

Reflections:

*A Student Response Journal for...*

# *O Pioneers!*

*by Willa Cather*

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## **Part I The Wild Land**

### **I**

1. The title of the book you are reading is taken from the poem “Pioneers, O Pioneers!” in Walt Whitman’s famous book, *Leaves of Grass*, which was published in 1900. The first stanza of the poem is as follows:

Come my tan-faced children  
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready  
Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?  
Pioneers, O Pioneers!

Imagine that you are a young pioneer in Nebraska in the late 1800’s. Write a four line poem in which you would tell Walt Whitman how you are living on the prairie.

2. In the opening section of this chapter, we meet the four children who will be the central characters in this novel. Write down each of their full names and a two sentence description of each. You may use the exact words which describe them that you find in the chapter as part of your answer, but be sure to put these exact words in quotation marks.

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3. This novel is set in the state of Nebraska soon after settlers arrive to try to make a living from this empty expanse of land. Alexandra Bergson and her family live on the wind-swept, desolate area of land known as the Divide. Alexandra's father, John, who is now dying, has been trying for eleven years to "tame" the land and try to support his family on it. Mr. Bergson has suffered many setbacks in his attempt to work his land. Willa Cather describes the unfortunate events which have happened to Mr. Bergson. List five of them. Choose one of those events and complete the dialogue you might have had with Mr. Bergson if you had been visiting his home after that sad event.

**You:** So many awful things have happened to you, Mr. Bergson.  
How did you keep on going?

**Mr. Bergson:**

4. Before Mr. Bergson's death, he calls together his children and tells them that he wants Alexandra to be in charge of managing the land. She is the oldest and the child he knows would be very capable of doing that. You might wonder why Alexandra's mother, being the adult who would survive after John's death, would not be in charge of the land. Read the description of Mrs. Bergson in this chapter. Complete the dialogue that Mrs. Bergson might have with Alexandra when they are next alone. In this dialogue, she tells her daughter, humbly, why she feels that her Alexandra's father made the right decision in choosing Alexandra to manage the land.

**Alexandra:** Mother, I hope your feelings are not hurt that Father asked me to make all the decisions about the land. I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt you in any way by this.

**Mother:**

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**III**

5. Six months after their father has died, the four Bergson children and their friend, Carl Linstrum, bravely go to the place where a man named Crazy Ivar lives. Make a list of four things that you feel would be reasons why Ivar had the word “Crazy” attached to his name. After you have finished reading the chapter, write a paragraph about whether you would or would not classify Ivar as “crazy” and why.
6. Alexandra does not have the same feelings about Ivar as do her brothers and Carl. She respects Ivar’s knowledge of animals and farming and has really come to his cave-home to ask his advice. Everyone has known a person who seems very different than the majority of people. Complete the following paragraph which a person who you feel would qualify as “crazy” or different might write:

I don’t understand why everyone thinks I’m “off the wall.” Just because I...

**IV**

7. It is six months after John Bergson’s death, and the land is drying up because of drought. The families trying to make a living on the land in the Divide can no longer hold on. Many sell their land and leave, including Carl Linstrum’s family. Alexandra worries about how “low-spirited” her brothers will be when they learn their good friend will be moving away. Write a letter that Alexandra might write to Carl to take with him when he leaves. In the letter, tell him of her feelings for him and how lost her brothers will also feel without him.
8. The author has drawn for the reader a very clear picture of the way a farm family spent a Sunday in Nebraska in the late 1800’s. Make a list of all the activities they took part in that day.

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**V**

9. As the first part of the novel, "The Wild Land," concludes, you can see how precious the idea of owning, caring for, and "taming" the unforgiving plains of America's early frontier is to Alexandra. She has realistically faced all the work and problems and has not romanticized the land. However, we read that she thinks, "She had never known before how much the country meant to her...She 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." Suppose your best friend does not understand why Alexandra has nothing but the land and making it a success on her mind. Nor can your friend understand why Alexandra does not seem interested in being married and having children. Explain to your friend why you think Alexandra is like this.
10. There are some interesting words in this novel. From the following list, write the eight words you like best. Look up and write one meaning for each. Then, use each one in a sentence which is connected in some way with land. The following is an example:

plank: a stout length of cut timber. I was in the forest the day they sawed down the tree for wood to make their plank floor.

The list of words:

- |              |            |
|--------------|------------|
| 1. tableland | 6. timber  |
| 2. mineral   | 7. hillock |
| 3. prairie   | 8. snipe   |
| 4. homestead | 9. sage    |
| 5. gully     | 10. corral |

## **Part II Neighboring Fields**

### **I**

11. A period of sixteen years has elapsed as Part II of the novel opens. The Divide, once a desolate and dusty stretch of acreage, has undergone a change. Suppose you were a real estate salesperson near the Divide in Nebraska. You receive a letter from an East Coast person named Joseph James who is thinking of coming to that area to take up farming. You are asked what the land there is like. Write an answering letter describing what the land Alexandra is farming is now like, which would begin as follows:

Dear Mr. James,

Thank you for your inquiry. I am happy to tell you...

12. Alexandra's younger brother, Emil, is home from college. While mowing grass in the graveyard, Marie Shabata, his now-married childhood friend, joins him. Marie says, "How brown you've got since you came home. I wish I had an athlete to mow my orchard." If you were an unseen person in the graveyard watching and hearing the conversation between Marie and Emil, what kind of a relationship would you think they had, or wanted to have?