

O Pioneers!

A movie based on the novel by Willa Cather

After viewing, be prepared for a 20-25 point quiz.

Jot down info about the characters listed below as you meet them.

Emil

Marie

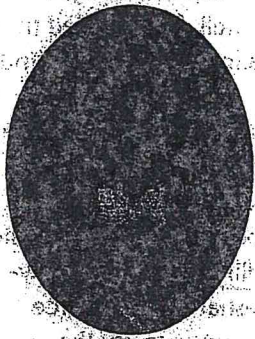
Alexandra

Frank

Ivar

Carl

Lew and Oscar



WILLA CATHER (1873-1947)

Willa Cather—one of America's most popular storytellers of the prairie frontier—was a lifelong pioneer. When she was 9 years old, her family moved from Virginia to Nebraska, a setting that featured prominently in her fiction. Later, Cather helped push back the frontier for women in education and literature. She attended the University of Nebraska and devoted her career to writing when these pursuits were reserved largely for men. In 1908, Cather became the managing editor of McClure's Magazine and spent the rest of her life in New York City. By 1947, she had penned thirteen novels and sixty short stories, many of them portraying accomplished, independent female characters like herself. Time and again, Cather's work probed broad pioneering themes—starting over or blazing new trails.

Willa Cather's home state of Nebraska was first organized as a territory before the Civil War in the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act. Thereafter, settlers began moving to the Great Plains in increasing numbers. To encourage the migration of families, the 1862 Homestead Act granted free land to both men and women. Consequently, a woman in the West could control the title to her own land. In practice, however, the Homestead Act proved a failure. Most Americans who did not already own land were too poor to become farmers—even when they could get land for free. Moving, building a house, and buying farming tools such as plows and wagons often proved too costly. Those who managed such feats often found homesteading a backbreaking, lonely, and financially unrewarding experience. Frequent droughts, floods, and blizzards made agriculture in Nebraska exceedingly difficult in the nineteenth century.

Cather published her novel O Pioneers! in 1913, after she had moved to New York City and agricultural advances had begun to tame the harsh frontier of Nebraska. In this work, Cather draws on her childhood experiences on the desolate plains and describes the landscape and the difficulties early settlers faced in farming. Her story focuses on the Bergson family, immigrants from Sweden who own land on the Divide, an area in Nebraska near the Kansas border. This reading introduces Alexandra, the eldest child of the Bergson family who will soon take control of the farm. By the end of the novel, Alexandra's tenacity and intelligence win out over male jealousy and the seemingly insurmountable odds of "the wild land." Meanwhile, Cather helps mold the ideal of the pioneer spirit, giving readers insight into their motivations, hardships, and dreams.



"[The land] was like a horse that . . . runs wild and kicks things to pieces." SIMILAR

O Pioneers!

Part I: The Wild Land, Chapter 2

On one of the ridges of that wintry waste stood the low log house in which John Bergson was dying. The Bergson homestead was easier to find than many another, because it overlooked Norway Creek, a shallow, muddy stream that sometimes flowed, and sometimes stood still, at the bottom of a winding ravine with steep, shelving sides overgrown with brush and cottonwoods and dwarf ash. This creek gave a sort of identity to the farms that bordered upon it. Of all the bewildering things about a new country, the absence of human landmarks is one of the most depressing and disheartening. The houses on the Divide were small and were usually tucked away in low places; you did not see them until you came directly upon them. Most of them were built of sod itself, and were only the unescapable ground in another form. The roads were but faint tracks in the grass, and the fields were scarcely noticeable. The record of the plow was insignificant like the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races, so indeterminate that they may, after all, be only the markings of glaciers, and not a record of human strivings. *simile*

In eleven long years John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame. It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods; and no one knew when they were likely to come, or why. Mischance hung over it. Its Genius was unfriendly to man. The sick man was feeling this as he lay looking out of the window, after the doctor had left him, on the day following Alexandra's trip to town. There it lay outside his door, the same land, the same lead-colored miles. He knew every ridge and draw and gully between him and the horizon. To the south, his plowed fields; to the east, the sod stables, the cattle corral, the pond—and then the grass. *metaphor*

Bergson went over in his mind the things that held him back. One winter his cattle had perished in a blizzard. The next summer one of his plow horses broke its leg in a prairie-dog hole and had to be shot. Another summer he lost his hogs from cholera, and a valuable stallion died from a rattlesnake bite. Time and again his crops had failed. He had lost two children, boys, that came between Lou and Emil, and there had been the cost of sickness and death. Now, when he had at last struggled out of debt, he was going to die himself. He was only forty-six, and had, of course, counted upon more time.

Bergson had spent his first five years on the Divide getting into debt, and the last six getting out. He had paid off his mortgages and had ended pretty much where he began, with the land. He owned exactly six hundred and forty acres of what stretched outside his door...

John Bergson had the Old-World belief that land, in itself, is desirable. But this land was an enigma. It was like a horse that no one knows how

simile

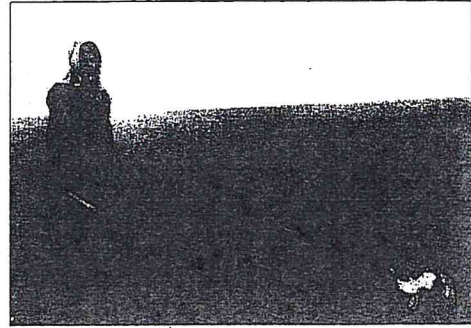
Hardships

to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces. He had an idea that no one understood how to farm it properly, and this he often discussed with Alexandra.

Their neighbors, certainly, knew even less about farming than he did. Many of them had never worked on a farm until they took up their homesteads. They had been *handworkers* at home; tailors, locksmiths, joiners, cigar-makers, etc. Bergson himself had worked in a shipyard.

For weeks, John Bergson had been thinking about these things. . . . He counted the cattle over and over. It diverted him to speculate as to how much weight each of the steers would probably put on by spring. He often called his daughter in to talk to her about this. Before Alexandra was twelve years old, she had begun to be a help to him, and as she grew older he had come to depend more and more upon her resourcefulness and good judgment. . . . It was Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors. It was Alexandra who could always tell about what it had cost to fatten each steer, and who could guess the weight of a hog before it went on the scales closer than John Bergson himself. . . .

Alexandra, her father often said to himself, was like her grandfather; which was his way of saying she was intelligent. . . . In his daughter, John Bergson recognized the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out, that had characterized his father in his better days. He would much rather, of course, have seen this likeness in one of his sons, but it was not a question of choice. As he lay there day after day, he had to accept the situation as it was, and to be thankful that there was one among his children to whom he could entrust the future of his family and the possibilities of his hard-won land. . . .



After a trip to the West, writer Margaret Fuller wrote that it was generally men's choice to migrate, and women followed "as women will, doing their best for affection's sake but too often in heartsickness and weariness." While Fuller's account was often true, many women adapted well to western life as farmers, ranchers, and bronco busters. A settler on the Great Plains (shown above) gathers buffalo chips for fuel.



BRET HARTE (1836-1902)

Bret Harte, born in Albany, New York, became famous for his fiction and poetry about the final settlement of the American frontier. His greatest literary successes occurred after he became editor of The Overland Monthly, a magazine in San Francisco, in 1868.

At that time, San Francisco's population was nearly 250,000, and it was the commercial heart of the Pacific Coast. Since the mid-1850s, Chinese immigrants had begun settling in

*"That isn't
her match in
the county."*

On the cover

Willa Cather's novel made for TV

ON COVER

By MIKE HUGHES
Gannett News Service

There is something special about the eloquent silence of a rural childhood. Author Willa Cather, who grew up on a Nebraska farm, could tell you that a century ago. Jessica Lange, who grew up in smalltown Minnesota, can tell you now.

But Lange — who stars at 8 p.m. Sunday in Cather's *O Pioneers!* — recalls something else: During that childhood, she wanted to get out. "When I was growing up, I had such a yearning for something else," Lange says. "I thought, it's such a huge world out there. I wanted to be part of it."

So she left with a handsome Spaniard. She spent seven years in Paris and New York and

beyond. Then she settled down, became a movie star... and began celebrating the world she had fled.

"When you get to be 30 or 40, you have a different sense of your self," says Lange, 42. "You have this sense of ancestry and passing it on to your children."

She was talking from rural Minnesota, where she often retreats with playwright Sam Shepard and her three children. It is a world Willa Cather might cherish.

The author was born in Virginia in 1873 and moved to a stubborn stretch of Nebraska farmland. She spent most of her adult years in New York City, becoming a journalist, teacher, editor and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist. Still, her fame began with *Pioneers*, retreating to her

childhood. "The country insisted on being the hero of my book," she wrote, "and I did not interfere."

Lange read the book as a school assignment, with no particular reaction. "When I was 15 or 16, I don't think I appreciated the beauty of her writing."

A quarter-century later, the central role seemed perfect. At the core is the unshakable Alexandra Bergson, played by Heather Graham (*Twin Peaks*) and Lange. She conquers the reluctant land; as others leave, she struggles with her own longings.

Now Lange becomes another Alexandra, Cather's eloquent heroine. It brings her back to her northern world, past and present.

A SPECIAL INVITATION FROM YOUR HALLMARK RETAILER TO WATCH JESSICA LANGE IN THE PREMIERE OF "O PIONEERS!"

In her first network television film, Academy Award-winning actress Jessica Lange delivers an inspired and inspiring performance in "O Pioneers!" the 172nd presentation of the Hallmark Hall of Fame. Based on Willa Cather's classic novel, "O Pioneers!" is a portrait of one woman's determination to stay

on the land she loves and make it prosperous, even in the face of extraordinary hardship.

Set at the turn of the century on the unforgiving Nebraska prairie, this is the story of Alexandra Bergson (Lange), the daughter of immigrant Swedish farmers. When it becomes Alexandra's responsibility to preserve the Bergson homestead, she transforms the daunting Nebraska landscape into a bountiful oasis. Her special relationships with a neighbor, Carl Linstrum (David Strathairn), and her youngest brother, Emil (Reed Diamond), provoke feelings of love and loneliness in Alexandra that sorely test her courage.

Don't miss "O Pioneers!" Sunday, February 2 on CBS.

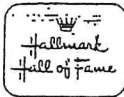
O PIONEERS!



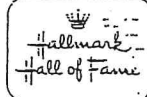
SUNDAY,
FEBRUARY 2
ON CBS



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CLOSED CAPTIONED FOR THE HEARING IMPAIRED



Read: The Pioneers by Charles Mackay (1814-1889)

Rouse! brothers, rouse! we've far to travel,
Free as the winds we love to roam,
Far through the prairie, far through the forest,
Over the mountains we'll find a home.
We cannot breathe in crowded cities, 5
We're strangers to the ways of trade;
We long to feel the grass beneath us,
And ply the hatchet and the spade.

Meadows and hills and ancient woodlands
Offer us pasture, fruit, and corn; 10
Needing our presence, courting our labor;--
Why should we linger like me--forlorn?
We love to hear the ringing rifle,
The smiting axe, the falling tree;--
And though our life be rough and lonely, 15
If it be honest, what care we?

Fair elbow-room for men to thrive in!
Wide elbow-room for work or play!
If cities follow, tracing our footsteps,
Ever to westward shall point the way! 20
Rude though our life, it suits our spirit,
And newborn States in future years
Shall own us founders of a nation--
And bless the hardy pioneers.

PLEASE USE A COLORED PEN or HIGHLIGHTER to mark up poem

1. Underline the **ONE simile**. Hint: it's not in line 12!
2. How many **rhyming SETS (not words)** are there in the poem that would be labeled with the same lower case letters for rhyme scheme? _____
3. Circle two examples of **REPETITION** in the poem.
4. Which mood or emotion is **not** portrayed in the poem?
a. optimism b. enthusiasm c. indifference d. confidence
5. Which **LINE** of the poem best demonstrates **SIBILANCE** based on the total # of sounds? _____
6. Star two examples of **imagery** appealing to two specific **SENSES**.