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No Place Like Home:
Fiction of Scandinavian Women and the American Prairie

A Thesis Presented for
The Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Rebecca Frances Crockett
May 2012

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Doug and Patricia Crockett, who taught me early the value of good books.

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I owe a debt of gratitude first and foremost to my thesis committee, for all of their time and patience as I figured out what I was trying to say. Their openness and approachability greatly encouraged my own academic curiosity. In particular, my thanks to Dr. Mary Papke, for listening to and encouraging my earliest, half-formed ideas and agreeing to chair my committee. Thanks also to Dr. Chuck Maland, for all of the books and the first-hand descriptions of Norway, and to Dr. Bill Hardwig for always having a minute to chat despite his numerous other commitments.

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Abstract

This thesis examines various fictional depictions of Scandinavian pioneer women and their struggle to adapt to the American prairie. It looks specifically at three novels: Johan Bojer's *The Emigrants*, O.E. Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, and Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*. All three novels depict Scandinavian immigrant groups who settle in the Great Plains area during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The thesis looks in detail at the numerous ways in which each author's female characters adapt or fail to adapt to the landscape, exploring the possible reasons for these successes and failures. It argues that the immigrant characters' cultural heritage and past experiences heavily shapes their perceptions of the prairie. While male characters tend to be readily adaptable due to a previous history of farm labor, female characters often have difficulty maintaining traditional household duties in the new landscape and must find alternate ways of imposing order in their worlds. The thesis concludes that female characters who are able to see their roles as flexible and shaped by the demands of the landscape fair better than characters who try to impose old ways of living on a new environment.

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Introduction

Scandinavian Women and the Female Landscape

Since its conception, the United States has been characterized by a fascination with land, with the lure of claiming uncharted territory. A great deal of American literary tradition revolves around this fascination. Harold Simonson calls the promise of pushing west into virgin space "synonymous with the American Dream" (1), suggesting that for European settlers, frontier spaces symbolized everything from cheap agriculture and social mobility to the almost mystical notion that "on the open frontier a person could be reborn" (2).

However, the lure of this new land has an equally long tradition of being approached in almost purely masculine terms. Louise Westling describes the traditional attitude toward the American frontier as "a strange combination of eroticism and misogyny," gone unchallenged for decades (5). Glenda Riley further points out that even the "usual ways of defining frontier areas have been male in orientation. The very notion of a western region as a fur, farming, mineral, or lumber frontier reflects an overwhelming interest in the economic pursuits of its Euro-American male settlers" (4). As important as the frontier may be to the American mindset, then, it has long been approached in a less than inclusive fashion.

Recent literary criticism has gone a long way toward complicating this image. A number of women writers, from Mary Austin to Leslie Marmon Silko, have attracted critical interest by offering their own versions of the wilderness tradition, and as a discipline, literary criticism has begun to move away from the simple vision of the white man settling the wilderness. In the wake of this shift, however, there remains a whole

canon of frontier fiction to be reexamined, especially in terms of how women related to a landscape characterized in such masculine terms.

It might be tempting to suggest that theoretical conceptions of landscape would have had no bearing on realistic literary representations of pioneer women, which often focus on the mundane routine of daily existence, yet even such a practical life as homesteading is typically presented in masculine terms, revolving around tending the fields and the livestock. As Glenda Riley points out, "given the nineteenth-century role expectation that . . . women's lives would be domestically oriented, women were often disappointed with the setting and the resources that were offered to them by the prairie" (46). In other words, the sphere in which women were traditionally expected to function almost entirely disappeared in a prairie setting, raising questions as to women's "proper" roles in this new setting.

Given that the vast majority of authors writing about the frontier are men, one might wonder whether the struggle of woman within the prairie landscape is simply not a theme that naturally occurred to them. However, this is frequently not the case. Dorothy Burton Skardal notes, for instance, that "the literature regularly [shows] woman immigrants doing barn and field work on pioneer farms" especially during the "difficult early years" of settlement (242), although this seems to have changed after the initial period, with "younger wives and growing daughters soon depicted having no more to do with the stock than feeding the chickens" (242). Hans Norman and Harald Runblom in fact lament that "the role of women is a neglected aspect in the historiography of Nordic immigration in America" (267) despite their apparent importance in settling the prairie.

Regardless of the scarcity of first-hand accounts by women, then, there would still seem to be material waiting to be discussed in light of critical focus on gender.

As many of the accounts of prairie fiction are written by those of Scandinavian descent, the need for a feminist reinterpretation of landscape in these texts is particularly compelling for three reasons: First, a notable feature of the Scandinavian countries as a whole is the relative equality of women from a relatively early period. In Sweden, women were permitted to vote in local elections as early as 1862, a good seven years before American women achieved the same right (Nordstrom 253), with universal male suffrage only being achieved eleven years prior (Scott 50). Further, the relationship between women and manual labor was much different than in urban America. Nordstrom stresses the "complementarity that had characterized the relationships between men and women on the farm and in the production and delivery of goods for centuries" (248).

While it would be foolish to suggest that Scandinavian societies were thus a perfect model of gender equality, history suggests that they operated under a slightly different set of gender paradigms than did their American counterpart. It seems reasonable, then, to expect such differences to be reflected in the culture's literary traditions and to question whether these differences also influenced Scandinavian understandings of the frontier.

Additionally, the Scandinavian relationship to land is a significant topic even discounting issues of gender, as land was a key reason for immigration. Franklin Scott suggests that "scarcity of land and food [was] the foundation for the epic of [Scandinavian] emigration" (58), and this claim is bolstered by the fact that Scandinavian immigration to the United States reached a peak after the 1862 passage of the Homestead

Act, which promised 160 acres of almost-free land to anyone willing to farm the acreage and declare U.S. citizenship (Norman 53). Norman claims that most early immigrants from Norway and Sweden left "nearly exclusively in order to obtain land" (53).

Settlers from Norway made a particularly early start. While Sweden was faced with a growing population and a subsequent scarcity of land, the Norwegian settlers' home country was rocky and mountainous to begin with, creating a culture of subsistence living that became more and more difficult to endure as small land holdings were divided again and again among subsequent generations of children (Norman 90). For these groups, the lure of cheap, plentiful land was nearly irresistible, and perhaps because of this, Norman notes, Norway had the "earliest, most extensive and long[est]-lasting emigration" (52). It seems reasonable to conclude that depictions of these settlers would necessarily be attuned to their hunger for land in the new world.

It is important to clarify, however, that immigration from other parts of Scandinavia occurred for motives that often had nothing to do with land. Immigrants from Finland were frequently mine and sawmill workers, and tended to pursue this same kind of work in America, and approximately half of Danish immigrants during the peak years of migration were Mormon, coming to America in response to religious persecution (Norman 58). Finally, while migration from Iceland "reached a rate higher than in any other Nordic country" in the 1870s, the bulk of Icelandic interest was directed toward Canada rather than the U.S. (59). As a result, Norwegian and Swedish accounts are the most likely to focus upon land ownership and breaking ground on the American prairie merely as a matter of statistics—these groups emigrated in greater numbers and were more focused on agricultural pursuits.

Finally, it is also worth considering the Scandinavian literary traditions that the immigrant population brought with them and the degree to which these influenced an understanding of the land. To some degree, Scandinavian traditions were comparable to what was happening on the American and British literary scene. According to H.G. Topsoe-Jensen, the Scandinavian era of Romanticism lasted from 1800-1870, followed by a burgeoning Naturalist movement in the ‘70s (1). However, there are also differences. For instance, Frederika Blankner calls Scandinavian literary history “a noble, thoughtful vision of life . . . serving as a responsive background for [a] deep sense of the elemental forces of the universe” (8), suggesting a continuing influence by a past heavily steeped in sagas, and Topsoe-Jensen observes that following the Naturalist period was a quick return to neo-Romanticism, wherein “history and nature become the great sources of inspiration” (126) once more, and that even before this romantic resurgence, “an ever fertile source of inspiration for . . . Norwegian writing have been the mountains, the sea, and the forest” (4). These accounts suggest, then, an already heightened cultural sensitivity to one’s physical surroundings, leading one to conclude that the transition into the wide prairie spaces of the United States would not have gone unnoticed in Scandinavian frontier literature.

By all accounts, then, we can see that female roles in the new world and preoccupations with land and landscape are all important issues to be considered in Scandinavian frontier literature. To date, however, little critical effort has been made to address these issues in conjunction with one another. This may stem partially from difficulty in obtaining source material. Fictional accounts of settling the plains were at first few and far between. Skardal notes that the first novel written by a Scandinavian in

America didn't appear until 1873, and even then, it focused not on life in America but took place in Norway (36). Yet, there was growing interest in capturing the immigrant experience. Orm Overland recounts the desire among Norwegians throughout the 1870s to "create a historical record before the deeds of the past were forgotten" (71), and by the early 1900s, the movement was underway.

However, for all the mythical status that homesteading on the prairies seems to hold in American culture, there are surprisingly few accounts dealing primarily with that experience. In addition to accounts that remain untranslated, early records of prairie life were often written for extremely didactic purposes, such as to encourage temperance or church-going. More skilled authors eventually emerged, but a number of them chose to focus on urban scenes or to depict the prairie as one of many changing backdrops rather than a final settling place. Johannes Wist, for example, primarily offers accounts of early town and city life on the plains, while the characters in Hamlin Garland's *Middle Border* series follow the edge of the still-widening frontier all the way to California rather than putting down permanent roots.

Nonetheless, an eclectic mix of literature ultimately ensures an eclectic mix of perspectives as well. This study hopes to look at representations of landscape and women's relationship to it from three different authorial perspectives: that of the Scandinavian immigrant, that of the native Scandinavian, and that of the native U.S. citizen.

O.E Rolvaag is the most obvious (and frequently the only) name to arise when discussing Scandinavian depictions of the Great Plains. In particular, *Giants in the Earth* (1927), the first volume of his prairie trilogy, stands as a seminal example of early

pioneer life. Rolvaag himself immigrated to the United States in 1896 when he was nineteen to work on an uncle's farm (Haugen 7), and so had first-hand experiences upon which to draw, although given his excellent education he can hardly be counted as one and the same with most early immigrants.

Critically, Rolvaag is well-acclaimed. However, only a handful of books have been published dealing exclusively with Rolvaag and his work, including two that are largely biographical.[1] Much current scholarship on Rolvaag focuses on his political views and whether his stance on naturalized citizenship affected his fiction. Einer Haugen, for instance, suggests that Rolvaag viewed "preservation of… ethnicity" as "an ethical duty laid down by divine fiat in every ethnic group" (23). However, Rolvaag's detailed descriptions of prairie life and the complex psychology of his characters also suggest that there remains much to be said regarding both women and landscape.

A now virtually unknown Norwegian contemporary of Rolvaag also wrote about prairie life. Unlike Rolvaag, Johan Bojer never emigrated, spending only a few months in the United States for the sake of researching his novel, *The Emigrants*, which was published only a few months before Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*. Apparently concerned over the similarity of the two books, and wishing to fend off any charges of plagiarism, Rolvaag in fact takes pains to explain in the foreword to his own novel that *Giants in the Earth* "was in the hands of book dealers a little better than one month before Bojer's book appeared" (xi). However, little effort has been done to examine the two novels side by side.

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[1] Paul Reigstad's *Rolvaag: His Life and Art* (1972), and Einar Haugen's *Ole Edvart Rolvaag* (1983).

Although Bojer is practically unheard of in the American literary tradition, he was a popular and prolific novelist in his own time, and histories of Norwegian and Scandinavian literature tend to reference him under the assumption that one is already familiar with his work. Unlike Rolvaag, who has been examined in conjunction with American modernism and naturalism, Bojer represents a separate Norwegian literary tradition. *The Emigrants* in some respects follows the formulaic plot of a young man who must seek his fortune to win true love. However, critics have also cited Bojer as one of the "principal representatives" of the still developing Scandinavian neo-Realist movement (Blankner 63). *The Emigrants* is usually numbered among his better works, following an early period marked by "optimistic religiosity" and "didacticism" (Rossel 126).

The Emigrants occupies a somewhat liminal space in both Norwegian and American literary tradition. Scandinavian critics are more interested in Bojer's later novels, particularly *The Last of the Vikings* and *Folk by the Sea*, which focus on Norwegian fishing traditions in the far north. They are considerably less interested in Bojer's forays into the American plains.[2] However, American critics also are hardly more interested, usually mentioning *The Emigrants* only in conjunction with Rolvaag's work. Rarely is the novel afforded any space of its own.

Finally, while Bojer may be thought of as "too Norwegian" to discuss in terms of the immigrant experience, Willa Cather is sometimes portrayed as not Scandinavian enough. Though known for her focus on frontier expanses and immigrant life, she was

[2] See, for instance, Bojer's treatment in Harald Naess's *A History of Norwegian Literature* or Sven Rossel's *A History of Scandinavian Literature*, where *The Emigrants* is conceded to be an important novel and then barely mentioned again.

American born and raised in Virginia, though at the age of nine she and her family moved to the Nebraskan plains for a short period of time (Levy 65). However, this does not stop her from focusing on immigrant life. *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918), in particular, as well as a number of short stories, are excellent examples of this focus. Though *My Antonia* receives the brunt of critical attention, *O Pioneers!* maintains a more rural, agrarian focus throughout and falls more closely in line with the landscape that Bojer and Rolvaag are also depicting.

Perhaps due to Cather's own lack of Scandinavian ancestry, critics have tended to focus more heavily upon other themes within her work. Cather has little apparent connection to Scandinavian immigrant culture: Her father's ancestors were primarily Scotch-Irish and had settled in America by the 1750s, while her mother's side of the family were deeply-rooted Southerners (O'Brien 12-13). Issues of gender are more frequently pushed to the forefront in critical discussions of Cather,[3] and while land and the female relationship to it are also discussed, rarely is Cather's work aligned with a specific ethnic focus. For instance, Roy Meyer speaks rather vaguely of "the adjustment of the immigrant" in Cather's work and the material success of "the immigrant rather than the American" (45), without specifying what kind of immigrant Cather is writing about, as if all immigrants were more or less interchangeable. This tendency suggests that there is ample room to look at Cather's work specifically in the context of Scandinavian culture.

[3] Frances W. Kaye's *Isolation and Masquerade: Willa Cather's Women* and Josephine Donovan's *After the Fall: The Demeter-Persephone Myth in Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow* are two examples, though the list is a long one.

Taken together, then, these three authors represent three possible perspectives on the lives of the Scandinavian immigrants settling the prairie, and all three offer the chance of examining previously overlooked themes. Given the Scandinavian awareness of both women's issues and of land and landscape, a study of the intersection of these issues in literature seems long overdue. Rolvaag, Bojer, and Cather thus provide an interesting assortment of lenses through which to begin addressing the issue.

Chapter One

Johan Bojer's Sea of Grass

Once popular and now largely forgotten, Norwegian author Johan Bojer (1872-1959) leaves a legacy of mixed reactions. His praise and damnation as a writer range widely, one critic claiming he is "the most significant writer" since Ibsen (Gad 27) and another ridiculing him as an "obviously inferior [novelist] who by some accident of human taste [has] attracted very considerable reading publics" (Gustafson 11). Critics tend to agree, however, that while Bojer's early novels tend toward didacticism (Rossel 126), his last five are his most powerful, succeeding in "portray[ing] the lives of ordinary people simply and artistically" (Naess 207). It is in these later novels, according to Sven Rossel, that Bojer is "able to freely express his epic talent" (126).

This focus on "ordinary people" can be seen in *The Emigrants* (1925), one of the last of Bojer's works, which recounts the trials of a group of Norwegian immigrants who come to America to escape various hardships in their homeland. The novel follows them as they settle on the Dakota prairie and face various setbacks—hard winters, bad crops, and prairie fires—while trying to acclimate. Despite their setbacks, by the end of the novel they have progressed from claiming adjacent farm land to establishing a town with electric lights and a railroad.

Though *The Emigrants* belongs to Bojer's more mature period, the novel tends to be ignored by American critics, due largely to the fact that Bojer writes as an outsider, depicting life in America from the perspective of one who has never lived there. Einar Haugen, for instance, deplores Bojer's "lack of experience with immigration as well as

America" and declares it "unsurprising that [Bojer lacks] the authenticity and the depth" of other writers on the subject (120).

This "lack of depth" may be due to Bojer's relative inexperience with American culture. He lived his entire life in Norway, and his research into the immigration experience for *The Emigrants* consisted of only a few months in America. Einar Haugen references Bojer's "visit to America [to] collect materials for a novel about Norwegian immigration" in the spring of 1923 (75), but according to contemporary accounts, this trip was more akin to a lecture tour than a research trip ("Johan Bojer"). Nor were Bojer's travels necessarily centered on the Midwestern region: A 1923 news article records the "banquet to be given in [Bojer's] honor" by the Sons and Daughters of Norway in Los Angeles. His depiction of the Midwestern region, then, necessarily lacks the kind of depth that a native of the region might expect.

However, Bojer's foreignness does provide an outsider's perspective on the settlement of the American frontier. As a newcomer and an outsider himself, he is well situated to capture the perceptions of other newcomers in a strange land. Indeed, Bojer's description of the land proves to be one of the most unconventional elements of *The Emigrants*. The novelist relies upon his knowledge of the Norwegian landscape in his efforts to portray the Great Plains: To Bojer, the American prairie looks strangely like the sea. More specifically, throughout *The Emigrants*, Bojer draws a constant comparison between life on the prairie and life among the Norwegian fishermen of the Lofoten Islands.

Even more interesting than the comparison itself is the equally unique novelistic dilemma it creates: Norwegian fishing was almost entirely a male occupation, so while

life on the sea is an easy and familiar trope through which the male characters might come to understand prairie life, the female characters lack this fishing experience. Bojer's female characters thus have no easy way to describe or understand prairie space except in terms of what it lacks. The novel attempts to place the female characters into roles comparable to the roles they would have played as fishermen's wives. However, the new landscape does not fully allow this, and *The Emigrants* has difficulty resolving the tension between the women and their new setting. The novel thus suggests that for female characters, at least, feeling at home on the prairie lacks an easy solution.

The connection between prairie and sea is obvious from the very beginning of the novel. Bojer describes the new land almost exclusively in terms of water vocabulary. During the first scene set in the new world, he tells us of the "ocean of earth, undulating in heavy, long-drawn waves, on and on into the blue distance, till the last wave spent itself somewhere beyond the sky-line" (78). The land is repeatedly referred to as both a "prairie ocean" (81) and an "ocean of earth" (118). After the fields have been planted and begin to sprout, they turn into a "golden sea" of wheat (182). One of the wheat fields is even described as "billowing away toward the distant blue horizon like an ocean of food" (328). Further, the prairie prompts reactions in the men that are similar to those prompted by the sea. When one of the characters, Per Foll, feels overwhelmed by the vastness of the prairie, he is described "as a capsized fisherman [struggling] frantically to keep his head above water" (243), as though the prairie has the power to drown.

The narrator also makes repeated references to the fact that all the male characters have experience as fishermen. Morten and Jo know each other specifically from "fishing off the Lofotens" (17), and Morten is in particular difficulty because "the fishing off the

Lofotens ha[s] failed four years running" (16). Ola has "been at sea before" (11) and when Kal and his family are preparing to leave Norway, he must say farewell to "his old pals of Lofoten days" (55). Even Per Foll once refers to having "cleared a whole tap-room, up in the Lofotens" (248). Thus, the sea is an integral part of each of the male characters' personalities, a part that Bojer takes the time to make explicit.

The men proceed to draw on their experience as fishermen to survive on the prairie, suggesting an extremely similar skill-set is needed in both worlds. For instance, when one of the men, Morten Kvidal, must try to find a doctor during his first winter on the prairie, Bojer tells us that because "Morten was an old sailor," he is able to find his way across the snow-covered prairie, "[relying] more upon his sailor's instinct" than the compass (167). The experience is likened to "sailing in a sea-mist" (167). Much later in the novel, after a crop failure, we are told that due to the immigrants' "fishing days in the old country," they know how to withstand hard times (207).

Though Bojer gives little background in *The Emigrants* on Norwegian fishing practices, according to Anita Maurstad, "the knowledge related to the seascape [in Norway] is mostly a male knowledge. The seascape is a man's world" (287). When discussing treatments of the sea in Scandinavian fiction, George White infers the same thing, focusing solely on the "Scandinavian seamen" with little mention of women's relationship to the sea. It is easy to assume, further, that Bojer was familiar with these masculine elements of fishing culture. Two of his late novels are *about* Lofoten fishermen,[4] and one of these, *The Last of the Vikings,* won universal praise for its realism. William Mishler states, for instance, that this novel is "considered by critics to be the best

[4] *The Last of the Vikings* (1921) and *Folk by the Sea* (1929).

novel written about sailors and the sea in Norwegian literature" (207). It is also worth noting that *The Emigrants* was the next of Bojer's novels to be published following *The Last of the Vikings*. Bojer's constant references to Lofoten fishing culture, then, refer to a subject with which he would have been intimately familiar. However, this conceptualization has no explicit place for women. While it provides an excellent framework by which to describe the men's experiences on the plains, it offers no such clarity to the female characters, suggesting that some alternate model must be found for them.

However, an alternate model is not immediately introduced. Even when the prairie is not equated directly with the old fishing grounds, the male characters still tend to conceptualize the land purely in terms of the sustenance and income it can offer, much as the sea would offer these same things to a fisherman. Arne Kalland relates just how heavily Lofoten fishermen were dependant on the sea, pointing out that "only about 5 percent of the land area [of the islands] is arable" (206) and that "fishing has always been the most important source of income on the islands" (207). The men of *The Emigrants* seem to measure the prairie landscape by these same standards. One of the characters, Morten Kvidal, sees "wealth…wealth… Only wait! Very soon he would claim his share" (178). Another, Kal Skaret, sees "a whole world of splendid earth . . . covered with grass six feet high—enough to feed a million cows" (86). Indeed, the prairie differs drastically from the characters' previous experiences with farming. The region of Norway from which the emigrants come encompasses rocky soil and steep grades, or, as Morten puts it when he returns for a visit, life revolves around "stumps and stones, pickax and spade" (273). On many levels, then, the open expanses of prairie would have had more in

common with the sea than with the men's previous experience with farmland, suggesting that for them, the open expanses of prairie represent bounty and opportunity.

It is true that in at least one case, a male character has negative encounters with the land. We are told that "very different was the effect of the plain upon Per [Foll]," the one male character who struggles against the prairie (179). He is overwhelmed by the fact that "there [is] not a single obstacle [t]here, nothing one could shoulder aside, nothing of any kind" (119). When spring comes, instead of feeling tempted by the riches the land offers, he feels overwhelmed "with its muggy, stifling gloom" and builds a little hill of earth to help relieve the flatness (179).

Per Foll is not supposed to be reacting like this, however. His actions are presented by the novel as the exception rather than the norm. In fact, the other men are disgusted by Per's reactions and tell him he is "going too far" (248). Indeed, Per has such a completely wrong reaction to the prairie that he eventually goes mad and is taken away to an asylum (251). Per's response is somehow unfitting for a man who, just as one on a fishing journey, ought to be willing to face a harsh landscape for material gain.

However, while Per's reaction is depicted as madness, the women's virtually identical response to the prairie is shown as normal. Per sees "this plain…receding, always receding from him" (119), and in almost identical language, Kal's wife Karen's initial response is to see nothing but "the plain, the same everlasting plain" (89). Indeed, most of the negative adjectives describing the prairie are used in conjunction with female perspectives. "The everlasting plain" makes one of the women feel dizzy (79), and another woman also "[complains] of dizziness and [cannot] eat or sleep properly," again because of the "everlasting plain" (97). While Kal Skaret's first impulse is to start

"swinging his scythe vigorously" (88), his wife Karen "[sits] brooding," prompting Kal to wonder, "what the deuce was wrong with the old woman?" (89). These incidents suggest that Bojer's female characters understand the landscape in a fundamentally different way than do the men. In fact, Maurstad makes note of the difference between male and female perspectives in the Lofoten Islands as well, explaining that "[women] see the sea from the village, while men see it from *being* on it. This provides unequal frames of reference for perception of the seascape" (287). Maurstad thus suggests precedence for the separate frames of reference that continue to be reflected in Bojer's prairie landscape.

Initially, in part because they have no experience of life on the sea, the women of *The Emigrants* see the landscape only in terms of absence or lack, not potential. There are no mountains or trees, and thus there is no real landscape. One of the women, Else, suggests that landscape means "forest-clad hills . . . the scent of turf and leaf" (80). To her, the prairie is "smoothed out, dull, and featureless" (80). When one of the characters returns to the homeland, Else half-jokingly asks him to send her love "to the landscape at home. To the mountains and the sea" (257). This view of the landscape is somewhat singular within the tradition of prairie literature. Carol Fairbanks writes that the group of women who "never became reconciled" to the landscape "[represent] a minority perspective in prairie women's fiction" (34). The reaction of the women in *The Emigrants* may thus be a result of a landscape unlike anything with which they would have had previous experience, having more in common with the sea than with the mountainous regions of western Norway where they would have conducted their daily routines.

The novel initially attempts to place the female characters in the same roles that they would have played as fishermen's wives. In a fishing setting, this role would have involved turning inward toward the home sphere. James Acheson states that while fishing cultures sometimes force "both fishermen and their families to play roles that are often not standard," the women are still expected to "bring up families and run households with their men gone much of the time" (277), suggesting duties still largely centered on the domestic sphere. Michael Jones further adds that in Norwegian fishing culture, "while fishing has always been a male occupation, women traditionally looked after livestock" (199).

The Emigrants initially portrays the women as focusing precisely on these traditional duties. During the journey across the plains, for example, "the three women [have] to milk their cows before they [can] attend to anything else" when they stop for the evening (77). Later in the novel, milking the cows is very clearly specified as "women's work in the old country" (224). Bojer also describes how the women are charged with cooking and doing other household chores: The "women-folks had their hands full, one making butter, another cakes, Anne washing clothes in a little stream" (87). Later, while her husband is out surveying the land, Karen "[puts] on the porridge to boil" (89). The women are also frequently occupied with their young children, and Anne describes the difficulty of trying to watch a child and still take care of chores outside (95).

However, it becomes increasingly evident in the novel that, on the prairie, focusing only on housework is no way to escape the strangeness of the surroundings. To begin, while housework traditionally takes place indoors, the settlers' sod homes are

hardly what the women are used to. Instead, these are repeatedly compared to makeshift fishermen's quarters. With "four walls…a door, two holes for light [and] a roof of elm poles," Kal concludes that his home is, indeed, "just like a fisherman's hut" (104). When another of the immigrants is visited by his brother from Norway, the brother is dismayed to find that he will be staying in a house that is nothing more than a "squalid little room. A fisherman's hut" (213).

Camille Vallaux describes the typical housing of seasonal fishermen in Norway as extremely temporary, nothing more than "great wooden sheds" (516) that are occupied only for the duration of the two months' winter fishing season (517). That the settlers' sod houses are compared to this kind of temporary housing suggests that they are a space little suited to normal domestic activities. Indeed, as Joanna Stratton notes, the sod house in fact "lacked adequate ventilation and seemed perpetually dark, damp and musty. Furthermore, the roof leaked regularly" (54). Thus, while the women would typically be expected to find comfort and familiarity within the domestic sphere, even this space is defined in terms of the men's experience. At the same time, due to the male-centered conception of the outdoors, there is no clear place for them there either, leaving the women with no clearly delineated space to claim as their own.

Due to this lack of delineation, perhaps it is unsurprising that much housework takes place outside. The narrator describes how the warm weather of spring allows the women to "do their work out of doors, where there were air and light and room to move about" (170). Other activities that normally occur inside are also transported into the outdoors. The first church service the settlers hold is "an open-air service," with some of the immigrants even sitting on the grass (188-89). Thus, during the early years of the

settlement, the domestic sphere essentially blends into the landscape, a landscape that makes the women extremely uneasy, suggesting, again, that housework is hardly an adequate way of coping with the new setting.

Further, the sod "fishermen's huts" are far from a temporary situation. Even after the settlers "have plodded along for five years" (204), they have only just begun to build a clapboard church, and after six years, the settlement is still described as "nothing but a grayish-brown desert, and a few sod huts which in Norway even a beggar would refuse to live in" (223). When Kal Skaret finally begins to build proper buildings, we are told he starts not with a house but "with the outhouses" (330). Even when the settlement has become established enough to bring in a preacher and his wife, they, too, are expected to stay in a sod house, as only two members of the settlement have built frame houses (238). The wife's reaction is to "[sink] down on [a] wooden bench and burst into tears," a reaction heightened by the fact that she "ha[s] grown up in a well-to-do home in a town in the East, had gone to balls and played at concerts" (239), suggesting that the prairie is even more antithetical to the perceived roles of an upper-class woman.

Thus, due to the extreme inhospitality of the "house" setting for at least the first six years of the settlement, and the resulting futility of trying to separate indoor and outdoor work, the novel brings to attention the fact that generic female spheres will not serve as a respite from an unfamiliar landscape. The old ways do not work in the new country.

The next solution presented by the novel initially seems to be a departure from traditional gender roles: Since focusing on household work is not an adequate means of acclimating, the women are shown helping with farm tasks that might seem more

traditionally "men's work." Anne helps her husband plow by "sitting in front on the [plow] beam" (94), and when there is grain to be reaped, the entire settlement pitches in, "the men walking in line mowing, while the women and children ran about binding sheaves and piling them in shocks" (182). There is some indication that working the land helps the characters draw closer to it. One of the men describes the "personal bond between the earth and himself" established by manual labor (148).

However, while from an American perspective, this may seem like a departure from gender norms, with Carol Fairbanks suggesting that "within the nineteenth-century norms for female behavior[,] only a few deviate from the division of labor which [distinguishes] between inside work and appropriate outside work" (92) and Stratton stating that "it was the daily housework which consumed most of a woman's time and energy" (62), Marit Haugen and Berit Brandth clarify that this kind of work would have been well within the bounds of traditional gender roles in Norway. In Norwegian tradition, "women do a lot of work on farms as farmers' wives, assistants or partners…" (207). Thus, assistance with farm work is only another facet of what would traditionally be expected of the female characters of *The Emigrants,* and this work seems to be only an added burden on top of household chores. By the end of the novel, we are told that Karen has not taken a day off "for nearly forty years…working away, even while the men had their midday rest" (337). The toll that this heavy workload takes on the women is also made explicit. Else, "who was once the pretty young lady at Dyrendal," has, by the end of the novel, turned into a woman whose "hands [are] rough and… back bent from the hard life of an emigrant woman" (299).

There is a single attempt made by one of the women to break completely with conventional gender roles and focus solely on farming. Haugen and Brandth suggest, however, that this is unusual, stressing that "women [in Norway] rarely own and/or manage the farm enterprise in their own right" (207). Indeed, most of the women in the novel are presented solely in the capacity of assistants or helpers, never the initiators of the work. Nevertheless, Kal and Karen's oldest daughter, Paulina, determines to manage her own farm.

Early in the novel, this daughter is described as a sweet child, "little flaxen-haired Paulina" (92). As she grows toward adulthood, she seems to be growing into adult beauty also, and one of the men describes her as "quite a little woman…[;] one almost felt tempted to write her a little love-letter!" (114). However, nine years later, she has grown into an awkward and ungainly woman who is repeatedly teased about her large hands. One of her brothers even says she has a fist "like a leg of mutton" (295). She informs her parents that she is going to stake a claim on her own homestead, since "it's true enough that [she'll] never get married" (296), suggesting that by taking on her own homestead she is renouncing the possibility of a husband and children. Thus, taking on this new role is essentially a rejection of the old one, and while it may allow her to relate to the landscape in the same way that the men do, it is at the cost of her relationship to the other immigrants.

Her situation is explained more fully by the narrator, who describes her as "no beauty, certainly, being coarse and masculine in appearance" (313). The cause of this is that "she [has] done man's work out of doors and woman's work indoors during all the

years since they came to America" (313), suggesting again that taking on a man's role is directly responsible for her "failure" as a woman.

Paulina's case might still be seen as a partial victory—she has adapted to the prairie environment, and though there are costs, she has made a place for herself in the world. That is, until she is killed: She is "driving the binder one day, when the horses [take] fright and [bolt]." She is "only just breathing" when she is found (327). Thus, Paulina's attempt to acclimate to the landscape by wholly abandoning her old roles is literally deadly. The old ways may not work in the new land, but Paulina's fate seems to suggest that the new ways also will not work. The female characters are essentially at an impasse.

Interestingly, the narrator seems more sympathetic toward the women's problem than the events of the plot would suggest. In Paulina's case, most of her troubles arise from the other characters' notions about what is proper for a woman. While the other immigrants avoid her, the narrator has nothing but sympathy, describing how "it was hard enough out of doors, but worse in the house. While the men took their after-dinner nap, she had had to help her mother…. Young? She'd never had time to be young; the boys were young, and [her sister] Siri, the apple of her father's eye" (313). The narrator, then, seems aware of the difficulty of placing women within the framework the novel has erected.

This sense of the narrator's sympathy is heightened due to the fact that some of the blame for the women's difficulties seems to be laid at the feet of the male characters. The men repeatedly attempt to shield the women from overly harsh experiences, and this attempt is often met with ridicule both from the women themselves and from the narrator.

For instance, when one of the men discovers an Indian burial ground, he asks his friend to "keep this to [himself]" because it is "no use scaring [the women] out of their wits again" (137). However, the only person in the entire settlement to encounter an actual Indian is a woman, Else, who has been left on her own while her husband is in town. She "[does] not faint. She [looks] him straight in the eye and [asks] him in English what he [wants]" (141). The suggestion, then, is that Else is not actually so weak and helpless in this alien landscape after all. Though the male characters seem to go through the motions of being properly protective of the female characters, the narration is at the same time undermining the necessity of such behavior by pointing out its futility and unfairness.

Yet, oddly, the novel ultimately fails to develop the inferred ability of the women in any meaningful way. This may be due largely to the formulaic origins of *The Emigrants*. The entire novel bears traces of popular Norwegian-American plot tropes that leave little room to explore the women's dilemma more thoroughly. Orm Overland gives a list of common Norwegian-American plots, including such elements as "the restrictions of a rigid class society, often expressed through a love story; the lack of economic opportunity in the old country… and, usually, social and economic improvement" (100). Bojer's novel, in fact, manages to include every single one of the themes that Overland lists. For instance, one of the central plot threads revolves around Ola Vatne, a poor man who convinces the landowner's only daughter to come to America (64). The plot arcs that make up *The Emigrants* are thus rigidly defined enough that they allow little room for any major breaks with convention.

Additionally, even contemporary scholars of the frontier experience struggle with how to understand the frontier woman's process of acclimation, suggesting that confusion

over how to understand women's roles is far from being a problem for Bojer alone. Glenda Riley writes that "because the overwhelming majority of plainswomen were domestically oriented people trying to function in a demanding environment…a significant question is, How did they manage to carry on?" (95), a question that she spends most of her book addressing and ultimately concludes has no easy or specific answer. *The Emigrants* is thus grappling with a question that has still not been definitively answered. Further, the novel approaches the issue from an even more restrictive angle than is customary, due both to its genre constraints and to its conceptualization of the prairie as a gendered space.

It is not surprising, then, that most of the female characters struggle in their efforts to feel at home. By the end of the novel, rather than trying to acclimate to the new landscape, several are actively trying to turn the landscape back into Norway. Morten Kvidal's wife takes this solution literally, coming to him "very pale and with dark shadows under her eyes, and ask[ing] whether it wasn't possible to sell the farm and go home" (293), a suggestion which Morten never follows through on. His wife's reaction is also sharply contrasted with the feelings of Morten himself, who discovers that he finds the landscape of his old home "unrestful—shooting up and plunging down…. Was it because he was so used to the prairie now?" (267).

Since the other men have also acclimated and are no more inclined to leave than Morten, a number of the women simply attempt to replicate Norway in the new world. This is a practice well-documented in frontier fiction as a genre. Riley writes that "re-creating certain social institutions and patterns of behavior was another way in which women …cushioned their adjustment to the prairie" (73). Karen, for instance, is only

soothed after seeing “the brownie” that she believes lived in her old home at Norway (106). After she sees the brownie, we are told, “her dizziness passed off, and she no longer got a headache from looking at that tiresome plain. It seemed as if all she had cared for at Skaret had accompanied her here” (106). The brownie comes up again whenever Karen is dealing with a new situation, such as when her husband finally builds a frame house (336). In effect, Karen can only feel at home when she has tangible evidence of the old world available to her, even if that “tangible” evidence is supernatural.

However, Karen later takes her attempt to recapture the sights of Norway one step further when she gets “another bee in her bonnet” and plants trees outside her sod house so that they “look like the little thicket of birch-trees on the north side of the byre at Skaret” (229). The other women of the settlement are inspired to do likewise, and even Morten’s unhappy wife “plant[s] a little grove, as Karen and Else and Anne had done” (319). At the close of the novel, Morten reflects on these little groves, which “[bear] witness of [the women’s] unquenchable yearning for the land of forests” (344).

Nor is the planting of trees the only measure the women take. Else replicates her old life in Norway not only through material things but also through her growing daughter, who is described at the end of the novel as being “the very image of her mother and [making] folks think of the young Miss Else of Dyrendal” (304). Anne takes a similar route, “telling [her children] tales of her own young days” (314). She is resigned to staying in America for her children’s sake, but the narrator tells us that “still, they all enjoyed going home with her on one of these dream journeys” (315). These actions read, then, as a still-present longing for the old world.

Several of the women do ultimately seem to find purpose in the new landscape, primarily through turning their domestic impulses toward the wider world. By the novel's end, Else and Bergitta have both become involved in the building fund for a new hospital (318), and Else references her efforts to raise money for "the Norwegian university in Nidaros" (342). June O. Underwood suggests that such activities were one of the commonly accepted roles for frontierswomen, placing them in the role of "civilizers, in that [frontier women] felt a moral imperative, a god-given duty, to transmit religious, social, and humane values to a lawless land" (6). *The Emigrants* largely glosses over the struggle that must have been required for the settlement to *reach* the stage that sustains universities and hospitals, however, side-stepping the question of how the women might have found meaning in their lives if such amenities were not possible. Glenda Riley also points out that the role of social civilizer was acceptable for women primarily because it still fell within the sphere of the domestic (2). Thus, the novel's solution to the problem of women's acclimation stays largely within previously delineated notions of acceptable behavior without exploring ways in which the landscape might alter these norms.

Ultimately, *The Emigrants* seems to register the fact that the female characters face a much steeper challenge in learning to adapt to their new home, and it struggles to resolve this issue. While the men are able to learn to love the land due to its similarities with life on the ocean, the women lack this connection. Further complicating matters, despite the changed landscape, the female characters are largely expected to operate within traditional gender roles. Thus, until the settlement has begun to grow and flourish, providing new opportunities for them as civilizers, they have few other activities upon which they may appropriately focus. *The Emigrants*, then, ultimately shies away from

radical solutions, depending on a slight variation of women's traditional roles to depict their happiness and well-being on the prairie.

Chapter Two

Whose Fairy Tale is it, Anyway?: Folklore, Gender, and Place in *Giants in the Earth*

O. E. Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927) is at first glance remarkably similar to Johan Bojer's *The Emigrants*. Rölvaag's novel, too, tells the story of a group of Norwegian immigrants settling on the Upper Midwestern prairie and the trials they face as they attempt to survive in this new environment. However, rather than focusing impartially on an entire group of settlers, as Bojer attempts, Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth* focuses closely upon two particular characters: Per Hansa and his wife, Beret. This somewhat tighter focus allows the reader to develop an increasingly complex understanding of their struggle to acclimate to the Great Plains.

Also unlike *The Emigrants*, Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth* has received much greater, and much more positive, critical attention. Einar Haugen claims the novel "burst upon the American literary scene...like a meteor out of the dark" (Preface), and the novel continues to sustain critical interest. One of the most commonly remarked upon themes of *Giants in the Earth* is its incorporation of numerous references to Norwegian folklore. Several critics have pointed out the other-worldly feel of the prairie setting and the sense that supernatural things are taking place there.[5] Philip Coleman-Hull identifies folklore as one of the "three primary focal points" of Rolvaag's novels (106), and Owen Jordhal claims that "folklore was an integral part" of Rolvaag's formative years and then continued to define his writing (1). These critical interpretations tend to focus upon Per Hansa's delighted sense that he is a hero out of a fairy tale, using Per's excitement as proof that he is better suited to the prairie environment than his wife, Beret. Per is

[5] See Paul Reigstad's "Mythic Aspects of *Giants in the Earth.*"

frequently compared with the *Askeladd* figure from Norwegian folklore, a male character who is "a kind of favorite of fortune who travels far in quest of a fortune and a princess" (Flanagan 79). Such arguments assume that Per Hansa's model is a successful way to understand prairie life, that, as Lewis Saum puts it, "Per Hansa's is paramountly a success story" (585).

However, Per's insistence on viewing life on the prairie through the lens of Scandinavian fairy tales is in fact far more damaging than successful. His views clash directly with Beret's somewhat different interpretation. More specifically, Per attempts to cast Beret as the passive princess to his active hero, while at the same time, Beret organizes her own actions around a separate and conflicting set of fairy tale motifs in which she is heroine. The clashing views of Per and Beret do not reconcile well. Interpreting the landscape via two separate folktale patterns, Beret and Per end up mutually excluding each other, leading to isolation for each and a failure for both to acclimate successfully to the new setting. The novel ultimately suggests that Norwegian folktales are not suited to the harsh reality of Plains life.

The connection between folktales and physical landscape is fairly well catalogued and suggests an initial reason for the failure of the couple's fairy tales. Richard Dorson speaks to the belief that Norwegian folklore in particular mirrors "the craggy fjords and forest-covered slopes of the northern land" (i), and Reimund Kvideland and Henning Sehmsdorf make a similar point when they argue that the folk traditions of the Scandinavian people developed by "respond[ing] to nature in the way [the Scandinavians] experienced it" (9). Reidar Christiansen devotes an entire book to the question of what happens to European folklore when brought to America, suggesting that

when imported, “the ancient European oral tradition [cannot] escape a further development, if not a complete transformation, due to the entirely new background" (12 European). In a sense, then, folktales are a way of interpreting environment, and bringing an old-world interpretation of the landscape into a new environment is inherently problematic as it represents a belief structure patterned from a setting that is no longer present. Robert Kroetsch points out that "the literature of our European past and of eastern North America, is emphatically the literature of a people who have *not* lived on prairies" (qtd. Turner 3). To draw on European folklore, then, is to draw on a tradition that is intrinsically unsuited to the prairie.

Despite this potential complication, Per’s vision of himself as folktale hero initially seems a success. During the immigrants’ first summer on the prairie, the narrator tells us that Per “[is] transported…on the wings of a wondrous fairy tale—a romance in which he [is] both prince and king” (125). Everything falls into place for him even when it should not. Though he plants his wheat too early, it still grows (349). Though his family arrives last, their fields are planted first and their sod house springs up “like an enormous mushroom" (56). He goes on a trip for lumber and comes back “with a load so big that the oxen were just barely able to sag up the slope with it. It was like an incident out of a fairy tale” (67). Everything he touches prospers.

These repeated references to fairy stories do bring to mind the male-dominated nature of trials and challenges in folklore. Bengt Holbek, in his study of Nordic folk forms, emphasizes the gendered nature of traditional folktales, stating that typically there was "a strong tendency for men to prefer masculine tales (tales with a male protagonist), whereas women's repertoires were more evenly distributed" (42). Masculine and feminine

tales have somewhat different elements, and Holbek notes that tests and trials are an integral part of the male folkstory, a part which “few heroes avoid,” unlike heroines, who often “do not have to pass a test” (50). It is the male character who is most likely to go adventuring, encountering trials and tests and successfully overcoming them to return home a hero or a wealthy man. Per, then, seems merely to be closely following the typical pattern of the folktale hero.

However, the self-interpretation of Per as folktale hero becomes problematic when applied to his married life. In fact, his role as hero would seem to negate the existence of a married life altogether. There are few examples of married heroes who go adventuring, either within Norwegian tradition or most other Euro-centric traditions, and as Bengt Holbek puts it, weddings "*conclude* fairy tales nine cases out of ten" (44, emphasis mine). Winning the princess is the *goal*, not the starting point. Christiansen reiterates this point, noting that "in Nordic stories, the hero usually fights to recover a... maiden" (27 Studies), again suggesting that the winning of the woman is the goal rather than the starting point. Holbek even suggests that the pattern of trials and challenges to be overcome by the hero before the marriage can take place "corresponds to what Danish storytellers knew from their own culture: a young man could not court a girl unless he was well on his way to independence, and he could not marry until he had won her acceptance, her parents' consent, and some sort of 'kingdom,' be it ever so small" (49). Per himself references a similar Norwegian belief, marveling over the strangeness of owning land “years after he won the princess” (48). Per's marriage, then, violates traditional folktale order. He has already won the princess but has yet to establish his kingdom.

Indeed, in Per's determination to see himself as a folk hero, the further *Giants in the Earth* progresses, the less he seems to consider Beret his wife in any meaningful sense. At first, Beret is the ostensible motivation for Per's efforts. We are told that "[Beret's] image dominated all the visions which now seemed to come to him…. Oh yes, that Beret-girl of his should certainly have a royal mansion" (52). At the start of the novel, he clearly both admires and desires her: He describes Beret as having "more sense than most people" (17), and the narrator tells us that at night "Per Hansa was good to his wife" (24). However, as he begins to break sod on the prairie and dream of success, rising earlier and earlier, Beret has to "beg him" to stay in bed with her (57). During her illness, he "[treats] her as a father would a delicate, frail child," and even after she has recovered, "this paternal attitude [has] become fixed with him" (515). Thus, while at the start of the novel Per seems content with having won his princess, by the end of the novel he identifies so closely with the struggling hero that he in effect regresses to an earlier stage of the fairy story, a stage in which there is no role for a wife. As Haugen so succinctly puts it, Per "has forgotten that he already had a princess" (91).

Part of this process of forgetting entails a growing awareness on Per's part of other women. At the beginning of the novel, Beret and Per both believe that he has eyes only for her. He thinks her "a woman of tender kindness, of deep, fine fancies" (52), while she reveals her sublime confidence that "she alone among women held [Per's] heart…[;] for him she was the only princess!" (256). However, as the novel progresses, this attitude proves to be more and more untrue. As Per goes about his solitary challenges, he encounters women; for example, he tells a town widow that if he "had met [her] in time, [he] would have courted [her]!" (200), and at the Tronder settlement, he

dances with one of the wives, although this is apparently not something he wishes his own wife to know about (322). Even Per's kingdom itself tends to be presented in female terms. We are told the "Great Prairie stretch[es] herself voluptuously" (398), and when Per is harvesting his wheat, he feels a "sensuous pleasure welling up within him" when he feels the sap from the wheat stems (385). The prairie that Per is obsessed with thus becomes another rival female, stealing away his attention from his forgotten "princess" and assuming the role of both kingdom and woman. Such a characterization effectively places Beret in competition with the land rather than allowing her to work alongside Per in cultivating it.

The gendered nature of Per's fairy kingdom extends also to his treatment of his children, as he trains his sons to view the landscape in the same way. It is "Per Hans and his boys" who "work like firebrands….They [go] from one fairy tale into the next" (226). The boys are bitterly disappointed when they must remain indoors with their mother; Store-Hans refers at least once to the indignity of having to go "pottering around like a hired girl—just like another woman!" when his father is off on one of his fairy-tale expeditions (190).

Per's manner of viewing the world also seems to lead him to overlook the existence of his daughter, And-Ongen, almost entirely. At first glance, Per's preferential treatment of his sons can be attributed to nothing more than the fact that the sons are both older than his daughter. However, by the end of the novel, eight years have passed and And-Ongen is ten or eleven. Despite this, in the scene prior to his death, when Per seems to be subconsciously bidding farewell to his family, he spends time playing with his youngest son (523), and then goes out to watch the older boys digging in the snow (527),

but And-Ongen is never mentioned, as if he cannot place her within his interpretation of his prairie life. Per seems able to conceive of his sons growing up to become heroes like himself, but daughters cannot conquer kingdoms and win princesses. In effect, Per is so focused upon his conception of life as a fairy tale that he inadvertently excludes his own daughter.

Per has difficulty, then, accounting for anything that falls outside of the folktale pattern that he is expecting, which in this case includes both wife and daughter. Such an interpretation is not explicitly condemned by the narrator, but Per's growing exclusion of his wife from his daily routine is shown to have an increasingly negative effect on Beret. At the start of the novel, the whole family, including Beret, assists in building the sod house. It gives all of them "such keen enjoyment that they [work] until they [can] no longer see" (56), an enjoyment that contrasts directly to Beret's "wild" outbursts when Per begins to venture further and further from the settlement in search of ways to get ahead (116). Indeed, Haugen suggests that "with his material success [Per] has left his wife behind" (91).

That Beret's significance to the novel extends far beyond her being a passive foil for Per is abundantly clear, and a variety of attempts have been made to identify more precisely her actual role. Though a connection between Per and folklore motifs has been drawn repeatedly, such a connection is not usually extended to Beret, whose character has tended to garner widely disparate readings. Catherine Farmer has suggested a mythological connection, arguing that Beret "incorporates aspects of femininity embodied in the Norse goddess Freya/Ferthr" (179). An even more prominent

interpretation focuses on Beret's Christian faith, on the "pietism associated with her during... the novel" (Coleman-Hull 107).

However, if we place Beret, too, in the role of folktale hero/ine, both of these seemingly separate versions of her character, pagan and Christian, are, in fact, extremely compatible. Her amalgamation of beliefs may thus be a deliberate method of emphasizing her folk roots rather than some eccentricity on her part. Kvideland and Sehmsdorf point out that in Scandinavian folk tradition old and new beliefs "exist side by side" (9). This dual belief system in the folklore seems to sum up perfectly Beret's own views. Despite her religious fervor, there is a curious muddling of Christian and pre-Christian beliefs within her mind. Though Beret mentions the church and cemetery of her childhood, and the old Bible she has inherited (262), her conception of Christianity seems quite different from the religion of the traveling minister, who preaches of “the gladness of salvation, the abiding joy that issues out of…faith” (460). Further, she sees otherworldly signs that do not fit into traditional Christian beliefs, such as the ominous “magic circle about their home” (65) or the visits from her dead mother (443). These things seem to hint at a far older belief system, and Kvideland and Sehmsdorf mention that "the notion of the dead returning to give advice" (105), as Beret believes her mother does, was well-established in traditional Scandinavian folk-belief.

Beret’s slow descent into the recesses of her own mind also fits into the more specifically "feminine" pattern of the folktale heroine. According to Marie-Louise von Franz, in much of folklore, it is the woman who is "confronted with the powers of good and evil" while the man tends to face "life and its problems" (107). Von Franz emphasizes that the heroine's inward focus sometimes seems like "complete stagnation,"

especially when compared to the "more active quest of the male hero" (106). Indeed, Beret is frequently described as “lost in her own imaginings” (114) or lost in “the web of her thoughts” (143). When spoken to, she "seem[s] to come from far away" (205), and even Per “[cannot] make her come out of the enchanted ring” she is in (241). Her descent into some form of madness and her eventual recovery from it suggest an inward trial in stark contrast to Per's physical labors. In fact, Paul Olson has noted that Beret "does almost nothing in the book," and he calls this behavior "the tragic heroism of Lear or Kierkegaard's Abraham or Job" (271). Beret, then, seems to claim the role of heroine in much the same way that Per has claimed the role of hero but dependent upon different definitions of heroism.[6]

Indeed, the role of heroine seems to carry with it a greater psychological burden than its male counterpart. Von Franz describes another common motif of the feminine fairy tale as that of "complete isolation" for the heroine (153), which is brought about by having a "second occupation" apart from her role as wife and mother, an occupation which nobody knows about or can understand (153). Beret's "second occupation" can be read as her growing concern for the spiritual welfare of the settlement, which ironically leads to her greater isolation from her neighbors. On top of the roles of wife and mother, she is convinced that she must stand against the evil forces at work on the prairie. She

[6] While it is easy to compare Per with the specific figure of the *Askeladden*, there is a less clear correlation between Beret and any particular fairy tale heroine. There seems to be a close connection, however, between Beret and the princess of the tale sometimes referred to as “The Maiden Who Saved Her Brothers.” The story tells of a woman who must save her brothers from an enchantment by weaving them magical shirts. For her efforts to be effective, she “must neither speak nor laugh until the shirts…are finished” (Christiansen, “Studies” 117). During her period of silence, the heroine typically encounters a king who insists on marrying her, an evil mother-in-law who accuses her of having eaten her own children, and the threat of being burned at the stake. Throughout these trials, she must stay silent or risk the lives of her brothers (“Studies” 118).

believes that "everything human in [the settlers] [will] gradually be blotted out" if they stay (215), and she faces the task of convincing her neighbors of this. However, they do not understand her sense of urgency. Instead, she sees "respectable people [sitting] around rejoicing" over deeds she finds sinful (176), and we are told that Per "[cannot] fathom the source of her trouble" (261). She cannot convince them of the reality of her premonitions.

Holbek suggests that the heroine's story is somewhat different from the hero's in that in "feminine" folktales, specifically, marriage often serves as a catalyst, with trials and testings occurring not *before* the marriage but *after* it has already taken place (49). After marriage, Holbek suggests, it is not uncommon for the fairy tale heroine to be "mercilessly persecuted in her new home" (53). Many of these fairy tales focus on overcoming trials within the household or attempts to trick the heroine out of her children and her role. Von Franz emphasizes much the same thing, suggesting that these misunderstandings frequently lead to the loss of the heroine's children (152). Beret's increasing preoccupation with her inner struggle nearly leads to this exact loss. When Per is speaking with the minister, he expresses his fear that "the mother may do away with her own children" (439), and the neighbors express a similar opinion that "tragedy might happen at any time" around Beret (433). In fact, her capability as a mother is called into such question that Sörine and her husband offer to step in and “take [the youngest child] and care for him as though he were [their] own flesh and blood” (474).

Throughout these episodes, Beret maintains her own innocence, taking on the role of persecuted heroine that Holbek and von Franz describe. When Per reproves her for holding one of the children too tightly, she asks the minister, "Am I not to love my own

child!" (436). Indeed, Beret herself seems to interpret Sörine in a role very similar to that of the "wicked mother-in-law," the figure who most frequently "takes [the heroine's] children away and accuses her of having murdered them" (von Franz 152). Beret is “jealous” because Sörine is “so fond of her little boy” (469). Indeed, Sörine oftens acts in the capacity of mother to the youngest, "carrying the child in her arms" and planning to "help put things in order" after the church service in Beret's home (433), representing a direct challenge to Beret's role as mother and housewife. When Beret first hears of the scheme to take away her child, her reaction is to "[snatch] up a piece of stake" with a "quick, fierce movement" (474), suggesting just how deeply she fears losing her children to another woman.

However, unlike Johan Bojer’s female characters, who are presented primarily as victims of their situation, Beret is ultimately both victim and perpetrator. All of the aforementioned scenarios are characterized by her isolation, secrecy, and sense of persecution, suggesting a role that is as exclusionary as Per Hansa’s. This role causes her to see enemies and challenges that are largely of her own fabrication, and her husband and neighbors must contend with her accusations. And, just as Per cuts Beret from his narrative, Beret increasingly comes to ignore Per. Indeed, Holbek points out that in tales which focus on the heroine, the prince or husband typically becomes the passive agent, arguing that the folktale form is not capable of focusing on two active agents at once, that "only the fate of the protagonist is followed from beginning to end" (50).

Particularly in the latter half of the novel, Per tends to be viewed as another obstacle in Beret's struggle rather than as a companion and equal. Initially, he simply has little comprehension of the kinds of struggles Beret is facing and offers her no actual

assistance with her problems. By the novel's end, however, he is viewed almost as an enemy. At one point, Beret tries to insist that "[Per] as the father of the family should conduct daily devotion," and when he declines, she is "full of deep sorrowful concern over his seemingly total depravity" (526). Just as the folktale hero is not supposed to win the princess until he has completed his tasks, so the heroine, after her marriage, must focus on her spiritual struggle before she can focus on her actual husband.

However, while Per appears to choose his own role as hero, choosing of his own free will to come west, Beret is operating under slightly more constrained parameters. The narrator suggests several times that it is Per's withdrawal from her, his eagerness to focus on his own quest, that increases her own sense of isolation and leads her to understand life on the prairie in terms of an internal struggle. The narrator describes "how sorely she need[s] some one to be kind to her" (219), and yet Per is "scared to show her any tenderness" (239). When he leaves her to go on his various expeditions, including ones that are not absolutely essential but which appeal only to his sense of adventure, she becomes most aware of the prairie as an evil force. When he is gone, she "hang[s]...heavy clothes up over the windows...to shut out the night" (121), and when he returns, she does not, concluding that covering the windows is unnecessary "nonsense" (223). Per is aware of Beret's problems, but when he looks at his farm, he is "filled with an exultant joy that [makes] him momentarily forget his wife's condition" (380). He has adventure on his expeditions, but concludes it is "better not to tell her such things!" (335). Both Beret and their daughter And-Ongen remain housebound, and at dinner when the family is "seated around the table, wrapped up in all their remarkable experiences," Beret finds herself "unable to follow" any of the talk because she has not experienced any of it (227). Per's

initial choice and subsequent exclusion of Beret, then, seems at least partially responsible for Beret's own interpretation of prairie life.

Regardless of cause, however, these two vying folk narratives ultimately succeed in cutting Per and Beret off not only from each other but also from their neighbors. In Beret's case, her self-imposed isolation eventually alienates the others, who become uneasy with her and cease visiting as frequently, citing "something queer about the woman in that place; she said so little" (230). She assists at Hans Olsa's deathbed but is convinced of the "filth and pollution" of her neighbors (502), and makes Hans Olsa himself so uncomfortable that he fakes a coughing spell to be rid of her (508). Per Hansa's understanding of the prairie also excludes all others. Several times he goes to great lengths to keep his plots and plans to himself, the better to surprise and amaze his neighbors. When he builds his house and barn under the same roof, he has "reasons that he [keeps] to himself…Now he would get ahead of [his neighbors]" (63). Beret even feels a "twinge of jealousy" because he is not confiding in her (66). When he learns how to whitewash his sod hut but keeps quiet about it, his neighbor Hans Olsa is troubled, wondering, "was this like Per Hansa, who had always confided everything to him?" (231). Per's ambition causes him to see his neighbors as competitors rather than as members of the same community. He and Beret both model themselves upon the lone hero/ine, according to the patterns of folklore in which "only the fate of the protagonist" really matters (Holbek 50).

However, this pattern, while suitable for an Old World setting, works poorly on the prairie. Kvideland and Sehmsdorf suggest that much Nordic folklore developed under the premise that one must be self-sufficient, due to the "often isolated" nature of the

common people (8). Dorothy Skardal implies that there were "strict rules" relating to the treatment of strangers in the "closed society" of the Old Country (84). While to a certain extent, this would seem to hold true also for life on the prairie, one account by a prairie housewife states that “the pre-eminent law of the land was hospitality” (Stratton 129), and, indeed, there are repeated suggestions that for Norwegians in particular, settlers ought to look out for their fellow countrymen. Skardal relates how "story after story recorded the mutual helpfulness, the generous sharing of everything" among pioneers, and how Scandinavians in particular would "[pass] on to all comers what they had learned" (84). Both Per and Beret explicitly violate this rule of hospitality due to their insistence upon seeing the landscape in terms of an old-world pattern. Their insistence on independence and secrecy has a negative impact on the entire community, a community which is organized around the need to band together rather than to seek individual gain.

It is of note, too, that the other characters, both male and female, seem far less concerned with fitting their lives into some form of narrative structure or in looking backward to find that structure. The narrator rarely uses such fanciful language in the brief passages which are focused on more secondary characters, instead describing practical and mundane details. When Per Hansa is building his sod house and dreaming of castles, his neighbor Tönseten is concerned that Per is “getting big-headed; heavens and earth, it was nothing but an ordinary sod hut that he was building!” (61). To Tönseten, then, Per’s dreams are nothing but harmful fantasies that interfere with daily life. Throughout the novel, this practicality appears as a stark contrast to Per’s tendency to dream: though the ripening wheat kernels are described in near-mythic terms as “tiny bodies…dream[ing] of the marvelous life…stirring within them,” Tönseten is concerned

only with practicalities, with “the reaper to overhaul, and the harnesses to be mended; he had to keep a sharp eye on the wheat, too, lest they let it stand too long” (381). Neither are the other female characters given to flights of fancy. Sörine’s ideas, for instance, are described as “sensible and practical” (325).

Perhaps as a result, the other married couples are able to display far more mutually supportive relationships than Per and Beret, relationships that center on inclusion rather than exclusion. Per and Beret constantly keep secrets from one another, Beret finding, for instance, that she “[can] not ask” him about the missing boundary markers, and Per telling her he is just burning “some rubbish” (141) when he is in fact burning the markers. In contrast, Tönseten “[tells] his wife the whole story” of the Irish claim jumpers (162), even though Per has urged him "[not to] breathe a word” to her (156). Hans Olsa and his wife disagree about the size of the house they build, but rather than remaining silent, they “talk about it a great deal” (466). In short, none of these couples is hindered by unsuitable expectations regarding their own heroism. They are able to negotiate through new circumstances as they arrive rather than attempting to fit them to a pre-existing pattern.

Though striving to make a home in the new world, both Beret and Per are looking backward, modeling their behavior on much older traditions and ways of thought, and this ultimately is their downfall. They fail to reinvent themselves in response to the new environment. At the novel’s conclusion, in fact, both Per and Beret end up at the natural conclusion of each of their respective narratives—Per’s status as fairy-tale hero is what convinces his neighbors to second Beret in requesting that he fetch a minister in a snowstorm, with Sörine telling him that "nothing is ever impossible for you" (522).

Similarly, Beret's view of herself as martyred heroine, her determination to save herself from the threats of both prairie and neighbors, ends with her being quite cut off from the others. Beret is left her isolation; Per is left quite literally to his prairie kingdom.

The question of whether to view the prairie in terms of new ways or old ways seems to mirror Rölvaag's own complicated views on acclimation. Rölvaag tends to be viewed as a strong proponent of Norwegian nationalism, of maintaining traditional ways and customs even in a new setting. Though he immigrated to America at nineteen, he remained proud of his ties to his home country, conducting his writing in Norwegian and only later translating it into English (Haugen "Ole Edvart"). Paul Reigstad suggests that Rolvaag's work was heavily influenced by these values, owing much to the "flourishing" Norwegian nationalist movement of the nineteenth century (21) and highlighting the author's ties to the old world even when he was writing about the American frontier.

Unlike Bojer, then, who focuses primarily upon the positive economic outcomes of emigration, Rolvaag is able to give detailed descriptions of the pain of losing one's native culture. Einar Haugen suggests that when Rolvaag arrived in America, he was dismayed to discover his fellow countrymen "only too anxious to cut loose from their Old World standards and Old World culture and to chase the flimsy ideals of a machine-made civilization" ("O.E. Rölvaag"). Rölvaag's own experience provided ample evidence, then, of the danger of losing all sense of native culture in an effort to pursue material gain.

However, Harold P. Simonson suggests that the relationship between Rölvaag's Norwegian and American ties was more complicated than a dismissal of the new in favor of the old. He notes that "[Rölvaag's] loyalties wavered between the New World and the

Old" while writing his prairie trilogy (91). Haugen brings up a similar notion of conflicted loyalty, pointing out that, despite Rolvaag's ties to the Old World, he remained committed to his belief that his Norwegian countrymen had something important to contribute to American society ("O.E. Rolvaag"). Despite Rolvaag's ambivalence, then, he seems to have been committed to the idea of a new kind of American community, a way of living that honored the old customs while adapting to the demands of a new setting. Rolvaag had first-hand experience of the need to form a new kind of community in the new world. Neither Per nor Beret manages to form this kind of community, and the results are disastrous.

Giants in the Earth may be read, then, as an exploration of the proper model through which Norwegian immigrants might adapt their behavior to suit their new landscape. If, as Christiansen suggests, folktales are indeed a reflection of their original environment, then it follows that those forms must be changed when a new environment is encountered. The old forms must be adapted to a new setting, and the novel seems to hint at a possible future in mutual support rather than mutual exclusion. The forms upon which the behavior of Per and Beret are modeled are both based on solitary accomplishment, with little sense of partnership or cooperation. Yet, frequently, accounts of prairie life recall the necessity of stepping outside of expected roles to assist both family and neighbors and ensure survival. The heroes and heroines of folklore lack the flexibility to be able to do so. By depicting the tangled, unhappy nature of Per and Beret's relationship with each other and with the rest of the community, Rölvaag demonstrates the necessity of finding new ways to interpret new landscapes.

Chapter Three

Princesses and Peasants: Conflicting Swedish Traditions in Cather's *O Pioneers!*

Unlike O.E. Rolvaag and Johan Bojer, Willa Cather had no Scandinavian ancestry upon which to draw in her writing. Though a number of her novels describe life on the plains among various Scandinavian immigrant groups, her own experience was limited to the years she lived as a child in Red Cloud, Nebraska, in the 1880s. It was here that she first came into contact with the Swedes, Bohemians, and Norwegians who would later people her fiction (O'Brien, "Introduction" ix).

Cather's own ancestry was much more deeply rooted within the United States: Her family had been settled in America for generations, had moved to Red Cloud from Virginia, and in many ways the family still identified as Southerners (O'Brien, *Willa* 12). Perhaps due to this lack of direct connection to Scandinavian culture, Cather's work tends to be compared with larger American literary currents, frequently either feminist or environmental concerns.[7] Critics are less inclined to place her in conversation with immigrant authors of the same time period. Thus, little has been done to explore her portrayal of Scandinavian culture in her writing.

While it might be tempting to dismiss Cather's exposure to immigrant life in Red Cloud as inconsequential to her concerns as a mature author, Cather herself believed that the best and most influential material for a novelist to draw upon occurred "before the age of fifteen" (Cather, "Articles" 50), and her childhood experience among these plains

[7] William Barillas provides a helpful overview of critical approaches to Cather in Chapter Two of his *The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland.*

immigrants appears to be one of the defining factors of her own childhood. As Sharon O'Brien relates:

> Cather remembered the excitement she felt in identifying with the immigrants' dramatic struggle to root themselves in a new soil and culture. They offered her 'older traditions' than did her own family--the heritage of European language, custom, and culture from which Americans were severed and which Willa Cather would eventually want to claim as her own. (*Willa* 71)

O'Brien further quotes Cather as describing how her initial impulse for writing came from "the old women, who used to tell me of their home country…. Their stories used to go round and round in my head at night" (73). Thus, while Cather is an outsider from the perspective of a Scandinavian readership, her memories of her Scandinavian neighbors were in fact influential enough to serve as an impetus to begin writing. Given her close fascination with these settlers, it is not difficult to believe that Cather's writing captures many of the same issues that authors like Rolvaag and Bojer also explore.

In particular, Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) touches upon much the same struggle to adapt to a foreign landscape as do the works of Rolvaag and Bojer. The novel depicts the early attempts of the Swedish Bergson family to wrest farmland out of the Nebraska prairie, describing the eventual success of the Bergsons' daughter Alexandra as well as the tragic death of her younger brother. While Alexandra's adaptation to the land has received much critical attention, these readings rarely look at the role that her Swedish heritage might play in such an adaptation process. In fact, the novel uses the Bergsons' Swedish background to chart two alternate models of behavior for Alexandra. The first model, which Alexandra ultimately rejects, is offered by the epic literary tradition of

Sweden that was popular at the turn of the nineteenth century. The second is a more pragmatic Swedish peasant tradition that proves more adaptable to a new environment.

The idea that *O Pioneers!* may encourage heritage as a means of adapting to the prairie has been suggested previously. John H. Randall argues that one of the most prominent issues raised by the novel is the idea that the settlers "receive absolutely no hint at all from their environment as to how they should act" (65). Thus, pre-existing traditions are not just an option for adapting to the Plains, but may, in fact, be the only means available by which to interpret the landscape. Indeed, the novel introduces a number of references to Swedish culture fairly early in the story, suggesting that the Bergsons are encoding the environment with their own traditions rather than relying on it to provide behavioral cues. Repeated mentions are made of the "old" way of doing things, and we are told that for Alexandra's mother, "Preserving was almost a mania" (19), a statement which seems to encompass not just her experimental jams and jellies but also her firm belief in her Swedish upbringing, her "unremitting efforts to repeat the routine of her old life among new surroundings" (19). Mrs. Bergson passes along to the rest of the family this belief in maintaining old ways, and these ways seem to shape the manner in which the family approaches life in Nebraska. The idea of “Swedish heritage” is rather general, however, and it is thus worthwhile to examine exactly what kind of traditions the Bergson family is bringing with them to the Plains and, in particular, which of these traditions Alexandra internalizes as she attempts to frame her Nebraska life via her Old World heritage.

The first and less suitable set of traditions is suggested through the reading material to which Alexandra is drawn. The narrator goes into great detail to tell us exactly

what Alexandra enjoys: In addition to Longfellow and the Bible, Alexandra knows "long portions of the 'Frithjof Saga' by heart" (32). The “Frithiof Saga,” a retelling of an older Viking saga of the same name, was exceedingly popular during the nineteenth century among Swedes and Swedish Americans, although it has been largely forgotten by contemporary criticism. Andrew Wawn describes the plot as centering on the princess Ingeborg and the low-born Frithiof. They have grown up together, and so despite class differences, “the two youngsters fall in love, and thus incur the wrath of [Ingeborg’s] brothers,” whereupon Frithiof is sent away on various adventures (118). The lovers are eventually reunited, and Frithiof is crowned king (119). The fact that Alexandra has not merely memorized portions but knows them “by heart” suggests that the story is deeply appealing to her on some level.

An extensive amount of secondary criticism on *O Pioneers!* has focused on its “epic” tone. James Woodress makes the convincing case that Cather wrote “with an awareness of her literary predecessors from the Greeks to the major authors of the twentieth century,” and he believes that Alexandra herself is an "idealized epic heroine" (247). Peculiarly, however, no one has yet drawn a parallel between the epic traits of the novel and the single actual Swedish epic referenced within it. The “Saga” was, in fact, extremely popular during Cather’s lifetime. Wawn relates that “parts of [“Frithiof’s Saga”] found their way into a volume of the ‘Library of the World’s Best Literature’ series in 1897” (119), suggesting that the piece was far from being obscure. Given that Cather mentions it by name in *O Pioneers!*, there is some suggestion that it, too, is among the ranks of the “literary predecessors” of which Cather was aware.

Indeed, there are recurring moments of similarity between the novel and the "Saga." Most notably, throughout *O Pioneers!* Alexandra has recurring dreams of a mystery figure who is never clearly identified but who shares a number of characteristics with the "Saga's" Frithiof. Alexandra dreams of a man who is like "no man she knew; he [is] much larger and stronger and swifter, and he [carries] her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat" (86). The sensation of being carried is particularly appealing to Alexandra, whose "gleaming white body...no man on the Divide could have carried very far" (87). Frithiof is described as a hero with almost super-human strength, able to drag a "sleigh and horse and all" out of cracked ice in order to save Ingeborg (Tegner 41). In the opening canto of the "Saga," Frithiof is actually pictured carrying Ingeborg, "her little white arms [holding] him fast" (44), suggesting he is a man of superhuman strength who can carry his beloved, just like the figure of whom Alexandra dreams. There is also a similarity of appearance. The narrator of the "Saga" suggests a parallel between Frithiof and sunlit radiance: "He stood between the brothers as glorious day/ Stands between rosy dawning and twilight gray" (51). This description is surprisingly similar to the depiction of Alexandra's dream-man in *O Pioneers!*, who is "yellow like the sunlight" (86).

If we are to read Alexandra's mystery lover as a type of Frithiof, then it follows that there would be parallels between Alexandra herself and Frithiof's beloved, Ingeborg. Such a parallel is, in fact, suggested. In addition to her "white body," Alexandra is described in the very opening of the novel as having a "shining mass of hair" with "a fringe of reddish-yellow curls blowing out from under her cap" (11). The colors that are used to describe her body—white, yellow, and red—are the same that appear early in the

“Saga's” description of Ingeborg, whose "tresses seem to hold/ Lily and rose in net of gold" (45).

However, more interesting counter-parallels appear between Alexandra and Ingeborg in terms of their differences. Apart from physical similarities, Alexandra is repeatedly presented as a direct opposite of Ingeborg, taking action while Ingeborg sits and waits. Throughout the “Saga,” Ingeborg remains passive while Frithiof is forced to leave because of Ingeborg’s brothers, exploring new lands while she remains at home. In fact, Wawn argues that within the saga "passive female stoicism is made to seem an active virtue” (134). In Cather’s novel, however, Alexandra is the opposite of the passive stoic. She actively pursues the new Nebraska farmland, convincing her reluctant brothers to “buy every acre [they] can” of the prairie when everyone else is selling out (34). She is also aggressive in her efforts to find new ways to cultivate this land, going to talk to other farmers about their methods (34). Alexandra operates, then, under an inherently different set of values than does Ingeborg.

The difference results in a number of more specific contrasts. Most notably, Ingeborg’s passivity ensures that she never takes part in any kind of physical labor or, indeed, has any kind of direct interaction with the landscape. In the opening canto, the narrator describes the gifts from the natural world that Frithiof *brings to* Ingeborg: "The first fair flower that spring-time bred,/ The first wilde berry, sweet and red,/ The first ripe ear of golden corn/ Faithful and glad to her were borne" (44). Ingeborg’s role is to wait for Frithiof, who will do all of the necessary work. However, Alexandra does not wait for anyone to bring her anything. Instead, it is she who coaxes flowers from the wilderness, who plants the wheat, who turns the empty farmland into a garden of delight. When Carl

comes looking for her in the first section of the novel, she has gone out to “dig sweet potatoes” (27), and we are told she has “looked upon men as work-fellows” (86).

Though Alexandra seems tempted to compare her life to the noble Ingeborg's, especially in moments of extreme tiredness (87), Ingeborg’s approach to life would end badly in Nebraska. Joanna Stratton describes the necessity of everyone’s pitching in on the prairie, arguing that "the working family needed all the help it could muster. When the strength of the frontiersman and his sons proved inadequate, the mother and the daughters assisted with the traditionally male tasks of planting and harvesting, tending livestock, hauling water, gathering fuel, and even hunting" (61). Such an environment rarely allows for a life of passive awaiting, suggesting that for Alexandra to follow the lead of a figure like Ingeborg would be disastrous. Survival on the prairie requires the ability to do rather than to wait.

Another direct contrast between Alexandra and Ingeborg is their respective relationships with their own family members. Wawn describes Ingeborg as "obedient to her brothers" (134), who order her to have nothing more to do with Frithiof. However, one of the key plot elements of *O Pioneers!* is Alexandra's supremacy over her brothers, her lack of obedience to their wishes. Rather, the brothers agree to “be guided by [their] sister” (19). It is Alexandra who runs the farm after her father's death, and Alexandra who, through her foresight, saves the family from ruin. Alexandra expects obedience from others rather than practicing it herself. Indeed, just as her lack of passivity allows her farm to thrive, so, too, does her lack of obedience ensure the farm’s continued success. As she explains, if not for her guidance, the brothers would have “gone down to the river and scraped along on poor farms for the rest of [their] lives” (73). Alexandra's

character, then, seems not just incompatible with Ingeborg's but emphatically the opposite, a negative reversal of the conventionally virtuous Ingeborg. These differences, however, are the key to Alexandra's ability to adapt and survive on the prairie.

Indeed, it might even seem improbable that Alexandra would be tempted to internalize a story with characters like Frithiof and Ingeborg given her own willingness to buck convention in favor of practicality. However, Margaret Clunies Ross suggests that one of the purposes of sagas like "Frithiof's Saga" was to provide examples of proper behavior, and that often "the male and female characters [of sagas] served as role models for ordinary people" (115). The temptation for Alexandra to turn herself into a sort of American Ingeborg would thus not have been an idle one. Rather, Alexandra's modeling of herself after this character whom she has taken "to heart" would have been *expected* in Scandinavian culture.

O Pioneers! nevertheless appears to reject any successful parallel between Alexandra and Ingeborg. Indeed, the ideal of feminine passivity which "Frithiof's Saga" promotes is a far cry from the type of gender politics with which Cather is usually connected. Hermione Lee points out that Cather is remembered for "being the only woman of her time to have appropriated a 'great tradition' of male American writing…. She is intervening in a masculine language of epic pastoral" (5). The direct contrast between the conventionally docile Ingeborg and Alexandra suggests, then, an attempt to subvert the epic, to demonstrate how wholly unsuitable its gender roles are for women on the prairie.

Unlike Per and Beret's disastrous flights of fancy, Alexandra's interest in the "Saga" never comes to be the idea around which she formulates her life. She ultimately

chooses her relationship with Carl and her farm work over the chance for a life in the shape of Ingeborg's. Alexandra never wholly rejects the temptation of this model: it is one she has taken "to heart," after all, and when she is particularly weary, she is more inclined to dwell upon it (87). After the death of Emile, she even acknowledges that she has seen the bronze arm of the "mightiest of all lovers" in her dream (115). However, at the end of the novel she has decided that the dream "will never come true now, in the way [she] thought it might," because she has agreed to marry Carl instead (125). It seems, then, that unlike the female characters of Bojer and Rolvaag, Alexandra is able to recognize the impossibility of living according to an incompatible framework. Instead of rejecting her responsibilities and searching for ways to turn herself into an Ingeborg, she merely goes on with her life, choosing a different set of customs from which to draw.

Indeed, as a counterpoint to "Frithiof's Saga," which encourages an impossible life of idleness and passivity, *O Pioneers!* introduces a second, more practical set of Swedish habits through Alexandra's mother. While *O Pioneers!* seems to discourage the sweeping national epic as an unsuitable role model for Alexandra, these commoner Swedish traditions are treated far more kindly. Early in the novel, the narrator reveals that "John Bergson had married beneath him, but he had married a good housewife" (19). Though we are told nothing of Mrs. Bergson's lineage beyond this, we do know that Mr. Bergson worked "in a shipyard" (17), suggesting that for Mrs. Bergson to have been beneath him, she must have come from peasant or crofter background. Indeed, her own actions and knowledge seem to support this. She knows how to fish and grow a garden and preserve (19). Through Mrs. Bergson, then, Alexandra has access to a set of very different class values and expectations than had Ingeborg.

These values are somewhat more egalitarian, suggesting, instead of the distinctly divided gender roles of “Frithiof’s Saga,” a balancing of daily labor between two partners. Allan Pred suggests that lower-class Swedish women would have routinely assisted with farm work out-of-doors, from haymaking to assisting with harvest, although a distinct division of labor would still have been present (71). In other words, unlike Ingeborg, common women would rarely have had the luxury of idleness and would have been used to long days and back-breaking labor even in the Old Country.

Further, women’s tasks among lower-class Swedish families were frequently based upon need: Their expected roles might expand or contract depending upon the season and the availability of outside help, suggesting that there was already some degree of flexibility expected of them. Pred describes how, when "major agricultural and fencing activities were in full swing," it was not unusual for "adult women occasionally to become involved in the field labor itself" (75), and it was "taken for granted and regarded as natural that women could assist with plowing, fertilizing and other heavy tasks when necessary" (80). Alexandra seems to work in the fields under similar parameters, at first helping alongside her father and brothers, but later focusing on her butter and her chickens because the family is able to afford hired men and Alexandra's physical labor is no longer imperative for the survival of the farm (19). Such a view encourages one to view land as something which must be actively worked, suggesting a set of roles that adapts *to* the landscape rather than struggling against it, with entire families pitching in as needed in order to survive.

It may largely be *due* to Alexandra’s femaleness, then, that she is able to succeed on the prairie where so many others fail. She is able to draw upon a history of flexibility

and the balance of disparate elements with which lower-class Swedish women would already have been comfortable. Indeed, despite the unhappiness of Alexandra's mother, Mrs. Bergson seems in many ways to acclimate to the prairie better than Mr. Bergson, who is never able to realize his dreams. It is the mother who refuses to move again, despite her longing for her old home (32). Alexandra, then, comes from a feminine tradition of flexibility and appreciation for a disparate environment. Indeed, O'Brien suggests that Mrs. Bergson's gift to Alexandra lies in "show[ing] her daughter how to farm [the land] by the model of creativity she exemplifies" through her gardening and preserving (*Willa* 441). In Alexandra's case, this creativity is in strong contrast to the much more rigidly defined roles of upper-class women or nobility, who would not have been expected to do any kind of outside or manual labor. Alexandra is able to recognize the most useful way to draw on her Swedish heritage, and though she may be tempted to fashion herself into an Ingeborg, she ultimately does not pursue the notion, choosing instead the flexibility of lower-class customs.

Such flexibility would have been encouraged, too, by lower-class Swedish property customs, which tended to find value in land of any kind. The narrator even references Mr. Bergson's "Old-World belief that land, in itself, is desirable" (17). This value did not merely extend to farmland, however. Even uncultivated land had value to the Swedish peasant, an attitude most clearly demonstrated through the Swedish common lands custom, which acknowledges the value of both cultivated and uncultivated land. Florence Janson describes this tradition thus: "The commons (*allmänningar)* were very old in Sweden and are found mentioned in the earliest existing legal contracts and charters. They were the stretches of forests that lay between the cultivated lands of the

villages. These patches of woodland were considered necessary to supply the villagers with building material and fuel, and served as reserve for the future expansion of cultivation" (318). In other words, to survive in the landscape, Swedish farmers had to maintain a balance between farmlands that supplied one set of needs and uncultivated land that supplied another equally important set of needs. Mr. Bergson does not succeed in transferring this value to Nebraska, where there are no trees, only wide-open space that baffles him (17). However, perhaps due to the history of flexibility already encouraged in lower-class Swedish women, the ability to value all aspects of the land seems to come easily to Alexandra.

Indeed, the contrast between open land and cultivated farm, and the importance of both, is made explicit repeatedly throughout the novel. Alexandra feels a deep connection to the wide open land, almost as if she were a part of it, an embodiment of its spirit and heart. When she looks out at the land, we are told that she "[feels] 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" (36). The land's wildness, its lack of cultivation, seems to be its charm here. However, Alexandra is not content to leave the land as it is. Unlike Old Ivar, the “crazy” Norwegian who does not cultivate his plot, leaving it to unspoiled wilderness (22), Alexandra is also driven to break land, to “tame” it into a farm that is always described in the most ordered and domestic of terms. In her farm and gardens, one finds "order and fine arrangement...in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds..." (41).

Alexandra’s actions are sometimes read into a typically “feminine” role, as demonstrating her ability to tame the wilderness. Matthew Cella, for instance, argues that

"Alexandra embodies the romanticism implicit in cultivating the grasslands" (101). Such an interpretation fails to take into account Alexandra's initial connection with the open land, her passion for the wildness and emptiness of the prairie even before it has been cultivated. Alexandra embodies an equal appreciation of both cultivated and wild land that harkens back to the deeply-rooted values of the Swedish peasant community.

Though one might have little cause to believe that Cather herself would have been familiar with all the intricacies of lower-class Swedish culture, there is a strong suggestion that the immigrants living in Red Cloud as Cather was growing up would have exhibited the importance of such values. Janson suggests that the collapse of traditional farming and land customs led to a surge in Swedish immigration to the United States. During the 1800s, timber companies in Sweden began purchasing land rights, causing once commonly held lands to be divided up individually. At this point "in many cases... the peasants...became dissatisfied with their dependent position [upon the timber corporations], and left the region either to go into industry, or more often to emigrate to America" (324). Janson and historian Michele Micheletti both suggest that these issues came to a head in the latter part of the 1800s, Micheletti in particular noting that due to the "agricultural crisis of the period…the largest number [of Swedish emigrants] left in the 1880s" (35). These dates closely correspond with the Cather family's own westward movement to Red Cloud "during the 1880s" (O'Brien, "Introduction" ix). There is a strong possibility, then, that the old Swedish women Cather so delighted in listening to would have had direct knowledge both of traditional Swedish land customs and of the consequences of failing to maintain them.

Alexandra's status as a Swedish woman of common birth, then, provides a far more useful set of ways to interpret the landscape than does the female figure of the Romantic epic. In addition, however, to being a way of understanding environment, this background also supplies a useful way for Alexandra to categorize the consequences of her decision to live as a farmer, especially as regards her personal life. In light of Victorian standards of femininity, Alexandra would seem to be a failure. She is not a mother, and for a very long time she is not married, two of the typical defining characteristics of womanhood. When she does marry, she chooses Carl, a man often presented in rather effeminate terms. He is not large; he does not swagger or shout. Instead, he has a "low, pleasant voice" (49) and "seem[s] to shrink into himself" (53). Rather than being taken care of by Carl, Alexandra suggests that she is willing to take care of him (72). Too, there seems to be only a slim chance that she will ever bear children of her own. As Alexandra's brothers point out, she is "forty years old!" (74), and at the novel's end, she again mentions the possibility of her brothers' children inheriting the farm when she is gone (125).

Several critics have remarked upon the androgynous qualities of her character. C. Susan Wiesenthal points to Alexandra as a "vaguely intimidating sort of 'mannish' woman who appears to combine certain traditional aspects of masculinity and femininity in one" (403), which seems to suggest that the consequences of Alexandra's choices place her as far as possible from the kind of romantic ideal that Ingeborg represents. In contrast to the 'mannish' qualities that Alexandra possesses, Ingeborg's characteristics were admired enough during the nineteenth century that the first translation of the "Saga" into English was dedicated to the soon-to-be-queen Victoria, who was thought to embody

the same demure and feminine traits as Ingeborg (Wawn 134). Alexandra's choice to be active in farm work, then, might seem to result in a loss of the typical markers of femininity.

However, once more, Alexandra's choices seem hardly out of place at all when viewed through the lens of Swedish peasant culture.[8] Allan Pred suggests that apparently mismatched marriages would hardly have raised eyebrows among the farmers of Sweden, where "men and women alike often chose new partners who were many years junior to them" (66). Oscar's complaint that Carl is "nearly five years younger than [Alexandra]" and that "everybody's laughing" about it (74) thus seems rather overblown. It is worth noting, however, that the narrator reveals that "Oscar's wife…was ashamed of marrying a foreigner, and [Oscar's] boys do not understand a word of Swedish" (46), suggesting that Alexandra's marriage to a younger man, while perfectly acceptable according to old cultural standards, may not be "American" enough for Oscar now that he has begun the process of turning his back on his native culture.

Further, Alexandra's childlessness also seems less troubling from a Swedish perspective. Though she has no children of her own, she is very close to all of her hired hands, both male and female. She "ha[s] dinner with her men," (41) all of them eating at the same table despite their differences in status, and she keeps "three pretty young Swedish girls" to do her housework, and enjoys having them around "to hear them giggle" rather than because she actually needs help (41). She may not have borne

[8] Cather herself is sometimes described in the same androgynous terms used to depict Alexandra. Sharon O'Brien, for instance, mentions Cather's habit of "masquerading as a young man" (11). Given that many of these "mannish" qualities seem to have been commonplace within Scandinavian peasant culture, it might thus be worthwhile to consider whether Cather's exposure to the culture impacted her personal life as well as her fiction.

children, but she exhibits a good deal of concern and affection for the people working under her. Again, Pred suggests that this relationship was not unusual among Swedish farmers, that for a time it was in fact the custom for landholders to view the household servants and farmhands as surrogate children. Indeed, the woman of the house was often called “mother” by the hired hands (65).

In short, while Alexandra’s role might seem limited and “unfeminine” from a Victorian perspective, when placed within the context of lower-class Swedish traditions, these oddities start to unravel. It is through a practical set of Swedish beliefs and values that Alexandra is able to succeed in an unprecedented way. Her farm is “one of the richest farms on the Divide” (40) in large part because she is able to reject the temptation of reading her life through an irrelevant worldview and instead maintains only the Swedish heritage and traditions that are actually useful, those which allow her to interact with the new landscape in a satisfying way.

Indeed, such an approach appears to be one of the only successful methods of acclimation. One critic suggests that "in novels of rural life written by women in which the main character is a woman, the authors indicate that satisfying work is essential to women's economic and emotional well-being" (Labrie 119). Alexandra is able to pursue meaningful work due largely to the flexibility of her Swedish background, which gives her the ability to identify such work even in an unfamiliar landscape. Alexandra differs startlingly from the heroines of both Rolvaag and Bojer in large part because of this flexibility, the fact that she is encouraged to move outside of the traditional boundaries of domesticity and to assist her father in the fields.

This adaptation is certainly not without loss. Though Alexandra finds fulfillment in the roles that she chooses for herself, others are not always kind in their assessment of her choices. Her brothers, in their fervor for all things American, remain unsympathetic, and Alexandra severs her ties with them, lamenting that she "would rather not have lived to find out what [she] has" (74). Cather, then, seems to suggest that the prairie landscape exerts a heavy toll even from the relatively victorious, that success is possible for women on the prairie but that it may come at a high cost. Indeed, Alexandra herself does not seem aware that she has succeeded. She speaks of the "high rent" that the prairie exerts on its inhabitants (56), and she sees "hav[ing] sons like Emile, and…giv[ing] them a chance" as the only reason her father left Sweden in the first place, a reason which has nothing whatsoever to do with her prosperous farm (54). Even the successes of the novel are less romantic and idealized than those of "Frithiof's Saga." While Ingeborg wins her lover, and her lover wins a throne, Alexandra loses a great deal in the process of her victory.

Alexandra's epic, then, can be read as a direct rejection of the kind of romanticized nationalistic sagas that were popular during the nineteenth century. "Frithiof's Saga," in particular, provides a model for precisely the kind of female character who would not survive on the prairie. Instead, Alexandra draws from the flexibility of Swedish farming traditions, allowing her response to the environment to be guided by the land itself. If *O Pioneers!* is indeed an epic, it is an epic of commoners. Alexandra succeeds due to her ability to reject irrelevant romantic ideals and to face the landscape in terms of its own reality, though this reality is frequently harsh and exerts a heavy price. Cather's novel can thus be read as a response not just to the American

pastoral tradition but to Swedish literary traditions as well, highlighting the unsuitability of such traditions as models for prairie life and suggesting a new kind of model instead, one based upon traditions and values of a more common, less idealized kind.

Conclusion

Interpreting Empty Spaces

As Willa Cather so eloquently states in *O Pioneers!*, on the prairie, "the great fact [is] the land itself" (14). A predominant issue in Midwestern literature, then, is the struggle to categorize such an expanse of open space. Robert Thacker notes that "ever since Spaniards wandered onto the prairies during the sixteenth century, Europeans and their descendants have been vexed by the imaginative impact of prairie space" (1), and that as a whole they were "historically ill-equipped to view and to understand the prairie landscape" (3), suggesting that an actual solution to the supposed blankness of the landscape was difficult to come by.

It is little wonder, then, that when the question of how to reinscribe such a landscape arose, answers would frequently be sought among the familiar traditions of home countries. The works of O.E. Rolvaag, Johan Bojer, and Willa Cather all demonstrate the ways in which Old World habits and traditions might serve as a base upon which to build a new kind of life on the Plains. As Thacker might be unsurprised to find, however, the success of such a method is widely varied. In particular, the three authors all suggest that female characters face a physical impossibility in continuing life as they have been accustomed to in their home countries, often due to a lack of the most basic resources with which to maintain a household. The ever-present dirt of sod houses, the difficulty of preparing meals due to lack of resources, the lack of water for washing and gardening, all are issues raised by the three novels and corroborated by the actual accounts of woman homesteaders.

The defining measure of success for the female characters in all three works is based upon their ability, and willingness, to adapt to the landscape by changing their routines in response to these challenges. Characters like Cather's Alexandra who draw upon a tradition of flexible gender roles are more adept at managing the new demands placed upon them by the prairie environment, whereas characters such as Rolvaag's Beret who remain locked into rigid, predefined behaviors, do not fare as well. Indeed, Glenda Riley suggests that this is a close mirror to real-life experiences, where the prairie women who thrived were those willing to "create a rich social life from limited resources" (97), finding engaging and satisfying ways of adapting old customs to the new landscape.

Of the three novels examined, there is also a suggestion that the greater the author's exposure to actual life on the prairie, the greater his or her awareness of this need for flexibility. Bojer, whose experience of the prairie land was limited to only a short visit (Haugen 75), casts his female characters into fairly conventional roles. Those like Pauline who do not fit into this conventional scheme are simply written out of the narrative. *The Emigrants* as a whole seems largely unaware of the need for a different approach to life in response to a different landscape.

O.E. Rolvaag spent considerably more time upon the Plains than Bojer, working on a farm owned by his aunt and uncle for two-and-a-half years (Haugen 7-8), and thus he had personal experience of prairie life upon which to draw while writing *Giants in the Earth*. The novel offers a correspondingly more detailed depiction of the problems arising from life on the Plains, bringing to the forefront the issues that emerge from overly rigid expectations. However, *Giants in the Earth* offers little insight into what a

solution to those problems might look like, merely an acknowledgement that the problems do exist.

Willa Cather alone among the three thoroughly explores what successful female adaptation to the prairie might actually be. Unlike the female characters of the previous novels, Alexandra of *O Pioneers!* is largely successful in navigating the challenges of the prairie due to her willingness to bend conventional gender roles. Though Cather herself never experienced the back-breaking labor of Midwestern farming, she had contact from an early age with a number of women who had actually experienced such a lifestyle, giving her not just one perspective to draw upon in her writing but many. Indeed, Cather's initial reason for writing seems to have sprung from a desire to record the lives of the people she came into contact with, suggesting from the start a greater awareness of the reality of prairie wom*e*n's lives (O'Brien 78).

Even Cather seems to suggest, however, that the bending of convention to succeed on the prairie may result in a life void of the traditional markers of femininity, including family and motherhood. Although Cather's Alexandra succeeds in making the prairie into a home, she forgoes both children, and, for many years, marriage, as she focuses instead on the farm. Such a vision of prairie life requires a willingness to explore possibilities of fulfillment outside of the common bounds of nineteenth-century female propriety, to see the emptiness and lack of social conventions of life on the plains as not a threat but, rather, an opportunity to experience life outside of these strictures. Still remaining, however, is the fact that such a life would be radically different from anything previously envisioned.

All three novels point also to the uneasy conclusion that *literary* conventions often enforce restricting social roles far more than society itself does. Bojer, in his reliance on conventional nineteenth-century literary tropes, with their clearly delineated places for women and equally clear set of consequences for straying outside of those places, boxes in his own characters. The narrator relates an awareness that all is not well among the women but has only a limited number of options in resolving this problem without moving outside of accepted boundaries. Rolvaag exhibits an awareness of the restrictions that literary convention places on both male and female characters, depicting with tragic accuracy the inability of Scandinavian folklore motifs to transfer successfully to the Great Plains. However, he chooses to explore the consequences of these restrictions rather than positive alternatives, perhaps due to his personal experience with the pain and confusion often accompanying immigration. Cather, however, chooses to challenge directly the "heroic masculine literary tradition" found in both epics and pastorals (Westling 59), and only through this challenge do successful female characters like Alexandra have the chance to develop, stepping outside of the traditionally delineated boundaries for female characters.

In contrast to literary conventions, actual social conventions, particularly among lower-class Scandinavian groups, tended to be rather less rigid: As Allan Pred demonstrates, though still emphasizing "proper" work for either gender, such communities recognized the necessity of bending the rules for purposes of survival. Too, the heightened emphasis on community is somewhat in opposition to the emphasis upon the lone hero in a number of literary traditions, suggesting another manner in which actual Scandinavian culture was better suited to the frontier than literary culture.

All three authors, however, ultimately suggest a close connection between characters' Scandinavian origin and their manner of interpreting the prairie. Though Great Plains literature may seem firmly American, with its focus upon reactions to the American landscape and the process of American acculturation, it is thus abundantly clear that reactions to this landscape are closely tied to Old World cultures and environments. It is useful, then, in interpreting Great Plains fiction to examine specific immigrant backgrounds rather than referring generally to the experiences of "the immigrant" or even "the European."

These Old World expectations are sometimes useful; in the case of women, though, they often result in unrealistic expectations regarding the domestic space. Only a cultural heritage that encourages flexibility is ultimately useful on the Plains. Further, just as cultural expectations can hinder female acclimation, so, too, can conventional forms of literary discourse hinder depictions of women's prairie life. Environments that call for unconventional gender roles and ways of living may not be easy to transcribe within expected literary forms. Passive heroines and epic heroes stand somewhat at odds with the realities of the American frontier. Instead, as Cather demonstrates, new forms of literature may be required to accommodate new landscapes and the shifting gender and social roles that inevitably evolve in such spaces.

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