

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

O Pioneers!

by
Willa Cather

Book Information

Willa Cather, O Pioneers!
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This classic story tells of heroic Swedish pioneers in the Nebraska country in the 1880s.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Natural Environments, Plains/Plateaus/Prairies; People, Pioneers/Settlers; Popular Groupings, College Bound

Main Characters

Alexandra Bergson the principal character, an intelligent, successful homesteader on the Nebraska prairie

Carl Linstrum a neighbor boy of the Bergsons, who returns to the prairie as an adult and renews his relationship with Alexandra

Emil Bergson Alexandra's youngest brother, who falls in love with Marie Shabata

Frank Shabata Marie's jealous and bitter husband

Ivar a "crazy" old hermit who understands animals

Marie (Tovesky) Shabata a childhood visitor to the prairie who moves onto the Linstrums' old homestead once she marries

Oscar and Lou Bergson Alexandra's brothers, who work the land and share in the inheritance

Vocabulary

enigma something that is puzzling

John Huss a fifteenth-century Bohemian religious reformer

probity acknowledged virtue

sanguine optimistic

Synopsis

The story begins in Hanover, Nebraska, a windblown prairie town. Alexandra Bergson has

come to town with her young brother, Emil, to get medicine for her dying father. While there, Emil's kitten climbs a pole and is afraid to come down. A neighbor boy, Carl Linstrum, rescues the cat. The three of them go into the general store where they see a young girl, Marie Tovesky, being teased and adored by the men that are there. Carl, Alexandra, and Emil ride home together and Carl talks of his drawings. After letting off Carl, Alexandra and Emil arrive home to their supper. Afterward, Mr. John Bergson calls a family meeting in which he expresses his wishes for Alexandra to run the homestead after his death. He advises his sons Lou and Oscar to listen to her and to keep the land. Mr. Bergson dies shortly thereafter.

Drought has come to the prairie now, and many farmers are abandoning their homesteads, including the neighboring Linstrums. Oscar and Lou are beginning to lose faith, but Alexandra visits the river area to see if "the grass is greener" there, determines it is not, and proposes instead that they buy all the prairie land they can. This proves to be a wise move.

The story shifts to sixteen years later and the Bergson family has prospered. The prairie, once so desolate, has begun to be tamed. The family roles have changed little. Alexandra has been strong, resourceful, and forward thinking. She relies on Crazy Ivar, an animal-loving, Bible-reading hermit for advice and has now taken him in since he lost his land. Lou and Oscar remain narrow-minded, suggesting Ivar be sent to an institution. When Carl Linstrum returns to the area to visit, Lou and Oscar approach Alexandra and tell her she should not marry him. They are caught up in the talk of the appearance of a wealthy woman marrying a man deemed a failure because he owns no property, nor has a successful business. Alexandra defends him, however, just as she does Ivar. Meanwhile, Emil has graduated from the University. He returns in summer to find Marie Tovesky, the charming girl from his youth, married to Frank Shabata, a controlling and jealous husband. Emil moons over her but leaves to study in Mexico, fearing something would happen between them if he stayed.

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When at last Emil returns from Mexico, Marie and Emil finally speak their feelings to one another. Emil resolves to make a permanent move from the area. While saying his good-byes, his friend, Amedee falls ill and dies later that night of appendicitis. Following the confirmation service, Emil goes to Marie for a final goodbye. In the orchard, they become lovers for the first time. Frank returns home from town drunk, and upon not finding Marie in the house, gets his gun and walks the land. Upon hearing voices, he shoots and kills both Emil and Marie.

Alexandra remains in a daze for months until being caught in a storm at the cemetery, when she seems to find her determination again. She decides to work for Frank's freedom and goes to Lincoln to visit him. Carl Linstrum arrives in Hanover while she is there, wiring her that he learned the news of Emil's tragedy. Alexandra returns home and decides to marry Carl, affirming the goodness of their friendship.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why are nationalities so obviously distinguished in *O Pioneers!*?

The book was written at a time when first-generation immigrants were arriving on the prairie. The differences in language, culture, and worship were pronounced. People still identified closely with their motherland. Many of the old-country values were maintained, and it was considered desirable for people to marry within their nationality and religion. Even in areas where a number of nationalities were represented, people of like-origins tended to settle on neighboring farms, so that, for example, the Swedes lived down one road, the Russians another, and the Bohemians still another.

Literary Analysis

In the first scene of the story we find Alexandra, Emil, Carl, and Marie interacting together. How does this encounter set the stage for the story that follows?

The four principal characters are introduced to the reader and display the characteristics that will be both their strengths and their downfalls in the story. Alexandra is determined, a manager, and a strong woman "showing Amazonian fierceness"; Emil is the lover of a troubled kitten; Carl is the artist and rescuer; and Marie is the playful charmer. Later events in the story reveal that Alexandra becomes the homestead's manager; Emil falls in love with Marie, a charmer, but whose life is troubled by an unsuccessful marriage; and Carl remains a dreamer, but rescues Alexandra from loneliness.

Inferential Comprehension

Carl is an aspiring artist who leaves the frontier with his family. Although he becomes an engraver, he returns years later with little to show for himself. What does Carl's character convey?

A creative and sensitive person has difficulty surviving in a world that demands practicality and manual labor. Artists were unappreciated even in cities, being relegated to making cheap carvings or such. Carl, however, has much to offer. He is perceptive, kind, and loving.

Constructing Meaning

Alexandra seems troubled by the thought that there may be something wrong in being warm-hearted and impulsive like Marie. It had brought destruction and sorrow to many people in Marie's life. How do you feel about this observation? Why?

Students may agree or disagree with the assessment. If they agree, they may feel that Marie had been spoiled and needed attention wherever she went and brought this misery on herself. On the other hand, perhaps the people around her could not accept her for who she was and they should have examined their own motivations. Marie resisted those who tried to control her and demand she behave in a way that suited them, not her.

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Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story takes place during the years around the turn of the twentieth century. References are made to William Jennings Bryan and J.P. Morgan. Have the students research the governmental and financial issues that charged the political climate at that time. How would these issues have bearing on the people of the Nebraska frontier?

Comparing and Contrasting The value of the land holds a strong undercurrent throughout the story. Different cultures hold differing ideas about land, its value, and its ownership. Choose at least four cultures from different continents and create a chart that compares and contrasts their ideas of land ownership. Speculate on how these cultures would get along if they were suddenly asked to live together.

Recognizing Details The tale of the tragic ending of Emil and Marie is never witnessed, but is surmised by the evidence at the murder scene. This type of situation has become the basis of many detective stories and movies. Have the students relate their favorite detective cases. They should be attentive to the small details that each detective uses as clues in solving the case.

Identifying Persuasive Language Alexandra has to convince Oscar and Lou to sell their cattle and remortgage the farm to buy more land. Have the students think of an idea they would like to see come to fruition. They can research the market to determine its feasibility and then come up with a sales pitch in order to obtain the start-up funds to see that their idea becomes a reality. You may want to be like some business schools that have contests to evaluate the ideas and rank them for their potential.