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So, you are planning to teach a Cather novel in your secondary English classroom! Great! Here are some practical tips you might incorporate into your classroom.

If the majority of students have not read anything by Willa Cather, I suggest beginning with the novel *O Pioneers!*. This novel is quick to gain secondary students' attention as it has two strong story lines, several romances, and plenty of action.

So, let's begin . . .

Objectives: My objectives in teaching a Cather novel (or any novel) revolve around the following:

1. To encourage students to read and understand the entire novel
2. To encourage self-discovery of important issues in the novel
3. To encourage students to understand the structure (or backbone) of the novel and to have an appreciation for the author's effective use of language
4. To encourage self-expression of ideas in the novel through discussion, writing, and projects
5. To accommodate a variety of student learning styles

Assignment: Since most students will not read a novel twice, it is imperative that they begin with some clues as to what to look for as they read.

For *O Pioneers!*, students should be looking for the following:

1. Notice that the novel has two story lines. You will want to keep track of both stories. Sometimes they intersect; sometimes they proceed in a parallel fashion. You will immediately find hints of the two stories in "PRAIRIE SONG," a poem that introduces the novel. (Responses should indicate that Carl and Alexandra are at the center of one story and the story of Emil and Marie is the other.)
2. The book consists of five parts. In each part, look for references to ducks and record what you find. Keep a journal of sorts, keeping track of the page numbers where you find your "evidence."

"Evidence" should include the following:

- a. Part I, Ivar warns the Bergsons not to shoot the ducks
- b. Part II, Emil shoots some wild ducks flying overhead, first to the glee and then to the dismay of Marie
- c. Part III, Section II, Alexandra remembers the single wild duck confined to the pond

d. Part IV, Section IV, Emil remembers the single wild duck confined to the pond; Section V, Marie remembers the ducks that Emil shot

e. Part V, Section III, Carl tells Alexandra about the incident at the pond when Emil shot the ducks

- Students should early on identify that the characters Emil and Marie are parallels to the wild ducks. In addition, the conversation between Alexandra and Carl, Part II, Section IV, about what constitutes freedom should be brought to students' attention.
- Early in the book, Carl sees Alexandra's confinement on the land as freedom and she disagrees; Alexandra sees Carl's ability to roam as he pleases as freedom and he disagrees. She encourages Emil to be free to go anywhere and do as he wants (giving him her sense of freedom). Emil, of course, goes beyond social restraints and seeks Marie's love. Marie is a married woman, and her affair with Emil ends in disaster.
- This notion of freedom can be applied to the ducks: 1) Notice that Ivar warns the boys not to shoot ducks; 2) Emil shoots some wild ducks and Marie becomes dismayed at the ducks' sudden loss of life and happiness; 3) Both Alexandra and Emil remember the lone wild duck on the pond; in their minds the duck stays safely in the confines of the pond for eternity (which appears to be an analogy to Alexandra's situation)--the confinement provides limited freedom which Alexandra eventually comes to appreciate in her own life; 4) Notice that Emil and Marie, when they break the rules and freely express their love under the Mulberry Tree, are shot, just as the wild ducks flying freely wherever they wish to go are shot by Emil; 5) Alexandra and Carl both see the need to have constraints on freedom at the end of the novel--similar to the single duck on the pond.
- Alexandra's and Carl's conclusions about freedom are documented at the end of the novel. Students should note that late in the book, Part V, Section III, Alexandra says of the land, "There is great peace here, Carl, and freedom." She has learned a hard lesson about the restraints of true freedom; Carl has known all along that freedom comes with responsibility.

3. Cather personifies the land, making it a character in the novel. Record where you find evidence of the land personified. Secondly, take note of how Alexandra relates to the land and how the land relates to Alexandra. (Is there a romance here? How does the character in Alexandra's dream relate to the land and the romance? What (or whom) does Alexandra come to symbolize in relation to the land?)

4. List and define possible social issues of the late 1800s. (Social issues: who is fit to own land? (men, according to the brothers); who can vote? (men according to the law); what is the outlook upon those who seem "different"? (Ivar is in danger of being committed to an institution because he is "different"); other issues?)

Class discussion/activities:

1. While students are reading *O Pioneers!* and making their discoveries, spend some class time looking at Cather's writing style. You may want to refer to Cather's "The Novel Démeublé" to gain additional hints as to how she went about writing her novels. It is obvious that she writes

sparsely, has a talent for description, and occasionally puts down a sentence or two that refer to the text but that can also stand apart from the text as wisdom for the ages. Her writing is so fluid as to be closer to poetry than prose. Employ tone, diction, syntax, imagery, personification, etc. as tools for your discussion.

2. Notice that Cather regularly takes snapshots: instances when she stops the characters in place and paints a picture of them. Many of her snapshots are composed in a manner similar to those of French Traditionalist Painters of the 19th century such as Jules Breton. A good example would be when Carl comes to find Alexandra to tell her that he is leaving the Divide (Part I, Section IV). He finds her "standing lost in thought, leaning upon her pitchfork, her sunbonnet lying beside her on the ground." Cather goes on to describe the dry garden patch. The result is a stunning still-life painting. After a moment, the action begins again. Can you find and record other such still-lives?

3. What is Ivar's role(s) in the novel? How does Cather use Ivar to express meaning in the novel?

4. Part III, The Mulberry Tree, revolves around a mulberry tree. Students may or may not be aware of the literary allusion connected to this portion of the novel. Find a copy of the ancient Babylonian myth called "Pyramis and Thisbe." Read the myth to the students following their reading of Part III. Have students suggest other stories that have the same pattern. (Results should include Romeo and Juliet and Westside Story, for example.) Have students discuss in detail how the tragic story of Emil and Marie compares to the *Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*. Ask the following: Why do authors intentionally employ allusions of this type? Why are these allusions effective? Explain to students that they should be looking closely at Cather's writing for other such powerful allusions.

5. In one of the more famous passages in American literature, Cather writes, "Isn't it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years." (Part II, Section IV) How does this quotation relate to item 3 above? This makes a wonderful discussion topic, both within the text of *O Pioneers!* and as a free standing statement. Or, for a talented student, this would make a terrific essay topic.

6. What are the responses within the novel to Emil's and Marie's deaths? Consider Frank, Carl, Alexandra, Ivar, and the court system. How do the responses differ? Considering the death scene--including the positioning of the bodies, the butterflies, and the roses--what messages does Cather send to the reader about the situation? What is your response as a reader?

Review:

(I like to use a review as a teaching tool to get a good overview of what has been accomplished and also add to students' understanding. Below are some suggestions of general ways to see the book in a wider perspective:

1. Review the plot(s)--there are two of them

2. List and review the characters

3. Additional thoughts about characters:

- Who or what does Alexandra come to symbolize? As in the traditional Greek tragedy, the protagonist Alexandra, has a flaw. What is it?
- Compare Alexandra and Carl. Why is Alexandra more suited to the land? What are Carl's strong points? Do they make a good couple? What advantage, according to Cather, do they have in their marrying?
- What is wrong with the marriage of Marie and Frank? Why did they marry? Why will Alexandra and Carl marry? Do the differences in situations make a difference in their marriages in your opinion?
- Why is the marriage of Signa and Nelse important?
- Compare Amédée and Emil. What information does this analysis provide? What does Cather say about the way they have grown up? Does this have anything to do with the outcome of the novel?

4. Discuss the setting: time and place

5. List motifs and symbols such as ducks, the mulberry tree, the Divide, Genius, death, butterflies, the color white, etc. How do the above symbols and motifs add to the story? What effect does repetition of a motif have?

6. Language and style: How does Cather effectively employ each of the following elements to add meaning to the novel?

- Tone
- Diction
- Syntax
- Imagery
- Personification

7. Themes: What is the theme(s) of the novel?

- Consider freedom
- Consider delay of gratification
- Consider persistence
- Consider the land
- Consider Alexandra's flaw
- Others?

Essay/research topics:

1. Ducks appear to be important in *O Pioneers!*. Why?

2. How does Cather personify the land in *O Pioneers!*? How does this personification enhance the meaning of the novel?

3. Explore a social issue found in *O Pioneers!*. To test the validity of Cather's suggestion in her

fiction about this particular social issue, research the later half of the 19th century for evidence/examples of the social issue you have chosen.

4. How does Cather's approach to Emil and Marie's relationship affect your feelings or judgments about it? What is she saying? Consider how Alexandra works through this tragedy. Would you come to the same conclusions? What does Alexandra's conclusion about Frank say about Willa Cather?

5. Consider any of the discussion questions as possibilities for essay topics.

Field trip:

If you live within a reasonable distance, make arrangements with the Willa Cather Foundation (Phone 402-746-2653) for a field trip to Red Cloud. Be sure to take the town tour, but arrange to spend plenty of time on the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie. Ask students to take notes on the town tour and spend solitary time on the prairie during which they should write at least a two-page journal about their experience. Students may also want to bring their cameras.

Projects:

1. Use the field trip discussed above or find a wilderness park/landscape in your area. Ask students to spend time there taking notes and photographs. Have students combine photographs with original prose or poetry. An individual student might look at a photograph and see a reminder of a situation or individual that has impacted his/her life. Sometimes this makes a good poetry topic. You and your students will have lots of other ideas about how to go about writing a good poem in response to a field trip.

2. When they return from the field trip, ask students to use their notes from the town tour to choose a historic building about which to write a short story with a creative plot and set of characters. The historic building will be the setting. The student may choose any time frame-- 1880s, the present, or far into the future. Students should be encouraged to use the details of the building (from their notes) to create an accurate, detailed setting as the background and foreground for their stories.

Resources:

Cather, Willa. *Willa Cather on Writing*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976.

Kort, Betty. "A 'Reading' of the Nebraska State Capitol: The Cather/Alexander Connection." *Nebraska English Journal: Cather in the Classroom*. Omaha: Creighton University, 37.1.1991.

Rosowski, Susan. "Willa Cather and the French Rural Tradition of Breton and Millet." *The Rural Vision France and America in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987. 53-61.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR: Betty Kort is a 25-year veteran high school English teacher, a former Nebraska Teacher of the Year, a Disney Award Teacher, and the first teacher in Nebraska to receive the National Endowment for the Arts Teacher-Scholar Award. Most recently, she served as executive director of the Willa Cather Foundation for five years and presently serves as Special Projects Director for the Foundation and managing editor of the *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review*.