

Symbiotic Bonding between Land and Human Beings in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*

Dhami Prem Bahadur

Abstract

This paper explores the symbiotic bonding between land and human beings in the novel. Writer chooses Carther's O Pioneers! being ecologically conscious text when it is read against the background of deep Ecology. Writer finds this text that expounds upon the symbiotic bonding between land and human beings to subvert anthropocentric notion and its constraints. Clinging with the ideas why many critics and writers focused this text against the grain of ecocritical perspective, writer here tries to bring the balance in literary components and ethics of the discipline with the perspective of Leopold's deep ecology and its components. Overall, writer tries to analyse how this text show the eco-consciousness perspectives avoiding the one-dimensional approach that reads culture and nature to revitalize literary study and help address some of the pressing questions concerning our global and local ecology. The characters, setting, and the plot of the novel show the biorhythm with nature. This is argued on basis of various ecocritics; Aldo Leopold's concept of The Land Ethic, Scott Russell Sanders, John Hannigan, Gtofelty Cheryl, David Pepper and Holmes Rolston III on the interplay between nature and human beings.

Key Words: Symbiotic, Conservation, Preservation, Environmentalism, Eco-consciousness,

Introduction:

Carther's *O Pioneers!* expresses deep love of the land and her concern for the symbiotic relationship between the land and our human beings. *O Pioneers!* emerges as ecologically conscious text when it is read against the background of deep Ecology, professed by Arne Naess, Fritj of Capra and Aldo Leopold. With the advent of ecological crisis and in the context of globalization, the study of literature is combined together with the study of ecology. Carter expands the "notion of the World to include the entire ecosphere" (Cheryll XIX) as an ecocritical writer. She tries to redirect us from "ego-consciousness to eco-consciousness" (Cheryll XXX) in order to establish bucolic harmony between the human and non-human world. Ecocriticism, when applied in literature, is to study the relationship between literature and the physical environment. One important motive of ecocriticism is to revitalize literary study and help address some of the pressing questions concerning our global and local ecology.

Likewise, the classical statement of ecological ethics is Aldo Leopold's "The Land Ethic," published posthumously in 1949 as the last part of *A Sand County Almanac*. Leopold observed that human ethical sensitivity can be seen as a gradually widening circle of beings respected as possessing intrinsic worth. That is, beings within "the magic circle" (224) should not be regarded as mere things to be used as a matter of expediency. Leopold noted that, in the distant past, the circle has expanded from self to family, to clan, then to tribe,

nation, and race and on to the entire human race. More recently, some animals (dolphins, porpoises, whales, and primates) were considered worthy of respect. Leopold's proposal is that we enlarge our sense of community to include all animals, then all living things and eventually, to the land itself:

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. . . . The land ethic simply enlarged the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. In short, a land ethic changes the role of "Homo sapiens" from a conqueror of the land-community to a plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such. (203–04)

In two areas, Leopold's position is problematic. First, does that land have intrinsic as opposed to instrumental value and second, what is entailed by "respect"? Leopold's ambiguity is critical at both points. In the first, Leopold is unclear whether we ought to acknowledge that the land actually possesses intrinsic value or that we ought to confer upon it a quasi-intrinsic value. In his second ambiguity, he sometimes translates respect into a wise use of the land, an imperative requiring careful conservation practices; at other times, he shifts his position and urges hands-off preservationist policies. Carter in *O Pioneers!* redress this policies as such.

Leopold's ambiguities are clearly connected- if the land possesses intrinsic value, an ethical stance of noninterference seems warranted. He states, for example, "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (224–25). On the other hand, if the land ought to be valued as if it has intrinsic value, another sort of ethical position is dictated. In this second case, the land has value for humans, a moderate, wise-use conservation morality is appropriate, "a land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, the use of these 'resources' [soil, water, plants and animals] but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state" (204). Philosophically speaking, the "hands-off" versus "wise-use" debate hinges upon a more basic, metaphysical disagreement- a clash of homocentric versus bio-centric world views.

Objective:

In what follows, the researcher tries to explore Cather's divided alliance of homocentric versus biocentric, hands-off versus wise-use philosophy; to decipher intrinsic value of land; and to find out priorities that are established through conservationist policies in Cather's *O Pioneers!* While her deepest environmental impulse, it seems to me, is in favor of a homocentric position of conservation, she also, though less often and with less fervor, sides with a bio-centric position of preservation.

Method:

To meet the estimated objectives and find out the concerns on symbiotic bond between land and human beings that are mentioned above, the researcher uses qualitative approach of research applying phenomenological base of Cather's *O Pioneer!* as the primary textual analysis. Clinging with the ideas why many critics and writers focused this text against the grain of ecocritical perspective, writer here tries to bring the balance in literary components and ethics of the discipline with the perspective of Leopold's deep ecology and its components. Overall, writer tries to analyse how this text show the eco-consciousness perspectives avoiding the one-dimensional approach that reads culture and nature to revitalize literary study and help address some of the pressing questions concerning our global and local ecology. This is argued on basis of various ecocritics; Aldo Leopold's concept of *The Land Ethic*, Scott Russell Sanders, John Hannigan, GlotfeltyCheryll, David Pepper and Holmes Rolston III on the interplay between nature and human beings.

Textual Analysis:

The symbiotic bonding between land and human beings get manifested through the rendering issues of biocentric, homocentric, and theocentric environmentalism in *O Pioneers!* Carter uses descriptive language as the "poetic discourse which is based on narratives of nature that emphasize its beauty, spirituality and emotional power" (Hannigan 37) to bring out the full essence of the land and its homesteads. He does this by appealing to the senses. The researcher explores Cather's divided alliance in terms of a problematic position illustrated by Aldo Leopold's essay, "The Land Ethic," the classic statement of ecological ethics.

Cather assumes as obvious and not requiring argument that the natural world exists to serve human welfare and to satisfy human desires. It is, however, a pristine world that must be humanized, for in its original, natural state, it can be an alien, hostile place where settlers, native as well as emigrants, are unwelcome foreigners:

The little town behind them had vanished as if it had never been, had fallen behind the swell of the prairie, and the stern frozen country received them into its bosom. The homesteads were few and far apart; here and there a windmill gaunt against the sky, a sod house crouching in a hollow. But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its somber waste. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's mouth had become so bitter; because he felt 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. (9-10)

Though Cather's frontier is not the gritty, even malignant, place that Hamlin Garland's very unlucky homesteaders confront, nonetheless the setting is harsh and the contest with the land is a stern one.

This redresses to the Homestead Act of 1862 signed into the law by President Abraham Lincoln on May 20, 1862, the Homestead Act encouraged Western migration by

providing settlers 160 acres of public land. In exchange, homesteaders paid a small filing fee and were required to complete five years of continuous residence before receiving ownership of the land. John Logie mentions:

The act allowed any person who is the head of the family, or who has arrived at the age of twenty-one years, and is a citizen of the USA or who shall have filed his declaration of his intention to become such and who has never borne arms against US government or given comfort to its enemies to file for up to 160 acres of free land from the Federal government. (35)

The engineers of the homestead Act might have dreamt of men living with their families under the same roof, working for themselves on their farms but not raping or commodifying the land, depending neither on capital nor slaves nor machines, developing harmonious relation between land and human beings James L. Roark argues “nation will be powerful, prosperous and happy, in proportion to the number of independent cultivators of its soil” (38). No man could be truly free as long as he had to till another man’s soil. So, Homestead would draw off urban centers surplus laborers, chop land monopoly and the old slave holding aristocracy. It helps developing sense of placeness, rootedness, and optimism to the land and life through enfranchisement. Witness Alexandra’s father’s trials:

In eleven long years John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land that he had come to tame. It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods; and no one knew when they were likely to come, or why. Mischance hung over it. Its Genius was unfriendly to man. . . . Bergson went over in his mind the things that 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 to cholera, and a valuable stallion died from a rattlesnake bite. Time and time again his crops had failed. He had lost two children, boys, that came between Lou and Emil, and there had been the cost of sickness and death. 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 on more time. (11-12)

Those who are patient and hardworking, resilient and resourceful, can succeed. As Cather puts it in this novel, although “the land, in itself, is desirable,” it is “an enigma” (12). But once the key is found and the puzzle solved, the land submits to the human hand that develops, tames, subdues, orders, masters, controls, and improves (all Cather’s terms) it.

As reality stands malleable for humans and tolerates, even welcomes, the humanizing touch. For Cather two points need to be emphasized: though it is “the wild land” (11), “a dark country” (10) with “wild soil” (26), and “a raw place” (32), after an initial struggle it readily tolerates the human imprint. She attempts to make the readers truly appreciate the “biorhythm of the land” (Sanders 95) that is subtle miracles present when there is symbiosis between land and human beings which are at play. In addition, Cather also metaphorically makes suggestions that the land is Godly. Second, once humanized, the land becomes vastly more productive and fruitful, at least in so far as satisfying human

desires. The natural world made to fit human designs is a recurring theme celebrated by Cather. Here are two of her accounts. In the first, it is sixteen years since John Bergson has died, and Alexandra, her brothers, and her mother have turned a homestead into an estate:

They drove westward toward Norway Creek, and toward a big white house that stood on a hill, several miles across the fields. There were so many sheds and outbuilding grouped about that the place looked not unlike a tiny village. A stranger, approaching it, could not help noticing the beauty and fruitfulness of the outlying fields. There was something individual about the great farm, a most unusual trimness and care for detail. . . . Any one thereabouts would have told you that this was one of the richest farms on the Divide. (45)

This description of Alexandra Bergson's farm is quite unique with verbal picture. Cather explores happiness in the proximity of nature through her "pastoral images [which] are carefully intertwined" (O' Brien 168) and shows the reciprocity between place attachment and human identity. At the same time, in the second account Carter's ideas, characters, and events are surrounded by nature and its phenomenon:

Winter has settled down over the Divide again; the season in which Nature recuperates, in which she sinks to sleep between the fruitfulness of autumn and the passion of spring. The birds have gone. The teeming life that goes on down in the long grass is exterminated. The prairie-dog keeps his hole. The rabbits run shivering from one frozen garden patch to another and are hard put to it to find frost-bitten cabbage-stalks. At night the coyotes roam the wintry waste, howling for food. (103)

The "upshot" of this view, to use Leopold's term, is that the world is considered a commodity- a valuable commodity- but still an instrument in the service of human heredities. For Cather, then, homocentric conservation is first and foremost translated into wise-use partnership practices with the soil. Her ecological rituals rejoice at the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting.

There is little need to worry about wasteful, shortsighted, foolish or abusive farming. Nature, ever vigorous and resilient, quickly recovers. For example, the narrator of this novel explains that "that summer the rains had been so many and opportune that it was almost more than Shabata and his man could do to keep up with the corn; [so] the orchard . . . [became] a neglected wilderness" (83). There is visceral connection between the settlers and their environment. Or much earlier, when it appears that mother and children will have to struggle on without Mr. Bergson, Alexandra expresses her misgivings:

I don't know what is to become of us, Carl, if father has to die. I don't dare think about it. I wish we could all go with him and let the grass grow back over everything." Carl made no reply. Just ahead of them was the Norwegian graveyard, where the grass had, indeed, grown back over everything, shaggy and red, hiding even the wire fence. (9)

Some of Cather's characters, however, find wildness and naturalness the preferred state. As Dale Jamieson points out that "we are not separate from nature. Nature not only has brought us into existence and sustain us, but also constitute our identity" (96). There is harmonious relationship between biotic and abiotic worlds and Alexandra refers to one memorable

examples of ecological identity. The integration of human beings into natural world get manifested in the novel.

Result:

Though a biocentric metaphysics that refuses to rank species as higher or lower, or does not recognize some of them as having intrinsic versus instrumental value, is not a dominate stream in her philosophy, Cather gives preservationist ethics flowing from the biocentric view with careful consideration. Interestingly she relies on non-Americanized characters to express her biocentric impulse: Ivar in the novel *O Pioneers!* as such.

A hands-off preservation policy is for Cather, and the overwhelming majority of Americans, mostly a theoretical stance. This view is generally given the token status of a minority dissenting view, a fact Cather underscores by calling Ivar “Crazy” by representing exiles in his own land, as exemplar of a life-centered ethic. Homes Rolston III points out, “The unexamined life is not worth living; life in an unexamined world is not worth living either. We miss too much of value” (143). Crazy Ivar Practices species egalitarianism at least down to the level of animals: he is a vegetarian, “he never ate meat, fresh or salt” (23), he won’t allow guns near his big pond, saying, “ ‘I have many strange birds stop with me here. They come from very far away and are great company. I hope you boys never shoot wild birds?’” (22); he communicates with horses and cattle, and he understands birds. Carter presents ecotopian vision through Crazy Ivar.

Ivar’s regard for the natural- “he preferred the cleanness and tidiness of the wild sod” (20)- and his ethic of noninterference are symbolized in his abode. He has made his home in the land without disturbing it. In his earth house:

[A] door and a single window were set into the hillside. You would not have seen them at all but for the reflection of the sunlight upon the four panes of window-glass. And that was all you saw. Not a shed, not a corral, not a well, not even a path broken in the curly grass. But for the piece of rusty stovepipe sticking up through the sod, you could have walked over the roof of Ivar’s dwelling without dreaming that you were near human habitation. Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before he had done. (20)

The key word is “defile.” Though wise-use conservationists celebrate humanizing as improving, empowering, and assisting nature, hands-off preservationists see the same conduct as deplorable. Nell Gustafson points out, “Both [John and Alexandra] are entitled either to be lauded for final success or condemned for subduing nature through force since they share a common dream and practice a similarly pragmatic agriculture” (160). Cather continues her critique of homocentric imperialism.

Hands-off posture also extends to native Americans permanent dwellings that recall Leopold’s preservationist imperative that realistically sanctions some use of resources, while still maintaining that soil, water, plants, and animals have “a right to continued existence, and at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state” (204). Cather’s sense of the Southwest Native Americans’ preservationist posture is very Leopoldian. Arne

Naess points out, “exporting pollution is not only a crime against humanity, but also against life” (53). In this regard Cather is humanitarian.

Cather’s willingness to endorse a biocentric world view is clear in her subtle and tellingly precise word to explain why Crazy Ivar has come to live with the Bergsons. “When Ivar lost his land through [mismanagement] a dozen years ago, Alexandra took him in, and he has been a member of her household ever since” (47). “Mismanagement” meant that Ivar failed to make the “improvements” that seemed obvious to conservationists and were required to prove up a homestead or tree claim. Instead, Ivar’s improvements were to construct a dam and plant green willow bushes to shelter birds. Preservationists would find that Ivar had made the proper sort of environmental impact, especially since humans would be only remotely the beneficiaries of his actions. However, even the biocentric ethic of Ivar is not a pure preservation. The obvious fact of the impossibility of a zero-impact human (or any other sort of) life is the practical Achilles heel of biocentrism. Theoretically and ethically, species egalitarianism is counterintuitive to the point of silliness.

The opening description in “Winter Memories” suggests through its images “Winter has settled down over the Divide again; the season in which Nature recuperates, in which she sinks to sleep between the fruitfulness of autumn and the passion of spring” (103). The personifications of the seasons in this sentence seem to suggest that nature is as equal to the human beings. Similarly a brief descriptive passage subtly suggests the final situation of the novel: “They paused on the last ridge of the pasture, overlooking the house and the windmill and the stables that marked the site of John Bergson’s homestead. On every side the brown waves of the earth rolled away to meet the sky” (169). The compressed imagery of this last sentence combines three of the traditional basic elements: water, earth and air. But fire is notable absent. Marie and Emil are dead. Thus *O Pioneers!* ends with reference of return to basic elements, to the land and sky, to what is always left.

A homocentric world-view has serious flaws, too. Cather’s critique of human-centeredness, however, is given curious expression. What are we to make of her celebration of first-generation pioneers and her worry about the indolence and spiritual lassitude of their children and grandchildren? While first-generation homesteaders are invigorated and enlivened by the challenge of humanizing the wild land, all that they have achieved- success and security, profit and comfort- seems to lead to a soft and lax character in their progeny. For example, near the end of this novel *O Pioneers!* Cather has Alexandra Bergson take stock of her very successful farm management, which has made it possible for Emil to not have to farm!

Alexandra was well satisfied with her brother [Emil] . . . Yes, she told herself, it had been worthwhile; both Emil and the country had become what she had hoped. Out of her father’s children there was one who was fit to cope with the world, who had not been tied to the plow, and who had a personality apart from the soil. And that, she reflected, was what she had worked for. She felt well satisfied with her life. (117)

Perhaps it is the challenge and opportunity of humanizing the land that is worthwhile. Bruce P. Baker II avers “*O Pioneers!* ends with the theme of the cycle of life as it returns to Alexandra, Carl Linstrum and their relationship with nature” (222). A homocentric view that treats the land as a commodity to be used for humans runs another risk: economic pressures

can quickly and rudely shoulder aside any ethical imperatives dealing with wise use. Accordingly biocentric preservationism has serious theoretical flaws, and homocentric conservation is vulnerable to economic pressures. Perhaps a third option, environmental theocentrism, can address some of the shortcomings of both views.

Even Crazy Ivar is not a complete hands-off preservationist. He does, however, carry out Leopold's ambiguous imperatives of both a moderate, benign use of resources along with leaving some resources with a "continued existence in a natural state" (204). Ivar is able to manage this delicate balance because his fundamental commitment is religious. And, though he is a nature mystic, Cather takes care to establish the biblical basis of his faith. We first meet him when young Emil, Carl, and Alexandra, approaching his earth-home, find him reading his Norwegian Bible. Years later, now living at the Bergson home, Ivar deals with the news of the double murders of Maria and Emil by sitting inside his barn/home "repeating to himself the 101st Psalm" (151). This refers to Alexandra's emotional creativity and land's prosperity

Ivar's ethic of "harm no one," even animals and birds, holds that all life is sacred, especially "wild things . . . [because they] are God's" (22). He tells Alexandra, "Listen, mistress, it is right that you should take these things into account. You should know that my spells come from God, and that I would not harm any living creature" (50). Likewise the world view and moral stance of the native people is theocentric. In Leopold's terms, these Native peoples see themselves as plain members and citizens of the land community.

Accordingly they adapt themselves (not vice-versa) to their environment. Abstractly described, Ivar measures lives against a moral standard of stewardship. An ecological ethic of stewardship implies that the current landholders are not the owners but only its latest tenants and that it is always with an eye to future generations that wise-use and preservation practices are to be evaluated. An important and persistent theme in Cather's works is how, paradoxically, the future delimits the present and defines the past.

Cather is explicit about ownership, stewardship, and the future in *O Pioneers!* "You [Alexandra] belong to the land," Carl murmured, "as you have always said. Now more than ever." "Lou and Oscar can't see those things," said Alexandra suddenly. "Suppose I do will my land to their children, what difference will that make? The land belongs to the future" (169). Cather's religiosity is neither apologetic nor proselytizing; for her, religious faith is simply a given of human experience. As David Pepper argues "Utopianism permeates both radical and reformist environmentalism" (3). Cather presents a form of utopianism through this novel.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, Cather in her *O Pioneers!* manifests strong symbiotic relation between human and the natural world. She more focuses on conservation and the preservation of nature and natural world. She postulates utopian world having the harmony between human, animals and the natural world. Her focuses further orient and gear to a gentle, live and- let-live, appreciate-your-place lifestyle where humans pause and settle for a while but do not dominate. This conception is quite similar to the way "we all [human

beings] travel the milky way together, trees and men” (Muir 184) with theocentric stewardship. Cather presents symbiotic bond between land and human beings through the exploration of happiness in the proximity of nature, reciprocity between place attachment and human identity, placelessness and loss of identity, the spiritual and visceral connection between the settlers and their environment, land’s impregnation in Alexandra’s mind and imagination, ecotopian vision, and Leopoldian land ethics and the like in *O Pioneers!*

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