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Secondary *O Pioneers!* Guide

- LA 12.1 Students will learn and apply reading skills and strategies to comprehend text.
 - LA 12.1.5 Vocabulary: Students will build literary, general academic, and content specific grade level vocabulary.
 - LA 12.1.6 Comprehension: Students will extract and construct meaning using prior knowledge, applying text information, and monitoring comprehension while reading grade level text.
- LA 12.2 Students will learn and apply writing skills and strategies to communicate.
 - LA 12.2.1 Writing Process: Students will apply the writing process to plan, draft, revise, edit and publish writing using correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and other standard conventions appropriate for grade level.
 - LA 12.2.2 Writing Genres: Students will write for a variety of purposes and audiences in multiple genres.
- LA 12.3 Students will learn and apply speaking and listening skills and strategies to communicate.
 - LA 12.3.2 Listening Skills: Students will develop, apply, and refine active listening skills across a variety of situations.
 - LA 12.3.3 Reciprocal Communication: Students will develop, apply, and adapt reciprocal communication skills.
- LA 12.4 Students will identify, locate, and evaluate information.
 - LA 12.4.1 Multiple Literacies: Students will research, synthesize, evaluate and communicate information in a variety of media and formats (textual, visual, and digital).
- SS 12.1.4 Students will analyze the impact of immigration on American life, identifying factors.
- SS 12.1.5 Students will summarize causes and effects of the Industrial Revolution.
- SS 12.1.13 Students will develop skills for historical analysis.
- SS 12.2.7 Students will analyze the scientific, political, and economic changes of the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.

Curriculum objectives:

1. to read, understand, and discuss the novel
2. to discuss the novel in terms of historical and cultural context
3. to relate the work to self and the larger culture
4. to display mastery of these ideas through diverse activities

Discussion questions may be distributed to students to consult as they read, or after reading the novel. The questions are structured to discourage right/wrong answers or selective reading; rather, students will be encouraged to discuss the larger questions raised by the novel. (Student copies of discussion guides follow the teacher's set.) Several student questions are listed, to be assigned according to skill level of the student or student group.

Discussion questions:

1. The title of the novel, *O Pioneers!*, is taken from a Walt Whitman poem. Listen to the poem as it is performed by Will Geer. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUPU03998yE>) Why would Willa Cather have chosen this poem as her title? How does the poem relate to the novel's action or characters? Do we see Whitman's poem reflected in the novel itself?

a. Look: at the text of Whitman's poem and highlight words or phrases that relate to the novel *O Pioneers!* (see following sheet)

b. Write: a paragraph or essay explaining how 3 of the words or phrases you chose pertain to *O Pioneers!*

c. Discuss: Why would Willa Cather have chosen this poem as her title? How does the poem relate to the novel's action or characters? Do we see Whitman's poem reflected in the novel itself?

Walt Whitman "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" text:

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/99>

Will Geer ("Grandpa Walton") reading the poem, a version later used in a Levi's commercial:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUPU03998yE>

(excerpt)

See my children, resolute children,
By those swarms upon our rear we must never yield or falter,
Ages back in ghostly millions frowning there behind us urging,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

On and on the compact ranks,
With accessions ever waiting, with the places of the dead quickly fill'd,
Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

O to die advancing on!
Are there some of us to droop and die? has the hour come?
Then upon the march we fittest die, soon and sure the gap is fill'd,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

All the pulses of the world,
Falling in they beat for us, with the Western movement beat,
Holding single or together, steady moving to the front, all for us,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

This passage is reflected in the scene in which Ivar tells Emil about the migration of the ducks:

"The point of the wedge gets the worst of it; they cut the wind. They can only stand it there a little while--half an hour, maybe. Then they fall back and the wedge splits a little, while the rear

ones come up the middle to the front Never any confusion; just like soldiers who have been drilled."

Whitman, though he never ventured to homestead himself, was enthusiastic about the prospects for pioneers. Scholar Emory Holloway wrote, "When . . . the 'mania for owning things' (as Whitman called it) lured thousands of adventurous or disgruntled Easterners to take ship or caravan for the California el dorado, he remained untempted, content to enjoy the newest national enterprise in his fancy alone. In the West he pictured the 'average man' in his true glory. 'Radical, true, far-scoped, and thorough-going Democracy may expect . . . great things from the West!' he announced," in an editorial (10). (Source: Holloway, Emory. *Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative*. New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969.)

2. Cather opens the novel with a poem of her own, "Prairie Spring." How does this poem relate to the novel and characters? How do the two poems work together, or do they?

- a. Look: at the text of Cather's poem and highlight words or phrases that relate to the novel *O Pioneers!* (see following sheet)
- b. Write: a paragraph or essay explaining how 3 of the words or phrases you chose pertain to *O Pioneers!*
- c. Discuss: How do "Prairie Spring" and "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" work together, or do they?

"Prairie Spring":

Evening and the flat land,
Rich and sombre and always silent;
the miles of fresh-plowed soil,
Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness;
The growing wheat, the growing weeds,
The toiling horses, the tired men;
The long empty roads,
Sullen fires of sunset, fading,
The eternal, unresponsive sky.
Against all this, Youth,
Flaming like the wild roses,
Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
Flashing like a star out of the twilight;
Youth with its insupportable sweetness,
Its fierce necessity,
Its sharp desire,
Singing and singing,
Out of the lips of silence,
Out of the earthy dusk.

Readers might point out the enthusiasm of the pioneer prior to leaving (in Whitman), versus the tired men and tired animals present in Cather's poem. Readers may also recognize the language of the soldier in Whitman's poem, absent in Cather's. Both are strongly hopeful.

3. How does Cather describe the town of Hanover in the opening? What are some of the adjectives she uses to describe the town? Consider an author's use of synecdoche, a figure of speech in which a term for a part of something is used to refer to the whole of something, and metonymy, a figure of speech in which a term denoting one thing is used to refer to a related thing. Is Cather employing either of these in her opening, or elsewhere in the novel?

- a. Create a chart: on one side, write down adjectives Cather uses to describe Hanover in Part I "The Wild Land," Section I; on the other side, write down the adjectives used to describe The Divide in Section I of Part II, "Neighboring Fields."
- b. Write a paragraph or essay explaining how Cather's portrayal of The Divide is different from how Hanover is depicted, based on the two noted sections.
- c. Consider an author's use of synecdoche, a figure of speech in which a term for a part of something is used to refer to the whole of something, and metonymy, a figure of speech in which a term denoting one thing is used to refer to a related thing. Is Cather employing either of these in her opening, or elsewhere in the novel?

Answers will vary, but may include that Hanover is a much newer prairie town. Cather uses words like "haphazard," "straying," "straggled," "trampled," "coarse," and gives a feeling of impermanence. Blackhawk, though boring to Jim Burden, and Frankfort, Claude Wheeler's hometown, are reasonably settled and permanent. Marcus Klein of Barnard College wrote, in an introduction to *My Mortal Enemy*:

"Her companions in the village were the old men and women, anyone whose real life had been elsewhere. Her allegiances were to the Europeans scattered among the populations, whose lives hinted a substantial and ancient and non-proscriptive culture. The village in all her Nebraska novels was to be the source of all corruptions, its dominant Anglo-Saxon inhabitants narrow, ignorant, imposing, convention-ridden . . ."

4. The land itself figures large in this narrative. How does Alexandra Bergson feel about the land? Compare her outlook to that of Carl Linstrum, her brothers, Ivar. Copy and share several quotations from the text to represent each.

- a. Create a list of quotations. Include a quote from Carl, from Lou and Oscar, from Alexandra.
- b. Discuss how Alexandra's views differ from her brothers. Why might this be?
- c. Write a short essay or paragraph discussing which character's view of the land is closest to your own. What makes you feel as you do about land?

When Alexandra looks at the land with "love and yearning," she displays an affection for the land that is quite a departure from the general population of the novel. Her brothers, Lou and Oscar, focus on the work involved. This may be a fair argument, to suggest that the boys did the bulk of physical labor; however, it reminds us of the phrase "working smarter, not harder." Cather tells us in "The Wild Land" that Oscar "worked like an insect, always doing the same thing over in the same way, regardless of whether it was best or no. He felt that there was a sovereign virtue in mere bodily toil, and he rather liked to do things in the hardest way." Lou, however, "always planned to get through two days' work in one, and often got only the least important things done." Even Carl, when presented with the fully grown and bountiful orchard, remembers first the buckets of water his father required him to carry. Alexandra recognizes that her brothers and neighbors are skeptical of science and research that brings innovation to the Divide, but she recognizes too that new ideas will allow them to flourish by working with the land, instead of working against it. "We come and go," Alexandra says, "but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it--for a little while."

This sentiment is echoed in a later quote from Aldo Leopold: "Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." Alexandra's land ethic might also be considered a type of Christian environmentalism or stewardship, though she does not explicitly mention God or scripture.

Often chosen quotations include the following:

Carl: "It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be left alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness."

Ivar: "He disliked the litter of human dwellings: the broken food, the bits of broken china, the old wash-boilers and tea kettles thrown into the sunflower patch. He preferred the cleanness and tidiness of the wild sod."

Lou: "Now they're beginning to see this high land wasn't never meant to grow nothing on, and everybody who ain't fixed to graze cattle is trying to crawl out."

Oscar: "He felt that there was a sovereign virtue in mere bodily toil, and he rather liked to do things in the hardest way. If a field had once been in corn, he couldn't bear to put it into wheat. He liked to begin his corn-planting at the same time every year, whether the season were backward or forward. He seemed to feel that by his own irreproachable regularity, he would clear himself of blame and reprove the weather."

5. Alexandra's family were sailors and involved with shipping. Why might this distinction be relevant to our story? What were the occupations of others who came to try homesteading in Nebraska?

- a. Create a list of other occupations from the novel. Which might you have liked to try?
- b. and c. Why might this distinction be relevant to the story? What similarities can you think of between farming on the prairie and sailing?

While Alexandra came from a seafaring family, Carl's father was a factory worker, in a cigar factory. Uncle Otto was a baker, and Cather reinforces that Lou and Oscar would have preferred that life. Alexandra and her father believe that their family's background better suits them to success on the

Divide. It is interesting that Alexandra's grandfather--whom Alexandra is said to take after--was disgraced by a poor marriage, much as Oscar and Lou fear Alexandra will be. One parallel between sailing and homesteading is that both rely on the weather and skillful adaptation to the elements. The sea is uncontrollable, and sailors change course and method to accommodate. Alexandra behaves similarly regarding the prairie, which is often said to resemble "a sea of grass." This approach is in stark contrast to agricultural methods that initially tried to raise incompatible crops on the Plains, and might even be tied to today's modern agriculture that relies so heavily on irrigation, resulting in draw-down of the Ogallala Aquifer.

6. Alexandra was a single woman farmer; homestead records suggest that roughly 10%-12% of all homesteaders were single women. Describe the tensions between Alexandra and her brothers Lou and Oscar with relation to their farm. What does Alexandra tell us is at the root of their disagreements? How do those same ideas overflow with regard to Emil and Carl?

- a. What difficulties might a woman homesteader have encountered that a man might not have?
- b. Read Section X of "Neighboring Fields." What are the problems between Alexandra and her brothers? Is this the first time they've quarreled over the farm?
- c. Research the time period in which *O Pioneers!* is set – what gender issues do you discover from this point in history? Where does Alexandra fit in the women's suffrage movement? What do the stories of real women homesteaders tell us about women's roles in the settlement of the Great Plains? Write a short essay discussing your findings.

Regarding women homesteaders and farmers, the following links contain interviews, historical information, and a few photographs. The last link is an extended discussion on gender on the Great Plains.

<http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.040>

<http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.041>

<http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.001>

Dr. Reg Dyck, publishing in *Great Plains Quarterly*, writes:

Written at a time of rapid industrialization and urbanization, Cather's first Nebraska novel reflects the uneasiness its readers felt toward changing U.S. culture. Stories of the pioneer past were reassuring to them. However, Cather's pioneer was not typical. Her protagonist is a woman, not a farmwife but a farm manager. Along with her rural attachment to the land, Alexandra shared with her author many qualities of the economically independent, professional New Woman emerging in the urban East. While threatening to her brothers and their wives, Alexandra gains the readers' sympathy. Yet the conflicts between competing definitions of gender roles and Alexandra's relationship to the land are not comfortably reconciled for Cather's reluctant New Woman pioneer, whose farming success is balanced by her personal losses.

The complete article can be read here:

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3415&context=greatplainsquarterly>

Tensions between Alexandra and her brothers nearly always revolved around Alexandra's willingness to try new things. In Section X of "Neighboring Fields," Lou and Oscar finally air their grievances with a long

passage beginning, “Lou turned to his brother. ‘This is what comes of letting a woman meddle in business,’ he said bitterly. ‘We ought to have taken things in our own hands years ago. But she liked to run things, and we humored her.’” The text from this point through the end of the section allows Lou and Oscar to express several problems they have been holding back.

Lou and Oscar tell Alexandra that they’ve done all the “real work” on the farm; Emil irritates them because they feel that Alexandra has babied him. They also dislike her new farming methods, and it’s noted in “The Wild Land” that they “did not mind hard work, but they hated experiments and could never see the use of taking pains.” Emil’s college education rankled because, to Lou and Oscar, it smacked of new ideas.

7. Cite some examples of when we see costumes in the novel. (There are many.) When are people wearing costumes, and what does a costume suggest?

- a. Make a small poster or chart representing some examples of costumes in the novel.
- b. “Denotative meaning” is the explicit or dictionary definition of a word. For example, the denotative meaning of “costume” is “a set of clothing particular to a time period or a region.” However, “connotative meanings” are social or emotional associations with a word. In the example of costumes, one connotation might be “Halloween.” What are the denotative and connotative meanings of the costumes you see in *O Pioneers!*?
- c. Write a short essay exploring Cather’s uses of costumes, including denotative and connotative meaning, foreshadowing, symbolism, etc.

Marie’s fortune teller costume

Emil’s traditional Mexican costume

Frank Shabata’s dandy-ish clothing when he first arrived

Annie Lee’s fancy dress and “battleship” hat

Signa’s wedding outfit—which she immediately changes back into her farm boots

Frank in his prisoner’s uniform

Alexandra’s mourning costume

The costumes seem to be related to social custom. Some costumes are worn at festive events, while others are used to signify social position (prison, Annie Lee’s fancy outfit). Costumes might be considered an attempt to hide the truth. When Marie kisses Emil at the fortune-teller’s booth, Cather writes, “The veil that had hung uncertainly between them for so long was dissolved.”

8. Cather uses many examples of plants and animals in the novel Are you able to distinguish native species from non-native ones? What might this discussion of native species mean in relation to a story about the homesteaders' settlement of Nebraska?

- a. Make a list of the plants and animals that Cather mentions. Using the internet, look up the plants from your list.

b. Using a list from question A, try to determine whether the plants Cather mentions are native to Nebraska or non-native. (The USDA plant database is a good place to start.) Highlight native species in your list.

c. In a short paragraph or two, discuss why native plants and non-native plants might be important to the novel.

Some native species mentioned: snow-on-the-mountain, wild larkspur, bunchgrasses, wild roses, plums, ground cherries, buffalo-pea, red mulberry

Some non-native species mentioned: bluegrass, white mulberry, apple, apricot, fuschia, alfalfa, castor bean, wheat, corn

The most obvious answer is that the non-native plants mirror the homesteaders themselves, coming from elsewhere. However, Alexandra highlights that certain non-native plants are more fit for service on the Great Plains than others--alfalfa, for example, has deep roots that "fix" nitrogen, or capture nitrogen in its tissues and form storage nodules on its roots. In other words, this plant actually improves soil quality. Alfalfa is also a long-lived plant, capable of growing 10-20 years. Corn, on the other hand, is considered one of the heaviest nutrient feeders that could be chosen and requires a tremendous amount of water for success, making it a dubious choice for the high tablelands of the prairie. This opens the door for a great deal of conversation regarding Cather's position on the Great Plow-Up and the move toward industrialized agriculture that falls within the same time line of the novel. Ken Burns' recent documentary *The Dust Bowl* gives a great historical accounting of those times and the catastrophic results.

<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/about/episode-guide/>

Like most fruit trees (excepting the native plum), the white mulberry is not native to the Great Plains. It is traditionally an Asian species but was planted elsewhere because of its use as a host for silkworms. It is known for being a fast growing and short-lived species, tying in nicely with the Emil/Marie storyline. Today, it is considered a problem because it hybridizes with the native red mulberry; in some areas it is considered an invasive species. Cather likely would not have known all this, yet it creates an interesting topic when applied to Cather's use of cultural generalizations in the novel, the "American melting pot" mythology, and the xenophobia sometimes said to be characteristic of the Great Plains.

9. What does the orchard suggest to you in this novel? "Allusion" is defined as an expression designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly. What are some allusions that the orchard calls to mind?

a. Why would an orchard be so important in this novel? Why would an orchard be important to early Nebraska pioneers?

b. and c. "Allusion" is defined as an expression designed to call something to mind without explicitly mentioning that thing. When you read the sections of *O Pioneers!* dealing with the orchard, is Cather using allusion?

See reference to white mulberries above, but aside from the horticultural considerations, the white mulberry is also a nod to Ovid's tale of Pyramus and Thisbe.

http://www.pantheon.org/articles/p/pyramus_and_thisbe.html

The orchard setting is also rather Edenic--the site of picnics, quiet reflection, conversation, pleasant physical exertion--though the white mulberry doesn't correlate directly to the Tree of Knowledge. Emil and Marie's knowledge--knowledge of each other and (finally!) recognition of their feelings for each other--lead directly to their fall.

10. Note the references to birds. (There are many.) What birds are mentioned? The term literary symbolism is defined as the practice of representing things by symbols, or of investing things with a symbolic meaning or character. Is there a symbolic meaning associated with any of the birds you noted? Does Cather use any of the birds to impart meaning that is specific to *O Pioneers!*?

a. Make a poster depicting the birds Cather mentions in *O Pioneers!*

b. and c. The term literary symbolism is defined as the practice of representing things by symbols, or of investing things with a symbolic meaning or character. Is there a symbolic meaning associated with any of the birds you noted? Does Cather use any of the birds to impart meaning that is specific to *O Pioneers!*?

The owl:

<http://www.owlpages.com/articles.php?section=owl+mythology&title=myth+and+culture>

Though the appearance of an owl can mean other things, generally, hearing the hooting of an owl means a death is imminent. Cather uses the hooting owl twice in rapid succession--Marie hears the owl as she wanders in the night before going to the orchard, where she will eventually meet Emil a final time, and Frank hears the hooting of an owl in the distance as he approaches the orchard just before firing the fatal shots.

The ducks:

<http://www.ittybittyurl.com/327w>

The duck plays an important role in *O Pioneers!* In the art world, the duck is considered a liminal figure, signifying a transition or a boundary, because it is equally at home in the water, in the air, and on the land. For these reasons, ducks were used extensively in funerary art. Ducks are also symbolic of migration, of course, and that too makes sense in context of the homesteading era. In *O Pioneers!*, the ducks, especially on the water, seem to be safe. Alexandra and Emil remember them often, with Alexandra noting, "It always seems to me she's there still, just like we saw her." We know, however, that Emil has hunted and killed when they left the safety of the pond and took to the air. The ducks that flew from Ivar's pond were not killed, but only because Ivar did not allow guns. The ducks might also be considered representative of Emil and Marie and their freedom to love. They might have continued their friendship with the undercurrent of passion (staying safe in the pond), but to openly declare their love caused calamity (taking wing and being killed).

The lark:

<http://www.ittybittyurl.com/3281>

One of the most famous quotes from *O Pioneers!* is Carl's mention of the lark upon his return to Nebraska:

"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."

The lark typically represents daybreak, because of the bird's propensity for singing at dawn and dusk. It is also said to signify "youthful enthusiasm . . . and the human desire for happiness." Carl notes that most human stories are repeated, just as the lark repeats its song. Nebraska boasts several larks, two of which are ubiquitous, as well as some migrant species.

http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Western_Meadowlark/id
http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Meadowlark/id

Though the more common of the two in Red Cloud, Nebraska, is the Western Meadowlark, the song of the Eastern Meadowlark perhaps matches Carl's description much better. If this is the case, what is Cather doing with the larks here?

After the Novel - Activities

1. Timeline: Construct a timeline of the novel's main events. Cather leaves these rather vague but leaves clues throughout. Also include contextual dates such as the signing of the Homestead Act, William Jennings Bryan's presidential campaigns, the Klondike gold rush, Nebraska women getting the right to vote, etc.
2. Mapping: Based on the descriptions given by Cather and your own imagination, construct a map of The Divide. Things to include: Alexandra's homestead, the Shabata farm, the orchards, the French settlement, the town of Hanover, Norway Creek, the duck pond, Ivar's dugout, the Norwegian graveyard, etc. . . .
3. Creative writing: Retell a portion of Cather's story from another perspective. For example, describe the scene and conversation that took place between Lou, Oscar, and Carl, just before Carl leaves for Alaska. Or, write an onlooker's (or journalist's) view of Frank Shabata's trial.
4. Research: What technologies became available during the timeline of the novel that helped homesteaders finally succeed? This website (http://www.agclassroom.org/gan/timeline/farm_tech.htm) contains a list of innovations; what technologies does Cather describe in *O Pioneers!*? What would you feel is most important?
5. Research: The way a culture or individuals view the land has changed over the years. After reading *O Pioneers!*, read Part 3 of *Round River*, by Aldo Leopold, as well as his section "The Land Ethic" from *A Sand County Almanac*. Discuss the ways in which the idea of a land ethic have changed in the years between Alexandra Bergson and Aldo Leopold, and the ways in which they have stayed the same. What would Alexandra have made of Leopold's ideas? What would Lou and Oscar have made of his ideas?

6. Supplemental: Watch the Hallmark Hall of Fame movie of *O Pioneers!* starring Jessica Lange (<http://www.amazon.com/O-Pioneers-Hallmark-Hall-Fame/dp/B00008IHF2>). Compare and contrast the movie adaptation of the novel to Cather's work. What is gained with a video presentation of the story? Are there advantages and disadvantages to each mode of storytelling?

Outside the Classroom

1. Visit Red Cloud - Red Cloud, Nebraska, and the Willa Cather Foundation provide tours for school groups to visit important Cather sites in town and in the country, including the 610 acre Willa Cather Memorial Prairie. See the town that was the prototype for Hanover, and experience the prairie that remains unchanged from the time of Nebraska's early homesteaders. You can even drive north of Red Cloud until you are on The Divide!

2. Research the five major acts signed into law by Abraham Lincoln in 1862--the Emancipation Proclamation, the Homestead Act, the Morrill Act, the Pacific Railway Act, and the Act to Establish a Department of Agriculture. How did these important pieces of legislation impact the area in which you live? Were any of your ancestors directly affected by these laws? Your county or state museums will be useful resources for this research.

Student Discussion questions:

1. The title of the novel, *O Pioneers!*, is taken from a Walt Whitman poem. Listen to the poem as it is performed by Will Geer. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUPU03998yE>)

a. Look: at the text of Whitman's poem and highlight words or phrases that relate to the novel *O Pioneers!* (see following sheet)

b. Write: a paragraph or essay explaining how 3 of the words or phrases you chose pertain to *O Pioneers!*

c. Discuss: Why would Willa Cather have chosen this poem as her title? How does the poem relate to the novel's action or characters? Do we see Whitman's poem reflected in the novel itself?

2. Cather opens the novel with a poem of her own, "Prairie Spring."

a. Look: at the text of Cather's poem and highlight words or phrases that relate to the novel *O Pioneers!* (see following sheet)

b. Write: a paragraph or essay explaining how 3 of the words or phrases you chose pertain to *O Pioneers!*

c. Discuss: How do "Prairie Spring" and "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" work together, or do they?

3. How does the town of Hanover compare to The Divide?

a. Create a chart: on one side, write down adjectives Cather uses to describe Hanover in Part I "The Wild Land," Section I; on the other side, write down the adjectives used to describe The Divide in Section I of Part II, "Neighboring Fields."

b. Write a paragraph or essay explaining how Cather's portrayal of The Divide is different from how Hanover is depicted, based on the two noted sections.

c. Consider an author's use of synecdoche, a figure of speech in which a term for a part of something is used to refer to the whole of something, and metonymy, a figure of speech in which a term denoting one thing is used to refer to a related thing. Is Cather employing either of these in her opening, or elsewhere in the novel?

4. The land itself figures large in this narrative. How does Alexandra Bergson feel about the land? Compare her outlook to that of Carl Linstrum, her brothers, Ivar. Copy and share several quotations from the text to represent each.

a. Create a list of quotations. Include a quote from Carl, from Lou and Oscar, from Alexandra.

b. Discuss how Alexandra's views differ from her brothers. Why might this be?

c. Write a short essay or paragraph discussing which character's view of the land is closest to your own. What makes you feel as you do about land?

5. Alexandra's family were sailors and involved with shipping. Why might this distinction be relevant to our story? What were the occupations of others who came to try homesteading in Nebraska?

a. Create a list of other occupations from the novel. Which might you have liked to try?

b. and c. Why might this distinction be relevant to the story? What similarities can you think of between farming on the prairie and sailing?

6. Alexandra was a single woman farmer; homestead records suggest that roughly 10%-12% of all homesteaders were single women. Describe the tensions between Alexandra and her brothers Lou and Oscar with relation to their farm. What does Alexandra tell us is at the root of their disagreements? How do those same ideas overflow with regard to Emil and Carl?

a. What difficulties might a woman homesteader have encountered that a man might not have?

b. Read Section X of "Neighboring Fields." What are the problems between Alexandra and her brothers? Is this the first time they've quarreled over the farm?

c. Research the time period in which *O Pioneers!* is set – what gender issues do you discover from this point in history? Where does Alexandra fit in the women's suffrage movement? What do the stories of real women homesteaders tell us about women's roles in the settlement of the Great Plains? Write a short essay discussing your findings.

7. Cite some examples of when we see costumes in the novel. (There are many.) When are people wearing costumes, and what does a costume suggest?

a. Make a small poster or chart representing some examples of costumes in the novel.

b. Denotative meaning is the explicit or dictionary definition of a word. For example, the denotative meaning of "costume" is "a set of clothing particular to a time period or a region." However, connotative meanings are social or emotional associations with a word. In the example of costumes, one connotation might be "Halloween." What are the denotative and connotative meanings of the costumes you see in *O Pioneers!*?

c. Write a short essay exploring Cather's uses of costumes, including denotative and connotative meaning, foreshadowing, symbolism, etc.

8. How many examples of plants and animals can be found in the novel? Are you able to distinguish native species from non-native ones? What might this discussion of native species mean in relation to a story about the homesteaders' settlement of Nebraska?

- a. Make a list of the plants and animals that Cather mentions. Using the internet, look up the plants from your list.
- b. Using a list from question A, try to determine whether the plants Cather mentions are native to Nebraska or non-native. (The USDA plant database is a good place to start.) Highlight native species in your list.
- c. In a short paragraph or two, discuss why native plants and non-native plants might be important to the novel.

9. What does the orchard suggest to you in this novel? "Allusion" is defined as an expression designed to call something to mind without mentioning it explicitly. What are some allusions that the orchard calls to mind?

- a. Why would an orchard be so important in this novel? Why would an orchard be important to early Nebraska pioneers?
- b. and c. "Allusion" is defined as an expression designed to call something to mind without explicitly mentioning that thing. When you read the sections of *O Pioneers!* dealing with the orchard, is Cather using allusion?

10. Note the references to birds. (There are many.) What birds are mentioned? The term literary symbolism is defined as the practice of representing things by symbols, or of investing things with a symbolic meaning or character. Is there a symbolic meaning associated with any of the birds you noted? Does Cather use any of the birds to impart meaning that is specific to *O Pioneers!*?

- a. Make a poster depicting the birds Cather mentions in *O Pioneers!*
- b. and c. The term literary symbolism is defined as the practice of representing things by symbols, or of investing things with a symbolic meaning or character. Is there a symbolic meaning associated with any of the birds you noted? Does Cather use any of the birds to impart meaning that is specific to *O Pioneers!*?

Further resources:

An extended biography of Cather: <http://www.willacather.org/about-willa-cather/willa-cather>

The University of Nebraska Cather Project: <http://cather.unl.edu/>

Texts available online:

<http://www.willacather.org/about-willa-cather/online-texts>

The Willa Cather Memorial Prairie:

<http://www.willacather.org/cather-prairie/about-the-prairie>

Visit Red Cloud and tour the Cather sites:

<http://www.willacather.org/cather-tours>

Excerpt from Walt Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers!"

All the pulses of the world,
Falling in they beat for us, with the Western movement beat,
Holding single or together, steady moving to the front, all for us,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Life's involv'd and varied pageants,
All the forms and shows, all the workmen at their work,
All the seamen and the landsmen, all the masters with their slaves,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

All the hapless silent lovers,
All the prisoners in the prisons, all the righteous and the wicked,
All the joyous, all the sorrowing, all the living, all the dying,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

. . .

O you daughters of the West!
O you young and elder daughters! O you mothers and you wives!
Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Minstrels latent on the prairies!
(Shrouded bards of other lands, you may rest, you have done your work,)
Soon I hear you coming warbling, soon you rise and tramp amid us,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Willa Cather's "Prairie Spring"

Evening and the flat land,
Rich and sombre and always silent;
the miles of fresh-plowed soil,
Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness;
The growing wheat, the growing weeds,
The toiling horses, the tired men;
The long empty roads,
Sullen fires of sunset, fading,
The eternal, unresponsive sky.
Against all this, Youth,
Flaming like the wild roses,
Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
Flashing like a star out of the twilight;
Youth with its insupportable sweetness,
Its fierce necessity,
Its sharp desire,
Singing and singing,
Out of the lips of silence,
Out of the earthy dusk.

—

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