in the 1940s, both disillusioned with modern life and much of modern fiction. Though in their early careers each would write works considered by some to be scathing indictments of rural life, each would longingly look back on those days later in their writing careers and also as their lives came to a close. Garland, the youthful champion of social progress and reform (Pizer, Early Work 59), would be called in 1931 by the left-leaning Granville Hicks "undemocratic [and] out of sympathy with every vital movement in contemporary life" ("Garland" 435). Garland did not exactly demur: "They forget that forty years is a long time for any mood to endure" (Holloway 295).²¹

Hicks was also highly critical of Cather, accusing her in 1933 of being completely out of touch with important
contemporary social issues, of fleeing reality through flights into romanticism ("Case" 710). Cather was always somewhat reclusive; but by 1936, "[h]er desire for privacy amounted almost to an obsession. As this year ended, she was feeling out of sorts with life. She thought the world used to be a great deal happier for everyone . . ." (Woodress 475). In this same year she would publish an article in an attempt to answer her critics who called her art escapist. She wrote, "What has art ever been but escape?" It had always been her adamant contention, in strong contrast to Garland's early beliefs, that art could not solve social problems: "But the world has a habit of being in a bad way from time to time, and art has never contributed anything to help matters--except escape" ("Escapism" 968).

But beyond the polemics, the politics, and the accusations lies an interesting question: What did the two writers think about the life each is most famous for chronicling? The next three chapters of this study are devoted to the consideration of that question. The critical consensus, as is discussed in Chapter IV, is that Garland viewed frontier existence as one of brutal, unmitigated hardship and that Cather saw it as predominately a pastoral idyll. A close look at Garland's own writings about farm life on the Middle Border in Chapter V and Cather's own
writings about life on the Divide in Chapter VI illustrates that neither generality can be substantiated.
Notes

1. Bennett explains that Cather, too, had a religiously zealous grandparent. Her "Grandfather Cather was a devout Baptist who spent hours reading the Bible to his sometimes unwilling grandchildren and intoning beautifully-worded but interminable prayers" (11). He would serve partly as a model for Jim Burden's equally religious grandfather in My Ántonia (Woodress 14).

2. It would appear, though Richard Garland did sell the Wisconsin farm in 1868, that the family did not move until February 1869, according to Hamlin (SMB 71). Hill and Pizer, the two primary sources of biographical material other than Garland himself, disagree with each other and with Garland on several points. I choose to use Garland's account, even though he is often unreliable about dates. For his account of this series of moves from Wisconsin to Osage to be false, Garland would have had to add seasons to the years and imaginary events to those seasons, which seems unlikely. Pizer claims that the family moved from Wisconsin in February 1868 (Early Work 170); in the cited passage, Hill suggests that both the sale and the move took place in 1868; but Garland's own account details the last Christmas (1868) in the coulee before the move in the following February. Pizer also has the Garland family moving to Winneshiek County, Minnesota, rather than Iowa. Hill agrees
with Garland. Garland explains that the family travelled across the river from LaCrosse into Minnesota. Then they travelled south to La Crescent, Hokah, and Caledonia, all Minnesota towns on present-day Highway 44, before reaching their farm in the vicinity of the Iowa town of Hesper. According to Garland, the family finally ended its odyssey in August 1870 when it arrived at a farm outside Osage. That fall, Garland, calling himself a boy of ten (86), began breaking the prairie sod. He would have been ten on September 14, 1870. This date contradicts Pizer who has the family arriving in August 1869; Hill does not give a date, but he agrees with Garland's own recounting of the events between the move and the arrival at Osage.

3. Others also comment on the importance of her Virginia years. Woodress notes her "ambivalent feelings about her southern background," noting that "she did not want to be considered a southern writer and declined to serve on a committee of southern writers" (28). She felt the south to be somewhat backward, and she used it as a setting very sparingly until her last novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl. See also Edith Lewis (13); Robinson (14).

4. In an introduction to a 1926 school text of Boy Life titled "To My Young Readers," Garland says, "You may, if you wish, substitute . . . Hamlin for 'Lincoln,' . . . for this book is substantially made up of the doings of my own
family." This introduction is included at the end of the edition of the text that I am using, pages 425-427. The quoted statement is on page 426.


6. Though she was christened Wilella, the family called her Willie, and she named herself Willa eventually (Woodress 21). Years later, around 1900, she added Sibert as a middle name.

7. The name of this home is given as Willowshade Farm in Brown and Sergeant; Willowshade in Bloom, Edith Lewis, and Robinson; Willow Shade Farm in Gerber and Bennett; and Willow Shade in Woodress, Lee, O’Brien, and Thomas. By a score of four to three to two to two, Willow Shade, the choice of this sampling of Cather’s more recent critics and biographers, is victorious.

8. While Lewis writes that Catherton (an area named after her uncle George and family), where Willa’s family joined her grandparents, is "about twenty miles west of Red Cloud" (13), the general area called Catherton is more correctly located from five to six miles west and ten to eleven miles north of Red Cloud. The site of Willa’s first home in the area is about seven miles west and nine miles north of Red Cloud.
9. That it was an intentional technique of Cather's to be sparse about "details," as she suggests in "The Novel Démeublé" and elsewhere, is here acknowledged. Yet, Cather could be very detailed indeed when she wished, as illustrated by her description of Olaf Ericson's barn raising in general and of the older women who attended it specifically in "The Bohemian Girl" (117-18). My point here is that she could hardly know as much about the actual work of a pioneer farm as a boy who worked one for eleven years.

10. "Veritism" is Garland's particular brand of realism. It is not like the French realism of his day, which he considered to be bordering on the pornographic, nor like photographic realism, which he felt presented detail for the sake of physical accuracy. Rather, veritism is aligned with impressionism--as well as local color--in Garland's artistic philosophy, of which more will be said later. See Garland's *Crumbling Idols* and Pizer's *Hamlin Garland's Early Work and Career*.

11. Though Hill says the Garland family moved into Osage as early as summer 1875 when Richard Garland was first hired to run the Grange grain-buying operations, Garland himself explains that "we were not to move till the following March" (SMB 181), even though his father travelled daily to Osage to attend to Grange business. They returned to the farm a year later on March 27, 1877 (204).
12. Bennett writes that Cather once sent Annie Pavelka, her model for Ántonia, a check for fifty dollars with which she was to buy herself a gift. Annie paid her property taxes (WWC 51).

13. Bennett cites the following statement by Cather from a November 6, 1921, interview by Eleanor Hinman in the Lincoln Sunday Star: "Of course Nebraska is a storehouse of literary material. Everywhere is a storehouse of literary material. If a true artist were born in a pigpen and raised in a sty, he would still find plenty of inspiration for his work" (WWC 93).

14. Bennett identifies the music teacher as Professor Shindelmeissner, who became the model for Professor Wunsch in The Song of the Lark. Cather "hungered to hear music and stories about it" rather than play, which exasperated her teacher (WWC 152).

15. Bennett states that Cather began to read Latin in 1884 with William Drucker, "a well-educated Englishman who took an interest in her" (WWC 119). Since Willa did not turn eleven until December of that year, presumably she began this exercise at the tender age of ten.

16. Lee's comments about the suffocating aspects of Cather's youth may be derived less from biographical data than from certain of Cather's stories which do depict life in small towns as limiting and narrow (but usually to her exceptional
characters only). Generally, Cather wrote more positively about the farm than she did about the small town. It is interesting, however, to note that Garland, too, felt that *Main Street* "fail[ed] to convince"; he found Lewis's accounts of that life "bitter" and "vengeful." "I like his earlier books, but I do not like this!" (*My Friendly Contemporaries* 337).

17. This diary is included in the Hamlin Garland collection at Doheny Library, University of Southern California.

18. Carol Fairbanks, in *Prairie Women* (1986), comments that Midwestern accounts of pioneer life often place great emphasis on the effect the vast open spaces had on the developing minds of children: "In [these] descriptions, the ability of children to physically see across vast expanses of plain becomes a symbol for their ability to know not only the land but self and life. In these instances, the prairie is a tutor. Space, instead of diminishing one's sense of self, actually enhances the self" (222).

19. While several biographers provide these details, Woodress probably most thoroughly, a fairly comprehensive chronology is also offered at the end of each of the Library of America's three volume set of Cather's works, which is edited by Cather biographer Sharon O'Brien.

20. Biographies cited in this study include those by Thomas (1990), Lee (1989), Woodress (1987), O'Brien (1987), and

21. Holloway quotes from "Fortunate Exiles," which is found among the "Garland Papers" in the Doheny Library at the University of Southern California.
Chapter IV: Generalized Critical Interpretations of the Midwestern Writings of Garland and Cather

According to Roy Meyer, Hamlin Garland and Willa Cather were the only artists between 1891 and 1920 to write farm fiction that was "not negligible" (667-68). If it is from these two writers, then, that students and critics of American literature and American social history have and will come to know fictional representations of Midwestern farm life during the pioneer period, it is imperative, first, to place Garland and Cather squarely within that time of rural unrest and political revolt, as detailed in Chapter II; and, second, to understand as clearly as possible what sort of lives the two actually lived on that frontier, as discussed in Chapter III.¹ This background is essential to an objective evaluation of their attitudes toward frontier life; ignorance of that background is an essential cause of what I see as pervasive critical misconceptions of Garland's and Cather's work.

The experiences of the two during the critical years between 1887, when the drought set in and the boom busted, and 1897, when conditions began to improve for farmers and farm communities, became central to the art they created. Garland was just beginning his serious writing career in 1887; during the tumultuous farmers' revolt years which followed, he was a political and literary spokesman for the
Alliance and the Populists; by 1897, he had essentially abandoned writing Midwestern fiction. Cather, only fourteen in 1887, would live through the hard economic times her family experienced in the early bust years, go off to college in Lincoln (Bryan's home town) in 1890 at the beginning of the political revolt, and by 1896 leave Nebraska to become a magazine editor in Pittsburgh.

In spite of the fact that Cather and Garland grew up in similar environments, lived through both good and bad economic times on the frontier, and wrote both positively and negatively about aspects of that life, each has become—in the general critical view—symbolic of a type of representation of Midwestern pioneer life; and, the types are opposites: Garland is the destroyer of the idyllic agrarian myth; Cather is primarily the frontier myth-maker. Just as the character of their childhoods and young adulthoods in Iowa and Nebraska has been misunderstood or at least erroneously summarized, so too has the character of their literary depictions of that environment been too narrowly interpreted.


Hamlin Garland's writing career spanned fifty-five years, from 1885 until his death in 1940. Yet, his reputation in the literary world is built upon those Midwest
works which were produced during only about six of those fifty-five years, beginning in 1888 with the composition of those stories that eventually would be published in *Main-Travelled Roads* and *Prairie Folks* and ending in 1893 when the latter book, which contained some previously unpublished stories as well, was published. In 1921, Carl Van Doren would summarize Garland's Midwest fiction as follows: "The romancers had studied the progress of the frontier in the lives of the victors; Mr. Garland studied it in the lives of its victims" ("Hamlin Garland" 82). Such an assessment can only result from a very limited sampling of Garland's work.

In spite of the effort of a few critics to provide a more balanced evaluation of Garland's work, he continues to be known best, unfortunately, by an even further distillation of these mere six years of work. To a significant extent, three Garland stories have come to "represent" Garland's work and to characterize his contribution to American letters: "Under the Lion's Paw" and "Up the Cooly," eventually included in *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), and "A Prairie Heroine," eventually included as "Sim Burns's Wife" in *Prairie Folks* (1893). These three stories were first published in magazines, "Under the Lion's Paw" in 1889, the latter two in 1891; and each focuses on a bleak aspect of rural life on the frontier, which is, I believe, the primary reason they are predominantly selected as representative of Garland's
Two other stories—"A Common Case" and "John Boyle's Conclusion," both written in 1888—are equally negative in their portrayals of pioneer life, but they are less often cited as exemplary. "A Common Case" was published by Belford's Magazine in July 1888, its first year of business. "John Boyle's Conclusion" was accepted by the same magazine in March 1889 but was returned to Garland when Belford's ceased operations; it never resurfaced until it was resurrected and published in American Literature by Donald Pizer in 1959 ("John Boyle" 60), making it essentially unavailable to earlier critics. "A Common Case" was not included in Main-Travelled Roads or Prairie Folks, but was, instead, included in Wayside Courtships (as "Before the Low Green Door"), which was not published until 1897 when Garland was well past his "realistic/naturalistic" period and which might explain its being less often cited than those stories printed in his two best-known collections.  

It is, again, my contention that critics generally characterize Garland's work on the basis of a few negative stories, such as those named above. I further contend that many critics fail to understand the importance of a number of phenomena which strongly affected what Garland wrote at specific times; these include, among others, economic conditions on the frontier, political revolt among the farmers, tragic personal events in Garland's life and
his particular psychology, the nature of Garland's own developing artistic creed, and the writer's driving ambition to be both a financial and a literary success.

Without an adequate understanding of these and other phenomena, critics' evaluations of his work tend toward a narrow, single-dimensional, reductionist characterization. Lucy Lockwood Hazard writes in 1927: "The stories in Main-Travelled Roads are all variations of the same theme: the ugliness, the monotony, the bestiality, the hopelessness of life on the farm. An analysis of one will give the spirit of them all" (265). Hazard then, typically, chooses only "Under the Lion's Paw" to illustrate her thesis. Ima Honaker Herron, in 1959, calls Garland "an uncompromising delineator of the dirt and dust and toil of the farm and the barrenness of prairie towns . . ." (220). Anthony C. Hilfer, in his nearly petulant Revolt from the Village (1969), writes that Garland "saw clearly the material and spiritual deprivation of farm and town life, perceiving tragic values in scenes that had once seemed merely dull and petty" (42). Roy W. Meyer writes in 1987 of "the indignation that led to the composition of Main-Travelled Roads" (665).

Carl Van Doren writes in 1940 that Garland desired to tell the unheeded truth about the frontier farmers and their wives in language which might do something to lift the desperate
bribes of their condition. Consequently, his passions and his doctrines joined hands to fix the direction of his art; he both hated the frontier and hinted at definite remedies which he thought would make it more endurable. (American Novel 226)

In his generally insightful discussion of Main-Travelled Roads, Van Doren does acknowledge the bleak economic conditions on the frontier as well as Garland's dedication to a literature of realism and reform, but his analysis that Garland "hated the frontier" is certainly not warranted. And Van Doren specifically omits mention of "Mrs. Ripley's Trip," a story which illustrates something of a courageous, though temporary, triumph over dire conditions and which presents, as well, a story of love between an old married couple.

Neither does he mention the positive aspects of some of the other stories. "A Branch Road," for example, is primarily a love story which—if one does not object to wife-stealing—ends happily when a woman is whisked away from a mean, miserly husband and his parents by a past suitor. "Among the Corn-Rows" is another story from Main-Travelled Roads that, while painting a realistic picture of life on a pioneer farm, is essentially a love story. A young man returns from Dakota to his childhood home in
Wisconsin to find a wife and finally rescues a young woman from a life of servitude to her parents.

Yet, in spite of the balanced attitude toward rural life that is typically presented in Garland's work, critical evaluations tend to focus on what is often not the focus of the stories. To Walter Prescott Webb in 1931, "Hamlin Garland stands as the exponent of life on the prairie farm. To him that life was sordid and ugly" (470); and further, "We can best understand Garland's view of life and his interpretation of prairie farm life in all its unrelieved ugliness by reading his Main-Travelled Roads" (471). Wayne H. Morgan writes in 1965, "The loneliness, isolation, and paucity of intellectual stimulation that seemed inevitable to his neighbors and fellows sparked rebellion and bitterness in Hamlin Garland" (252). Robert Thacker, writing in 1989, characterizes Garland's farm fiction as "unremittingly grim" (148).

Ironically, at least one critic is even disappointed in Garland for holding back from telling the whole, hard truth, as this 1941 assessment suggests:

For in spite of all the hardships and bleak penury, Garland has nothing to say about social aberrations (if we except the implied flouting of the marriage relations in "A Branch Road"); there is in his early work no moral disintegration, and
very little attempt to record mental or psychological collapse. (Simpson 172)

But most others seem to agree with Walter Prescott Webb in believing that Garland could not have been more negative: "To Garland a prison was a cheerful and inviting refuge in comparison with the prairie home set down in an infinity of solitude" (471).

Even Cather critics, in trying to place her in respect to her fellow Midwestern writer, get into the act. Consider this assessment in a 1990 Cather biography, for example:

For the most part they [Garland's books] are chronicles of poverty, monotony and deprivation. . . . A story such as "The Lion's Paw" [sic], for example, in Main-Travelled Roads (1891) has as its sole purpose the exposure of an economic system in which struggling farmers, powerless to pay off exorbitant mortgage rates, went to the wall. (Thomas 57)

In addition to not knowing the correct title of the story, Thomas has also misread it--or read it not--for the Haskins family does not own its farm and does not, therefore, have a mortgage. They are undone by a raise in rent, an issue more central to Garland's social and political stances than is the foreclosure of mortgages, though that, too, was a concern of his.
Cather biographer James Woodress writes in 1987 of the effect that Garland's "bleak stories of the Midwestern farm life, published as Main-Travelled Roads," had on Cather (78) and comments that in certain early stories "Cather was still writing in her Hamlin Garland manner . . ." (106). By using the phrase "Hamlin Garland manner," Woodress is stamping the writer in a particular mold, a mold which is far too confining as a description of even Garland's most acerbic accounts of rural life.

Even Cather contributes to the stereotyping when she writes disparagingly in 1895 about "encroaching realism and 'veritism' and all other literary unpleasantness" (WP 137). "Veritism" is, of course, the term coined by Garland to describe his particular impressionistic form of realism. On visiting an art exhibit in 1895, Cather is bothered by a particular picture which

was done too much for the story's sake. It is a picture that ought to delight Hamlin Garland. The secret of the jarring effect is that like too many novels and pictures of the hour it was not done with an artistic motive . . . but because it was a stern, ugly lesson in political economy. (KOA 219)

It is clear that in the minds of one hundred years of his critics and in that of one particular, soon-to-be-important contemporary writer, Hamlin Garland has come to
represent one thing: the single writer who saw the lie in idyllic depictions of nineteenth-century Western rural life and who then exposed it. Sinclair Lewis, in his 1930 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, credits Garland, "the Dean of American letters today," with being the first to tell the truth about the Midwest, thus freeing him to "write of the people of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, as one felt about them" (15-16). In one sense Lewis is correct; Garland should be credited, as Henry Nash Smith has suggested, for being the first to treat the farmer realistically. But Lewis--and Smith--are suggesting something further which is not true about Garland, that his general attitude toward pioneer life was derisive.

Cather speaks for most of her contemporaries when she notes in another 1895 article that a play titled Nebraska has been written; then she wonders:

Just what there is in this particular part of the universe to make a play of it is difficult to say. Probably the drama will deal with "barren, wind swept prairies; fields of stunted corn, whose parched leaves rattle like skeletons in the burning south wind," and all that sort of rot which Mr. Hamlin Garland and his school have seen fit to write about our peaceable and rather inoffensive country. (KOA 223-24)
Among the ironies of this passage is the fact that by this time, Cather herself had already written three stories in the manner of "that sort of rot";¹⁰ and, of course, she would find plenty to write about concerning "that particular part of the universe" all through her own sixty-year writing career.

What is established in Chapter V of this work is that the view of Garland as one who hated the country life and one whose work primarily stands as an indictment of rural life is largely false. It will be shown that Garland's earliest writings about the Midwest were very positive indeed; that, even in the midst of his most negative work, it is not a hatred of pioneer life that most informs even his most pessimistic accounts of that life; and that his major final fictional statements on the area demonstrate a distinct endorsement of rural life.

Part 2: General Critical Opinions of Cather's Midwestern Fiction

Under the heading "Willa Cather: Epics of Women," Vernon Parrington writes: "The Middle Border of Hamlin Garland seen through different eyes. She looks lovingly to a pioneer West, as the cradle of heroic lives" (382). While, again, some critics have declared that Cather's attitude toward pioneer life was ambivalent, Parrington's statement nevertheless encapsulates what she has come to
represent for many: Cather is an oracle for the beauty, the majesty, even the edenic quality of pioneer life on the frontier. To some extent, as is discussed in Chapter VI, this characterization of Cather's work results from a failure to consider all of her rural fiction. Her early stories, in fact, narrate some of the difficulties and evils of pioneer life; even in her prairie epics—*O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*—Cather presents the hard realities of farm life as well as its heroic qualities. But, for the most part, discussions of Cather's Nebraska fiction emphasize the idyllic qualities found therein.

John H. Randall writes that Cather depicted her "Garden of Eden" in *O Pioneers!* and explains that only during this brief "interval of time between the passing of the pioneers and the completion of settlement by the farmers" did this Eden exist. He further states that, in general, "[H]er picture of early Nebraska was paradisaic in the extreme" (74-75). Susan J. Rosowski—though certainly aware of Cather's ability to paint a negative picture of Nebraska—also acknowledges Cather's connection of her Nebraska environment and Eden in her assessment of the same book:

In the first part, Cather drew upon Virgilian pastoral tradition to celebrate a communal myth of New World Paradise; in the second, she drew upon a modern pastoral tradition to exalt a private paradise within an alien world. (xi)
It is certainly true that Cather developed a strong relationship to the land and that it was her own devotion to the land that is infused into her characters. E.K. Brown writes that "the high plains had a vigorous beauty to which she responded with joy" (29). And this personal relationship with the Nebraska environment is seen as key to the direction her art takes. "The human drama is subordinated to the drama of the plains and the seasons, and the characters seem less interesting than the background against which they move," writes David Daiches (27). Robert Thacker further elucidates the importance of emotional attachment to the landscape to her work, explaining that in her prairie fiction the organic relationships between several characters and their landscapes . . . embody not just thinking but, and more especially, feeling. These emotions, which she was able to isolate through the prairie landscape, are essential to her characters' beings. . . . (151)

Philip Gerber explains that though young Willa's first response to Nebraska as a child was negative, by the fall of her first year on the Divide, she has acclimated herself to the new environment. "It was her home, and, despite its terrifying aspects, she had come to love it. The land had gripped her attention, her emotions, with a passion she never escaped" (22). Cather herself contributed
significantly, often in interviews, to developing this sense of a special relationship, which critics have emphasized, between the writer and her environment:

I knew every farm, every tree, every field in the region around my home and they all called out to me. My deepest feelings are rooted in this country because one's strongest emotions and one's most vivid mental pictures are acquired before one is fifteen. I had searched for books telling about the beauty of the country I loved, its romance, the heroism and strength and courage of its people that had been plowed into the very furrows of its soil and I did not find them. And so I wrote *O Pioneers!* (Bennett, WWC 139)

Cather was either composing her own sales piece here or expressing sincere love for her land. Perhaps a little of both.

Sinclair Lewis acknowledges Cather as one who made poetry out of the sparse Nebraska countryside. He begins his 1922 review of Cather's *One of Ours*, titled "A Hamlet of the Plains," as follows:

Moments of beauty which reveal not an American West of obvious heroisms but the actual grain-brightened, wind-sharpened land of today; moments out of serene October afternoon and eager April mornings and cold-gasping winter nights; all of
them as tenderly remembered as the hedges of A
Shropshire Lad. (170)

Here "wind-sharpened," "cold-gasping" scenes become parts of "moments of beauty." The implication is, it seems, that while Cather, too, describes nature in its bad moods, such descriptions in her work do not brand a story—or a way of life—as negative. One cannot imagine the use of such phrases to describe a Garland work in a positive light because he has come to represent the debunker of the myth of idyllic pioneer life, while Cather has become the poet of the plains.

As previously noted, Cather's own original reaction to Nebraska was negative. But it seems true, as Gerber has related, that her first revulsion toward the land was short-lived, as she so confirmed in an interview:

   So the country and I had it out together and by the end of the first autumn, that shaggy grass country had gripped me with a passion I have never been able to shake. It has been the happiness and the curse of my life. (140)

Her career supports her contention that she was never "able to shake" the hold the land had on her, as her very first story, "Peter," and her very last, "The Best Years," written more than fifty years apart, were set in the midst of "that shaggy grass country."
But though the land held her imagination firmly from her first year on the Divide, neither her acceptance of it as literary material nor an illustrated devotion to it and its people in her works came immediately. As is discussed in Chapter VI, much of Cather's early work does express a "Garlandesque" attitude, as Woodress might label it, toward that environment, and even after the early bleak depictions end, it is many years before the flavor of total devotion to the land and its people that is seen in *O Pioneers!* begins to slip into her fiction. Three of the stories included in her first book, *The Troll Garden* (1905), are also harsh in their presentation of the Midwest; "A Death in the Desert" (first published in 1903), "A Wagner Matinée" (1903), and "The Sculptor's Funeral" (1905) all depict the Plains as a place deadly to the artistic temperament.

Both Willa Cather and Hamlin Garland have come to represent specific attitudes toward the agricultural pioneer and her or his environment. Garland is seen as the debunker of the idyllic myth of the Midwestern agricultural frontier, as the pioneer boy who "developed an intense dislike of farm life" (Ahnebrink 63) and who, as soon as was possible, fled a hated land and lifestyle. Cather is the writer of psalms to the same land, a land which captured her emotional center as a child and did not let go. In fact, neither stereotype is true; Garland's work shows an appreciative attachment to the land and its heroic pioneer people that in many ways
mirrors Cather's. And Cather's work illustrates, as mentioned, only a gradually growing acceptance of pioneer life and environment as literary material; and her first work, as also noted, is in the harsh mode that she may well have derived partially from her own limited reading of Garland. Even her works most famous for an idyllic presentation of pioneer life are sprinkled with the realities of that life, with death and failure, with drought and lost crops, with greed and dishonesty. In fact, throughout both their careers, Cather and Garland presented a realistic picture of pioneer life, describing it in the manner of what I have chosen to call the hard pastoral.

In Chapter V, through a review and analysis of several key works, a more balanced evaluation of Garland's prairie fiction will illustrate that he, while conscious of dire farm conditions and critical of the injustices--as he saw it--that caused them, has been miscast as the rebellious farm boy who devoted his early career to denigrating rural life. A similar look at the breadth of Cather's rural fiction will illustrate that she too has often been mistakenly categorized--most commonly, as the Midwestern writer whose only view of rural life is wholly edenic. But Cather's case is specifically complicated, as a few recent commentaries have asserted that she, too, presented a primarily negative picture of Nebraska. In fact, she has been through the years and continues to be today forced into
several extremely limiting critical camps, the most recent of which is that of "woman writer." Of these developments, more is found in Chapter VI.
Notes

1. During the crucial early years of the drought, Garland was a young man in his middle-to-late twenties, Cather only a teenager; but during Garland's own teenage years in the mid-1870s, Granger activities against railroads, grain elevators, and various trusts and monopolies were at a feverish pitch, and Garland's father was much involved. This movement of the late 1880s and early 1890s was, then, the second farmer's uprising that Garland had witnessed.

2. Robinson (24), Lee (43), and Woodress (68) all comment on the occasional hard times of the Cather family in the 1890s.

3. "A Prairie Heroine" of Arena magazine (July 1891) was retitled "Sim Burns's Wife" in the 1893 edition of Prairie Folks; it was again retitled "Lucretia Burns" when published in the 1899 edition of Prairie Folks and the first (1910) edition of Other Main-Travelled Roads. As I am using the 1893 version of the text, I will refer to the story as "Sim Burns's Wife" from now on. Changes in titles are frequent in Garland's work.

4. Typical are Henry Nash Smith who notes that Garland comments on the difference between fact and fiction about American rural life in "Lucretia Burns" (193) and Wayne H. Morgan who finds Garland's "pessimism and grim tension . . . best illustrated in 'Up the Coolly'" (260). Eldon Cleon Hill explains the prevalence of Garland's attitude toward
the Midwest being characterized by a limited sample of his work when he notes that "Under the Lion's Paw" "remains the work most often chosen to represent its author in the anthologies" (90). Other illustrations of this pigeonholing follow.

5. As I am using the text from *Wayside Courtships*, I will hereafter refer to "A Common Case" as "Before the Low Green Door." This latter title is also used in *Other Main-Travelled Roads* (1910).

6. In the past another of Garland's stories, "The Return of the Private" from the original *Main-Travelled Roads*, was often anthologized. This account of a soldier's return from the Civil War to a Wisconsin farm, which mirrors Garland's own father's experience, is included in Norton's *The American Tradition in Literature* (1962), for example. This story—which is, incidentally, only marginally about farm life—seems to attract less attention now. No Garland work is included in Norton's 1989 edition.

7. Thacker is an important Cather critic. His statement reads: "Cather's depiction of life on the Divide in her early tales is, like Garland's before her, unremittingly grim..." It is important to note that many others who have blanket-characterized Garland as one who wrote only negatively of the pioneer Midwest—like Woodress and Thomas,
who are quoted later in this chapter—are also Cather scholars.

8. Actually, "Sim Burns's Wife" does exactly this. The entire story details how both Burns and his wife Lucretia have been bestialized by the farm experience. Lucretia, in fact, goes into a deep depression during which she scorns even her own children. Also, both "Before the Low Green Door" ("A Common Case") and "The Owner of the Mill Farm," in Wayside Courtships, deal with the destruction of normal familial relationships. The latter story was first published in 1893 as "A Graceless Husband."

9. Thomas does not qualify "they" in the first line of this quotation. Probably, she is referring to Garland's Midwestern books, but this is a typical example of the narrowing rhetoric that is used to reduce Garland's presentation of the Midwest to the negative. Of course, each of his rural books contains numerous contradictions of Thomas' statement, a statement which I would label completely false.

10. "Peter" (1892); "Lou, the Prophet" (1892); and "The Clemency of the Court" (1893). In the following year of 1896, Cather would publish "On the Divide," an extremely bleak tale of an isolated, lonely immigrant who is nearly driven insane by his plight and who kidnaps a wife to relieve his loneliness.
11. It is not my intention to suggest that Randall and Rosowski, two thorough and respected Cather critics, are unaware of Cather's less than edenic depictions of pioneer life. But their perfectly sensible analyses noted here, which help make a legitimate connection between Cather and an idealization of the pioneer environment in certain works, may well lead inadvertently to the false generalizations of others who have based their analyses on a very limited selection of Cather's writings. This is a position taken by myself and some other critics: see, for example, the comments of Sheryl L. Meyering and Loretta Wasserman in Chapter VI of this study.

12. Bennett quotes from an interview by Eva Mahoney, Omaha Sunday World-Herald, Nov. 27, 1921.

13. Bennett quotes from an interview in the Omaha Daily Bee, Oct. 29, 1921.
Chapter V: The Stages of Garland’s Prairie Representation

I have divided Garland’s work between 1887 and 1899 into four chronological periods based on the phases of his presentation of life on the agricultural frontier. The first phase, from 1887 to 1888, reflects his devotion to the cause of local-color realism. This phase is best represented by a series of six articles in which Garland discusses what it was like to grow up on an Iowa farm in the 1870s. A second stage, from 1888 to 1891, is best represented by his most famous short stories which, after publication in magazines, would make up his two most important story collections, *Main-Travelled Roads* and *Prairie Folks*. At this time Garland was experiencing a transformation into a reformer; his fiction of this period would label him—as it continues to—as the writer who destroyed the myth of the rural idyll and exposed some of the hardships of that life. Certainly, these stories do expose many of the political and economic injustices discussed in Chapter II, but I maintain that even during this stage, most of Garland’s stories actually manifest a balance between the positive and negative aspects of pioneer life.

The year 1892 marks the third stage in Garland’s farm fiction. The two 1892 reform novels set in the West reveal Garland’s full emersion in the reform movement. But, the
books are inferior to his stories of the preceding phase; they lack full development and often become even more overtly polemical than his short stories. It is also apparent that they were produced specifically to highlight particular Populist issues—general political corruption, and the problems created by land speculators and other middlemen.

The fourth phase begins in 1893 when Garland began work on *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* and continues through 1899 when *Boy Life on the Prairie*, partially based on his 1888 "Boy Life" articles, was published. The novel and the story collection represent Garland's final statements on pioneer life until he began his autobiographical series nearly twenty years later. *Rose* and *Boy Life* illustrate a distinct turning away from the intense reform statements that marked stages two and three. Though reform issues are important in *Rose*, the central issue is women's rights, not general political and economic reform; and Garland's presentation of reform statements has mellowed. The tone and content of these last two works demonstrate that Garland had by this time retreated from radical political statements and returned to presenting farm life as essentially positive, as he had in his first statements on the subject in the 1888 "Boy Life" articles.

In discussing the two reform phases, I have attempted to indicate what impetuses—ranging from very personal
experiences to national political policies--informed these more radical statements and more negative accounts of pioneer life. Basically, I contend that, because they were written with a reformist's zeal, these works do not reflect Garland's true attitude toward the farm experience; I further maintain that his honest attitude is best represented by the works which both preceded and followed this reform period--respectively, the "Boy Life" articles, and Rose and Boy Life.

Part 1: Early Local Color and Realism

Garland's first writings which centered on his experience on the Middle Border were not fictional. In 1887 he began to write a series of realistic local color articles describing the life of a boy on the frontier in a positive light. A total of six articles, all of whose titles begin with "Boy Life," were published in American Magazine between January and October 1888. These were the first fruits of a labor that began many years earlier.

Though Garland was years away from publishing his literary creed in Crumbling Idols (1894), he was by 1887 a devoted local colorist and was becoming an exponent of realism, even before he met his eventual realist mentor, William Dean Howells, in June 1887 (Holloway 21). During his first meeting with Howells, Garland had laid out his theory of local color:
American literature, in order to be great, must be national, and in order to be national, must deal with conditions peculiar to our own land and climate. Every genuinely American writer must deal with the life he knows best and for which he cares the most. (SMB 387)

Garland then lists several local color artists (Kirkland, Jewett, and Harte, among them) and exclaims that their writings "are but varying phases of the same movement, a movement which is to give us at last a really vital and original literature!" By the summer of 1887, Garland had decided that he was to be the local-color artist who delineated the life of the Midwest, and his "Boy Life" sketches, which generally present a pleasant attitude toward the Midwest farm experience, were his first attempts at fulfilling this responsibility.

But his championing of local color was rooted in earlier experiences. Garland had embarked on an intense effort to educate himself, an effort which began on a Dakota homestead in 1883 and continued during his early years in Boston. Donald Pizer has carefully traced the development of Garland's literary creed and the sources of the ideas that were to form it. His devotion to local color derives from his interpretations of the writings of Hippolyte Adolphe Taine, who taught that the purpose of literature was to trace the history of a "race" or a national culture.
(Pizer, "Herbert Spencer" 210); from Herbert Spencer, who taught Garland "that all life--physical, social, political, etc.--is governed by a natural law which transforms it . . . from incoherent homogeneity to coherent heterogeneity" (Spencer 211) (in other words, all life forms naturally progress or evolve into more complex systems); and from Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, who combined the theories of Taine and Spencer to propose that Spencer's theory of natural progress and evolution also applied to Taine's idea of a national literature (Pizer, Early Work 15). In Garland's mind, local color--which he thought of as a late development in the natural evolution of literature in America--was the only method by which a young country could create such a national literature; these three men had shown the way. By the summer of 1887, Garland was to play his part in the nation's local-color movement by preparing articles about his childhood homes in Iowa and Wisconsin.

It was presumably an early one or two of these "Boy Life" sketches that Garland showed Joseph Kirkland in Chicago in the summer of 1887 when he was returning from Boston to the Midwest to visit his parents. Kirkland--the author of Zury, a novel Garland had reviewed favorably--was impressed with Garland's work and urged the young writer to try his hand at fiction (Holloway 26). This encouragement from a writer Garland respected marked the beginning of a pivotal three days in Garland's life (Taylor, "Garland" 135-
The idea that he could be the fictional chronicler of his section of the country overwhelmed him, as until this time he had thought himself incapable of fiction (RM 112).

Garland’s recounting of the events of those three days in his autobiographical *A Son of the Middle Border* and *Roadside Meetings* takes on an almost spiritual tone. In these recollections—published thirty and forty-seven years later, respectively—Garland would have us believe that he experienced a psychological transformation, an awakening to the reality of the truth of the circumstances of the Midwestern farmer. As he left Chicago the next day, the spell of his new purpose in life was upon him; at this point, somehow—and the reader is not entirely convinced—he saw that he was to look at this life he knew so well with a realist’s and a reformer’s eye: "My mind was in a tumult of readjustment. . . . three years in Boston had not only given me perspective on these farms and villages, they had made me a reformer" (RM 113). Even the beautiful Midwestern countryside that he loved looked different, somehow.

All that day I had studied the land, musing upon its distinctive qualities, and while I acknowledged the natural beauty of it, I revolted from the gracelessness of its human habitations. The lonely box-like farm-houses on the ridges suddenly appeared to me like the dens of wild
animals. The lack of color, of charm in the lives of the people anguished me. I wonder why I had never before perceived the futility of woman's life on a farm. (SMB 356)

By the time he reaches his boyhood hometown of Osage, Iowa, on July 4, Garland tells us, his entire perspective has changed, and he sees his boyhood home through different eyes. He is ashamed at having ever been entertained by the tawdry little Fourth of July parade; the town seems occupied only by old and beaten people. "I perceived the town from the triple viewpoint of a former resident, a man from the city, and a reformer, and every minutest detail of dress, tone and gesture revealed new meaning to me" (356).

As noted, this is Garland recollecting for his autobiography an experience which had happened nearly three decades before. This sudden transformation not only sounds unlikely, but in fact did not happen, at least in any such abrupt or absolute manner, which can be established by an analysis of what Garland was writing at the time and continued to write for several months—a series of boyhood remembrances. Biographer Pizer believes he started working on these "Boy Life" western sketches in the fall of 1887 after his return to Boston from his Midwestern trip (Early Work 55), and Holloway notes that the January 1888 acceptance of the first article, "The Huskin," encouraged him to continue expanding on the series (16). So more
than half a year after he had dedicated himself to telling
the hard truth about the unpleasantness of Midwestern life,
Garland is working on a series of, basically, positive--but
realistic--boyhood reminiscences. 2

Critics have classified these articles variously.
Joseph B. McCullough writes that the "Boy Life" series "is a
mixture of informative detail, which includes accounts of
the painful realities of Western farm life, and of a
nostalgic attempt to dwell on the lost world of Garland's
boyhood" (104). (I would note that while Garland could not
return to his own childhood, certainly, the boyhood
experience itself was not a "lost world." It would be lived
by many thousands more, as that way of life was by no means
dead in 1887.) Pizer notes that his "mood" in writing these
pieces was "straightforwardly nostalgic. Once established,
this mood persisted throughout the series" (Early Work 55).
Holloway says that "his attitude toward his subject matter
wavers between a somewhat self-conscious nostalgia and an
attempt at realistic perspective" (16). I believe that
McCullough and Holloway, in also noting the realistic
aspects of the articles, are closer to the mark because
several scenes do describe in detail the daily and often
difficult tasks of the farmer.

Other writers have chosen to force even these
interesting and distinctively positive descriptions of the
Midwest into a different mold, testimony to the fact that
critics often refuse to acknowledge any positive or balanced attitude toward farm life in his work and, instead, opt to reinforce the negative—even where it is nonexistent. For example, Herron writes that his "first article on Western cornhusking linked his name with a particular phase of the literature of the Middle Border, the trenchant and severe Western fiction of town and country, narrative of protest . . ." (219). Simpson describes Garland's efforts this way: "Without much feeling for art he did a series of anti-romantic articles designed to overthrow the Old-Oaken-Bucket feeling for the farm" (169). It is positively astounding that anyone could read those articles and arrive at these conclusions, as the following review of their contents illustrates.

"Boy Life on the Prairie. I.--The Huskin'" starts the series in the January issue of American. Garland establishes his attitude toward this harvesting experience in the second paragraph:

I venture to present, therefore, the latest phases of corn-husking in the West, though daunted at the outset by the doubting word of a friend who says "Oh! There is n't any poetry in such wholesale methods of corn gathering." I answer him by saying, "There is for me, and there will be for
many others who, like myself, grew up amid it and took part in it." (299)

He continues: "Oh, those matchless autumn days, when the vast plain is wrapt in a shimmering robe of mist; when the sun rises red as wine in cloudless skies each day, its splendor veiled by the thick smoky air!" But, of course, husking corn is work, and, after detailing the generally pleasant aspects of the husking season, Garland chooses to present an account of a particularly heroic "huskin'" which takes place on Thanksgiving Day as his family struggles to get the last of the crop harvested, an untimely task necessitated by a coming snow storm. It is hard, cold, and painful work on such a day (and a holiday, to boot), and at times only "the cheery voice of father or the taunts of an older brother and the hired man" could keep the younger ones going. But at the end of the day, working now in the dark and in the midst of a biting, wind-driven snow, the whole troop experiences victory; one by one each wagon reaches the end of its last row "and then in the snow and darkness we all yell 'Hooray!'" (302). The effort has been extremely taxing, but Garland clearly paints it heroic as well. It is a story of family effort; we see them struggling against the harsh elements, succeeding in spite of the hardship, and then retiring to the warmth and security of the farm house, greatly satisfied at the success of their endeavor.
Two months later, in March, "Boy-Life on the Prairie. II.--The Trashin'" was published. This article details the joy of threshing for children and adults alike. Threshing entailed "changing works," a custom of necessity that resulted in several farmers, their wives, and children converging on one farm to thresh wheat. The threshing crew made the rounds to all the neighborhood farms until each harvest had been threshed. Garland does not romanticize the work; it is long, dirty, and exhausting, "but the spirit which made the old-time threshing a festival, the circumstances which made of it a delightful meeting together of neighbors," continue to delight him in memory as he looks back with peculiar tenderness to the days of "bees" and of "harvest dances;" to the old-time "thrashin' season," when the cheer and gladness of a neighborly meeting sweetened, in a measure, the bitterness of farm-life, and the sound of the violin sent tired feet tripping with most wonderful airiness around the warm and mellow-lighted kitchen; and when the boys walked home with the girls, in the crisp, starlit air. 0, those days and nights! (576-77)

Again, Garland does not minimize the fact that farm life does entail work, but the work is positive, satisfying, and rewarding.
In the April issue of *American* came the third installment, "Boy Life on the Prairie. III.--The Voice of Spring," in which Garland details the many activities of children after the winter leaves the land, including skating in the temporary ponds formed in fields by thawing snow which iced up overnight, playing baseball, planting corn, chopping wood, and storing up eggs for Easter. There is work constantly on a farm, but there is pleasure and camaraderie even in this work, as the boy worked side-by-side with father, brother, and sister and "noticed his playmates in the neighboring fields going to work, and heard their merry songs and shouts through the marvelously clear air . . ." (689). This pioneer life is not one of unremitting loneliness, poverty, and toil.

The June issue carried "IV.--Between Hay N' Grass," in which a more detailed discussion of corn planting, "one of the pleasantest experiences of the year," is presented; it is an experience during which "you must pull off your boots or you will miss the delicious feeling of the warm moist earth" (148). While this, too, is work, it is pleasant in the experience and magnificent in memory.

O, days unspeakable! O, simple, homely tasks!
How shall the careworn man tell the glory, the majesty of those nights and days as they filled the boy's heart with a pleasure so deep as almost to be pain. O, to bury my feet again in that
moist, warm earth; to lie on the mellow ground in
the sun; to walk across the fields and hear the
steady click of the hoe at my heel, and the laugh
of the girls working beside! (149)

Then Garland does something that astonishes; he follows this
paragraph immediately with, "It is a delusion, the mere
gilding of a hard task, a halo around a dull and laborious
life by the passage of time." But he is not convincing;
nothing he has shown us supports this sudden change in
attitude. And, furthermore, the remainder of the article
recounts numerous other experiences, all pleasant, of this
particular season—gopher hunting and cattle herding,
primarily—with equal enthusiasm.

These occasional caveats which Garland sprinkles
throughout this series of articles are so out of tone with
the rest of the material that they read as if they were
dropped in in a later draft. It is as if he remembered, on
occasion, that he had dedicated himself to realism and that
such statements were, thus, required for balance. Though
the isolated negative statement, dropped in like a weed in a
garden, may partially destroy the tone of an article, it can
not cloud the fact that the article is a strongly positive
statement about farm life. This holds true for the entire
series. For perspective, it is also important to remember
that Garland is not an old man looking back through thirty
or fifty years to recall a past age, as he is in A Son of
the Middle Border and Roadside Meetings. He had left the farm only six years before he penned the first of this series, and the distinctly positive attitude toward farm life manifested in the articles can leave no doubt, in spite of critical assertions to the contrary, that Garland did not hate his boyhood life.

But Garland senses that such experiences may not translate to the uninitiated and that

their interest will be mainly due to the observer and his angle of vision; to one who (like myself) is a product of these scenes and incidents, a word or sentence concerning a common experience will assume great value, while at the same time, those reared among a totally different set of vulgar incidents will be amused merely. (150)

This is not an insignificant point, as those who have not experienced farm life may look at farm work as pure drudgery, while, to a farmer--and a farm boy--work is life. A farmer expects to work hard, to get dirty, to have to work in foul weather and fair. To the uninitiated, to the teacher, the secretary, the bank clerk, the attorney--to the occasional literary critic--to all who keep their hands clean, such tasks as loading manure or husking corn in a snowstorm may appear to be disgusting, on the one hand, and abject torture on the other; to a farmer, or a farm boy, they are precisely how one makes his living.
The fifth article, "Meadow Memories," appeared in July and concerns haying season.

One of the most pleasant seasons on a Western farm was that of haying, which began about the 25th of June, and lasted two or three weeks into July. Indeed, as the Western farmer looks back on this season, there is little that is not pleasant to remember. (296)

Such a pleasant experience is this that Garland thinks it might well work as a tonic for nonfarmers: "Ah, if the worn toiling-man in the far city might only bathe for an hour in such an atmosphere!" (297). This is work, yes, but it is most satisfying:

The Western haying field is a bright and joyous one. . . . Here are no bowed backs and gloomy faces, toiling in the half-light; no huge and clumsy tools; no feet thrust into huge wooden shoes; no miserable looking women straining at a load too great for their strength. The American farmer is poor enough and brutal enough, but he is not hopeless. I say "Western" haying field, because even in New England there is not the same exuberance of young life. . . .

The haying-field always had a distinct and massive pleasure to us all, even when the boy grew to the point of taking a place in the work of
pitching the hay; the fresh air, the merry voices of companions made it more like play than work. (298).

The themes of play in work and work as part of everyday life are prevalent in all six pieces. In the above passages, Garland clearly does not foreshadow the predominant tone that will characterize his "reform" stories, some of which, as a matter of fact, he is writing almost simultaneously with these sketches.

The last of the "Boy Life" sketches, "Melons and Early Frost," appeared three months later in October 1888. The positive tone toward farm life is maintained in this sketch except for a single four-paragraph passage which is another weed thrown into the garden. In this piece, the theme of hard, but satisfying and pleasurable work is reiterated and an emphasis is placed on the satisfaction derived specifically, here, from building good wheat stacks:

[W]ith what pride he looked upon his portly cones (standing, when finished, like dancers, four in a place, about the broad fields), no one but himself will ever know. As he heard the murmured praise of the hired men his heart swelled with pride. (713)

Again, though, Garland does not discount the fact that stacking wheat "was hard work," but it was also "cheery and pleasant" (713). And theirs is the great satisfaction one
feels after completion of the task: "Just as the sun is going down, the stacker stands erect like a figure of Victory on a monument, and surveys the glorified landscape, then slid down the side, and, ho! for the supper table" (714).

The season also provides for numerous socializing opportunities for the farm community; in the space of a single page seven such opportunities—of encounters with neighbors, planned parties, or "changing works"—are recorded (714-15). This is not the life of lonely people stranded miles from the nearest neighbor, who work relentlessly at meaningless tasks, who grow old, tired, and desperate. What is presented is a balanced picture of farm life in the late nineteenth century. The "Boy Life" series, to the extent that these articles describe the sometimes harsh and sometimes glorious experiences of farm life, fits perfectly within the concept of the hard pastoral, as I have defined it. After all, the farmer's work is in nature; the work can be pleasant in good weather and painful in foul weather. Work can be repetitious and solitary; it can be varied and social. Work is, on a farm, the central fact of a way of life. In the "Boy Life" articles, work is all of these, and it is usually satisfying and often heroic.

Part 2: The Reform Impulse

in Garland's 1888-1891 Short Stories
When Garland wrote the "Boy Life" articles, he was already devoted to the cause of local color; he had already read the works of Henry George and had become a single-tax reformer; he had already read Herbert Spencer and was a confirmed believer in the natural evolution of all life toward a form of perfection. While this series of articles represents his first concerted effort at realistic local-color reporting, they are not particularly informed by the theories of George or Spencer. For the most part these reminiscences are set in Iowa in the 1870s when life was reasonably good for farmers. As Walter F. Taylor has written (in contrast to the many accounts of Garland's supposedly austere early life cited in Chapter II), "The Garlands and most of their neighbors were native American stock--sturdy, hard-working, moderately well-to-do, religious folk. A kind of agrarian middle class . . . ." ("Garland" 129).

It would take a series of events to turn Garland, the local colorist, into a reform writer whose works lost this early sense of balance about farm life and became predominantly negative. His 1887 journey to the Midwest and finally to his parents' Ordway, South Dakota, home took place after the horrible winter of 1886-1887 discussed in Chapter II. The season which followed this winter was dry, and much of the plains section of the Midwest harvested a limited crop or no crop at all. Garland, who was broke,
asked his father if he could help harvest to earn passage money back to Boston, but in neither of his accounts of this harvest in *A Son of the Middle Border* (370-73) and *Roadside Meetings* (117-18) does Garland mention a poor crop. It is clear, though, that his father was at this point a successful and "respected" farmer, "for he was the owner of seven hundred acres of land" (RM 118).

Upon his return a year later, Garland does note that "Another dry year was upon the land and the settlers were deeply disheartened. The holiday spirit of eight years before had entirely vanished" (SMB 398). The boom, which had begun "eight" years before (actually seven, as Garland has misdated this trip), had begun to bust. Also during this trip, as mentioned, Isabelle Garland suffered a stroke. As Hofstadter has noted, during good times, there was little complaining by farmers; but the businessman farmer began to turn, in Hofstadter's phrase, into the "injured little yeoman" farmer as the drought years followed one after the other. This condition of drought and economic hard times was to continue for a full ten years and result, within a few, in the "agrarian revolt" of the late 1880s and early 1890s.

The dry conditions and poor economic outlook and, more particularly, Garland's mother's stroke--a powerful source of guilt for him--stimulated a similar revolt in him:
My heart filled with bitterness and rebellion, bitterness against the pioneering madness which had scattered our family, and rebellion toward my father who had kept my mother always on the border, working like a slave long after the time when she should have been taking her ease. Above all, I resented my own failure, my own inability to help in the case. (SMB 402)

It is clear that Garland was beginning to see what he believed to be the trick that had been played on his family and hundreds of thousands like it. The booming American economy of the previous decade—with its tremendous industrial growth, its railroads, its improvements in agricultural equipment, its easy credit—had lured millions to the West, millions who would now be destroyed financially by the happenstance of a prolonged drought and the resulting financial crash. In the midst of this boom, the Cathers had migrated to Nebraska in 1883; and Garland himself, in the same year, had been lured to Dakota by the prospect of quick profit and had homesteaded and then sold his property to pay his way to Boston.

After the crash, however, even "successful" pioneers like Garland's father and mother had little to show for their efforts in terms of an improved life style. The men, as he saw it, merely worked themselves to death; the women, like his mother, merely wilted away. He saw that during the
boom itself, it had been the railroad companies that hauled their crop, the trusts that built his equipment, the middlemen elevator operators who bought their grain at unfair prices, the money lenders who exacted high interest rates, the land speculators who did not work the land, but profited through the sale of it to pioneers--it had been these who had benefited from the boom. The farmer’s "success" was manifested only in the land he owned, for he and his family had no luxuries, no culture, no savings, no life. After the bust, his father was the proud owner of 700 acres of unsaleable, drought-destroyed, barren land.

This was to mark the beginning of the appearance of a different attitude in Garland’s writing. He discusses the basis of this transition at length in his volume on literary theory, *Crumbling Idols*, written a few years later. Garland contends that local color is the proper vehicle for the veritist (his particular brand of realist); and the veritist "sees life in terms of what it might be, as well as in terms of what it is; but he writes of what is, and, at his best, suggests what is to be by contrast" (43). Garland is providing a philosophical basis for adding a reform agenda to his local color realism. Local color writers, veritists, "have made art the re-creation of the beautiful and the significant. Mere beauty no longer suffices" (50). Pizer writes: "During this period of his career [1890 to 1892], Garland believed that art and polemics were
inseparable" (Early Work 69). Garland saw the veritist as a crusader: "With this hate in his heart and this ideal in his brain the modern man writes his stories of life" (Crumbling Idols 44). Though these statements were written around 1893, they seem to validate his movement away from pure local color realism to veritism, local color with an active conscience. Garland was no longer satisfied merely to describe life as he saw it; henceforth, his fiction would be directed, also, toward improving life.

Garland was now a fiction writer, and the stories of 1888 and 1889, following one or both of his two return journeys to the Midwest, would sound a dour note. The first of these, "Before the Low Green Door" was published in July 1888 (as "A Common Case"). It details the death from cancer of Matilda Bent in the presence of her childhood friend and present neighbor Martha Ridings, to whom she says, "I don't care to live" (WC 255). Matilda's life has been one of hard work and great disappointment; in her dying hours, she repeatedly laments this fact: "I never thought I'd die--so early in life--and die--unsatisfied" (255). She wishes to relive her happy and hopeful youth with her childhood friend as she dies, but thoughts of past happiness merely increase her bitterness over what actually happened after childhood. She finds no solace in her children ("They ain't ben much comfort to me"), and she refuses to allow her husband to come into the room, though we are given no clue as to his
sins against her (257, 259). If we are given little insight into understanding—and, therefore, little reason to empathize with—Matilda, the story does at least introduce another major theme of Garland's fiction: the plight of the woman, especially the frontier woman, which will receive greater attention in several later works. It is not difficult to see in Matilda characteristics that Garland would attach to his own mother, whom he feared might also die on a desolate frontier.

In describing Matilda's last moments, Garland employs a technique that he will use repeatedly in stories and novels that follow; he paints a picture of beautiful nature:

The night was perfectly beautiful, such a night as makes dying an infinite sorrow... A whip-poor-will called, and its neighbor answered it like an echo. The leaves of the trees, glossy from the late rain, moved musically to the light west wind, and the exquisite perfume of many flowers came in on the breeze. (261)

Generally, nature is amoral in Garland's fiction; the institutions of mankind, not nature, are to blame for the hard conditions of the poor. The same nature which brings drought to the land also brings beauty and a sense of spiritual tranquility to the farm dweller.

But In "John Boyle's Conclusion" (written in the fall of 1888, though it did not surface until 1959), Garland
presents a different scenario. At least to his central character, John Boyle, it seems as though "God, Man, and Nature had assaulted him as if by preconcerted plan" ("John Boyle" 62). This passage captures how Garland felt about the circumstances of his own parents, and this story serves as a prime example of how Garland's personal experiences would color his fiction. "John Boyle" was written just after his return from Dakota, where he had witnessed his mother suffer a stroke and where he saw his aging parents living through a second drought-stricken year (Pizer, "John Boyle" 60).

To an extent, "John Boyle" marks the beginning of Garland's serious attempts to correct society through literature. He is here trying to work out his thoughts on the plight of the farmer. What were the pioneer's options? What was the rational reaction to unpredictable natural disaster and an unfair land policy? This story, a partial attempt to answer those questions, provides two reactions to a ruinous drought that is broken only by a hail storm and the resulting total destruction of the wheat crop. In the first half of the story, the desperate lives of John and "Sairy" Boyle are detailed. John is "a pathetic, almost tragic example of toil-worn man. . . . His hands were knotted and shapeless with toil. . . ." Sairy is "thin and sallow"; she is "simple, faithful, and hopeless." The Boyles' crop was in danger of being destroyed by drought for
the third year in a row, and when the potentially saving moisture does come, it comes not to slake the parched soil, but to pulverize the wheat and mash the straw into the mud. As a result of this last insult—in fact, in the midst of it, as John charges out into the very storm—the husband drowns himself in the now swollen river, and the wife goes insane.

This had been their last chance, as John points out. They had suffered from his absence from their original farm when he served in the Civil War (mirroring Richard Garland's experience) and had lost the farm; they moved to Kansas and lost that farm to a prairie fire; they returned to Iowa to rent and lost their crop to the chinch bugs (as the Garlands had in 1879 and 1880); then they moved on to Dakota in the boom years (as the Garlands did in 1881) and were now being ruined by drought and hail. They are old and their situation is completely hopeless because they cannot sell their farm in drought conditions ("John Boyle" 64). Except for the ruinous hail storm and the Kansas homesteading, Garland is recounting his own father's pioneering odyssey.

In the second half of the story, Porter and Ida Alling are returning from town to their homestead, which is just beyond the Boyle farm. The storm has brought the destructive hail to only certain parts of the countryside while other farms are blessed with rain. The Allings begin to realize that their crop has been destroyed as they get
nearer to their home. They stop at the Boyle farm and discover the now insane Sairy and learn that John has committed suicide.

But faced with the same situation as the Boyles, the Allings do not fall into complete despair. They are, after all, young. They can try again. Alling had been "partly lured [to Dakota] by the flaming advertisements of some land syndicate" (70), but he is an educated easterner who can admit that he has made an error and return to his previous occupation as a merchant. He is not the traditional pioneer who, like Garland's father, refused to back-trail or "surrender so long as I can run a team" (SMB 437).  

Again, as Pizer explains, this story was written in a mood of "anger and bitterness" immediately after Garland returned from his 1888 trip to Dakota where he had seen his mother suffer a stroke (Pizer, "John Boyle" 60). In his sensitive state and in his guilt, Garland can only see the negative in the rural existence of his parents. In the East, to which he returns to write, is stability, culture, society, and hope. In some important ways this is a pivotal story, for in his recounting of the Boyles' tribulations, he notes the effect of land speculation on their plight; in telling the Allings' tale, he emphasizes the role of deceitful "boomerism" ads in luring people to the edge of nowhere in the hope of acquiring free land and making their fortunes. This story, as noted, marks the beginning of
Garland's polemic literature, though the reform themes that occur repeatedly in his fiction of the next few years are not central to this very early story. It seems to present, primarily, the hard-luck story of one elderly couple; the reform issues are there in incubation, but they are for the most part unhatched.

During the following three years, from 1889 through 1891, Garland's reform fervor would increase, and he would publish all the stories which would appear in the original *Main-Travelled Roads* and several which would appear in *Prairie Folks*. Among them would be those stories most often cited as exemplary of the "real" Hamlin Garland: "Under the Lion's Paw," "Sim Burns's Wife," and "Up the Coolly." As these works were being created, the Midwest continued to suffer under the economic conditions that followed the crash of the land boom in 1887; it continued to experience year after year of drought; and it saw the rapid development of the agrarian revolt culminate in the formation of the Populist Party. These stories were written to express Populist grievances and to augment political activities.

Garland's most famous story, "Under the Lion's Paw," in detailing the tragic story of Tim and Nellie Haskins, would also espouse a particular solution to what Garland saw as one of the great social evils of the day: the unfair distribution of land. Two years before Garland wrote this
story, he had become an avid believer in Henry George's Single Tax theory (Pizer, *Early Work* 62). On the very day "Under the Lion's Paw" appeared in *Harper's Weekly* (September 7, 1889), George's magazine, the *Standard*, "announced that Garland was willing to read the story, which showed 'in very vivid colors the whole question of landlordism,' before single-tax clubs upon payment of travel expenses" (60). It was clearly Garland's intent to write a story which detailed precisely what he saw as the single greatest cause of rural strife, the unfair and improper utilization of land.

George's economic philosophy "traced the unequal distribution of wealth . . . to the institution of private property in land." His solution was to "substitute for the individual ownership of land a common ownership" (George 328). He bases this stance on the premise that "no one can be rightfully entitled to the ownership of anything which is not the produce of his own labor, or the labor of someone else from whom the right has passed to him" (336). To eliminate the benefit to those who held land without using it, George proposed his "single-tax," which would tax unimproved or unused land at the same rate as improved land and which would, further, eliminate the benefit of holding unused land.

The plight of the Haskinses would expose the evil of this unfair land system. They had just lost their Kansas
farm, finally, to grasshoppers that accompanied the
drought of the late 1880s; and, now destitute, they have
retreated east to Iowa as part of the great back-trailing
movement that began in Kansas in 1888 after the second year
of the great drought (Shannon 308). This young family with
three children stops one night at the Iowa farmhouse of
Steve and "Sairy" Council who feed and shelter them.

After Steve hears Tim's hard-luck story, he asks him
why he went so far west to homestead; Tim replies: "Fer the
simple reason that you fellers wantid ten 'r fifteen dollars
an acre fer the bare land, and I hadn't no money fer that
kind o' thing" (M-TR 203). Earlier he had complained of the
same situation: "What galled me the worst was goin' s' far
away acrosst so much fine land layin' all through here
vacant" (202). In these statements Haskins has struck the
very nerve of Garland's reform program.

Soon Council helps Haskins rent a farm on good terms
(one of which allows Haskins to purchase the farm in three
years) from one Jim Butler, who makes his money by
collecting interest on mortgages and by renting out his
unsold land. Once the deal is arranged, "Haskins worked
like a fiend, and his wife, like the heroic woman that she
was, bore also uncomplainingly the most terrible burdens"
(209). By the end of the growing season, the run-down farm
is much improved through their herculean effort. After
three years the farm is practically a showplace, and when
Haskins tells Butler that he would like to purchase the farm, Butler doubles the price he had quoted Haskins three years before. Haskins is astounded, but Butler explains: "It was all run down then; now it's in good shape" (214). When Haskins explains that he is responsible for that change and that he has put fifteen hundred dollars of his own money into improvements, Butler is unmoved: "Your improvements! The law will sing another tune" (215).

Henry George's Single Tax theory, Garland believed, would, once in practice, eliminate landlordism. In this theory Garland saw the resolution of the pioneer problem, and his "Under the Lion's Paw" was his artistic expression of that theory. In the January 1891 issue of Arena he would publish "A New Declaration of Rights," his "Under the Lion's Paw" in essay form, in which he attacks the land speculator:

Speculation in land--what harm has it done? What has it not done? In the first century of our nation's life it has scattered us out from sea to sea, pushing men on into the wilderness, into the forest and on the plain, keeping us a nation of pioneers, holding the body of our people against the inclemency, the rigors, the solitudes of our land, when we might have been living east of the Mississippi River, or even east of the Alleghanies [sic], in a state of civilization so high that its actuality would be a dreamer's vision.
Speculation in land! It has created vast corporations and privileged classes. It has created artificial scarcity of land, air, and water. (165-166)

Garland believed that many farmers, like his fictional Haskins, had been forced west into lightly populated areas because much of the available land in already settled areas was controlled by speculators who withheld the sale of their lands, knowing that the improvements made in the real estate around their properties would dramatically raise the value of their idle land. This meant that pioneers often lived in extreme isolation from their neighbors, an isolation, as Garland saw it, that deprived them of social and cultural activities. The villains were land speculators, whether they be opportunistic individuals, like the landlord Butler, or corporations, like those which owned the railroads.

Speculation, of course, was wide-spread and was practiced by farmers as well. Garland had homesteaded himself for the purpose of speculation. Even Willa Cather's archetypal pioneer heroine, Alexandra Bergson, was a land speculator, as is clearly illustrated by her plans to buy land when others are abandoning their farms. It had been her father's intention to follow such a plan, but he died before the opportunity arose. Alexandra means to make herself and her brothers large enough landowners that they
will not need actually to work the land; others will work it for them (OP 171-73).

But, by 1891 it was clear to Garland that such speculation was the great evil, the cause of strife, suffering, and injustice in the Midwest. "Under the Lion's Paw" proved to be the perfect vehicle to appeal to the grievances being voiced first by the various farmers' alliances in the late 1880s and then by the Populists in the early 1890s. It contained all their familiar complaints against the weather, insects, and, in particular, the middlemen, here represented by the landlord who was growing wealthy through the labor of others. During his trips west in 1890-1892 to campaign for these farmers' organizations, when Garland's penchant for reform was becoming an obsession, he often read the story during meetings. In fact, he read it to the Populist delegates at their July 4, 1892, nominating convention (Pizer, Early Work 95), and among those in the audience was his own father, a delegate from Brown County, Dakota (SMB 424).

Another obsession that broiled within Garland and that, like his concern with the plight of farmers, had been born out of personal experience was that of the circumstances of the pioneer woman. "Sim Burns's Wife," which was published in Arena in July 1891 as "A Prairie Heroine," is perhaps Garland's most extreme attack on what rural conditions do to
women, his mother's own condition no doubt working on his mind as he wrote this story. Its beginning sets the tone:

Lucretia Burns had never been handsome, even in her days of early girlhood, and now she was middle-aged, distorted with work and child-bearing, and looking faded and worn as one of the boulders that lay beside the pasture fence near where she sat milking a large white cow. (PF 101)

Lucretia has been brutalized by her pioneer experience, and, as a result, she is brutal to her own children, "cuffing" them regularly, and speaking to them in vicious tones:

"Sadie, you let him drink now 'r I'll slap your head off, you hateful thing! Why can't you behave, when you know I’m jest about dead?" (103).

Lucretia is clearly on the brink of a mental collapse: "[T]he woman fell down on the damp grass and moaned and sobbed like a crazed thing" (104). She considers suicide. But, just when circumstances seem as bad as possible, they get worse when Sim comes in from the field. He treats the children--her "brats," he calls them--even worse than she does; and he curses the exhausted Lucretia for not finishing the milking. We soon learn, though, that Sim's life is equally depressing, through, apparently, no fault of his own. He is a hard worker, but he has gotten bad breaks and is forced to live a brutalized existence.
Lucretia, slowly going insane, separates herself from her husband, first by not eating with the family, then by moving out of their bedroom. She has decided that the cause of her trouble is Sim Burns:

"I hate him," she thought, with a fierce blazing up through the murk of her musing. "I hate t' live. But they ain't no hope. I'm tied down. I can't leave the children, and I ain't got no money. I couldn't make a living out in the world. I ain't never seen anything an' don't know anything." (112-13)

The reader's sympathy is clearly with Lucretia at this point. And Garland has slipped into his text another prominent theme of his reform agenda—the economic entrapment of all women. But, though Garland always depicts the suffering of pioneer women as greater than that of pioneer men, here the reform writer has more to say. Sim Burns is not by nature the monster he has become:

Burns was not a drinking man; he was hard-working, frugal; in fact, he had no extravagances except his tobacco. His clothes he wore until they all but dropped from him; and he worked in rain and mud, as well as dust and sun. It was this suffering and toiling all to no purpose that made him sour and irritable. (121)
This man is as much a victim of the system, of circumstances, as is his bedraggled wife. Several of the Burnses' neighbors try to explain the condition of this blighted family. The consensus of opinion is that falling crop prices, higher machinery costs, and increased taxes have eliminated profits and created the circumstances which ruin people like the Burnses--though the neighbors themselves do not seem to be in a state of ruin. Garland cannot resist aiding his characters in their lament about conditions, though; so he editorializes on the political causes of trouble:

The Democrats said protection was killing the farmers; the Republicans said no. The Grangers growled about the middle-men; the Greenbackers said there wasn't circulating medium enough, and, in the midst of it all, hard-working, discouraged farmers, like Simeon Burns, worked on, unable to find out what really was the matter. (122)

The resolution of these evils lies in a clear-cut political solution. Enter Douglass Radbourn, local lawyer and social reformer. He and his female companion Lily Graham, the "[v]ery beautiful . . . town-bred 'school-ma'am,'" are discussing the plight of the farmer and his wife. She asks him, "But what is the way out?"

This was sufficient to set Radbourn upon his hobby-horse. He outlined his plan of action--the
abolition of all indirect taxes; the State control of all privileges the private ownership of which interfered with the equal rights of all. He would utterly destroy speculative holding of the earth. He would have land everywhere brought to its best use, by appropriating all ground rents to the use of the State. . . . (128)

This is the doctrine of the Single-Taxer. Two years earlier, Garland had been satisfied to let the story tell the story in "Under the Lion's Paw." Here, two more years into the movement, and heavily involved personally in its politics, Garland resorts to direct preaching.

Radbourn and Graham believe one reason that farm people such as the Burnses suffer so and that their lives are vulgar and bestial is that they cannot partake of "the world of art, of music, of literature"; if economic reform were enacted, the resulting fairer distribution of wealth would bring culture and light into their lives (126). This, of course, is part of Garland's solution to the loneliness and colorlessness, as he interpreted it, of his own mother's life.

In the end, Lily reunites the Burnses through, apparently, her very decency and her sympathy. She gets Sim to accept the blame for their conflict. (The male must always accept the final blame for marital problems in Garland's work, for it is always the female who suffers the
most). But Lily manages the reconciliation by saying to Lucretia, "If you will only see that you are both to blame and yet neither to blame, then you can rise above it. Try, dear!" (140). The message is clear: the imperfect institutions of man are finally to blame. And one other thing, as Radbourn tells us:

Writers and orators have lied so long about "the idyllic" in farm life, and said so much about the "independent American farmer," that he himself has remained blind to the fact that he's one of the hardest-working and poorest-paid men in America. (125).

Here is both the cause of the problem—the unfair system of landownership—and Garland's personal contribution to its solution—telling the truth in literature about these hard-working and poor folks.

If Radbourn and Graham serve as the foils to the evils of the system in "Sim Burns's Wife," it is a thinly veiled image of Garland himself, in the guise of Howard McLane, who offers counterpoint to rural struggle and poverty in the third of this group of most-cited Garland's stories, "Up the Coolly." But we are in error if we see this story as primarily a presentation of the struggle of poor farm folks; it is clearly a story written by Garland in penance for his
own sins of omission, one of which involves his not having rescued his aged and ill mother from her frontier existence.

That "Up the Coolly" is essentially the delineation of Garland's feelings of guilt is made clear even before Howard has seen the deplorable economic condition of his mother and his brother and family: "and now it was with a distinct consciousness of neglect of duty that he walked up to the fence and looked into the yard . . ." (M-TR 78). And well he should feel guilty. While Howard has become a rich and famous New York actor, Mom and brother Grant have lost the homestead and are now living in impoverished tenancy on another farm farther up the coolly.

If solving the great economic problem of the country, if creating an original and powerful American national literature based on veritism in local color, if freeing women from servitude are three of Garland's four most pressing obsessions, then a problem related to the latter, dealing with his guilt over abandoning his mother to hardship, is his fourth. In A Son of the Middle Border, he wrote about leaving his mother after her stroke: "On the face of it, my plain duty was to remain on the farm, and yet I could not bring myself to sacrifice my Boston life" (404).

Whether or not Garland should have felt this guilt, indeed, whether or not his mother was the suffering soul that he thought her to be, has been called into question by a number of critics, including Carol Fairbanks who writes of
his "very limited understanding of pioneer women." She suggests that he even refuses to acknowledge his mother's statement in response to his having removed her from Ordway, South Dakota, back to West Salem, Wisconsin, in 1893 (quoting her here from Garland's *A Daughter of the Middle Border*): "Yes, I like it here— it seems more like home than any other place—and yet I miss the prairie and my Ordway friends" (15). It is Fairbanks' view that Garland's attitude toward women mirrors that held by most late nineteenth-century men, that women are weak and must be protected; she believes that Garland can only identify with weak women (17). Thacker agrees, noting that Garland's presentation of women in general is stereotypical and, further, that this "stereotypical image of frontier wives as frightened drudges . . . needs to be treated skeptically" (142). But, regardless of the source or soundness of Garland's attitude, a deep feeling of guilt is operative in "Up the Coolly."

After observing the living conditions of his family members, Howard first admits to himself and then to his brother that he could have returned to visit them, that he could have helped all along, but that he had been unwilling to sacrifice a "summer on the Mediterranean" or the New York life he has come to enjoy (94, 128). The influence of Garland's anguish in this and other stories is emphasized by Thomas A. Bledsoe in his introduction to a 1954 edition of
Main-Travelled Roads: "Perhaps the word which best describes the spirit which informs these stories is guilt," most particularly that arising out of his abandonment of his mother (192).

But the sense of guilt in this story extends even beyond his mother; in fact, the essential guilt Howard feels relates more to his brother Grant than to his mother. Howard tells Grant that his failure as a farmer has deeper causes than are apparent:

It ain't your fault. I begin to see it now.

Being the oldest, I had the best chance. I was going to town to school while you were ploughing and husking corn. Of course I thought you'd be going soon yourself. I had three years the start of you. (127)

Howard had met a man at school who gave him a break, and, after this original break, others followed. "Circumstances made me and crushed you. That's all there is about that. Luck made me and cheated you" (127). This deterministic attitude is important in the story, but its combination with a second factor more fully explains the tone and theme of "Up the Coolly."

What makes this a very personal story to Garland is that he felt the same way about his and his brother Frank's own experiences in Osage, about his own opportunities in relation to those of his brother, who, while Hamlin attended
the seminary, was still on the farm working for their father. Frank acknowledges a sense of having been cheated in youth in a letter he wrote to Garland biographer Cleon Hill a few months after Hamlin's death:

While Hamlin was attending the Cedar Valley Seminary . . . I was at home doing the chores and keeping up the farm work on the assumption that I was to have my chance when he had finished, but my chance never came. (Hill 25)

Hamlin acknowledges this inequity in *A Son of the Middle Border*. Frank wrote him in Boston that his attempts at working for their father in the family business in Dakota had failed; he was, therefore, moving on west, perhaps to Montana. Hamlin writes,

His letter threw me into dismay. I acknowledged once again that my education had in a sense been bought at his expense. I recalled the many weeks when the little chap had plowed in my stead whilst I was enjoying the inspiration of Osage. (348)

Hamlin immediately asked Frank to join him in Boston where he found work first as an accountant and eventually, through Hamlin's friendships in the theatrical world, as an actor (SMB 394).

Even with no knowledge of the biographical parallels between the lives of the Garland family and those of these fictional characters, that the story is first of all about
McLane's guilt is profoundly obvious. A harsh portrayal of rural life and an attack on the economic conditions that cause it are clearly secondary in importance to the drama of penance which dominates both the action and tone of "Up the Coolly." The grim determinism which causes Grant to reject Howard's money ("You can't help me now. It's too late.") serves to emphasize the evil done by Howard that will not be undone. Howard has already solved the family's financial problems by buying back the old homestead. But Grant is a defeated man who has lost too much, who has slipped so far that he can not be revitalized, and with this irremediable wrong, Howard, who knows he could have prevented it, must live (M-TR 129). As Grant says, "You can't fix this thing up with money" (126). A major part of what cannot be fixed is the relationship between the brothers.

"Up the Coolly" also contains another indictment of what Garland saw as the plight and the quandary of rural women which is illustrated by the lives of the minor characters Rose McTurg and Laura, Grant's wife. Rose, who is single and who works as a school teacher, feels trapped in the coolly: "Marriage is a failure these days for most of us. We can't live on a farm, and can't get a living in the city, and there we are" (107). The problem is that all the young men have gone west in search of--what is to Hamlin Garland by 1891--the false pioneer dream. Laura McLane's story is slightly different; she did marry.
I was a fool for ever marrying. . . . I made a living teaching, I was free to come and go, my money was my own. Now I'm tied right down to a churn or a dish-pan, I never have a cent of my own. (119)

As Gary Allen Cuthbert has written, these and other stories in *Main-Travelled Roads*, *Wayside Courtships*, and *Prairie Folks* are concerned with the tragedy "of unfulfilled feminine potential" (275).

Truly, if any single thread--other than the general plight of the Midwestern farmer--ties the five stories discussed here, it is the particular plight of the pioneer woman. Sairy Boyle, Matilda Bent, Lucretia Burns, Nettie Haskins, and Mother McLane all are suffering women when we meet them and by story's end they are, respectively, insane, dead, recovering from a mental breakdown but with nothing to look forward to, the victim of yet another economic injustice, and, well, just Mother. Perhaps Garland could not get himself to kill off or otherwise destroy this woman who is too clearly drawn from his own mother. We will see the gradual transformation of women from hopeless victim to triumphant professional woman, artist, and man's equal in works written in the next two years.

A troubling aspect of the more general analysis of these stories is that most critics would have us believe
that in each of them Garland is presenting one character or one family as a type of all rural characters. McCullough, author of the 1978 Twayne series book on Garland, is typical: "Garland's tendency to destroy this myth [of the West as paradise] is clearly presented in all of the [M-TR] stories as they depict the ugliness, monotony, and hopelessness of the average American farmer" (41). The word "average" is key to my point; in none of the stories in Main-Travelled Roads is the specific "victim"--Tim Haskins or the Burnses, for example--presented convincingly as the "average American farmer." In fact, in each of the five stories just discussed the victim is clearly the exception; he or she is surrounded by other characters whose lives are not tragic. Thus, the "victim" becomes an anomaly rather than a type.

But Garland, too, must have believed that he was purposely setting up his victimized characters as symbolic of a whole class of people. He refers to the beleaguered Sim Burns, for instance, as "a type of the average prairie farmer, and his whole surrounding was typical of the time" (PF 108). "His mind--the average mind--was weary with trying to solve an insoluble problem" (121). But the clear fact is that, in spite of what Garland may have intended, Sim is not the equal of his peers. His neighbors are baffled by his failure, and the Burnses are surrounded by successful, well-dressed, seemingly happy people. Garland
has chosen for his case study a reprobate family; he has chosen the exception, not the typical. This is made apparent by the fact that no one else in the story shares in the Burnses’ hardships.

In fact, in each story, the tragic central characters are quite clearly exceptions. If Garland was hoping to write blanket incriminations of farm life, he has shot himself in the foot. John Boyle repeatedly laments that the rain always seems to just miss his farm and that his neighbors are faring much better. When the hail storm comes, it destroys his crop, but many are spared; and the Allings, while also losing their crop, are still young enough to make a new beginning elsewhere. It is as if John Boyle, rather than standing for the general case, has been selected, as he says, by "God, Man, and Nature," for deliberate assault ("John Boyle" 62).

As Matilda Bent lies dying, she tells her lifelong friend that "Things have been better for you. You ain’t had to live in an old log house all your life, an’ work yourself to skin an’ bone for a man you don’t respect nor like" (WC 258-59). While her friend admits to feeling "a little" as though her own life may have been something of a disappointment, she is clearly shocked at Matilda’s dying statements and cannot identify with them. Whomever Matilda speaks for or whomever Garland would have her represent, it is not, apparently, her own best friend. And the action and
dialogue of the entire story suggest strongly that Matilda's has been an unusual situation.

Is Haskins the best representative of what life is like for an Iowa farmer in the late 1880s? Only if the typical farmer is a fool. The Councils, the only other farm family we meet, are not destitute. They are successful and extraordinarily kind as well; not only do they take the wandering Haskins family in in the middle of the night, they also feed and lodge the family for the entire winter at their own expense and then lend them seed for planting in the following spring. While it is true that Haskins is undone by an unscrupulous landlord, it is also no doubt true that he has acted unwisely in not having a set purchase price recorded legally and, further, in being foolish enough to put his own money into improvements without such assurance. While Garland has made his point that land speculators are involved in the great injustice of the land system in the Midwest, his chosen victim is both victim and fool.

Even in "Up the Coolly," the neighbors who come calling do not appear as destitute as the McLanes; and, as far as we know, none has lost a homestead. Their lives do not seem marked by the desperation that has scarred Grant and Laura McLane. This is, certainly, the time of Populist unrest in the Midwest, and the men do gather to talk about "free-trade" and the end of the land boom in the Dakotas, but it
is only Grant who voices the complaints one might expect to hear. It is he who compares his position to that of "a fly in a pan of molasses" (M-TR 113). In the single important confrontation we see between Grant and his wife, Laura contends that they themselves, not Howard, are to blame for their failure (100). And it is a curious fact that Grant should lose the original homestead after it had been in the family all those years.

The fact that Garland's victims are not types but exceptions to the rule has the effect of diluting the impact of his reform statements. If Sim Burns' neighbors can't understand why he has such a tough life, why his luck seems inexplicably bad while their own lives are not visited by similar nightmarish circumstances, then the tragedy of Burns becomes not a symbol of widespread social problems that warrant address, but a personal and peculiar exception to the rule.

Though Garland focuses each of his stories on a victim of society (usually, of its flawed economic system), he does not make his case general enough. If Sim Burns' neighbors do not suffer, is not Burns merely, perhaps, a freak? If the Haskins family is the only tragic family in "Under the Lion's Paw," then Steve and Sairy Council are better credentialed as the "type" of the "average American farmer" that McCullough is looking for (41). No doubt Garland intended to do differently, but he has not. Could it be
that, subconsciously, Garland—who had great affection for agrarian life—could not bring himself to write negatively of that whole segment of society? Or, perhaps more likely, the stories are merely flawed. Perhaps Garland was incapable of detecting the flaws in his own work that would weaken their very impact.

It would appear that here, as well as in other stories, Garland has not adequately contemplated the full implications of his plot constructs. If he has intended to create types, the works fail in their construction and execution and are, therefore, both thematically and artistically flawed.

Perhaps a more fruitful avenue of interpretation of "Up the Coolly" might follow an investigation of Howard McLane as a metaphor for that segment of the American culture and economy (corporate America, the East, the corrupted government) which has abandoned the Western segment of its population to cultural deprivation and fiscal ruin. The wealthy Howard as beneficiary of—or one enfranchised by—the country's laissez faire economic policies, of the whole explosion of "progress" in America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, works well allegorically. The author's personal guilt is purged (this story is an act of penance); and, at another level, he points with accusing finger at his country's abandonment of his beloved Midwest and its people. And he may be suggesting that it is too
late to save the West without recourse to the extreme
measures that he is so vehemently to espouse in his reform
novels of 1892. As Grant has lost faith in the decency and
fairness of his brother Howard, so too has the American West
lost it naïveté about the East and its economy and its
government.

A closer analysis of many of these stories is fruitful. Are we to assume, as the typical critical comments recorded here have suggested, that in a story like "Under the Lion's Paw," Garland is exposing as blatant lie the idyllic agrarian myth? Consider Tim and Nettie Haskins at work on their rented farm.

The new hope which now sprang up in the heart of Haskins and his wife grew great almost as a pain by the time the wide field of wheat began to wave and rustle and swirl in the winds of July. Day after day he would snatch a few moments after supper to go and look at it.

"Ain't it grand, Nettie? Just look at it."

It was grand. Level, russet here and there, heavy headed, wide as a lake, and full of multitudinous whispers and gleams of wealth, it stretched away before the gazers like the fabled field of the cloth of gold. (M-TR 210-11)

There are struggles yet to come, but they manage a good harvest and are finally triumphant. It is theirs! The
dream comes true; the idyll is reality. This is the agrarian dream in capital letters: a farm family working in the open, clean air on its own plot of land yields the deserved reward of a good harvest and self-satisfaction. This is the same hard pastoral view of farm life we are given in Garland's "Boy Life" series of articles. That Haskins is too much yeoman and not enough businessman does not alter the fact that Garland has painted a positive picture of emotional satisfaction in the Haskins family's experience. But the trick at the end, and only that, destroys the idyll.

In all these stories the loser—like Grant, like Tim Haskins, like John Boyle and Matilda Bent and Lucretia and Sim Burns—is clearly the exception among the characters peopling their respective stories, thus calling into question such assessments as that of Stanley Harrison who calls Lucretia Burns an example of the "not atypical" pioneer housewife (322). Where in the story does Harrison find the basis for this opinion? It is not there. Consider the similar assessment of Henry Nash Smith who cites "Lucretia Burns" ("Sim Burns's Wife") as a good example of Garland's commentary on the difference between fact and fiction in American rural life (193); or of Anthony C. Hilfer who prefers "Under the Lion’s Paw" and "Up the Coolly" to other Garland stories because they "were unspoiled by false affirmation," commenting not at all on
whether or not they were spoiled by false generalization; or of Thomas Bledsoe who, in analyzing *Main-Travelled Roads*, tells us that "we do not need to be convinced that Garland has told us what midwestern farm life in the eighties was really like" (193); or of Lucy Hazard who chooses "Under the Lion's Paw" as her choice for the work best illustrating "the ugliness, the monotony, the bestiality, the hopelessness of life on the farm" (265); or of Ronald Weber who believes that "Up the Coolly" "stands out as the finest work of early Midwestern realism" (48), without any apparent evaluation of just how realistic a picture was presented in the story and without acknowledging that the central point of this story is the expurgation of an author's guilty conscience, not a realistic depiction of Midwestern farm life.

This is a central issue to me. What seems to inform Garland's angry fiction is not a desire to present a realistic portrayal of "the ugliness, the monotony, the bestiality" of life on the farm. In "Up the Coolly" the actual description of farm conditions is limited to a couple of short scenes and a few pages in this sixty-one-page story; in "Under the Lion's Paw" the description of Tim Haskins's farm life is generally positive except for his brief recounting (two paragraphs) of his Kansas experience. What is under attack in these two most famous of Garland's stories is not "life on the farm," but, rather, what he
thought of as an unfair economic system. What would appear
to be the impetus behind Garland's most angry fiction, then,
is not a desire to expose the agrarian myth, but a reformist
zeal for social causes, such as land reform or the feminist
movement; or very personal issues, such as the guilt he
feels about his actions toward his mother and brother in "Up
the Coolly."

We do not get in these most-often cited Main-Travelled
Roads stories the realist's detailed description of farm
life that we do in the more realistic, local-color "Boy
Life" series, for example. If we were being given a truly
realistic picture of that life, would we be reading about
characters who are exceptional within their own particular
fictional milieux? who are thought of as inexplicably
unfortunate even to other characters in the same stories? I
would think not.

The more positive stories of Main-Travelled Roads often
receive little or no attention. "A Branch Road"--a story in
which a young man, Will, saves a young woman, Agnes, from a
life with her nasty husband and his parents--is a case in
point. Rural life is presented very positively in the first
section of this lengthy story; even hard physical labor is
portrayed in a somewhat heroic light and is shown to be
satisfying to the protagonist of the story. Only when Will
returns to his childhood home after a long absence and needs
an excuse to rescue Agnes do hardship and penury appear; and
these conditions are apparent only in the life of Agnes, as other farmers seem to be prospering (M-TR 35-36). In truth, this is a story about a young man's guilt; in a fit of jealousy he first abandons a sweetheart to a mean existence and then returns to rescue her from it. "A Branch Road" has less to do with the elimination of the general suffering of the Midwestern farmer than with the elimination of one sweetheart's suffering—or more pointedly, the elimination of a young man's guilt over having abandoned this woman to a hard life. We have here another echo of Garland's own sense of guilt about his mother.

"Among the Corn-Rows" is another Main-Travelled Roads selection which, being a love story, fails to fit the common critical criteria of a "typical" Garland work. A young man, Rob, returns from his Dakota homestead to his childhood home in Wisconsin to find a wife. He rescues Julia from a life of servitude to her parents and takes her with him so that she can live "that free life in a far-off, wonderful country." Rob and Julia are not escaping from farm life as Will and Agnes do in "A Branch Road"; instead, they return to Rob's homestead where Julia will also have to work, "but it would be because she wanted to" (163), and where Rob will "[build] a new house, with a woman's advice and presence" (164-65).

Why has "A Branch Road" been ignored while "Sim Burns's Wife," "Under the Lion's Paw," and a few other stories have
come to represent Garland's attitude toward farm life? More important, this latter limited selection of negative works has come to represent an author, a literary movement, to most critics. But not only have a few atypical works of Garland's come to represent his viewpoint in the study of American literature, those stories also fail as realistic portrayals. They do not—in spite, no doubt, of Garland's wishes to the contrary—represent the usual. They are, each and every one, polemically inspired works.

I am not suggesting that the grievances of the Midwestern farmer were not real, nor that political and economic reform was not needed. Nor am I suggesting that it was not Garland's specific goal to right those wrongs by exposing such evils in his stories. That certainly was his intention. I am, rather, suggesting that a close analysis of what he actually wrote fails to make the case he so desperately wanted to make.

I further contend that, if the specific tragedy of each story is bracketed, life on the agricultural frontier is not, in general, presented as one of "unmitigated toil." Martha Riding, for example, will go back to her own life which seems unmarked by the troubles that scarred her friend Matilda's life. John Boyle's neighbors, whose farms have been spared the destruction of hail, will return to their own farms which have received a saving rain. The Councils—being the warmhearted, generous, and prosperous farmers that
they are--will continue to live well and may even find a way
to help the Haskins once again. These most famous of
Garland's reform stories do not, in the whole, illustrate
"the ugliness, the monotony, the bestiality, the
hopelessness of life on the farm," in spite of Hazard's
statement to the contrary (265). At best, they detail
personal tragedies.

Part 3: The 1892 Novels of Reform

In 1892, Garland published four novels. Most critics
dismiss them as aesthetically inferior to both the earlier
short stories and his 1895 novel, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*.
Of the four 1892 novels, only *Jason Edwards: An Average
Man*--the novelized form of an earlier play, "Under the
Wheel"--and *A Spoil of Office* are of interest in this study.
*A Member of the Third House*, while written in Garland's
reform furor, concerns political corruption in an Eastern
state legislature. *A Little Norsk: Old Pap Flaxen* is an
early romantic work completed in late 1888 which "suffers
. . . from the conventional sentimental ending and from the
artificiality of plot" (McCullough 64). These faults no
doubt contributed to the years between its completion and
its publication date.

According to Vernon Parrington, in *Jason Edwards: An
Average Man* "and in other studies done under the influence
of B.O. Flower [editor of the reform journal *Arena*], whose
appetite for reform literature was insatiable, Hamlin Garland had ceased to be an objective realist and turned propagandist . . ." (161). Yet Wayne Morgan sees the book as breaking new ground for realist/naturalist writers: "In its honest descriptions of tenement life, and its acknowledgement of the dark presence of sex in the streets, the book anticipated Stephen Crane's Maggie (1893)" (265). Charles Walcutt points toward a synthesis of these evaluations when he writes that Jason Edwards "is a novel of protest against the crushing forces of economic determinism as they operate in Boston industry and in western prairie farming" (203).

Jason Edwards does seem to be all these things. By 1890, working people, both farmers and city laborers, were attempting to work together to stem the growing power of what Walter F. Taylor calls the plutocracy; there was good reason:

Holding the compelling weapon of economic and financial power, they [the plutocracy] wrested into their favor all important decisions on the tariff, immigration, the currency, and even the disposal of the public lands, and at the same time either forestalled or evaded most legislation aimed at industrial control or social welfare.

(Economic Novel 31)
The Populists—and, thus, Garland—felt that only a united effort between farmer and laborer could defeat the monied powers; and, by 1892, the Populist platform (see page 37) represented the concerns of both groups.

Garland, the Populist zealot, apparently sat down to pen the perfect novel to illustrate the natural affinity of the two groups. Edwards, an average man, is living in the tenements of Boston in the mid-1880s with his wife and two daughters when the story opens. He is caught in the vise of constantly rising rents and constantly falling wages; he is forced to compete for wages against the burgeoning immigrant population which industrialists welcome (and have legislated) as a way of keeping labor costs down; it is a trap from which there is no apparent escape. And living in the tenements becomes almost intolerable, as this typical scene shows:

Children, ragged, dirty, half-naked and ferocious, swarmed up and down the furnace-like street, swore and screamed in high-pitched, unnatural, animal-like voices, from which all childish music is lost. Frowzy women walking with a gait of utter weariness, aged women, bent and withered, and young women soon to bring other mouths and tongues and hands into this frightful struggle, straggled along the side-walks, laden with parcels, pitifully small, filled with food.
Other women and old people leaned from the open windows to get a breath of cooler air, frowns of pain on their faces, while in narrow rooms foul and crowded, invalids tortured by the deafening screams of the children, and the thunder of passing teams and cars, and unable to reach the window to escape the suffocating heat and the smell of the cooking, turned to the wall, dumbly praying for death to end their suffering.

If a young soul from the quiet of suburban life, or a visitor from the country, had found himself in the midst of these streets and these people, he would have trembled with fear and horror. (24-25)

Edwards says, "It's like living in a lunatic asylum" (59). Into this troubled setting come several "gaily colored" posters, "the usual western railway folders" that promised free land in the West to those who would come and get it. One of the posters presents a picture of the Western farm. The farmer himself in the foreground was seated on a self-binding reaper, holding the reins over an abnormally sleek and prancing pair of horses. He wore a fine Kossuth hat and a standing collar, and his shirt was immaculate. A deer was looking out at him (with pardonable curiosity) from a
neighboring wood-lot. It was the ideal farmer, and the farm of the land-boomer... (62)

Such an opportunity, for a family gradually falling into financial ruin in a rotting city tenement, is not to be ignored. Edwards and family head west.

Unfortunately, all of the free land is at least thirty miles from the nearest railroad and, thus, the nearest market for crops; so, Edwards is forced to buy land. And this is no Eden:

It was hot in the town, it was frightful on the prairie, bare of trees as a desert. The eyes found no place to rest from the hot, brazen glare of everything—the grass, the grain, the sky. There was absolutely no fresh green thing to be seen, no cool glint of water, no pleasant shade—only a radiant, mocking, sinister sky... (132)

This is the scene three years later, in July 1889, when Edwards is experiencing his third consecutive dry year, nursing an endangered crop, and facing the improbability of being able to meet his mortgage payments. (The year 1889 was, in fact, the third year of the great Midwestern drought.) When moisture finally comes, it comes as it did for John Boyle, in the form of ruinous hail. So emotional and so final is this last act of a mad universe that Edwards suffers a stroke and is forced to accept his defeat as a
farmer. Finally, fate has crippled him physically as well as mentally. He will return to the East, courtesy of his eldest daughter's wealthy fiancé, who has been trying to marry the woman since the Boston days.

Between the Boston segment and the farm segment of the novel is a section devoted to detailing the scam of the Dakota boom land speculators (97-131). Thus, in a single book, Garland has managed to encapsulate much of the Populist propaganda: life is bad in the city for the laborer; life is bad in the country for the farmer; and though the causes of this situation are numerous, the one essential cause, the cause of causes, is an unjust land system and the preying speculators who make their money off desperate families.

Of note, though, is that this bleak, barren country is the drought-stricken Dakota of the late 1880s, not the pleasantly wooded hills of his Wisconsin coolly, nor even the beautiful, green rolling countryside of his boyhood Iowa farm. The lives of the farm people here are desperate not because farm life is intolerable, but because land speculation has forced them a thousand miles beyond where they should have settled, beyond land where natural rainfall is adequate to raise a crop, beyond the regions where small farms allow for close neighbors and society. Speculation has forced them to buy what they should have been given. We do not expect to be given a realistic picture of rural life
here—knowing that Garland is writing propaganda—and we do not get one. There is little doubt, however, that if it would rain and if the economic injustices which crush the farmer and distort his life were righted, the country would be a far better place to live than the city.  

While this often melodramatic exposé on the social evils of the era composes the main thrust of the novel, Garland also manages to create a sub-plot to advance yet another reformist cause, that of the right of women to become financially independent. Edwards' daughter Alice is a promising young singer in Boston who hopes to help elevate her family out of poverty and then support herself. She refuses to marry the man she loves, Walter Reeves, until she has achieved this goal. But, when the family moves west, she goes with them and leaves Reeves behind. Eventually, she will be forced to accept marriage without achieving her goal when Reeves rescues the family after Edwards' stroke.

In penning this unhappy ending to Alice's dream of financial independence before marriage, Garland suggests that here is yet another victim of the financial injustices that have arisen out of the country's economic inequities. Charles Walcutt, who sees in the sub-plot only Alice's struggle with the choice between love and duty, sees the "happy ending" (the family will live well in Reeves' care) as Garland's rejection of the idea that a solution to the Western land problem exists. Further, he maintains that by
writing a pessimistic ending, by allowing the characters to live out the full determinist ending that would seem called for here, Garland "would have demonstrated his eagerness to present the hard facts in all their hardness, so that democracy would know exactly what had to be done." In Walcutt’s view, Garland just gave up (205).

But if, in general, Jason Edwards can be dismissed as a straight piece of Populist propaganda, it is important for the one reason that it does introduce the "modern woman" theme into his work. As Lars Ahnebrink has written, "Through his literary friends in Boston and through his reading of Ibsen, Björnson, and Turgenev, Garland was well aware of the new woman as a character in belles-lettres . . ." (221). Also, the use of such a character was yet another way for Garland to resolve, if only fictionally, his own mother’s yet unresolved problem. Had she an education, had she her own money and the possibility of choosing her own fate, perhaps she would not—and she was still on that plain in Dakota in 1892—be suffering as she was now. Whether or not she was so suffering, that was how the son perceived his mother’s situation. No doubt Garland saw this as the way out of the social trap for all women. It was just such an educated, enlightened, and independent woman who would be a major figure in A Spoil of Office, both as a talented reformer and as "the motivating force" in all the hero’s actions (222).
A Spoil of Office begins in the late 1870s by introducing the reader to Bradley Talcott, an illiterate, rootless farm worker who has drifted into the Rock River countryside. He has driven his farmer employer to a Grange meeting where he hears a woman, Ida Wilbur, make a speech about the primary goal of the Grange, which is to educate and to provide social opportunities for the farm community. Speakers before her have urged the Grangers to drop their policy of not becoming involved in political issues, though this is not a generally popular view. When Ida disagrees with those who would politicize the Grange in her own speech by saying, "The work of the Grange is a social work," she receives "generous applause." Bradley is inspired: "As he listened, something stirred within him, a vast longing, a hopeless ambition, nameless as it was strange" (13).

Bradley goes to the local school and, after much struggle, educates himself and becomes something of a forceful orator himself. He studies law first under a local Rock River attorney, then at the University of Iowa. He returns to Rock River and is soon elected to the Iowa State Legislature. All of this effort is inspired by Ida, who, importantly, has had a change of heart about the mandate of the Grange. She has seen that more must be accomplished than mere education and is now much involved in political reform. Eventually she helps Bradley get elected as a U.S. Congressman, marries him, and soon after accompanying him to
Washington, returns to the Midwest "[b]ecause my people need me" (384).

A Spoil of Office is strident in its attacks on political corruption (from the most local level to the U.S. Congress) and the middlemen townspeople who oppose the reforms that the farmers believe would bring them justice. On the other hand, it presents the farm community positively from the very first Granger scene. These are hard-working folks who need such a social occasion as this as relief from "the life of ceaseless toil" (25). It is in the countryside that one finds trustworthy men who can see and will fight for the truth. In Bradley Talcott they have one of their own, someone they can trust not to fall into the hands of the railroad interests, the corrupt political system, or the equipment manufacturing concerns that are slowly and surely destroying their way of life, someone who has risen from toil and will now struggle on their behalf to right economic and political wrongs. It is clear to them that if enough Talcotts can be elected to congress, "the life of ceaseless toil" would soon become, at least, more remunerative.

Because both Jason Edwards and A Spoil of Office were written as reform novels, we expect propaganda and we get propaganda. Some attempts at realism are made in descriptions of the tenements, of the Grange picnic, of the legislative maneuvering; but even these are marred in that the need to produce propaganda for a movement necessitates
that reality take a back seat to reform. All dramatized situations become exaggerations, rather than realistic portrayals.

The comments of critics indicate that Garland's reform novels, while they fall short of artistic success, are not totally without merit. Walcutt writes, of Jason Edwards, that the book had some ingredients of a successful novel but that "the deterministic forces [which are introduced into the story] are not shown in operation--they are merely discussed--and they have only the most rudimentary relation to the plot" (204). Hofstadter writes that "A Spoil of Office showed how general was the familiarity with state corruption," and labels the book as one of the numerous "'premuckraking' novels" of the time (Reform 186). McCullough, while acknowledging that it is basically a failed novel, calls it "an excellent piece of social history because it provides insights into the dilemmas facing the farmer during the late nineteenth century . . ." (62). Eberhard Alsen acknowledges that Spoil is flawed but defends it by saying that there is more to the book than mere "political propaganda" (xvi). However we might categorize or otherwise critique these books, it is clear that they are only peripherally concerned with life on the agricultural frontier.

Part 4: Balance in Rose of Dutcher's Coolly
and Boy Life on the Prairie

It is reasonable to consider Garland's Rose of Dutcher's Coolly (1895) and Boy Life on the Prairie (1899) as his last two fictional statements on Midwestern rural life. Though Wayside Courtships (1897) was published after Rose, its stories run the gamut from an early and strange description of the death of a woman whose life had been disappointing in "Before the Low Green Door" (first published in 1888), to a psychological study of marital relationship in "The Owner of the Mill Farm" (1893), to a straightforward attack on religious denominationalism in "A Preacher's Love Story" (1895), to a strange story in which two people meet and decide to marry all within a few hours in "Upon Impulse" (1897). Wayside Courtships also contains stories that mark the beginning of his interest in "Far Western local color" (Pizer, Early Works 162).

Rose and Boy Life, on the other hand, are two of Garland's important works. Rose is generally thought of as his best novel, though most concede he never wrote a good one; of Boy Life B.R. McElderry, Jr., has written: "Aside from Main-Travelled Roads, Boy Life is probably the best single book that Garland ever wrote" (Introduction v).

Rose of Dutcher's Coolly, Robert Bray writes, "stands as the last and the best product of his literary association with the Midwest" (338). The novel is in many ways
autobiographical, even though its protagonist is a female. Garland tells the story of a bright and beautiful country child who is somehow different from her peers; this difference leads her away from the country, first, to college in Madison, Wisconsin, and, then, on to Chicago where she gains entrance into society and finally becomes a poet.

The primary focus of the novel centers on Garland’s interest in the emancipation of women, so in that sense *Rose* is a continuation of Garland’s reform writing. And, like his earlier bleak short stories, this novel had a controversial reception. Bray notes that early reviews of the book labeled its frank treatment of "female sexual awareness" immoral, and he suggests that this "frankness of manner . . . anticipated Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and . . . Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*" (339). Interestingly, it also anticipates the theme of the struggling, young female artist seeking culture that will occupy Willa Cather when she creates Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* and the title character in *Lucy Gayheart*, both of whom also travel from rural communities to Chicago in hopes of launching their careers in art, music in their cases.

In fact, there are numerous parallels between Garland’s and Cather’s books and the characters in them; and since Thea is drawn considerably from Cather’s own life (Lee 120-24), it is not surprising that we see much of young Willa in
young Rose. Cleon Hill quotes from an 1893 Garland notebook in which he is developing the character of Rose:

She fed potato bugs to toads and being interested in their tongue held them and pried their mouth open while her companions cried out in horror. She squeezed grasshoppers to see them emit green froth, and work their mandibles. (199)

It will be remembered that Cather had a similar curiosity about such things and that her graduation address concerned the right of students to dissect animals for the sake of knowledge. Just as the young Willa has been called a "curiosity shop," the young Rose nearly drives her father batty with an unending stream of provocative questions (7).

Garland's Rose Dutcher and Cather's Thea Kronborg also share something else, a great love for the beauty of the countryside of their childhood homes. Rose's experiences on her farm and in the rural milieu in general are essential to the creation of Garland's theme. Rose, motherless at age five, will grow up almost completely free of restraint and supervision and live the life of a farm boy rather than a farm girl. She will be "exposed to sights and sounds which the city girl knows nothing of" (18). She becomes adept at farm work and often does a boy's work in the field.

All things tended to make her powerful, lithe, and erect. The naked facts of nature were hers to command. She touched undisguised and unrefined
nature at all points. Her feet met not merely soil, but mud. Her hands smelled of the barn-yard as well of the flowers of the wild places of wood and meadow. (21)

Rose literally tasted life:

[S]he ate sheep-sorrel, Indian tobacco, roots of ferns, Mayapples, rose-leaves, rose-buds, raw turnips, choke-cherries, wild crab-apples, slippery-elm bark, and the green balls on young oak-trees.

She ate pinks and grass blades, and green watermelons, and ground cherries, and blackhaws, and dewberries, and every other conceivable thing in the woods and fields. . . . (16)

She was, in fact, Hamlin Garland, and she lived Hamlin Garland's boy's life. Rose's father, John, speaks for Hamlin when he tells his sister—who has come to live with them and who worries about Rose's unfeminine behavior—to "Let her be, as long as you can. . . . she's happy; don't disturb her; time to wear long dresses and corsets'll come soon enough without hurrying things" (21).

This peculiar pattern of life, for a girl of that time, is central to Garland's thesis as to how a girl should be raised, for it is this young woman who makes a success of her life, eventually capturing the admiration of Chicago's social and artistic communities before becoming an artist.
herself. The rural beginning of this odyssey is key in that it illustrates Garland’s belief that great strength and vitality and natural virtue are obtained by being reared in such an environment. Thus, Rose’s youth on the farm can be best described as blissful. But she is an exceptional child in every way; she is physically beautiful and intellectually superior to those around her, including her father. Like Thea Kronborg (like Garland and Cather themselves), Rose begins eventually to aspire to something beyond the coolly.

Garland carefully documents her growing awareness of the outside world and her developing need to leave the farm in its various stages. When Dutcher’s sister comes to live with them, Rose is at the train station when she arrives. She is frightened by the noise and size of the engine and shrinks back from it as it pulls into the station. "But the thing which had happened was this: Rose had conceived of distance and great cities" (10). Later she becomes attached to a school teacher who, being from the city, is possessed of a "refinement" missing from her other teachers, most of whom were country girls (28). As a teenager she attends a circus and there falls spiritually in love with the head performer, William De Lisle. The physical beauty, the grace and elegance of this man appears to Rose to represent the ideal. He will serve as her inspiration as she aspires to great things, which are vague but forming in her mind. She determines, finally, to be a scholar. Her adoration of De
Lisle is, to Garland, a positive: "This ideal came in her romantic and perfervid period, and it did her immeasurable good. . . . It lifted her and developed her" (52).

Rose begins to realize her goal of becoming a scholar when a former resident of the coolly, now a doctor, returns to his old country schoolhouse to relive memories. Rose speaks to Dr. Thatcher about going to Madison to attend college, and a year later Rose leaves the farm. The returning Dr. Thatcher's reaction to his old stomping ground serves to introduce a new aspect of the theme of rural versus city life. In the schoolroom, Thatcher finds himself "in another world, an old familiar world. His eyes wandered lovingly from point to point of the room. . . . He sat there listening to the recitations in dreamy impassivity. He was far in the land of his youth . . ." (56). We have in this single scene a successful man in the outside world of the city delighting in the reminders of his rural childhood, and an ambitious young woman yearning to leave the farm and to enter into the greater world that lies beyond the coolly. We have Hamlin Garland the mature adult visiting Hamlin Garland the ambitious youth.

But leaving is painful. Thatcher has convinced John Dutcher that Rose is different from the ordinary rural child and that she needs to leave: "What she wants is the larger life that will come to her in Madison" (67). Just before leaving, Rose grows fearful. She realizes that she will
miss her home (she cries over leaving "the bossies and the horses") and her father and the simple, pleasant life they had together (74). But go she must, and her uncertainty about leaving is compounded by two aggressive male mashers on the train ride to Madison. But she is saved, fittingly, by a woman from this evil, and soon "the romance and terror of her entry into the world came back to her, driving out her more morbid emotions. She became again the healthy country girl to whom Madison was a centre of art and society and literature" (81).

When the beautiful, graceful, exceptional country girl arrives at the Madison home of Dr. Thatcher, she suddenly becomes a country bumpkin. She has no clothes, she knows not which fork to use, she is in her own mind "a great country gawk" (87). Garland's message, simple and clumsily presented as it is, is that while the country life is responsible for the exceptional being that Rose is, that life has not prepared her for a painless transition into the more refined life of Madison. Eventually, she will make the even more difficult transition into the cultured class of Chicago. Fortunately for Rose, her transition will be aided by the fact that her country bumpkin father is "fairly well-to-do" (88).

Importantly, Garland is taking his "country gawk" not into the normal life of the city, but to, eventually, the brink of its very highest social categories. If Garland
himself was anything, he was an unabashed social climber. In 1893 when Rose was already on his mind, Garland visited, on behalf of Arena magazine, Louis R. Ehrich of Colorado Springs. Ehrich, "a member of a well-known merchant firm in New York City" (RM 183), invited Garland to stay at his home.

In accepting this gracious hospitality I had my first taste of luxury. Mrs. Ehrich gave me a spacious room which looked out over the Garden of the Gods toward the snowy crest of Pike's Peak. Never had I occupied such a room with such an outlook. (182)

Garland thoroughly enjoyed his time with this wealthy, educated family, and he greatly admired Mr. Ehrich: "He made me feel, as never before, the civilizing power of money" (183).

If Garland could foresee himself rising from the Wisconsin coolly into the monied and cultured classes—and he eventually did become friends with America's literary and political elite—why not the magnificent Rose? Even if the ordinary country girl who migrated to Chicago worked in a sweat shop or as a maid, why should its exceptional creature not become the toast of the town's cultural elite? Those exceptions, those with intellectual and artistic powers, those with driving ambition like Rose Dutcher and Thea Kronborg—like Hamlin Garland and Willa Cather—can achieve
success in the great cities. The real city of 1893, as Garland knew all too well (and had documented in Jason Edwards and elsewhere), was a place of widespread poverty and filth and noise and social turmoil. It was an ugly place where ordinary citizens do not attend the theater or the opera; nor do they visit art galleries or attend the finest schools (or even have access to libraries, as Hamlin knew from his own Boston experience). If one must choose between the real city and the coolly, the choice is simple. The exceptional country creature, therefore, must simply skip the squalid and vault directly from the haymow into the box seats, with a little painful transition along the way.¹⁹

But the love of the country in both the fictional and the real aspirants never wanes. The country is somehow, as Garland illustrates in his creation of Rose, responsible for the exceptional fineness of such individuals. So it is that when Rose returns to the coolly after her first year at college, she revels in becoming reacquainted with its genuine people and its unique freedoms.

She felt like kissing all the dear old ladies in the coolly. Oh, the old friends were the best after all! . . . They didn't care how you ate soup. They didn't keep you keyed up to company manners all the time.
She went back to her old dresses and cotton underwear, and went dirty as she liked, and got brown and iron-muscled again. (100)

But in the fall Rose is ready to go back to college. She has enjoyed the taste of the finer life she now knows there. After graduating, she returns to the coolly, but finds it impossible to stay, even though her father has built a new house for them. While she loves the countryside and its freedom, farm life is now too limiting for her. John Dutcher understands what he has done: "[H]e had educated his daughter out of his world" (152).

Near the end of the novel, after Rose has gone to Chicago and begun to establish herself socially and has fallen in love, she comes to realize that she must choose between a life of leisure on her father's farm or a life of marriage to a newspaper editor/novelist in Chicago. While in the city, she often tires of "the noise of grinding wheels, and screams and yells"; on certain days "the home longing was upon her and . . . it seemed that the city would be her death" (294). When she returns to the coolly to visit and to consider her future, "Some mysterious charm seemed imparted to everything she saw" (325), and she finds repose in the quiet beauty of her rural home. "How arid and artificial the city seemed in the freshness of green fields" (326). Yet the lure of her beau and the city remain.
By force of contrast she thought of Mason and his life in the city. The roar of traffic; the thunder of great presses; the nights at the opera or the theater, all had enormous significance and value to her, but how remote it all was! In the country the city seemed impossible; in the city the country seemed impossible. (327)

She resents having to choose between the two: "Life's problem was not without solution if she could enjoy--both city and country alike" (327). This would seem to be precisely Garland's personal view.

Mason proposes in a letter and comes to visit Rose and her father in the coolly, where he is smitten by the countryside: "Every shadow [of the woods] seemed to wash away some stain or scar of the city's strife. He grew younger" (349). Again, for Garland, nature has healing powers. Here, finally, Mason hears Rose's country-inspired poetry and announces to her that she has found her poetic subject and voice in the country. They decide, however, to marry and live in Chicago; but as Rose has previously told her father, they will come visit him in the summers. And it is apparent that it is there, in the coolly, where Rose must replenish her poetic materials.

In Rose of Dutcher's Cooly, Garland's country-city dichotomy finds its fullest and most balanced expression. The countryside offers peace, beauty, the solace of nature;
it is the healthier, saner place to grow up; it is a balm for the city-weary soul; but it cannot hold the exceptional country child who may need greater artistic and intellectual stimulation than can be offered by a beautiful--but quiet and even dull--farm in the coolly. But though one can leave the farm behind, it will forever maintain its hold on the child of the country, as it did on Rose and, quite obviously, on Garland himself.\textsuperscript{20}

A few years after the publication of \textit{Rose}, Garland published \textit{Boy Life on the Prairie} (1899), which was to be his last important statement on Middle Border life until he recounted it again eighteen years later in \textit{A Son of the Middle Border} (1917). As mentioned, \textit{Boy Life} the book grew out of the 1887-1888 "Boy Life" magazine articles, though the articles account for only about one-third of the material in the book version. If anything, the attitude toward the pioneer experience as related in the book is slightly more negative than it is in the earlier articles. No doubt Garland’s experiences in the intervening eleven years would account for some difference in tone. In the book, the narrator relates a fictionalized version of the earlier articles and adds much new material. Lincoln Stewart, a thinly disguised Hamlin Garland, is the protagonist;\textsuperscript{21} and through Lincoln’s experiences, as Garland wrote in the Preface, the author hopes to help his
reader "relive with me the splendid days of the unbroken prairie lands of northern Iowa" (xx).

Chapter XVI, "The Corn Husking," corresponds to the first article in the series, "The Huskin'." If anything, the book version is more negative in relating the Thanksgiving day husking episode, for Lincoln is a younger boy, eleven, in the book version (the narrator would seem to be describing the experience of, perhaps, a teenager in the magazine article). Young Lincoln is forced to pick up the "down rows" after the horses and wagons have passed over them, a cold work (here performed in darkness) and one which isolates him somewhat from those ahead. But at the end of the chapter, the same energy that is felt in the article prevails here, too, as the workers near completion amid the blowing snow; the same sense of victory over the elements thrills them as they triumph; and the same sense of warmth and security inside their home comforts them after completion of their heroic task (225-26).

Chapter XIV, "The Old-Fashioned Threshing," corresponds quite closely to the second article, "The Thrashin'." And again, the tone of the book version is somewhat harsher than the earlier article, primarily because in the book, Lincoln is older and forced to take the place of a man in the effort. It is here that Garland departs somewhat from his own experience because this threshing episode occurs in the coolly, which Garland had left at age eight. Thus, the
magazine version is closer to what Garland actually experienced, though the book version may well present the hard work involved in threshing for the adults more accurately. Yet the book version ends with a similar song to the beauty and pleasures of the threshing season:

Oh, those rare days and rarer nights! How fine they were then—and how mellow they are growing now as the slow-paced years drop a golden mist upon them. From this distance they seemed too hearty and wholesome and care free to be lost out of the world. (209)

This enthusiastic and nostalgic tone predominates also in Chapter V, "The Coming of Spring," which corresponds to the third magazine article, "The Voice of Spring." The same constant mingling of work and play is incorporated into each version; often work is pleasurable, as in this passage from the book.

Boys always insist upon having entertainment even in their work, and Lincoln found amusement in planning a new ditch and in seeing it remove the puddle before the barn door. There was a certain pleasure, also, in piling wood neatly and rapidly, and in watching the deft and powerful swing of the shining axes, as they lifted and fell, and rose again in the hands of strong men. (49)
Work on a family farm is as natural, as necessary, and as constant as breathing. As McElderry writes in his introduction to the 1961 reissuance of Boy Life, "Taken by itself, boy life on the prairie was not a bad experience, and there was a wholeness about it" (xvi).

The fourth magazine article, "Between Hay an' Grass," includes incidents that were related in four chapters of the book,24 and the differences in tone between the versions are slight. In the book, for example, Lincoln finds the poisoning of gophers "repulsive and terrible" (89) while in the article, it is just mentioned as one of the methods of killing the pests.

"The Wild Meadows.--Haying Time" from Boy Life corresponds with the article "Meadow Memories." In one sentence in the book, concerning old men, Garland strikes a tone reminiscent of the bleaker stories of his earlier "angry fiction" period.

At this time the summer was at its most exuberant stage of vitality, and it was not strange that even the faculties of toiling old men, dulled and deadened with never ending drudgery, caught something of exultation from the superabundant glow and throb of Nature's life. (105)

"Never ending drudgery" became almost an anthem in the stories of the late 1880s and early 1890s. Here, of course, the old men do enjoy the experience, but Garland is
reminding us that times have been hard. Twelve years before in 1887, when the long drought and depression were not yet a reality (1887 was the first dry year), Garland had written a different account in "Meadow Memories": "in the West, the old men are comparatively few and take less share in the hard labor" (298).

His own parents' hardships, the ten years of drought, the financial crash of 1893, his own reformist zeal and work for the Populist cause, must be expected to leave some residue, even in this dramatically positive recollection of his youth. The first section of this chapter ends with this description of Lincoln riding through a glorious countryside of wild flowers on his way to relieve his brother who is herding the cattle: "The boy's heart swells with the unutterable joy of life. The world is exaltingly beautiful. It is good to be alone--good to be a boy and to be mounted on a swift horse" (114).

The final magazine article, "Melons and Early Frost," is recounted in "Lincoln's First Stack," Chapter XIII of Boy Life. Both remark on how a boy naturally wants to do everything, but nothing for a long time ("Boy Life" 712; Boy Life 181); both comment on the pride taken in good work and in the display of skill ("Boy Life" 713; Boy Life 190). But, while the article presents the building of the grain stack in general terms, in the book, Lincoln, on the verge of manhood, must replace his injured father on the stack.
We are given a rite-of-passage story in which Lincoln struggles but is finally successful in proving that he can build a stack like a man. This is a highly positive presentation of the satisfaction one can get from hard work. It is particularly reminiscent of a scene in "A Branch Road" where the young protagonist takes his place among the men:

> Will was very happy in a quiet way. He enjoyed the smooth roll of his great muscles, and the sense of power in his hands as he lifted, turned and swung the heavy sheaves two by two upon the table, where the band-cutter madly slashed away. (M-TR 14)

This belief in the satisfaction, even heroism, of manual labor is expressed in his earliest sketches of 1887 and 1888, in his "angry fiction" of 1891, and in his last major recollection of farm life in Boy Life in 1899.

The two-thirds of Boy Life which was not based on the early sketches does not depart in any significant way—in terms of attitude toward rural life—from the one-third that was a rewriting of that earlier work. In essence, it continues to be a recollection of "the hardships and pleasures of country life" (McElderry v), though less emphasis is placed on work and more on play in this additional material. It is clear that Garland thought of his youth on the farm positively: "It remains to say that I wrote this book while still a young man. It is therefore
not an old man's dream of the past; it is the recorded recollection of a writer thirty years of age" (427).

Curiously, the two renditions of boy life bracket that fiction which expressed, in varying degrees, a more negative view of rural existence in *Main-Travelled Roads, Prairie Folks, Jason Edwards,* and *A Spoil of Office.* But after consideration of the many factors which seem to have informed his reformist and negative presentations of rural life, it becomes exceedingly obvious that, considering the continuity between the early and late recollections of boy life, we must trust as most honest Garland's first and last attempts to describe that life. And we must certainly, and completely, disregard the assumptions of legions of critics who have assumed that it was Garland's hatred of that life that spawned his supposedly negative portrayals of it.

Together, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* and *Boy Life on the Prairie* would seem to encapsulate Garland's honest, most supportable view of pioneer existence. It is a life of great freedoms and magnificent, almost inexpressible pleasures; it is a life of hard work and occasional loneliness. It provides for a child the best possible environment and circumstances in which to spend his or her youth; it provides limited opportunities for exposure to culture. Its people are genuine and heroic, the very backbone of the country; its people in some ways live
simple, unstimulating, unintellectual lives. This could be interpreted as an ambivalence toward farm life or as a realistic portrayal of a life that was, in fact, in the sense of the hard pastoral, both grand and limited.

Garland never quite got it straight himself. In *Crumbling Idols* (1894) he explains that Western literature, that local color--his and that which will follow during the then coming revolution in American literature--"will deal, I believe, with the wholesome love of honest men for honest women, with the heroism of labor, the comradeship of men . . . ." (25). More than twenty years later as he recalled his dedication to telling the truth about Western life in *A Son of the Middle Border*, he writes: "[A]ll the unpleasant results of severe physical labor I noted down, but with no intention of exalting toil into a wholesome and regenerative thing as Tolstoi . . . had attempted to do" (371). With Garland, the critic must check the pulse: if it is running fast, in the remembered heat of a reformer’s zeal, farm life and work will be hellish; if it is running slow, in the contemplation of literary history, that same life and work will be heroic.

But even in the middle of the fight, when he was campaigning for the Populists in 1892, Hamlin could not shake the hold the Iowa countryside had on him.

It was delightful autumn weather, and in central Iowa the crops were fairly abundant. On every
hand fields of corn covered the gentle hills like wide rugs of lavender velvet, and the odor of melons and ripening leaves filled the air. Nature's songs of cheer and abundance (uttered by innumerable insects) set forth the monstrous injustice of man's law by way of contrast. Why should children cry for food in our cities whilst fruits rotted on the vines and wheat had no value to the harvester? (SMB 427)

Hamlin loved his farm country deeply, but as a dedicated reformer he would manipulate his presentation of that environment to suit his needs. In the above passage, it serves his need to express the beauty and abundance of Iowa (as well as the misuse of that abundance); in "Sim Burns's Wife," he would describe part of the Burnses' homestead as follows: "A few broken and discouraged fruit trees standing here and there among the weeds formed the garden" (PF 109). As Roy Meyer has written, "The writing of propaganda seems to have come naturally to Garland . . ." (666).
Notes

1. How many of these sketches, which became the "Boy Life" magazine pieces, that Garland had with him at this time and at what stage of completion they were is difficult to decipher. The determination, however, is important, as it helps establish the fact that he was writing pleasant reminiscences at the same time that he was writing reform stories. It seems clear that Pizer must be mistaken if he assumes that Garland started them in the fall of 1887 because, as Garland mentions in *A Son of the Middle Border* (354), Kirkland read "some" of his western sketches in early July 1887. Perhaps Pizer means to imply that he began to prepare the drafts of the early sketches for publication and to write additional ones at that time. In another recollection of Garland's meeting with Kirkland recorded in *Roadside Meetings*, Garland mentions talking to Kirkland about corn-husking and wheat harvests as subjects of the sketches at hand. As these were the subjects of the first two printed articles, it is possible that he had begun work only on these two. Garland's own account of "my first writing of any significance" merely adds to the confusion. He explains that he was moved to write the corn-husking piece by hearing the sound of "a man shoveling coal in the alley" (SMB 351). But he records this event before his 1887 trip to the Midwest, which, considering other evidence,
seems impossible. But his statement that the acceptance of the first piece led him to fall "to work at once upon other articles" would indicate that he wrote the remaining articles in late 1887 and early 1888, since the first piece was printed in January 1888 (352). Garland is often wrong about dates in his autobiographical works. For instance, he made a second trip back to Iowa in 1888, though he records it as an 1889 journey; it was during this visit that his mother suffered a stroke.

2. As Pizer and others have noted, Garland was at this time writing and attempting to publish stories and articles based "on his warm recollection of the West of his boyhood and young manhood" (Early Work 54). Among these works are the "Boy Life" articles; several short stories, including "Daddy Deering," "An Evening at the Corner Grocery Story," "Uncle Ripley's Speculation," and "A Division in the Coule"; and a novelette, "Ol' Pap Flaxen" (54-57, 67). This suggests, of course, that his devotion to telling the hard truth about the Midwest was less than total and that his interest in making money was a compelling one. Jane Johnson notes that Garland had a specific interest in becoming a financial success: "[F]or him personal integrity and financial success were not incompatible" (xi). Garland himself believed veritism would pay: "Everywhere the value of truth increases, not only from the literary side of the stage, but
from its commercial side" (Crumbling Idols 77). But Pizer notes that Garland became worried about the lack of success of his reform novels and that he soon attributed the poor sales to the books' dreary reform themes, so that by late 1892, he was ready to give up politics in his fiction (Early Work 110-11). Pizer also notes that in 1888 and 1889 Garland was willing to revise or tone down polemic works or have them edited if that helped them gain acceptance by more main-stream publications. But in 1890, Garland discovered Arena; it paid him well for his blunter reform work (66-68).

3. Pizer notes that "'A Common Case' was probably written in the spring of 1888" and that "'John Boyle's Conclusion' was conceived by Garland during his visit to the West in the summer of 1888 and was written immediately upon his return to Boston" (Early Work 50-51). The last of the "Boy Life" sketches was not published until October 1888.

4. To the extent that Spencer's philosophy of progress and evolution encouraged the development of a national literature, his influence would be seen in all Garland's local color work. Garland had interpreted Spencer's call for a literature that described the state of a nation as a sound basis of support for the writing of local color. But in these articles neither Spencer's general evolutionary thesis nor George's land reform program surfaces.

5. Though Crumbling Idols was not published until 1894,
Garland had coined the term "veritism" as early as 1890 (Pizer, *Early Work* 124). For a definition of "veritism," see note 10 on page 98.

6. Since Garland's story is contained within Pizer's article, I use the citation (Pizer, "John Boyle") to indicate that I am citing Pizer's introduction to the story. Here, I am citing from Garland's story itself and, thus, use the citation ("John Boyle").

7. Garland notes that "[d]uring the years '79 and '80 . . . a series of crop failures" occurred (SMB 228) and that "[f]or two years the crop had been almost wholly destroyed by chinch bugs" (229), but he mentions only 1880 specifically as one of those chinch-bug years. These infestations of pests were a main reason Richard Garland moved on to Dakota in 1881; Hamlin headed east when his parents moved west.

8. In the Allings, we meet the forerunners of Garland's other young couples who will provide answers to the pioneer's problem—Douglass Radbourn and Lily Graham in "Sim Burns's Wife," and Bradley Talcott and Ida Wilbur in *A Spoil of Office*.

9. Grasshoppers were a constant problem in the plains states, and they, and the chinch bugs, were particularly prevalent in the dry years. Mildred Bennett writes that they ate everything of a vegetable base and that the
Nebraska legislature once passed a "grasshopper act" that required "all able-bodied men between sixteen and sixty . . . to kill grasshoppers" (WWC 106).

10. Chapter XXXII of *A Son of the Middle Border*, titled "The Spirit of Revolt" (421-32) provides an account of Garland's campaigning. "I took part in meetings of rebellious farmers in bare-walled Kansas school-houses, and watched protesting processions of weather-worn Nebraska Populists . . ." (423). It was to become a nearly three-year obsession.

11. As Carpenter explains, in this story the Single-Tax theory (personified by lawyer Radbourn) and True Womanhood (personified by teacher Graham) combine to show how Sim and Lucretia could be saved. Carpenter contends that Garland would have all women become Lilys and that he believed the Single-Tax reform would allow this to happen, would cause it, in fact (86).

12. Garland explains the view of women that he acquired in youth: "That man, the stronger animal, owed chivalry and care to woman, had been deeply grounded in our concept of life . . ." (SMB 175). Other male critics have echoed Garland's sentiments and agreed with his presentation of female pioneers as suffering saints. Walter Webb writes, "Imagine a sensitive woman set down on an arid plain to live in a dugout or a pole pen with a dirt floor, without furniture, music, or pictures, with the bare necessities of
life!" (506). Female critics object. Annette Atkins writes that the stereotypical presentations of pioneers feature adventurous men and frightened and suffering women. The truth is, she asserts, that life on the frontier "presented immense trials, backbreaking work, some loneliness, and some good times" for both sexes (8). Carol Fairbanks says that Garland "fails . . . to contemplate the satisfactions felt by women who sat around the quilt, talking and sewing," and, further, that he failed to fully investigate female life on the frontier (13). Historian Patricia Limerick's analysis of female pioneers supports these critics' contentions that Garland had a shallow understanding of such women; and she demonstrates that pioneer women were generally full partners in the pioneer venture, that these women, many of whom bore children during migration, were as hearty as their male counterparts: "Frailty did not afflict women to the exclusion of men" (52); and further, "In the record of their words and actions, the women of Western history have made a clear statement that they do not deserve or need special handling by historians" (54).

13. For other similar reductionist characterizations, refer to the critics' comments on pages 101 through 110.

14. In addition to the drought, the isolation of the pioneer is seen as a primary negative about farm life; and Alice and her sister do complain about this isolation. But it was part of Henry George's (and thus Garland's) theory that land
speculation artificially created these isolated conditions. If no one was allowed to hold land for speculation, then farmers would homestead side-by-side, resulting in more densely populated farm communities. For example, if all homesteads were composed of 160 acres, and an average of four people populated each homestead (generally, families were much larger), an individual on such a homestead could have within one and a half miles of his own home some thirty-five other homes and some 140 other people. Likely, he would have other homestead families directly across the road from his own. But holding land for speculation forced homesteaders well beyond the settled farms of an area and resulted in an artificially created, unnecessary, and destructive isolation.

15. Also at work here in Garland's design of Rose's development are the evolutionary theories of Herbert Spencer. Garland writes, "Germs of latent perception appeared to spring up like a conjuror's magic seed, here a kernel, there a tree" (20); and "Knowledge comes to the child . . . developing out of the child's organic self precisely as the flower [Rose?] blooms" (21). From the very beginning of the book, Garland tells us that if a child is allowed to grow up naturally and without the hackles of superstition and religion, if she is allowed to experience life first-hand and develop her own natural reactions to ideas and events, innate human nature will guide the child.
properly. "It was evidence of the girl's innate strength and purity of soul that the long succession of hired hands had not poisoned her mind" (8). Nature's child spurns evil. The institutions of man impede the progress, the evolution, of the human mind toward the higher state it would achieve if not so impeded. The accidental *laissez faire* rearing of Rose has resulted in such a human being.

16. In 1893 Garland accomplished a long-time goal to restore his parents to their home in West Salem, Wisconsin, not far from the coolly where Garland had spent his first eight years (SMB 444). This act was to relieve him of the guilt he felt for not having earlier saved his mother from what he saw as her miserable life on the Dakota prairie; it was this guilt that informed "Up the Coolly" and other stories. It is not hard to see in Dr. Thatcher Garland himself, nor is it difficult to understand why he would make this pleasant remembrance a part of a novel he was writing at that very time.

17. One wonders what happened to the apparent requirement that farmers live in abject poverty. When Garland first began work on this book, the Populists were hard at work, the farmers still suffering from drought conditions and financial ruin. Even when it was published in 1895, the struggle continued; Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech was a year away. It is apparent, though, that without money to
back Rose during her years in Madison and Boston, this would have to have been a different story. Garland has drifted considerably from his reform stance in this portrait of rural America, even though improved conditions for farmers would not come for a few years.

18. Bray writes that Garland took nearly five years in writing the book: "There was a long period of gestation, from a notebook source as early as 1890 to the finished manuscript in 1895 . . . ." (338).

19. Walcutt claims that herein lies the weakness of the last two-thirds of the book. He contends that Garland does not really investigate "the effect of the sordid elements of city life on an unspoiled country girl" (205).

20. It is curious and perhaps significant, in this late work in his Midwest fiction, that Garland does not try to bring culture to the country. This had been one of his great laments about rural life, that it was barren of art, literature, the theater. What perhaps is apparent to the reader all along--that it is an impossibility to bring the museum to the barnyard--seems finally to have struck Garland.

21. In an introduction written for a 1926 school text edition of Boy Life (included at the end of the text I am using), Garland has written: "You may, if you wish, substitute . . . Hamlin for 'Lincoln' . . . ." (426).
22. Lincoln's age is not consistent from one chapter to the next. Here, in Chapter XIV, he is about fourteen; he is only eleven in Chapter XVI (discussed first because it corresponds to the first "Boy Life" article).

23. It cannot go without notice that when Garland writes about rural life in such pleasant strains, he is without exception, according to the general run of commentators, writing in a romantic or nostalgic tone. In other words, he is not telling the real truth. When, on the other hand, he writes of gnarled knuckles and humped backs and hail storms, he is writing realism and, it is almost unanimously insisted, telling the cold, hard truth about rural life.

Chapter VI: The Stages of Cather's Prairie Representations

In a 1982 article Bernice Slote writes, "Willa Cather has been fairly well studied as a novelist of the Nebraska pioneer, a writer whose books have a lyric nostalgia for other times that were nicer than ours. This may be an oversimplification" ("Exploration" 210). It is my contention that Slote is correct and that many critics, as discussed in Chapter IV, have come to see the nostalgic Cather as the only Cather. Slote explains this problem in greater detail--perhaps, even, providing grounds for it--by writing that we "have handicapped ourselves by fashionable judgments, by critical assumptions made, held, and never reexamined; by our own ignorance of the nineteenth-century milieu in which Cather developed . . ." (211). It is, of course, central to my thesis that the physical, social, and political climates of the late nineteenth-century are inadequately considered in much Cather and Garland criticism and that ignorance of same has led to a miscasting of both writers. Another central contention of this study is that critics have indeed, in the majority, adopted the "critical assumptions" of a few scholars and "never reexamined" them.

Loretta Wasserman, in her 1991 study of Cather's short fiction, comments on some of these "fashionable judgments" when discussing how Cather's reputation varied during the
first half of this century. At first, she writes, Cather's work was thought of as

a retrograde art [that] changes colors through several decades: first she was seen as a regionalist of the Hamlin Garland variety, a categorization Cather always found irksome; then, for a time in the thirties, when the proletarian novel was the standard, she was dismissed as a prettifier of life; that view shifted in the fifties toward toleration for her elegiac pictures of the pioneer past. (9)

Currently, Cather is being investigated as an early modernist, according to Wasserman (10), as attempts to place Cather in a particular critical camp continue.

Sheryl L. Meyering, in her 1994 guide to Cather's short fiction, also writes that critics seem devoted to categorizing Cather. While early critics, for example, labeled her as "a part of the much despised genteel tradition" or "merely a regional writer," more recently she has been championed by feminists and has become "a 'woman writer'--in the minds of many, even a 'lesbian writer'" (xiii). She laments that "[s]ince Cather was first described as a lesbian writer in the 1970s, the question of her sexuality and its influence on her fiction has become the focus of almost all Cather criticism" (xiv). I address one such example--concerning an important, but errant,
feminist interpretation of O Pioneers!--later in this chapter.

To Meyering, any narrow focus in Cather criticism is "unfairly limiting"; and this limiting results, in part, from failing to look at the entire Cather oeuvre, specifically from failing to consider her numerous short stories. The result has been an "odd imbalance in Cather criticism" (xiii). Even when the short stories are considered, she notes, only a few attract attention: "Paul's Case," "Neighbor Rosicky," and "The Sculptor's Funeral," get most of the ink, with "Old Mrs. Harris" gaining more attention recently. This willingness to ignore the other fifty-seven short stories discussed in Meyering's book is a failure of the many, as she explains:

It is not just students whose experience of Cather is limited by this narrow range of selections; most critics of American literature have the same limited view of Cather's work because the vast majority of critical comment is directed at these same few popular stories. (xiv)

Writing three years earlier than Meyering, Wasserman notes that only "Paul's Case" shows up "sporadically" in story collections and that most literature texts include this story and "Neighbor Rosicky" only (3).

While seven or eight of Cather's twelve novels continue to attract significant critical attention, a mere handful of
her more than sixty short stories are the focus of general interest among critics. As particularly concerns my discussion, while the Cather novels which have attracted the greatest readership and critical commentary—O Pioneers! and My Ántonia—detail life on the agricultural frontier, of the four or five short stories Meyering and Wasserman identify as most often anthologized or analyzed, only one, "Neighbor Rosicky," concerns a farm experience. I heartily agree with both Meyering and Wasserman who contend that many nearly completely unknown Cather stories are equal to or even greater in quality than the few widely known stories and that this lack of familiarity with the entire body of Cather's work has contributed to the tendency of critics to ignore the scope and breadth of her work, to unfairly limit the broad stroke of her art.

The limited critical selection, the emphasis on Cather's "lyric nostalgia" for "the Nebraska pioneer," the "odd imbalance in Cather criticism" are all matters central to my argument. All are involved in the creation of a predominant critical attitude, and a false one at that, towards Cather's representation of life on the Divide. As noted in Chapter IV, some critics do acknowledge that Cather was more than the singer of psalms to the prairie; but the general perception even among critics of her writings about Nebraska—as Slote, Wasserman, and Meyering argue—remains the idyllic one: Cather is "a prettifier of life," a writer
of "elegiac pictures of the pioneer past." In this chapter, each of her works concerning the agricultural frontier will be discussed at some length, the purpose being to include the traditionally omitted and to reexamine the general critical perception.

I have chosen to organize this chapter chronologically, dividing Cather's farm writings into four stages which I believe represent identifiably different attitudes toward the West and the pioneer experience. The first stage of this gradual evolution of attitude consists of four pre-1900 farm stories which are distinctly naturalistic in tone. A second phase of development is represented by the short stories written from 1900 through 1912. During this time in her life, which was spent in Eastern cities, Cather would question the validity of Western material as subject matter for literature and would find herself, generally, vacillating between her attachments to the cultured world of the East and the free, rugged world of the West. Both of these concerns find expression in her second-phase Western stories.

The third stage, during which she wrote her three novels of the prairie--*O Pioneers!*,* My Ántonia,* and *One of Ours*--extends from 1913 through 1922. In the first two novels, Cather wholly embraces farm life; in *One of Ours*, she demonstrates an unhappiness with the materialism that had infected that life. After this last farm novel, Cather
generally abandoned farm fiction. Her remaining two stories about agricultural life—"Neighbor Rosicky," written in 1928 and first published in 1930, and "The Best Years," her very last story, written in 1945 and published posthumously in 1948—constitute her final statements on the subject and, thus, the fourth and final stage.

Part 1: Early Naturalistic Stories

Perhaps fittingly, Cather's very first published story—written when she was eighteen—concerned the life of an immigrant on the Nebraska prairie. "Peter" was published in *The Mahogany Tree* in May 1892 and in the *Hesperian*, the University of Nebraska magazine, in November of that year. "Peter" is properly grouped with two other early stories which concern immigrant pioneers or their offspring which were also published in the *Hesperian*: "Lou, the Prophet" (1892) and "The Clemency of the Court" (1893). A fourth story, "On the Divide" (1896), was published in the *Overland Monthly*, and, though written a few years later, it too concerns the life of an immigrant farmer.

The stories are related in another way; in each the life of the protagonist is tragic. These early works come as close to anything Cather wrote to being naturalistic in viewpoint, as the central character in each lacks any control over his situation and—with the exception of Canute
in "Divide," who considers but rejects suicide--each finds an early destruction to be his fate.

The first three stories, though they betray the symptoms of an amateur's first efforts, are important to a complete comprehension of Cather's agricultural fiction. Several specific situations, themes, and characters which recur in later works are first treated in these early stories. In "Peter," for example, the title character is a despondent immigrant unsuited to life on America's Great Plains. His unhappiness leads to suicide, an act which anticipates the suicide of Mr. Shimerda in *My Ántonia*. Both are Bohemian immigrants, both are violinists with a taste for culture, both--after a short, unhappy time in the New World--shoot themselves in the mouth with a shotgun. Also, Peter's son Antone serves as a type for Mr. Shimerda's son Ambrosch. Of interest as well is the fact that we are not given any sense of hope in this naturalistic 1892 story as we are, through the character of Ántonia, in the 1918 novel. The differences in tone between the two works may well be explained, at least partially, by the fact that in 1892 the Midwest was suffering under the extended drought, resulting in great financial hardship; by 1918, the Midwest was thriving during the golden age of agriculture.

"Lou, the Prophet," a story in which a demented immigrant fails at establishing his homestead, represents Cather's first attempt to use the land and the historical
time as central factors in her fiction. It is the hard
winter of 1886-1887 and the drought of 1887 that force Lou
to insanity; here the intractibility of the land and the
weather prove to be central, if undeveloped, factors in the
action. Though the use of the land as a "character" is much
more developed in later works like *O Pioneers!* and *My
Ántonia*, the land still serves at times in these novels, as
it does in "Lou," as the enemy of humanity before
eventually--and finally--functioning as its friend. As
Cather was to write about frontier Nebraska early in *O
Pioneers!*, "[T]he great fact was the land itself, which
seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society
that struggled in its sombre wastes" (144). This is the
land as both antagonist and a source of dark, mysterious
power. This is the land as Peter and Lou knew it. But by
the end of *O Pioneers!* and practically throughout *My
Ántonia*, the land becomes the great positive fact in the
lives of Alexandra and Ántonia.

As Peter was to be a precursor of Mr. Shimerda, so Lou
was to serve as something of a type for Crazy Ivar in *O
Pioneers!* Ironically, while Lou is driven insane and, we
assume, destroyed by the land, Ivar's very "insanity" is
attributed to him largely because he is the odd-ball
defender of nature. He is the champion of its wildness and
of the wildlife that lives on it. This "crazy" man becomes,
in conjunction with Alexandra, the symbol of a right relationship to the land.

"The Clemency of the Court" concerns the life of the orphaned son of a Russian immigrant. Serge eventually meets his death at the hands of the State in which, ironically, he has come to put great faith. The story is important because, for the first time, we see in Cather's work a rendering of the landscape which is suggestive of its power, beauty, and spirituality, an attitude which will become prominent in Cather's works throughout her career, including major stories like "Eric Hermannson's Soul" (1900) and "Neighbor Rosicky" (1930) and her trilogy of great prairie novels written from 1913 through 1922. As Serge is dying, his thoughts are of the landscape:

He thought how lovely the plains would look in the morning when the sun was up; how the sunflowers would shake themselves in the wind, how the corn leaves would shine and how the cobwebs would sparkle over the grass and the air would be clear and blue, the birds would begin to sing, the colts would run and jump in the pasture and the black bull would begin to bellow for his corn. (521-22)

Twenty years later Cather would write of her ultimate prairie heroine, Alexandra, gazing at the land with a similar "love and yearning" (OP 170).
"Clemency" is also of interest because in it Cather employs a reform theme, and reform as a theme in literature is something that supposedly did not interest her—as the author herself and her biographers and critics have often maintained.\footnote{The story was based on an 1893 incident in the Lincoln penitentiary which resulted in the death of a prisoner (Bohlke 138-39). But, the mood was right in 1893 for works of protest; Cather lived in a hotbed of agrarian revolt at the time and probably had heard the debates over those issues in William Jennings Bryan's own study in his Lincoln, Nebraska, home (Woodress 101). It is clear, too, that she was familiar with the works of the most prominent of Midwestern protest writers, Hamlin Garland.}

Together these three early stories point to the early development of other important elements of Cather's later fiction. For example, all three victims are immigrants, thus presaging the prominence immigrants would have in her later farm fiction. Also, each protagonist is particularly unfit to survive in the world in which he finds himself. Many of Cather's later stories and novels are also concerned with the placement of an individual into an environment for which he or she is totally unsuited. It is a juxtapositioning that recurs in "Tommy, the Unsentimental" (1896), in which an Eastern dandy is thrust into a prairie town; "The Sculptor's Funeral" (1905), in which the incompatibility of artistic temperament and a small prairie
community is delineated; and, of course, *My Ántonia*, in which another Bohemian resolves his own dilemma with suicide. Some are fit for this life; some are not. Alexandra in *O Pioneers!* thrives; her best friend, Carl Linstrum, and his family abandon the prairie for the security of the city. This interest in characters out of place will occupy Cather in many later stories and novels.²

The isolation of characters further ties these early stories together. Peter is forced to leave behind his world of music and friends for the desolate prairie; Lou struggles to make a living so that he might obtain a wife to ease his loneliness; Serge grows up essentially as an animal, so cut off from human society that he comes to value the life of his dog over that of his human employer.

Physical isolation is a central cause of Mr. Shimerda's suicide in *My Ántonia*, and certainly the descriptions of the desolate landscape in the early sections of *O Pioneers!* and Jim Burden's arrival on the frontier in *My Ántonia* also accentuate the sense of mankind being lost on a lonely expanse. But, generally, Cather's later works would be more concerned with cultural than physical isolation. Particularly in her works about artists, such as "A Death in the Desert" and *The Song of the Lark*, the frontier is seen as an environment incompatible with artistic aspiration.

The attitude toward rural life manifested in these first three naturalistic farm stories is mixed. The land
plays little part in "Peter"; the barren landscape serves only to accentuate the contrast between Peter's present barren world and the richness of the Old World that he longs for. In "Lou" the harsh physical facts of a prairie existence are more integral to the story, but Cather still keeps the reader at a distance from that life. We do not experience the work, the drought, the winter; we are only told of them. In "Clemency" the land is shown as sometimes brutal and essentially indifferent to man, but it is, as noted, still a source of beauty and solace to Serge.

It is to be expected, perhaps, that stories penned during the devastating ten-year drought and in the midst of widespread economic hardship should be harsh in tone and generally negative toward rural life. But in none of these stories does Cather use the land itself as a central impetus behind the action; this will change in her next farm story, "On the Divide."

Cather published these first three stories when she was a university student in Lincoln. "On the Divide" was published in January 1896 after she had left Lincoln and before she took her first full-time job as editor of the Home Monthly in Pittsburgh. It had been more than three years since the publication of her previous story about agricultural pioneers, "The Clemency of the Court," in the
Hesperian in October 1893. Slote characterizes the years between these two publications.

Eighteen ninety-three was a panic year: banks failed throughout the United States and depression settled over the land; locally, no rain fell, crops withered, and taxes went unpaid. In Willa's immediate circle, death took her maternal grandmother, Rachel Boak, her mentor, William Drucker, and her neighbor, Mrs. Wiener. Furthermore, Willa's father, Charles F. Cather, was among the many suffering financial damage. The Cathers owned tracts of land, but the parched fields brought in no tax money. (xvi)

While Slote describes this time to explain why Cather may have become interested in publishing for money, it is also obvious that such hard times would effect her perception of rural Nebraska as well as how she might depict it in print. While the Great Panic of 1893 was a pivotal event, the drought was by then some seven seasons old, and it would continue unabated for another three years through the 1896 growing season. Crops had been burned out by heat and decimated by insects for years prior to the panic year, and bankruptcies had been commonplace in parts of the great plains many years earlier.³

"On the Divide," apparently written in late 1895, tells the story of a Norwegian immigrant, Canute Canuteson, trying
to survive not only the physical trials, but also the mental and emotional strain of living alone through such an era in such a country. Canute

had seen [the Divide] smitten by all the plagues of Egypt. He had seen it parched by drought, sogged by rain, beaten by hail, and swept by fire, and in the grasshopper years he had seen it eaten as bare and clean as bones that the vultures had left. After the great fires he had seen it stretch for miles and miles, black and smoking, as the floor of hell. (9-10)

As we meet Canute, he is facing "the first day of winter on the Divide" (9), and the prospect of facing another, particularly without companionship, was not lost on him. "He was the wreck of ten winters on the Divide and he knew what they meant." Canute places the barrel of his gun against his forehead and "laid his finger on the trigger." Instead of pulling the trigger, however, Canute resorts to what has kept him alive and as sane as he is during all these lonely years: he drinks from a bottle of raw white alcohol. Cather is completely aware of the hardships of such an existence.

Insanity and suicide are very common things on the Divide. They come on like an epidemic in the hot wind season. . . . It causes no great sensation there when a Dane is found swinging to his own
windmill tower, and most of the Poles after they have become too careless and discouraged to shave themselves keep their razors to cut their throats with. . . .

Canute Canuteson was as mad as any of them, but his madness did not take the form of suicide or religion but of alcohol. (10-11)

Even the title character of "Lou, the Prophet" returns in this story (which might suggest an 1887 setting for "On the Divide" as well). "Crazy Lou," as he is called here, "has been tearing around the neighborhood trying to convert folks" (15). The whole countryside is a veritable bedlam.

In this emotional climate, Canute decides that he must do something to abate his loneliness, something to give his life meaning. He kidnaps a neighbor's daughter and forces a local minister to marry them, without either a license or the woman's consent. The story ends "happily" when Lena accepts her forced marriage to Canute.

The pioneer existence becomes a significant factor in "On the Divide." True, Lou had been driven insane by the same set of circumstances in "Lou, the Prophet"; but in "On the Divide" Cather takes us out onto the prairie; she drags the reader through waist-deep drifts in a blinding snow storm; she allows us to feel deeply the loneliness and despair of her protagonist and to understand that
he was mad, mad from the eternal treachery of the plains, which every spring stretch green and rustle with the promises of Eden. . . . Before autumn the lagoons are dried up, and the ground is burnt dry and hard until it blisters and cracks open. (12)

The antagonist in this story is pioneer life. It is the forced loneliness, the bitter winters, the parched conditions that characterized that life during the ten-year drought that is the enemy. It is the unfulfilled promise of the countryside, the annual crushing of hope, the continual failure that nearly destroys Canute and does destroy others on the Divide in this story.

As "On the Divide" and the other early stories were being written and published, the Nebraska prairie was indeed such a place of lost hope. There is no final victory in these stories as there is in O Pioneers! and My Ántonia because the blight of the countryside remains. The two novels end during prosperous times for the farmer, after the drought had ended in 1897 and during agriculture's twenty golden years through World War I. Of these first four prairie stories, only "Lou, the Prophet" and "On the Divide" use the physical setting and pioneer life as a catalyst for the central concerns of the works. Yet, it is not so much the very fact of pioneer life that destroys Lou and brings Canute to the edge of destruction; it is, rather, the
unusual condition of extended drought that brings hardship, that tries the minds and souls of men and women.

Some survive; some do not. The drought takes a prospective wife from Lou and then drives him insane. These same conditions bring the strength adequate to move Canute to action to alleviate his greatest problem, his loneliness. Peter cannot survive displacement from his Prague; Serge cannot survive having been raised like an animal. Are they fated to succumb in the face of such circumstances? What is it that makes one man or woman strong enough to endure, to triumph, while others suffer failure, insanity, even death? These are questions which will intrigue Cather for a lifetime.

But these stories also well illustrate that Cather was capable of seeing and portraying the life of the pioneer as one of desolation and deprivation. No "lyric nostalgia," no "elegiac pictures of the pioneer past," no "prettifying of life" is found in these early sketches of immigrant farmers, which are, in fact, naturalistic in tone. Yet Cather, rather than manufacturing background events and circumstances to deliberately present a negative picture of that life, has worked from the realities of the era about which she writes. If these works are to be considered naturalistic, they also must be recognized as particular strokes of the brush upon the real conditions and events of the time--lengthy drought
and extraordinarily harsh winters, economic chaos and widespread bankruptcy, and social and political upheaval.

Part 2: The Struggle Between East and West

A number of stories published from 1900 through 1912 open a new era in Cather's presentation of the agricultural pioneer life. By 1900 Cather had been working full time on the staff of the Pittsburgh Leader for two and a half years. She had been away from Red Cloud and in Pittsburgh since the summer of 1896, had travelled to New York City and Washington, DC, and had begun to fulfill her early promise as a theater and literature critic, writing not only for the Leader, but also contributing a book column to Home Monthly, writing play reviews for the New York Sun during a visit to that city, and continuing to produce a drama column for the Lincoln Courier and occasional columns for the Nebraska State Journal. She had become a respected journalist and, in effect, something of an Eastern sophisticate. A year earlier, in 1899, she had met Isabelle McClung, who was to introduce Cather to the world of Pittsburgh society and was to remain Cather's close friend until McClung's death in 1938.4

In August 1899, Cather, bearing the credentials of a successful Eastern journalist, returned to Red Cloud for a visit. One apparent product of this return home was "Eric Hermannson's Soul," which was published by Cosmopolitan in
April 1890 under the name Willa Sibert Cather, she having recently adopted the new middle name. In this story, the West--as represented by Eric Hermannson, at one time "the wildest lad on all the Divide" (23)--meets the East, as represented by Margaret Elliot, a young New York City resident. Of Margaret, Cather writes that she was one of those women of whom there are so many in this day, when an old order, passing, giveth place to the new; beautiful, talented, critical, unsatisfied, tired of the world at twenty-four. For the moment the life and the people of the Divide interested her. (27)

How much of Cather's beautiful, wealthy, cultured new friend Isabelle McClung or how much of her own exposure to "society" is portrayed in this somewhat sarcastic description cannot, of course, be deciphered; but the fact that she had met her only months before her return trip to the wild West is suggestive.

Margaret visits the Divide with her brother, a Harvard graduate who, some years before, had been sent west by his father "to rough it" for a year on a Nebraska ranch. The brother, Wyllis Elliot, returned to Nebraska later to purchase cheap land for his father "in a year of financial depression" (26). Wyllis accompanies Margaret on this later trip to Nebraska so that she might enjoy a last fling before marriage. Since this second return visit of Wyllis's takes
place some six years after the purchase of the property, and since this story was probably written in 1899, that purchase would have been made in the year of the Panic of 1893.

Cather continues to be true to historical events, and she introduces here, though only in passing, a cause of ill feeling between burned-out Westerner and wealthy Easterner, who comes to pick up the spoils of bankruptcy sales.

But the real East versus West theme of "Eric Hermannson's Soul" evolves through an unlikely love affair between the rough ranch hand, who had two years earlier given up his wild life and pledged himself to God in the aftermath of a revivalist conversion, and the sophisticated young lady, who "had no business to be in the West at all" (26). Eric's conversion is seen by Cather, herself no friend of religious fanaticism, as a sort of spiritual and emotional suicide, as a loss of soul; and, fittingly, Eric marks this conversion by breaking his violin over his knee, much as Peter Sadelack does in "Peter." For two years, now, Eric has had no soul, as his pledge to God has required him to give up his music; it is left to Margaret Elliot to retrieve Eric's soul for him.

She does this first by playing classical music for him. He had responded to this music with excitement, according to Margaret, who relates to her brother that Eric hadn't known that "there was any music like that in the world" (29). Then Margaret plans a dance for the night before she is to
return to the East. She invites Eric to come dance with her, and Eric, without hesitation, accepts the invitation, even though, because he is breaking his promise to God made two years earlier, "he believed that he delivered his soul to hell as he said it" (36). Of this, Margaret has no understanding. On the night of the dance, the two share a moment of passion in the form of a long embrace and kiss, a scene perfectly standard in a popular magazine. Next morning, Margaret leaves the West behind, and Eric harnesses his horses and returns to the fields, believing he has exchanged, most willingly, one night of bliss for eternal damnation.

Cather's presentation of rural pioneer life in "Eric Hermannson's Soul" is complicated and ambiguous. On the one hand, she acknowledges that life is difficult for these pioneers. She describes the temporary awakening of the hearts of women on the night of the dance.

They had a hard life enough, most of them. Torrid summers and freezing winters, labor and drudgery and ignorance, were the portion of their girlhood; a short wooing, a hasty, loveless marriage, unlimited maternity, thankless sons, premature age and ugliness, were the dower of their womanhood. But what matter? To-night there was hot liquor in the glass and hot blood in the heart; to-night they danced. (40)
This life of pioneer women, though in many ways sterile and demeaning, is still marked with passion, if only occasionally. Margaret's life is, by contrast, empty of passion. She is returning to the East to marry a society man, a man wealthy and bored, glib and vapid.

Margaret recognizes the contrast between her world and Eric's world. The East symbolizes for her "tension and strain" (28). Life there seems to dull desire; she tells her brother, "You know how seldom it is that one really wants to do anything nowadays" (31). After reading a passionless "love letter" from her betrothed, who admits to suffering from "general despondency" in her absence (38), she remarks, "Oh, it is all so little, so little there" (39). She longs for some true experience of love, some passion in her life; yet, when it is offered to her in the form of the Norse god incarnate, Eric, she cannot fully accept it. Her Eastern life has too strong a hold on her, and though she recognizes the power and passion of the West and, here, the Western man, she is constitutionally unfit to accept this greater life. But she has had a sense, since her arrival on the prairie, that something about this land is vital, as she reveals in a conversation with her brother.

I think if one lived here long enough one would quite forget how to be trivial, and would read only the great books that we never get time to read in the world, and would remember only the
great music, and the things that are really worth while would stand out clearly against that horizon over there. (29)

At this early point in the story, Margaret may be merely expressing a vague desire for something new in her life because she has not yet encountered the real passion of the West which is embodied in Eric. Later in the story, while they are riding horseback, Eric first saves Margaret from stampeding wild horses and then expresses the extent of his love for her: "I love you more than Christ who died for me, more than I am afraid of hell, or hope for heaven" (37).

Though Margaret does not reciprocate Eric's vow of total love at this moment, she is awakened to the possibility of real passion, something to which she had never before been exposed. During the dance, as is the custom among "the young Norwegians," Cather explains, Eric and Margaret climb a windmill tower to escape the heat of the barn and to view the landscape before them.

Margaret wondered if she would not hunger for that scene all her life, through all the routine of the days to come. Above them stretched the great Western sky, serenely blue, even in the night, with its big, burning stars, never so cold and dead and far away as in denser atmospheres. The moon would not be up for twenty minutes yet, and all about the horizon, that wide horizon, which
seemed to reach around the world, lingered a pale, white light, as of a universal dawn. (41)

As they begin their descent from the windmill, they embrace passionately, and for that long moment Margaret experiences what she fears will never come again. But after their embrace, "When she drew her face back from his, it was white with fear" (43).

This would be their only moment of passion. A few hours later, she would return to her "ultra-refined civilization which tries to cheat nature with elegant sophistries" (43) and to her fiancé, to "the drooping shoulders, high white forehead and tight, cynical mouth of the man she was to marry. . ." (41). Stouck writes that "The overrefined, almost decadent character of life in Eastern cities is epitomized by Margaret’s fiancé. . ." (10). It is to this world that Margaret returns. And Eric, Thor in work pants, would return to the hay field.

Yet, the story is ambiguous toward that open and powerful world of the West; Eric is greatly moved by the music Margaret plays for him, music he will never hear again, possibly, in rural Nebraska. His lack of access to such cultural amenities will result in his living an artistically starved and limited, even brutal, life. And the world of the West is too massive and untamed for Margaret’s delicate Eastern constitution. She fears it. Yet, the reader is left knowing that she returns to an
unreal life of emotional fastidiousness. She chooses a refined, but stunted, life with her fiancé over a limiting and rugged, but passionate, life with Eric. As Weber has written, "the story suggests that it is the momentary union of Western vigor and Eastern culture that unlocks a renewing passion in each of them and casts over the agrarian landscape an aura of perfection" (125).

This story is a metaphor of the choice Cather made herself, or, more correctly, that she could never quite make herself. Drawn to the culture, the stimulation, and the variety of opportunities of the East, she abandoned her Nebraska at twenty-three. But, like so many of her characters, she was never able to find complete release from the magnetism of the Great Plains. The spell of that country would remain with her all her life, as her comments in a 1921 interview suggest: "that shaggy grass country had gripped me with a passion I have never been able to shake. It has been the happiness and the curse of my life" (Bennett, WWC 140). In this story, at least, though the allure of the East is present, it is the unrefined power of the West that seems preferable. That 1899 return visit to Red Cloud before writing—or, during which she wrote--this story seems to have renewed in Cather her emotional attachment to the prairie.
Another 1900 farm story, "The Sentimentality of William Tavener," does not specifically concern the East versus West dichotomy, though the memory of a shared Eastern childhood experience becomes the pivotal event in the story. More importantly, the story hints at another theme that will become prominent in Cather's later farm writings, the insidiousness of creeping materialism, which would be targeted in One of Ours, "Neighbor Rosicky," and "The Best Years," her last three fictional statements on rural life.

William and Hester Tavener are, as Cather's own parents were, homesteaders from Virginia. They have been successful Midwestern pioneers, and this very success has driven a wedge of silence between husband and wife whose "relationship had become purely a business one" (49). But the accidental recollection of a childhood memory, which they had unknowingly shared, brings the wall down. "For years they had talked of nothing else but butter and eggs and the prices of things, and now they had as much to say to each other as people who meet after a long separation" (50). In their discussion of a circus each had attended as children in Virginia, Hester comes to see a different, or at least forgotten, side of her husband.

Materialism, the story suggests, has the power to destroy human relationships. The obsession with monetary success buries more important human values which Cather believed were most often found in farm settings. After
Hester's awakening to the humanity of her husband, she "had the painful sense of having missed something or lost something; she felt that somehow the years had cheated her" (50). Claude Wheeler in One of Ours and Mrs. Ferguesson in "The Best Years" feel the same way.

Though rural life in this story is shown positively (with the exception of the fact that a farm family is always somewhat isolated from most social activities), the tone of Cather's first attack on the effect of rural materialism is negative indeed. It is noteworthy that by 1900, when this story was penned, the hard and heroic times for farmers were past, and they were in the midst of the golden era of agriculture. But such financial success, Cather tells us, is no assurance of contentment; an obsession with the acquisition of material wealth can lead to a failure in the daily experiment of living with one another, as it has for Hester and William. In its more exaggerated forms, materialism will contribute to the destruction of relationships in several novels, including O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, My Mortal Enemy, A Lost Lady, The Professor's House, and, again, One of Ours.

In 1905, Cather's first book, The Troll Garden, a collection of short stories, was published. Included in the book's six stories are three which are at least partially set in the West, "A Death in the Desert" (first published in
1903), "A Wagner Matinée" (1903), and "The Sculptor's Funeral" (1905). In each story, the theme of the unsuitability of the West as a place for those of artistic sensibility is investigated. "The Sculptor's Funeral," however, is not set on the farm and is, therefore, not pertinent to this discussion, except that it does further illustrate the dominance of the East-versus-West theme in Cather's work during this period.

"A Death in the Desert" involves the life of a singer, Katharine Gaylord, who has lately performed in Europe. She had struggled from a childhood in rural Iowa to become a successful artist. In the words of her brother, with whom she is now staying and who now lives outside of Cheyenne, Wyoming,

She was a great woman . . . and she didn't come from a great family. She had to fight her own way from the first. She got to Chicago, and then to New York, and then to Europe, where she went up like lightning, and got a taste for it all; and now she's dying here like a rat in a hole, out of her own world, and she can't fall back into ours" (65).

Katharine is a forerunner of the struggling young artist in Cather's fiction who escapes her rural beginnings to achieve in the artistic world; she anticipates both Thea Kronborg of
The Song of the Lark (1915) and the title character of Lucy Gayheart (1935), for example.

Now, dying of a lung disease, Katharine is forced to fall back upon her brother for a place to die, even though her life as an artist has made her incapable of living in such a place a rural Wyoming. She longs for all the news about the New York theater scene; she longs for conversation with an educated, cultured individual. When Hilgarde Everett—an old friend and brother of an old lover—arrives to visit her, Katharine inundates him with questions about the world of art.

Cather is addressing in this story a personal concern. She, too, left a rural home to enter the world of art and culture; but, as "A Death in the Dessert" illustrates, such a choice exacts a price. While Cather tells us that Katharine had accomplished much in her life, that she had escaped from meager beginnings into the exalting world of art and culture, we also see that it has taken a considerable toll. Hilgarde looks at a photo of a young Katharine: "It was the face of a woman already old in her first youth, thoroughly sophisticated and a trifle hard, and it told of what her brother had called her fight" (67). To make it in the artistic world, she had had to sacrifice much, which the "sad and cynical" shape of her mouth betrayed. This loss of simplicity in one's life is the very toll Cather believed the artist should expect to be taken, a
toll that Cather herself expected to pay, and one that she feared to some extent. As Woodress writes, "Cather expected writers, singers, actors, to give all to their art, and she had meant it when she wrote that the god of art accepts only human sacrifices" (92).

The choice of the Western setting for this story is curious; there is certainly no solace for Katharine in returning to her humble, rural beginnings. For Cather the artist, however, each return invigorated.

Whenever I crossed the Missouri River coming into Nebraska the very smell of the soil tore me to pieces. I could not decide which was the real and the fake me. I almost decided to settle down on a quarter section of land and let my writing go. My deepest affection was not for the other people and the other places I had been writing about. I loved the country where I had been a kid, where they still called me Willie Cather. (Bennett 138)

What may have saved Cather from a fate similar to Katharine's was the fact that her art was involved in recurring physical and spiritual revisitations and reinventions of her own past. The nature and subject matter of Katharine's art took her distinctly and necessarily away from her roots; Cather's art would never reach its pinnacle until she returned to hers.
The East (or the city) holds an irresistible lure for the aspiring artist; but the cost of succumbing to its enticements may be high, for in seeking the laurel, one must be willing to abandon all other ambitions, all other ties. At this time, Cather was working as an English teacher in a Pittsburgh high school, as yet unwilling to abandon the security of a job for a life devoted to the pursuit of art, something she would not do for another ten years. "A Death in the Desert" was published in January after her first trip to Europe in the summer of 1902 where she met A.E. Houseman and visited many cultural shrines that honored Flaubert, de Maupassant, and others (Woodress 156-63). Quite likely she was inspired to pursue her own artistic goals by such events, but doubt apparently lingered; and, now near thirty years old, she may have begun to wonder if time was running out for her. Consider that Hilgarde's brother Adriance, who never appears in the story but who is the prime mover of all the action, was inspired by Cather's close friend, composer Ethelbert Nevin, who had died in 1901 in his thirties before achieving full potential (Robinson 102).

For Katharine, her devotion to her art has led first to abandoning ties to family and then to dying in a country wasteland, "like a rat in a hole." Though the use of the rural setting is extremely limited in "A Death in the Desert," Cather's description of the countryside as "dusty plains of red grass, with the ragged blue outline of the
mountains before them" (65) and as a "grey plain that ended in the great upheaval of the Rockies" (66) evokes a sense of desolation and, at the same time, limitation. It is an odd place for a successful international artist to die an early death; no doubt Cather intends the contrast between this vast empty space and the pregnant, bustling artists' world of New York and Europe to emphasize the tragedy of Katharine's unfulfilled life. In selecting an isolated ranch environment—in which, in fact, Katharine, the Midwesterner, had never lived—Cather successfully creates a sense of artistic and spiritual emptiness.

In doing so, Cather may also have been justifying her own rejection of her rural home as suitable residence for an artist, and—since her portrayal of the rural setting is negative—she may have been rejecting that environment as a suitable positive setting for her own literary efforts. On the other hand, she may have been questioning whether or not total dedication to her artistic ambitions might exact too high a price.

"A Wagner Matinée" is a powerful story about a Nebraska homesteader, Aunt Georgiana, who is coming to visit her nephew, Clark, in Boston. She had raised Clark on her farm, and when he left the farm he relocated in Aunt Georgiana's own hometown, where she "had been a music teacher at the Boston Conservatory" many years before. She had fallen in
love with an adventurer, and they had travelled to Nebraska to homestead, measuring the boundaries of their land by counting the revolutions of a wagon wheel, much as Cather's own aunt and uncle and Hamlin Garland had done in the early 1880s.

Aunt Georgiana, who comes to Boston to collect a small inheritance, is taken to a Wagner concert by her Clark, who intends the outing to be a small token of repayment to this woman who was responsible for "most of the good that ever came my way in my boyhood." When she arrives, however, her appearance is disconcerting:

[H]er shoulders were now almost bent together over her sunken chest. . . . She wore ill-fitting false teeth, and her skin was as yellow as a Mongolian's from constant exposure to a pitiless wind and to the alkaline water which hardens the most transparent cuticle into a sort of flexible leather. (104)

Aunt Georgiana had been a woman of culture; she had taught her nephew mythology, Shakespeare, Latin, and music as he grew up on the Nebraska prairie. He begins to have conflicting thoughts about the appropriateness of taking her to the symphony. Perhaps he will only awaken thoughts of a better past: "Indeed, for her own sake, I could only wish her taste for such things quite dead." Perhaps "it would have been best to get her back to Red Willow County without
waking her." On the other hand, perhaps the years on the prairie had in fact deadened her ability to appreciate art, as she seemed to be "in a semi-somnambulant state" and not "to realize that she was in the city where she had spent her youth" (104-05).

Clark soon discovers that he was wrong in his second analysis, that he had judged her "superficially."

When the horns drew out the first strain of the Pilgrim's chorus, my Aunt Georgiana clutched my coat sleeve. Then it was I first realized that for her this broke a silence of thirty years; the inconceivable silence of the plains. (107)

Clark's first fear is realized; this exposure has indeed awakened old sensitivities that might make a return to her existence in Nebraska intolerable. He is compelled by this moving experience to recall scenes from Nebraska, his past, her present.

I saw again the tall, naked house on the prairie, black and grim as a wooden fortress; the black pond where I had learned to swim, its margin pitted with sun-dried cattle tracks; the rain gullied clay banks about the naked house, the four dwarf ash seedling where the dish-cloths were always hung to dry before the kitchen door. . . . to the east, a cornfield that stretched to
daybreak; to the west, a corral that reached to sunset. . . . (107)

At concert's end, Aunt Georgiana "burst into tears and sobbed pleadingly. 'I don't want to go, Clark, I don't want to go!'" (109). The nephew is moved.

I understood. For her, just outside the door of the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs; the tall, unpainted house, with weather-curled boards; naked as a tower, the crook-backed ash seedlings where the dish-cloths hung to dry; the gaunt, moulting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door. (110)

If Cather could write about Nebraska as a grand arena of space and freedom and beauty, she could also write about it as a wasteland.

In this story, there is little ambiguity—as there is, for example, in "Eric Hermannson's Soul"—about the preferability of East or West. The clear attack on Nebraska solicited angry denouncements, some from old friends,§ accusing of her of "denigrating her home state" (Lee 79). Any reader of "A Wagner Matinée," "A Death in the Desert," "On the Divide," or even the later "The Bohemian Girl" can no longer identify Cather as merely that creator of "elegiac pictures of the pioneer past." It is apparent that, at this point in her career as an aspiring artist, Cather could understand the cost to an individual who is faced with
complete separation from a life of art and culture. In "A Wagner Matinée," Van Ghent sees her taking a "firm grip on the fatality of deprivation which was an inherent part of Miss Cather's native Nebraska material" (11). Sergeant says Cather suffered "a truly gruelling inner pull between the opposites of East and West," noting her "restless doubling back and forth across our vast continent" (54).

This wavering attitude toward her Nebraska heritage would be expressed again in "The Bohemian Girl," her next story about agricultural pioneers published in 1912, nine years after her most recent farm stories, "A Death in the Desert" and "A Wagner Matinée," and only one year before O Pioneers! But "The Bohemian Girl," a lengthy and pivotal story, more closely resembles an even earlier story, "Eric Hermannson's Soul," because it evokes both positive and negative images of life on the prairie.

In "The Bohemian Girl," Nils Ericson returns to his Nebraska farm roots ostensibly to visit his mother. The East versus West theme in this story contains a twist in that Nils returns from his immigrant family's original homeland, Sweden. He has travelled widely in Europe and America since escaping the farm twelve years earlier. We soon learn that Nils has a particular motive for returning; he intends to steal away the sweetheart of his youth, Clara
Vavrika, the Bohemian girl, who has married Nils' older brother Olaf.  

Throughout the story Cather will mark Nils and Clara as different from others in the farm country. Nils' mother says to him, "You'd never be contented tied down to the land. There was roving blood in your father's family, and it's come out in you" (96). And his younger brother, Eric, says, "You had always wanted to go, hadn't you?" Nils replies that the leaves of the cottonwood tree outside their bedroom window had always spoken to him: "[T]hey always whispered to me about the sea. Sometimes they said names out of the geography books. In a high wind they had a desperate sound, like something trying to tear loose" (97-98).

Clara is first introduced to the reader as something of a social outlaw.

Mrs. Olaf Ericson--Clara Vavrika, as many people still called her--was moving restlessly about her big bare house that morning. Her husband had left for the county town before his wife was out of bed--her lateness in rising was one of the many things the Ericson family had against her. (100) Nils asks his mother if Clara has any children. She replies, "She's too proud. She tears about on horseback all the time. But she'll get caught up with, yet. She sets herself very high, though nobody knows what for" (96).
Clara has a fiery personality; she is "self-willed and discontented" and "selfish," and she had studied music in Chicago in her youth (101) and is, like Nils himself, a good musician.

So it is these two misfits who are to escape the farm life of Nebraska to the greater life of the East and Europe. Importantly, it is not the life of pioneers that they will escape. This is not the Nebraska of the 1870s and early 1880s in which John Bergson struggled to carve out a life for his family in *O Pioneers!*, nor even of the harsh winter and drought years of 1886 and 1887 which drive Lou to insanity in "Lou, the Prophet." This is the Nebraska of the second generation; Mrs. Ericson drives an automobile and calls her daughters-in-law on the telephone. The Ericsons are the wealthiest family in the area, and Clara herself stands to inherit some wealth.

It is this post-pioneer Nebraska that comes under attack in "The Bohemian Girl." Olaf Ericson represents this new Nebraska for Cather. His "features were rudimentary: the thing one noticed was the face itself, wide and flat and pale, devoid of any expression." He was characterized by a "heavy stubbornness" and could "butt his ideas into you . . . without ever saying a word" (107-08). He is a member of the Nebraska legislature, is the most solid of solid citizens, a strong and generally silent man of ponderous spirit. He is described by Nils as "weighing a thousand
tons" (125). Olaf represents the materialism that seduced the children of those heroic pioneers who challenged the hardships and tamed the wild country.

In "The Bohemian Girl," that generation is still alive in his own mother, who, at seventy, still has black hair. She is a pillar of strength and still somehow youthful; but she disapproves of Nils's abandonment of the farm, and she bitterly resents Clara's superior airs. She is, in fact, in league with Olaf and her other seven grown sons who have stayed on the farm against Nils, whom they suspect of holding a secret will sent to him by his father that they fear he may use against them. So even his mother, a first-generation pioneer whom Nils clearly admires, represents the smothering oppression of growing materialism in farmers.

But in a powerful scene at Olaf's barn-raising party, Nils does find a group of original pioneers that attracts his admiration. A group of elderly women sits in a corner of the barn knitting and "chattering in four languages." As he watches them,

he fell into amazement when he thought of the Herculean labors those fifteen pairs of hands had performed: of the cows they had milked, the butter they had made, the gardens they had planted, the children and grandchildren they had tended, the brooms they had worn out, the
mountains of food they had cooked. It made him dizzy. (118)

These original pioneers are heroic to Cather and to her protagonist Nils; they represent the generation that survived the vigors of a wild land, that has lived to enjoy the deserved fruits of their labor.

But along with his admiration for them comes another recognition, as Clara attracts his attention. "'No,' he reflected; 'she'd never be like them, not if she lived here a hundred years. She'd only grow more bitter. You can't tame a wild thing; you can only chain it. People aren't all alike'" (119). Again, some are suited for such a life; some are not. The old women have thrived; Clara is dying a slow death of the spirit, much as Nils would have had he stayed. He must leave again, and he must take Clara with him.

On the night that they escape together,

The moonlight flooded that great, silent land. The reaped fields lay yellow in it. The straw stacks and poplar windbreaks threw sharp black shadows. The roads were white rivers of dust. The sky was a deep, crystalline blue, and the stars were few and faint. Everything seemed to have succumbed, to have sunk to sleep, under the great, golden, tender, midsummer moon. The splendor of it seemed to transcend human life and human fate. (124)
This expression of awe of and love for the Nebraska landscape echoes that found nearly a decade earlier in "Eric Hermansonn's Soul"; it anticipates similar scenes and emotions in *O Pioneers!* published in the following year, in *My Ántonia* (1918), "Neighbor Rosicky" (1928), and other works. As Nils contemplates his moonlit universe, "His own life seemed strange and unfamiliar to him, as if it were something he had read about, or dreamed, and forgotten" (125). Cather may well have felt the same way on any one of her return visits to Nebraska, the most recent of which had been in 1909, two years before she wrote "The Bohemian Girl" in the fall of 1911 (Woodress 207, 225).

Her own attachment to the land may be expressed by both Clara and Nils who, as they debate the decision to leave, acknowledge the powerful lure of the land. He accuses her of lacking the nerve to break away.

Clara looked across the fields. "It isn't that, Nils, but something seems to hold me. I'm afraid to pull against it. It comes out of the ground, I think."

"I know all about that. One has to tear loose. You're not needed here." (127)

Here Clara expresses the essential dilemma for Cather as well as for herself; and Nils provides the resolution. "One has to tear loose." For Clara, "The great, silent country seemed to lay a spell upon her. The ground seemed to hold
her as if by roots" (128). But she, like Cather had, makes the necessary decision to leave.

In this, her last story before she would begin writing her great prairie studies, Cather works with most of the themes and attitudes that will predominate in *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *One of Ours*, her three farm novels: the heroism of the first pioneer generation and the degenerative materialism of the second; the struggle between East and West, culture and raw power; and the always enigmatic presence of "that great, silent land" of Nebraska. In this just-reviewed second stage of her writing about the farm experience, the first story, "Eric Hermannson's Soul," and the last, "The Bohemian Girl," best express her ambivalence about Nebraska. Others, "A Death in the Desert" and "A Wagner Matinée," seem to fall squarely on the side of escape to the cultured East. Of these latter two stories, Herimone Lee notes that "Cather— as usual dismissive of all her work before *O Pioneers!*— would look back on [The Troll Garden stories], within ten years, as 'warped' expressions of the 'raging bad temper' of a young person kept from the things she wanted, howling for 'music dramas' in the cornfields" (73-74). This "confession" would seem to be an oversimplification of the full truth, since the pull of the East would continue to be a dominant theme in many later works, including, perhaps most notably, *The Song of the Lark* (1915). But it is clear that in all of her Nebraska farm
fiction to this point, spanning twenty years of writing, Cather was no mere writer of "lyric nostalgia" about the agricultural pioneer experience. Whether writing at the age of nineteen or thirty-nine, she was capable of perceiving and depicting both the negative and the positive aspects of country life.

Part 3: The Prairie Novels: Hardship and Triumph, and Deteriorating Values

In the ten years from 1913 through 1922, when she was thirty-nine to forty-nine years old, Cather would publish her trilogy of prairie novels. The positive reception of "The Bohemian Girl" in 1912 seems to have proven to Cather that Nebraska was a satisfactory setting and rural life was an acceptable subject for her literature. A year later, her first great novel of farm life, *O Pioneers!*, was published.

If—as Slote, Wasserman, and Meyering have suggested— critics have tended too much toward generalization in assessments of Cather's work, if they have too narrowly defined her work—thus belittling her talents—and have tried to analyze her fiction against only the most recent critical dictums of the particular times, then such reductionism deserves exposure. Meyering believes the dominant critical focus since the 1970s has centered on Cather's sexuality, and she calls Sharon O'Brien's *Willa*
Cather: The Emerging Voice (1987) "the work in Cather studies that cannot be ignored, requiring those who disagree with O'Brien's conclusions to come to terms with the arguments she presents and the evidence she marshals" (xiv).

My discussion of O Pioneers! will focus on my disagreement with O'Brien's conclusions, at least in terms of how this first important novel of Cather's fits those conclusions. I believe it can be illustrated that O'Brien, in attempting to place all of Cather's work neatly into her thesis, has distorted the text of O Pioneers! to accomplish her critical agenda. My analysis will also illustrate that, even in this work famous for glorifying the pioneer experience, Cather actually was presenting a balanced, honest view of that life, depicting both the hardship and the heroism of the times.

O'Brien goes to great lengths in her critical biography to establish a distinct difference between the ways in which Alexandra Bergson and her father, John, perceive and work with the land in O Pioneers!. It is, of course, critical to the primary thesis of her study to portray the feminine as distinctly different from the masculine in general. In the case of Alexandra and John Bergson, this difference is built upon O'Brien's assertion that while "John Bergson wants to make his mark on the soil by imposing his will upon it" (EV 434), Alexandra "achieves her creative designs by
letting them emerge from the soil, not by seeking to subdue nature through force" (EV 392).

John is a "defeated" man, O'Brien explains. He fails because "men like Alexandra's father . . . can only interpret [the land's] resistance to cultivation as hostility . . ." (EV 430). Their first and only impulse is, therefore, to "tame" the land; and this is the impulse that destroys. But Alexandra herself succeeds on the same land because of her different approach: "Gifted with imagination, able to see possibilities in the soil that no one has glimpsed, she triumphs because she combines a mystic faith in the Divide with a pragmatic willingness to experiment with new farming techniques" (430-31). Alexandra feels no compulsion to forcibly tame the land: "Possessed by the land more than possessing it, Alexandra rejects a model of ownership and authorship based on the rights of dominance and force . . ." (EV 154).

O'Brien is making a case for a particular feminist stance on the relationship between gender and landscape or nature. While one does not object out of hand to such an assumption, it being widely held and vigorously promoted by a number of critics,¹³ it is important not to ignore the statements of a particular text when trying to recruit that text in support of the larger assumption. In the case of O Pioneers!, O'Brien's view is clearly contradicted by Cather's written word.
I maintain that while Cather does portray John Bergson as a tired, physically beaten man, she also shows him to be a man who has in essence sacrificed his own life for the betterment of his entire family. He is finished, but not "defeated." He has been particularly devoted to his family and sensitive to their needs from their first days at the frontier. While others on the Divide live in sod huts, for example, John, aware of his wife's inability to abide such a residence, builds her a log home (147), no small feat in the middle of a treeless plain. As he is dying, he urges his sons not to "grudge your mother a little time for plowing her garden and setting out the fruit trees" because "she has always missed the old country" (151). As she watches her father deteriorate during his last days, Alexandra acknowledges that his concern for his family is uppermost in his mind: she says to her friend Carl Linstrum, "He lies and counts on his fingers all day. I think he is trying to count up what he is leaving for us" (145). Cather's characterization of John hardly matches O'Brien's portrait of him as a hard, willful, insensitive man. When he dies, John is a rarity among his neighbors: he is out of debt. He owns one square mile of land, unencumbered. This is "what he is leaving" his family, a solid beginning.

The tragedy is that John, himself, will not share the rewards of his effort.
As he lay there day after day he had to accept the situation as it was, and to be thankful that there was one among his children to whom he could entrust the future of his family and the possibilities of his hard-won land. (14)

As Cather tells us here, John has not failed; he has "his hard-won land," and he may now bequeath it and all its "possibilities" which he has foreseen, as this passage illustrates—to his children. John is comforted in knowing that he is leaving his hard-won farm in the capable hands of his daughter who—as we learn from John's own thoughts—is a kindred spirit, who possesses "resourcefulness and good judgment," "who read[s] the papers and follow[s] the markets,. . . . who learn[s] by the mistakes of their neighbors" (148-49), and who could further develop their land's "possibilities."

John calls the children together to explain that Alexandra will be left in charge of the farm and to urge his sons Oscar and Lou to heed the advice of their older sister. He further says, "And Alexandra must not work in the fields any more. There is no necessity now. Hire a man when you need help" (151). This passage indicates that a degree of success has been achieved; it is no longer necessary for Alexandra to work like a man. They are even prosperous enough to hire help when a labor-crunch occurs, and Alexandra will have the help of seventeen- and nineteen-
year-old young men as she continues to work and improve the land. When John arrived on the prairie eleven years before, these young men were but boys of six and eight (150), not much help in breaking sod. What John had accomplished alone could now be built upon by an entire family. He had tilled one-half of his farm; the tilling of the second half is left to his children. His is not a legacy of failure.

But as many of their neighbors were giving up the fight and returning to Eastern cities (Carl Linstrum's family, for example), it is reasonable that John be concerned about the future and important that he choose the right person to lead his family. He tells Alexandra, "Don't let them [Oscar and Lou] get discouraged and go off like Uncle Otto [his brother]. I want them to keep the land" (150). As becomes apparent, John, in deciding to name Alexandra as leader, shows wisdom, the kind of wisdom in judging character that he would leave as yet another legacy to his talented daughter. Her insight and good business sense allow her to build an agricultural empire from which the entire family benefits.

But it is wrong to assert that Alexandra creates this empire alone, as O'Brien suggests. Always, as Alexandra acknowledges, it is the beginning with which their father has provided them and his mandate that they "keep the land" that serve as Alexandra's sources of strength and determination, as she illustrates when she tells Lou and
Oscar, as their neighbors are fleeing the Divide, "I think we ought to hold on as long as we can on father's account. He was so set on keeping this land" (166). He has left them in good stead, as the family's prosperity continues unabated for the first three years after John's death (161), solid testimony to both his fine preparation and Alexandra's continued good management. Alexandra clearly explains to her brothers just how much they all owe to their successful father by saying that "they [other farmers] all got into debt while father was getting out" (166). And again, "Why are we better fixed than any of our neighbors? Because father had more brains" (172). These are not the accomplishments nor the characteristics of a failure. In Alexandra's evaluation--and, it would seem, Cather's--John Bergson, in contrast to many others, had been a good farmer, even a successful farmer.

The text states unequivocally that it is this good farmer's dream that Alexandra continues to build upon. When hard times do come again to the Divide, in the form of "three years of drouth and failure" (161), Alexandra proves her particular mettle. She sees the chance to expand their land holdings as others are selling out, and, as usual, she gives due credit to John: "The chance that father was always looking for has come" (171). It was obviously his goal to expand their holdings at the first opportunity, an intention he must have made clear to his daughter during one
or more of their frequent consultations (148). When Cather writes, "The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman," she is speaking of Alexandra, clearly; yet Alexandra seems to tell us in many ways that her father's dream was the seed planted in her heart that grew large enough to encompass the whole country "with love and yearning" (170). And it was clearly Cather's opinion that "the heart of [either] a man or woman" could embrace the land, could look at it with that same gaze of "love and yearning."

But love alone will allow neither Alexandra nor anyone else to build an agricultural empire. Though O'Brien blames John's failure and even his death on his ill-advised, masculine-driven attempt to tame the land, she admits finally that this is just what his daughter has accomplished. Alexandra has successfully tamed the land, something John supposedly had failed to do, though O'Brien would have Alexandra's taming the result of her feminine "artistic project" (EV 438). The text suggests otherwise.

As stated, from the very beginning we are told of Alexandra's "resourcefulness and good judgment." She is constantly trying to improve her farm and farming techniques. She goes to visit Crazy Ivar on the pretext of buying a hammock, but we discover that her real intention is to learn how better to raise hogs (159). While her brothers and Carl cavort in the family pond the evening after the
trip to Ivar's, she dreams of building "her new pig corral" (160). She is also canny enough to know, since it is a "real estate man" who is buying up all the farmland on the Divide from those pioneers who are giving up, that their Divide land is valuable land. She will not be persuaded by her brothers to trade it for land near the river (166). Yet, she is wise enough to test this hypothesis; she takes a trip to the bottom lands to find out for herself, a trip which only solidifies her desire to expand their Divide holdings. And while she's there, she does what she can to absorb any new farming techniques being practiced in the river bottoms. Upon her return she invites her brothers to make a similar fact-finding excursion (168-70), showing her to be a practical and effective manager of people.

In her efforts to win them over to her opinion, the extent of her pragmatism is highlighted: "Let's try to do like the shrewd ones, and not like these stupid fellows." The "shrewd ones" are those who are buying land; the stupid ones, those who are selling it. Shrewd men are "the ones to watch in a new country," Alexandra says; they "don't try to farm" the land they are buying; instead, they let others work it and then live off these laborers' efforts (172). Alexandra appreciates the practicality and shrewdness of managing real estate and the people who work it as opposed to actually toiling on the land. This is not loving the land into productive submission; it is, rather, the
application of good, hard business sense. She is setting up her family members for a life of relative leisure based on the possession of large tracts of land. Alexandra leaves no doubt that this is her goal: at one point, Oscar expresses his concern that buying more land will lead to more work than they can physically manage. She comforts him by saying, "You poor boy, you won't have to work it" (172). Through calculated land speculation, by taking advantage of the weakness or failure of her neighbors, Alexandra, like the "shrewd men" she has learned from, will achieve financial independence for her entire family.

The point here is not to deny that Alexandra has a dream and that she accomplishes it. What must be made clear is that the nature of her victory has little to do with "mystic faith" and everything to do with foresight and successful risk-taking. And, further, it must be acknowledged that Alexandra shares and expands upon a dream first envisioned by her father; that she, like her father had been, is a hard-working and practical visionary with a particular goal in mind; and that she, unlike her sacrificing father, was not so broken by the first hard steps toward the realization of the dream that she couldn't experience the fulfillment of it. Mrs. Bergson is unequivocal when Alexandra asks her if it was harder in the beginning for John than it is now for Alexandra, Oscar, and Lou.
"Oh, worse! Much worse," moaned Mrs. Bergson. 
"Drouth, chinch-bugs, hail, everything! My garden all cut to pieces like sauerkraut. No grapes on the creek, no nothing. The people all lived just like coyotes." (167)

John Bergson, it is apparent, had faced difficulties in the early days that his children can not even remember. Some of them he recalls on his death bed:

Bergson went over in his mind the things that had held him back. One winter his cattle had perished in a blizzard. The next summer one of his plow horses broke its leg in a prairie-dog hole and had to be shot. Another summer he lost his hogs from cholera, and a valuable stallion died from a rattlesnake bite. Time and time again his crops had failed. . . . Now, when he had at last struggled out of debt, he was going to die himself. He was only forty-six, and had, of course, counted upon more time. (147-48)

Whatever reason Cather may have had for cataloguing this nearly melodramatic list of misfortunes, it is clear that she saw John's struggle as heroic and his death upon the brink of success as tragic. And it is obvious that Cather was willing to write about the bitter side of the pioneer experience as well as the exalted.
"The things that held him back." They seem to have had less to do with Bergson's attempt "to tame the land" behind a philosophy of "dominance and force" than they did with bad weather and worse luck. No gift of "imagination," no "mystic faith" can stay a blizzard, detect or fill a prairie-dog hole, or kill a rattlesnake. And though Alexandra may have been "possessed by the land more than possessing it," it must be acknowledged that, through honed business practices, she ended up being possessed by a lot more of it than when John first handed her the reins. If, as O'Brien states, Alexandra "achieves her creative designs by letting them emerge from the soil" (EV 392), it must be further acknowledged that the attributes of this particular "artist" include some that are consistent with those of a skilled land speculator, an ambitious entrepreneur, and a capable capitalist.

No doubt, these are not characteristics that O'Brien would have attached to her heroine. But at the end of *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra owns "one of the richest farms on the Divide" (178). And we are led to believe that her good business sense results in her brothers' prosperity as well. There is also something traditionally masculine about the arrangement and scale of her agricultural empire.

When you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in
the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds, planted with scrub willows to give shade to the cattle in fly-time. There is even a white row of beehives in the orchard, under the walnut trees. (178)

All this order, symmetry, and practicality; all this fencing, hedging, and delimiting colors Alexandra in distinctly masculine tones, suggesting, perhaps, that a traditionally masculine sensibility was required to "tame the land" after all, in spite of O’Brien’s assertion to the contrary.16

Alexandra seems completely in tune with what historian Patricia Nelson Limerick has to say about the narrow (and unfortunately distorted) pioneer attitude toward land: "There was but one appropriate way to treat land—divide it, distribute it, register, it" (55). Our Alexandra has done just that, and she's done it, apparently, with a skill unsurpassed on her Divide. She and her father, kindred spirits that they are, have crafted a dream; he the first part, she the last. While Alexandra molds the final shape of the dream, it was John who had first glimpsed the vision and who had set the foundation for Alexandra’s future success. Both are entitled to be either lauded for this final success or, as O’Brien would apparently have it, condemned for "subdu[ing] nature through force," since they
shared a common dream and practiced a similarly pragmatic agriculture.

This is not to deny the validity of an argument which insists upon a distinctly feminine relationship to the land. I am merely stating that, clearly, Alexandra can not be recruited as an example of that relationship. While Alexandra has had a dream, a vision, she is no mystic; she has subdued nature—as the text illustrates—through the force of her will, her tenacity, her courage, and her good sense, attributes Cather always admired in her heroines. There is a much larger dose of shrewdness than mysticism in this universally admired, female, pioneer character.

Cather was in her fortieth year when *O Pioneers!* was published in 1913; seventeen years earlier, in 1986, her "Tommy, the Unsentimental," a story about another young Nebraska woman of grit, was published. What Cather says about Tommy applies perfectly to Alexandra: "People rather expect some business ability in a girl there, and they respect it immensely" (473).

*O Pioneers!* is, in many ways, the most complete statement of Cather's attitude toward the agricultural pioneer experience. It is fitting that she show the heroism of the first generation immigrant, John, in his struggle to tame the Nebraska prairie. And it is fitting that John's appointed successor, Alexandra, also be presented as sharing that heroism, as it is she who completes the dream. But
Cather generally viewed the second generation negatively, and in this novel, that generation is represented by Alexandra's brothers Lou and Oscar, who are spoiled by success and entrapped by the lure of materialism. She describes the two sixteen years after their father's death when financial success has been achieved.

Lou now looks the older of the two; his face is thick and shrewd and wrinkled about the eyes, while Oscar's is thick and dull. For all his dullness, however, Oscar makes more money than his brother, which adds to Lou's sharpness and uneasiness and tempts him to make a show. The trouble with Lou is that he is tricky, and his neighbors have found out that, as Ivar says, he has not a fox's face for nothing. Politics being the natural field for such talents, he neglects his farm to attend conventions and to run for country offices. (185)

We see much of Olaf Ericson from "The Bohemian Girl" in both Oscar and Lou. And as Olaf and his brothers feared that Nils would return, produce a new will, and take some of their land from them, so Oscar and Lou disapprove of Alexandra's relationship with her suitor, Carl Linstrum, fearing that some of "their" land might end up in Carl's hands. This is the same man who had been their childhood
friend, further illustrating the deterioration of their characters.

If we are to recapture the glory of the pioneer experience as related in *O Pioneers!*, we must retreat to the days before success had been achieved, specifically, to the time Alexandra returned to the Divide from a trip to the bottom lands.

That night she had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it. . . . She had never known before how much the country meant to her. The chirping of the insects down in the long grass had been like the sweetest music. She felt 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. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring. (173)

Alexandra, unlike her brothers, never loses this feeling for the land; nor is she spoiled by her success; her attachment to the land and her understanding of its powers never wanes. It is this sense of an almost spiritual connection to the land that Cather admires. It is this struggle to carve out a niche in an inhospitable and powerful country that she eulogizes; and this particular passage relates the essential moment for Alexandra, the very moment of the beginning of her personal movement toward triumph.
In *My Ántonia*, Cather manages both to invest the pioneer landscape with physical and spiritual power and to allow her heroine, Ántonia, to avoid the trap of materialism. In this sense, it more completely represents Cather's own hopes for the country and its people. While there is a distinct sense at the end of *O Pioneers!* that an era is at an end, that the Alexandras of the West and what they represent have become passé, Ántonia remains true to the pioneer instincts of a past time.

The novel begins, however, not with the story of Ántonia, but with Cather's strongest expression of the meaning of the great prairie land. Her discussion of this begins in the "Introduction," in which two old friends--who had grown up with Ántonia and now live in New York--meet on a train which is travelling through Iowa on its way to Black Hawk, Nebraska, their hometown, and points west. The writer of the introduction--a writer by profession, presumably Cather herself--discusses with Jim Burden what it was like to grow up on the prairie and

spend one's childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the color and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when
the whole country is stripped bare and gray as sheet-iron. We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. (711)

Though she refers here to "small towns," what Cather is writing about is, in fact, the farm, as Burden's narrative will illustrate. The two soon fall into a discussion of Ántonia who had held some magic attraction for them in their youth. Burden has kept up a relationship with Ántonia over the years which, at his companion's request, he records and a few months later hands over to his fellow New Yorker who then, ostensibly, edits it for publication.

As discussed in Chapter III of this paper, Burden's arrival on the prairie closely parallels Cather's own. He had come from Virginia at age ten to be thrown into another world. Jim, who has been orphaned, has come to Nebraska to live with his grandparents. The scene in which Burden arrives in Black Hawk, in the middle of a Nebraska night, resembles a violent rebirth. Young Jim has been sleeping; he is roused from sleep as the train arrives.

We stumbled down from the train to a wooden siding, where men were running about with lanterns. I couldn't see any town, or even distant lights; we were surrounded by utter darkness. The engine was panting heavily after its long run. In the red glow from the fire-box,
a group of people stood huddled together on the platform. . . . I pricked my ears, for it was positively the first time I had ever heard a foreign tongue. (716)

Among that huddled group of foreigners is Ántonia, who will come to shape Jim's life. As he emerges into his new life, it is as if he hears speech for the first time. But the erasure of Jim's past and his rebirth in the strange new land are not yet complete. As he rides in the back of a farm wagon "into the empty darkness," he peered over the side of the wagon. There seemed nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land; not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. . . . I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction. . . . Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be. (718)

While Cather herself said she "had it out" with the country when she first arrived, Jim seems to accept his new circumstance as fated. His old world is erased. This new sky above him "was the complete dome of heaven, all there
was of it. I did not believe that my dead father and mother were watching me from up there. . . . I had even left their spirits behind me" (718).

In the morning, Jim's rebirth into a completely new world continues. It is a strange land he sees as he walks outside his grandparents' home for the first time: "Everywhere, as far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but rough, shaggy, red grass, most of it as tall as I" (722). So eerie is the scene, so completely otherworldly, that when his grandmother joins him, Jim "had almost forgotten that I had a grandmother." As they walk toward the garden, Jim senses that the country has a life of its own, for more than anything else I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping.

. . .

His sense of awe is unabated, but already his attachment to the land is growing: "I wanted to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world, which could not be very far away" (723).

He asks to stay behind in the garden when his grandmother returns to the house.
I was left alone with this new feeling of lightness and content.

I sat down in the middle of the garden, where snakes could scarcely approach unseen, and leaned my back against a warm yellow pumpkin. . . . There in the sheltered draw-bottom the wind did not blow very hard, but I could hear it singing in its humming tune up on the level, and I could see the tall grasses wave. The earth was warm under me, and warm as it crumbled through my fingers. . . . Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep. (724)

The death of Jim's former life and his rebirth into a new existence is complete. He has left an old world behind, been dragged into his new world in a nearly hellish scene, amidst confusion, flashing lights, the noise and fire of the steam engine, all the while "surrounded by utter darkness." He submits completely to the power, the life of his strange
new country and is finally transported into the garden where he finds a "new feeling of lightness and content." He gives himself to the land, becomes part of it much as the sky and the pumpkins are part of it, and finds himself "entirely happy."

Jim's love for this new-found Eden never leaves him, as it never left Cather. As Jim repeatedly travels west to revisit his childhood home, so did Cather. As the majesty of the landscape--its massiveness, its barren beauty, its fertility--has captured Jim's affection, so did it grip Cather's very soul and her imagination for a lifetime.

But even in this novel, which begins as a song of tribute to the prairie lands, Cather will demonstrate that the land can both nurture and destroy. Jim, after all, must exit the garden and enter the world beyond the edenic "sheltered draw-bottom" where the wind does blow hard and where the snakes do threaten tranquillity. Not long afterwards Jim and Ántonia do encounter a rattlesnake which threatens them. Jim notes, "He was not merely a big snake, I thought--he was a circus monstrosity. His abominable musculature, his loathsome, fluid motion, somehow made me sick" (741). Jim beheads the snake with a spade and becomes a hero in the eyes of Ántonia.

But snakes are not all that threaten the uninitiated in this wild land. Ántonia and the Shimerda family, Bohemian immigrants who are completely unprepared for life on the
unplowed prairie, live in "a hole in the bank like badgers" (757), are reduced to eating prairie dogs, sleep on a dirt floor covered with straw, and share a single overcoat through the winter. A January blizzard smothered the countryside during Jim's and the Shimerdas' first winter in Nebraska. On the following day Jim watches the hired men as they tunnel through the snow to reach the barns so that the stock can be fed. The next morning, news comes that Mr. Shimerda has killed himself.

Less than a month earlier, on Christmas day, Mr. Shimerda had visited the Burdens, had sat quietly and peacefully in the sitting room gazing at the Christmas tree. He had come from his hole in the bank and was obviously enjoying the more civilized environment of the Burden home. He stayed long and left with apparent reluctance. Some days later, but before the suicide, Ántonia tells Jim about her father.

"My papa sad for the old country. He not look good. He never make music any more. At home he play violin all the time; for weddings and for dance. Here never. When I beg him for play, he shake his head no. Some days he take his violin out of his box and make with his fingers on the strings, like this, but never he make the music. He don't like this kawn-tree. . . .
"He not want to come, never!" she burst out.
"My mamenka make him come. All the time she say: ‘America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls.’ My papa, he cry for leave his old friends what make music with him." (771-72).

Though Cather portrays Mr. Shimerda as an entirely sympathetic character, he is not a man who can survive the rigors of this new, harsh land. Like Peter in Cather's 1892 story, like John Bergson's brother Otto and Carl Linstrum's family in O Pioneers!, like many, many others, Mr. Shimerda cannot make the transition from the Old World to the new. A land that is opportunity for one man may crush his father. Ambrosch Shimerda, the son, thrives; the father cannot forget or adapt, and the land destroys him. The blizzard apparently had intensified the sense of isolation Mr. Shimerda had suffered on the barren land to an intolerable point. As Terrance Martin writes, noting that Mr. Shimerda has only his fiddle and gun from the Old Country, "He dies from a lack of history, his suicide a testimony to the grim reality of the struggle imposed by frontier conditions" (305). In Jim's mind, "he had . . . been so unhappy that he could not live any longer" (MA 780).

Even though Cather seems to pronounce Mr. Shimerda unsuited for such a life, it is equally clear that she does not approve of Ambrosch's approach to the land because he
sees in it only material wealth. But he is a ceaseless worker, a prime characteristic of a successful pioneer, so Cather indicates her disapproval of him by portraying him as a cheat and, generally, as sneaky, surly, and ungrateful to his neighbors who have helped him considerably. He also forces fourteen-year-old Ántonia to do a grown man's work on the land, resulting in her beginning to adopt Ambrosch's attitude to some extent, which worries Jim and his grandmother. But all the while, as becomes apparent, Ántonia has been developing an attachment to the country, telling Jim one night as they sat on a roof during a warm rainstorm, "I like . . . all things here . . . I wish my papa live to see this summer" (802).

Eventually it is Ántonia who comes to embody the very essence of a proper relationship to the land. At the end of the book, she has married and given birth to nearly a dozen children and has made a home on the prairie. On one return visit from New York, Jim sits with Ántonia in her arbor.

There was the deepest peace in that orchard. It was surrounded by a triple enclosure; the wire fence, then the hedge of thorny locusts, then the mulberry hedge which kept out the hot winds of summer and held fast to the protecting snows of winter. The hedges were so tall that we could see nothing but the blue sky above them, neither the barn roof nor the windmill. The afternoon sun
poured down on us through the drying grape leaves. The orchard seemed full of sun, like a cup, and we could smell the ripe apples on the trees. (920)

The marked fertility of this scene, involving also something of a return to the security of the garden, and Ántonia's own fertility suggest that she has crafted of this country a work of living art. When Jim first arrived, he, Ántonia, and her children had visited Ántonia's new fruit cave. After the two adults had emerged from the cave, the children "all came running up the steps together, big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight" (918). Though the country had robbed Ántonia of her beloved father, it had rewarded her with this "veritable explosion of life."

Jim recognizes a deep truth in Ántonia's existence. She is not surrounded by wealth, by things, but by a plenitude of life in all its forms. Her triumph has not been without its costs. Jim is seeing her for the first time in twenty years, and she is no longer the beautiful Bohemian woman. She has lost her teeth, her hair is grizzled and her skin is "brown and hardened" (917). But Jim realizes that such changes are to be expected in one who has "lived as long and hard as this woman has." Soon, "the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger. She was there, in the full vigor of her personality,
battered but not diminished. . ." (914). The physical change, Jim decides, is unimportant: "I know so many women who have kept all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, Ántonia had not lost the fire of life" (917).

Through his reunion with Ántonia and his new relationship with her family, Jim will soon begin to experience a personal revitalization. One evening he helps the boys with their chores and begins to feel again the spiritual power one derives from a life on the land.

Everything was as it should be: the strong smell of sunflowers and ironweed in the dew, the clear blue and gold of the sky, the evening star, the purr of the milk into the pails, the grunts and squeals of the pigs fighting over their supper. I began to feel the loneliness of the farm-boy at evening, when the chores seem everlastingly the same, and the world so far away. (923)

Even the remembered "loneliness of the farm-boy" is sweet now to Jim, who has lived a sterile life with a society wife who does not love him and who bore him no children. Though he cannot escape the obligations of his life in the East, he knows now that Ántonia and her family will serve as his living link to the great country of his roots and that each return visit will revitalize his spirit.
At the beginning of the novel, Jim had experienced the death of a past existence and a rebirth into a new one—a life on a vast, fertile land. On this latest return trip to Nebraska, he witnesses a similar birth scene as Ántonia's children issue out of the dark fruit cave in "a veritable explosion of life . . . into the sunlight." This scene, and the family that peoples it, is to give Jim yet another chance at life. It is as if Jim now understands the proper utilization of the once-wild land. What has been lost is the brutal but pregnant innocence of the original, unplowed prairie; the new role of the land is to foster a new form of living art, a family which embodies a right relationship to the changed land. Jim's life has come full circle for him; he feels in Ántonia's orchard the same sense of security he had felt sitting in his grandmother's garden on his first day on the prairie. And though Grandmother Burden's garden is gone, Ántonia's orchard remains.

Jim leaves the farm and returns to Black Hawk to take a train back East. To pass the time until the train arrives, he walks out into the countryside "where the land was so rough it had never been ploughed" and where he experiences again the power of the land he had felt on that first day in his grandmother's garden.

Out there I felt at home again. Overhead the sky was that indescribable blue of autumn; bright and shadowless, hard as enamel. To the south I could
see the dun-shaded river bluffs that used to look so big to me, and all about stretched drying cornfields, of the pale-gold color I remembered so well. Russian thistles were blowing across the uplands and piling against the wire fences like barricades. Along the cattle paths the plumes of golden-rod were already fading into sun-warmed velvet, gray with gold threads in it. I had escaped from the curious depression that hangs over little towns, and my mind was full of pleasant things. . . . (936)

It is apparent that enough of the old power of the raw land remains to reinvigorate him. Jim's return trips to this country will allow him to escape the depression of his Eastern life as well.

But, though beautiful and spiritually uplifting, this is still a land of two faces. It has been hard on Ántonia; it has destroyed her beloved father, taken a heavy physical toll on herself, and fed the greediness of her brother. But it also has given her what Randall calls the "deep but narrow satisfactions" of rural living (105). Hers is a life of meaning and vitality because she understands the country and "uses" it properly. Now it will do the same for Jim Burden. 18
In *One of Ours* (1922) Cather presents Midwestern farm life for the last time in a novel, and she uses a country setting for just over half the book, the second half being devoted to Claude Wheeler's life as a soldier in France during World War I. If Ántonia and her family had shown a proper utilization of the land in Cather's previous novel, the Wheeler family shows the opposite. Claude's father, Nat, owns many farms and works none of them, having "come to this part of Nebraska when the Indians and the buffalo were still about" and having "homesteaded and bought and leased enough land to make him rich" (947). Because he does not like to work, he spends his days travelling about the countryside chatting with neighbors. "There was this to be said for Nat Wheeler, that he liked every sort of human creature; he liked good people and honest people, and he liked rascals and hypocrites almost to the point of loving them" (948).

Wheeler would spend money on anything having to do with agriculture; his farm featured every newfangled machine available, usually purchased by another of his sons, Ralph, who loved anything mechanical and bought items whether they were needed or not. Nat's generosity to others was extensive, and he is actively interested in the lives of his neighbors: "He had encouraged new settlers to take up homesteads, urged on courtships, loaned young fellows the money to marry on, seen families grow and prosper; until he
felt a little as if all this were his own enterprise" (947).

But Nat Wheeler would not waste money. For example, he "considered [it] extravagant to go to a hotel for dinner" (951). He also "thought [Claude's] going to college [was] a waste of money" (953), but since Claude insists on going, he sends him to a "struggling denominational college" called "the Temple" in Lincoln instead of the University of Nebraska because it is cheaper (961). Another reason Wheeler prefers that Claude attend the lesser school is that with a second-rate education he is less likely "to be offensively intelligent at home" (962).

It is clear that Cather sees Nat Wheeler as opposed to all to civilized life. In spite of all his economic success and the consequent ability to have anything he wants, he has little respect for knowledge, culture, or the small things that make life pleasant. He has raised his children to make money and to eschew anything that does not contribute to that end. Somehow, Claude has managed to grow up wanting something else: "He could not make himself believe in the importance of making money or spending it. If that were all, then life was not worth living" (972). In Lincoln, he comes to know the Erlich family, and through them he learns much. The Erlichs are an educated family, and though they are relatively poor, they live a full and cultured life. He finds them to be the complete opposites of his own family.
They merely knew how to live, he discovered, and spent their money on themselves, instead of on machines to do the work and machines to entertain people. Machines, Claude decided, could not make pleasure, whatever else they could do. They could not make agreeable people, either. In so far as he could see, the latter were made by judicious indulgence in almost everything he had been taught to shun. (976)

From the Erlichs Claude learns that thinking is acceptable, that intelligent discussion and analysis of an issue and taking a stand on that issue is pleasurable, that improving one's mind and one's quality of life in other than purely economic ways is perfectly admirable. "He had grown up with the conviction that it was beneath his dignity to explain himself, just as it was to dress carefully, or to be caught taking pains about anything" (977). His association with the Erlichs has opened his eyes to a life based on thought, conversation, and culture, not on the mere acquisition of material wealth at the exclusion of all other pursuits.

Though Cather's prose almost degenerates to the level of preaching here, it may well be that she is trying to outline what she felt should be the next step for the Midwest after the heroic pioneering period. Once the land has been domesticated, once financial success has been achieved, what should follow is the proper refinement of
rural culture. Money, rather than buying another section of land or another unneeded machine, should buy education and a more sophisticated way of looking at and living life, one which does not degenerate into materialistic hedonism. Culture and education, which had been in limited supply on the frontier, should now come to the prairie--without destroying the more meaningful values that she believed had thrived on the prairie in the heroic pioneer era.

But Claude is soon to have this new world of possibilities that the Erlichs represent wrenched from him when his father buys a large ranch in Colorado and determines to leave Claude in charge of the home farm while he develops the new property with Ralph. Claude is disappointed that he must leave school, but he takes his new responsibilities seriously and enjoys some success and feels some pride in his work. The freedom of being out from under his father's thumb is satisfying to Claude, though he does not like "sweat[ing] under this half-responsibility for acres and crops that were not his own" (1006). Yet the actual farm experience is generally pleasurable to him.

That afternoon Claude suddenly stopped flinging white ears into the wagon beside him. It was about five o'clock, the yellowest hour of the autumn day. He stood lost in a forest of light, dry, rustling corn leaves, quite hidden away from the world. Taking off his husking-gloves, he
wiped the sweat from his face, climbed up to the wagon box, and lay down on the ivory-coloured corn. The horses cautiously advanced a step or two, and munched with great content at ears they tore from the stalks with their teeth. (1006)

Claude's yearning for another kind of life does not grow from a hatred of farm life and the farm environment as the above passage well illustrates. He enjoys his work and feels pleasure being in nature. Were other circumstances altered, life in the country could be rewarding.

Having attained the skill of thinking through a problem and now, for the first time, having the time and inclination truly to think at all, Claude comes to grips with what is wrong with the modern farm and farmer, and in his analysis, we hear Cather herself loud and clear.

Claude felt sure that when he was a little boy and all the neighbours were poor, they and their houses and farms had more individuality. The farmers took time then to plant fine cottonwood groves on their places, and to set osage orange hedges along the borders of their fields. Now these trees were all being cut down and grubbed up. . . . With prosperity came a kind of callousness; everybody wanted to destroy things they used to take pride in.
It is this prosperity that has ruined the farm existence. The farmer raised and took to market things of intrinsic value. . . . In return he got manufactured articles of poor quality; showy furniture that went to pieces, carpets and draperies that faded, clothes that made a handsome man look like a clown. (1023)

The farmer has become only the latest victim of materialism; it has made him a slave to money, and he has not yet discovered that money can buy him little of real value. Someone has told Claude that money can buy security: "Sometimes he thought this security was what was the matter with everybody; that only perfect safety was required to kill all the best qualities in people and develop mean ones" (1024). In other words, the heroic struggle of the pioneer farmer--that had nearly deified them in Cather’s mind--had been replaced by an insidious materialism in the modern farmer.

Earlier Claude had had a conversation with a friend, a Bohemian immigrant named Ernest Havel. Claude has asked Ernest what he intends to do with his future, and Ernest replies that he will continue farming and, perhaps, if he’s lucky, he’ll marry someday. To Claude, this does not seem like much, does not add up to a whole life; Ernest replies:

But what do you expect? What can happen to you, except in your own mind? If I get through my
work, and get an afternoon off to see my friends like this, it's enough for me. . . .

. . . You Americans are always looking for something outside yourselves to warm you up, and it is no way to do. In old countries, where not very much can happen to us, we know that,—and we learn to make the most of little things. (984)

It is work, friends, family, and contentment—the little things—that Cather believes hold value and give quality to life.

*One of Ours* is Cather's most direct attack on what she saw as the deterioration of rural American virtue. One believes that were she to have her way, Jefferson's dream of a nation of small farmers, which even he abandoned as hopeless, would come to fruition. Her rhetoric even approaches something akin to Garland's attacks on the "unearned increment" when she has Claude muse, "It was strange that in all the centuries the world had been going, the question of property had not been better adjusted. The people who had it were slaves to it, and the people who didn't have it were slaves to them" (1006). Thus writes the artist who takes "the dimmest possible view of literature that had a moral message" (Woodress 188).

In a 1923 article written for *The Nation* (one year after the publication of *One of Ours*), Cather discusses her
home state, noting first the positives of life there, then
the negatives:

Of course, there is the other side of the medal, stamped with the ugly crest of materialism, which has set its seal upon all of our most productive commonwealths. Too much prosperity, too many moving-picture shows, too much gaudy fiction have colored the taste and manners of so many of these Nebraskans of the future. It is her hope that eventually the disease of materialism will wane and that the people "will revolt against all the heaped-up, machine-made materialism about them. They will go back to the old sources of culture and wisdom. . . ."
("Nebraska" 238). Cather uses the temperamental and unsatisfied Claude to illustrate, once again, that certain types of humans, those who have "that finer strain in [their] natures" (1063), are unsuited to this particular Nebraska. But the issue is complex. Claude stands for many positives in the novel; he not only appreciates the beauty of nature, he is also a conservationist; he sees through the materialism of his father and brothers; he is sensitive to the artistic and cultural needs of people; though he has been more or less forced into his farm experience, still he recognizes and appreciates the sense of harmony the farmer may experience working on the land. For Cather--though she is heavy-handed
in her condemnation of farm life as epitomized by the Nat Wheelers, the Ambrosch Shimerdas, and Olaf Ericsons of Nebraska—still believes the rural experience can be the very best way of living. She presents an idyllic harvest scene, reminiscent of those of Hamlin Garland, in which life, work, and nature come together in perfection.

Every morning the sun came up a red ball, quickly drank the dew, and started a quivering excitement in all living things. In great harvest seasons like that one, the heat, the intense light, and the important work in hand draw people together and make them friendly. Neighbours helped each other to cope with the burdensome abundance of man-nourishing grain; women and children and old men fell to and did what they could to save and house it. (1064)

To Cather, this whole "changing works" scene, as Hamlin Garland would refer to it, is "man-nourishing"; this is, in fact, perfection in life. It is perhaps passages like this that have caused several critics to note the influence on Cather of the Populist viewpoint, which saw agrarian life as holy, almost. That viewpoint promulgated "the concept of the virtuous farmer dwelling in a Garden of Eden" (Randall 6). But Claude Wheeler will not find satisfaction here because this scene is an aberration in the Nebraska of his time; it depicts a temporary retreat to the sanity that
characterized an earlier age. The reality of Claude's world is better illustrated by the materialism of his father. He is spared from the impossible task trying to fit into this unacceptable world by the advent of World War I. He enlists in what he believes is a glorious cause and dies in France; and, we are told, he dies happily, sure that his life had finally come to mean something.

Part 4: Final Statements: Stay on the Land

We are never sure if Claude Wheeler could ever have been happy on the farm. His need for something more than what his contemporary Nebraska could offer may have forced him, as it does so many of Cather's protagonists, away from his home. But Cather does not leave the reader without a guide to how life should be lived on the prairie; she gives us Ernest Havel, the young Bohemian immigrant who came to America and found satisfaction in his work and in his friendships. It is to be expected that the life of an immigrant will be closest to Cather's ideal, for they come from hardship and from established cultures. In fact, the proper approach to life will be best illustrated in her last significant statement on the agrarian existence, "Neighbor Rosicky," written some six years after One of Ours, in 1928, and published in 1930.

Anton Rosicky is another Bohemian who had immigrated first to England and then to the United States. He had
lived in London and then New York City where he worked in a tailor shop and lived a good life; but he "never saved anything" (598). Eventually, "as the years passed, all alike, he began to get a little restless." Springtime made him restless; his restlessness made him drink too much. When the lilacs bloomed in the spring, "he was tormented by a longing to run away. That was why he drank too much; to get a temporary illusion of freedom and wide horizons" (599).

Rosicky came to see the city as "[s]o much stone and asphalt," as a place where "[t]he emptiness was intense." (We recall that Cather had been living in New York for more than twenty years when she wrote this.) On the Fourth of July, he experiences a moment of epiphany:

It struck young Rosicky that this was the trouble with big cities; they built you away from any contact with the ground. You lived in an unnatural world, like the fish in an aquarium, who were probably much more comfortable than they ever were in the sea. (599)

Rosicky was beginning to see that his comfortable existence in the city was slowly draining his life of meaning. From that day on, "the desire to return to the country never left him." It was a desire that had its source in his roots, when, as a boy, he had lived on his grandparents' rented farm in the Old Country where he had "formed those ties with
the earth and the farm animals and growing things which are never made at all unless they are made early" (600).

At the age of thirty-five, Rosicky makes his way to Nebraska to begin to carve a new life out of the soil. He marries, acquires land, and raises a family of five sons and a daughter. To Rosicky, family is the single, essential ingredient of a good life, and he has forged for his, not a life of wealth, but a life of love. Their family doctor occasionally overheard people wondering why Rosicky didn't get on faster. He was industrious, and so were his boys, but they were rather free and easy, weren't pushers, and they didn't always show good judgment. They were comfortable, they were out of debt, but they didn't get much ahead. Maybe, Doctor Burleigh reflected, people as generous and warm-hearted and affectionate as the Rosickys never got ahead much; maybe you couldn't enjoy your life and put it into the bank, too. (592).

The Rosickys, though, live a life of quality. Rosicky buys the best ticking in town for his wife, and spends a little money on candy for his family. They eat well, and rather than make a little extra money by selling their cream, Mrs. Rosicky insists that she'd "rather put some colour into my children's faces than put money into the bank" (597).
Anton and Mary Rosicky have the values that Cather admired. "They had been at one accord not to hurry through life, not to be always skimping and saving. They saw their neighbours buy more land and feed more stock than they did, without discontent" (596). When their oldest son complains about the current crop failure and hard times, Anton's core beliefs about life inform his response. "You boys don't know what hard times is. You don't owe nobody, you got plenty to eat an' keep warm, an' plenty water to keep clean. When you got them, you can't have it very hard" (606). Then their mother tells them a story about how their father had reacted when a torrid day had destroyed their corn crop several years before. Though he knew the crop failure would mean financial hardship for the rest of the year, he had just walked out of the field and asked Mary to prepare a picnic. Then he tossed the boys in the horse tank and joined them to cool off. Later, the entire family proceeded to eat their evening picnic of biscuits and plum preserves, fried chicken, and wine in the shade of their orchard. Mary tells us that happiness can be attained even in the absence of wealth: "An' we enjoyed ourselves that year, poor as we was, an' our neighbours wasn't a bit better off for bein' miserable" (608).

The oldest son, Randolph, has just married and begun to farm on his own. Rosicky's greatest fear is that this drought will discourage him to the point that he will
quit the farm and take a factory job in Omaha. . . .

But to Rosicky that meant the end of everything for his son. To be a landless man was to be a wage-earner, a slave, all your life; to have nothing, to be nothing. (604)

Living on the farm as they did, without great regard for getting ahead, was living well. Rosicky hopes for the same kind of life for all his children.

They would have to work hard on the farm, and probably they would never do much more than make a living. But if he could think of them as staying here on the land, he wouldn’t have to fear any great unkindness for them. Hardships, certainly . . . . But there would be other years when everything came along right, and you caught up. . . .

In the country, if you had a mean neighbor, you could keep off his land and make him keep off yours. But in the city, all the foulness and misery and brutality of your neighbours was part of your life. (612)

What he would leave as legacy to his children is a life in which hardship might, but brutality would not, play a part.

Rosicky’s weak heart gives out and he dies. He is buried in a country cemetery just across his own field from the lamplight of his own kitchen. His boys farm around the
graveyard itself. There lies Rosicky, as Cather would have him, "dissolved into something complete and great" (MA 724).

Cather wrote her last story, "The Best Years," in 1945, a little less than two years before her death. It was published posthumously as one of three stories in The Old Beauty and Others in 1948. Though it does not center on a character who lives on a farm, it does concern farm life to some extent, and it is her last statement, brief as it is, on that way of life.

Evangeline Knightly, through whose focus the story is told, is the County Superintendent of Public Instruction. Among her tasks is the very pleasurable one of visiting the one-room country school houses of the county.

She loved the beautiful autumn country; loved to look at it, to breathe it. She was not a "dreamy" person, but she was thoughtful and very observing. She relished the morning; the great blue of the sky, smiling and cloudless,—and the land that lay level as far as the eye could see. The horizon was like a perfect circle, a great embrace, and within it lay the cornfields, still green, and the yellow wheat stubble, miles and miles of it, and the pasture lands where the white-faced cattle led lives of utter content. (729)
Presumably, it is her penning of pastoral scenes such as this which have led critics to label Cather as a "prettifier" of rural life. But, as the story illustrates, behind the beauty of nature is also its awesome and sometimes destructive power.

On this day, the superintendent stops at the school of sixteen-year-old Lesley Fergusson. Directly beside the unfenced schoolyard is a cemetery—very few graves, very much sun and waving yellow grass, open to the singing from the schoolroom and the shouts of boys playing ball at noon. The cemetery never depressed the children, and surely the school cast no gloom over the cemetery. (730)

In placing the cemetery and the school in harmonious juxtaposition, Cather is suggesting again, as she had seventeen years earlier in "Neighbor Rosicky," that one of the virtues of farm life is that the cycle of life is everywhere apparent and in every way natural.

Knightly takes Lesley back to her home in the county seat for the weekend where we meet her unusual family, headed by an eccentric father who is possessed of many of the characteristics Cather admired. James Fergusson is a farmer, though his family lives in town in the small home his wife had purchased with an inheritance. He is not a particularly successful farmer because "[h]is habits were
too unconventional" (740). He calls himself an experimental farmer, and "[e]xperimental farming wasn't immediately remunerative" (741). He likes to work until noon, then rest and think during the afternoon. When the neighborhood farmers begin to give their farms names, like "Lone Tree Farm" and "Cold Spring Farm," Fergusson names his place "Wide Awake Farm" (740). He explained to his wife that "the important crop on that farm was an idea. His farm was like an observatory where one watched the signs of the times and saw the great change that was coming for the benefit of all mankind" (741).

But Fergusson's family is proud of him. Because the children, like Lesley, work, they are able to live a comfortable life, though one without luxury. Their dreamer father, who enjoys politics and whose personal hero is William Jennings Bryan, is allowed to think in the afternoons, and his family grows up strong and vital and close in spite of—or perhaps partially because of—his eccentricities.

Eventually tragedy strikes the family as Lesley and her students are trapped in a sudden snowstorm that drops over four feet of snow in less than an hour on the countryside. It had come so quickly that some people were completely disoriented in their own backyards. Eventually, Lesley and the children are rescued by a neighboring farm couple, but Lesley catches pneumonia and dies. The fourteen miles from
town and the compounding factor of the blizzard made the
doctor's arrival too late to save her. Lesley's mother and
brother arrive before she dies, aided by many farmers along
the way who all "knew about the school and the teacher by
that time, and wanted to help, no matter how bad the roads
were" (751).

Twenty years later, Knightly, returns to the little
town after an absence of fifteen years and her own marriage.
She visits Mrs. Ferguesson who now lives in a fine, new
house, some workable ideas apparently having come from "Wide
Awake Farm." But Mrs. Ferguesson is not happy; her boys are
all successful now and living in other states. She longs
for a time past, when her children were upstairs in the old
house, when her daughter was still alive. She says, "Well,
this I know: our best years are when we're working hardest
and going right ahead when we can hardly see our way out"
(756). What keeps this scene from being one of mere
oppressive nostalgia is the fact that the reader sees
exactly how true that statement is in Mrs. Ferguesson's
situation. Her life is over, essentially; what has ended it
is the unlikely success of her odd-ball husband as well as
that of her four sons--and, of course, the death of her only
daughter.

Just as Cather had done in "Neighbor Rosicky," in "The
Best Years" she places at the center of her action an
active, working family. But the Rosickys are not ruined by
success; their lives, we are led to believe, will continue
on the same even after the death of the patriarch. Mrs.
Ferguesson, on the other hand, is the victim of progress and
of monetary success. In each story, Cather demonstrates
both the positive and negative aspects of rural life.
Hardship and struggle and tragedy are part of such an
existence, but so are neighborliness, strong family values,
and a meaningful life. In "The Best Years" the suggestion
is unavoidable that, since Mr. Ferguesson left the farm and
became a political appointee, the life of the Ferguessons
has deteriorated. The Rosicky's contentedness, still
grounded in a life on the land, will continue unabated.

Willa Cather's writings about the agricultural pioneer
experience defy any narrow categorization. Most certainly,
it is absurd to label her writings about the agricultural
frontier as pure "lyric nostalgia." In her three novels and
eleven short stories that depict country life, the farm
existence is both deadly and life-giving. It stands for
desolation, isolation, and deprivation; it stands for
beauty, heroism, and spirituality. In her earliest as well
as her latest works, both aspects of the frontier are
detailed.

An analysis of her work also brings into question other
"fashionable judgments" and "critical assumptions." Though
she has been labeled as one who will not tolerate reform
themes in literature, certainly Cather is pointedly attacking one kind of life, the materialistic, as soul-destroying—most particularly in "The Bohemian Girl" and One of Ours. And, though a recent trend in Cather criticism emphasizes particular feminist themes, it is apparent that Cather, at least in the case of O'Brien's analysis O Pioneers!, is being recruited for a cause that is not—at least intentionally—hers.21

The ambivalence toward country life in Cather's work stems from many sources. It reflects dramatically the events of the difficult years between 1887 and 1896 when Cather was growing up in the midst of enduring drought and economic hardship. It is affected by her personal need to escape from the limitations of country life and her equally strong need to return to it for spiritual sustenance. It is molded by her concern over the substitution of materialistic values for older, more life-centered values. Cather, the artist, worked with the materials she knew; what she knew best was the life of Nebraska settlers. On that canvas, she painted a variety of scenes and characters in an attempt to tell her particular version of the human experience. It is not surprising that she should portray the agricultural milieu variously, for she was no propagandist, but an artist.

Critics wishing to recruit her as a writer who fits into any single category, at least as concerns her
agricultural fiction, must meet disappointment. Her art is not one that "changes color through several decades," as Wasserman correctly notes. She is, in fact, in term of her farm literature, remarkable consistent only at providing a balanced and varied view of that experience. There is, in fact, not a single story or novel which presents either a wholly positive or wholly negative picture of pioneer life in the country.
Notes

1. Recent biographers provide good examples. O’Brien notes that Cather was opposed to novelists becoming "reporters or crusaders for social justice" (151). Thomas writes that Cather "had no interest in social reform" (11) and refused to "believe that society would ever be changed by a novel" (13). Woodress writes, "She had little interest in McClure’s crusading zeal, found social reformers very dull people, and took the dimmest possible view of literature that had a moral message" (188). Cather herself contributed to this idea by attacking the work of writers like Hamlin Garland and Sinclair Lewis. And, in "Escapism," an article designed to be something of a reaction to the critics of the 1930s who called her work escapist, she merely wrote, "What has art ever been but escape?" (968).

2. Examples are numerous; they include Colonel Bywater in "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional" (1901); Katherine Gaylord in "A Death in the Desert" (1903); Aunt Georgiana in "A Wagner Matinée" (1903); the title character of "The Joy of Nelly Deane" (1911); Nils Ericson and Clara Vavrika in "The Bohemian Girl" (1912); Thea Kronborg in A Song of the Lark (1915); Claude Wheeler in One of Ours (1922); Marion Forrester in A Lost Lady (1923); Godfrey St. Peter in The Professor's House (1925); Euclide Auclair in Shadows on the Rock (1931); and the title character of Lucy Gayheart
(1935). The publication dates of these stories and novels indicate that the theme interested Cather throughout her career. The list can easily be expanded.

3. Weber writes, "Her dark response to farm life also owed something to the natural catastrophes and economic depression of the early nineties that clouded the western regions of the Midwest for recent immigrants and established figures alike. In the panic year of 1893 Cather's father was among the many who suffered financial damage" (123). For a more lengthy discussion of the problems of this pivotal decade of drought, financial hardship, and political upheaval, see Chapter II.

4. Cather's experiences between 1896 through 1900 are carefully documented in Woodress, pages 112-47.

5. Revivalism was alive and well during these years of drought and depression in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Cather is not sympathetic; she refers to those at the meeting in which Eric Hermannson is "saved" as "people who had starved all the passions so long, only to fall victims to the basest of them all, fear" (25). The conversion of those in attendance, she writes, results from a "complete divestment of reason" and a "frenzy born of a convulsion of the mind" (22). Of the "Free Gospellers" in this story, one character says, "They're responsible for a few suicides, and they've sent a good-sized delegation to the state insane
asylum. . ." (31). In One of Ours, Cather presents a scathing picture of Enid Royce, whose fanatical dedication to her religion and to missionary work makes her marriage to Claude Wheeler a destructive farce. In contrast, her reverence for sincere and constructive religious belief, as she seems to interpret it, is illustrated by her handling of Fathers Latour and Vaillant in Death Comes for the Archbishop. Religious practices in general (and interdenominational squabbling) become important quite naturally in The Song of the Lark, as Thea Kronborg's father is a local minister. Hamlin Garland also often attacked revivalism, as in "The Test of Elder Pill" (Prairie Folks), and even rabid denominationalism, as in "A Preacher's Love Story" (Wayside Courtships).

6. Bennett quotes from a Cather interview with Eva Mahoney in the November 27, 1921, issue of the Omaha Sunday World-Herald magazine section.

7. It is significant here that one of the experiences of life that the artist may well expect to forgo, according to Cather, is marriage, as Gerber (38) and many other writers have noted. See also Woodress (126).

8. Mahoney interview; see footnote six.

9. Lee cites correspondence between Cather and friend Will Jones (May 1905 letter, now in the University of Virginia collection) in which Cather "replied defensively that she
had intended a tribute to the courage of the pioneer women" (79).

10. This plot line parallels that of Hamlin Garland’s "A Branch Road" in which Will Hannan returns to his childhood farm country to rescue his childhood girlfriend, Agnes Dingman, from her mean husband and his surly family. No doubt Cather, who frequently commented on Garland’s stories, was familiar with this first story in Garland’s *Main-Travelled Roads* collection.

11. Lee cites letters to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant (1911) and Will Owen Jones (1914).

12. O’Brien’s work finds its beginnings in “[Nancy] Chodorow’s analysis of the role of the mother in the daughter’s psychological development. . . ." She is concerned with Cather’s lengthy "struggle to resolve the culturally imposed contradictions between femininity and creativity" (5). In *O Pioneers!* , O’Brien asserts that Cather has reached a certain stage in this struggle; in it she presents "the narrative of a creative woman whose life story follows neither the conventional female nor male plot" (428). O’Brien’s thesis, however, requires that she belittle both the positive efforts of the father and his contributions to Alexandra’s success.

13. Two important broad delineations of this concept are in Josephine Donovan’s *After the Fall* and Elizabeth Jane
Harrison's *Female Pastoral*. Dorothy Tuck McFarland, in her *Willa Cather*, says specifically about *O Pioneers!* that 
"[John] Bergson exemplifies one possible relationship to the land--that of impersonal ownership--which is shown, by its results, to be inadequate" (21). She further states, "Though many have attempted to subdue the land, its submission to the hand of man is dependent on love rather than force" (23), thus anticipating much of O'Brien's argument. I, of course, disagree with McFarland as well as O'Brien.

14. The word "possibilities," used here by Cather and attributed to the thoughts of John Bergson, is emphasized because it is a key word in O'Brien's statement quoted earlier in this paper. She speaks of Alexandra as being "able to see possibilities in the soil that no one has glimpsed." I submit that at least Cather thought that John, too, had glimpsed those possibilities.

15. Again Cather's fictional chronology closely resembles historical fact. In the novel's first line, we are told that the story begins "thirty years ago," meaning that John would have died in 1883. Three good years follow for the family, but in 1887, the drought came to their land as it did to all the plains states historically (Shannon 313). This is the year that the great land boom of the plains came crashing to an end, resulting in severely tightened credit
policies. Many farmers who were in debt were unable to keep their property, allowing for the purchase of inexpensive land by debt-free farmers, such as Alexandra, and wealthy Easterners, such as Margaret Elliot's father in "Eric Hermansson's Soul." And we remember that John had presented his daughter with one square mile of debt-free land. When Part II of the novel begins, sixteen years have elapsed since John's death. It is 1899, and Alexandra has seen the fulfillment of her dream. Historically, by this time prosperity had indeed come to the farmer, a prosperity that would continue unabated for nearly twenty years through World War I (326).

16. Other critics have seen Alexandra as masculine. See, for two examples, Hermione Lee who remarks that, in O Pioneers!, "The attributes of the strong pioneer figure who combines masculine and feminine qualities is firmly introduced" (106--the emphasis is Lee's); and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant who comments on Alexandra's particularly "masculine vision and her power to 'dominise' . . . the land of her inheriting and increasing." Sergeant also contrasts this masculinity in Alexandra with the femininity of Ántonia who "was simply and lustily contained in the country" and whose "rôle was so primeval, and so much woman's whether she plowed for her brother or cooked for Mrs. Harling . . ." (150-51). Sergeant's comments also support my contentions
that, first, Alexandra did dominate the land as much as anyone, and, second, her task was not to forge a prosperous farm out of nothing, but to build (increase) upon the inheritance, the substantial head start, her father had bequeathed to her.

17. We learn in the introduction that the Burdens do not have a successful marriage but that Mrs. Burden—who is "temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm" and who seems generally displeased with Jim—"[f]or some reason . . . wishes to remain Mrs. James Burden" (712).

18. David Stouck sees this apparent reliance on Ántonia's existence to give his own life meaning as resulting from his being "a man whose personal life is wanting, who retreats into the fuller life of his memories" (45). Stouck defines the pastoral as "a mode of art based on memory" (35); in Jim's particular case, he is escaping from real life into memory. Blanche Gelfant writes that Cather, through Jim Burden, used nostalgia to mask the horror of life on the prairie under a cover of pleasant childhood remembrance. She also sees in Jim's looking back on a preferred time of innocence proof of his own inability to deal with his adult sexuality. The sense of nostalgia—or even escape—in this book cannot be denied; I would suggest, however, that any discussion of whatever psychological motives may have induced Cather to write this material must be tempered by a the consideration of a more simple possible impetus: the
reasoned desire to judge, to choose between, and to annoint one of two approaches to life: an artificially complex, sterile, and empty existence or a simple but fertile and meaningful one.

19. Lee notes that Cather's "celebration of the hardworking farmers who took hold echoes the voice of agrarian Populism, the mid-West politics of the time" (43). Alfred Kazin writes of "[h]er enduring values" as deriving from a mixture of "pioneer and agrarian values" and her love of European cultures, to which she was introduced, at least partially, on the Nebraska prairies (17).

20. This most powerful of Cather's short stories may have obtained some of its strength, and sentiment, from the fact that she wrote it only a few months after the death of her much-loved father (Woodress 438).

21. Most critics, while noting positive presentations of female (and male) characters in her fiction, agree that Cather would never have thought of herself as a feminist. Susie Thomas, in her feminist critical biography of Cather, for example, states bluntly that "she was no feminist," though Thomas does identify feminist characteristics in Cather's fiction (10). Ironically, it was Garland who was something of a feminist champion. Francis W. Kaye writes that "he was the only male author of literary significance who specifically endorsed in his writings woman's rights, woman's suffrage, and woman's equality in marriage" (135).
Chapter VII: Conclusion

Eric J. Sundquist writes in the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* that Hamlin Garland's experiences as a pioneer "showed him the bitter toil and loneliness of rural life" (518) and that his "short fiction, in wrenching stories like 'A Branch Road,' 'Up the Coulee,' or 'Lucretia Burns,' depicts common life [as one of] . . . humility and degradation. . ." (519). There is no mention here of the primarily positive attitudes toward rural life expressed in the "Boy Life" series or even in *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* or *Boy Life on the Prairie*, certainly two of his best books. In this 1988 general scholarly summary of our country's literature and literary figures--whose stated goal is the "redefinition of our literary past" (xi) --Garland stands for, essentially, one thing: the debunker of the rural idyll.

The same text connects Willa Cather with other women writers around the turn of the century whose works were regional and whose audience was an "increasingly . . . metropolitan America looking nostalgically upon its past" (Tichi 597-98). Further, Cather "allied herself with the energies of the land, and identified them as female," and her fiction instructs the reader that "[t]he American land . . . is the center of woman's power." Generally, here, she is understood as one who nearly deified the landscape,
noting its great power to "fashion an alternative women's aesthetic" (605). Cather's work is characterized as wholly positive, even primarily nostalgic, toward the pioneer landscape and the rural experience; she is seen as a romantic, a regionalist, and--most recently--a partisan for certain feminist thematics.

These characterizations of Garland and Cather are the subject of this study. If in a few short phrases or pages of our country's most recent literary history these two Midwestern writers have come primarily to represent, respectively, the destroyer of the rural idyllic myth and the lionizer of rural life (as well as a romantic and a "woman writer"), then I contend this the general perception of their work is clearly reductionist and pointedly incomplete or even false.

I have traced what I consider to be three major causes of this erroneous critical distillation: First, writers often ignore the nineteenth-century milieu in which the two grew to maturity. The lives of Garland's and Cather's characters--and those of the two writers themselves--must be understood in relation to the background of natural disasters, economic upheaval, and political tumult that characterized that era, which has been discussed in some detail in Chapter II of this study. Certain of Garland's and Cather's negative accounts of rural life owe their conceptions not to the inherent qualities of that life, but
to the accidents of nature and the manufactured and unjust
social and political conditions of the period in which the
two grew to maturity.

Second, many critics have made assumptions about the
childhood and young-adult experiences of Garland and Cather
that are insupportable. I contend, also, that those who
comment on the lives and literature of the two writers seem
to be, for the most part, completely unable to identify with
a rural existence and are therefore prone to interpret
normal farm activities as brutal or disgusting or demeaning.
As Chapter III has demonstrated, neither writer grew up in
poverty or in conditions of cultural or educational
depression. Garland, the voracious reader from childhood,
was raised in what Walter F. Taylor has called an "agrarian
middle class" family ("Garland" 129); Mildred Bennett makes
note of Cather's solid education and identifies the Cathers
as a "cultivated people" (Introduction xiv). In fact, the
great freedoms that each writer knew and the numerous and
varied experiences they had while growing up were certainly
significant factors in their artistic development. It was
during those years that both artists established their life-
long attachments to the Midwestern prairie. While the two
precocious youngsters did leave their prairie homes to
pursue literary careers, neither would ever truly leave that
country behind.
Third, as discussed in Chapter IV of this study, many of the inaccurate assessments of the writers' attitudes toward farm life have resulted from critics' making assumptions based on a limited selection of works by the two authors. While Garland wrote "Sim Burns's Wife" and "John Boyle's Conclusion," he also wrote "Boy Life: The Voice of Spring" and *Rose of Dutcher's Cooly*. While Cather wrote "Neighbor Rosicky" and *My Ántonia*, she also wrote "The Clemency of the Court" and "A Wagner Matinée." The true attitudes of the writers toward their pioneer experiences and farm life in general are found not in any one of these works, but in the combination of them all. Even in Garland's most bleak accounts of that life, the better side of it also appears, if in muted tones. Even in Cather's most elegiac depictions of the Nebraska landscape, its demonic potential lurks.

In Chapters V and VI I have examined the farm writings of Garland and Cather, respectively, my purpose being to consider the full spectrum of their work on that subject and thus address the problems of narrow categorization and false generalization that result from looking at only a small sample. Certainly, for example, Cather's work does illustrate a deep affection for the Nebraska landscape; she does demonstrate the functioning of a romantic sensibility in her work; she does write of powerful women who achieve in a sometimes inhospitable world. But Cather's *oeuvre*
transcends any such narrow characterization. In works outside the scope of this study, she also writes about French missionaries working in the American Southwest in the mid-nineteenth-century in Death Comes to the Archbishop; she describes the lives of French immigrants in late-seventeenth century Quebec in Shadows on the Rock; she details the experiences of an American doughboy in Europe during World War I in One of Ours; she delineates the deterioration of an intellectual's life in The Professor's House.

In her strictly rural Midwestern writings, she creates both heroines and heroes: along side Alexandra Bergson, Ántonia Shimerda, and Thea Kronborg, one must consider Anton Rosicky, John Bergson, Eric Hermannson, and Claude Wheeler. Most importantly to this study, she saw both the negative and positive aspects of pioneer farm life, and her presentations of that life are on the whole realistic, not idealistic. She narrates the hardships of that life resulting from vicissitudes of weather, the occupational ignorance of pioneers, and the volatile social and economic conditions of that era. But, she also acknowledges the great pleasures of that life and the spiritual connection that one can develop with that natural environment. Hers is a balanced look at the Midwestern pioneer experience in which the harsher aspects of that life are never glossed over even as she is creating a picture of a generally positive farm existence. The pioneer environment, for
example, took the lives of both Alexandra's and Ántonia's fathers, though it would eventually nourish their daughters' existences.

What also must be acknowledged is that Cather took years to arrive at a point at which she could write her epics of the prairie, O Pioneers! and My Ántonia. Her first uses of Nebraska as setting would portray that land as an unforgiving one, and her earliest accounts of that place and that era are dominated by a naturalistic tone and naturalistic themes. Only gradually would she even come to accept the lives of those on the prairie lands as suitable subjects for her mature artistic expressions, and this gradual acceptance would mirror the working out of her own feelings about her Nebraska childhood and her own need to leave it to find artistic fulfillment. Finally she would come to see, as she reveals in My Ántonia, that for Jim Burden—and for herself—a combination of the two worlds, the primitive world of pioneer Nebraska and the sophisticated world of the East and Europe, was necessary to make the individual whole.

Hamlin Garland arrived at a similar conclusion, as his Rose of Dutcher's Cooly best illustrates. As a young man, Garland had felt the need to leave his prairie home to sate his need for a literary life, but he never shook the hold the Midwest had on him. Rose Dutcher, the farm girl turned poet, is Garland's best expression of the best compromise:
a youth in the unconfining world of the farm, an adulthood in a center of culture. But even after the artist has left his or her rural home, he or she must have easy access to it. Always the farm would be the source of spiritual replenishment for Rose, as it was for Garland for the first half of his life.

To correctly understand Garland's portrayal of life on the Midwestern agricultural frontier, one must not only evaluate the full spectrum of his farm writings, but also consider the impact of personal factors that so informed that fiction. Perhaps the two most significant of those factors—and they are related—are Garland's reformist zeal and his sense of guilt about having abandoned his parents—particularly his mother—to a life on a drought-stricken, desolate Dakota plain. As Garland's father had been, so did the son become involved in the agrarian revolt during the late 1880s and early 1890s. Though his accounts of rural life both before and after this five-year reform period would be notably positive, Garland's fiction from 1888 to 1892 would often become straight propaganda pieces for various Populist causes. His concern for his ailing mother during this same period would also affect many of his short stories, as is demonstrated by his repeated presentation of the life of pioneer women as one replete with unrewarded toil in an atmosphere of loneliness and cultural vacuity.
No doubt women did suffer on the frontier; no doubt men and children did as well. But suffering is not necessarily indigenous to a typical rural existence. Had the extended drought not occurred, had economic conditions been fairer to the farmer, had land speculation not spread homesteads farther and farther apart, rural life—as Garland tells us in most of his works—would have been a largely positive one. In fact, before and after those years of turmoil and revolt, Garland felt it to be a good life, as he has shown us in the "Boy Life" series of articles, in *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, and in numerous other stories.

In portraying Garland's attitude toward pioneer farm life as even primarily negative, one hundred years of critics have misunderstood him. In portraying Cather's attitude toward that life as wholly or consistently positive or in attempting to fit her into any narrow critical category, her critics have made a similar mistake. Each wrote realistically about rural life; to them it was both a difficult life and a good life; it could destroy and it could exalt.

The complete farm-related works of each provide the reader with a realistic, balanced statement of life on the Midwestern agricultural frontier. I have, again, adopted (and redefined) Carl Van Doren's phrase the "hard pastoral" as the best characterization of the total picture Garland and Cather provide of the frontier experience. It was a
hard life, and its financial rewards and cultural opportunities may have been limited; but it was an immensely satisfying life emotionally and spiritually.

Hamlin Garland died in 1940 of a cerebral hemorrhage in Hollywood, California. Seven years later Willa Cather died of the same cause in New York City. The two Midwestern pioneer children spent nearly all of their adult lives away from their childhood homes, though both revisited them frequently. Perhaps it is fitting that Cather become the New Yorker and live in this country's cultural center and that Garland finally settle in Hollywood, this country's center of popular glitz. In most matters, the three thousand miles that separated the two properly symbolize the gulf between them in terms of their artistic creeds and their current placement among America's literary artists, for certainly Cather's reputation continues to improve while Garland's continues to wane. And while Garland would at one point abandon his serious Midwestern writing career to become a writer of Western romances and a collector of famous acquaintances, Cather would continue to use Nebraska as a fictional setting throughout her career, to hone her uncompromising art almost until her death, and to become more and more reclusive.

But in one important way the two remain akin: neither ever shook the hold that rural America had on them. Garland
chose to have his ashes sprinkled near his childhood home in Salem, Wisconsin.¹ Cather was buried beside pioneers in a rural setting she loved in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, where she had written the ending of My Ántonia (Woodress 505). In a letter Cather sent to Garland (1919?), one senses that kinship.² Apparently Garland had contacted her about coming to his home for tea with himself and Mrs. Garland; Cather replies that she is grateful to have attracted his notice and obtained his apparent approval of her work. She also comments that Garland is among the very few whom she would care about pleasing and whose disapproval would matter to her at all. Cather closes by reiterating her gratefulness and by acknowledging that the two of them would certainly have much to discuss.

Indeed they would. For Garland had only two years earlier published his critically acclaimed account of his own pioneer experience in A Son of the Middle Border and Cather had only one year earlier published her pioneer masterpiece, My Ántonia. I can find no proof, however, as to whether or not the two pioneers ever finally got together and had the opportunity to discuss their shared and, among literary figures, unique heritage.
Notes


2. Two letters from Cather are included in Garland's papers in the Doheny library at the University of Southern California. Neither of Cather's letters includes a year, though one scholar has suggested that the second letter was written in 1920 or 1921 and has so noted his guess on the letter folder. The first, from which I paraphrase here, was written on a December 27. The second letter notes that the two had still not gotten together, but Cather suggests that he call the following Friday the thirteen. Such a Friday occurred in February 1920. So I am guessing that the first letter was written in December 1919.


---. "Lou, the Prophet." 1892. Faulkner, Short Fiction 535-41.


---. "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle." Nation 5 Sept. 1923: 236-238.


---. "The Novel Démeublé." 1922. O'Brien, Other Writings
834-37.


---. "Before the Low Green Door." *WC* 253-62.


---. "Boy Life on the Prairie. IV.--Between Hay an'..."


---. "A Branch Road." M-TR 7-65.


---. "John Boyle's Conclusion." Pizer, "John Boyle" 61-75.


---. Prairie Folks. [Chicago: Stone & Kimball, 1893.]

---. "Return of the Private." M-TR 167-94.


---. A Son of the Middle Border. New York: Macmillan,
1917.


---. Unpublished diary, 1877. Doheny Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

---. "Up the Coolly." M-TR 67-129.


Kaye, Frances W. "Hamlin Garland's Feminism." *Women and Western American Literature.* Eds. Helen Winter Stauffer and Susan J. Rosowski. Troy, NY: Whitston,
1982.
Mcfarland, Dortothy Tuck. Willa Cather. New York: Ungar,
1972.


Parrington, Vernon Louis. *Main Currents in American


Richardson, Albert D. Beyond the Mississippi: From the Great River to the Great Ocean. Life and Adventure on the Prairies, Mountains, and Pacific Coast. Hartford, CT, 1867.


Schroeter, James. Introduction. Willa Cather and her


Wasserman, Loretta. *Willa Cather: A Study of the Short

