

O Pioneers!



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLA CATHER

Willa Cather was born into a large farming family in rural Virginia. In 1883, when Cather was ten years old, her family relocated to Red Cloud, Nebraska. She attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she paid her way by working for the Nebraska State Journal, and later moved to Pittsburgh to teach high school English. In 1906 she moved to New York City to work for McClure's Magazine, but began to write full-time in 1912. In her lifetime, Cather published 12 novels and many short stories, many of them focused on the plains and prairie of the American Midwest. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1922 for her novel *One of Ours*. A fiercely private person, Cather never married. Her most significant relationships were with women, most notably the editor Edith Lewis, with whom she lived in New York City from 1912 until her death in 1947.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the late 19th century, many Northern Europeans traveled to settle in Nebraska and the Dakotas. Accustomed to small fishing villages in their countries of origin, many immigrant farmers despaired at the vast expanses, language barriers, and harsh weather that separated them from their neighbors in the prairie. This sense of isolation is one of the main themes connecting Cather's prairie trilogy novels. *O Pioneers!* also appealed to progressives who were interested in social and economic issues because the novel explored women's strength and adaptability, and also brought attention to the hardships of immigrant life in the United States.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many copies of *O Pioneers!* are accompanied by the poem, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" by Walt Whitman, which is said to be the source of the novel's title. *O Pioneers!* is the first novel of Cather's "prairie trilogy," followed by *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *My Antonia* (1918). Cather was also a great admirer of Sarah Orne Jewett, the author responsible for *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, a short story collection that describes the isolation and hardships of the inhabitants of decaying fishing villages along the coast of Maine.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *O Pioneers!*
- **When Written:** 1913
- **Where Written:** New York

- **When Published:** 1913
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** Hanover, Nebraska in the 1880s
- **Climax:** Emil and Marie are fatally shot by Marie's husband, Frank Shabata
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Ban on Film: After being upset by a film adaptation of her novel *A Lost Lady* in 1934, Willa Cather vowed not to allow any more film adaptations of her writing to be made. She included this stipulation in her will in 1947, but following the death of the last living executor of her estate in 2011, the ban on film adaptations—and the publication of her personal letters—has been lifted.

Willa the Tomboy: As a college student, Cather dressed as a tomboy and sometimes used the name "William." Most of her novels are written from the point of view of a male character. Though she never declared her sexual orientation, it has been a topic of debate among scholars.



PLOT SUMMARY

On a windy January day in Hanover, Nebraska, a 5-year-old Swede boy sits on the sidewalk, crying for his kitten that has run up the pole. When his sister, Alexandra, returns from a doctor's visit, Emil runs up to her, and she enlists the help of their neighbor, Carl Linstrum. Carl fetches the kitten and sends Emil into the store to warm up, and when Alexandra follows him in, she finds Emil playing with Marie Tovesky, a pretty little Bohemian girl from Omaha.

John Bergson, Alexandra's father, passes away shortly afterwards, leaving the farm in Alexandra's hands, knowing that she is more familiar with the land than her brothers, Lou and Oscar. Alexandra convinces her brothers that they must mortgage their farm to buy more **land**, even though many of their neighbors are moving away due to drought and hard conditions of the soil. Carl Linstrum's family is one of the neighbors who leave for the city.

Alexandra's premonition about the land turns out to be justified, and sixteen years after John Bergson's death, the family farm is very prosperous. Alexandra, Lou, and Oscar have divided the land between them, and Alexandra's farm is the most impressive of them all. She has sent Emil to university, and he has returned to help her with the farm. Alexandra has also



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Alexandra Bergson – The novel's protagonist, Alexandra Bergson, is a strong, tall woman, the eldest child of the Swedish immigrant John Bergson. Alexandra is a resourceful, practical person who loves and understands the **land** as no one else in the novel does. However, she is not nearly so intuitive when it comes to understanding other people. She inherits the farm and brings her family prosperity, but in exchange, she works and toils through the prime years of her life. She deeply loves her younger brother Emil, and sees all of her work and effort as dedicated to giving him the opportunity to have an identity that isn't rooted in the soil.

Carl Linstrum – Carl is Alexandra's childhood neighbor and best friend. He grows to become a brooding, sensitive man, who leaves the Divide for a career in engraving and then eventually leaves again to mine for gold in Alaska. He and Alexandra have a steadier kind of love between them, and they marry at the end of the book.

Marie Shabata – Marie is Emil's childhood friend and the object of his love. She comes from a Bohemian family and is beautiful, with red cheeks and yellow flecks in her eyes, and her liveliness and affection make her popular with everyone she meets. She runs off and marries Frank Shabata when she's just eighteen, but comes to believe that she was not the right person for Frank. She comes to return Emil's love, and though she tries (and fails) to resist her feelings.

Frank Shabata – Frank is Marie's husband and Alexandra's neighbor in the latter half of the book. He is described as a cheerful, handsome man early in life, but he becomes embittered by hard work and turns into a jealous man after he marries. He falls into rages, including the one that eventually kills Marie and Emil.

Lou Bergson – Lou is one of Alexandra's brother, the middle brother in the Bergson family. He is more intelligent than the third Bergson brother, Oscar, but he's also petty, small-minded, and flighty, often involving himself in politics and tirades against those with money. He hates to stand out from his neighbors, and he marries Annie Lee.

Oscar Bergson – Oscar is Alexandra's younger brother and the eldest son of John Bergson. He is solidly built, but a slow thinker. He doesn't mind hard work, as long as it is part of his routine. Oscar and Lou stick close together, and they both resent Alexandra's unconventional ways and relationship with Carl Linstrum.

Crazy Ivar – Ivar is an elderly man with a strong upper body and white hair. He is deeply religious and loves animals, but his unconventional ways frighten most people. Alexandra recognizes that Ivar knows how to care for animals and

taken in a man whom many others believe is crazy, Ivar, whom she recognizes as offering sound advice on caring for animals. Marie Tovesky has also married Frank Shabata, and now the Shabatas live on the Linstrums' old homestead.

One day when Lou and Oscar are visiting Alexandra, Carl arrives, having come to visit the prairie. Alexandra is thrilled to see him and asks him to stay awhile. Carl, however, says he must leave soon to go prospecting for gold in Alaska. Lou and Oscar are wary of Carl's motives in visiting Alexandra, and they are suspicious of his wandering ways. However, Carl stays for a month, and Alexandra is pleased with his company.

During this time, Emil also confronts Marie about his feelings for her. She refuses to acknowledge anything, which angers Emil, and he resolves to put off law school for a year. He decides to spend a year in Mexico instead. Meanwhile, Lou and Oscar confront Alexandra about Carl, saying that she is making a fool of herself by spending so much time with him at her age. They do not wish for him to marry into the family farm and inheritance. Alexandra grows angry with her brothers, but Carl is unable to deal with the criticism and leaves for the coast the next day, leaving Alexandra alone, with neither Emil nor Carl for company.

When Emil returns to Hanover after his stint in Mexico, Alexandra shows him off at the French Church, where Emil and Marie finally share a kiss when the lights are extinguished. When Emil confronts Marie later, she admits that she loves him—but that she wishes he would leave her alone, since they cannot do anything about their feelings for each other. Emil resolves to depart for law school.

However, Emil's best friend, Amédée dies suddenly of appendicitis, and his death leaves the town shaken. Emil rides away from the Sunday Mass to say goodbye to Marie before he leaves for law school, and instead finds her napping beneath the **white mulberry tree** in her orchard. He takes her in his arms, and she does not resist.

Later, when Frank returns home after a day of drinking, he discovers Emil's mare in his stable, and grabs his gun to look for his wife. He wanders to the orchard hedge, where he finds the two lovers. In an unthinking rage, he aims and shoots three times, killing Emil and Marie. Ivar discovers the bodies in the morning, and he runs to Alexandra to deliver the news.

When Alexandra recovers from her shock, she resolves to do something for Frank, who confessed to the murders and is serving a prison sentence in Lincoln. She visits the penitentiary and finds Frank much changed, though she still tells him she wants to help him. Having seen the news in a newspaper, Carl returns home while Alexandra is away, and when she goes back home with him to Hanover, the two finally decide to marry, no longer worried about Lou or Oscar.

livestock, and she takes him in after he loses his land to mismanagement.

Amédée Chevalier – Amédée, a light-hearted French boy, is Emil's best friend. Amédée is slight of figure, graceful, and constantly joking around. He is very happily married to Angélique, and they have a newborn son he dotes on. However, he dies, suddenly, of appendicitis. His death prompts Emil and Marie to come together.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Emil Bergson – Emil is Alexandra's younger brother, and one of the people closest to her. Emil is handsome and intelligent, one of the novel's only characters to have attended university. He is desperately in love with Marie Shabata, and their illicit love eventually brings tragedy to the Divide.

John Bergson – John Bergson is the father of Alexandra, Oscar, Lou, and Emil. An intelligent man, John Bergson left his life in Sweden for the difficult terrain of Nebraska. He falls sick at forty-six and leaves the farm in Alexandra's capable hands, recognizing that she knows the **land** best.

Mrs. Bergson – The wife of John Bergson, Mrs. Bergson is a comfortable-looking, plump woman who loves routine just as her oldest son, Oscar, does. She misses the Old World and passes away a few years after her husband dies.

Angélique – Angélique is Amédée's wife. She has faith in their good fortune and jokes around with Emil, just like her husband does.

Signa – Signa is the youngest of the three Swedish girls Alexandra employs to do housework. She is Alexandra's favorite, though she can be skittish around the men at the table. When Alexandra is upset after Emil's death, Signa returns to take care of her.

Nelse – Nelse, Signa's suitor and eventual husband, is a gloomy fellow. He works for Alexandra on the farm and constantly scolds Signa about everything.

Albert Tovesky – Albert Tovesky, Marie's father, is a successful town leader in Omaha. Marie is his youngest and favorite child.

Joe Tovesky – Joe Tovesky is Marie's uncle. He dotes on Marie when she is a little girl, showing her off to his friends and buying her a mechanical toy from the shop in town.

Mrs. Lee – Mrs. Lee is Annie Lee's mother. She is fond of Alexandra, as she misses her old country habits, and Annie and Lou don't give her as much liberty as Alexandra does.

Milly – Milly is Lou and Annie's daughter. Unlike her parents, Milly is kind and straightforward, and Alexandra is very fond of her.

Annie Lee – Annie Lee is Lou's wife. She's very conscious of her clothing and tries hard to be fashionable. She hopes to move to the city one day, when the girls are grown.

Mrs. Hiller – Mrs. Hiller is the Shabatas' next-door neighbor.

Barney Flinn – Barney Flinn is Alexandra's foreman, though he doesn't officially go by that title.

Carrie Jensen – Carrie is the sister of Nelse Jensen. She was unhappy and suicidal until her parents sent her to Iowa to visit relatives. When she returned, she was cheerful and said that she was happy to work in a world that was so big and interesting.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



POWER OF THE LAND

The novel portrays the Nebraskan prairie wilderness, describing it as a powerful expanse where settlers felt themselves “too weak to make any mark here, that the **land** wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness.” As Cather famously said, the land is the real hero of *O Pioneers*, making the real story one about its transformation from wilderness to civilization and its relationship with the characters who try to push this transformation. Lou, Oscar, and their father, for example, all struggle against the land, attempting to treat the soil like other soil they've known, something they can own and control. They tire themselves out without making real progress. Alexandra, on the other hand, succeeds where others have failed because she submits to the land, understanding that she must work with it in order to bring out its riches. When Alexandra has built up her farm, it appears almost to be part of the outdoors: “There was something individual about the great farm, a most unusual trimness and care for detail.... You feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best.” Alexandra makes the realization that she belongs to the land and not vice versa.

Alexandra further expresses at one point that she has no personality “apart from the soil,” to which Carl replies, “Here you are an individual, you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody, we own nothing.... We sit in restaurants and concert halls and look about at the hundreds of our own kind and shudder.” Carl's point is that Alexandra's connection to the land is what provides her with a unique identity—as opposed to the rootless traveling workers who remain anonymous wherever they go. At the same time, it is Alexandra's goal to

allow Emil to go to college and law school and establish an identity separate from the soil. But Emil, too, feels rootless and is unable to resist his attraction to Marie, perhaps suggesting that the effort to separate oneself from the land is inherently destructive.



LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

The relationships in the novel cover both romantic and familial love. Both types of love are complicated. While Alexandra has a chillier relationship with two of her brothers, Lou and Oscar—who resist both the land and Alexandra’s management because she is a woman—she genuinely cares for Emil, whom she dotes on from the beginning of the novel. Romantic love falls into two categories as well—there’s the reckless, passionate love between Emil and Marie, and the steadier, practical love of Carl and Alexandra. Marie and Emil’s violent end at the end of the book suggests that the life of a pioneer has no room for the selfishness and passion that accompany illicit love, however.

As immigrants and pioneers, the characters inhabit a world that is in no way designed for them, and they’re separated from their neighbors by vast expanses of **land**, language barriers, and harsh weather. As a result, loneliness permeates the book’s rural setting, and the characters struggle to maintain meaningful relationships with one another. Marie secretly pines for Emil, instead of her husband Frank, and when Frank discovers the two lovers, he fatally shoots them, simultaneously ending their relationship as well as his own free life. Alexandra must choose between her affection for Carl and her loyalty to her brothers, who are suspicious of an outsider marrying into the family. When Carl leaves to avoid trouble, he isolates both himself and Alexandra. The characters struggle through their platonic relationships as well; Alexandra, for example, has difficulty understanding her brother’s actions until Carl explains them to her. Her biggest flaw is a lack of empathy for other people; inversely, her biggest asset in the book is her relationship with the land, possibly suggesting that in order for pioneers to succeed, their relationship with the land must come first.



DIGNITY OF WORK

The novel suggests that being devoted to one’s work and loving the work for its own sake provides a kind of dignity. Alexandra’s character is the prime example of this. Although she doesn’t demonstrate a vivid inner life or incredible passion, she is the novel’s undisputed heroine because she devotes herself to her work with the **land**. She sacrifices her youth and femininity in order to take care of the farm and carry out her father’s wish that she bring success to the family, and she succeeds because she yields completely to the work.

In contrast, the other characters who fail to love their work for its own sake—and instead turn to other distractions, like drink or illicit love—meet undignified, tragic ends. Emil and Marie are killed by Frank, who goes to jail, and Lou and Oscar, who are distracted by their jealousy and resentment towards Alexandra and Carl, struggle with the land and never achieve the noble stature or success of their sister.



SELF-SACRIFICE VS. TEMPTATION

In many ways, *O Pioneers* serves as a cautionary moral tale. Throughout the book, various temptations pull characters away from their duty to the **land**—but the characters who succumb are punished for their weakness. Many of the Bergsons’ neighbors sell their homesteads in exchange for an easier way of life, for example, and they find relatively small, pointless lives in town. Alexandra, on the other hand, stays behind and yields to the land, taking a risk in buying up other homesteads, and she finds success because of her hard work and dedication to the task at hand. More dramatically, Emil and Marie give in to the temptation to consummate their love, and they’re punished by Marie’s husband, Frank, who fatally shoots them. Frank is also punished for his reckless action, his drinking, and the jealousy that plagues him throughout his marriage to Marie—he’s left alone, with no one to love or love him at the end of the book. Even though the neighbors are spread far apart, it’s clear that individual actions still affect the community as a whole. Marie and Emil’s inability to resist temptation holds consequences for everyone in their farming community. Frank goes to jail, and Alexandra is left in shock.

In contrast with Emil and Marie, Carl and Alexandra act practically throughout the novel. Instead of causing trouble with Lou and Oscar, for example, Carl heads to Alaska for work. Alexandra accepts his departure without much of a reaction—she doesn’t show a particularly passionate inner life, except when it comes to the land—and in the end, the two are reunited, thanks to their steadiness and practicality.



PIONEERING AND IMMIGRATION

In a most basic summary of the book, one could say that *O Pioneers* describes the difficulties of homestead life. It’s a book about inhabiting a **land** that resists habitation. Loneliness permeates the community, thanks to the distances that separate neighbors, the language barriers between immigrants of different countries, and the often-extreme weather.

As immigrants, for example, Mr. and Mrs. Bergson struggle with the harshness of the New World, as they pine for what they left behind. Mr. Bergson’s early death represents how easily the harsh New World crushes the Old World when the characters don’t make adjustments to the land, and Mrs. Bergson’s

constant comparisons between life in Nebraska and life in Norway prevent her from ever finding happiness in Nebraska. As pioneers, the characters live difficult lives in an attempt to pave the way for generations to come. Their way of life depends on persistence and the delay of gratification. Those who do give in to temptation are punished, and the ones who succeed, like Alexandra, give away the best years of their lives to the land.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



LAND

The land is of such significance in *O Pioneers!* that Cather even commented that the true heroine of the novel is the land itself. It is the land that undergoes the most dramatic transformation in the story, from wild terrain to fruitful pastures. In the very beginning of the book, the land symbolizes the harshness of the New World. It resists the efforts of the pioneers, who don't understand how to work the foreign soil. The land comes to emphasize just how far these pioneers and immigrants have strayed from their homes. The land also symbolizes other essential aspects of pioneer life—like the delay of gratification and the hard work necessary to prosper. Even when the land is transformed in the latter half of the book, there are hints that all the human drama is secondary to the land itself, which represents a greater Nature that continues to move forward even in the wake of human destruction. Even after Emil and Marie die in the orchard, for example, the narrator reminds us that this is only part of the story. The other part of the story involves the butterflies fluttering above the alfalfa, and the wild roses dying in bloom—in other words, the world around the people, which continues on regardless of human tragedy.



DUCKS AND WILD BIRDS

The symbol of wild birds appears subtly in the novel, but it recurs at key points. The characters first discuss the shooting of wild birds when the Bergsons and Carl Linstrum go to buy a hammock from Ivar. Lou and Oscar want to hunt the ducks, but Ivar, who understands that there is something fundamentally free and joyful about their wildness, is against it. Later, when Marie and Emil are by the pond, Emil shoots several ducks, and Marie becomes upset, also realizing that the ducks are too free to be killed for recreation, though it's their very wildness that endangers them, makes them feel that they will not truly be hurt. This same sort of wildness exists in Emil and Marie. They are young, reckless, and until Frank shoots them through the hedges, they don't believe that they

can truly be harmed. On another level, it is when their love takes flight—as the birds do—that they are shot down and killed. Emil and Alexandra's awe of the wild duck in the river also represents the respect a good pioneer must have for the **land**. Even as they try to shape and cultivate the land, they must maintain respect and love.



WHITE MULBERRY TREE

The white mulberry tree is a species nonnative to Nebraska, just like the homesteaders who arrive from foreign countries. It is known for being a short-lived species, reflecting the brevity of Emil and Marie's relationship. Its coloring reflects the innocence of the young love that blooms beneath its branches, and the blood that eventually stains the fruit represents the destructive passion that brings their lives to an end. The mulberry tree also alludes to Ovid's tragic tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, another young couple that meets a violent end beneath a white mulberry's branches.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *O Pioneers!* published in 1994.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

☹️ But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its somber wastes.

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Emil, a 5-year-old Swedish boy, has been fretting over his kitten, who has climbed up a telegraph pole. His older sister Alexandra has fetched her friend Carl, who has rescued the kitten. After playing with his friend Marie, then Emil rides away in a wagon along with Alexandra and Carl. The narrator describes the landscape in this part of Nebraska; the homesteads are few and far apart, and although it is only four o'clock in the afternoon, it is already getting dark. In this passage, the narrator emphasizes the power of "the land itself," which dwarfs human attempts to dominate it.

Early on in the book, the relationship between the characters and the environment in which they live is

established as a power struggle that humans are ill-equipped to win. In comparison to the vast expanse of the land, the "little beginnings of human society" are weak and fragile. The mood of this struggle is melancholy, illustrated by the phrase "its somber wastes." In the novel, the experiences of pioneers are not romanticized, but shown to be harsh, lonely, and often tragic.

...he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness.

Related Characters: John Bergson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Carl, Alexandra, and Emil are riding away from the town as dusk spreads over the landscape. The narrator has described the sombre gazes of both Carl and Alexandra—yet while Alexandra looks to the future, Carl seems fixated on the past. In this passage, the narrator explains how Carl has been embittered by his experience of struggling with the land. He has now come to believe that "the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength." This observation confirms the difficult position of the pioneers, whose task it is to control and exploit the land for their own benefit, yet who are faced with the resistance of the land itself.

Note that this is one of many instances in the novel when the narrator anthropomorphizes the land, suggesting that it not only has human qualities but even a kind of consciousness, with its own emotions and desires. One could interpret this view of the land as the result of the intense loneliness and isolation of pioneer life; because human interaction was rare, the landscape began to take on human characteristics.

On the other hand, it is also possible to interpret this anthropomorphization as a kind of haunting presence of the Native Americans who lived on the land before the arrival of the pioneers. Due to genocide and forced "removal," many Native American populations had been eradicated or displaced from their original homelands. Although there is little mention of Native Americans in *O Pioneers!*, passages

like this perhaps indicate the haunting legacy of their resistance, and the pioneers' role as unwelcome invaders.

John Bergson's father had been a shipbuilder, a man of considerable force and of some fortune. Late in life he married a second time, a Stockholm woman of questionable character, much younger than he, who goaded him into every sort of extravagance. On the shipbuilder's part, this marriage was an infatuation, the despairing folly of a powerful man who cannot bear to grow old. In a few years his unprincipled wife warped the probity of a lifetime.

Related Characters: John Bergson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has described the Bergson homestead and the patriarch of the family, John Bergson. John has struggled as a result of his Old World beliefs and has relied on the judgments of his daughter Alexandra, who has a much better understanding of the land. John has compared Alexandra to her grandfather, a man who was strong-willed yet mistakenly decided to marry a much younger second wife from Stockholm who "goaded him into every sort of extravagance." This story introduces the dangers posed by sexual desire and "infatuation," a major theme in the novel. Despite his "considerable force and... fortune," John's father was easily ruined by the temptation of a younger woman. By comparing Alexandra to her grandfather, John implicitly warns Alexandra not to make the same error.

This passage also emphasizes the importance of not resisting natural forces, such as the passage of time. John's father's motivation for marrying the younger woman is characterized as "the despairing folly of a powerful man who cannot bear to grow old." Just as successful farming requires submitting to the natural "will" of the land, so too must people accept the inevitability of growing old, or else risk ruining their lives and fortunes.

She had never known before how much the country meant to her. The chirping of the insects down in the long grass had been like the sweetest music. She had felt 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. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring.

Related Characters: Alexandra Bergson

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Alexandra has decided to mortgage the homestead in order to buy more land in the area, and has explained her plan to Lou and Oscar, who are resistant to it. Eventually, however, Oscar confesses that he knows she is right, and this passage describes the quiet sense of triumph Alexandra feels afterward. In this moment, the country takes on a new meaning for Alexandra; she has devised her own plan for how to benefit from the land in a way that maintains her harmonious, respectful relationship to nature.

Indeed, the idea that Alexandra is "at one" with nature is confirmed by the description that "she felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover." Unlike other pioneers, who envision conquering, taming, and industrializing the land as their eventual goal, Alexandra perceives the future as "stirring" *within* the natural landscape.

Part 2, Chapter 3 Quotes

☞☞ The conversation at the table was all in English. Oscar's wife, from the malaria district of Missouri, was ashamed of marrying a foreigner, and his boys do not understand a word of Swedish. Annie and Lou sometimes speak Swedish at home, but Annie is almost as much afraid of being "caught" at it as ever her mother was of being caught barefoot.

Related Characters: Oscar Bergson, Lou Bergson, Annie Lee

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Oscar and Lou have come to Alexandra's house for dinner. Alexandra has ensured that her house is elegantly furnished for her guests, although she personally prefers "plain things." Oscar, Lou, and their wives are tense and uncomfortable, and in this passage the narrator explains that the dinner conversation was in English, as the wives are embarrassed of speaking Swedish (and one doesn't even know the language). The fact that Oscar's sons "do not

understand a word of Swedish" highlights how quickly all connection to the Old World can be lost. Meanwhile, the comparison between Annie's fear of being caught speaking Swedish and "being caught barefoot" emphasizes a symbolic connection between the English language and modern civilization, in contrast to the Swedish language, which--like Alexandra--is associated with an untamed, natural state of being (in the world of the novel, at least).

Part 2, Chapter 4 Quotes

☞☞ "We hadn't any of us much to do with it, Carl. The land did it. It had its little joke. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself..."

Related Characters: Alexandra Bergson (speaker), Carl Linstrum

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

After years of absence, Carl has arrived at Alexandra's house. Alexandra observes that he hasn't changed much in the years that have passed, and as they stroll together in the garden Carl asks how Alexandra managed to become so successful. Alexandra responds that "the land did it," once again anthropomorphizing (giving human qualities or identity to) the land by describing its formerly harsh, unyielding nature as a "little joke." This passage shows how intimately Alexandra feels connected to the land; her relationship with it is akin to a relationship with another person. Her words also confirm the idea that the land is hostile to people who do not treat it with the proper understanding and respect. Alexandra's respect for the land is shown by the fact that she credits the land itself for what others would see as *her* success.

☞☞ "He shall do whatever he wants to. He is going to have a chance, a whole chance; that's what I've worked for."

Related Characters: Alexandra Bergson (speaker), Emil Bergson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Carl and Alexandra have been walking together in Alexandra's garden, discussing her success with the farm. Carl has asked if Emil will farm with Alexandra when he is older, and Alexandra replies that he will "do whatever he wants to." Alexandra's words reflect a quintessential immigrant narrative: the idea that personal self-sacrifice will ensure prosperity and freedom for future generations. Alexandra's attitude toward Emil is striking in its contrast to the serious, stoical approach she takes to her own life. Indeed, Alexandra's indulgence of Emil, although well-intentioned, arguably does not benefit Emil in the long run. Unlike his hard-working sister, Emil feels aimless and finds it difficult to resist temptation—specifically through his love for Marie. As a result, both he and Marie ultimately end up being killed by Marie's husband, Frank.

“Isn't it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years.”

Related Characters: Carl Linstrum (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 80-81

Explanation and Analysis

Having arrived unexpectedly at Alexandra's house after many years away, Carl has asked after Emil, Oscar, and Lou. Alexandra has admitted that she rarely sees Oscar and Lou now that they have their own farms, and Carl confesses that he liked the brothers better in the old days, adding that he even nostalgically misses the old country. Alexandra agrees, and Carl observes that "there are only two or three human stories," comparing these stories to the cyclical repetition of the birds and the natural landscape. This passage highlights the similarity between Carl and Alexandra. Both work hard for the future, yet are inescapably bound to the past and to nature.

This passage can also be interpreted as a self-conscious statement about the novel itself. Based on Carl's observation, *O Pioneers!* is less a story about a specific, unique set of characters, but rather a narrative shared by many people across different times and places. Indeed, this idea is reflected in the themes of the novel, which speak less to a particular historical reality than to the fundamental nature of the human condition. This emphasis on universalism arguably serves to highlight the similarities between immigrants to the U.S., who—despite coming from different cultural, religious, and class backgrounds—experience similar challenges in the New World.

“Freedom so often means that one isn't needed anywhere. Here you are an individual, you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody, we own nothing. When one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him...We sit in restaurants and concert halls and look about at the hundreds of our own kind and shudder.”

Related Characters: Carl Linstrum (speaker), Alexandra Bergson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

As Alexandra and Carl continue to discuss what's happened in the years since they last saw one another, Alexandra asks why Carl is so "dissatisfied." Although alarmed at Alexandra's bluntness, Carl confesses that he does not enjoy his work, and in this passage explains that the allure of "freedom" and life in the city is merely an illusion. Carl's experience highlights the paradox of the pioneers' relationship to the New World and modernity. Alexandra and the other pioneers work the land in pursuit of freedom, prosperity, and the chance to participate in the consumer-based urban lifestyle that Carl references when he describes "restaurants and concert halls." Indeed, this lifestyle is the end goal of many of the pioneers' struggle.

However, in this passage Carl suggests that the communal existence of pioneers is fundamentally preferable to the life of a "free," individual, urban worker. Although the mythology of the American dream usually constructs freedom and individuality as being intertwined, Carl contradicts this, arguing that total freedom makes a person anonymous and

indistinguishable from the masses. Individuals, he claims, are produced by communities where there are people who care about a person and know that person's history. This paradox is central to debates over modernity that continue in the present day.

“Maybe,” said Alexandra placidly; “but I’ve found that it sometimes pays to mend other people’s fences.”

Related Characters: Alexandra Bergson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Carl, Marie, and Alexandra have been catching up on all that has happened during their years apart. Later, as Carl and Alexandra are leaving, they run into Frank Shabata, who complains about his neighbor's hogs. In this passage, Alexandra responds to Frank's grumbling by calmly pointing out that "sometimes it pays" to help one's neighbors. Alexandra's even-tempered, generous spirit is a marked contrast to Frank's violent bitterness. At the same time, note that Alexandra frames neighborly compassion in a way that shows how it can lead to personal gain. Although Alexandra is far from selfish, she is extremely pragmatic, and her behavior is governed by the strategic self-interest necessary in order to survive and flourish as a pioneer. Frank, on the other hand, is sabotaged by his own selfish anger.

“The Bohemians, you know, were tree worshipers before the missionaries came. Father says the people in the mountains still do queer things, sometimes,—they believe that trees bring good or bad luck.”

Related Characters: Marie Shabata (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

It is a sunny day; Frank has gone to the saloon, and Marie has ventured into the orchard to pick cherries. There she encounters Emil, who she promises not to disturb her; however, she then proceeds to talk to him about the natural

landscape and pagan spirituality. She has asked Emil about the religion of Swedes before Christianity. He isn't sure about it, and in this passage Marie explains that the Bohemians were "tree worshippers" before the arrival of Christian missionaries. Although Marie frames the Bohemian's pagan practices as "queer," it is obvious that she is fascinated by this way of life, and indeed, the pagan worship of nature coheres with the magical significance of the natural world within the novel.

Like the "people in the mountains," the characters in the novel—particularly Alexandra—come to think of the land as having a will of its own. To some extent, the experience of migrating to the New World has prompted a temporal return back to a pre-Christian way of life. Marie's description of the Bohemians also brings to mind Native Americans, whose absence haunts the novel. Like Bohemian paganism, Native American religious practices bestow significance on trees and the natural world. Although they have been murdered and driven from the land the pioneers now occupy, their presence lingers through passages like this.

Part 2, Chapter 9 Quotes

“He and Amédée had ridden and wrestled and larked together since they were lads of twelve...It seemed strange that now he should have to hide the thing that Amédée was so proud of, that the feeling which gave one of them such happiness should bring the other such despair. It was like that when Alexandra tested her seed-corn in the spring, he mused. From two ears that had grown side by side, the grains of one shot up joyfully into the light, projecting themselves into the future, and the grains from the other lay still in the earth and rotted, and nobody knew why.”

Related Characters: Emil Bergson, Amédée Chevalier, Alexandra Bergson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Carl and Emil have gone to a Catholic fair in the French country; here, they have encountered Emil's best friend, Amédée, who is newly married. Amédée is very happy, and has advised Emil to marry as well, but Emil has responded that he has no one to marry. However, a few moments later

he catches Marie's eye as she looks on with jealousy (when he is teasing Amédée's wife flirtatiously). In this passage, Emil reflects on the divergence between himself and Amédée. Although as boys they were inseparable, there is now a stark difference between them—Amédée is happily and proudly married, whereas Emil must keep his love for Marie a secret and cannot marry her.

Emil's comparison of his and Amédée's friendship to the two ears of corn once again highlights the significance of nature as a parallel to the social lives of the characters in the novel. Like the workings of nature, human relationships are mysterious and unpredictable. Although the image of the rotting corn is deeply sad, Emil's analogy suggests he has accepted the fact that his tragic romantic fate is beyond his control. Like plants in the natural world, not all people are able to thrive and "project themselves into the future." Some are left behind and suffer, for reasons that we will never know.

Part 2, Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ "Hard on you? I never meant to be hard. Conditions were hard. Maybe I would never have been very soft, anyhow; but I certainly didn't choose to be the kind of girl I was. If you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard, like a tree."

Related Characters: Alexandra Bergson (speaker), Lou Bergson, Oscar Bergson

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

With Carl and Emil away, Lou and Oscar have come to visit Alexandra. They protest about her relationship with Carl, claiming that she is giving the family a bad reputation. They complain that, as men, they should have controlled the land, not Alexandra. They also complain that Alexandra has been hard on them, to which she responds that this was because "conditions were hard," and that it is not in her nature to be "soft." Alexandra's words emphasize her absolute coherence with the landscape around her. Like the land itself, Alexandra can seem tough and stubborn; yet it is these qualities that have allowed her farm and family to flourish. In comparison to their sister, Oscar and Lou appear whiny and childish. As this conversation suggests, they do not

possess the stoic grit and mature temper required to successfully thrive in harsh surroundings. Indeed, Alexandra's description of the vine suggests that it is the difficulty of her life that has made her so hard and resilient. Like the vine, she has been "cut... back again and again," yet has responded by becoming stronger and tougher. To some extent, this also posits her as possessing more traditionally masculine virtues than her more sensitive, weak-willed brothers.

Part 2, Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ "I have a feeling that if you go away, you will not come back. Something will happen to one of us, or to both. People have to snatch at happiness when they can, in this world. It is always easier to lose than to find. What I have is yours, if you care enough about me to take it."

Related Characters: Alexandra Bergson (speaker), Carl Linstrum

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

Having learned of Lou and Oscar's anger about his relationship with Alexandra, Carl resolves to leave Alexandra's farm. He has told Alexandra that he will try to find "something to offer" Alexandra—implying that he will strive to earn money. Hearing this, however, Alexandra protests that there is no point in offering people things they don't need, and in this passage she asks Carl not to leave. Alexandra's words reflect her solemn, serious view of life. Even as she suggests marrying Carl, she frames this in terms of the ultimate harshness of life, saying "it is always easier to lose than to find." Although this attitude may appear pessimistic, it allows Alexandra to pursue long-term, sustainable happiness, rather than acting according to her own whims or those of other people.

Part 3, Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ The hedgerows and trees are scarcely perceptible against the bare earth, whose slaty hue they have taken on. The ground is frozen so hard that it bruises the foot to walk in the roads or in the ploughed fields. It is like an iron country, and the spirit is oppressed by its rigor and melancholy. One could easily believe that in that dead landscape the germs of life and fruitfulness were extinct forever.

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

Winter has returned to the prairie, and the ground is completely frozen over. In this passage the narrator describes the total desolation of the land, which is so stark that it is hard to imagine that anything will ever grow there again. This passage emphasizes the harsh character of the land—even when farmed successfully, winter still renders it bleak and barren, and there is never any guarantee that life will grow again. Indeed, the seasonal cycle is similar to the shifts in happiness and fortune in the lives of the characters. The novel is filled with suffering and tragedy as well as success, love, and joy, and both good and bad experiences inevitably end, giving way to their opposite. Like the land, however, the dominant mood is one of "rigor and melancholy."

☝☝ Alexandra had never heard Marie speak so frankly about her husband before, and she felt that it was wiser not to encourage her. No good, she reasoned, ever came from talking about such things...

Related Characters: Alexandra Bergson, Marie Shabata, Frank Shabata

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Marie has invited Alexandra and Mrs. Lee over to her house while Frank is out. Here, Marie admits to Alexandra that the night before she had been crying from loneliness, and later tells Alexandra that she thinks Frank should have married a different woman, one who was more devoted to him. Alexandra is surprised by this comment and worries that no good "ever came from talking about such things." Although Alexandra is less worried about propriety and reputation than other characters (such as her brothers), she has a strong aversion to the dangers of passionate emotions. Alexandra's maturity and pragmatism allow her to sense that "no good" will come of Marie's expression of regret (and, by extension, her love for Emil). To Alexandra, it is better to stoically endure misfortunes one cannot change

than to speak too openly about them. As it turns out, of course, Alexandra's intuition on this matter is tragically correct (although also not very romantic or personally fulfilling).

Part 3, Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ If Alexandra had had much imagination she might have guessed what was going on in Marie's mind, and she would have seen long before what was going on in Emil's. But that, as Emil himself had more than once reflected, was Alexandra's blind side, and her life had not been of the kind to sharpen her vision. Her training had all been toward the end of making her proficient in what she had undertaken to do. Her personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence; like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there, at intervals months apart, and then sank again to flow on under her own fields.

Related Characters: Alexandra Bergson, Emil Bergson, Marie Shabata

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

After the visit to Marie's house, Alexandra has seen her less and less, as Marie has become more withdrawn and religious. In this passage, the narrator reflects that if Alexandra had more "imagination," she would have been able to guess that Marie and Emil were in love. However, this kind of social intuition is Alexandra's weak point. She understands how to thrive as a successful farmer, but her own "personal life" remains a mystery to her—"like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there." By comparing Alexandra to a river, the narrator again emphasizes her unusual similarity to the natural landscape. With little interest in or understanding of social life, Alexandra's consciousness resembles the impassivity of the land to human affairs.

While there are many ways in which Alexandra's harmony with the land allows her to thrive, this passage illustrates that it also hinders her. Her poor understanding of the interior lives of those around her prevents her from acknowledging the suffering of Emil and Marie, and from doing anything to alter their tragic fate.

☞ There were certain days in her life, outwardly uneventful, which Alexandra remembered as peculiarly happy; days when she was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination in the soil.

Related Characters: Alexandra Bergson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has described Alexandra's ignorance of Emil and Marie's love, and commented that Alexandra's interior consciousness is concealed and mysterious to her. On the other hand, the narrator adds, Alexandra does have a strength of personality that has allowed her to thrive as a pioneer. In this passage, the narrator mentions that Alexandra remembers some days of her life as particularly happy, "days when she was close to the flat, fallow world about her." This passage confirms Alexandra's absolute unity with the land; indeed, her joy originates in her ability to feel at one with the landscape and personally implicated in its fertility.

In this way, Alexandra takes on a peculiarly invested, almost maternal role in relation to the land. Her farming work allows her to lose her sense of self in the land, and this is what makes her happy. Rather than seeking personal, individual success, Alexandra simply wants to become united with nature.

☞ Sometimes, as she lay thus luxuriously idle, her eyes closed, she used to have an illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by some one very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but he was like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat. She never saw him, but, with eyes closed, she could feel that he was yellow like the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him.

Related Characters: Alexandra Bergson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has continued to describe Alexandra's interior life and relationship to the land, commenting that she has not had the usual emotional experiences that come with falling in love and indulging in "sentimental reveries." The harsh challenges of her life are reflected in her personality, which is serious and practical. However, in this passage, the narrator mentions that Alexandra would occasionally dream about being "lifted up bodily and carried lightly" by an anonymous man, whom she imagines resembles the natural world—"yellow like the sunlight" and smelling of "ripe cornfields."

This passage provides a new depth to Alexandra's character, suggesting that she may be more similar to "ordinary" people than we might expect. However, the details of her romantic dream also confirm her exceptional personality and relationship to the world. Indeed, one could interpret this passage as suggesting that Alexandra's dream is about the land itself. After a difficult, "serious" life working hard as a farmer, Alexandra fantasizes about being carried and cared for in the same way as she has always done for others and for nature.

☞ "You belong to the land," Carl murmured, "as you have always said. Now more than ever."

Related Characters: Carl Linstrum (speaker), Alexandra Bergson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

Alexandra and Carl have been discussing what happened to Emil and Marie, and Carl has gently advised Alexandra not to be too harsh toward them, as the evidence suggests that they tried to resist their feelings. Alexandra has told Carl that she would like to come with him to Alaska, but that after she will return to the land; Carl agrees that Alexandra belongs to the land "now more than ever." This comment shows that Alexandra's bond to the land is strengthened by the drama and tragedy of life, rather than being weakened by it. Unlike human affairs, the land is constant; its purpose and value is unchanging and eternal. Alexandra's closeness to the land thus allows her to endure the unpredictable, difficult, and often tragic course of life.

“The land belongs to the future, Carl; that’s the way it seems to me. How many of the names on the county clerk’s plat will be there in fifty years? I might as well try to will the sunset over there to my brother’s children. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while.”

Related Characters: Alexandra Bergson (speaker), Carl Linstrum

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

Alexandra has told Carl that she will come with him to Alaska, but that afterward she will return to her farm, where they both agree she belongs. Alexandra suddenly expresses

concern about leaving the land to Oscar and Lou's children. In this passage, she explains that "the people who love and understand [the land] are the people who own it," a fact that means Oscar and Lou and their descendants could never truly own the land. Alexandra's words emphasize the transient, fragile nature of human existence in comparison to the enduring power of the natural world. For this reason, the idea of people owning the land is somewhat absurd, especially if those people do not have the proper respect and understanding for the land.

On the other hand, Alexandra herself must accept that the future of the land and its owners is ultimately beyond her control. Note that her thoughts represent a perversion of the usual narrative around pioneering and immigration. Although Alexandra states that "the land belongs to the future," she does not mean that it will be used in a way to make future generations more prosperous—rather, the land will exist even when human individuals do not.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

Thirty years ago, in January, the wind is howling in the small town of Hanover, Nebraska. The houses look haphazard and temporary, and the main street is frozen solid. It's midday, so the street is mostly empty, save for a few countrymen and their wives. A little Swede boy, age five, sits on the sidewalk in front of one of the stores, crying for his kitten, which has run up a telegraph pole. He waits for his sister to return from a doctor's visit.

His sister finally approaches. She's a tall, strong girl with a serious face, and she walks quickly and resolutely, not noticing her brother until he pulls at her coat. She reprimands Emil for going outside when she told him to stay in the store and asks him what's the matter. Emil responds that a man put his kitten outside, and a dog chased her up the pole. His sister, Alexandra, calls for the kitten, but she refuses to come down. Alexandra resolves to go and see if she can find Carl Linstrum to help.

Alexandra removes her veil to wrap around Emil, and a traveling man remarks on what a fine head of hair she has. Alexandra gives him a look so severe that he drops his cigar on the sidewalk and heads off to the saloon. Meanwhile, Alexandra hurries to the drug store to find Carl, and he returns with her to the pole where Emil's kitten is.

Carl says he'll have to go up after the kitten and heads into the depot to get some spikes to strap onto his feet. When he returns, Alexandra watches him anxiously as he climbs to the top of the pole to retrieve the kitten. Carl hands the kitten over to Emil, telling him to go into the store to get warm. Carl asks Alexandra whether she's seen the doctor, and she replies shakily that she has—the doctor has said that her father can't get well. For a moment, she and Carl stand in silence, and then Carl turns away to see to her team of horses.

Willa Cather's opening lines describe the power of the land by emphasizing the smallness of human endeavors—the houses that cannot withstand the forces of nature. The land is clearly newly settled and hasn't yet been tamed. The people who inhabit the space are still paving the way as pioneers.



Even as a young girl, Alexandra is serious and practical. Her strong body seems to be built to farm the land, and she's not easily distracted from her goals. It's clear that she truly cares for Emil, however, since she softens enough to help him with his kitten. She works to protect him, ordering him to stay in the store where it's warm. She is built to work the land and face the elements; but she protects him from doing the same.



Alexandra dotes on Emil, exposing her own head to the cold in order to keep him warm. She disapproves of the traveling man—he's clearly not working and gives in to the temptation of drinking in the saloon. His comment on Alexandra's hair also reflects a different type of temptation, in that he finds her to be an attractive girl. In any case, Alexandra has no patience for his frivolous behavior. That she scorns the man and goes to find Carl suggests her preference for Carl.



Carl and Alexandra's silent understanding demonstrates their strong bond. Carl also treats Emil as if he is his younger brother as well, rescuing Emil's kitten and urging him to get warm. Alexandra's father's illness also hints at some of the hardships of working the land. Although we don't know the nature of his illness, it's likely that the work has been tough on his body.



Alexandra enters the store and finds Emil playing with Marie Tovesky, a pretty little Bohemian girl from Omaha. Marie is dressed in an expensive outfit of red cashmere and wears a white fur tippet around her neck, which Emil fingers admiringly as she plays with his kitten. Alexandra allows them to play for a while, until Joe Tovesky comes in to pick up his little niece. He shows her off to his friends, who tease her and ask her to choose one of them for a sweetheart. Marie takes this all with good nature.

When Joe's friends give Marie a bag of candy, she asks to be let down so that she can share some of it with Emil. Her uncle's friends tease Emil about this as he tries to hide his face in his sister's skirts, and Alexandra scolds him for being such a baby. Carl enters the store to let Alexandra know that the wagon is ready, and he carries Emil out into the straw in the wagon. Emil sleepily informs Carl that he was very good to rescue his kitten for him and says that when he gets big, he'll climb and get little boys' kittens for them too.

As Carl and Alexandra ride into the cold dusk, the remaining light falls upon their faces, revealing both Alexandra's eyes—which seem to be looking uncertainly into the future—and Carl's eyes, which are already looking into the past. As they ride, the town vanishes behind them, and the prairie **lands** swell before them, with homesteads few and far apart. The land seems to overwhelm all traces of human society that are struggling to survive on it. Carl's bitterness stems from his belief that men are too weak to make any sort of mark on the land, which only wants to be left alone.

Carl asks Alexandra about her family, and she expresses uncertainty over what will happen after her father dies. She wishes that they could all go with him and "let the grass grow back over everything." Carl offers to come over and distract her father from his illness with his magic lantern, an early type of image projector. Alexandra seems cheered by this, and she drops Carl off at the Linstrums' homestead before riding on towards home.

Even as a child, Marie is extremely loveable. She is kind to everyone and knows how to handle a crowd. She doesn't seem upset that Emil is touching her white fur or that all her uncle's friends are teasing her. Even as a youngster she is treated like a pretty object. This early scene also suggests a certain connection between Emil and Marie.



Marie also demonstrates her generous nature by sharing it with Emil—again suggesting a connection between them. Emil admires Carl's self-sacrificing behavior in retrieving Emil's kitten for him, and Emil vows that he, too, will be self-sacrificing when he is older, without understanding how difficult it might be to overcome adult temptations.



Alexandra already reveals herself to be the true pioneer in the book, with her forward-looking eyes. She has the ability to place herself in the future rather than the present or the past, and this gives her the capacity to work hard for something better. Carl, on the other hand, is focused only on the land as it appears in the moment. He sees that it currently overwhelms all human society, and he cannot imagine that anything will change in the future.



Even in Alexandra's despair, she doesn't struggle against the land. Instead, she expresses the wish that the land could just take over once more. She has the ability to farm the land because she is able to surrender herself to it and doesn't choose to fight instead.



PART 1, CHAPTER 2

The Bergson homestead overlooks Norway Creek, a shallow stream at the bottom of a winding ravine. The houses on the Divide are small and insignificant, and the human impact on the **land** seems inconsequential. In eleven years, John Bergson, Alexandra's father, had only made a tiny impression on his land. He reflects on the things that have held him back over the years. One winter, his cattle died in a blizzard, and the next summer, one of his plow horses broke its leg. Another summer, his hogs died from cholera, and a rattlesnake killed a valuable stallion. He muses on the fact that he has finally managed to get out of debt, only to die himself at forty-six.

John Bergson has the Old-World belief that **land** is inherently desirable, yet he doesn't know how to manage this kind of land, which seems to him an enigma. Their neighbors know even less than him, since they come from different professions in their native countries: tailors, locksmiths, cigar-makers, etc. John Bergson has depended on Alexandra's judgments ever since she was twelve—she has always been more resourceful than her brothers, Lou and Oscar.

John Bergson compares Alexandra to her grandfather, a successful shipbuilder who lost his fortune eventually, after marrying a woman much younger than him. However, Alexandra is intelligent and strong-willed, just like her grandfather. John Bergson feels that he is ready to give up the farm and the **land** to Alexandra's capable hands. He senses her youth and strength, but feels that he would not wish to be young again himself.

John Bergson calls to Alexandra and tells her to bring her brothers, Lou and Oscar. He makes her promise that she will keep the **land** and take charge of the farm. He makes his wishes clear to her brothers, as well, also asking them to indulge their mother when she wants to plow her garden, as she has always missed the old country.

The land has been a constantly overpowering presence in John Bergson's life since his move to the New World. Like Carl, he sees that human society has made little impact on the land, which refuses to be tamed. At the end of his life, when he can no longer be useful, John Bergson also begins to look into the past, instead of looking forward with the future-facing gaze of the pioneer. He feels that the land has overpowered him.



John Bergson holds Old World beliefs that owning land is desirable, but tries to apply them to the New World without understanding how the worlds differ. The New World is much harsher and wilder, and John Bergson's early death represents how easily the New World can crush the Old. He was not born to the land and does not know it—and it, eventually, killed him.



The story of Alexandra's grandfather is a cautionary tale, reminding the listener that it is not wise to give in to temptation in general or reckless love in particular. However, John Bergson has experienced the other side of resisting temptation—self-sacrifice—and thus he doesn't envy Alexandra her youth. He knows that she must sacrifice her youth to hard work, especially if she is to survive as a pioneer and must struggle with the harsh prairielands.



Even on his deathbed, John Bergson senses the power of the land and urges Alexandra to keep hold of it, to not sell it. His reminder that Mrs. Bergson has always missed the old country also underlines how difficult it is to adjust to a foreign land as an immigrant. Mrs. Bergson is constantly comparing the old to the new, and this prevents her from finding true happiness in the new country.



The family sits down to a silent dinner, and the boys eat very little. Mrs. Bergson is described as a good housewife, with a penchant for preserving and pickling. She misses the old country's fish diet, making Lou and Oscar go out to the river once a year to catch fish. She does her best to maintain household order, and her neighbors believe she is very proud.

Again, Mrs. Bergson does her best to maintain order that is reminiscent of the old country, and this gives her a certain degree of comfort, but it is implied that she will never adjust completely to her new landscape. Her penchant for pickling and preserving is metaphorical for the way she herself also won't give up the past to live in the present, and how that sours her relationship with the present and the land.



PART 1, CHAPTER 3

On a Sunday afternoon in July, six months after John Bergson's death, Carl hears the Bergsons' wagon passing by. He runs out to greet them, and they invite him to ride with them to Crazy Ivar's place, where they hope to buy a hammock. Carl agrees to go, saying that he hears Ivar has the biggest pond in the country.

Carl and the Bergsons manage to be close friends, despite the distance between their houses. In more severe weather, however, or more difficult times, the land and the elements may keep the friends apart. Even personal relationships are subject to the circumstances of nature.



Carl teases Emil, asking him if he isn't scared to go to Ivar's. Emil admits that he would be frightened if he weren't with everyone else in the wagon. Carl reassures Emil that Ivar wouldn't hurt him, however, describing a time when Ivar went out to doctor the Linstrums' mare. Carl describes Ivar's familiar way with the mare, the way he talked to the horse while doctoring her, and the description makes everyone laugh. Oscar expresses scorn and skepticism about Ivar's animal doctoring skills, but Alexandra defends him. She describes a time when he took care of a neighbor's injured cow, easing her suffering and helping her recover in just two days. Ivar is content in his solitude and proximity to nature. Lou and Oscar express regret that they did not bring their guns to hunt the **wild birds**.

The party is split between those who respect nature (Alexandra, Carl, Ivar) and those who would attempt to master it by force (Lou and Oscar). This is one of the keys to Alexandra's success as a pioneer—even as she tames and cultivates the land, she maintains respect for it and for the natural, wild creatures that inhabit the land. Lou and Oscar—and many others, considering Ivar's nickname—think the care that Ivar shows to the animals and his willingness to live alone in the land makes him crazy. Alexandra, with her own connection to the land, knows better.



When Ivar hears the Bergsons' wagon approaching, he jumps up and shouts, "No guns, no guns!" until Alexandra reassures him that there are indeed no guns. Alexandra explains that they would like to buy a hammock and also that she would like to show the big pond to Emil. Ivar grins and describes some of the **birds** that have stopped by his pond, including one sea gull that strayed far from the ocean and seemed to be very mournful. Ivar gives Lou and Oscar permission to water their horses at the pond and then leads Alexandra and Emil inside to see the hammocks.

Ivar is the ultimate example of a character who understands the innate joyfulness of wild creatures like the birds who visit his pond. He forsakes human company for solitude and the natural world instead, and though it causes his neighbors to scorn him, he actually has some deep insight into farming and animals, as the Bergsons discussed previously.



Emil, having lost his fear, asks Ivar about **birds**, while Alexandra selects a hammock. After she finishes choosing the hammock and speaking about other subjects, she asks Ivar for advice about her hogs. Many of her neighbors are losing their hogs, and she worries that she may too. Ivar tells her that hogs prefer to be clean and that she must build a shed for them and bring them clean water and feed. Lou and Oscar overhear this conversation from the doorway and accelerate their departure, worried that Alexandra will get notions. Lou and Oscar prefer not to be experimental or to do things differently from their neighbors.

On the ride home, however, the boys forget their ill humor and joke about Ivar's crazy notions about farming. Alexandra doesn't propose any reforms out loud, but later in the evening, as she sits alone on the kitchen doorstep, she plans out where she will place her new pig corral.

PART 1, CHAPTER 4

For the first three years after John Bergson's death, the homestead does well. These three years are followed by three long years of drought and failure, however, and the families on the prairie grow discouraged by foreclosures and debt. Many neighbors leave, and the Bergson boys would probably be happy leaving as well, since they lack the kind of imagination that benefits pioneers. Pioneers should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves.

During the second summer of drought, Carl finds Alexandra in her garden, where she had gone to dig sweet potatoes. When he finds her, however, she's admiring the **land** before her, the warm sun and summer sky. Carl informs Alexandra that the Linstrums have made up their minds to go away to St. Louis, where Carl's father has a job lined up in a cigar factory. Carl plans to learn engraving with a German engraver there before trying to get work in Chicago.

Alexandra accepts the news sadly, and Carl expresses his distress at running off and leaving Alexandra to face the worst of the farming difficulties. He says that he was never really any help to her. Alexandra smiles at this and says that Carl helped by understanding her and her brothers and Mrs. Bergson. She and Carl agree that their relationship is special because they both felt the same way about things like homesickness, and they've both liked the same things together, like hunting for Christmas trees and **ducks**. Carl promises to write to her for as long as he lives.

Emil is drawn to the wild birds, foreshadowing his attraction to Marie Tovesky, who is also described as a wild creature. Alexandra, recognizing Ivar's intuition when it comes to animals, asks him for advice about her hogs, but Lou and Oscar worry that they will stand out from their neighbors if they try to do anything differently than everyone else does. Lou and Oscar lack the imagination necessary for a pioneering spirit. They can only see how they might look strange in the present moment, without considering the future benefits that a change might yield.



Alexandra's pioneering spirit pushes her to adapt more changes, even if her neighbors don't. She also spends most of her time working—even when she takes a break in the evening, it isn't long before she starts making plans for the farm.



In order to succeed as a pioneer, it's necessary to have a spirit of self-sacrifice. The land overpowers those who lack the imagination necessary to become pioneers and those who give in to the temptation of an easier life in the city. Lou and Oscar would give in to this temptation if it weren't for Alexandra.



Alexandra is the only character in the book who ever seems to admire the land without fearing it. All the same, she is dismayed when the land's power overcomes her ties to those she loves best—including her father and Carl.



Carl recognizes Alexandra's spirit of self-sacrifice and regrets running away for an easier life. Alexandra and Carl's strong bond is also overcome—at least for now—by the harshness of the land, as Carl's family is forced to move away and Alexandra stays behind. However, the understanding they share—their homesickness and their empathy for wild things—survives.



Alexandra worries that Lou and Oscar will become even more discouraged when they hear the news, and Carl offers not to mention the Linstrums' departure to them. Alexandra responds that she will tell them herself, however. She and Carl walk together down the potato rows, heading back towards the homestead. She says that she will only have Emil with her now.

Alexandra leads a lonely life, and her statement that she will only have Emil with her now reveals both that she is not very close with the rest of her family and the degree to which she is dedicated to and focused on Emil.



Lou and Oscar sit down moodily to dinner. They have grown to become more like themselves over the years, with Oscar becoming more and more attached to routine and regularity, and Lou growing flightier. They work well together and have always been good friends, with one seldom going anywhere without the other.

Lou and Oscar have a strong bond with each other as well, yet they continuously grow apart from Alexandra because they lack her imagination and desire to innovate. These differences only grow with age.



Alexandra opens the discussion by mentioning Carl's news, and Lou and Oscar jump in to argue that they too should quit. They mention that many of their neighbors are leaving, trading or selling their **land** to a real estate man, Charley Fuller. Alexandra argues that Fuller has the right idea and will someday be a rich man because of all the land he's gathering now. Alexandra also says that they should hold on to the land on their father's account. She asks their mother, Mrs. Bergson, what she thinks, and Mrs. Bergson begins to cry, saying that she doesn't want to move again. Lou and Oscar storm out of the kitchen, angry that Alexandra has turned their mother on them.

Lou and Oscar are tempted to quit the land, as their neighbors are doing. Alexandra, however, looks at the situation from a larger perspective, recognizing that the situation was even worse when John Bergson first moved to the prairie and that it will likely improve again. Again, her gaze is the only one set far into the future—she is willing to sacrifice her present for future success, as is necessary for a pioneer. She also trusts in the value of the land.



The next day, Lou and Oscar sulk in the morning, and Alexandra encourages Carl to play cards with them in order to relieve their feelings. When evening comes, Alexandra announces that she will be taking a trip to the river country to see how the land is down there. She says that the boys can trade their land for river land if she finds anything good. She reads "The Swiss Family Robinson" aloud to her mother and Emil, and soon Lou and Oscar are listening as well, enjoying the adventures of the family in the tree house.

While Carl still lives next door to the Bergsons, he helps to repair familial tensions. He understands the different members of the family and mollifies their feelings when they're upset. The tensions between Alexandra and her brothers, however, already foreshadow how they'll eventually drift apart, especially since Carl is moving away. The Bergsons are implicitly compared to the Robinsons of the Swiss Family Robinson – both are surrounded by nature, both are isolated. Yet Lou and Oscar only like such situations in stories; Alexandra is willing to live it.



PART 1, CHAPTER 5

Alexandra and Emil spend five days among the river farms, learning a great deal about poultry and alternative farming methods. On their sixth day, they turn back, and Alexandra has made up her mind. She tells Emil that there's nothing for them down by the river. All the best farms can't be bought, and the other farms are located on **land** that's rough and hilly. Even though the inhabitants of the river valley have a certain degree of certainty, they don't have a big chance the way the Bergsons do on the high land. As they drive home, Emil wonders why Alexandra looks so happy. She's turned towards the land with a face full of love and yearning, appreciating the strong earth.

Alexandra realizes that the Bergsons should not be tempted into giving up their future in exchange for a small degree of security. She believes that the future lies in their high land, and she gazes at it with love, which distinguishes her from all the other characters that have neglected to appreciate the land as they attempt to cultivate it. That Emil does not understand the cause of Alexandra's happiness suggests that while he is attached to her, he doesn't share her connection to the land.



When Alexandra reaches home in the afternoon, she holds a family council, describing her conclusion to her brothers. She encourages them to go down and see the river **land** for themselves. Alexandra says that the next thing to do is to mortgage the homestead to buy more land—an idea Lou and Oscar object to. Alexandra calmly explains that in six years, the land will be worth much more, and that in ten years time, the Bergsons can become independent landowners. When Lou challenges her, Alexandra says that she can't explain how she knows that the land will make them rich—she just feels it.

Alexandra sees that the high land they currently inhabit could become much richer than the river land in a few years, and she is willing to sacrifice her present comfort for future success. Lou and Oscar, however, are unwilling to make that sacrifice for an uncertain future—they lack the imagination to see what their land could become. Alexandra is even willing to alienate her brothers, however, in order to keep the land. That she “just feels it” suggests her fundamental connection to the land, a sense more basic than thought.



Lou says that the idea is crazy, or else all their neighbors would be doing the same thing. Alexandra says that the right thing is usually just what everybody else won't do. She argues that they're set up better than their neighbors because their father had more brains. Alexandra clears the table as the boys go to the stable to tend to the stock. When they finally return, Alexandra feels sure that they will consent to her plans.

Lou, again, demonstrates his lack of inventiveness in his reasoning that they should do as everyone else is doing. He prefers to play it safe, while Alexandra, like her father before her, is willing to make changes for the possibility of a better future. Pioneers and immigrants often need the same kind of imagination and spirit of self-sacrifice in order to succeed.



Before bedtime, Oscar goes out to fetch a pail of water and doesn't return, prompting Alexandra to go out and look for him. She finds him sitting by the windmill with his head in his hands. Oscar explains that he dreads signing his name to pieces of paper. Alexandra tells him that he doesn't have to, but Oscar replies that he can see that Alexandra's right, and there might be a chance that way. Oscar goes back indoors, and Alexandra looks at the stars, reflecting on the great mechanics of nature. Beneath the **land**, she feels the future stirring.

Although her confrontation with her brothers leaves Alexandra shaken, she still believes that her vision of the land is justified. She feels comforted by the sight of the stars, which remind her that the world is much bigger than the prairie and that nature continuously moves forward into the future.



PART 2, CHAPTER 1

Sixteen years after John Bergson's death, his wife lies beside him under an unrecognizable country. The **prairie** is now rich with crops and inhabitants, with a rich soil that yields heavy harvests. On a June morning, a young man is at the Norwegian graveyard, mowing the grass with his scythe while whistling a quiet tune. He has been to college, where he played the cornet and ran track.

Each time a character dies, there is a description of the natural world to remind the reader that nature moves on regardless of human deaths or drama. Here, both Mr. and Mrs. Bergson have passed away, but their youngest son, Emil, belongs to the country they immigrated to. He has gone to college and has a chance to make something of himself in the New World, justifying his parents' and Alexandra's sacrifices. Yet it's worth noting that what Emil studied and did at college did not make him rooted to the land in the way that Alexandra's youth did. It prepared him to be a lawyer or businessman.



After mowing for the better part of an hour, he hears the rattle of a cart on the road behind him. He assumes that it's his sister, Alexandra, and he continues working. However, when a contralto voice calls to Emil, he turns to see Marie, a young woman now. She calls to say that she'll give him a lift if he's done. Emil persuades her to wait for him as he finishes, and they banter over the histories of their home countries before falling into silence as Emil finishes his mowing. On the ride home, Marie chats about the upcoming wedding of Amédée and Angélique, urging Emil to dance with all the French girls so that their feelings won't be hurt. Emil reluctantly concedes.

Marie and Emil both belong to the New World, but they're still able to banter about their home countries, comparing different customs. The silence between them is a little bit tense—and Emil's reluctance to dance with other girls already hints at his attraction to Marie.



Emil and Marie drive westward, towards Alexandra's homestead, which is impressive in its trimness and care for detail. If one were to enter Alexandra's house, however, one would find it uneven in comfort and somewhat unfinished. The pleasantest rooms are the kitchen and the sitting room, where Alexandra has relocated the furniture from the Bergsons' old home. Exiting the house and entering the flower garden, there is again the order characteristic of the rest of the farm. Alexandra expresses herself best in the **soil**, and her true home seems to be the great outdoors.

Alexandra's farm is better kept than her house. She clearly feels more at home on the land than among the comforts of human society. Her belief in the land looks to have paid off, however—she has succeeded where others had failed in making the land livable.



PART 2, CHAPTER 2

When Emil reaches home, Alexandra is already seated at the head of the long table, having dinner with her workers. The three young Swedish girls who do Alexandra's housework cut pies, refill the coffee, and set the table, giggling at each other's mistakes. Alexandra tells her sisters-in-law that she keeps the girls around for entertainment more than for work purposes. Alexandra is particularly fond of the youngest girl, Signa, who is being courted by one of the men at the table, Nelse Jensen. Ivar also sits at the table. He lost his **land** a dozen years ago through mismanagement, and Alexandra took him in, allowing him to stay in the barn, which he prefers to the house.

Alexandra, true to her pioneer spirit, does things differently from her neighbors. For example, she insists on eating with her workers unless she has company—they are all united in their work with the land. Additionally, she has taken in Ivar, allowing him to care for her farm animals and land with his intuition. These habits also hint at Alexandra's loneliness—she does not often have company, so she seeks it in her help—the Swedish girls.



Alexandra has changed very little, still deliberate and calm in nature. She mostly listens to the talk at the table, rather than joining in. Today, Barney Flinn, Alexandra's foreman, grumbles about the new silo on the farm. Nelse Jensen joins in, saying that Lou claims he wouldn't have a silo at his place even if it were given to him. Alexandra calmly responds that it's a good thing that she and Lou have different notions about farming so that they can learn from each other's mistakes.

Alexandra's desire for innovation still causes trouble for her, in the form of doubts and complaints from her neighbors and workers. The mention of Lou's attitude towards the new silo highlights how much more he and Alexandra have grown apart. His conservative opinions have grown more extreme, even as Alexandra has grown bolder with her new farming techniques.



After the meal, Ivar speaks to Alexandra about his worries. He says that there has been talk of sending him to the asylum. Alexandra reassures him, telling him not to listen to such nonsense. She allows him to talk out his fears, which eventually helps to lift him out of his gloom. The conversation shifts to the new bathtub installed at Lou's house, and Mrs. Lee's complaints that it's impossible to wash oneself clean in so much water. They laugh about the idea, and Ivar goes away feeling much relieved.

Alexandra has a special bond with Ivar, who she vows to protect from prying neighbors. Their understanding and mutual respect stem from their love of nature and fondness for certain Old World habits—like washing in a small basin rather than a bathtub.



PART 2, CHAPTER 3

On Sunday, Lou and Oscar go to Alexandra's for dinner. Alexandra asked the Hanover furniture dealer to furnish her dining room for company so that it will look acceptably prosperous to visitors. Oscar's face is still thick and dull, and Lou's uneasiness has pushed him into politics, where he runs for county offices and neglects his farm work. Lou's wife, Annie, is very conscious of her attire, continuously warning her children not to drop anything on her clothing during dinner.

Alexandra and her brothers have grown even further apart since they divided up the farm. Oscar still loves routine too much to be a true pioneer, and Lou has neglected his land in order to involve himself in politics, which demonstrates his ego and lack of commitment to work. His wife, Annie, is similarly shallow. She's concerned with looking fashionable and eager to move to the city and leave the land.



The conversation at the table proceeds in English, as Oscar's wife is ashamed of having married a foreigner, and none of their children understand Swedish. Lou says that he described Ivar's symptoms to a doctor in Hanover while he was there, and the doctor believed Ivar to be dangerous. Alexandra and Signa laugh off the idea, and Lou says that it's only a matter of time before one of the neighbors complains. Alexandra answers that she'll have herself appointed Ivar's guardian and take the case to court if any of their neighbors do try to have Ivar committed.

Oscar and Lou's wives are both ashamed of having married immigrants—like their husbands, they care less about work ethic than they do about fitting in. Alexandra also chooses to defend Ivar over giving in to her brothers, further demonstrating the distance in their relationship and their different values.



Annie says that her daughter, Milly, is terrified of Ivar, but Milly, who is more at ease with Alexandra than with her mother, just grins, and Alexandra winks a reply. Alexandra says that she'll keep Ivar at home so that Lou won't have to trouble any more about him and changes the subject to Annie and Lou's new bathtub.

Alexandra is fond of Milly, and it's for her sake that Alexandra puts up with Lou and Annie.



Alexandra says that she might have to get a bathtub herself, but that first she wants to buy a piano for Milly. Oscar looks up and asks what Milly wants from a piano, causing Annie to become flustered. She worries that Oscar is apt to be jealous of what Alexandra does for Annie's children, since Alexandra does not get along with Oscar's wife at all. Alexandra defends Milly's piano playing as well, saying that she deserves a piano.

Lou and Annie's bathtub is also a symbol of the kind of extravagance that Alexandra would not be tempted to indulge in—on the other hand, she is willing to invest in a piano for Milly, in providing opportunities for the future generation. Oscar's jealousy also demonstrates how the original Bergson family has splintered into their separate new families. Even Lou and Oscar are susceptible to competition with each other.



After dinner, Lou and Oscar go to the orchard to pick cherries, while Annie gossips with Alexandra's kitchen girls, and Alexandra takes her three nieces into the flower garden. As they walk among the flowerbeds, a buggy drives up the hill and stops before the gate. A man approaches, asking whether Alexandra recognizes him. Alexandra takes a quick step forward once she recognizes Carl Linstrum and clasps his hands across the gate. She tells her nieces to go and fetch their fathers.

Carl tells Alexandra that he can only stay a few days before leaving for the coast, where he plans to learn about prospecting from a friend of his before they head to Alaska. Carl admires the farm, marveling at all Alexandra has done to the **land**. Lou and Oscar approach warily, but become more cordial once Carl tells them about his plans for Alaska. Annie emerges with her three daughters, greatly impressed by Carl's urban appearance. She brags about Milly's accomplishments, to the girl's great discomfort. Carl reassuringly takes Milly's hand and mentions that she resembles her grandmother, Mrs. Bergson.

Carl asks whether Milly runs about over the country like Annie and Alexandra used to, and Annie protests that things have changed a great deal since then. She says that they plan to rent their place and move into town as soon as the girls are old enough to go out into company. Lou grins and sends Annie back to get ready for the drive back to their farmstead and begins to talk politics with Carl, expressing a deep resentment of Wall Street.

As Ivar drives the carriage up to the gate, Annie emerges from the house and Carl goes to help her down to the carriage. Lou lingers with Alexandra, asking her what she thinks Carl has come for. Alexandra replies that she's been asking him to pay them a visit for years, and Lou and Oscar express their disapproval of Carl's wandering ways. Annie calls back that Alexandra must bring Carl by sometime, as the rest of the family departs.

Alexandra's decision to spend time with her nieces while the other adults go off on their own demonstrates her belief in investing in the future and, perhaps, her discomfort with the gossiping "polite society" of adults. She also meets Carl's arrival with much excitement. Despite years away from one another, she has remembered her fondness for her old neighbor.



Carl has been away long enough that he can fully admire the drastic change in the land. He is able to compare the land—currently in full flower—to the harsh, desolate prairie of his memory. Lou and Oscar react warily to Carl because they worry that Carl has come to try to marry Alexandra, which would affect Lou and Oscar's inheritance of this now rich land. They do not value his friendship—or possible love for Alexandra—above their own prosperity.



Annie's embarrassment over how she and Alexandra acted as children and immigrants shows that she doesn't fully appreciate the work and sacrifices of the previous generation. She doesn't see the dignity in hard work. Additionally, Annie is tempted to move into town as soon as the girls are grown. Her lack of appreciation for the land is probably part of the reason she and Lou are not as prosperous as Alexandra, who treats the land with respect and love.



Lou and Oscar remain suspicious of Carl, questioning his motives for visiting. They treat him as a complete outsider, even though he used to be their closest neighbor. Ironically, the argument that they use against Carl is that he has squandered his time wandering instead of working—even though they themselves would have chosen to leave the land years ago if Alexandra had let them.



PART 2, CHAPTER 4

Alexandra feels that Carl has changed less than she expected. He still seems somewhat unconventional and uncomfortable. He looks older than his thirty-five years, and his face is intelligent and unhappy. After supper, Carl and Alexandra talk in the flower garden, and Carl asks Alexandra about the **land's** transformation. Alexandra replies that the land transformed itself—it woke up one day and the Bergsons suddenly found that they were rich. Alexandra then went ahead and built the house for Emil. She proudly tells Carl that Emil is different from the rest of the prairie's inhabitants.

Carl asks whether Emil will farm with Alexandra, and Alexandra declares that Emil will do whatever he wants. That's the reason she worked so hard on the farm. Carl asks about Lou and Oscar, and Alexandra replies that she doesn't see much of them now that they have farms of their own. Carl says that he liked the old Lou and Oscar better and that he suspects they feel the same about him. Carl confesses that part of him even likes the **old country** better, when it was a wild old beast. He theorizes that there are only two or three human stories that go on repeating themselves like the same five notes of a **lark**, over thousands of years.

Alexandra tells Carl about Marie Tovesky, who has bought the Linstrums' old place. Marie ran away from convent school when she was eighteen in order to get married to Frank Shabata. Alexandra is fond of Marie and tries to get along with Frank on her account. Alexandra admires Marie's energy and spirit. Carl confesses that he dreads seeing his old place and that he wouldn't have visited at all if it weren't for Alexandra.

Alexandra asks Carl why is so dissatisfied with himself, and Carl explains that he has nothing to look forward to in his profession. He says that there are so many others like him that they cannot be individuals like the inhabitants of the prairie. They pay a high rent for a few hundred square feet in order to be close to the heart of things. Alexandra thoughtfully replies that she would still rather Emil turn out to be like Carl than to be like the rest of the people on the prairie, since they pay a different kind of rent there—they grow hard and heavy in the cornfields.

Alexandra's explanation of the land's transformation gives all the credit to the land itself—as always, she believes fully in the land. Her mention of Emil shows that she still dotes on her youngest brother the most. It is for him that she has worked as hard as she has. Her pride in Emil's difference is a pride in a young man who has options—who has been to college and can make his way in the world on his own. While she loves the land and doesn't mind hard work, she wants something different for Emil. She doesn't recognize that removing Emil from a connection to the land will also have costs for him.



Alexandra sacrifices her youth so that her brother, Emil, can have a chance to do whatever he wants in life. Carl's statement that there are only two or three human stories that go on repeating themselves warns Alexandra—and the reader—that it may be harder than Alexandra believes to create a new narrative or story for her beloved younger brother. Although Alexandra has sacrificed her own youth to give Emil a chance, there is no guarantee that he will make something of it. Carl's statement is also a reminder that nature's cycles—of the seasons, of life and death—continue even in the face of human drama or misfortune.



Marie's energy draws others to her. Her nature is generally warm and affectionate, but Alexandra's reservations about Frank hint that he's quite the opposite of Marie. Meanwhile, Carl's statement that he would not have visited if it weren't for Alexandra reveals how fond he truly is of her, or perhaps how much he loves her. On the one hand, this justifies some of Lou and Oscar's worries that Carl will marry into the family land. On the other hand, who are they to deny Alexandra and Carl possible love or happiness over an inheritance for which they barely worked?



Alexandra is fully conscious of the sacrifices that prairie life requires of its inhabitants, how it wears them down—and it's these sacrifices that she wants to protect Emil from. Yet Carl describes the costs of removing oneself from the land, of becoming one of an anonymous multitude in the city. Both Carl and Alexandra seem lonely, however, even though they've inhabited drastically different lives. They have had difficulty forming meaningful relationships.



Alexandra recalls Carrie Jensen, the sister of one of her hired men, who was so despondent she attempted to kill herself once or twice, before her family sent her to Iowa to visit her relatives. Ever since Carrie's return from Iowa, however, she's been cheerful, saying that she's happy to live and work in a world that's so big and interesting. Alexandra concludes that she's similarly motivated by what goes on in the rest of the world.

Carrie's story seems to indicate that the isolation of the prairie made her depressed and suicidal, but the realization of a larger world sustained her even as she returned to the prairie. Alexandra is similarly inspired—she, like Carrie, senses the privilege of being a part of such a big world, even if their work only occupies a tiny fragment of the world.



PART 2, CHAPTER 5

It's a busy time on the farm, and Alexandra doesn't find time to visit her neighbor's for the next couple of days. She spends the days working on the farms and her evenings talking with Carl. On Wednesday morning, Carl rises early to walk to the crest of the hill where the Bergson pasture joins the one that used to belong to his father. He sits and waits for the sun to rise, remembering the way Alexandra used to look when they did their milking together.

Carl admires the sunrise while reflecting on Alexandra, showing that he associates Alexandra with the land and nature. He still remembers their time as children together fondly, and those memories sustain him and strengthen his sense of a bond to Alexandra.



Carl crosses over the fence and into the Shabatas' pasture, toward the pond. He discovers, however, that he's not alone. Below him, Emil and Marie advance cautiously towards the pond, hoping to hunt some **ducks**. When Emil manages to shoot a few, however, Marie's face crumples. She says that Ivar's right about wild things—that they're too happy to kill. Emil assents and apologizes that he made Marie feel bad. Witnessing this exchange from a distance, Carl feels unreasonably mournful. He decides he needs his breakfast.

Marie becomes upset, realizing that the ducks are too free to be killed for recreation, though it's their very wildness that endangers them by making them feel that they will not be hurt. From afar, Carl can sense the connection between Emil and Marie, and he's unsure why he feels mournful. It may be because he senses that Emil and Marie don't understand where their attraction might lead them—like the birds, they don't truly believe that they can be hurt.



PART 2, CHAPTER 6

After dinner that day, Alexandra puts on her white dress and sunhat, and she and Carl walk towards his former home on the old path. She tells him how nice it's been to have a friend on the other side of the path again, and Carl responds that he hopes it hasn't been quite the same. Alexandra, surprised, says that of course no one could take Carl's place—but Marie is a wonderful companion. Carl asks whether Alexandra is at all disappointed in their reunion, and Alexandra responds that it's better than she had imagined—she had worried that Carl would be more changed. Carl tells her that he finds it easy to speak to Alexandra about everything except herself—because he fears that he would startle her if he told her how much he admires her.

Carl continues to hint at his deep feelings and admiration for Alexandra, and she seems surprised but pleased. Her appreciation of Marie also highlights how lonely she's been over the years—she's grateful to have a companion.



Carl and Alexandra admire the orchard Carl used to water, and Alexandra calls Marie, who comes running. She invites her guests into the house, but Alexandra suggests that they sit in the orchard instead. They head to Marie's spot under the **white mulberry tree**, and Marie insists that Alexandra take the seat on the wagon so that she won't stain her dress. Carl admires the picture they make in the sunlight, as he remembers Marie Tovesky as a little girl. She has the same eyes, brown flecked with gold. Carl finds it a pity that she isn't flashing these eyes for a sweetheart.

Soon, Marie springs up and goes to fetch something to show Carl. She returns with a branch laden with apricots, which launches Alexandra into an anecdote about her and Carl when they were younger. A circus had come into town, and Lou and Oscar drove them in to see the parade, though they were too poor to enter the actual circus. They left, feeling dejected, but on the road home, they passed a man selling apricots, and Alexandra and Carl bought a few pecks, saving the seeds in order to plant them later. When Carl left the prairie, they still hadn't borne any fruit at all.

Marie exclaims that that is a good story, and goes on to describe Carl as she remembers him from when she was a child. She recalls a time when he drew a lot of little **birds** and flowers for her when her uncle left her at the store. Carl smiles and says that he remembers that time as well. Marie's uncle had bought her a mechanical toy of a Turkish lady sitting on an ottoman and smoking a hookah. Marie laughs as she recalls the music box and how it made her aunt and uncle laugh as well.

Half an hour later, as Carl and Alexandra are leaving Marie, they meet Frank Shabata coming up the path. Marie runs up to him to introduce him to her guests, and Frank barely salutes them before angrily complaining about a neighbor's hogs. Frank is still a handsome man, but he looks rash and violent. Marie tries to reassure him, and Alexandra suggests that Frank help the neighbor secure her fences in order to save himself some time. Frank stiffens at the suggestion of doing extra work for a neighbor, and Alexandra placidly goes on her way with Carl.

The white mulberry tree is where many of Marie's important scenes with Emil take place. This is significant, as the tree is a potent symbol: a short-lived, non-native species (like the homesteaders themselves) with white leaves that suggest (at this time) the innocence of Emil and Marie's attraction. At the same time, the tree connects their relationship to tragedy, as the doomed Greek lovers Pyramus and Thisbe also met under a mulberry tree. Marie greatly appreciates the outdoors, and Alexandra likens Marie herself to a wild creature—a brown rabbit. Carl feels that Marie's energy and affection should be applied to loving a sweetheart, another testament to her warm nature.



The story of the apricot trees reminds the reader of how difficult life was for the book's characters at the beginning of the novel. They were too poor even to indulge in a circus visit in town. However, the blooming of the apricot trees signifies both the Bergsons' current state of prosperity and the eventual payoff of hard work, since Carl consistently watered the trees before he left, but they didn't bear fruit until after he moved. Like other pioneers in the novel, his own delayed gratification benefits a future generation.



Carl's drawing of birds and flowers for Marie reflects her generous, free personality, which is itself an act of nature, drawing others to her warmth. She seems to have been loved by everyone she's ever encountered: her aunt, uncle, uncle's friends, Frank, Emil, etc.



Alexandra's suggestion that Frank mend his neighbor's fence shows that she believes that sacrificing some of one's own effort can save time—and also possibly build valuable relationships, which Frank obviously has trouble doing. Frank refuses to do extra work for a neighbor, however, even if it will ultimately benefit him. This might explain why he labors so hard, only to be disappointed by what he reaps. He does not trust in others, and therefore must "fight" to work the land on his own. And that losing battle only makes him more bitter.



Marie follows Frank into the house, doting on him and telling him that she will make him some coffee. She says that she'll go over and talk to their neighbor—but she adds that the last time the neighbor's hogs got out, the neighbor was so sorry, she almost cried. Frank angrily replies that Marie always takes the neighbors' sides over his. Marie hurries away to make the coffee, and when she returns, Frank is already asleep. She feels sorry for Frank when he works himself into his rages, but she is also aware that her neighbors have a lot to deal with, and they put up with Frank for Marie's sake.

Frank's violent nature is in direct opposition to Marie's warmth, and their marriage is a struggle to reconcile these two extremes. Her devotion to Frank is simultaneously a form of self-sacrifice and a punishment for giving into temptation and running away with Frank in the first place.



PART 2, CHAPTER 7

Marie's father, Albert Tovesky, settled in Omaha and became a leader and adviser among the people. Marie was his youngest child and the apple of his eye. When she was sixteen, Frank Shabata came into town and intrigued many of the girls, since he was handsome and seemed interestingly discontent. Frank flirted with a few of the girls, but with Marie he seemed the most intent. One summer day after Marie's graduation, she went on a boat trip with Frank and returned home to tell her father she was engaged. Her father launched into a tirade about how Frank didn't work like the rest of the men in town, deciding to send her to a convent to teach her some sense.

Marie is her father's favorite, just as she was her uncle's favorite. Her father objects to her engagement to Frank Shabata, however, because Frank doesn't work hard enough, like the other men in town. Albert Tovesky looks down on Frank for this reason.



Frank became more determined than ever to have Marie, and Marie pined in the convent until her eighteenth birthday, then ran off and married Frank. Marie's father forgave her, since there was nothing else he could do, and bought her the Linstrums' old farm. At the time of Carl's visit, the Shabatas had lived on the **land** for five years already, and Frank did turn out to be a hard worker.

Marie and Frank give in to the temptation of physical attraction by getting married, disobeying Marie's father, who out of love for Marie gives up on staying angry with her and instead buys her a farm on the land she loves. Marie's affection for the land again reflects her own wild nature, which adores the outdoors. Frank also turns out to be a hard worker, which lends him a certain dignity, and yet, again, while Alexandra's hard work included the creation of a community of workers, Frank is more solitary, angrier, and therefore less successful.



PART 2, CHAPTER 8

The evening after Carl and Alexandra's visit, Frank reads about their neighbors' divorce, growing angry at the details about how they purportedly spend their money. Marie sighs, always dreading the arrival of the Sunday papers, since they tend to give Frank more reasons to become angry at the doings of rich people. Frank and Lou have similar political ideas on this point.

When Frank becomes jealous, he is also giving into the temptation to indulge emotionally. He wants to feel like a desperate man, so he finds sources to target, even if they might be far-fetched. In this case, he is jealous of and angry with the neighbors for their wealth and extravagance.



The next morning turns out to be clear and sunny, but Frank heads to the saloon because he claims that the ground is too wet to plough. Marie heads to her porch to do some butter churning, but she longs to go out into the orchard, which looks inviting in the sun. She hears the sound of a scythe mowing, however, and that decides her—she puts on boots and heads out to the orchard with a tin pail to pick cherries. Emil has already been mowing there for a while, and he looks up when Marie arrives. She tells him not to let her disturb him and rambles about how beautiful everything looks after the rain. Emil tells her she seems flighty, and Marie attributes that to the wet season too. She goes off to pick her cherries, and Emil continues to mow.

When Emil reaches Marie, she is sitting beneath the **white mulberry tree** with the cherries beside her. She tells Emil about the Bohemian belief that certain trees bring good or bad luck. Emil expresses doubt, but Marie says that she likes the saying—she feels, for example, that the white mulberry tree she sits beneath knows about all the thoughts that come to her when she sits there. Emil has nothing to say to this and picks a handful of the fruit to drop into Marie’s lap. Marie then asks Emil what he thinks about Carl Linstrum, adding that she thinks Alexandra may be in love with him—an idea that makes Emil laugh.

Emil says that he likes to talk to Carl about New York, and Marie seems alarmed that he might go off there. Emil defiantly responds that there is nothing for him in the prairie—Alexandra can run the farm just fine on her own, and he feels that he should be doing something in his own right. Marie says sadly that she wishes he weren’t so restless, and Emil accuses her of pretending not to understand what’s going on between them. Marie says that if she acknowledges it, then all their good times together would be over. She says she wishes he would pray, but Emil refuses to try. He agrees, then, that their good times are over, and he returns to his mowing, as Marie returns to the house with her cherries, crying bitterly.

Marie begins to settle down to work at butter churning, but the weather and the promise of company tempt her outside to the orchard. The wet season seems to affect Marie just as it reflects the land—another parallel between Marie and the wild country. She acts flighty, as Emil says, and rambles incoherently about how beautiful things are after the rain. She also might be a bit nervous around Emil.



Marie recalls an old Bohemian belief—a remnant of her immigrant past—about the significance of trees. She enjoys trees, especially her white mulberry, because she feels that they are resigned to their fate. The statement seems to signify that she wishes she could be more resigned to her own fate with Frank. She seems to be in a particularly reflective mood this morning, sharing her perception that Alexandra may be in love with Carl as well. Emil, however, is blind to the possibility that his sister might be in love—he is focused on his own feelings for Marie, and takes Alexandra for granted (just as he takes the land for granted).



Emil expresses a desire to work in his own right—to make a name for himself that exists outside his sister’s shadow. The idea of restlessness in the novel seems always to be connected to a lack of connection to the land, and also to an ego-driven desire to make a mark in the world. The unspoken innocence of Emil and Marie’s relationship is here broken, as now Emil brings their feelings out into the open, feelings that Marie can’t give into as she is already married.



PART 2, CHAPTER 9

On a Sunday afternoon, a month after Carl's arrival, he accompanies Emil to the French country to attend a Catholic fair. Some of the boys come straight from a ball game and are still wearing their uniforms. Emil's best friend, the newlywed Amédée, has pitched particularly well, and Emil tells him that he's pitching even better than he did the previous spring. Amédée says that it's because he's a married man now, and he doesn't lose his head anymore. He advises Emil to get married too, but Emil just laughs and asks how he's supposed to get married without any girl. Amédée tells him to go after any of the French girls, but gives up when Emil seems unresponsive.

Amédée challenges Emil to a high jump contest, which Emil wins. Angélique, Amédée's wife, tells Emil that Amédée would surely win if only he were as tall as Emil. Emil laughs at her teasing and picks her up, pretending to steal her away as she calls to her husband. Emil continues to tease until he catches sight of Marie's flashing eyes, and then he returns Angélique to Amédée.

Emil wonders at how the same kind of emotion could manifest so differently in himself and his friend, Amédée. He compares the two of them to two ears of corn that have grown side by side, except one ear thrives and the other remains rotting and buried in the soil.

Emil's friend Amédée serves as a foil for Emil. While Emil is stuck in love with a woman he can't have, Amédée has been lucky in love and is remarkably happy. Amédée connects his marriage with a kind of rootedness—no longer losing his head—and in contrast it is clear that Emil lacks such rootedness, to the land or in love.



Amédée's relationship with his wife amuses Emil, and he gets caught up in their silliness and affection for one another—before he's broken out of his reverie by a glimpse of Marie's jealous, flashing eyes. Marie's jealousy speaks to her love for Emil, and reminds him of what he both has, sort of, and cannot have: Marie.



Emil wonders how the same emotion—love—could seem so different in himself and in Amédée. Amédée is so proud of his newlywed status, yet Emil must hide his feelings for Marie because she's married. He compares himself to the rotting ear of corn, fighting the temptation to express his feelings for Marie and therefore keeping that love in darkness, while Amédée—the other ear—thrives in the sun.



PART 2, CHAPTER 10

While Emil and Carl are away, Lou and Oscar pay Alexandra a visit. They approach very seriously, telling her that people are talking about her and Carl. Alexandra tells her brothers that they can't advise her on this sort of subject, and her brothers respond indignantly that she is making fools of the family. They worry that Carl is a tramp who is coming to claim the family **land** and fortune by marrying into it.

Lou and Carl intervene in Alexandra's personal affairs because they are concerned with the fate of the family land. They liken Carl to a tramp because he hasn't worked for the land and therefore lacks the dignity of work. They believe he shouldn't be able to marry into their family land and fortune. Mostly, though, they'll just say what they have to in order to preserve their inheritance for wealth that they, too, had little hand in creating. They demand that their sister, who has sacrificed so much, continue to sacrifice for them.



Lou and Oscar argue that the **land** rightly belongs to the men of the family, since they're the ones who must do the most work and are held responsible when things go wrong. Alexandra reminds them, however, that they would have sold the land long ago if it weren't for her advice. Lou and Oscar tell her that she was always so hard on them, even while she babied Emil. Alexandra responds that she has had to grow hard, like a vine that's continuously cut back.

Lou and Oscar say that Alexandra shouldn't marry Carl, since she is only making a fool of herself at her age—forty years old. Alexandra tells them that the only hold they have on her decisions from now on will be legal and sends her brothers on their way. Lou and Oscar hope that they have talked some sense into her.

PART 2, CHAPTER 11

When Emil arrives home that evening, he calls for Alexandra, who has been crying in her room. The dusk, however, hides any hint of this. Emil is preoccupied as well, since he has decided to put off law school another year. He tells Alexandra that he plans to go to the Mexico City instead, and he suspects that Lou and Oscar will be sore about it.

Alexandra mentions that Lou and Oscar are very angry with her as well, and Emil absentmindedly asks what they're angry about. When she mentions that they are afraid she might marry Carl Linstrum, Emil brushes off the news as if it were ridiculous, which hurts Alexandra's feelings. She explains that she has led a very lonely life and that Carl is one of her only friends. Emil uncomfortably agrees that Alexandra should do whatever she wants to do in these matters and adds that Marie has said that it would serve everyone right if Alexandra were to run off with Carl. This seems to cheer Alexandra somewhat, and Emil heads upstairs when he hears Carl's horse heading towards the house.

Lou and Oscar argue that the land belongs to the men because they're the ones who work the hardest—only Alexandra knows that the land cannot truly be owned. She reminds them that she has sacrificed as well. She has had to grow hard and lose her youth working the harsh land so that the family could benefit. Her pioneering spirit pushed her to delay her own gratification in order to send Emil to college.



As Alexandra stands up for Carl, she severs ties with Lou and Oscar completely. They haven't been close companions to her since they were children, and the distance growing between them has finally hardened.



Emil arrives home to announce his plans to Alexandra without paying any notice to her feelings. He often accuses her of being blind to other people's emotions (not incorrectly; she's attuned to the land, not to people), but it seems that he can act similarly, as caught up as he is in his own problems. His decision to leave for Mexico City is clearly influenced by Marie's denial of feelings for him—but Alexandra is unable to sense this.



Emil only really pays attention to the conversation after Marie's name is mentioned, showing a bit of self-absorption and blindness when it comes to his sister's feelings. He seems unable to imagine his sister loving someone or wanting to get married. Alexandra explains her loneliness to Emil, but he seems to feel uncomfortable with this information, since she has never been the one to confide in him before.



Emil escapes to his own room, feeling that his sister is, in fact, a little ridiculous to be contemplating marriage at her age. His thoughts quickly turn to Marie, however, and he agonizes over the fact that she is married and seems not to notice his affection for her. He begins to daydream that she does love him back. At his university, Emil often neglected to dance with the girls because he was daydreaming of Marie. For two years, already, this storm of feelings has been brewing.

Emil cannot empathize with his sister, in part because he is too embroiled in his own thoughts of Marie. Further, though, he seems like a somewhat typical spoiled child, who lacks a bit of respect for the person who sacrificed to provide for him in some sense because they sacrificed themselves. Emil has never had to sacrifice himself, because of Alexandra's efforts. Emil escapes to Mexico City in order to flee the temptation of his feelings for Marie—which is evasion, not sacrifice.



PART 2, CHAPTER 12

Carl enters the sitting room, looking tired and worn from his anger. He says that he has seen Lou and Oscar, and Alexandra takes this to mean that Carl will be leaving soon. Carl admits that this is the case, saying that Alexandra is unfortunate to be surrounded by little men such as Lou and Oscar—and Carl himself, since he cannot stand up to their criticisms. He plans to leave the next day. Carl says that he hopes to make something of himself so that he may have something to offer Alexandra, but Alexandra responds sadly there's no good in offering people things they don't need. She doesn't need money, but she has needed Carl's companionship.

Carl recognizes his own smallness in being unable to stand up against Lou and Oscar's criticism of his intentions. Rather than deny that criticism, he feels that he must evade it by making himself well off enough that no one can see his interest in Alexandra as merely interest in her wealth. Of course, Alexandra knows the truth, and doesn't want him to go make money. She wants him to stay with her. But Carl doesn't have Alexandra's strength of will.



Alexandra says that she has the feeling that if Carl goes away again, he will not come back. She believes that something will happen to one of them. Carl begs her to give him a year, and Alexandra sighs and says that he should do as he wishes. She feels that she has lost everything in a single day, with both Carl and Emil going away. She follows Carl's gaze to the portrait of her father, and she hopes that John Bergson cannot see what has become of her or hear tidings from the New World.

Alexandra is back to her lonely days without Carl and Emil. She sees this as part of the sacrifice her father asked her to make in taking care of the family land and hopes that he cannot see how lonely she is—at that moment, she is not sure that his sacrifices, and thus, by extension, her own sacrifices, have paid off.



PART 3, CHAPTER 1

It is winter in the prairie again, and the **ground** is frozen over. It seems possible that life and fruitfulness will be extinct forever. Alexandra has settled back into her old routine, receiving letters from Emil once a week. She has not seen her other brothers since Carl left and has started attending a different church in order to avoid them.

The land has settled into winter, and Alexandra, who is deeply connected to the land, settles down too into a kind of functional coldness, a hibernation of sorts. She is back in her old routine, minus the visits from her brothers and her more loving relations with Emil and Carl.



Mrs. Lee had been afraid that she would not be able to visit Alexandra's this year, due to the family quarrel, but on the first day of December, Alexandra informs Annie that Ivar will be picking up Mrs. Lee the next day. Mrs. Lee enjoys the liberty Alexandra gives her, allowing her to live in a comfortable, old-fashioned way and to keep up her favorite habits, including a little drink of brandy before bed.

A week into Mrs. Lee's visit at Alexandra's, Marie calls to invite them over. Frank has gone to town for the day. Mrs. Lee wears her new cross-stitched apron, and when they arrive at the Shabatas', Marie runs out to greet the old woman. She exclaims that Mrs. Lee's apron is beautiful, flattering her. She asks Alexandra whether she has heard from Carl, and Alexandra replies that he got to Dawson before the river froze, but she'll likely not hear anything more from him until spring. Alexandra adds that she has brought a bundle of Emil's letters for Marie to read, before commenting on Marie's perpetually rosy cheeks—the same ever since she was a young girl.

Marie asks whether Alexandra has sent out Emil's Christmas box yet, and when Alexandra responds that she hasn't, Marie asks to add a silk necktie she knit for him. She says that Emil should wear it when serenading the Spanish girls, which makes Alexandra laugh, since Emil hasn't shown any interest in the Mexican women. Marie pulls out the apricot rolls she has been baking in the oven, and Alexandra compliments Marie on the variety of different breads she is able to bake, while Mrs. Lee appraises the rolls. Alexandra asks whether Marie had been crying when she called the night before, since she sounded like she had a cold, and Marie admits that she had been—Frank had been out late, and she had gotten lonely. Alexandra worries what will become of the rest of the town if even Marie gets down.

After Mrs. Lee declares that she's tired, Marie and Alexandra head upstairs to look for some crochet patterns for the old woman to borrow. As Alexandra looks for the patterns, she comes across Frank's old yellow cane, and Marie exclaims at the finding. She says that Frank used to be very cheerful and happy and continues to reflect, saying that he would have done better with a different kind of wife. Marie says that she is too giddy and sharp-tongued, and Frank needs someone who will think only of him. Alexandra is surprised by Marie's frankness and changes the subject once she finds the crochet patterns they had been looking for.

Mrs. Lee, like Mrs. Bergson before her, misses her habits from the old country, and she cherishes the fact that Alexandra allows her to observe these habits when she visits. Alexandra seems to understand this nostalgia for the Old World, as she has also felt homesick before and understands the sacrifices that must be made in pioneering or immigrating to new land.



Marie's warm nature wins over Mrs. Lee. She comments on Mrs. Lee's apron, knowing that this will please the old woman, and she asks Alexandra about Carl, knowing that Alexandra likely misses her old friend. Marie's gift for empathy and for general warmth causes people to gather around her—this is partly what instigates Frank's jealousy.



Marie continues to make Alexandra and Mrs. Lee feel at home. She presents them with a variety of breads and rolls she has baked, recipes from the old country, and Mrs. Lee is pleased with them. Marie is very forthright as well—when Alexandra asks her whether she'd been crying, she admits to crying without trying to deflect the conversation. It seems that almost all the characters in the book are lonely—Alexandra misses Carl and Emil, Emil misses Marie, Marie misses Emil, Mrs. Lee misses the old country, etc. Relationships are difficult to form or maintain in the New Country.



When Marie sees Frank's yellow cane, she grows reflective. She believes that she and he are a bad match, but they're married now, so she must be resigned to her fate. Alexandra feels that she shouldn't encourage this kind of talk, since it might lead to temptations—maybe the temptation for Marie to split from Frank, to find somebody else, or just to wallow in her discontent.



After Alexandra and Mrs. Lee head off in the snow, Marie sits down with Emil's letters, examining the foreign stamps. Marie is aware that Emil's letters are meant more for her than for Alexandra, and she imagines the types of adventures he might be having in Mexico. Marie feels sorry that Frank can't have those kinds of adventures any longer—she feels that she has brought out the worst in him by marrying him.

Marie feels that both she and Frank are sacrificing—or being punished—in this relationship. It is important to note that Frank is not portrayed as evil—just as someone who is unsuited for his situation, who needs to be free but who, in marrying, lost that freedom. Marie seems to be growing more accustomed to the idea that Emil cares for her too, since she accepts that his letters are more for her than for Alexandra.



Alexandra later remembers this visit as the last satisfactory visit she has with Marie, who continues to withdraw into herself. The harsh winter weather also prevents the two friends from visiting each other very often, and it even cuts the telephone wires for three weeks. Marie turns to the church, finding more comfort in religion than ever before. She tries to be patient with her husband, but she longs for her orchard and the outdoors—she senses that deep beneath the snow, the life is still safe and will appear again in the spring.

The harsh winter separates Marie and Alexandra, even disconnecting the telephone wires. It causes a rift in their friendship, allowing Marie to withdraw further into herself. Marie senses that spring will return, however, no matter how bleak the winter season seems or how dark her mood is. Nature continues to move forward, and in Marie's thoughts is the implication that just as spring will once again bloom so too will emotions that are now frozen.



PART 3, CHAPTER 2

If Alexandra had had more imagination, she might have been able to guess at what was going on between Emil and Marie—however, Alexandra's attention has always been absorbed in doing what she needs to do to make a living. Her personal life and happiest days are almost subconscious and tend to involve the **land**. She also has fond memories of her time with Emil, including one particular time when the two of them picnicked by a river and saw a solitary wild **duck** swimming and diving in the water. Both Alexandra and Emil remembered the duck for how beautiful she was, and Alexandra imagines that the duck is still there, never aging or changing.

Even Alexandra's personal moments tend to involve the land. She has grown up tending to it, and she's given the best years of her life to it. One of Alexandra's fondest memories with Emil involves the natural world as well. The solitary wild duck they see and the awe they share when they remember that duck represent their respect for the land they inhabit and nurture. It is interesting that Alexandra sees that duck as an embodiment of the land, while Emil earlier saw the duck's as connected to Marie. This difference in symbolic interpretation indicates their differences in their focus: Alexandra toward the land, Emil toward other people and Marie in particular.



All of Alexandra's happiest moments are similarly impersonal. She has never been in love or indulged many reveries, having grown up in serious times. She does have one recurring dream, however, of being bodily lifted by a very large, strong man. In her imagination, the man is yellow like the sunlight and smells of cornfields. After indulging in this dream, though, Alexandra always rises from bed, angry with herself, and goes to take a vigorous cold bath. The dream occurs more to her as she grows older and more tired. Just before falling asleep, she often has a sensation of being lifted and carried away.

Alexandra's dream shows that she longs to be taken care of by a force that's stronger than she is. It seems that the man represents the land, since his coloring is like sunlight and he smells like cornfields. However, when Alexandra awakens, her angry reaction seems to suggest that she views the dream as a foolish reverie. She is too big for any man on the prairie to carry her off like that—and her life has been given to self-sacrifice rather than giving in to temptation. And yet as she grows older she seems to subconsciously want the comfort and ease she has refused herself all through her life.



PART 4, CHAPTER 1

The day after Emil returns from Mexico, Alexandra proudly drives him to the French Church for a supper. He wears the Mexican costume he brought home, and Alexandra informs him that all the girls there will be wearing fancy costumes—Marie will be wearing a Bohemian dress and telling fortunes. Alexandra is proud of her brother and satisfied with her life's progress. She believes that her work has been successful because out of her father's children, there is one of them—Emil—who has a personality distinct from the **soil**.

When they arrive at the church, Amédée, now a new father, rushes out to embrace Emil. He tells Emil how wonderful it is to have a son, and Emil laughs and tells him that he has brought cups and spoons and blankets for the boy. The other French boys crowd around Emil, admiring his costume and telling him what has happened in town since he left. Emil has many friends among the French and the Spanish boys, since they are less suspicious of new things than are the Swedish and Norwegian boys. The French boys carry Emil off to see the new clubroom at the post office.

Alexandra wanders into the basement, where the women are setting up their stands. Marie sees her and rushes to her, only to stop short when she sees that Emil is not there. Alexandra reassures her that Emil will be along shortly and compliments Marie's coral earrings, which once belonged to Marie's grandmother. Marie wears a Bohemian costume with a short red skirt and yellow turban.

When Emil returns from the post office, he lingers outside with the boys, singing and talking on the terrace. It makes Marie nervous to be able to hear but not see him, but once the boys arrive in the basement, she forgets her annoyance and runs to greet Emil. She admires his costume and asks about Mexico, and when everyone sits down to supper, she drags Frank's arm so that they are sitting across from the Bergsons. Marie hangs on to every word that Emil says about matadors, breaking out in a volley of questions after he finishes his story.

After supper, there is a game of charades and an auction, at which Emil allows everyone to bid on one of his turquoise shirt studs. Marie attempts to get Frank to bid, but he refuses, and the stud goes to a French girl. Marie shrugs and sets up at her fortune-telling tent, which soon becomes very popular. Frank glowers at the side, and his jealousy is all the more painful because he cannot affix it to any one source—Marie is kind to everyone. He broods over the way Marie once loved him and no longer does.

Alexandra is happy to have Emil back, and she believes that he has finally become someone who has a personality apart from the land. Alexandra considers this a success—now Emil may do whatever he wants to do in life—and all her sacrifices (and her father's sacrifices) have paid off. Alexandra still has no idea that Emil has any feelings for Marie, however—that in becoming detached from the land he seems to have become completely attached to Marie—and mentions Marie's name casually.



Because of his time away Emil is able to see the changes in the prairie as Carl did before him, but he still maintains ties and an identity at home. His friends greet him happily when he arrives. The boys retain traits from their old countries, and it's the French and Spanish boys who greet Emil more enthusiastically, as they aren't as suspicious of new things.



Marie's costume emphasizes her old country background. Her excitement to see Emil also betrays that she still has feelings for him. However, Alexandra still doesn't sense that Marie has any more feeling for Emil than she would for an ordinary friend.



Marie is unable to contain her exuberance. It's part of her warm nature. She is clearly excited to see Emil again, and she forgets her brief annoyance quickly. Marie has a wild curiosity that's fascinated with the foreign land of Emil's tales.



Frank can be perceptive about his relationship with Marie. He understands that it's in her nature to be kind and generous to everyone, yet he cannot help but be jealous. He realizes that he's partly responsible for the fact that she no longer loves him as she used to, since he started acting irrationally and bullying her, and yet the loss of his love only makes him angrier. A class self-destructive cycle.



Amédée calls to Emil and tells him that they are planning to play a joke on the girls. At eleven o'clock, Amédée will switch off the electric lights, at which point every boy will have a chance to kiss his sweetheart. The only problem is the candle in Marie's tent, and Amédée enlists Emil to blow out the candle, as he has no sweetheart. Emil agrees.

At five minutes to eleven, Emil wanders up to Marie's tent and asks to have his fortune read. He gazes at her intently, and she begins talking quickly, asking him why he put his turquoise shirt stud up for auction—she had wanted it desperately, but Frank would never bid for it. Emil laughs shortly and pulls out a handful of uncut turquoises to drop into her lap, telling her not to let anyone see them. Marie is enraptured by the stones and asks if everything in Mexico is as beautiful as those stones.

Amédée turns out the lights, and Marie starts up into Emil's arms, where she doesn't have time to think before they kiss. When the lights come back on, Marie is pale, and Emil is already at the other end of the hall. Frank is watching jealously, but he sees nothing. Alexandra notices that Marie seems tired and offers to help her with the card booth. Marie stiffens at Alexandra's touch, which hurts Alexandra's feelings—but it's Alexandra's calm that seems fatal to Marie, whose heart feels at the mercy of storms.

PART 4, CHAPTER 2

After Signa's wedding supper, Signa and Nelse walk their gift cows to their new home on Alexandra's north quarter. Marie complains that she has no patience with Signa for marrying such a grumpy fellow, and Alexandra says that Swedish girls tend to have a "good deal of the cow" in them—they prefer to be led. Alexandra jokes that Bohemians wouldn't understand the sentiment. Marie feels a little irritated by this and heads out into the night, telling Emil that he needn't walk her. However, Emil follows her until he overtakes her and confronts her about his feelings. Marie tells Emil that if she were as free as him, she would take the first train and go off and have all the fun there is. Emil responds that he tried that, but he couldn't stop thinking of Marie.

Amédée's lighthearted joke pulls Emil into a situation with Marie. He agrees, but it's likely that he'll again face the temptation to make his feelings known.



Marie and Emil talk with a nervous energy that betrays their feelings. It seems that their time apart hasn't really diminished the tension at all. If anything, Marie seems more aware of the anxiety between them, talking quickly and avoiding eye contact with Emil. Emil ran away to not have to face his feelings, but in doing so he only made it so that they were all the stronger when he returned.



Marie and Emil's first kiss surprises them both. It draws the blood from Marie's face, and Emil is surprised by how natural it feels. It seems that they've finally crossed a line between yearning and giving into temptation, and the deception causes Marie to withdraw into herself. She flinches at Alexandra's touch both because of Alexandra's calm and the fact that her relationship with Alexandra is no longer honest, since Alexandra doesn't know about Marie's relationship with Emil.



Marie gets annoyed at Alexandra's joke because Marie sees Signa and Nelse as similar to her and Frank—a happy girl marrying a grumpy fellow. When Alexandra says that Bohemian girls aren't like Swedish girls who are "willing to be led," Marie feels it as a kind of accusation because she is unhappy being "led" by Frank. She feels guilty about kissing Emil, and that makes her touchy here. Alexandra, of course, realizes none of this. Marie and Emil, meanwhile, seem to be unable to separate themselves from each other, despite their impossible circumstances.



Emil asks Marie why she ran away with Frank Shabata, and Marie says simply that she loved him. She says that she loved the way she wanted him to be, and now she's paying for it. Emil responds bitterly that she's not the only one paying, and Marie tells him that at least he can go away. Emil says that he cannot leave her behind though, and recklessly asks her to run away with him. Marie indignantly responds that she isn't that kind of girl. Emil takes her arm and says that he will leave her alone if she will only say that she loves him. Marie responds that she couldn't help loving him, and after Emil leaves Marie at her gate, he wanders the fields all night.

Marie responds relatively calmly to Emil's questions—she is the one doing most of the work in resisting temptation. Emil, on the other hand, is neither capable of understanding Marie's pain nor able to resign himself to reality, as Marie does.



PART 4, CHAPTER 3

A week after Signa's wedding, Emil is packing his books, getting ready to leave for law school at Ann Arbor, Michigan. Alexandra sits sewing by the table. Emil feels that there is something final about his departure this time around, and after a while, he takes a break from packing his books and lies down. He studies Alexandra in the lamplight, recalling that Marie had called her handsome. He studies the portrait of their father on the wall and feels that between the two of them, he resembles their father more.

Emil attempts to observe his sister as someone other than the practical, strong guardian she has always been for him. He sees her as Marie sees her, and he tries to compare her to their father, who he barely knew. He recognizes more of his own features in his father. That may be a sign of his own self-absorption, or it might signify the fact that Alexandra is more attuned to the land than either Emil or her father was. Their father was an educated man who came to the uncomfortable prairie to work. Only Alexandra felt connected to this land, and in her success she allowed for Emil to then escape that connection, making him more like his father than Alexandra is. In some ways, a familial cycle has been completed.



Emil asks Alexandra about the old walnut desk that once belonged to their father, starting up a conversation about John Bergson. Emil doesn't remember very much about his father from before he was sick, and Alexandra tells Emil that their father was a very quiet, intelligent man, not at all small-minded like Lou and Oscar. She recalls that their father belonged to a choir in Stockholm, and she used to be very proud of him. Emil thoughtfully replies that their father had a hard fight in the New World, and Alexandra agrees—but adds that he had hope and believed in the **land**. Emil responds that he must have believed in Alexandra too, and the two of them sit in a contented silence.

Emil's reflection also makes him realize the extent of the sacrifice his father made in bringing the family to the New World. He realizes that his father had a hard fight and left a much different life in Stockholm in order to cultivate the land in Nebraska. The land ultimately overpowered John Bergson, but he left it to his daughter to tame. Emil's realization of all that his father and sister have done for him adds an extra layer of understanding between him and his sister.



Eventually, Emil speaks up again, saying that Lou and Oscar might have been happier if they'd been poor. Alexandra smiles at this and says that that might very well be true—but she is glad they're prosperous for their children's sakes. She's very fond of Milly. Emil worries that the small-mindedness only gets worse as time goes on, however, and Alexandra reprimands him for thinking so darkly of his people.

Although Alexandra isn't fond of what Lou and Oscar have become—and she recognizes, as Emil does, that it may be in part due to their wealth—she still would rather they be prosperous so that future generations can benefit. This is just an extension of her belief that one should sacrifice for the future.



Alexandra has no anxiety about how Emil will turn out—she believes in him as she believes in the **land**. She feels that he is no longer as restless as he was before he went to Mexico and that he will soon be settled in life. Emil suddenly brings up the **duck** that he and Alexandra once saw in the river. Alexandra says that she often thinks of the wild duck too, and Emil comments that it's funny what one remembers and what one forgets. He says goodnight to Alexandra, telling her she's done well by the family.

Alexandra trusts her gut feelings when it comes to the land, and she trusts her gut when it comes to Emil. She believes that he has finally settled down and is finding his place in the world. Emil's mention of the duck that he and Alexandra saw in the river signifies that he may finally be ready to leave his own wild creature—Marie—alone to preen beautifully in the water. He's ready to resign himself to reality.



PART 4, CHAPTER 4

The next morning, Angélique is in the kitchen baking pies, with her infant in a cradle by her side. Emil arrives for a visit, and Angélique directs him to the field, where Amédée is cutting wheat. She mentions that Amédée has been sick, but she doesn't sound too anxious, since she feels safe in their good fortune. Emil jokes that the baby looks Indian, and Mrs. Chevalier—Amédée's mother—grows angry and chases Emil into the field, where he goes to look for his friend, Amédée.

Amédée has been a foil to Emil, a man who has been lucky in comparison to Emil's lack of luck. And Amédée's family has come to trust in that luck. Emil's joke about the baby is a joke that maybe the child is illegitimate, the product of adultery—foreshadowing events to come.



Emil recognizes Amédée on the wheatfield, directing a team of horses. He feels a pang of admiration for his friend, who does his work with such ease and purpose. When Amédée catches sight of Emil, he hands the reins over to a cousin and goes to Emil. Soon, however, a pain at his side bothers him, and Emil advises him to go straight to bed. Amédée says he cannot, however—there is too much work to be done. Emil sees that this is not a good time to visit and drives on to the French church to bid his friends goodbye. When he rides home later in the day, however, he catches sight of Amédée staggering home, supported by two of his cousins. Emil helps them put Amédée to bed.

Emil admires Amédée's single-mindedness when it comes to work—he possesses a dignity and grace as he directs his team of horses. Yet the work is also difficult and unrelenting, and Amédée feels the need to keep working in order to provide for his family. Amédée's fate in the novel provides a stark example of just what Alexandra is trying to save Emil from—a life of backbreaking work, isolated from the benefits of society (such as modern doctors), and a world where luck can turn in an instant (i.e. where there is no security). Things went right for Alexandra, but they could just as easily have gone wrong.



PART 4, CHAPTER 5

Frank learns about Amédée's illness when he returns from work in the evening and goes off to the saloon. Marie telephones Alexandra, who tells her that Amédée is in very bad shape and that Emil has only just returned home himself and gone to bed. Marie feels extremely lonely after hanging up the phone. She means to confess everything between her and Emil to Alexandra after Emil leaves so that their relationship can be honest. Until then, however, she does not know what to do with herself. Marie decides to go outside.

Marie wants to confess everything about her relationship with Emil to Alexandra because Alexandra is one of her closest companions, and she wants their relationship to be honest. As it is, she feels lonely being left alone in her house, so she seeks comfort in nature. It's in the outdoors that she finds some solace.



Marie wanders out to the path to the Bergsons', stopping to sit down at the stile. She feels disappointed that Emil did not come to tell her the news, and she muses on her feelings for Emil. She feels that there is no more harm in indulging in her feelings for him in her mind, now that he is leaving for good. She can only hurt herself by dwelling on them, and she has no intention of dragging anyone else down with her.

Marie wanders to the pond where Emil once shot the **wild ducks**, and it occurs to her that there is a dirty way out of this life. She feels, however, that she would not want to take it—as long as she has her feelings for Emil, she wishes to live a hundred years and to treasure the pain it brings her.

When Emil wakes the next morning, Alexandra meets him in the sitting room and tells him that she hadn't wanted to wake him when they phoned—but that Amédée died at three o'clock that morning.

Marie is finally able to face her feelings for Emil once she believes that she won't see him again before he leaves for law school. She thinks that she can't do harm to those around her by indulging in her feelings in her head, even if it causes herself some pain. Thinking that she will never see Emil again, she lets her feelings for him free at last.



Briefly, the pond and the image of the fallen ducks remind Marie that there is the option—the temptation—of suicide to consider. Just as the wild ducks were killed, she could kill herself. But life is too sweet for her—even the pain of life is too sweet—for her to go through with it.



One of Emil's main ties to the land in Hanover falls away once Amédée dies. This is a case where delaying gratification did not pay off—Amédée attempted to put off his pain in order to do more work, and it caused his appendicitis to go undiagnosed for too long. Nature and the world are harsh, and bad things can happen to good people. Luck comes and it goes.



PART 4, CHAPTER 6

At Church on Saturday, the activity is split between mourning for Amédée and preparing for a confirmation service for a class of one hundred boys and girls. The next morning, Emil rides with forty French boys to meet the bishop's carriage. As they pass the graveyard, they pass the man who is digging Amédée's grave, and the boys look from the grave to the Church with one accord.

Emil waits outside as the church is filling for Mass, and he sees that Frank Shabata has come alone, without Marie. Emil turns and enters the church, sitting in Amédée's empty pew. During Mass, Emil tortures himself with questions about Marie, wondering at her absence. As he listens to the music in the church, however, Emil comes to feel that good can triumph over evil and that good is possible to men. He is able to regard Frank with a degree of calmness after this revelation.

The Church's division between celebrating the confirmation service and mourning Amédée's death reflects the way that life and nature move on even when someone passes away. New boys come of age even as Amédée passes away. Emil and the French boys also possess solidarity in their mourning, which recalls Carl's comment that one's death is mourned in the prairie, but individual deaths go unnoticed in the city.



Affected by Amédée's death, Emil feels moved by the church music. He suddenly is able to see possibility in life, and his ability to view Frank with calmness suggests that his jealousy has eased.



After Mass, Frank and Emil are both invited to dine in town. Emil stays until three o'clock, then slips out on his mare. He is affected by his friend's death, though he feels no horror as he rides past Amédée's grave—that, too, seems beautiful to him. He realizes that he is riding to say goodbye to Marie, without bitterness. It seems to him that his horse is flying, and when he arrives at the Shabatas', his mare is in a lather. The house is empty, but Emil only wants to be reminded of Marie, so he heads to **the white mulberry tree** in the orchard. When he reaches the tree, he finds Marie napping on her side, and Emil throws his arms around her. Marie awakes and tells Emil that she has been dreaming of this.

When Emil slips out to see Marie, he has no intention of acting on his love—he sees the world as beautiful, suddenly (which, perhaps not coincidentally is the way Marie usually sees it) and simply wants to say goodbye. However, when he finds her under the mulberry tree, they both have let down their guard and give into temptation. They allow their love to come out into the open.



PART 4, CHAPTER 7

When Frank arrives home in the evening, he is shocked to find Emil's mare in his stable. He has been drinking all day and is in a bad temper. He is upset further when he discovers that the house is dark, and he grabs his gun in a rage. He doesn't have any real sense of grievance, but it satisfies him to feel like a desperate man, so he brings his gun with him as he walks towards the orchard.

Frank gives into the temptation to act recklessly, like a desperate man. He doesn't truly believe that he intends to shoot anyone, but he likes the extremity of feeling, so he brings the gun along as he searches for Marie.



Frank walks around the outside of the orchard hedge, and when he reaches the wheatfield corner, he's stopped by a low murmuring sound. He peers through the hedge and sees two figures in the dark. In an unthinking rage, he takes up his gun and fires three times through the hedge. He peers again through the hedge and sees the man's hand spasming, and then he hears the cries of the woman as she begins to drag herself up. Frank recoils in horror, drops his gun, and runs back up the path.

Frank, having brought his gun, is unable to keep himself from shooting when the scene in the hedge surprises him. His body acts before he can think. When he sees the violence he has caused, he realizes the enormity of what he has done and flees in terror. Again, Frank is not portrayed as a villain but rather as a victim—of circumstances and of himself.



When Frank reaches the dark door of the house, he realizes that he has shot Marie, and he prays that she is not suffering. He takes Emil's horse and starts off for Hanover, all the while regretting his actions, and lamenting that Marie had been so careless when she knew very well that he was like a crazed man when in a rage. He feels terrified by the prospect that she might still be alive and suffering. He suffers a violent attack of nausea halfway to Hanover, and he is overwhelmed by a desire to return home and be comforted by his wife.

Frank's horror at his own actions forces him finally to appreciate Marie's presence. He wishes, at that moment, to be able to go home and be comforted by her. He regrets his own behavior, and his terror and the bout of nausea show that Frank is not truly a violent man. His words have always been louder than his actions, until now. But these actions can't be taken back. He has killed the "wild duck."



PART 4, CHAPTER 8

When Ivar climbs down from his loft the next morning, he comes across Emil's mare, lather-stained and exhausted, and Ivar becomes immediately panicked. He believes that something must be very wrong for Emil to treat his mare in such a manner. Ivar hurries down across the fields.

Ivar senses that something is wrong because he knows that Emil would not treat his horse in such a manner. Ivar's intuition with animals leads him to discover the scene with Emil and Marie.



In the orchard, the **white mulberries** are covered with a dark stain. Emil had been shot in the heart and died quickly. Marie, on the other hand, had been shot through the right lung and her carotid artery, and there is a trail of blood leading to Emil's body, where she must have dragged herself in her final moments. She lies on Emil's shoulder, with his hand in her hands, and a look of ineffable content on her face. Above the two lovers, a pair of white butterflies flutters in and out among the shadows.

When Ivar reaches the hedge and discovers the bodies, he falls to the ground and prays. Alexandra has also been worried and sees Ivar coming up the path from her spot in Emil's room where she had been standing and waiting for Emil. She worries that he must be having an especially bad episode of one of his spells and rushes out to meet him. Ivar falls at Alexandra's feet and says that sin and death has fallen upon the young ones.

PART 5, CHAPTER 1

Three months after the violent deaths of Marie and Emil, Ivar is sitting in the shed at 5 o'clock in the evening, mending a harness. A storm has come in, bringing a cold wind and torrents of rain, and suddenly, Signa bursts into the shed. She and Nelse now live with Alexandra, who has refused personal care from anyone other than Signa. Signa does not know where Alexandra has gone, and she worries that her mistress will catch cold. Ivar agrees to go out and look for her.

Signa suspects that Alexandra is at the graveyard and worries about the way Alexandra is acting—she needs reminding about when to eat and when to go to bed. Ivar reassures Signa that Alexandra will eventually find peace. Until then, he and Signa will bear with her, as they are the ones she most trusts. Signa expresses how terrible the past three months have been, and how they have made everyone suffer.

Signa suddenly asks Ivar why he goes barefoot. Ivar responds that it is to indulge his body and protect him from other temptations. When he feels low, he can indulge his feet in filth, and they are easy to make clean again. Signa ponders this thoughtfully, and then tells Ivar that he has been a good friend to their mistress. He responds in kind and then leads Emil's mare into the storm.

Although Emil and Marie have died, butterflies continue to flutter above them, and flowers still bloom—nature cycles on, even in the face of human tragedy. The bloodstains on the white mulberry tree symbolize the loss of innocence and also allude to Ovid's story of Pyramus and Thisbe, another pair of tragic lovers, reminding the reader of Carl's theory that there are only two or three human stories that repeat themselves over.



Ivar's declaration that "sin and death" have fallen upon Emil and Marie show that he believes that the two lovers were in the wrong. He believes that they gave into forbidden temptation and therefore are doomed to damnation.



The weather rages on in spite of the deaths of Marie and Emil. Seasons still change, and nature moves on without noticing human loss. Signa and Ivar prove themselves to be loyal companions to Alexandra, who accepts little help during her months of mourning. Signa and Nelse even move back to be near her.



Signa's lament that everyone has had to suffer because of Emil and Marie's deaths echoes Emil's previous lament that other people had to pay for Marie's impulsive marriage to Frank. Giving into temptation affects the entire community, not just the individuals directly involved.



Signa doesn't laugh at Ivar's explanation of avoiding temptation by allowing his feet to wallow in filth. She instead shows respect for the old man because he is a hard worker and has been loyal to Alexandra through the years.



When Ivar reaches the graveyard, the storm has died down, and he finds Alexandra by John Bergson's grave. She apologizes for worrying everyone and says that she is glad to see him. She talks about how pleasant it is to feel the rain once one has become thoroughly cold, how it seems to bring back feelings of being a baby. She wonders aloud whether this is how the dead feel. Ivar reproaches her, saying that the dead are in Paradise, but then he hangs his head since he does not believe that Emil has reached Paradise.

When they arrive home, Signa and Ivar take care of Alexandra and put her to bed, where she has the illusion of being lifted and carried off again, as in her dream. She feels that she knows who the figure is now—"the mightiest of all lovers"—and she goes to sleep.

When Alexandra awakens the next morning, she has a cold and stays in bed for the next few days, resolving to go to Lincoln to visit Frank Shabata, who has received a prison sentence of 10 years after confessing to the murders. Alexandra feels that Frank is the only one she can help now, and she blames him less than she blames others, including herself. She feels guilty for having thrown Emil and Marie together at every opportunity, and for not recognizing their feelings for each other. Alexandra recalls the morning she found the bodies in the orchard, and the awe she felt towards them. She felt then that they could not have helped loving each other.

Alexandra resolves to help Frank, who she feels she is able to understand more than she could understand Marie. The day after Emil's funeral, Alexandra had written to Carl, but she heard nothing in the following weeks as a response, and her heart grew hard against him. She wonders whether it would not be better for her to finish her life alone.

PART 5, CHAPTER 2

On an October afternoon, Alexandra arrives in Lincoln. She lingers around her brother's university, watching the young students pass by. One of the boys accidentally runs into her and apologizes. She engages him in a brief conversation, asking where she might find some of Emil's friends. Afterwards, heading back to her hotel, Alexandra finds herself unreasonably comforted by the conversation, thinking fondly on the boy and wishing him well in university.

Alexandra finds solace in nature, even in a storm. The cold comforts her. Emil and Signa clearly care for Alexandra, and she recognizes their concern—however, her attention is still with the deceased. Ivar, sadly, believes that Emil has not reached Paradise because he gave into bodily temptations.



Alexandra has the recurring dream of being carried away by the godlike figure of the land, and she finally realizes that this figure may be "the mightiest of all lovers"—or death. She feels safe and at peace in his arms, ready to be carried away, since she has completed her earthly duties.



When Alexandra recovers, she has a sense of renewed purpose. She has always had a purpose in her life, something to dedicate her work to: Emil. Now she looks for another purpose, and settles on Frank. She pities Frank, who she sees as a victim of circumstance. She's unsure whether to blame Emil and Marie or whether their love was inevitable. By acknowledging the possibility that their love was inevitable, however, Alexandra demonstrates an understanding of the irrepressible forces in pioneer life.



Alexandra pities Frank because she feels that he is as alone as she is. She sees them both as victims of a senseless act. When she doesn't hear from Carl, Alexandra begins to harden more—the same way she had to harden when circumstances on the farm were tough.



The comfort Alexandra finds in the boy somewhat counters Carl's assertion that everyone in the city is anonymous. Carl doesn't take into account that people have personal associations and remembrances that can make a chance meeting with a stranger feel significant.



The next morning, Alexandra presents herself at the State Penitentiary and tells the warden of Frank's story. The warden reassures her that they will take care of him, but when they bring Frank along for her to talk to, he seems to Alexandra a changed man. He begins to rant about how he didn't mean to hurt "dat woman" or "dat man." He confesses that he's almost forgotten Marie's name. Frank seems not altogether human anymore to Alexandra, who tells Frank that she doesn't blame him and wants to help him.

Alexandra remembers the yellow cane she found in his closet and feels that it's awfully unfair that Frank has ended up this way. She blames Marie for making those around her suffer for her affectionate and impulsive nature. She once more reassures Frank that she will get him out, and Frank says that he won't bother this country anymore once he's out—he just wants to visit his mother.

When Alexandra emerges from the penitentiary, she feels that she is also trapped in a larger prison. She feels a disgust of life weighing on her. When she arrives at the hotel, there is a telegram from Carl waiting for her. He is in Hanover, and Alexandra bursts into tears upon receiving the news.

Even the memory of his relationship with Marie is too painful for Frank to conjure, and he has learned to cope by forgetting Marie's name. Alexandra sees that Frank is truly being punished for his behavior—and for Emil and Marie's behavior—in the penitentiary. It is the consequence of giving into reckless behavior and temptation.



Alexandra sees Frank as a victim of circumstance. Alexandra believes that Marie is to blame because her warmth and impulsiveness make her a force of nature—no one can resist her, and her magnetism eventually leaves destruction in her wake.



Alexandra feels that she and Frank are both being punished for Emil and Marie's actions, even though Frank is in prison and she is technically allowed to walk free. She feels, however, that she isn't truly free. There is no one she cares for in the world anymore. When she receives the telegram from Carl, however, these circumstances suddenly shift—Alexandra's hard shell comes off, and she bursts into tears.



PART 5, CHAPTER 3

The next afternoon, Carl and Alexandra are both in Hanover. They leave Mrs. Hiller's after delivering a little present from Lincoln. Alexandra learns that Carl never received her letter but had learned about Frank's trial from an old copy of the San Francisco paper. Carl hurried back as quickly as possible. Alexandra worries that he left his business, but Carl laughs at her prudency, assuring her that he trusts his partner in everything. Carl says that he would like to spend the winter with Alexandra. He asks her whether she needs him now, and Alexandra says that she needed him terribly when the deaths first happened. After she didn't hear from him for a while, her heart grew harder, but as soon as she received Carl's telegram, she felt the same as she used to. She tells Carl that he is all she has in the world.

Carl has finally achieved some of the dignity that comes with doing his own work. He has a business and affairs to attend to away from Nebraska, and he seems calmer for this reason. He also believes that Alexandra truly needs him now, after suffering the tragedy of losing her brother, so his presence has a sense of purpose.



Alexandra asks Carl whether he understands what happened between Emil and Marie. Carl explains that they probably tried very hard to resist their feelings. It's the reason Emil went away to Mexico, for example. Carl mentions that he had a feeling there was something going on before, at the French Church, but he had gotten so angry over his argument with Lou and Oscar that he forgot to mention it to Alexandra. Carl tells Alexandra not to be so hard on Emil and Marie.

Carl describes the day he saw Emil and Marie hunting **ducks** by the pond, and how he felt they were young and charming and full of grace. He says that it happens sometimes that there are women who spread ruin around them just by being too full of life and love. Alexandra sighs and agrees that people couldn't help loving Marie, but she wishes it had been another boy. She wonders why it had to have been Emil, and Carl answers that Emil and Marie were both the best they had on the prairie.

Alexandra tells Carl that she would like to accompany him to Alaska in the spring, but she will always return to the land. Carl agrees that she belongs to the **land**, now more than ever. Alexandra agrees and says that the land belongs to the future—to the people who love it and understand it. She doesn't understand how she can will the land to Lou and Oscar's children. Carl asks her why she is thinking of such things, and Alexandra responds that it was a dream she had before she went to Lincoln. She says that she will tell him about it after they're married. Alexandra feels that she and Carl will be very happy, since they have been friends a long time and are safe. The two of them enter the house, leaving the Divide behind them.

Carl explains to Alexandra what she cannot understand about Emil and Marie—which is that they did try very hard to resist their feelings, but couldn't resist each other in the end. It's one of the two or three human stories that Carl mentioned on his previous visit, and something that Alexandra, with her focus on the land rather than people, couldn't comprehend.



Carl's mention of the duck scene reminds the reader—and Alexandra—of how wild and joyful Emil and Marie were. They couldn't help their own nature, and they didn't truly believe they would be harmed for their wildness, nor did they enter into the act with bitterness or anger or an intent to hurt others. Marie, especially, couldn't help being warm and generous and attracting attention.



The land is the true protagonist of the novel, and the book opens and closes with mentions of the land. Carl finally acknowledges that Alexandra doesn't really belong to him—she belongs to the land, and because he accepts this, he avoids all the jealousy and drama that has characterized the other romantic relationships in the novel. Alexandra feels safe in this understanding, and she's comforted, also, by the fact that the land will continue to develop and grow, long after she passes away herself.





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