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The cycle of the seasons in selected works of Willa Cather

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THE CYCLE OF THE SEASONS IN SELECTED WORKS OF WILLA CATHER

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INTRODUCTION

Willa Cather's reputation as a coherent symbolist needs no real amplification. Starting with O Pioneers!, her novels are emphatic manifestations of her artistic use of symbolism. Cather's poems and short stories are in some cases earlier evidences of her skill in this area. Moreover, a clearly-observable pattern of symbolism, motif-like in its coherency and regularity, manifests itself throughout her works. Cather, in her poetry, short fiction, and novels, exhibits a sensitivity to the seasonal cycle, an attention which exerts a strong influence upon the total meaning of her art.

That Willa Cather should use the seasons of the year as meaningful devices in her work is not surprising in that many of her best works have settings in the country where the seasons are most evident in the ceaseless, unchanging, cyclical process. In general, a summer setting in one of Cather's works suggests life, vibrancy, and youth growing toward maturity. The harvest of winter-wheat in mid-summer is often a token of nature's promise of fruition in the autumn phase of the cycle. Autumn is the season of full maturity and fruition, a time of storing things up for the winter. Winter, the death and decay stage of the cycle, is pictured in several ways. Sometimes Cather emphasizes the bleakness of bare, gray earth in a snowless winter. The suggestion of this type of situation is of the land being robbed of its ability to be reborn. At other times Cather shows the earth in winter covered by a soft blanket of snow, a blanket that will keep the earth protected from the ravages of death and decay and insure the rebirth

of spring. Spring's rebirth, always pictured as quite brief in Cather's works, nonetheless emphasizes the continuity and essential hopefulness of the cycle, the fact that rebirth always comes after death.

A particular extension of Cather's treatment of the seasons is quite meaningful, at least in several instances. John H. Randall, throughout his long, critical work, The Landscape and the Looking Glass, points to the primitive vegetation myth of the Fisher-King as a foundation for much of Cather's seasonal attentions. Only in the cases of My Ántonia and A Lost Lady, however, is he able to draw any dramatic parallels to the Fisher-King myth of vegetation and its relation to fertility during the King's health, and sterility during his sickness. Only Captain Forrester of A Lost Lady stands as a very informative corollary to the myth of the Fisher-King. Mr. Shimerda of My Ántonia, despite his ill health and his death in winter, lacks the stature of a vegetation god.

Specifically, therefore, Willa Cather's treatment of the seasonal necessity is more casual, quite unrelated, at least in purpose, to the Golden Bough figures of Frazer to which Mr. Randall refers quite casually. Instead, Willa Cather's treatment has an almost unconscious artistry. Her figures, when they surrender themselves to the cyclical necessity of life, fruition, death, and rebirth, typically find themselves at peace with their environments. Especially is this true when they relate the life pattern to its meaningful counterpart in nature, the seasons of the year.

These generalities about Willa Cather's seasonal attentions are almost universally true in her major works. Her poems in April Twilights are rich in seasonal imagery. The Troll Garden, her first volume of short stories, has two stories in particular which dramatize man's relationship to the

seasonal cycle. The novels are a culmination of that motif. In particular, O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, and A Lost Lady exhibit the author's belief in man's need to unite himself with nature as it shows itself in the seasons.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CRUELEST MONTH

Willa Cather's first book, the 1903 April Twilights, is a small volume of poetry. It was later published in 1923 as April Twilights and Other Poems. The later publication included all but a few from the former and added thirteen poems that had been written in the twenty years that intervened between the two.

Critical reactions to this poetry have been rather mixed, most commentaries calling attention to Cather's place as a novelist and to a certain inability in a medium where she was "not at home."[1] We are told, for example, that April Twilights "is a book of poems by a great literary personality, who well deserves the Pulitzer prize--but not by a great poet."[2] It is easy to admit that Miss Cather's poems are not deathless, that they are not the poems that she, perhaps, would have wished them to be. This is not to say, however, that they are not important in establishing some of her basic interests and themes. "The poems of a distinguished novelist are always interesting as revealing the author's moods and attitudes more directly than is generally done in prose fiction, whatever their intrinsic merit as poems. Miss Cather's verses possess this interest, and some of

[1]Eunice Tietjens, "Poetry by a Novelist," Poetry, XXIII (July, 1923), 222.

[2]Ibid., p. 221.

them are in addition agreeable and competent exercises in a medium which was not really hers."[3]

Four poems in particular, "In Rose Time," "Autumn Melody," "Winter at Delphi," and "Fides, Spes," indicate Willa Cather's interest in the seasonal cycle. Her concern for and attention to the seasons is manifest in the mood, structure, and theme of each of the poems. The book itself falls into the spring movement of the cycle, using, as it does, "April," as a designation in the title. Even within this springtime of her efforts, however, is the awareness of life going through a summer of vibrancy, an autumn of maturity and fruition, a winter of death and decay, and a spring full of hope, a hope that is tempered by a kind of sweet sadness in the awareness of impermanence. In this sense, the four poems manifest an interest in the endless seasonal cycle of life, death, and rebirth. It is the brevity of the spring scenes in April Twilights that seems dramatic, particularly if one relates that same brevity to the brevity of the twilight.

Willa Cather's concern with the seasons is evident in her own words. "Writing of Nebraska in the Nation, she said: 'In this newest part of the New World autumn is the season of beauty and sentiment, as spring is in the Old World.' Paradoxically, then, spring signified the beauty of the old and far away, autumn the beauty of the new and far too close (and readers of Willa Cather will find very few, or very brief, spring scenes in her novels; important scenes are in autumn or winter). No wonder that

[3]David Daiches, Willa Cather, A Critical Introduction (Ithaca, 1951) p. 119.

April enchantments were tenuous and bittersweet; they were part of that other beauty one did not have."[4] The four poems, starting with the life and vibrancy of summer and ending with the rebirth of spring, seem to progress naturally in an arrangement that would include the life of "In Rose Time," the fruitfulness and maturity of "Autumn Melody," the death of "Winter at Delphi," and the rebirth of "Fides, Spes."

"In Rose Time,"[5] from the 1903 collection, is a poem that exemplifies the summer of life in the seasonal cycle. A three-stanza selection, it is preceded by the statement, "Oh, this is the joy of the rose:/ That it blows,/ And goes." The short-lived flower suggests the impermanence of summer; the time of vibrancy and life will soon pass.

The mood of the poem, appropriately, is one of sadness--sadness at the shortness of summer. Miss Cather emphasizes the length of winter by the expression, "Winter lasts a five-month." The term "five-month" (as opposed to "five months") is recognizable as similar to the use of "twelve-month" to name the year. The association suggests something of the duration of winter, making it seem to be a continual condition, a lengthy period of time. Spring is but one month long in this poem and is followed by a short but indefinite summer, after which the autumn rye fields blow yellow in the fruition that will be followed by a new death of winter. And thus begins another "five-month" of waiting.

[4]Bernice Slote, "Willa Cather and Her First Book," Introduction to April Twilights (1903) (Lincoln, 1968), p. xxxvi.

[5]The texts of the four poems discussed are to be found in the appendix. Other titles in the volume, "London Roses," "I Sought the Wood in Winter," "Arcadian Winter," and "Prairie Spring," are also illustrative of Miss Cather's concern for the seasonal cycle.

The mood, though still sad, shifts in stanza three to a longing for abandon as the poet contemplates the summer rose and its spendthrift nature and wishes for herself the same madness, a madness that will allow her, too, to burn "myriad sunsets/ In a single hour." The sad mood is reinforced by the obvious inability of the poet to share in the joy of the rose in summer, since she, unlike the rose, cannot forget what is to come as the seasons change.

The structure of the poem reinforces the mood. Just as the poem begins with a statement about the rose's evanescence, it ends with a similar expression: "For this is the joy of the rose:/ That it blows,/ And goes." Between the two explanations of the rose's joy are three eight-line stanzas that illustrate the evanescence of pleasure. In the second stanza, for example, pleasure is said to have a straw thatch. The stone house of sorrow, in the same stanza, is in dramatic contrast.

The theme of "In Rose Time" grows out of the statements about the joy of the rose, statements that also frame the structure. Further, the theme may be thought of as an answer, at least partly, to the sombre mood. The joys of life are brief, says the poet, but still enjoyable, particularly if one remembers the attitude of the rose. Nevertheless, this theme of life's joys does not soften the prevailing mood of sorrow at the evanescence of pleasure.

"Autumn Melody," a poem that did not appear until the 1923 edition, is representative of the mature stage of the seasonal cycle. Its mood, too, is sad in its picture of autumn as a time of parting, even in the midst of fruition. Details which suggest this fruition are the wine, the bees, the grape, and the cup untasted. The mood is intensified in the

memory of "budding time and blowing." The garden, she says, is "sunk in honeyed sleep." The memory of spring storms and midnights in summer further dramatizes her feeling. All of these remembered joys heighten the tension and evoke the mood through a contrast between what was and what is.

The structure of "Autumn Melody" is quite traditional. It is like a ballad, having four quatrains that rhyme abab. Moreover, the structure shows a clear movement from the specific to the general. The poem moves from a series of vivid images of dying, even in the midst of fruitfulness, to a commentary upon these observations.

The commentary points up the poem's theme. All of these pictures of nature going down to an annual death call attention to man's place in the cycle, a place that denies him the complete identification with nature that he wishes for instinctively. Man, suggests Miss Cather, longs for the same peace that nature gains each autumn, but has difficulty gaining that rest because of memory. The tension of the poem, therefore, arises from the contrast between the past and the future. One is reminded of Emily Dickinson's concern with nature in this regard, always observing with a "transport of cordiality" her friends among "nature's people" but never able to forget man's necessary separateness.

"Winter at Delphi," another of the 1903 efforts, dramatizes the poet's awareness of the winter phase of death and decay. Like Thoreau, in his vision of the pond in winter, Miss Cather sees the laurel tree in its sorrow through the months of death, and the poem's mood is this same sorrow. It is the sorrow of Daphne, now a laurel tree, as she contemplates and

regrets her rejection of Apollo, lord of Delphi.[6] The mood of sorrow is amplified so that it becomes despair in the second stanza. Even the hope that the third stanza announces is a shaky hope because of the caprice of Apollo amid all of the weaker, less meaningful signs of spring: the crocus buds, hawthornes, birds, and flowers. Spring, though it may come after winter, cannot dismiss the laurel's knowledge of the cyclical necessity of a returning winter after a new spring, summer, and autumn.

The clear structural arrangement of "Winter at Delphi" into three twelve-line stanzas helps to establish the mood and to suggest the theme. The first stanza, an image of winter, is vivid and precise in its emphasis on the coldness of the season. The second stanza pictures the sorrow of the laurel tree in its existence alone at Delphi. The note of hope in the third stanza, quickly dispelled by the doubt that Apollo will return, is nonetheless an annual hope, a hope that must be qualified by the awareness of the cyclical nature of the seasons. The repetition of the question about the god's return is a structural element that reinforces the prevailing doubt that is already a part of the mood. The theme, closely bound with the seasonal cycle, is one of awareness within doubt. The awareness is that the death of winter leads to the rebirth of spring; the doubt is in the surety of meaningful or genuine rebirth. This doubt is personified by the possible failure of Apollo to return.

Perhaps the cycle of spring is best represented by "Fides, Spes." The mood of this poem, appropriately enough, is at first quite optimistic.

[6]An influence on the writing of "Winter at Delphi" may have been the English painter, Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones. He painted a series entitled "The Seasons" that shows Apollo "with his feet on the clouds; he is laurel-crowned and playing his lyre." Slote, pp. xxviii-xxix.

The underlying sombre note is there only because of the same awareness that characterizes "Winter at Delphi." The optimism springs, first of all, from the joy one feels in observing the fresh signs of nature in the spring. The mad beating of youthful hearts, though contrasting with the "Great hearts cold," helps to sustain some of the optimism. The sombre note is demonstrated by the "comfortless, bare" oaks and sycamores. There is a coldness to age, even in the new season, because of the awareness of impermanence. The general mood of sweet sadness, then, is related to the contrast between the young and the old.

"Fides, Spes" has an interesting structure. It is much like a sonnet. It has fourteen lines, though not of iambic pentameter. The ten-syllable lines vary considerably in meter. The rhyme scheme is not of the standard sonnet, for "Fides, Spes" rhymes in couplets. Neither does "Fides, Spes" submit itself to analysis on the basis of three images in three quatrains with a couplet reflecting on the details of the quatrains. Nor does the octave-sestet division of the Petrarchan sonnet hold true. Rather, "Fides, Spes" seems to follow a two-part structure of seven lines each. The first seven lines are concerned with fresh colors, youth, and smallness. The mood emphasized in this first structural unit is optimistic. The other side of the mood, that sombre note beneath, is implied by the rich colors, age, and size of the last seven lines.

The theme, the faith and hope of the poem's title, grows naturally from the mood and the structure, particularly if one considers hope to contrast with faith in their differing degrees of confidence in the future. The dual theme provokes dual questioning: Can the faith of the old be as

strong as that of the young? Indeed, may the old still have hope? Faith and hope are privileges, even illusions of the young.

Bernice Slote suggests that this poem may have been influenced by two paintings, "Fides" and "Spes": "Fides (Faith) is a woman watching a lamp, though the serpent of doubt is coiled around a staff at the side. Spes (Hope) is a woman with a branch of apple blossoms, pictured against a barred window and distant towers of a walled town."[7] A comparison of "Fides, Spes" to the paintings is warranted by details other than the title, but the parallels are by no means complete. The pink that comes to the apple in the second line is one detail shared with the second painting. The distant towers of the walled town are not unlike the "comfortless, bare" oaks and sycamores. Other details from the paintings are not explicit, but certainly the serpent of doubt finds his way into the mood and theme of the poem.

The present importance of the four poems is their illustration of Miss Cather's early and continual concern for the cyclical drama of the ever recurring seasons. Important also is the place of April Twilights in the spring period of her writings. This spring period of rebirth is reflected in each of the poems, not just in "Fides, Spes." Nor is it true that the season of rebirth is entirely joy-filled. Each of the poems, in any reference to spring, dwells on spring's brevity.

Another significant fact, in any view of these poems, is the bearing that they have on her later works, the short stories and the novels. That one can find the same genius at work is fortunate, but not surprising.

[7]Slote, p. xxix.

"The same humanity, the same sense of drama, the same directness of vision are in this book which are in her prose."[8]

If a literary artist is characterized by a certain unity of purpose and subject over the entire span of a writing career, Miss Cather is that artist. "Nothing in her work is unrelated to the whole. In the poems (as in the first stories, some of which she also rejected), we find the early sketches, the first motifs, the suggested design of her major work."[9]

Quite often, the sketches, motifs, and designs are her concern with the fleeting seasons and years, related, certainly, to her continual nostalgia. E. K. Brown points to "the general note of the elegiac, the ache of things dead and gone, the 'incommunicable past,' which will be struck repeatedly and in particular in My Antonia."[10] Some readers of Willa Cather's novels may have reason to point to a contrast with the poems, since the novels do not repeat the mythological settings of the poems. But there is good refutation for this point of view: "For one thing, with a certain distance of time and experience, she had turned about and found Arcadia in her own West. If Old Romance had been reality, it was finally equated by the new romance of the ordinary, transformed through the imagination. She put it all in, beginning with O Pioneers!--the cyclic seasons [italics mine] and the creative earth, the fields and the farmers, the themes of music as art and inspiration."[11] The four poems selected from

[8]Tietjens, p. 222.

[9]Slote, p. v.

[10]E. K. Brown, Willa Cather, A Critical Biography (New York, 1953), p. 111.

[11]Slote, pp. xliii-xliv.

April Twilights are not untypical of the book. Their selection, on the basis of their matching the four seasons of the year, has the intention of contrivance but not distortion. That Miss Cather's poems exhibit a concern for the cyclic seasons is obvious; that her concern would seem to be a preoccupation is also true.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FORGETFUL SNOW

Willa Cather's first book of collected fiction, The Troll Garden, was published in 1905. These stories are largely concerned with the plight of sensitive or artistic personalities in a Philistine environment. The book includes seven stories that were written between 1903 and 1905; some of them had already appeared in Scribner's, Everybody's Magazine, and McClure's. In 1920 a new collection, Youth and the Bright Medusa, included four of the stories from The Troll Garden with four others that had been written in the fifteen years between the two publications.

The stories in The Troll Garden, though not all relevant to the seasonal motif, often seem winter-like, particularly in Miss Cather's vision of the bleakness of life for some of her characters as they stand in contrast to the artificial, materialistic people around them. The very sterility of many of the characters is emphasized again and again, and the sterility of winter would seem to be related to it.

Two stories especially, "Paul's Case" and "The Sculptor's Funeral," appeared in the 1905 Troll Garden and again in the 1920 Youth and the Bright Medusa. Both stories are informed by the seasonal motif, particularly in that they both dwell upon the season of winter in a special way; both stories show winter as a time of desolation, death, and sterility. Moreover, the stories are similar in their portrayal of sensitive

personalities who are brought to disaster in winter, the season of death and decay.

"The Sculptor's Funeral" was first published in the January, 1905, McClure's Magazine and would seem to be a product of Willa Cather's Nebraska experience. The story has been frequently anthologized and has been generally praised. Sarah Orne Jewett, in a letter to Willa Cather, says that the story "stands alone, a head higher than the rest."[1] The story is not a hymn of praise to pioneer virtues. Stories like that would come later. It is "a powerful story but grim, bitter, vitriolic about the paucity and narrowness of the Midwest environment."[2]

The sculptor of the title, Harvey Merrick, is the artist of so many of Willa Cather's stories, who leaves his small western town, in this case Sand City, Kansas, to fulfill his artistry in the East. Merrick is "the artist [who] is obliged to escape small town conformity to bring about the flowering of his talent."[3] He is brought back to Sand City to be buried. The events surrounding the arrival of his corpse and the reactions of the observers are the basic elements of the story. The observers are, appropriately, the townspeople (especially one of them, Jim Laird), the sculptor's family, and Henry Steavens, the sculptor's apprentice, who has accompanied the corpse and acts as a reflector for the third-person narrator.

[1]Mrs. James T. Fields, ed., The Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1911), pp. 247-248.

[2]Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather, A Memoir (Philadelphia, 1953), p. 57.

[3]Edward Alan and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale, 1962), p. 11.

The story begins at the railroad siding as the official mourners form to await the arrival of the body. The train is late, and when it arrives the townspeople are surprised to find a young man, Henry Steavens, accompanying the corpse. The scene shifts to the Merrick house, and the wake follows. Conversation eventually centers upon what the town considers as the waste that had been the artistic life of Harvey Merrick. The mourners continually refer to their own Philistine values in lamenting the "failure" of "young Harve." All during their caviling Henry Steavens tries in vain to see from where his master's gentleness and sensitivity had been derived. Finally, in reaction to all the callow appraisals of the mourners, Jim Laird lashes out at them in a diatribe which condemns the whole system of values from which they pontificate about the nature of success. Jim Laird, the town lawyer, a man fallen to mammon himself, becomes Willa Cather's voice in an excoriating condemnation of the crassness and sterility of middle-class values.

Never far from the surface of this story is the presence of the winter season. The season forms an appropriate part of the setting for the events which take place in it. More significant, however, is Miss Cather's association of this season with the ideas of desolation, death, and sterility, ideas tightly bound to the characterization and plot of "The Sculptor's Funeral."

The desolation is part of winter in Sand City, Kansas; two characters, Henry Steavens and Jim Laird, reflect this mood. Henry steps off the train into the winter night of the little town. In mourning, he is desolate himself, somewhat bewildered. His sorrow and desolation are not unrelated to the quality of the scene he faces. He has lost his master, and now he

faces the desolate town itself, his master's starting place, and the surrounding winter prairie which is really part of the scene. He rides from the station with the undertaker: "They clambered up over the wheels and drove off in the starlight up the long, white hill toward the town. The lamps in the still village were shining from under the low, snow-burdened roofs; and beyond, on every side, the plains reached out into emptiness, peaceful and wide as the soft sky itself, and wrapped in a tangible, white silence."[4] The "white silence" is the very image of desolation, as Henry Steavens sees it, and he is repelled by what he sees. At one point, after arriving at the Merrick house, Steavens is so affected that he "turn*[s]* away and shut*[s]* his eyes with a shudder of unutterable repulsion" (176). This is the desolation of the cultural wasteland from which Harvey Merrick came, a desolation that is enhanced by the white silence of winter.

Jim Laird has his thoughts about the desolation of the town, too. In a conversation with Steavens, he is prompted to comment on the phenomenon of Harvey Merrick's life, the unusual quality of a man who came from such an environment: "'That is the true and eternal wonder of it, anyway; that it can come even from such a dung heap as this,' the lawyer cried, with a sweeping gesture which seemed to indicate much more than the four walls within which they stood" (179). Jim is expressing his high opinion of the deceased Harvey Merrick, of course, but also he implies a disgust with the whole, desolate scene, the Merrick house and the snow-covered world outside.

[4]Mildred R. Bennett, ed., Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction 1892-1912 (Lincoln, 1965), p. 175. Subsequent references to "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "Paul's Case" are indicated in the text with the page number in parentheses.

The plot, through Miss Cather's choice of events, is as important as the characters in sustaining the mood of desolation. One event especially, the arrival of the mourners at the Merrick house, emphasizes that mood: "When the hearse backed up to a wooden sidewalk before a naked, weather-beaten frame house, the same composite, ill-defined group that had stood upon the station siding was huddled about the gate. The front yard was an icy swamp, and a couple of warped planks, extending from the sidewalk to the door, made a sort of rickety footbridge. The gate hung on one hinge, and was opened wide with difficulty" (175). The desolation of this picture is, in part, dependent upon the winter season: the "naked house" is isolated in the midst of an "icy swamp." The mourners are "huddled about the gate." The "footbridge" from the house to the sidewalk further dramatizes the isolation.

Desolate also is another brief episode, at the beginning of the story, as the official mourners await the train, "their shoulders screwed up with the cold" (173). The sky is clear, but "snow had fallen thick over everything" (173). The snow, the rickety station, the necessity of waiting for a late train all contribute to the winter desolation of the scene. When the train arrives, it comes "from out the eastward marsh lands" (174). It makes its way to town "under the long lines of shivering poplars that sentineled the meadows, the escaping steam hanging in grey masses against the pale sky and blotting out the Milky Way" (174). The marshes form a kind of barrier between the town and the east, further isolating the scene and making it more desolate. The poplars are shivering; even the Milky Way is blotted out. It is directly after this desolate arrival that Henry Steavens steps from the train and the main events of the story begin.

Death is another prominent feature of "The Sculptor's Funeral." The very title speaks of death. Death is the reason for the story, and death is closely related to the winter season through the events of the story. The two main characters are aware of the relationship between winter and death. Henry Steavens' every thought concerns the death of his beloved master and Merrick's relationship to Sand City. He is also immediately aware of an environment that seems dead, just as is his master. Jim Laird, too, is related to death. He is as closely related to the dead man as Henry is, having gone east to school with Harvey. Only Jim has fared differently. Spiritually dead all these twenty years, he is an example of one who succumbs to the stifling, deadening effect of a Sand City. That he is something of a foil to Harvey Merrick is demonstrated, not only by his former close relationship to him and the fact of spiritual death, but also by the nature of Laird's own death: "Jim got the cold he died of driving across the Colorado mountains to defend one of Phelps's sons who had got into trouble out there by cutting government timber" (185). Thus, both Harvey Merrick and Jim Laird die in the midst of winter. Harvey's had been a result of pneumonia and Jim's a cold. Between these two deaths the events of the narrative are pregnant with the trappings of death. The longest episode in the story, the wake, is the vigil of death by the dead in spirit, and Jim Laird's speech, within the episode, emphasizes the spiritual death of the town. The winter setting is thus literal and symbolic.

Sterility in winter is an aspect of "The Sculptor's Funeral" that seems very meaningful. The townspeople are sterile in their thoughts: there is no new life here. They have produced nothing really, most of their children

having failed in one way or another. Neither do Henry and Jim have children. Harvey Merrick himself, the only one from the town who has ever amounted to anything, has produced no offspring, but he has produced great works of art. Even the source of Harvey's own life, his mother, with "teeth that could tear" (176), is in no way a traditional image of motherhood. Dorothy Van Ghent has observed, "There, over the corpse the observer sees the mother, the voracious mother . . . frenzied in her sterility . . . ."[5] Particularly dramatic in her characterization of the mother, Miss Cather introduces her when the hearse backs up to the house: "The grating sound made by the casket, as it was drawn from the hearse, was answered by a scream from the house; the front door was wrenched open, and a tall, corpulent woman rushed out bareheaded into the snow and flung herself upon the coffin, shrieking: 'My boy, my boy! And this is how you've come home to me'" (175-176). Sterility's relationship to winter is suggested by several details of this gruesome scene. The scream of the mother is juxtaposed with the grating sound of the coffin being pulled from the hearse. Mother, coffin, and the snow of winter are juxtaposed also: bareheaded, she rushes into the snow and "[flings] herself upon the coffin."

The winter setting of "The Sculptor's Funeral" is thus an essential element of the story, an element that helps communicate the meaning of the story. Moreover, an important aspect of this meaning is the relation of the setting to the seasonal cycle. The cycle is represented dramatically by the snow, cold, and barrenness of the winter.

[5]Dorothy Van Ghent, Willa Cather (Minneapolis, 1964), p. 12.

The first appearance of "Paul's Case" was in The Troll Garden in 1905. The story appeared in the May McClure's, too, with several changes, but in subsequent printings Miss Cather restored the original. When the story appeared again in the 1920 Youth and the Bright Medusa, the subtitle, "A Study in Temperament," had been dropped, and there was some minor revision.[6]

Unlike "The Sculptor's Funeral," "Paul's Case" derives from Willa Cather's years as a teacher in Pittsburgh. Unlike the sculptor, Paul is not an artist but merely a creature of feeling, nonetheless restricted by an oppressive, middle-class environment which he must escape.[7] He is a romantic but by no means a creative person. He is something of a rebel and a nonconformist, but in no way does he have the discipline to do anything but escape and indulge his senses.

The story moves smoothly from Pittsburgh, to New York, to death in winter. In his Pittsburgh high school, Paul antagonizes his teachers by his flippant and disrespectful attitude. He considers himself above them, even to the point of aversion. He manifests his distaste for them by outright insult, impertinent comment, and inattention. The story opens with Paul's arraignment before the school principal for these habits and moves on to the reason for his behavior, his near obsession with the sense appeal of his job: Paul is an usher at Carnegie Hall.

Eventually, Paul finds himself in trouble with his father and the school authorities because of the wild stories he feels compelled to tell of his close associations with actors and actresses. It is agreed that he

[6]Bennett, p. 589. The analysis of "Paul's Case" in this paper uses the 1905 text.

[7]Van Ghent, p. 10.

defer school to work as a "cash boy" for a large concern in Pittsburgh. Not at all affected by these measures, Paul steals a thousand dollars and flees to New York where, for more than a week, he lives the life of a wealthy, self-indulgent aesthete.

The newspapers quickly pick up the story of the boy who has run off, and Paul learns through them that reality and Cordelia Street are closing in on him. He contemplates the purposive suicide of a pistol but finally throws himself beneath a train.

Again, the seasonal motif is evident in the story of Paul. The phase of the cycle that predominates is winter, along with a longing for the rebirth of spring and the abandon of summer. Sterility and barrenness seem characteristic of the winter setting and of the Philistine environment of the story. The winter setting also provides a suitable time for Paul's surrender to death and the endless cycle of existence. Paul's life in Pittsburgh is paralleled by the sterility and barrenness of winter. His desires dwell figuratively on the coming of spring and summer. His death is his surrender to the inevitable, cyclic nature of the pattern of life, his awareness that even in spring one may know that winter has just passed and will come again.

Sterility is characteristic of life in Paul's part of town, Cordelia Street. He "grows up in the comparable tastelessness and esthetic barrenness of the middle class city."[8] His life at school and on Cordelia Street prompts his escape into the make-believe world of the opera where he can dream himself into "a tropical world of shiny, glistening surfaces and basking ease" (247).

[8]Bloom, p. 11.

The sterility of Paul's life on Cordelia Street is related to seasonal descriptions just as his wish for a "tropical world" is an indication of his desire for a continual warm season. The Pittsburgh portion of the story takes place in late autumn and early winter. Even the significance of late autumn is not neglected by the author, even if ironically. At one point, early in the story, Cather sets the scene for a Sunday afternoon by revealing that "the sodden November chill was broken by the last flash of autumnal summer" (249). Juxtaposed with this image of final autumn fruition, a "fraud that cannot cheat the bee," is an account of a young man, a cash boy, obviously intended as a foil for Paul. "He happened to be the young man who was daily held up to Paul as a model, and after whom it was his father's dearest hope that he would pattern" (250). The young man's success, a safe job, near-sighted wife, and child--a kind of fruition--is not the fulfillment that Paul yearns for, for Paul "had no mind for the cash-boy stage" (250). The only thing appealing to Paul is the young man's account of a brilliant employer who cruises the Mediterranean, escaping the cycle of life, fruition, death and rebirth by staying always in a "tropical world" where it is always spring or summer.

The irony of Paul's experience in a sterile environment and his hate for the "prosy men who never wore frock coats" (252) is his own very real cultural sterility. He is not really artistically inclined. His teachers think that bad reading habits have affected him, "but the truth was that he scarcely ever read at all" (252). There are no books around him that are lewd, "and as for reading the novels that some of his friends urged upon him--well, he got what he wanted much more quickly from music; any sort of music, from an orchestra to a barrel organ" (252). Paul is not

even discriminating; he has no taste. "He had no desire to become an actor, any more than he had to become a musician. He felt no necessity to do any of these things; what he wanted was to see, to be in the atmosphere, float on the wave of it, to be carried out, blue league after blue league, away from everything" (252). Paul is a complete sensualist, a creature of feeling, who neither creates nor has any desire to. His failure to be part of the creative world is token of his personal sterility.

Paul's desire to be wrapped continually in the enchantments of the fairy tale world of music is related to the seasonal motif. Paul's love for the world of music is tied to his longing to be caught up in a "tropical world" of romance and fantasy, a world where the seasonal cycle may be cheated because of the ever-present spring and summer. Even the contrasts of his real world highlight his desire: while he waits for a glamorous actress to grace his adoring eyes, he stands "in the slush of the gravel driveway" (247). Even as he looks upon the Schenley Hotel and dreams of being caught up in the spirit and presence of its illustrious guests, "mocking spirits stood guard at the doors, and, as the rain beat in his face, Paul wondered whether he were destined always to shiver in the black night outside, looking up at it" (247).

Paul's surrender in death to "the immense design of things" (261) begins, really, with his escape from Pittsburgh. The seasonal motif is present in the details of his escape. This second section of the story begins with an "east bound train . . . ploughing through a January snow-storm" (253) and ends with Paul beneath the wheels of another train that rolls west toward Pittsburgh in the snow. Between these two events are the days and nights of sense gratification in New York. Cather's description

of New York seems purposeful, particularly as it contrasts with her Pittsburgh descriptions; E. K. Brown sees this contrast between her treatment of the two cities and says that "New York is drawn in a contrasting manner, for which there is not a parallel in any of the other stories, as a dream city, snow-covered, with a beautiful thick impressionistic haziness that suits the setting for the dreamlike climax of Paul's life."[9] The "contrasting manner" is to Pittsburgh and its bleakness, but the New York glamour to which Paul escapes is no less bleak than that of Pittsburgh.

The New York experience is merely an extended debauch like his nights at Carnegie Hall. It is not the real thing; the winter snow merely provides a convenient white blanket to cover the bleakness. The characteristic, sad, even ironic thing about Paul's experience is his impatience, his need for immediate pleasure. Paul "settles" for New York with flowers in his room, silk underwear, the music from an orchestra in a hotel dining room. This is enough for him: the sham experience of pretending that winter is not howling outside. Occasionally he does think of what it would have been like to have achieved real escape: "He reflected drowsily, to the swell of the music and the chill sweetness of his wine, that he might have caught an outbound steamer and been well out of their clutches before now. But the other side of the world had seemed too far away and too uncertain then; he could not have waited for it; his need had been too sharp" (259). Thus Paul finds himself unable to escape the cyclic necessity of winter and surrenders to it, appropriately, beneath the wheels of the

[9]E. K. Brown, Willa Cather, A Critical Biography (New York, 1953), p. 122.

train roaring back to Pittsburgh, for now "all the world had become Cordelia Street" (259).

A significant aspect of Paul's attitude to the seasons is to be seen in his habitual red carnation. As a symbol, it is impressive enough as an embodiment of his defiant attitude toward both his teachers and the bleak world that he confronts. But the carnation is much more than a symbol of Paul's attitude in such a narrow sense; it is, rather, his defiant shout at the "design of things," the cyclic necessity of existence. Paul's awareness of the cyclic necessity is demonstrated by what goes through his mind before his death: "The carnations in his coat were drooping with the cold, he noticed; their red glory all over. It occurred to him that all the flowers he had seen in the glass cases that first night must have gone the same way, long before this. It was only one splendid breath they had, in spite of their brave mockery at the winter outside the glass; and it was a losing game in the end, it seemed, this revolt against the homilies by which the world is run. Paul took one of the blossoms carefully from his coat and scooped a little hole in the snow, where he covered it up. Then he dozed awhile from his weak condition, seemingly insensible to the cold" (260). Paul's red glory is over too. His brave mockery of winter outside the glass of the restaurant window is like that of the flowers; his too is a losing game. The burial of the carnation in the snow is symbolic of his surrender to winter, a desire to be covered up by the blanket that hides the bleakness and protects the earth so that life may be renewed in the spring. Paul's insensibility to the cold may show an escape from the cyclic necessity of the seasons, but, more accurately, he is caught up in the cycle: as he dies, "there flashe[s] through his brain, clearer than

ever before, the blue of Adriatic water, the yellow of Algerian sands" (260). Even as Paul dies in winter, Cather juxtaposes his ideal of escape from winter with a rebirth in a "tropical world."

The seasonal cycle in "Paul's Case" is thus a significant motif in the narrative. Paul is not just "any high school boy, hungry for luxury and self expression, who lost his sense of proportion and came to a tragic end."[10] He is Miss Cather's portrait of a personality, "a study in temperament." Paul is a tragic figure whose struggle against the eternal cycle of the seasons is Willa Cather's symbolic representation of the man in western America who continually mounts a failing struggle against the lamentable facts of his existence.

The seasonal motifs, in both "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "Paul's Case," are most evident in the winter settings. Winter, in both stories, dramatizes the desolation and bleakness of an unbearable environment, the sterility and barrenness of an insignificant existence, and the final surrender to death and the seasonal cycle. Cather's attention to the seasonal motif in these two stories seems almost indispensable. In her novels she continues this attention and expands it, often making it the controlling pattern of the narrative.

[10]Sergeant, p. 67.

CHAPTER THREE

ROOTS THAT CLUTCH

Willa Cather's second novel, "the first affirmative story she ever wrote about Nebraska,"[1] was O Pioneers!. The title, from Whitman's famous lyric, refers to those farmers on the western prairie who broke the land and made it fruitful. The book is concerned not only with their triumph over the land, but also with their human concerns, notably love. Moreover, both the land and the love story are continually related to the seasonal cycle.

Prefixed to all editions of the novel after the first one in 1913 was a poem, "Prairie Spring."

> Evening and the flat land,
> Rich and somber and always silent;
> The miles of fresh-plowed soil,
> Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness;
> The growing wheat, the growing weeds,
> The toiling horses, the tired men;
> The long, empty roads,
> Sullen fires of sunset, fading,
> The eternal, unresponsive sky.
> Against all this, Youth,
> Flaming like the wild roses,
> Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
> Flashing like a star out of the twilight;
> Youth with its insupportable sweetness,
> Its fierce necessity,
> Its sharp desire;
> Singing and singing,
> Out of the lips of silence,
> Out of the earthy dusk.

[1]John H. Randall, The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston, 1960), p. 58.

The poem, a 1912 composition and a 1923 addendum to April Twilights, presents the major ideas of the novel.[2] It also indicates a return to the spring cycle of her 1903 poems. Appropriately the continual concern of the novel itself is with new life, particularly as the rebirth of life in the spring is tied to an awareness of the land's cyclical fruitfulness.

The story begins, however, in winter. Indeed, Part One, "The Wild Land," is a sixteen-year winter of waiting for spring and summer. A graphic, suggestive picture of winter is presented in the first paragraph:

> One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away. A mist of fine snowflakes was curling and eddying about the cluster of low drab buildings huddled on the gray prairie, under a gray sky. The dwelling-houses were set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod; some of them looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves, headed straight for the open plain. None of them had any appearance of permanence, and the howling wind blew under them as well as over them. The main street was a deeply rutted road, now frozen hard, which ran from the squat red railway station and the grain "elevator" at the north end of the town to the lumber yard and the horse pond at the south end. On either side of this road straggled two uneven rows of wooden buildings: the general merchandise stores, the two banks, the drug store, the feed store, the saloon, the post-office. The board sidewalks were gray with trampled snow, but at two o'clock in the afternoon the shopkeepers, having come back from dinner, were keeping well behind their frosty windows. The children were all in school, and there was nobody abroad in the streets but a few rough-looking countrymen in coarse overcoats, with their long caps pulled down to their noses. Some of them had brought their wives to town, and now and then a red or a plaid shawl flashed out of one store into the shelter of another. At the hitch bars along the street a few heavy work-horses, harnessed to farm wagons, shivered under their blankets. About the station everything was quiet, for there would not be another train in until night.[3]

[2] Ibid., p. 64.

[3] Willa Cather, O Pioneers! (Boston, 1941), pp. 3-4. Subsequent references are indicated in the text with the page number in parentheses.

The winter stage of the seasonal cycle reigns over the town, and Miss Cather's description, with its emphasis upon the winter, is particularly dramatic at the beginning of the story. "The opening of the novel is quite carefully wrought, and the quiet close of the paragraph--'About the station everything was quiet, for there would not be another train in until night'--is certainly not the result of automatic writing. It is the result of a deeply felt emotional pattern manifesting itself not unconsciously but easily in appropriate images and prose rhythms."[4]

The setting is an appropriate prelude for the introduction of the novel's main character, Alexandra Bergson, who is making purchases in the little town prior to returning to the family farm. Alexandra is the eldest child of John Bergson, a Swedish immigrant who farms 640 acres near Hanover. With her younger brother, Emil, Alexandra returns to the farm. Carl Linstrom, a neighboring farm boy, accompanies them. As they jolt along in the old farm wagon, the scene is even more desolate than the town: "The little town behind them had vanished as if it had never been, had fallen behind the swell of the prairie, and the stern frozen country received them into its bosom. The homesteads were few and far apart; here and there a windmill gaunt against the sky, a sod house crouching in a hollow" (15). The land, like the town, seems dead during the season of death.

Immediately juxtaposed against the great death of nature is the condition of Alexandra's father: "On one of the ridges of that wintry waste stood the low log house in which John Bergson was dying" (19). John Bergson has lived through eleven years of tragedy on the land. His

[4]David Daiches, Willa Cather, A Critical Introduction (New York, 1962), p. 23.

livestock and his crops have failed. Two sons have died. "Now, when he had at last struggled out of debt, he was going to die himself" (21). He had come to America to make up for misfortune in Sweden, but he dies without wringing anything from the land. David Daiches suggests that "his death symbolically proclaims that the new world will not respond fully to those who come to it in order to get back what they lost elsewhere, but only to those who see it for what it is and meet it on its own terms."[5] John's daughter Alexandra is the person who will meet it on its own terms. One of its terms seems to be a recognition of the cyclical nature of the seasons and a willingness to live in harmony with nature, the physical embodiment of the cycle. Miss Cather "leaves [John Bergson] almost abruptly, consigning [him] to decay and death, and turns to [his] children to study the much more complex phenomenon of their merging of cultures and backgrounds."[6]

Before John Bergson dies, he makes known his wish that Alexandra should guide her younger brothers in all things. "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" (24). Alexandra's rather dull brothers, Lou and Oscar, indicate their acceptance of his death-bed request. "'Alexandra is the oldest,'" [he tells them] "'and she knows all my wishes. She will do the best she can. If she makes mistakes, she will not make so many as I have made. When you marry, and want a house of your own, the land will be divided fairly, according to the courts'" (27). Thus, John Bergson's death in January, consistent with the

[5] Ibid., p. 24.

[6] Ibid., p. 21.

death phase of the seasonal cycle, is marked by his division of the life-giving land among his children.

The rest of Part One is devoted to the struggles of Alexandra as she prods her reluctant brothers to new ways. First, at the suggestion of Crazy Ivar, a local eccentric, she institutes some radical changes in the keeping of hogs. Her brothers object strenuously, but she triumphs. Next, after a three-year period of prosperity and another three years of famine, she urges her brothers to buy more land, the land of those who have been beaten by the land. Even Carl Linstrom's father has given up. Carl's subsequent departure saddens Alexandra and frightens her brothers, just as the news of any farmer's defeat frightens them. They want to leave the cruel "Divide," and buy river land, land that they have heard is so productive.

Alexandra agrees to investigate the boys' proposal, admitting that perhaps she is "'too set against making a change'" (62). She spends five days looking at the river farms and finds them either unavailable or poor. "'They can always scrape along down there, but they can never do anything big'" (64). She begins her journey back to the high land, determined to make it prosper. As if in answer to her determination, the very spirit of the land replies:

> When the road began to climb the first long swells of the Divide, Alexandra hummed an old Swedish hymn, and Emil wondered why his sister looked so happy. Her face was so radiant that he felt shy about asking her. For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman (65).

Alexandra, in a sense, has given herself to the land and to the controlling force of the land by looking upon it with love. She has made herself one with its moods and whims, no small part of which are demonstrated in the seasons which come and go and come again.

Alexandra's experience has been almost mystical. It is her experience that gives her the ability to persuade her brothers, and it seems that the reality of her experience shines out of her as she bends them to her will. They agree reluctantly, and "The Wild Land" closes with Alexandra's confidence in the future:

> Alexandra drew her shawl closer about her and stood leaning against the frame of the mill, looking at the stars which glittered so keenly through the frosty autumn air. She always loved to watch them, to think of their vastness and distance, and of their ordered march. It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security. That night she had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it. Even her talk with the boys had not taken away the feeling that had overwhelmed her when she drove back to the Divide that afternoon. 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 (70-71).

The strength Alexandra receives from the "great operations of nature," and her contemplation "of the law that lay behind them" is not unrelated to the cyclical necessity of the seasons to which, in effect, she has surrendered herself by deciding to love the land rather than do battle with it. Cather pictures the land as a sleeping source of plenty that will awaken to a rebirth in the spring. "As though to propitiate the gods of grubby existence, she seems to say there is something genii-like in the land and at the appropriate time it will respond to man's desire with a shower of riches."[7]

[7]Edward Alan and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale, 1962), p. 34.

Part Two of O Pioneers!, entitled "Neighboring Fields," begins sixteen years after the death of John Bergson. The land, after Alexandra's long winter of waiting faithfully, has come to life again. Included in "Neighboring Fields" are the rebirth of spring, the heady, spontaneous life of summer, and the fruition of autumn, "the time of parting," as Willa Cather described it in "Autumn Melody."

The Bergson family has changed as all families do. Alexandra, though, is essentially the same. Emil, the youngest of the three boys, is a young man, home now from the University. Lou and Oscar have married, unwisely perhaps, but so have their wives, really.

Cather begins this section by calling attention to the great changes in the land. "She now uses geometrical imagery and emphasizes its symmetry, signifying that nature has been reduced to order by the human hand."[8] She calls the land "a vast checker-board, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light" (75). Immediately following this general description Miss Cather focuses in on a single field for a panegyric to spring: "There are few scenes more gratifying than a spring plowing in that country, where the furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length, and the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness" (76). Spring, in this description, is dramatized as the time of rebirth by the strong emphasis on fertility and growth as things being unlocked from the land that now eagerly responds,

[8]Randall, p. 71.

ready to give without hesitancy: "There is something frank and joyous and young in the open face of the country. It gives itself ungrudgingly to the moods of the season, holding nothing back" (76).

The events of this section, unlike those of "The Wild Land," are concerned with the more leisurely aspects of human relationships--the kind of associations that are possible now that Alexandra has tamed the land. These relationships and their results are related somewhat to the seasonal motif, especially in that the attitudes of the characters may be compared to man's proper response to the cycle of seasons; the proper response here seems to be one of patience, serenity, and detachment. Alexandra, of course, responds properly. Lou and Oscar, characteristically, cannot submit to the seasonal necessity. Emil, the youngest brother, seems submissive, notably because of his closeness to Alexandra. His departure, however, is a sign of his rebellion, his unwillingness to submit to the oncoming winter of unfulfilled love.

The love story begins in this section with the friendship of Emil and Marie Shabata. The first episode, appropriate as an echo of earlier events and as a foreshadowing of later ones, is in the Norwegian graveyard where Emil is using a scythe to cut down the high grass that grows from John Bergson's grave. The grass is not unlike the grave grass that Walt Whitman uses so powerfully in Leaves of Grass to dramatize the annual rebirth from death. Soon Emil is interrupted by Marie Shabata, the young and pretty wife of Frank Shabata, a rather dark and moody man. The episode is notable for Marie's inappropriate flirting: "'How brown you've got since you came home. I wish I had an athlete to mow my orchard. I get wet to my knees when I go down to pick cherries'" (81). Emil, not improperly, indicates a

willingness to be helpful, and her reply reinforces Cather's picture of her as flirtatious: "'Will you? Oh, there's a good boy!' She turned her head to him with a quick, bright smile. He felt it rather than saw it. Indeed, he had looked away with the purpose of not seeing it" (81). Emil is not unaware of her; in fact, he seems to fight the desire to respond to her flirting by trying to ignore it. Their conversation shifts to the impending marriage of two friends, Amédée and Angélique, and to the prospect of an enjoyable party which Marie fears missing because her husband is angered at her for lending a saddle to a neighbor. Her concern with the dance that will follow the supper further emphasizes her vivaciousness, and her admonition to Emil not to dance with her more than several times, because of the way people looked at them the last time, helps to indicate that the nature of their friendship is certainly more than casual. Emil agrees reluctantly, and she drives him back to the farm.

The farm has changed: "There were so many sheds and outbuildings grouped about [the house] that the place looked not unlike a tiny village. A stranger, approaching it, could not help noticing the beauty and fruitfulness of the outlying fields" (83). The farm house stands in contrast to the land. It is described as "curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort" (83). Emphatically, Miss Cather relates the difference to Alexandra's personality. "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" (84).

Alexandra is eating dinner at a long table with her hired men when Emil comes in. Crazy Ivar, the Russian immigrant who had advised her in the past, is at the table. She has taken him in since he has lost his land through mismanagement twelve years ago, and he, we learn, is the cause

of a present conflict between Alexandra and her brothers, Lou and Oscar. They have expressed fear that Ivar will do some harm during one of his spells, and therefore they want him put in an asylum. Ivar knows of their attitude and after dinner tells his story to Alexandra. She reassures him and compares his differences to her own differences, speculating that some people would want to put her in an asylum for installing a silo on her land. The conflict here is the old one between her and her brothers. Ivar, in a way, represents the willingness to change old ways. Oscar and Lou are not about to. It was Ivar who had encouraged a change in hog-keeping practices. They had resisted then. Ivar is almost a mystic in what others report as his "spells." He is close to nature, refusing even to live in human habitations: he sleeps in the barn. Alexandra's protection of Ivar is akin to her oneness with nature and her willingness to make her farm work by following his advice about the workings of nature.

The confrontation over Ivar comes during a family dinner on the day of Amédée's wedding. Emil is at the wedding and therefore not home for dinner. Neither is Oscar's wife present. But Lou is there with his wife and daughter Milly, and Oscar is there with his four boys. The confrontation is fairly insignificant except that it deepens the enmity between Alexandra and her brothers. She prevails and skillfully turns the conversation to the subject of a piano for Milly. The subject of Ivar is dropped. The characterization of Lou and Oscar in this episode is fairly significant. They are no different than they were in Part One of the novel. "After dinner Lou and Oscar went to the orchard to pick cherries--they had neither of them had the patience to grow an orchard of their own" (104). Even back in Part One Oscar's "love of routine [had] amounted to a vice" (55). In

those days he went so far as "to begin his corn-planting at the same time every year, whether the season were backward or forward" (56). Lou, when he was younger, had always been characterized by such ridiculous practices as mending fences when the wheat demanded harvesting. The boys have not changed in sixteen years; they have simply "grown to be more and more like themselves" (98). Lou and Oscar contrast with Alexandra because of their almost perverse unwillingness to adapt themselves to the seasonal cycle. Oscar's corn-planting stubbornness was a way of resisting the cycle and always resulted in a poor harvest. Lou's failure to obey the seasonal necessity of harvest usually put him in bed from the overwork of trying to catch up with the season of fruition. Now, sixteen years later, their impatience with putting in orchards stands as a symbol of their perennial and characteristic unwillingness to work with nature and the seasons. Even their intolerance for Ivar is symbolic of their impatience with nature.

While the boys and their families are still at Alexandra's farm, a buggy drives up to the house. It is Carl Linstrum, the Bergson's childhood friend. He is on his way to Seattle and then to Alaska. His ambition to be an artist has turned to the unprofitable occupation of engraver, and he intends to help himself financially by going to the goldfields. Even Oscar's comment has some interest: "'Turrible cold winters, there, I hear,' remarked Oscar. 'I thought people went up there in the spring'" (109). The boys leave for home presently, obviously disapproving of Carl's willingness to stay a few days. Later that day Carl expresses to Alexandra his awe at the change in the land and wonders how she has done it. "'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. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still'" (116). Alexandra gives the land credit for her own willingness to adapt to the cycle. They spend the rest of the evening speculating about things great and small, especially about the things that make a man happy and fulfilled.

Carl's return is like the rebirth of spring and the new, vibrant life of summer. A particular episode, a visit to the former Linstrum farm, dramatizes Carl's rebirth. On the Wednesday after his arrival he and Alexandra visit Marie Shabata and sit talking in the old Linstrum orchard. After pleasantries and reminiscences Marie goes away for a moment and returns with a bough from an apricot tree. The tree, Alexandra recalls, is one of the products of a day in Hanover at the circus. Apricots that she and Carl had bought on that day supplied the seeds from which the trees grew. The apricots are the early fruit that symbolize Carl's rebirth on the Divide. He stays for a month, not just a few days.

With something of an attachment already beginning between Alexandra and Carl, the emphasis of "Neighboring Fields" returns to the more fully developed love of Emil and Marie. On the day after Alexandra's visit, Frank Shabata goes to spend the day at the saloon, giving the dampness of the early summer ground as an excuse for not plowing that day. Marie, making butter in the churn, hears the sound of whetstone against scythe and goes to the orchard where Emil, she knows, is mowing the high grass. With some artifice, she secures a pail and starts for the orchard, ostensibly to pick cherries. After some cherry picking, some grass mowing, and some idle conversation, Emil and Marie, at Emil's instigation, begin to

speak of their relationship. He protests her pretense, her refusal or failure to understand his love for her: "If you won't understand, you know, I could make you" (157)! Marie knows, but now that she is forced to acknowledge her awareness, she is lost. "Marie clasped her hands and started up from her seat. She had grown pale and her eyes were shining with excitement and distress" (157). Now, with admission, the illusion is gone; there is no more innocence of flirtation. The summer of spontaneity and life has come, and the tentative spirit of spring must give way to it. Marie's convictions forbid pursuing things any more. Her religion forbids divorce as well as the infidelity for which her temperament longs. Weeping, she returns to the house, knowing that the springtime of flirtation is over and that things might not go beyond flirtation.

As if to reinforce Emil's sense of loss, Cather places him in a situation of extreme discomfort, a circumstance that impels him to an important decision. Toward the end of the summer, with autumn and denied fruition approaching, he and Carl Linstrum attend a fair at the French Catholic Church. Emil's old friend Amédée Chevalier is there with his recently wed wife Angélique. Their happiness and confidence in the future heighten Emil's despair, especially when they encourage him to marry soon, even offering to supply him with a girl. Marie is at the fair, too, but Emil doesn't see her until a moment that seems strangely violent: He and Emil, contesting who can jump highest, finish with Emil the victor. Angélique teases Emil until he teases her with a kiss and carries her about the lawn, pretending to steal her away from Amédée. "Not until he saw Marie Shabata's tiger eyes flashing from the gloom of the basement doorway did he hand the

disheveled bride over to her husband" (163). Marie seems possessive, a wild creature who will neither turn him loose nor let him go.

As Emil and Carl enjoy themselves at the fair, Alexandra is confronted again by Lou and Oscar. They protest her closeness with Carl and insist that she break off the relationship that seems to be developing. She reproves them with no mercy and points up their avarice for her land, the main item of their concern anyway. This argument results in a significant break between them, far deeper than any of the other disagreements. The departure of Oscar and Lou is marked by the return of Emil and Carl from the fair. The two brothers persuade Carl to come with them for a talk, and Emil comes into the house. He reveals to Alexandra his intention of going to Mexico but covers his real motive by pretending to join an electrical plant that is run by a friend from the University. Shortly thereafter, Carl returns and admits that he, too, must leave. He has talked to Oscar and Lou and finds himself unable to face up to their criticism.

Thus, with the autumn phase of the cycle once more returning, Alexandra is left alone. Emil's escape may be interpreted as an attempt to avoid the necessity of the dark autumn and winter phases of the cycle, especially in that he leaves for Mexico, a semi-tropical environment where the seasonal cycle may be cheated. Carl's decision to depart immediately for Alaska contrasts with his earlier plan to spend the winter in Seattle first; and his promise to return after a year marks him as one who is resigned to the necessity of ups and downs, the cyclical necessity of facing the winter. Emil's desire to cheat the winter phase of the cycle is related to his refusal to accept the loss of Marie Shabata, a loss that to him will be a continual winter of despair.

Part Three, "Winter Memories," is the shortest section of the book. It stands in quantitative contrast to the preceding section, wherein Cather has emphasized the leisurely aspects of the living seasons. Autumn had been the time of parting, and therefore winter is pictured as a time of remembering both those who have left, Carl and Emil, and times past, days in warm seasons. Nature in "Winter Memories" seems cruel, but "for all its apparent cruelty . . . [it] is the force that will temper the pioneer and bring him to his peace--his ultimate goal--as a result of his acquiescence. Only by an ethical courage can he withstand the land. The warm, pleasant summers lull him into a false sense of security. But in winter the land is another matter."[9]

The opening paragraph of the section shows clearly what winter means, even more than the winter descriptions of "The Wild Land":

> Winter has settled down over the Divide again; the season in which Nature recuperates, in which she sinks to sleep between the fruitfulness of autumn and the passion of spring. The birds have gone. The teeming life that goes on down in the long grass is exterminated. The prairie-dog keeps his hole. The rabbits run shivering from one frozen garden patch to another and are hard put to it to find frost-bitten cabbage-stalks. At night the coyotes roam the wintry waste, howling for food. The variegated fields are all one color now; the pastures, the stubble, the roads, the sky are the same leaden gray. 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 (187-188).

The season of death and decay can make man doubt that spring will come again. "It is in passages such as these that the emotional pattern of the novel is clearly visible. The human drama is subordinated to the drama of

[9]Bloom, p. 85.

the plains and the seasons, and the characters seem less interesting than the background against which they move."[10] The characters do have interest, though, perhaps because of the background. Willa Cather creates "an atmosphere of waiting and mounting tension against a background of frozen winter exteriors and warm domestic interiors."[11]

The "warm interiors," the houses of Alexandra Bergson and Marie Shabata, to some extent signify a way of holding off the cruelty of winter by imitating the warm seasons, as the characters speak of things that happened in warm seasons. The section begins with the annual visit of Mrs. Lee, Lou's mother-in-law. (Mrs. Lee has begun her visit to Alexandra on the first day of December for twelve years, and even the differences between Alexandra and Lou do not prevent her this year.) Soon after Mrs. Lee's arrival, Marie invites Alexandra and her to tea, since Frank is spending the day in town. The visit is punctuated by references to the seasonal changes and attempts to adapt to them. One early reference to the cyclical necessity helps to characterize Marie Shabata. Mrs. Lee inquires about Marie's potted fuchsias and geraniums: "'How you keep from freeze'" (191). Marie's reply--"'I keep the fire all night, Mrs. Lee, and when it's very cold I put them all on the table, in the middle of the room'" (192)--shows more than Marie's willingness to keep flowers alive by extraordinary means. The flowers are somewhat like the carnations in "Paul's Case." Her attention to the flowers is symbolic of her rebellion against the winter, an attempt to preserve summer's life in the time of death: in another context, perhaps, this interpretation would seem merely

[10]Daiches, p. 26.

[11]Ibid.

speculative, but Marie, after telling Mrs. Lee her method, turns abruptly to Alexandra and asks, "'What do you hear from Carl, Alexandra?'" (192). The juxtaposition of Carl with the preservation of potted plants is only Marie's way of moving the conversation to matters that really concern Alexandra and herself, Carl and Emil.

Alexandra, in her reply, continues the flower imagery by relating that Carl, before leaving California, had sent her some orange flowers, "'but they didn't keep very well'" (192). Immediately, unconsciously, Alexandra turns to Marie's real interest: "I have brought a bunch of Emil's letters for you" (192), and then to Marie's ability to withstand the winter. "'You don't look as if the weather ever froze you up'" (192). Marie is too much alive for winter to affect her. It is as if the letters are part of the reason for Marie's ability to withstand the winter. Alexandra is really unaware of the attachment between Marie and Emil, even though Marie reveals her unhappiness with Frank. Alexandra continues to think of Emil as a baby brother, but "Marie knew perfectly well that Emil's letters were written more for her than for Alexandra" (199).

Marie's unhappiness with Frank is also related to the winter season. When Alexandra inquires about the way Marie had sounded on the telephone, she asks if crying had been the reason, "'Maybe I had'" [been crying], Marie smiled guiltily. 'Frank was out late last night. Don't you get lonely sometimes in the winter, when everybody has gone away?'" (195). The snow that begins to fall brings the afternoon visit to an end. Alone now, Marie sits "watching the flying snow while the dusk deepened in the kitchen and the stove sent out a red glow" (199).

Winter next closes in on the friendship of Alexandra and Marie and is significant of a change that comes over the younger woman. Winter begins to win over Marie. Alexandra notes the change, and they visit not nearly as often as before. The winter season is related to their alienation: "The weather had a good deal to do with their seeing less of each other than usual. There had not been such snowstorms in twenty years, and the path across the fields was drifted deep from Christmas until March" (201). Marie's period of dormancy in the season of death is, however, marked by some hope. She is more hopeful than the mourning laurel tree in "Winter at Delphi." On many winter nights Frank and his hired man played cards.

> Marie sat sewing or crocheting and tried to take a friendly interest in the game, but she was always thinking about the wide fields outside, where the snow was drifting over the fences; and about the orchard, where the snow was falling packing, crust over crust. When she went out into the dark kitchen to fix her plants for the night, she used to stand by the window and look out at the white fields or watch the currents of snow whirling over the orchard. She seemed to feel the weight of all the snow that lay down there. The branches had become so hard that they wounded your hand if you but tried to break a twig. And yet, down under the frozen crusts, at the roots of the trees, the secret of life was still safe, warm as the blood in one's heart; and the spring would come again! Oh, it would come again (202)!

Marie's reverie is a proclamation of faith in the seasonal cycle's ultimate purpose, the rebirth of spring after the death of winter. That the passage also foreshadows tragedy is not, of course, obvious; but an atmosphere of impending tragedy is enhanced.

The remainder of "Winter Memories" concerns Alexandra's reveries. She thinks about happy days in the past, "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" (204). It is as if Alexandra is identified with the force that will instigate the rebirth in the spring. Another of her

memories is of a time when she and Emil had observed a duck. "Alexandra remembered that day as one of the happiest in her life. Years afterward she thought of the duck as still there, swimming and diving all by herself in the sunlight, a kind of enchanted bird that did not know age or change" (205). Alexandra's memory of the bird may signify her own changeless serenity and confidence in the ultimate rightness of things in nature, a confidence in the perpetual changelessness of the seasonal cycle that will always result in a returning spring.

Alexandra's most significant memory, however, is of a dream, a nearly mystical experience that seems very much like her feeling on that day long ago when she and Emil came back to the Divide from the river farms:

> There was one fancy indeed, which persisted through her girlhood. It most often came to her on Sunday mornings, the one day in the week when she lay late abed listening to the familiar morning sounds; the windmill singing in the brisk breeze, Emil whistling as he blacked his boots down by the kitchen door. 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. She could feel him approach, bend over her and lift her, and then she could feel herself being carried swiftly off across the fields. After such a reverie she would rise hastily, angry with herself, and go down to the bath-house that was partitioned off the kitchen shed. There she would stand in a tin tub and prosecute her bath with vigor, finishing it by pouring buckets of cold well-water over her gleaming white body which no man on the Divide could have carried very far.
>
> As she grew older, this fancy more often came to her when she was tired than when she was fresh and strong. Sometimes, after she had been in the open all day, overseeing the branding of the cattle or the loading of the pigs, she would come in chilled, take a concoction of spices and warm home-made wine, and go to bed with her body actually aching with fatigue. Then, just before she went to sleep, she had the old sensation of being lifted and carried by a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness (205-207).

The dream seems symbolic of Alexandra's relation to nature and to the seasonal cycle which rules it. Dorothy Van Ghent asserts that "the subject of the dream is an authentic god straight out of the unconscious, one of those vegetation and weather gods by whose urgencies [Alexandra] is compelled and whose energies sustain her."[12] Certainly, this experience marks Alexandra as one particularly identified with nature and with nature's seasons.

Part Four, "The White Mulberry Tree," begins with Emil's return from Mexico. It is early summer, and everywhere are the signs of the life that has returned in the spring, the life that is now vibrant and throbbing with the abandon of the spendthrift rose of "In Rose Time." The winter wheat, dormant all winter, is nearly ready to cut. It is one of the first pledges that the land repays after the winter of holding back its gifts. Ironically, in this season of life and joy tragedy will occur under the white mulberry tree.

The first episode in the section is a fair at the French church. Alexandra persuades Emil to wear an outfit that he has brought back from Mexico and to take his guitar along. Amédée, a father for just a short time, exudes happiness, the spontaneity of life in the season of life. Marie, of course, is at the fair. She is wearing a Bohemian costume, somewhat in keeping with her job as fortune teller in one of the booths in the church basement. Emil is immensely popular with everyone, and Marie is rather jealous. Later in the evening Amédée plots to turn off the lights

[12]Dorothy Van Ghent, Willa Cather (Minneapolis, 1964), pp. 16-17.

so that the boys can kiss their sweethearts. Emil is assigned to blow out the candle in Marie's booth. When the time comes, Emil and Marie kiss for the first time. "The veil that had hung uncertainly between them for so long was dissolved" (224-225). Their costumes, Emil's Mexican finery and Marie's Bohemian attire, signify a kind of masquerade that they have played and can play no more and also a kind of romantic, make-believe world that, in vain, they try to secure.

A week later, after the marriage of Alexandra's hired girl, Emil confronts Marie with the pain of his love and agrees to leave, just as she insists he must, if she will admit her love for him. "She lifted her face to his. 'How could I help it? Didn't you know?'" (233). For a week after their agreement Emil packs, not too deliberately, for a departure that this time will take him to Omaha, where he plans to prepare for law school in Michigan. He and Alexandra reminisce about their childhood, about John Bergson, and about the peculiar qualities of Lou and Oscar.

The first tragedy strikes soon. Amédée, working hard in the fields to harvest his winter wheat, is stricken with appendicitis. He ignores the pain because of the necessity of the harvest. Ironically, his death, in summer not winter, is marked by his submission to the seasonal cycle, his persistence in the face of pain as he obeys the seasonal necessity of harvesting the first fruition that comes in summer. Emil and Marie, as a result of Amédée's death have separate experiences that lead them to the same purpose. Marie, alone and wondering why Emil does not come to comfort her, resolves to love Emil unselfishly, perhaps more platonically. "With the memory he left her, she could be as rash as she chose. Nobody could be the worse for it but herself; and that, surely, did not matter" (249).

With Emil gone, she reasons, it will be easier. "Emil once away, she could let everything else go and live a new life of perfect love" (249), she tells herself.

Emil's experience is at the Confirmation ceremony on the day before Amédée's funeral. The music of the Mass is a catalyst for Emil's experience. As he listens to the music, "he seem/s/ to discover that there /is/ a kind of rapture in which he /can/ love forever without faltering and without sin. He looked across the heads of the people at Frank Shabata with calmness. That rapture was for those who could feel it; for people who could not, it was non-existent. He coveted nothing that was Frank Shabata's" (255). Thus, both Emil and Marie independently reach tentative decisions to love unselfishly, spiritually.

After the Mass Emil passes the new grave that yawns for Amédée's body and thinks about death. "That, too, was beautiful, that simple doorway into forgetfulness. The heart, when it is too much alive, aches for that brown earth, and ecstasy has no fear of death. It is the old and the poor and the maimed who shrink from that brown hole; its wooers are found among the young, the passionate, the gallant-hearted" (257). Without really knowing why, Emil heads for the Shabata farm. "It seemed to him that his mare was flying, or running on wheels, like a railway train" (258). He arrives at the farm, ties his horse in the stable and walks to the orchard, where he finds Marie asleep, lying on her side under the white mulberry tree, her face half hidden in the grass, her eyes closed, her hands lying limply where they had happened to fall. She had lived a day of her new life of perfect love, and it had left her like this" (259). They consummate their love, and, as dusk falls, Frank Shabata, drunk and violent, shoots

them both. Emil dies almost immediately, but Marie has the strength to crawl to the hedge and back again to Emil, where they both bleed to death beneath the tree, much like Pyramus and Thisbe; Marie and Emil also stain the white mulberries red. "But the stained slippery grass, the darkened mulberries, told only half the story. Above Marie and Emil, two white butterflies from Frank's alfalfa-field were fluttering in and out among the interlacing shadows; diving and soaring, now close together, now far apart; and in the long grass by the fence the last wild roses of the year opened their pink hearts to die" (270). The butterflies seem representative of the now free souls of Emil and Marie. The roses are akin to the spendthrift rose of "In Rose Time." Ivar, the next morning, discovers the bodies and tells the horrible news to Alexandra.

The deaths of Amédée, Emil, and Marie in the summer of life seems at first inappropriate. "The violent double intrusion of death into the picture of a new social life flowering under the impact of an old people on a new land shatters the surface of the novel somewhat; but the shattering is deliberate and evidently meant to suggest that once life has put down roots anything can happen."[13] That these deaths take place in the season of life is, in a way, token of Willa Cather's own opinion about unbridled spontaneity. Their deaths result from unwise, "spendthrift" ways.[14] Marie's winter revery comes to mind; the foreshadowing is now evident. The weight of the snow, the hardness of the branches, the blood of the heart at the roots of the white mulberry tree, all of these elements were part of Marie's winter revery as she looked out at the orchard.

[13]Daiches, p. 27.

[14]Cf. the short-lived flower of "In Rose Time."

"Alexandra," the last section of the novel, involves the events that follow the deaths of Emil and Marie. Significantly, Alexandra's resignation to Emil's death is represented by another visitation of her old dream. Returning from the graveyard where Emil's body lies, she has her dream:

> As she lay with her eyes closed, she had again, more vividly than for many years, the old illusion of her girlhood, of being lifted and carried lightly by some one very strong. He was with her a long while this time, and carried her very far, and in his arms she felt free from pain. When he laid her down on her bed again, she opened her eyes, and, for the first time in her life, she saw him clearly, though the room was dark, and his face was covered. He was standing in the doorway of her room. His white cloak was thrown over his face, and his head was bent a little forward. His shoulders seemed as strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm, bared from the elbow, was dark and gleaming, like bronze, and she knew at once that it was the arm of the mightiest of all lovers. She knew at last for whom it was she had waited, and where he would carry her. That, she told herself, was very well. Then she went to sleep (282-283).

Now she seems to recognize him as death, "the mightiest of all lovers." But if so, he is all that death implies, including the rebirth of the spring, and in this sense he is just as much an embodiment, a personification of the seasonal cycle to which Alexandra has continually submitted herself.

Renewed in spirit, Alexandra goes to Lincoln where she visits Frank in prison and promises to work for his release. She admits to him that she blames Emil and Marie more than him. Returning to her hotel, Alexandra receives a telegram from Carl Linstrum, who is in Hanover, awaiting her return. Her conversation with him, during the next few days, helps her to readjust her thinking about Emil and Marie. Carl's appraisal helps her to see things clearly. "'There are women who spread ruin around them through no fault of theirs, just by being too beautiful, too full of life and love.

They can't help it. People come to them as people go to a warm fire in winter'" (304).

The intention of Carl and Alexandra to marry seems appropriate, particularly in its contrast to the abandoned love-making of Emil and Marie, which has brought on the tragedy, and "the book ends by establishing an earlier note."[15] Alexandra speculates that friends, when they marry, are safe from the pains of the young. They go into the house, and Miss Cather closes with an appraisal of Alexandra: "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (309). Already admitting a future death for Alexandra, Cather emphasizes the cyclical nature of death and rebirth and relates it to the ever-returning wheat and corn and to the unbridled eyes of another Marie. As John H. Randall observes, "The older generation has been ground down, and is almost ready to take its place in the cyclical process of death and rebirth."[16] Indeed, "the accents of intense suffering, as well as the Catheresque sense of the sweetness and splendor of life, are now linked to the forces of pioneer aspiration and pioneer fate, to the seasons, and almost to nature itself."[17]

The structure of O Pioneers! thus reflects the seasonal motif; it is the seasonal necessity that helps make the novel more meaningful. "The two parts of the Nebraska pastoral--Alexandra's part and that called 'The

[15]Daiches, p. 27.

[16]Randall, p. 93.

[17]Maxwell Geismar, "Willa Cather: Lady in the Wilderness" in The Last of the Provincials (Boston, 1949), p. 162.

White Mulberry Tree'--are wrought into one form by an instinct as sure as the cycle of seasons, a cycle which itself seems to be the natural commanding form of the novel."[18] From the beginning of the novel in "The Wild Land," through "Neighboring Fields," "Winter Memories," "The White Mulberry Tree," and "Alexandra," a continual part of the setting has been the seasons of the year, particularly as those seasons are reflected in the moods of the characters and their relationships to nature. In later novels Miss Cather continues this emphasis, a concentration on the significance of the seasons as they relate to the endless cycle of life, death and rebirth.

[18]Van Ghent, pp. 17-18.

CHAPTER FOUR

MEMORY AND DESIRE

In her fourth novel, My Ántonia, Willa Cather returned to the themes of O Pioneers! Published in 1918, My Ántonia is even more affirmative than O Pioneers! in its picture of Nebraska. "It contains the fullest celebration ever to come from her pen of country life as opposed to life of the cities, for the book is one long paean of praise to the joys of rural living and shows her a passionate advocate of the virtues of a settled agricultural existence."[1] The seasonal cycle, it would seem, controls the "rural living" and the "settled agricultural existence" of the novel. Moreover, the cycle of the seasons is related to fertility. In previous works the idea of fertility was treated differently. The poems say much of the seasons but little of fertility. "Paul's Case" and "The Sculptor's Funeral" were heavy with seasonal descriptions but dwelt on sterility. O Pioneers! did emphasize the land's fertility; the characters and their lives, however, showed little fertility, except perhaps in the promise of new life in the lovers' blood which flowed into the ground and Alexandra's position as a kind of fertility goddess. "My Ántonia shows fertility of both the soil and human beings."[2]

[1] John H. Randall, The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston, 1960), p. 105.

[2] Ibid., p. 149.

In a short introduction to the novel Willa Cather presents a character who will be her first-person narrator: Jim Burden and Willa Cather ride across the Midwest on a train. During their conversation they turn to the subject of Ántonia Shimerda, a Bohemian girl whom they both knew as children and admire very much. They agree to record their impressions of Ántonia and to meet later to compare their efforts. Cather admits to her readers that Jim Burden's story of Ántonia is likely to be better than her own because of his opportunities to observe the girl. Eventually, Jim brings his manuscript to Cather in New York. She has managed nothing more than a few paragraphs, and Jim's manuscript becomes first Ántonia and then My Ántonia, the addition indicating the narrator's point of view. However, Miss Cather altered the brief introduction in a 1926 reissue of the novel. In the new version Jim has been working on his story for some time when he meets Willa Cather on the train and agrees to bring the manuscript to her when he has finished it. Deleted in the 1926 introduction is the reference to Cather's intention to write a story about Ántonia.[3] The change in the introduction points more strongly to Jim Burden as an effective narrator and helps bring him out as an important character, since the title is still to be My Ántonia, the Ántonia that Jim Burden knew. Such a contrivance seems to indicate that the story of the girl is to be colored more than a little by the point of view of the narrator, a narrator who is part of the story itself and who stands as an animus for Willa Cather; her own early years are reflected vividly in the story. "The story is as much Jim Burden's as it is Ántonia's."[4] And it is as much Willa Cather's as it is Jim Burden's.

[3]Edward Killoran Brown, Willa Cather, A Critical Biography (New York, 1953), p. 200.

[4]Dorothy Van Ghent, Willa Cather (Minneapolis, 1964), p. 12.

In the introduction, Miss Cather indicates an acute awareness of the seasonal cycle: "We were talking about what it is like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the colour and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and grey as sheet iron."[5] John H. Randall sees this passage as one which "suggests the sequence of birth and death as outlined in the vegetation myth, that age-old interpretation of the cycle of the seasons. On the side of warmth we have life, color, fecundity, and organic material; on the side of coldness we have death, lack of color, sterility and sheet metal which is something mechanical with no life in it."[6] Mr. Randall neglects to analyze the reference to the country being stripped bare in winters "with little snow." The sterility inherent in this reminiscence is in the lack of snow as a blanket to warm the earth and keep the land in a suitable condition for the rebirth of spring. Thus Willa Cather's own concern with the seasonal cycle is indicated in the brief introduction. In the remainder of the novel, though, Cather's interest becomes Jim Burden's interest. "It is Jim Burden's sensibility which imposes form on My Ántonia and, by that form, shapes in the reader a sharpened awareness of cyclic fate that is the human destiny. The sense of cyclic fate finds expression first in an obsessive engagement with the colorful, somber and varied seasons of the year."[7]

[5]Willa Cather, My Ántonia (Boston, 1949), p. 1. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated in the text.

[6]Randall, p. 110.

[7]James E. Miller, Jr., "My Ántonia: A Frontier Drama of Time," in American Quarterly, Volume X, 1958, pp. 476-484, p. 478.

The main body of the narrative begins with "The Shimerdas," a section that seems shaped by the seasonal cycle. James E. Miller, Jr., comments that this section

> introduces from the start the drama of time in the vivid accounts of the shifting seasons. The book encompasses one year, beginning with the arrival in Autumn of the Shimerdas and Jim Burden on the endless Nebraska prairie, portraying the terrible struggle for mere existence in the bleakness of the plains' Winter, dramatizing the return of life with the arrival of Spring, and concluding with the promise of rich harvest in the intense heat of the prairie's summer. This is Jim Burden's remembered year, and it is his obsession with the cycle of time that has caused him to recall Antonia in a setting of the changing seasons.[8]

Soon after the arrival of the orphaned Jim Burden at his grandparents' farm, he is caught up in the seasonal world of the Nebraska prairie. On the day after his arrival the ten-year-old boy explores his new surroundings, the house, the prairie, and, a quarter of a mile from the house, his grandmother's garden. Her garden, in many ways, seems representative of the new world into which the boy has been thrust by circumstances and a suitable place for the seasons to do their work. Grandmother Burden introduces Jim to the garden when they go to dig potatoes. The garden reveals its location to Jim because of the bright-colored autumn pumpkins that grow there. Otherwise he would not have seen it at all. After admonitions about snakes and a local badger, Grandmother Burden goes back to the house alone, for Jim wants to stay awhile. Jim relates his experience: "I sat down in the middle of the garden, where snakes could scarcely approach unseen, and leaned my back against a warm yellow pumpkin. There were some ground-cherry bushes growing along the furrows, full of fruit. I turned back the papery triangular sheaths that protected the berries and ate a

[8] Ibid.

few" (15). That this is a picture of autumn's fruition in a garden where snakes can be avoided is manifest first in Jim's leaning against the pumpkin. His initiation to the cycle of nature, almost a communion ritual, is his sampling of the ground-cherries.

Later in the same episode he surrenders himself to the seasonal cycle of life, death and rebirth. He lies on the warm earth: "I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep" (15). Jim's rather precocious speculation about "being dissolved into something complete and great" is his recognition of the seasonal necessity, particularly in his association of the process with death and the idea of becoming a "part of something entire." No small part of his symbolic surrender to death's necessity in the cyclic drama is his awareness that death leads to a new existence, "whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge." So early in the novel, this picture of the autumn phase of the cycle has nothing in it of winter's threat, even in Jim's surrender to the cycle.

Juxtaposed with the autumn fruitfulness of the Burden farm, however, is an immediate shift to the Shimerda place. The contrast between the two homesteads is a poignant one. The Shimerdas have neither chicken house nor garden. Much of their land is unbroken to human needs. Their house, not even a "soddy," is but a cave in a bank, and their windmill is a skeleton

with no wheel. Cheated by their countryman, Peter Krajiek, the Shimerdas barely subsist. For the Shimerdas "the autumn is not the autumn of bountiful nature but the autumn of approaching death."[9] The Burdens have arrived to offer some assistance to their new neighbors, bringing them potatoes, cured pork, bread, butter, and pumpkin pies. The Shimerda family is introduced and succintly characterized in this scene. Mrs. Shimerda seems shrewd, grasping, even mean; her son Ambrosch is like her. "His hazel eyes were little and shrewd, like his mother's, but more sly and suspicious" (18). Yulka, the younger daughter, is described as "pretty" but "Ántonia was still prettier" (18). Marek, the other son, is an idiot and physically deformed; his fingers are webbed. The father, cultured, gentle, refined, seems out of place among his family; only Ántonia seems identified with the old man who has married beneath himself and has fathered a family who, for the most part, are like his peasant wife. Ántonia alone is the exception. As the Burdens leave the Shimerda place, the old man's earnest request that Jim teach Ántonia English, is token of his knowledge and recognition of his daughter's special position.

Jim's friendship with Ántonia is a product of this first meeting and of her father's request. Jim's experience contrasts with Ántonia's during that first autumn of friendship. "All the years that have passed have not dimmed my memory of that first glorious autumn" (21). With Ántonia Jim explores the countryside. One of their first experiences is watching the prairie-dog town where ground owls are accustomed to nest, too. Rattlesnakes live an easy life here, eating prairie-dog pups and owl eggs with impunity. Jim and Ántonia feel particular sympathy for the owls. "But,

[9] Ibid.

after all, [they feel], winged things who would live like that must be rather degraded creatures" (22).

The analogy to the Shimerdas, in their cave, and Krajiek, who lives with them still, is lost on Jim and Ántonia; but the reader is duly informed by a passage just a few paragraphs later: "They hated Krajiek, but they clung to him because he was the only human being with whom they could talk or from whom they could get information. He slept with the old man and the two boys in the dugout barn, along with the oxen. They kept him in their hole and fed him for the same reason that the prairie-dogs and the brown owls house the rattlesnakes--because they did not know how to get rid of him" (23). The Shimerdas, living more like animals than men, are as yet unadapted to the life of men on the prairie and not yet in tune with the cyclic drama. In the midst of autumn, the season of fruition, "the Shimerdas were famished for fruit" (23) because of their long trip across the ocean.

On one of their late autumn trips to the Burden's garden Jim and Ántonia eat watermelon, and Jim's narrative brings up the first reference to the oncoming threat of winter and the decline of the year. As they eat the hearts of the watermelons, "the juice trickling through [their] fingers" (23), they regard the white Christmas melons curiously: "They were to be picked late, when the hard frosts had set in, and put away for winter use" (23). The necessity of providing for the privations of winter is the suggestion here. Winter has no fruits, and man, therefore, must preserve the lifegiving food of the phase of fruition. The watermelon episode is a foreshadowing of the hardships of winter, particularly for the Shimerdas because they have no garden.

As the autumn days move inevitably toward winter, the adventures of Jim and Ántonia dramatize the inevitable decline of the year to the death of winter. On one occasion Ántonia artificially preserves the life of a small insect, and they listen to its chirping. The insect's song reminds Ántonia of an old story-teller in Bohemia; more dramatically, however, her effort to keep the insect alive signifies a desire to preserve the germ of life through the season of approaching winter of death and sterility. Another autumn episode, Jim's battle with the snake, besides its phallic association and Jim's distrust of false heroics, is like a fight against the entry of the serpent into the garden, a futile fight really because the garden, too, is going down to winter. Ántonia's scream calls Jim's attention to the snake:

> When I turned he was lying in long loose waves, like a letter 'W.' He twitched and began to coil slowly. He was not merely a big snake, I thought--he was a circus monstrosity. His abominable muscularity, his loathsome, fluid motion, somehow made me sick. He was as thick as my leg, and looked as if millstones couldn't crush the disgusting vitality out of him. He lifted his hideous little head, and rattled. I didn't run because I didn't think of it--if my back had been against a stone wall I couldn't have felt more cornered. I saw his coils tighten--now he would spring, spring his length, I remembered. I ran up and drove at his head with my spade, struck him fairly across the neck, and in a minute he was all about my feet in wavy loops. I struck now from hate. Ántonia, barefooted as she was, ran up behind me. Even after I had pounded his ugly head flat, his body kept on coiling and winding, doubling and falling back on itself. I walked away and turned my back. I felt seasick (32-33).

This "ancient, eldest evil" (34) seems to Jim very much like the serpent who continually invades the garden of man.

Juxtaposed immediately is the figure of Wick Cutter, a human rattlesnake, the only genuinely evil person in the novel. His treatment of Peter and Pavel is the serpent's invasion of their garden. Peter and Pavel, two

brothers, are Russian immigrants that Mr. Shimerda has befriended. Wick Cutter, the money-lender from Black Hawk, holds mortgages on everything they own. (Ironically, it was the Russians who had provided Jim with his snake-killing spade.) The misfortune of the Russians is matched to the seasonal motif. "While the autumn colour was growing pale on the grass and cornfields, things went badly with our friends the Russians" (35). Pavel falls seriously ill from overwork directly after Peter renews the mortgage with Cutter, and Jim and Ántonia are present when Pavel recounts a story of his youth to Mr. Shimerda. The story, of wolves in the Russian winter, is a bone-chilling horror. The young Peter and Pavel, groomsmen in a friend's wedding, are returning the young couple to the groom's village. The bridal party, driving across the snow-covered countryside, is attacked by a wolf-pack which proceeds to close in and devour the members of the procession, sleigh by sleigh. Peter and Pavel are driving the leading sleigh with the bride and groom in it. In order to escape, Pavel reasons, it will be necessary to lighten their load, and so in desperation he throws the bride and groom to the wolves, thereby making escape possible for him and Peter, who are the only survivors. Known everywhere in Russia as the men who fed the bride and groom to wolves, they eventually find their way to America and ultimately to the Nebraska prairie where Pavel now lies near death.

The story, sometimes criticized as a unity-destroying digression, is really quite significant in its picture of the terrors of winter. Pavel's remorse is connected to his fear of oncoming winters in Nebraska, winters not much different from those of Russia. His death, after his confession to Mr. Shimerda, is a release from worldly cares and a surrender to the

cycle, an appropriate conclusion to his tragic life. Peter's subsequent sale of the land and all of their belongings, including his beloved cow, is followed by a symbolic feast. He gorges himself on the Christmas melons that had been stored for winter use, as if to fortify himself immediately for the hard life he intends to lead in a railway construction camp. Significantly, the departure of Peter and Pavel marks the beginning of Mr. Shimerda's decline. "When he was out hunting, he used to go into the empty log house and sit there brooding. This cabin was his hermitage until the winter snows penned him in his cave" (42).

Now the winter strikes in fact rather than in story, and its horrors eventually are equal to those of Peter and Pavel. The season begins calmly enough with the first snowfall in early December and Jim's little sleigh, in which he drives about the prairie with Ántonia and Yulka. The early winter is beautiful and deceptive. "The descent of the winter snows heightens the vast primitive beauty of the undisturbed plains."[10] At first everything seems beautiful. "The sky was brilliantly blue, and the sunlight on the glittering white stretches of prairie was almost blinding" (43). This is a false view of winter, and it does not last long. Jim starts seeing more meaningful signs in nature. "The tree-tops that had been gold all the autumn were dwarfed and twisted, as if they would never have any life in them again" (43). The prairie now "seems indifferent to man, hostile to life."[11] As if to dramatize the reality of winter, Jim catches a cold that confines him for two weeks. He admits to himself during his illness

[10] Ibid.

[11] James E. Miller, Jr., "The Nebraska Encounter: Willa Cather and Wright Morris," in Prairie Schooner, Volume 41, 1967, pp. 105-167, p. 167.

that the cold is "man's strongest antagonist" (45) and that "getting warm and keeping warm" (45) are the most important things to think about. The Burdens are safe and secure in the harsh winter, yet, Jim thinks, they are adventurous--as much as are the characters in The Swiss Family Robinson, which he reads aloud to his grandmother.

Meanwhile, the Bohemian family Shimerda is near being conquered by the harshness of winter. The Burdens' hired men learn of their plight, and the next day an expedition of mercy leaves for the Shimerda place. They find the family in a miserable condition, living on rotten potatoes and some flour. Before the Burdens leave, however, Mrs. Shimerda presents them with a small bag of mysterious, dried chips. Unaware that the chips are dried mushrooms, Mrs. Burden throws them into the fire when they return home. There is some meaning in the fact that the Shimerdas have been able to preserve some form of life-giving food in this new environment, particularly the rather exotic dried mushrooms, which, Jim assumes much later, they had brought from their native Bohemian forests.

The events surrounding the holiday season are nearly routine. Christmas at the Burden farm is joyful, despite the heavy snowfall that prevents going to town for presents. Jim makes presents for the Shimerda children, and the Burdens send other gifts to the destitute family. Late Christmas day Mr. Shimerda comes to the Burdens to express thanks and seems strangely peaceful as he sits in the warm and orderly home. A highlight of his visit is his reaction to the Christmas tree, because he kneels before it almost as one of his heathen ancestors from the Bohemian forests would have knelt before a tree. After Christmas a week of thawing provides relief from winter's hardships. It is almost as if nature is reminding them that spring will

come again. Even the farm animals are fooled; the bulls in the corral begin butting each other. But reality soon asserts itself again. Jim's eleventh birthday on January twentieth brings the biggest blizzard in ten years. "Here again the precariousness of civilization on the plains is made to stand for the precariousness of life. But Willa Cather now uses different means to express this: the toughness of reality is now symbolized, not by the unwillingness of the land to be tamed, but among other things by the rigors of a continental climate. The extremes of hot and cold to be found in the Middle West stand for the best and worst life has to offer; heat is correlated with vitality, and the great enemy of life is the cold."[12]

Two days after the storm Jim wakens to learn that Mr. Shimerda has killed himself. The old man, homesick, sure that spring will never come again, takes his own life in the season of death. David Daiches sees the suicide and its significance in terms of the winter season: "By this time it was midwinter, and the atmosphere of the frozen landscape is effectively employed to emphasize the pity and horror of this death from homesickness."[13] John H. Randall sees other seasonal possibilities: "To express [the hardness of life] Willa Cather refers to the . . . rigors of a continental climate in a submerged metaphor based on her statement that 'man's greatest enemy is the cold.' The submerged metaphor is that of frozen blood. It is hard in both the literal and figurative senses; the very stuff of life itself has been reduced to immobility by nature's indifference."[14] In another

[12]Randall, p. 109.

[13]David Daiches, Willa Cather, A Critical Introduction (New York, 1962), p. 39.

[14]Randall, p. 126.

statement Randall relates Mr. Shimerda's suicide even more surely to the cyclic seasons:

> The fact that the pioneers are willing to chop Mr. Shimerda's body from the pool of frozen blood shows that they are facing unflinchingly the toughness of reality, the hardness of life. It is no accident that the body is frozen, or that the death occurs in the midst of winter. According to the old vegetation myth winter is the death of the year, because all crops have died down in the fall and are not to be reborn until spring. The meaning of the myth is that death is not final; one year's crop dies, but next year's crop takes its place; in human terms, the individual dies but the community lives on. This is just what happens in My Ántonia; the chapter following the one describing the burial of Mr. Shimerda, and dealing with the further fortunes of his family, begins with a description of the coming spring.[15]

Spring's arrival is dramatic and full of the spirit of rebirth. Jim describes it poetically:

> When spring came, after that hard winter, one could not get enough of the nimble air. Every morning I wakened with a fresh consciousness that winter was over. There were none of the signs of spring for which I used to watch in Virginia, no budding woods or blooming gardens. There was only--spring itself; the throb of it, the light restlessness, the vital essence of it everywhere: in the sky, in the swift clouds, in the pale sunshine, and in the warm, high wind--rising suddenly, sinking suddenly, impulsive and playful like a big puppy that pawed you and then lay down to be petted. If I had been tossed down blindfold on that red prairie, I should have known that it was spring (79).

Jim is reborn with the spring.

Other spring events dramatize rebirth, too. Burning of the old grass "so that the fresh growth would not be mixed with the dead stand of last year" (79) indicates the desire to make a completely new start, to be completely reborn by casting off any reminders of the dead year now past. The Shimerdas start life anew in a log house that neighbors had helped them to build in March. Ántonia, now fifteen, is being broken to the new life

[15] Ibid., p. 127.

of the soil. Yulka now learns reading from Jim, and Jim begins studying at the country school. A feud with the Shimerdas, precipitated by Ambrosch, cools the spring atmosphere some, but Grandfather Burden reconciles differences by early summer when he offers day work to Ambrosch and Ántonia.

The summer phase of the cycle is confined to a single chapter of "The Shimerdas" and is marked by images of growth and heat. "Summer, when it descends with fiery fury on the empty lands, brings with its devastation also fertility."[16] Jim, caught up in the season, thinks that he can hear the corn growing. The sun burns down by day, and the rains come at night; the corn is secured, thus insuring another year of fruitfulness. Ántonia helps Mrs. Burden with the extra work that attends feeding hired men during the wheat harvest, and one night, as she and Jim watch an electric storm, their conversation leads Ántonia to her own surrender to the seasonal cycle. Ántonia says, "'I wish my papa live to see this summer. I wish no winter ever come again'" (93). Ántonia "displays intuitive insight into the relation of her father's suicide to the cosmic order of time which decrees that the death of winter must unfailingly follow the ripening autumn."[17] Jim reassures Ántonia that summer will last for some time and in the same breath repudiates her for trying "'to be like Ambrosch'" (93). Ántonia's reply, the last statement of Book One, is her recognition of life's necessity: "She put her arms under her head and lay back, looking up at the sky. 'If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us'" (93). Ántonia is willing to suffer the hardships that she knows will come.

[16]Miller, "Drama of Time," p. 479.

[17]Ibid.

Book One of My Ántonia represents the complete cycle of life by showing the year's complete cycle of seasons. The characters are sometimes dwarfed by the setting; indeed, "almost every detail in 'The Shimerdas' is calculated to shrink the human drama in contrast with the drama of nature, the drama of the land and sky."[18]

Book Two, "The Hired Girls," begins almost two years after the events that conclude Book One. The section covers approximately five years and deals mainly with Jim Burden and his associations with the farm girls who have come to work in town. Ántonia is the most important of these girls, of course, but "she merges with many 'hired girls' in Black Hawk who are of her kind."[19]

The chronology of Book Two is not the neat, confined year of "The Shimerdas." In fact, it is sometimes difficult to discern the passing of five years, for Willa Cather tends to compress the events into a year of seasons using short, representative vignettes. Within these picture-like episodes, the seasonal motif often shows the place of the events in time, a broader perspective of time than the puny year; the seasons themselves transcend man's arbitrary division of time into segments of one year or five years. Another reason for Book Two's comparative disorganization may be its setting in Black Hawk, rather than in the country where man lives in greater harmony with the cycle of the seasons. The seasons seem different in town, and the erratic progress of time in the narrative emphasizes the difference.

[18] Ibid., p. 478.

[19] Ibid., p. 480.

The Burdens move to Black Hawk nearly three years after Jim's first arrival in Nebraska. Increased educational opportunity for Jim is the main reason. Their arrival in the month of March corresponds to the idea of rebirth in the spring. The Burdens are reborn from farm life to town life. Jim describes Black Hawk as "the new world in which we had come to live" (98) and declares his own rebirth in spring by saying that he is "quite another boy" (98). Moreover, the new Burden house on the edge of town seems like a transition between farm and town. Their neighbors, the Harlings are former farm people, too.

Even as Jim accustoms himself to town life, Ántonia continues to work on the Shimerda farm, they learn from the Widow Steavens who now rents the Burden farm. "All through the wheat season . . . Ambrosch hired his sister out like a man" (99). They learn also that in the fall Ambrosch intends for Ántonia "to husk corn for the neighbors until Christmas" (99). Mrs. Burden intends to disrupt Ambrosch's plans by persuading Mrs. Harling to hire Ántonia as a cook. The plan succeeds, and Ántonia comes to Black Hawk where she fast becomes an integral part of the Harling household.

One fall evening, soon after Ántonia's arrival, Lena Lingard is introduced. Jim, as usual, is spending a happy evening at the Harlings when Lena comes to call on Ántonia. Lena, the reader soon learns, is from the Norwegian settlement near Black Hawk and has come to town to work for the local dressmaker. Lena's background is rather questionable in some ways, since she is best known to Jim as the one who, unintentionally, drove an old man nearly crazy with love for her. She seems to have a quiet, unearthly charm, and she seems almost nymph-like as Jim describes her, especially when he recalls her "miraculous whiteness which somehow made her

seem more undressed than other girls who went scantily clad" (110). Lena is further characterized as one who dearly loves her family back on the farm and manages to send them money out of her earnings as most of the hired girls do.

Shortly after the autumn introduction of Lena, Willa Cather subjects the town of Black Hawk to a winter that seems far different from the country winter of the previous book. The description points to winter as particularly death-like in the town. "Winter comes down savagely over a little town on the prairie. The wind that sweeps in from the open country strips away all the leafy screens that hide one yard from another in summer, and the houses seem to draw closer together. The roofs, that looked so far away across the green tree-tops, now stare at you in the face, and they are so much uglier than when their angles were softened by vines and shrubs" (115-16). Even the threat of winter was not ugly in the country. Buildings in town need the softening effect of spring and summer's greenery. Other elements contribute to the ugliness of winter. Jim's walks home from school are dramatically illustrative: "The pale, cold light of the winter sunset did not beautify--it was like the light of truth itself" (116). Jim's reflections on winter lead him to a further observation. Winter's wind is imaged as a "bitter song [that sings] 'This is reality, whether you like it or not. All those frivolities of summer, the light and shadow, the living mask of green that trembled over everything, they were lies, and this is what was underneath. This is the truth.' It was as if we were being punished for loving the loveliness of summer" (116). The green was just a mask, a lie. Truth, the winter, is the inevitability of death.

One of the few real refuges from the bleakness of winter on these long nights is the Harling house where Jim and the Harling children enjoy music, cookies, and other simple pleasures. On one of these evenings Ántonia tells a story of summer that points up the contrast between the death of winter and the life of summer. The story is of a tramp who once came to the Norwegian farm where Ántonia was helping with the threshing. After asking for beer he offers to help band the wheat and dives into the threshing machine where he is ground to pieces. Horrible as the story is, it prompts Ántonia to make an observation in the form of a question: "'Now, wasn't that strange, Miss Frances?' Tony asked thoughtfully. 'What would anybody want to kill themselves in summer for? In threshing time, too! It's nice everywhere then'" (120). Ántonia is mystified because she knows the seasonal cycle and that summer is the time of life. Threshing time, of course, is "nice" because of its early summer promise of the fruitfulness of autumn.

The winter drags on and is again characterized as particularly bleak in the town: "Winter lies too long in country towns; hangs on until it is stale and shabby, old and sullen. On the farm weather was the great fact, and men's affairs went on underneath it, as the streams creep under the ice. But in Black Hawk the scene of human life was spread out shrunken and pinched, frozen down to the bare stalk" (120). Winter in town makes one doubt that spring will ever return. Even as January and February are characterized in their bleakness, one episode brightens Jim's life. A Negro pianist appears at the hotel and plays songs of the charming, warmer south. They are typical plantation songs that remind Jim of a more cultured, comfortable existence in an environment where the seasonal cycle is less harsh, less real.

The coming of spring is marked by happiness and reunion with the land: "We were out all day in the thin sunshine, helping Mrs. Harling and Tony break the ground and plant the garden, dig around the orchard trees, tie up vines and clip the hedges" (128). Spring's reward must be matched by man's effort and dutiful service. But spring is so brief. Jim points to this when he observes, "'Yet the summer which was to change everything was coming nearer everyday'" (128).

The dance pavilion is what changes everything. It arrives in June and is well attended by the regular townspeople and the hired girls, too. The dance pavilion marks the vibrant life of summer and the budding of Ántonia's life, for it is at the tent that she becomes interested in things other than the hard work of cooking and caring for the needs of others. The prospect of the dance every night enlivens Ántonia. She becomes one of the most popular dancers in town. Jim enjoys the dances, too. Tiny Soderball, three Bohemian hired girls, Lena, and Antonia all interest him in his own immature way. Eventually, the dances lead to a dramatic change in Ántonia's life. One night Ántonia finds it necessary to repel the advances of a local boy who tries to kiss her as they say goodnight on the Harling's back porch. Mr. Harling, an unwilling witness to the slap that sends him running, insists that she either cease going to the dances or cease living at the Harlings. Ántonia, rebellious and indignant, declares that she must live her own life and will leave. She goes to work in the house of the infamous Wick Cutter. Probably this is the turning point in Ántonia's life, for now her extra freedom allows her to develop without the civilizing restraint of the Harlings.

talks of "the dew . . . still heavy on the long meadow grasses. It was the high season for summer flowers. The pink bee-bush stood tall along the sandy roadsides, and the cone-flowers and rose mallow grew everywhere" (151). Jim feels alive in the season of life. He declares his closeness to the land in summer when he observes, "The country was empty and solitary except for the larks that Sunday morning, and it seemed to lift itself up to me and to come very close" (152). Jim prepares to go for a swim before the arrival of the girls and observes the signs of life in the river: "The river was running strong for midsummer; heavy rains to the west of us had kept it full" (152). Jim's sensitivity to nature's signs of life is a prelude to the picnic with the girls.

After the girls arrive, Jim comes upon Ántonia alone; the other girls are hunting elderberries. He observes that she has been crying, and she tells him that all the smells and signs of nature remind her of her home-land and particularly of her father. Soon the other girls come back, and the conversation turns to their families, homesickness, and the general hardships of getting established in a new land. One of Lena's remarks seems especially significant. Anna Hansen brings up the subject of babies and how they seemed to come along so fast for her parents, but that the youngest one, the unwanted one, "'is the one we love best now'" (157). Lena's reply to Anna calls attention to seasonal hardships: "Lena sighed. 'Oh, the babies are all right; if only they don't come in winter. Ours nearly always did. I don't see how mother stood it'" (157). The birth of new life, it seems to Lena, is a special hardship in winter, the season of death. Man's conformity to the seasonal cycle of life, death, and rebirth, she implies, is almost a necessity.

The end of that day seems like the end of summer and the end of youth. As the sun goes down and illuminates a plow against the sun, the plow stands out against the "red disk" and is magnified by the rays of horizontal light. It stands as a symbol of the parents of Jim's immigrant friends and, by extension, for all the families of hard working pioneers. The added significance of the sunset is that it is the end of the day and the end of one stage in life. Summer, too, is drawing to a close. The first pioneers are being replaced by their children. Jim's youth in Nebraska is drawing to a close, for he will soon leave for the University.

A final episode in Book Two helps to emphasize Jim's maturity at the end of summer. The Cutters go to Omaha for a few days, and because of Wick Cutter's reputation, Ántonia suspects his motives, particularly because of his admonitions about not leaving the house or having any visitors. Also, he has had new locks put on the doors. Jim sleeps at the Cutter house that night, and Ántonia stays with the Burdens. Cutter shows up, intending to rape Ántonia, but finds Jim in the bed. Infuriated, he handles Jim roughly. Jim's escape in his night shirt and his own appearance in the mirror impress him with the ludicrous quality of the experience. It is much like his battle with the snake in Book One, only now he is mature enough to see the mock-heroic nature of the adventure. Humiliated, he pleads with his grandmother to keep the whole disgusting affair a secret. Jim's maturity at the end of Book Two seems a fitting conclusion, especially as it is paralleled with the end of summer and his departure for the University.

Throughout Book Two Jim overshadows Ántonia, but her relationship to his maturation is important, too. Most of his experiences are related to her. If Jim, in Book Two, represents youth coming to maturity, Antonia

"represents the overflowing liveliness and energetic abundance of physical woman come to the flower."[20]

Book Three, "Lena Lingard," is the story of Jim's further maturation at the University, his "time of mental awakening" (167) under the influence of Gaston Cleric, his Latin teacher and close friend. It is also the story of his relationship with Lena Lingard, now a dressmaker in Lincoln. Even though this section of the novel is quite brief, twenty pages or so, the seasonal descriptions are meaningful.

The first mention of the seasonal influence is a spring scene which awakens Jim's nostalgia: "One March evening in my sophomore year I was sitting alone in my room after supper. There had been a warm thaw all day, with mushy yards and little streams of dark water gurgling cheerfully into the streets out of old snow banks. My window was open, and the earthy wind blowing through made me indolent. On the edge of the prairie, where the sun had gone down, the sky was turquoise blue, like a lake, with gold light throbbing in it" (170-71). Jim turns to his Latin, reads in Virgil's Georgics that "'the best days are the first to flee,'" (171) and relates this melancholy thought to his own nostalgia for the area around Black Hawk and the people who live there. Spring's arrival affects Jim with a longing for home. That evening's revery also marks the arrival of Lena Lingard who explains to Jim that she has her own shop in Lincoln. Naturally, their conversation turns to home and to Ántonia, who, Jim learns, is now engaged to Larry Donovan and will take no one's advice about his bad qualities.

[20] Ibid.

What follows in this section is a nearly romantic relationship between Jim and Lena, framed by their regular attendance at the theater. The highlight is a production of Camille which moves them both, even though an aging actress plays the title role. Armand's desertion of Camille foreshadows Jim's departure for Harvard, and Jim's impression of the evening is marked afterward by his awareness of the early lilacs: "After leaving her, I walked slowly out into the country part of the town where I lived. The lilacs were all blooming in the yards, and the smell of them after the rain, of the new leaves and the blossoms together, blew into my face with a sort of bitter sweetness" (179). Jim decides, upon reflection, that whenever Camille is performed, it is April. Not long after this spring experience, Jim leaves for Boston at the persuasion of his teacher, Gaston Cleric. Jim, Cleric thinks, has become too interested in Lena for the good of his studies. The section ends with the parting of Jim and Lena, only vaguely recalling the parting of Armand and Camille.

The seasonal descriptions of Book Three, only two in number, are spring scenes. The relation of these descriptions to rebirth is vague. More importantly, they seem involved with Jim's memories of earlier springs, seasons of his youth when he was more aware of nature's new life, when he could participate in the spring reunion with nature.

Book Four is a story that the Widow Steavens tells to Jim Burden, now a lawyer working for a New York firm. The section, entitled "The Pioneer Woman's Story," is the story of Ántonia's tragedy, already foreshadowed in Book Three.[21] Ántonia, Jim learns, has given birth to the child of Larry

[21] Ibid.

Donovan who had deserted her without marrying her. Seeing a picture of Ántonia's daughter in the photographer's window, Jim thinks, "How like her" (197). The Widow Steavens tells Jim the whole story of Ántonia's engagement, departure, and return to bear her child in December with no help from anyone. The day after his conversation with the Widow Steavens Jim goes to see Ántonia. They meet at the crossroads where her father is buried and talk of their childhood. As they sit by Mr. Shimerda's grave, Jim describes the setting in terms of the vegetation growing there and its relationship to the seasons: "We sat down outside the sagging wire fence that shut Mr. Shimerda's plot off from the rest of the world. The tall red grass had never been cut there. It had died down in winter and come up again in the spring until it was as thick and shrubby as some tropical garden grass" (207-08). Here, on a summer day, Jim unconsciously relates Mr. Shimerda's grave to the endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth and to the seasons which control that cycle. After talking of her father and their friendship for each other, they part, Jim promising to return.

In Book Five, "Cuzak's Boys," Jim returns, after twenty years because "life intervened" (213). He finds Ántonia married, the mother of numerous children. She is in her declining years, but undiminished. It is late summer, moving into fall. Ántonia's husband, Anton Cuzack, is attending a fair in Wilbur with their oldest boy. Ántonia and Jim talk of the children, and Ántonia seems embarrassed when Jim tells her that he has no children. Ántonia has been fruitful. Significantly, near the house are orchards with various kinds of fruit. The trees stand as tokens of her personal fruitfulness. She tells Jim about starting the trees: "'They were on my mind like children. Many a night after [Anton] was asleep I've got up and come out

and carried water to the poor things. And now, you see, we have the good of them!" (221). Another incident in this book, that of the children bursting out of the fruit cave, has in it elements of fruitfulness. The cave is an echo of the old Shimerda cave, and the children bursting out of it seem like a fulfilled promise of continual fruitfulness and rebirth. This book and the novel close in a tone of nostalgia. Jim mourns the "incommunicable past" (240) which he and Ántonia will always share, but there is still that sweet sadness that has always characterized their relationship.

My Ántonia seems controlled by the seasonal motif. Indeed, "the form of [the book] is largely organic and arises from the cycle of the seasons."[22] Moreover, the novel, despite its concern with the maturation of Jim Burden, is the story of Ántonia, Ántonia as she has impressed Jim's maturing consciousness. "For Jim Ántonia becomes symbolic of the undeviating cyclic nature of all life: Ántonia is the insistent reminder that it is the tragic nature of time to bring life to fruition through hardship and struggle only to precipitate the decline and, ultimately death, but not without first making provision for new life to follow, flower and fall. The poignancy lies in the inability of the frail human being to rescue and retain any stage, no matter how beautiful or blissful, of this precious cycle."[23] The eternal wonder of Jim and Ántonia is their ability, unlike frail humans, to retain any stage of the cycle they wish, through their undiluted memories of a precious past.

[22]Randall, p. 147.

[23]Miller, "Drama of Time," p. 477.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE BROWN LAND

A Lost Lady appeared in 1923, one year after the Pulitzer Prize-winning One of Ours. A Lost Lady was serialized in three parts for Century Magazine, beginning in the April, 1923 issue. Alfred A. Knopf published the novel in September of that year, and it was an immediate success.[1] In contrast to O Pioneers! and My Ántonia, Willa Cather's sixth novel views the Midwest with considerable ambivalence. Gone is the idealistic view of the land and of the ultimate triumph of the pioneer spirit. Those days are over forever. "The chief period of A Lost Lady, thematically the last in her series of Midwestern frontier novels, represents the complete and tragic decline of the West as a victim of the new order, moral and esthetic and economic."[2] The decline of the West is imaged in the decline of Captain Daniel Forrester and of his wife, Marian, the lost lady of the novel's title. Their decline is marked by the passing of the seasons and by their own responses to the changing seasons.

Unlike either the omniscient third-person narrator of O Pioneers! or the first-person narrator of My Ántonia, A Lost Lady has a third-person narrator from the limited point of view of a single character, Niel Herbert.

[1]Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather, A Memoir (Lincoln, 1963), p. 184.

[2]Edward Alan and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale, 1962), p. 147.

Just as in My Antonia, though, this is the story of a character, Marian Forrester, as she has affected the consciousness of another person. "Through Niel Herbert one feels that 'suffering of change' that one feels through Jim Burden in My Antonia."[3] Most of what the reader learns about Marian Forrester is what Niel Herbert learns of her, and her "lostness" is as much the view of her that Niel loses as it is her being lost in fact.

The lush and vibrant summer season frames the first episode of the novel. Niel Herbert, the twelve-year old nephew of the Forresters' lawyer, is playing at the spacious Forrester property with several of his friends from the little town of Sweet Water. The boys play all morning "like wild creatures,"[4] and the beauty of the summer day dramatizes their play: "The wild roses were wide open and brilliant, the blue-eyed grass was in purple flower, and the silvery milkweed was just coming on. Birds and butterflies darted everywhere" (17). They eat their picnic lunch in a shady grove and are honored when Mrs. Forrester brings them some freshly-baked cookies. Soon after she leaves, an intruder comes into the grove; Ivy Peters, an older boy, one suspected by the boys of having killed several dogs, emerges from the trees and spoils their afternoon. It is plain that he does not stand in awe of the Forresters and their wishes as the other boys do, for he carries a gun and boasts of his intention to bag a few ducks and get away before the Captain can catch him. Seeing a woodpecker in a nearby tree, Peters hits it with a deftly aimed pellet from his slingshot. The bird, stunned, falls and is quickly imprisoned under Ivy's hat; when it begins

[3]Dorothy Van Ghent, Willa Cather (Minneapolis, 1964), p. 29.

[4]Willa Cather, A Lost Lady (New York, 1951), p. 16. Subsequent references are indicated in the text.

to flutter, he takes it out and slits its eyes with a small blade. In pain, the bird flies about, finally finding its perch, and crawls into an accustomed hole.

The boys are dismayed. Niel, particularly nauseated by this cruelty, climbs the tree to retrieve the bird and put it out of pain. Niel falls to the ground unconscious and is carried by Peters to the Forrester house. Mrs. Forrester has Niel placed in her own lovely room and dismisses the other boys. She has one of the boys call the doctor and herself attends to Niel's comfort. Reaching consciousness by now, Niel is aware of the pain in his broken arm, but even more is he aware of the attentions of Marian Forrester, as she bathes his forehead with cologne. The doctor arrives presently, sets Niel's arm, and takes him home.

Niel's home situation is contrasted to the lovely Forrester estate:

> Home was not a pleasant place to go to; a frail egg-shell house, set off on the edge of the prairie where people of no consequence lived. Except for the fact that he was Judge Pommeroy's nephew, Niel would have been one of the boys to whom Mrs. Forrester merely nodded brightly as she passed. His father was a widower. A poor relation, a spinster from Kentucky, kept house for them, and Niel thought she was probably the worst housekeeper in the world. Their house was usually full of washing in various stages of incompletion,--tubs sitting about with linen soaking,--and the beds were "aired" until any hour in the afternoon when Cousin Sadie happened to think of making them up . . . . His father was at home very little, spent all his time at his office. He kept the county abstract books and made farm loans. Having lost his own property, he invested other people's money for them. He was a gentle, agreeable man, young, good-looking, with nice manners, but Niel felt there was an air of failure and defeat about his family. He clung to his maternal uncle Judge Pommeroy, white whiskered and portly, who was Captain Forrester's lawyer and a friend of all the great men who visited the Forresters (30-31).

Thus, Niel's twelve-year old summer is condensed to the experience of a single summer day. Cather seems to pack an entire summer into that day and into Niel's feelings about his own background on this significant day.

At this point in the novel, Cather turns her attention more particularly to the habits of the Forresters. There is also an abrupt leap in the novel's chronology: "For the next few years Niel saw very little of Mrs. Forrester" (31). Niel was twelve in the last episode; now he is nineteen. The Forresters, between these years in Niel's life, have not always been at Sweet Water, and their presence and absence are related to the seasonal cycle. Marian Forrester "was an excitement that came and went with summer. She and her husband always spent the winter in Denver and Colorado Springs,--left Sweet Water soon after Thanksgiving and did not return until the first of May" (31). It seems significant that they are in Sweet Water for the rebirth, life, and maturity stages of the seasonal cycle and that their absence corresponds to the absence of life in nature, much as Proserpina's departure for Hades marks the death of the year. One winter, however, Captain Forrester falls from his horse and lies ill in Colorado for the rest of the season. His decline in health at this point affects the yearly routine. "He and his wife still went away for the winter, but each year the period of their absence grew shorter" (32). The change in their pattern of living is related to a certain disorder in the fortunes of the town: "All this while the town of Sweet Water was changing. Its future no longer looked bright. Successive crop failures had broken the spirit of the farmers" (32). Thus, the decline of Captain Forrester is juxtaposed with the decline of the farms around Sweet Water. He is like the Fisher-King of the vegetation myth whose age, illness, impotence, or sterility is related to the failure of the rebirth stage of the seasonal cycle.[5] Niel is

[5]John H. Randall, The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston, 1960), p. 201.

affected by the changes. His father's fortunes fail; in fact, his father seems generally to be rather impotent and inept. Niel's father takes an office job in Denver; Niel is apprenticed to his uncle, Judge Pommeroy, and reads law, "not that [he] had any taste for the law, but he liked being with Judge Pommeroy, and he might as well stay there as anywhere, for the present" (33).

One winter day in Niel's nineteenth year, Mrs. Forrester comes to the Judge's office to invite them both to dinner for the next evening. They accept the invitation, and Niel drives Mrs. Forrester back to her house. They drink sherry, and Mrs. Forrester reveals her fear that a Denver trip will be impossible this winter. She reconciles herself to being unable to escape any part of the winter phase of the seasonal cycle by observing that "a winter in the country may do [Captain Forrester] good" (40). Niel, during his return to town, is exultant about the necessity of the Forresters' staying for the winter: "Oh, the winter would not be so bad, this year!" (41). Niel associates Marian Forrester with life and vibrancy, a kind of artificial summer spirit, that can make the bleakness of winter seem less severe. He eagerly awaits tomorrow's party.

The dinner party, just before Christmas, is a festive affair. Niel and his uncle drive over in a broken down hack from the livery stable. Four other guests are there: a Mr. and Mrs. Ogden, their daughter Constance, and Frank Ellinger, a man from Denver whose reputation is less than exemplary. A highlight of the winter evening is Captain Forrester's toast, "Happy days!" The toast, an habitual one with the Captain, seems less than declarative. Instead, it has the mood of lost days that were happy and, perhaps, a wish for happiness in the future. The wistful quality of the toast on a winter

evening heightens the nostalgia of the season and impresses Niel with the same feeling. Another of Niel's impressions is of Frank Ellinger: "His whole figure seemed very much alive under his clothes, with a restless, muscular energy that had something of the cruelty of wild animals in it" (46). Niel notices Constance Ogden's interest in Ellinger and is a bit discouraged in his own inability to be entertaining. After a relatively pleasant evening Niel and his uncle depart.

Late that night, when everyone else has retired, Marian and Frank share a brandy by the hearth and arrange a tryst for the next day, and on the following afternoon, as Niel arrives at the Forrester place, Marian and Frank are leaving in a small sleigh "to cut cedar boughs for Christmas" (61). Marian asks Niel to keep Constance company as the sleigh jingles off to the river cedar thickets. Niel finds Constance pouting and playing solitaire. He is no more entertaining to her than he was the night before.

Meanwhile, Marian and Frank are down by the river. Their conversation reveals them to be more than casual friends. Ellinger pulls the sleigh up to a cedar thicket and unharnesses the horses. He and Marian take buffalo robes and go off into the trees. Their affair is not a secret to all. Adolph Blum, hunting in the woods, comes upon the empty sleigh and the impatient ponies. Hidden from view, he sees Ellinger and Mrs. Forrester emerge from the ravine adjacent to the cedar thicket. He sees them embrace before Ellinger takes a hatchet to go back to cut the forgotten branches. Adolph watches them with interest: "Not much ever happened to him but the weather" (66). Other boys, he speculates, would make something of the knowledge of the situation. "But with Adolph Blum [Marian's] secrets were safe. His mind was feudal; the rich and fortunate were also the privileged" (68).

This lover's meeting in winter is the first definite sign of Mrs. Forrester's decline, but her infidelity is not a new experience. Her conversation with Ellinger reveals this. The important thing is Niel's awareness of Mrs. Forrester, and he knows nothing of her infidelity as yet.

The Forresters, just as Marian feared, do not spend any part of the winter in Denver. "For the Forresters that winter was a sort of isthmus between two estates; soon afterward came a change in their fortunes" (69). Three times a week Niel and his uncle play cards at the Forresters. The Forresters' first winter in Sweet Water affects Niel dramatically, and the effect is partly suggested through Cather's use of seasonal imagery. "On bitter, windy nights, sitting in his favorite blue chair before the grate, he used to wonder how he could manage to tear himself away, to plunge into the outer darkness, and run down the long frozen road and up the dead street of the town. Captain Forrester was experimenting with bulbs that winter, and had built a little glass conservatory on the south side of the house, off the back parlour. Through January and February the house was full of narcissus and Roman Hyacinths, and their heavy spring-like odour made a part of the enticing comfort of the fireside there" (70). This keeping of flowers in winter is like Marie Shabata's habit in O Pioneers!. Both she and the Captain soften some of winter's bleakness by artificially maintaining the flowers of spring and summer. Even during the bitter cold that accompanies the year's big blizzard in early March, the Captain's flowers thrive. Niel expresses wonder at this until the Captain explains the hardiness of the blossoms.

Marian Forrester, however, is not so hardy a blossom; she seems to wilt even as the flowers bloom. As she and Niel contemplate the frozen

waste from a hill, she reveals her feelings: "'Oh, but it is bleak!' she murmured. 'Suppose we should have to stay here all next winter, too, . . . and the next! What will become of me, Niel?' There was fear, unmistakable fright in her voice" (77). Unable to escape the death phase of the seasonal cycle, she is near panic. Unlike the Captain, who seems to adapt to the natural cycle of life, death, and rebirth, she despairs since she does not understand winter's culmination in the rebirth of spring. Niel has to remind her of the sure return of spring: "'In a month you'll see green begin in the marsh and run over the meadows. It's lovely over here in the spring'" (77-78). Niel's comment reminds the reader that Marian has never really seen the land in early spring's rebirth, since she has always waited until May to return from Denver.

When spring does return, Miss Cather relates it to the Forrester estate: "Spring came at last, and the Forrester place had never been so lovely. The Captain spent long happy days among his flowering shrubs" (82). But happiness is short. In June a bank in Denver fails. Captain Forrester is heavily involved and must go to help settle the accounts. Judge Pommeroy, who is going with the Captain, confides to Niel that the affair may involve a great loss of money for the Forresters. Marian seems unaware of the possible financial tragedy, and Niel worries about her. "She was one of the people who ought always to have money; any retrenchment of their generous way of living would be a hardship for her,--would be unfitting" (83).

While the Captain is away, Frank Ellinger comes to town. Niel is aware of his arrival and assumes that he dines with Mrs. Forrester, since he does not appear at the hotel dining room where Niel eats. Because of the town gossip, Niel thinks it in very bad taste for Ellinger to visit while the

Captain is away. Critical as he is of Ellinger, Niel can connect no possibility of guilt to Marian, until one morning when he is awakened by the sound of a puffing switch engine. He tries to sleep, "but the sound of escaping steam for some reason excited him. He could not shut out the feeling that it was summer, and that the dawn would soon be flaming gloriously over the Forresters' marsh. He had awakened with the intense, blissful realization of summer which sometimes comes to children in their beds" (84). Niel's response to the life phase of the seasonal cycle dramatizes his still child-like attitude, especially in his ignorance of Ellinger's purpose in coming to Sweet Water. Cather emphasizes his youthfulness by relating his summer mood to the kind that children experience. Niel's youth of ignorance does not last much longer, however.

Still elated, jubilant, he rises and heads for the Forrester house. The summer description is vivid:

> The sky was burning with the soft pink and silver of a cloudless summer dawn. The heavy, bowed grasses splashed him to the knees. All over the marsh, snow-on-the-mountain, globed with dew, made cool sheets of silver, and the swamp milk weed spread its flat, raspberry-coloured clusters. There was an almost religious purity about the fresh morning air, the tender sky, the grass and flowers with the sheen of early dew upon them. There was in all living things something limpid and joyous--like the wet, morning call of the birds, flying up through the unstained atmosphere. Out of the saffron east a thin, yellow, wine-like sunshine began to gild the fragrant meadows and the glistening tops of the grove. Niel wondered why he did not often come over like this, to see the day before men and their activities had spoiled it, while the morning was still unsullied, like a gift handed down from the heroic ages (84-85).

Niel comes upon roses in the marsh and intends to make a bouquet. "Where [the roses] had opened, their petals were stained with that burning rose-colour which is always gone by noon,--a dye made of sunlight and morning and moisture, so intense that it cannot possibly last . . . must fade, like

ecstasy" (85). The foreshadowing in this passage, related certainly to the passing of Niel's impression of Marian's innocence, is just as clearly related to Niel's own loss of youth and ignorance. Marian's innocence, after all, is only in Niel's mind anyway.

When Niel reaches the Forrester's house, intending to place the bouquet by Marian's window, he hears voices. "As he bent to place the flowers on the sill, he heard from within a woman's soft laughter; impatient, indulgent, teasing, eager. Then another laugh, very different, a man's. And it was fat and lazy,--ended in something like a yawn" (86). Disillusioned and crushed, Niel leaves and in his mind relates Marian's infidelity to the flowers that lose their beauty: "'Lilies that fester,' he muttered, 'lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds'" (87). Niel has lost not just Marian, but the summer of youth. He seems like Hamlet in his disgust with the sudden awareness of corruption in the world. Summer, the season of life, has been ruined for Niel. He is no longer young; he is no longer innocent.

The Captain returns soon, having sacrificed nearly everything he had to see that his depositors received their money, since the other bank partners would not go along with him, wanting instead to settle for fifty cents on the dollar. Judge Pommeroy expresses his pride in the Captain's nobility and laments the passing of businessmen who are not scoundrels. Almost immediately, the Captain has a stroke and takes three weeks to recover. Even his recovery, however, is not complete. His speech is slurred, and his left arm and leg are affected. Niel helps the Forresters during this period, and, the day before he is to leave for Massachusetts to study architecture, he visits them. Because he must pack, Niel declines the Captain's invitation to dinner. "'Then we must have a little something before you

go.' Captain Forrester rose heavily, with the aid of his cane, and went into the dining-room. He brought back the decanter and filled three glasses with ceremony. Lifting his glass, he paused as always, and blinked. 'Happy days'" (100). Niel's departure in August is much like Jim Burden's departure in August. Like Jim, Niel is now mature. He has encountered both the sweetness and the coarseness of life, and now, with the season of maturity and fruitfulness approaching, the youth and vibrancy of summer must be left behind as he goes to complete his education. He will study to be an architect, not a lawyer, because in this new, materialistic world lawyers destroy; architects create.

Niel does not return for two years. On the train carrying him back to Sweet Water for the summer, he meets Ivy Peters. Now a lawyer and something of a shady entrepreneur, Peters reveals that he has rented the Forrester marshes, drained them, and planted wheat. Niel sees this act as a kind of defiance of the old, impractical beauties of nature and reflects bitterly on the passing of dreamers like Captain Forrester who are being replaced by unscrupulous materialists like Peters, "who had never dared anything, never risked anything" (106).

On the day after his arrival, Niel goes to visit the Forresters, finds the Captain taking great pleasure in a new sun dial, and goes to talk with Marian in the orchard. She is lying in a hammock, and as he lifts her, hammock and all, he wishes that he "could rescue her and carry her off like this,--off the earth of sad inevitable periods, away from age, weariness, adverse fortune!" (110). Niel's desire to rescue Marian from "inevitable periods" seems like a wish to avoid the necessity of the seasonal cycle.

Marian, "the excitement that came and went with summer" (31), is Niel's symbol of life, and his desire to protect her from the ravages of the winter phase of the cycle seems unrealistic, especially when Marian tells him of Captain Forrester's habit of watching "time visibly devoured" (111) on his new sun dial. Captain Forrester seems reconciled to "inevitable periods." After Niel and Marian return to the house, the Captain asks Niel to mail a letter in town. Looking at the envelope, Niel sees that it is addressed to Frank Ellinger, and the Captain's manner suggests to Niel that Marian's indiscretions have not gone unnoticed.

Ironically, the summer of Niel's return is not the summer of life but a season in which the fortunes of Daniel and Marian Forrester decline significantly. The first evidence to Niel of this decline is the impudence of Ivy Peters to "his betters" and Marian's opinion of men like Peters. Niel, studying in the Forrester's grove, often observes with irritation how Peters speaks to the Forresters. On one occasion Niel sees Peters telling Mrs. Forrester an improper story. He infers the nature of the story from Mrs. Forrester's laugh. Finally, Niel asks Marian why she puts up with Peters' impudence, and she replies that she has no choice: "'Remember, we have to get along with Ivy Peters, we simply have to!'" (123). She goes on to explain that Peters holds a five-year lease on the marsh land and that, besides, he has made investments for her in land that has probably been stolen from the Indians. Marian then praises Peters' business sense and contrasts him with careful businessmen like the Captain's old friends. Niel reminds her that "'rascality isn't the only thing that succeeds in business'" (124). She reveals her desperation and her complete fall to materialistic values by saying, "'It succeeds faster than anything else, though'" (124).

Toward the end of the summer another episode dramatizes Marian's desperation: Frank Ellinger marries Constance Ogden. Their marriage seems to isolate Marian Forrester, and Cather emphasizes the isolation by using seasonal imagery; the rains of late summer result in a flooded area between the town and the Forrester place. Frantic and intoxicated, Marian manages to cross what is left of a footbridge and stumbles into Judge Pommeroy's office where Niel is working late. She wants to use the long distance telephone to call Ellinger. Niel reminds her that the town telephone operator listens to such calls, but Marian persists, and Niel puts the call through to Colorado Springs. When he detects an hysterical note in her voice, he cuts the wire. Unaware of Niel's timely act, she goes on to denounce Ellinger in an harangue that no one but she and Niel hear. When Ellinger does not say anything, she thinks that he has broken the connection. Afterwards, she falls into a drunken sleep, and Niel sees that she is comfortable.

With autumn coming on and the year going down to winter, Captain Forrester suffers another stroke. His seizure is a further step in the decline of the Forresters. "Under the care of him, now that he was helpless, Mrs. Forrester quite went to pieces" (137). Now she can no longer hold the women from the town at arm's length, and they descend upon the place like harpies. Niel, as a result, decides to defer his return to school in order to care for the Captain.

Marian Forrester's isolation is linked to the Captain's failing health. Her isolation began when he fell from his horse; after that Marian was forced to stay in Sweet Water for the winters, away from the gay life of Denver and Colorado Springs. The Captain's first stroke further isolated her by

tying her to Sweet Water. Ellinger's marriage was another stage in her isolation. Now, during the Captain's declining days, she seems imprisoned by the house.

Early in December Captain Forrester dies, and Marian Forrester's "isolation becomes frantic."[6] It is winter, the season of death; and now she is really alone. "His death elicits from Miss Cather the obvious symbolical comparison with the arrival of winter."[7] Judge Pommeroy, Niel, and Marian have tea after the funeral; the seasonal description seems to imply Marian's isolation: "The grey dawn was darkening, and as the three sat having their tea in the bay window, swift squalls of snow were falling over the wide meadows between the hill and the town, and the creaking of the big cottonwoods about the house seemed to say that winter had come" (146).

From this point in the novel, Marian Forrester's decline is swift. She dismisses Judge Pommeroy and retains the services of Ivy Peters. She begins to entertain the young men of the town and even persuades Niel to come to one of her dinners. The contrast to the former, gracious dinners at the Forrester place is continually in Niel's mind. One summer evening Niel sees Ivy Peters embracing her and decides to leave Sweet Water without saying goodbye. He is more disillusioned than he was when he overheard her with Ellinger. "He had given her a year of his life, and she had thrown it away. He had helped the Captain to die peacefully, he believed; and now it was the Captain who seemed the reality" (170). Niel can finally see Marian as a lost lady. In this summer, one year after his return to Sweet

[6]Van Ghent, p. 27.

[7]Bloom, p. 72.

Water, he reaches another stage in his maturity and goes off to finish his education. Now, he thinks, he sees her for what she really is. "Nothing she could ever do would in the least matter to him again" (170).

Niel's opinion changes slowly. He receives letters from his uncle, letters that furnish him with fragments of information about Marian Forrester. He learns that her name is linked with Ivy Peters, that her health is failing, and finally, that she is "sadly broken" (171). After Judge Pommeroy's death Niel hears that Ivy Peters has bought the Forrester place and has married a girl from Wyoming. It is rumored that Marian has moved to California. "It was years before Niel could think of her without chagrin. But eventually, after he did not know if Daniel Forrester's widow were living or dead, Daniel Forrester's wife returned to him, a bright, impersonal memory" (171). Now Niel is able to look upon her as an important factor in his own maturation: "He came to be very glad that he had known her, and that she had had a hand in breaking him in to life" (171).

Many years later, Niel hears once more of Marian Forrester. Traveling west, he encounters an old friend, Ed Elliott, who tells him of having seen Marian Forrester in Argentina. Marian, it seems, had met a rich Englishman in California and had married him. His land holding and large fortune had allowed her to resume a gracious way of living. Her escape to Argentina is, in a way, an escape from the harshness of the seasonal necessity, an escape to the "tropical world" of "Paul's Case." Niel wonders if she is still alive, but Elliott tells him that she has been dead for three years. It does not grieve Niel to hear of her death. Instead, he says, "So we may feel sure that she was well cared for, to the very end . . . . Thank God for that!'" (174).

The novel ends on this rather cheerful note, but there is still a kind of sadness in Niel's awareness of what the death of Marian Forrester implies: "A Lost Lady mourns the evanescence of beauty, the frailty of the gracious life."[8] Throughout the novel, Niel seems aware of the connection between the Forresters and a way of life that is fading. He continually sees Marian in terms of the summer season and the Forrester house in terms of its vegetation and the seasons. The coming and going of the Forresters, moreover, is related to the changing seasons. The Captain's death in winter is appropriate in that it signifies the death of the pioneer spirit, the death of a way of life. Marian's decline, from that point, is inevitable. Her rejuvenation by another rich man on another, newer frontier seems to indicate that this genteel way of life may thrive only in a certain environment, a pioneer setting where men dare and take large risks, a time of spring and summer before the inevitable death of winter.

[8]Randall, p. 373.

CONCLUSION

Beginning with April Twilights in 1903, the cycle of the seasons is a prominent motif in the writings of Willa Cather. "In Rose Time," "Autumn Melody," "Winter at Delphi," and "Fides, Spes" are striking examples of the pattern in her poetry. Cather's short stories, too, often exhibit her concern with the seasons as meaningful symbols. "Paul's Case" and "The Sculptor's Funeral," with their emphasis on the bleakness of western life, show the season of winter as a time of desolation, death, and sterility.

Cather's major novels are rich in seasonal imagery. "In Miss Cather's novels from O Pioneers! to A Lost Lady we can see the rise and fall of the pioneering ideal."[1] This rise and fall may be related to the changing seasons. O Pioneers! shows a springtime of pioneer life, the first life wrenched from the soil. My Ántonia is summer-like in its picture of vibrant life coming to the prairie. A Lost Lady seems related to the autumn and winter phases of the cycle; the decline of the West is pictured in the decline of Daniel Forrester and his wife. "Alexandra Bergson and Antonia Shimerda found themselves in the heroic taming of the Nebraska plains; Marian Forrester lost herself in the emptying and vulgarizing process that followed."[2] Alexandra surrenders herself to the seasonal cycle and prospers because of her resignation to its rightness. Even in the aftermath of

[1] David Daiches, Willa Cather, A Critical Introduction (New York, 1962), p. 63.

[2] Ibid.

tragedy, Alexandra remains strong, refreshed by her vision. Ántonia's resignation to the cycle results, ultimately, in her ability to withstand hardship and to find happiness. Marian Forrester's failure to adapt to the cycle is part of her tragedy and of her failure to find happiness.

The seasons, Cather seems to say, are thus meaningful symbols for man's experience. Man, when he resigns himself to being "part of something entire," is likely to find happiness and fulfillment, especially when he is close to nature and involves himself with its ever recurring seasons.

APPENDIX

IN ROSE TIME

Oh, this is the joy of the rose:
That it blows,
And goes.

Winter lasts a five-month,
Spring-time stays but one;
Yellow blow the rye-fields
When the rose is done.
Pines are clad at Yuletide
When the birch is bare,
And the Holly's greenest
In the frosty air.

Sorrow keeps a stone house
Builded grim and gray;
Pleasure hath a straw thatch
Hung with lanterns gay.
On her petty savings
Niggard Prudence thrives,
Passion, ere the moonset,
Bleeds a thousand lives.

Virtue hath a warm hearth--
Folly's dead and drowned;
Friendship hath her own when
Love is underground.
Ah! for me the madness
Of the spendthrift flower,
Burning myriad sunsets
In a single hour.

For this is the joy of the rose:
That it blows,
And goes.

AUTUMN MELODY

In the autumn days, the days of parting,
    Days that in a golden silence fall,
When the air is quick with bird-wings starting,
    And the asters darken by the wall;

Strong and sweet the wine of heaven is flowing,
    Bees and sun and sleep and golden dyes;
Long forgot is budding-time and blowing,
    Sunk in honeyed sleep the garden lies.

Spring and storm and summer midnight madness
    Dream within the grape but never wake;
Bees and sun and sweetness,--oh, and sadness!
    Sun and sweet that reach the heart--and break.

Ah, the pain at heart forever starting,
    Ah, the cup untasted that we spilled
In the autumn days, the days of parting!
    Would our shades could drink it, and be stilled.

WINTER AT DELPHI

Cold are the stars of the night,
  Wild is the tempest crying,
Fast through the velvet dark
  Little white flakes are flying.
Still is the House of Song.
  But the fire on the hearth is burning;
And the lamps are trimmed, and the cup
  Is full for his day of returning.
His watchers are fallen asleep,
  They wait but his call to follow,
Ay, to the ends of the earth--
  But Apollo, the god, Apollo?

Sick is the heart in my breast,
  Mine eyes are blinded with weeping;
The god who never comes back,
  The watch that forever is keeping.
Service of gods is hard;
  Deep lies the snow on my pillow.
For him the laurel and song,
  Weeping for me and the willow:
Empty my arms and cold
  As the nest forgot of the swallow;
Birds will come back with the spring,--
  But Apollo, the god, Apollo?

Hope will come back with the spring,
  Joy with the lark's returning;
Love must awake betimes,
  When the crocus buds are a-burning.
Hawthorns will follow the snow,
  The robin his tryst be keeping;
Winds will blow in the May,
  Waking the pulses a-sleeping.
Snowdrops will whiten the hills,
  Violets hide in the hollow;
Pan will be drunken and rage--
  But Apollo, the god, Apollo?

FIDES, SPES

Joy is come to the little
  Everywhere;
Pink to the peach and pink to the apple,
  White to the pear.
Stars are come to the dogwood,
  Astral, pale;
Mists are pink on the red-bud,
  Veil after veil.
Flutes for the feathery locusts,
  Soft as spray;
Tongues of lovers for chestnuts, poplars
  Babbling May.
Yellow plumes for the willows'
  Wind-blown hair;
Oak trees and sycamores only
  Comfortless, bare.
Sore from Steel and the watching,
  Somber and old,
(Wooing robes for the beeches, larches,
  Splashed with gold,
Breath of love from the lilacs,
  Warm with noon,)
Great hearts cold when the little
  Beat mad so soon.
What is their faith to bear it
  Till it come,
Waiting with rain-cloud and swallow,
  Frozen, dumb?

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