

Willa Cather, Nature, and Community: Reading *O Pioneers!*
Midcoast Senior College, Fall 2024 (Term II)
Cheryl and John Swift

The class: Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) describes the natural and social transformations of Nebraska's Great Plains in the late 19th Century, when a vast wilderness went under the plow and immigrant farmers created a new American identity. This course's two instructors will draw on their different academic backgrounds – American literature and plant ecology – to lead a close reading and open discussion of the novel and of how ecological theory, particularly concerning plant succession, might illuminate Cather's representations of changes in both natural and human communities.

Instructors: Cheryl taught Biology and Environmental Science at Whittier College in Whittier, California; John taught English at Occidental College in Los Angeles. They have been having a conversation about Cather, plants, and ecology for several decades.

Meeting time

and place: Thursdays 1-3 p.m. in the Community Room of the Patten Free Library in Bath.

Texts: Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*. The novel is available in many paperback, hardback, and digital editions, and it's frequently found in used bookstores. Although the Norton Critical Edition (ed. Sharon O'Brien) is often used in academic courses, any version or format (or cost) is fine. Please acquire a copy that you can bring to class meetings. We'll read and discuss it as described in the next section. We'll end the course with the final two pieces of short fiction that Cather wrote before her death in 1947 – "The Best Years" and "Before Breakfast," which are posted on the course website – and consider how the themes of *O Pioneers!* illuminate them.

We will also put on the course website various supplemental recommended readings to which we'll refer in our discussions of *O Pioneers!*. These include

- "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" – Walt Whitman's 1865 poem, and the source of Cather's title.
- "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" – an influential 1893 scholarly paper by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner.
- "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" – Cather's account for *The Nation* (1923) of the European/American settlement of Nebraska.
- Selections from Frederic Clements's *Plant Succession* (1916).
- Brief PowerPoint presentations by Cheryl outlining central concepts of ecology.

We hope that you'll explore some or all of these. We'll probably use the website to post more as we move through the course.

(Turn over for the schedule of readings and discussions.)

Schedule of readings and discussions:

(The following outline presents the order in which we'll read and discuss *O Pioneers!* and the two Cather short stories that are our primary focus. We will recommend supplemental readings as the class progresses and need arises. We also list here some general discussion topics that we expect will interest us. These aren't exhaustive, and we hope that the group will develop further topics.)

- November 7: No reading.
Introduction(s) to one another and to the syllabus
Introduction to Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, and ecology
Reading the novel
- November 14: Reading: *O Pioneers!* ("The Wild Land" and "Neighboring Fields")
Supplemental reading TBA
Natural and human communities and "the great operations of nature"
- November 21: Reading: *O Pioneers!* ("Winter Memories" and "The White Mulberry Tree")
Supplemental reading TBA
Individual failures, false starts, and unpredictable events
- November 28: Thanksgiving Day (no class)
- December 5: Reading: *O Pioneers!* ("Alexandra")
Supplemental reading TBA
Two stories and two endings
- December 12: Reading: "Before Breakfast" and "The Best Years" (online)
Supplemental reading TBA
Cather at the end of her career/life: what has she learned?