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From main-travelled roads to Route 66: Transitions in Prairie Naturalism

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FROM MAIN-TRAVELLED ROADS TO ROUTE 66:
TRANSITIONS IN PRAIRIE NATURALISM

by

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Bachelor of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

**From Main-Travelled Roads to Route 66:
Transitions in Prairie Naturalism**

by

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To best represent a people of a specific spatial and historical context, literary texts must necessarily demonstrate a vested interest and familiarity of a region and its inhabitants' common experiences. In examining one particular aspect of regional naturalism in American literature, this study explores the basic tenets of Prairie Naturalism as defined by three major authors: Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, and John Steinbeck. The short stories in Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) establish the foundation of Prairie Naturalism with meticulous attention to daily lives on the plains and with political strategies to improve the lives of the oppressed. Willa Cather's novels, *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), again place national attention on the plains and provide representational balance with positive and negative aspects of prairie life. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) gives voice to an otherwise marginalized population in desperate need of conditional improvement. All three authors' works function first as truthful representations of prairie ecology, economy, and ethnography; they function second as deconstructive entities against images of the pastoral plains inhabited by noble yeomen.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: REVISITING NATURALISM AND THE POST-FRONTIER

PRAIRIE

Life in the American Prairies and Plains can be easily misrepresented. While there is an undeniable beauty in America's Middle West and Great Plains, there is also a brutal nature that engages an individual in a struggle to survive. For the newly-emigrated, there is the additional challenge of assimilation into an unwelcoming culture. For the prairie woman, there is the risk of stagnancy and losing individuality after marriage and childbirth. Among the other minute yet important details, from lost or broken tools to cracked and weathered hands, which certainly constitute a part of the genuine Prairie experience, there is the solemn and too-possible threat of losing personal property and prosperity regardless of effort or faith.

Adding to these anxieties, the United States eliminated the "frontier" category from the census in 1890, giving the nation's populace a feeling of termination to an impossible and unattainable ideal.¹ Before, the frontier symbolized expedition and development within the country and its citizens; the frontier's closure wrought anxieties of environmental and social enclosure. Meanwhile, those who actually lived on the Frontier, or more specifically those who acquired farmland in the nation's Middle West, gradually learned that living in a region advertised as exciting meant exerting a great amount of effort and finances, often leading to a life of stagnancy or, worse, perpetual labor. Resulting from the combination of public unease stirred from the closing of the frontier and the realization of the anticlimactic life of the American farmer, a developing literary genre flourished. Owing to its aesthetic qualities and varied apparent authorial

purposes, the American Naturalism movement in the later nineteenth century called for close consideration and perhaps re-classification of literature's purpose. In reconsidering naturalism in a contemporary setting, expanding the study of general naturalism to regional naturalism generates specificity in textual examination, and this specificity allows readers to observe how the portrayal of American lives differs between authors and regions.

The American Great Plains, or more generally the American prairie, is but one of these regions. Examining the differences and similarities in the portrayals of the prairie helps produce a broad idea of the authentic prairie and how its portrayal survived through the means of progressive authors. These authors are Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, and John Steinbeck. These three authors produced a trifocal vision of the American Plains through works including *Main-Travelled Roads*, *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. In addition to developing works that emphasized realistic experiences, these writers helped redefine naturalism with the added focus of one region and its specific cultures and historical instances. The fictions of Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, and John Steinbeck preserved a spatial-temporal matrix through textual media, helping to prevent unique perspectives from quiet demise over time: their works function as truthful representations of a specific time, place, and people. These authors' texts function within the tradition of literary naturalism, whose definition, as I hope to demonstrate in this study, will become increasingly complicated with each of these author's contributions. Each of them preserves the voices and experiences of a people who are at risk of erasure from the American literary catalogue.

Naturalism is an effective vehicle for so preserving these voices and experiences, yet the genre's precise definition gradually evolved into a complicated aesthetic classification. It began in the late nineteenth century in France with Émile Zola and his *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays* (1893), which introduced the notion of the removal of imagination from the novel. The text explains that "with the naturalistic novel and the novel of observation and analysis, the conditions change at once," and the naturalist novelist "invents a plan, a drama; only it is a scrap of drama, the first story he comes across and which daily life furnishes him with always" (210). To replace the driving factor of imagination, Zola's text demands that there must be a "sense of reality" in narratives and plays (212). After Zola's work became internationally read by scholars and popular readers alike, naturalism gained American momentum with authors such as Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Jack London, and Stephen Crane. These authors challenged Victorian values in literature, and instead of upholding the vision of man as superior or different from a common animal, their texts examined man as a product of his environment, heredity, and sexual drives. Later in 1956, naturalism received renewed critical attention with the publication of Charles C. Walcutt's *American Literary Naturalism, a Divided Stream*, which introduced the revolutionary theory that naturalism itself is a product of surrounding literary movements. Currently, Donald Pizer leads modern appreciation and consideration of the movement.

Because of naturalism's background and seemingly constant change, it may be beneficial to host a preliminary clarification as to the essential definition of naturalism. First, naturalism is more than a mere extension of realism. While realists represented the everyday, commonplace, and even the banal, naturalists represented an occurrence of

character or situation that may be sensational or decidedly unordinary. Charles Walcott carefully outlines the criteria of literary naturalism in his text, stating that the idea patterns of naturalism are three-fold. There is first the “attack on the dualist (therefore unscientific) values of the past”; then “the religion of reason-nature, revealed in an enraptured contemplation of Process”; and thirdly “the recognition and slowly growing fear of natural forces that man might study but apparently could not control” (20). Next, the influences of Darwinian theory on naturalistic texts is quite evident: characters, like animals, vie for survival in natural law and socioeconomic forces. Violence and taboo serve as vehicles for expressing truth; though Garland, Cather, and Steinbeck use a reserved amount of violence in their texts, they also included what their characters’ cultures would consider as taboo or unmentionable. Walcott also discusses the elusive and somewhat faulty nature of the genre’s style. Though many naturalistic works are “documentary, satiric, impressionistic, and sensational” (22), these are not exclusive terms for naturalist styles, which vary from the ordinary to the sensational.

Naturalism portrays the human experiment as it seeks survival in a socially- and biologically-constrictive existence. Scientific theory merges with aesthetic appreciation. Opposing Puritanical and traditional American notions of environmental response to a quality work ethic, naturalistic texts demand environmental ambivalence. A family may work and till the land to receive bounty, but the land does not provide for its workers through any transcendental or supernatural affection. Additionally, heredity and environment demonstrate dominance over the human will and effort. While many naturalistic works are pessimistic in tone, some authors, Cather included, proved that optimism is possible even in the direst of survival challenges. The pessimistic authors,

Garland and Steinbeck included, had what Walcutt considers an optimistic scientific purpose, in which readers will develop an understanding of man's lack of control of his fate and surrender a consequent reverence for exterior, determined forces. Through examining both the pessimistic and the optimistic in naturalism, we come to conclude that these modifications are but products of authorial and audience perception and judgment.

Despite the need to assume objective attitudes while frankly portraying subjects and events, naturalistic authors, especially Hamlin Garland and John Steinbeck, have a tendency to underpin their works with ulterior social motives. Garland utilized his short stories as demonstrations of the effectiveness that the Single Tax Law could have on farmers in the 1890s.² Similarly, Steinbeck utilized his novel as a platform to demonstrate the protection of rights available through government-controlled labor organizations. Lastly, though naturalism calls for frank rejection of Victorian airs while exploring man in his totality, including all of his inherent biology, naturalism is not necessarily anti-romanticism, as Frank Norris poignantly explains in his essay "Zola As a Romantic Writer."³ Though critics such as Richard Chase will continually debate the exact purpose and methodology of naturalism, it is not the antithesis of romanticism. The two genres are indeed quite different, but each author discussed here demonstrated the ability of maintaining naturalistic authority while incorporating Romantic elements within a text. In varying degrees these authors assume the frankness, objectivity, amorality, and understanding of predeterminism necessary to deem a work "naturalistic." These elements of this literary style, combined with specific regional representation, lend voice and credence to a historical, agrarian people.

For authors seeking to chronicle its place and people, the American Middle West hosts a particular challenge. First, there is the issue of nomenclature. The “Middle West” is an over-generalized term that includes too dissimilar places.⁴ A town in Michigan or North Dakota, for example, may not hold equivalent experiences as a town in Nebraska or Oklahoma. The authors discussed here typically provide their own titles for the regions they depict: Hamlin Garland often refers to the Middle Border or a particular town, Cather frequently refers to her characters on “The Divide,” and Steinbeck cites specific location names as he tracks the Joads’ journey from Eastern Oklahoma to Southern California. So to include only the regions that are actively discussed by these three authors, this discussion will refer to the “Plains” or the “prairie,” a region that includes in its scope Garland’s Iowa and Wisconsin, Cather’s Nebraska, and Steinbeck’s Oklahoma.

The second major challenge confronting authors who wished to create realistic stories of the Plains rests in dismantling the mythic West and the Puritan myth of work ethic resulting in reward. Resulting from the inception of the American dream of independence and self-reliance, the American public, including political and literary figures, subjected the Plains to an unreasonable image. Myths perpetuated images of agrarian life as consisting of noble simplicity, spiritual connections to the land, and ultimate self-reliance. Heroic types such as Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, and Lewis and Clark dominated the American idea of the Western frontiersman.⁵ Naturalist authors, meanwhile, in order to preserve a more accurate portrait of prairie life, helped deconstruct these unbridled conceptions, which were often created by outsiders or non-natives of the Plains.

To explore naturalism as it appears in fiction that principally describes the American Prairie, this study will focus first on how texts such as Garland's, Cather's, and Steinbeck's satisfy the general criteria for literary naturalism. It investigates how exterior forces determine and constitute an individual and his or her character. Accuracy is also problematic, since to truly portray a realistic experience, authors must limit imaginative input. But how are we to accept a text representing that which the author has not personally experienced? To answer questions such as this, this study will examine how these authors contribute to regional naturalism. This includes an intense study of the portrayal of the prairie woman, who must escape the Prairie in order to preserve individuality or instead thrive as a source of matriarchal power. Moreover, this study addresses the careful management of the supernatural, as the authors clearly limit, or in fact question, allusions to a higher power controlling the events occurring within the texts.

Historical context is crucial for understanding the works of Garland, Cather, and Steinbeck. Though forty-eight years separate the publication of Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, the themes and concerns of the Plains inhabitants remain similar. Garland and Cather's characters experience the natural and economic consequences of the Homestead Act just as much as Steinbeck's. The land values in Garland's tales fluctuate, and this remains the case in Steinbeck's most famous work. The need for accuracy in expressing the Prairie woman's experience remains just as prevalent, despite the nearly fifty years' difference. Historical context aids in demonstrating the precise differences present in each author's era. In examining each author's work, then, a glance into the historical background of each text will help

illustrate the authors' attempt to maintain accuracy and regional identification in their fictional creations.

The present discussion starts with a close examination of the fiction of Hamlin Garland, who published his collection of short stories, *Main-Travelled Roads*, in 1891. Four years later, he published *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*. To begin what would be a series of autobiographical memoirs, Garland published *A Son of the Middle Border* in 1917. All three of these works begin the initial deconstruction of the mythic West and prairie. Focusing on the increasing issues with tenant farming and bank-owned farms, Garland's families must come to the realization that their farms, if theirs, will forever keep them in financial turmoil. Garland's stories exemplify his proficiency in deflating pre-conceived dreams: in "The Return of a Private," a soldier returns to an empty homestead, his beloved dog having passed away long before. In "A Day's Pleasure," a wife, driven by boredom, follows her husband into town, wherein she finds that life has no value there, either; in "Mrs. Ripley's Trip," a grandmother returns from her long-awaited journey to the somber realization that, now without a dream, she will continue until her death the repetitious, monotonous housework, that she has done all her life. With stories like these and his later novels, Garland's texts propelled the image of the true Plains woman into the popular consciousness. *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, contrarily, seeks to follow the prairie woman who chooses to depart prairie life, liberating herself from familial and religious obligations. In all, Garland's texts are gritty, portraying, with few details neglected, the brutal life of the prairie family.

Meanwhile, Willa Cather, a few decades following the publication of *Main-Travelled Roads*, both challenges and compliments the vision of prairie folk put forth by

Garland. Her first successful novel, published in 1913, *O Pioneers!*, and her subsequent novel, published in 1918, *My Ántonia*, apply a gentler perspective upon the Prairie experience. Indeed, her style of fiction may be considered too gentle; critics continue the debate of categorizing Cather as romantic, realistic, or naturalistic.⁶ When examined closely, however, her narratives demonstrate quality examples of the basic tenants of naturalism. Suicide, familial abandonment, social isolation, and financial burden strain the families in the spatial equivalent of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Cather's close, near-documentary attention to European immigrants especially earns her fiction the label of Naturalistic. Her transcendental and romantic stylistic features certainly grant elements of optimism for readers observing Cather's characters and events, but Cather's characters simply cannot escape the constraints placed upon them by unseen, ambivalent forces.

Grittier than even Garland's works, *The Grapes of Wrath* was published approximately two decades after Cather's *My Ántonia*. The 1939 novel excels in documenting the strife of Okie immigrants seeking refuge in California's supposed haven, but the novel elicits numerous issues that may require close re-evaluation. However true the experiences may seem, Steinbeck was neither an Oklahoman nor an inhabitant of any prairie state, raising the question of authorial authenticity. In addition to critical backlash in both Oklahoma and his native California, Steinbeck's underlying call for social reform furthermore challenges the naturalistic aim of objectivity. Even so, the novel mastered the prairie voice for those undergoing the ecologically- and socially-oppressive era of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. A glance into Steinbeck's revisions also helps us understand the initial sentiments spurring him to generate his masterpiece. A discussion of these revisions may first reveal how naturalism survived

into the twentieth century, well after the reign of naturalistic authors, and second demonstrate how conscientious Steinbeck was of his audience and the potential reception of the work. *The Grapes of Wrath* furthermore portrays an event that is symbolic of a greater issue: though anxieties of the frontier closing had been long since present in the American consciousness, the Okies' journey into California represents the death of the Mythic West and American agrarian dream.

This study delves into broader comparisons elicited from the three authors' works. Among these comparisons, there is the study of the role and function of the prairie woman, who must assume the role of a housewife and household manager while abandoning her own personal development. It examines the details of everyday life, because the authors' documenting of these specific details of prairie life is perhaps the best method of preserving a time, place, and people in the American literary experience. Additionally, all three authors comment on the importance of altruism as superior to organized religion in farming communities undergoing strife. Last, there is the discussion of escape from the Plains and the fall of the agrarian dream.

All individuals of a particular region or place do not experience lives identical to those portrayed in these works, but the types of lives crafted by Garland, Cather, and Steinbeck serve justice to a community and region that contributes largely to the composition of the American experience.

Notes

1. See David Wrobel and Mary Lawlor for especially insightful discourse regarding anxieties of the closing frontier.
2. The Single Tax Movement was based on Henry George's philosophical beliefs that the elimination of all taxes and the promotion of one single tax based on land values would alleviate many economical and social issues plaguing the United States. Garland supported Single Tax campaigns in both Boston and Chicago (Pizer, *Early Work* 45-48).
3. Frank Norris's essay, "Zola as a Romantic Writer," can be found in a particularly helpful collection of essays on naturalism, *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism*, edited by Donald Pizer.
4. The United States Census Bureau considers the Midwest region to consist of Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Oklahoma, meanwhile, is categorized in the South region.
5. Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* as a whole delineates thoroughly these myths and heroic figures that the American West accommodated in the nineteenth century.
6. For authors who argue that Cather works primarily in the romantic tradition, see Susan Rosowski, and James Woodress.

CHAPTER 2

TOILING THE INGLORIOUS: HAMLIN GARLAND'S PRAIRIE FICTION

Published in 1894, Hamlin Garland's collection of literary theories, entitled *Crumbling Idols*, explores the need for truthful representations of the West and all American regions. He laments that "we have had the figures, the dates, the bare history, the dime-novel statement of pioneer life, but how few *real* novels! How few accurate studies of speech and life!" (16, emphasis mine). Instead of contributing to the myth of the West and of pioneer life, Garland demands that writers translate reality into a closely-related fiction: "There it lies, ready to be put into the novel and the drama, and upon canvas; and it must be done by those born into it" (16).

Hamlin Garland crafted realistic representations of the American Prairie and agrarian life and consequently helped initiate the naturalism movement while participating in the local color and regionalism movement in the late nineteenth century. With these representations, he sought to illustrate his own theories of what American literature should be, undoubtedly influenced by the authors such as William Dean Howells, and his works would ultimately capture the major issues afflicting the individual farm by uncontrollable forces. These forces, as this study will describe, include the natural, such as locusts or drought, and the socio-economic, such as value exploitation or isolationism. Despite some critical opinions that belittle Garland's work, Garland and his texts warrant further discussion, particularly regarding his involvement in shaping the plains region in American literature. Whether utilizing a bold and determined voice or one that elicits unanswered themes of women and religion, Hamlin Garland's work pioneers the forum of nineteenth-century prairie life in naturalistic works.

The examination of the historical and theoretical consequences of Garland's decisions in constructing his collection of stories, *Main-Travelled Roads*,¹ as well as his later novel *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, and his position within the budding naturalistic movement will serve only to reemphasize Garland's centrality to the genre. An additional analysis of Garland's formal theories, in conjunction with other scholars fluent in the field of naturalistic studies, such as Donald Pizer, will also illuminate the purpose and function intended for his works.

To claim that American life underwent drastic changes from 1861 until the turn of the century would certainly be an understatement. Prior to the Civil War, the American farmer was generally idolized as a symbol of independence and self-reliance, embodying "Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democratic faith in the good sense, vigor, and moral insight of the common person" (Pizer, *Documents* 4). Yet the Civil War's impact upon agrarian life nation-wide would be monumental, more so in some regions than others. Compounding issues associated with the war and advancements in the field of agrarian technology threatened the family farm. Whether it was the decrease in farm help or the eventual decline of independent farmers, the image of the American farmer called for improvement and renovation. The naturalistic movement, consequently, sought to dissolve the image of the idolized farmer and replace it with the destitute and struggling agrarian individual subject to forces beyond his control. Thus, Thomas Jefferson's notion of "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue" (170) would fade, and more realistic depictions of the American farm would take shape with the advent of the literary naturalism movement.

Prior to realism and naturalism's emergence into American literature, and prior to Hamlin Garland's impact upon the movement, the Civil War's conclusion burdened American citizens as victory could not be celebrated in either the North or South. Moreover, the nation faced the massive task of reconstructing and reestablishing national unity. Rebuilding efforts, compounded by the lingering trauma of war, helped sanction the call for an accurate depiction of the American experience in literature. Writers such as William Dean Howells and Henry James helped establish realism in American literature prior to 1890; following 1890, writers such as Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser would forward realism into a harsher portrayal of truth in naturalism. Naturalism would advance the study of the banal into a revolutionary balance of the ordinary and the extraordinary, or into a study of deterministic forces commanding human experience, drawing from the philosophies and analyses of surrounding intellectuals. These include Charles Darwin, whose evolution studies impacted philosophies well beyond environmental studies, Herbert Spencer, who applied Darwinian theory to sociology, Jacob Riis, whose *How the Other Half Lives* (1891) exposed the inhumane living conditions of the poverty-stricken in New York.

Hamlin Garland's entrance into the naturalistic movement was neither instant nor perfect. Garland, born in Wisconsin in 1860 but reared in the Iowa prairies, was fully familiar with the realities of the plains, but moved to Boston in October of 1884 to pursue a career in teaching and to escape the dreariness of the plains (Pizer, *Early Work* 5). While in Boston, Garland befriended William Dean Howells, whose literary strength would inspire and guide the occasionally-struggling Garland. In his biography of Hamlin Garland, Pizer explains that "Howells' praise of such evolutionary critics...and his

championing of realists and local-color writers soon convinced Garland that Howells was his foremost co-worker in the struggle for a truthful, national literature” (25). In addition to association with Howells, Garland also admired the work of Edgar Watson Howe, whose novel *The Moonlight Boy* brought Garland to tell the author that his “true delineation, of the monotonous and provincial life of the rural west compels my admiration, though it grieves me to think how unavoidable the most of its life is” (*Letters* 13). Above all, and most importantly, Garland liked “it for its truthful treatment of homely, prosaic people in their restricted lives” (15). Recognizing the power that writing the prairie could hold, as well as the lack of proficient authors in the subject, Garland returned to Iowa for professional observation of the American farmlands and farmers.

In the mid 1880s, when Garland took his observational tour, the Jeffersonian image of the farmer remained intact in popular consciousnesses. Donald Pizer again illustrates that “the myth of the American West as the ‘Garden of the World’ had reinforced the literary convention that the independent farmer, ‘with his simple rusticity and healthful habits, is the happiest man in the world’” (*Early Life* 35). Conversely, if he were not the “happiest man in the world,” the American farmer was instead a rural or countrified oaf, particularly in the perspectives of urbanites (35). Garland recalled and observed neither of these characters in the prairie. He instead found the dirty and tired farmer whose workload seemed endless. This was largely what would bring Garland to take up authorial arms in undoing incorrect images of the prairie farmer; while his own representations may not have been perfectly accurate, they sought to be truthful, or more realistic than unexamined stereotypes.

Garland, gradually taking the front of the line of naturalistic authors combating the romantic or the idealized, boldly states in the beginning of his essay “Productive Conditions of American Literature” that “American literature must be faithful to American conditions” (151). Also within this essay, Garland outlines the characteristics and duties of what he considers the “veritist,” or the American realist. Garland creates this unique term because of the unchecked overuse of the term “realism,” and furthers his definition with a close regard to the theories of William Dean Howells. He explains that “the veritist chooses for his subject not the impossible, not even the possible, but always the probable. He does not seek the exceptional, the sensational; he *naturally* finds the probable more interesting than the impossible” (152). The duty of the veritist is to utilize characters whom “you can find...at home if you call” (152). The veritist, like the realist or naturalist, amplifies the common voice while being mindful to avoid any potential glorification of the common. This amplification of the common, if executed properly, functions journalistically within an artistic field to accurately represent probable subjects and situations.

Further investigating the duties of the veritist, Garland explains that “his art consists in making others feel his individual and distinctive comment on the life around him” (155). In bringing an audience into the author’s art, the author must be entirely cognizant of the presentation of the portrayed region. The portrayal of the land should be neither idyllic nor grotesque. A great challenge for this veritist, then, remains in captivating his audience and making that audience feel the comment the author strives to make, while still capturing what is, not what ought to be, true to the region described. The urge to capture reality should be intrinsic in the veritist’s nature. Moreover, in capturing

the image of the citizen and the environment, the veritist contributes a realistic portrait of the American experience to an audience with an increasing interest in discovering what separates American literature from British. Because of the vastness of the country, regionalism aided in defining, in specific terms, portions of American experience. Regional fiction, at its onset, served merely as a window to regard outside destinations with outside inhabitants. “That most esteemed mythic community, the ‘folk,’” as Stephanie Foote states (160), serves equally as estranged Puritanical figures with standardized experiences and values. In order to establish the Midwest and the Great Plains in American literature with a delicate balance of accuracy and aesthetics, the image of a mythical “folk” needed to surrender to the representation of a true Plains community. Hamlin Garland, to whom Pizer notes that the middle border “was not a place out west, but a geographical reality, populated by people he knew who belonged in a specific locality with specific characteristics,” would strive to generate this reality with his fiction (*Early Work* 70).

Hamlin Garland demonstrates these characteristics and duties of the veritist best in his collection *Main-Travelled Roads*. Published in 1891, the collection consists of six stories, four of which were previously published by the Arena Publishing Company (McCullough xiii). Before the collection’s publication, “regional fiction, which had its heyday in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, appeared primarily in elite periodicals, such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, that catered to the upper middle classes” (Foote 160). Due to the upper-middle class’s interest in regional fiction, authors may have composed their works to cater to such an audience. Garland’s fiction, if read by an Eastern upper-middle class audience accustomed to elitism or romanticized regional

fiction, would have a radical two-fold effect. First, the work would deconstruct pre-conceived notions of the West, which were filled with romanticized ideas of independence and untamed natures. Second, the work would be inherently fated for a fall from popularity, as Garland's attention to the banal and the ordinary would be neither dramatic nor romantic, though he certainly includes dramatic and romantic elements intermittently throughout his work.

Main-Travelled Roads received largely positive reviews after its debut as critics were torn between admiring the work's boldness and realism and questioning its accuracy (McCullough xv-xvi). Some critics, as Foote has noted, considered his work to be too laborious or workmanlike (15). Yet Garland's style must necessarily be labored as, if he is to truthfully portray the region, his work must adequately mirror the people and region it represents. The "political and aesthetic economies" (Foote 16) entangled in his work cannot be avoided, this is true; however, one ought not to decidedly claim that these economies dictate his style. Regardless of the mixed reviews and the tendency for modern scholars to overlook the collection, the stories in *Main-Travelled Roads*, especially "Under the Lion's Paw" and "Mrs. Ripley's Trip," powerfully capture the lives of Prairie dwellers, which are far from fantastic and oftentimes near a painful dullness that only the most talented of authors can portray.

Often anthologized, "Under the Lion's Paw" was first published in *Harper's Weekly* on September 7, 1889. In it, Garland carefully weaves elements of environmental and economic determinism that contribute to the realistic portrayal of one family working to earn a homestead of their own through the help of another family. Garland begins the story with a serene picture of the prairie as it nears winter: the geese honk wildly, the

horses swing to and fro as they plough, and the ploughman, “though the snow lay on his ragged great-coat, and the cold clinging mud rose on his heavy boots, fettering him like gives, whistled in the very beard of the gale” (117). In this brief introduction, Garland demonstrates his capacity for balancing harsh detail with subtle optimism; he allows readers to see both the ploughman’s hard work in the snow, melting immediately upon contacting his shoulder, as well as the placid picture of wild geese flying across the prairie.

Garland carries this balance of beauty and plight, as well as optimism and pessimism, throughout the story. More notably, he illustrates community and altruism within the Plains. Stephen Council, after seeing the deprecated Haskins family, recently emigrated from their locust-ridden farm, immediately allows them into his home, without so much as an informal introduction simply to know their names. Council and his wife prove that they are more concerned with comforting the children than satisfying societal formalities. Furthermore, as Mrs. Haskins recounts how they lost their farm, Mrs. Council continues her chore of baking biscuits, and Garland takes time to note that “the good soul laughed...as she took a handful of flour and dusted the biscuit-board to keep the dough from sticking” (121). Benign as they may seem, these small details, from the steam rising from wet clothes to a barrel of dried apples, are crucial in constructing prairie life and its people.

Yet the powerful deterministic elements that Garland uses speak louder than his attention to detail. The author introduces Haskins as disheartened with the loss of his farm that was depleted by the “hoppers,” instantly bringing attention to the environmental forces that have driven the Haskins family to find means of economic

survival elsewhere. The family could not have prepared for this event, nor could they have ever taken control over it: “They wiped us out. They chewed everything that was green...It ain’t no use; if I was t’ talk all winter I couldn’t tell nawthin’,” he says (121). The family, in this first case of environmental impact, is powerless within their situation. They are subjects of natural forces that impede at random; these forces are faceless, indifferent, and cannot to be considered antagonistic or villainous. The family later suffers from yet another unpredictable force. After renting a farm and putting out a great deal of effort and capital to improve its value, Tim Haskins approaches his landlord, Jim Butler, to purchase the farm. Butler’s original estimate for the farm, prior to its substantial improvements, was “two thousand five hundred, or *possibly* three thousand” (128). Ironically, these improvements ultimately become a detriment to the Haskins family, as their hard work, according to Butler, made the farm “worth five thousand and five hundred dollars” (128), doubling the original price. Unfortunately for Haskins, Butler has reasoning in the fact that, regardless of who performed the improvements, the land is still his, and he must price it accordingly in order to remain an economically-viable landowner.

The confrontation between Haskins and Butler, wherein a hardened worker argues for reimbursement and a thriving businessman argues for law-mandated ownership, ends with Haskins’s attempt to murder Butler. After describing a sentimental whisper of childish laughter in the distance, Garland includes a powerful moment that will resonate in the naturalistic works of later authors: Haskins realizes that there is nobody to blame for his situation. Between locusts and land value, Haskins “was hid in a mist, and there was no path out” (129). This demonstrates perfectly Malcolm Cowley’s point that “the

effect of Naturalism as a doctrine is to subtract from literature the whole notion of human responsibility. ‘Not men’ is its constant echo” (227). Though Garland’s craft certainly insinuates that Butler is far from a kind and generous character, there is an unfortunate reasoning behind Butler’s argument. Thus, the picture of Haskins with his face in his hands ends “Under the Lion’s Paw,” its themes of ambivalence and uncontrollable forces, despite a hospitable community, earning it a place in the naturalist canon.

But are we to read these stories as analogues for every family on the Plains? Certainly not; instead, we ought to regard these portraits as quite probable experiences that many families had also endured. Between 1890 and 1900, eight states, including three from the Middle West, dropped from having an average of 75 to 90 percent of their farms owned by their inhabitants to an average of 50 to 75 percent, if not lower (Gannett 140). The statistics speak clearly enough to the contemporary events that Garland sought to capture. Agriculture was becoming more mechanized and commercialized, and Garland saw the need to examine how the independent farmer and his family adjusted, or failed to adjust, to such changes. Farms were failing, and they would continue to fail, through the twentieth century.

Focusing less on the loss of the farm and more on the loss of a dream, “Mrs. Ripley’s Trip” follows a farm woman’s preparation for a trip from Iowa to Georgetown, a trip for which she has prepared for years. Garland maintains the story’s naturalistic elements as it first demonstrates human behavior experiencing the stagnancy at the end of a dream, and second betrays “a reform ideal by unconsciously reflecting a middle class ethos” (Pizer 5). At its core, the story includes far more attention to domestic detail than its deterministic counterpart, perhaps because the author intended to explore more the

human dimension of the farmhouse experience than the farm in its entirety. Garland describes “the poor little shanty...on the vast Iowa prairie” as lit by a tallow candle, as “they couldn’t afford ‘none o’ them new-fangled lamps” (131). Garland states emphatically that “poverty was a never-absent guest” (131). Yet warmth and affection mingle delicately with poverty and frugality, as the opening sequence involves “the little grandson who lay before the stove like a cat” as Uncle Ethan mends his violin. There is a stability between Mr. and Mrs. Ripley as well, as the elderly couple care for each other as much as they respect each other, evidenced through both marital bickering and self-sacrificing kindness.

Similar to the construction of two additional stories, “The Return of a Private” and “A Day’s Pleasure,” Garland constructs “Mrs. Ripley’s Trip” from the perspective of the female lead character. Through Jane Ripley, Garland creates a veritable list of the responsibilities a farm wife must complete: “but if cookin’ for a drove of harvest hands and thrashin’ hands, takin’ care o’ the eggs and butter, ‘n’ diggin’ taters an’ milkin’ ain’t *my* part, I don’t never expect to do *my* part” (132). Mrs. Ripley continues to lament her marathon of work, claiming that she “never had a day to myself, not even Fourth o’ July.” Finally, she makes her case quite clear: “For twenty-three years, Ethan Ripley, I’ve stuck right to the stove an’ churn without a day or night off” (132). Garland neither exaggerates nor oversimplifies the prairie woman’s experience. Mrs. Ripley is characteristically outspoken and strong-willed, empowered enough to declare to her grandson and husband that they are to do their own cooking through the holidays, as she is to return to her original home in Georgetown.

The preparation for this trip, including the meticulous habit of sporadically saving dimes, took years, and for each dime Mrs. Ripley must have meditated on her return home. This reflection, consisting of years of quiet reminiscing on Georgetown, resulted in nostalgic qualities forced upon her memories. Garland was evidently aware of the effects of nostalgia on the homecoming pilgrim; having not been in Georgetown for twenty-three years, Mrs. Ripley, with those proverbial rose-tinted glasses, looks “to go back an’ see the old folks, and the hills where we played, an’ eat apples off the old tree down by the old well” (132-133). While the story is not necessarily an explicit cry against nostalgia, though the role of the veritist would certainly denounce such elements in any depiction of an experience, Garland explores the falsities and emotional grief that nostalgia causes. Also, by exposing nostalgia through an emphasis on reality, Mrs. Ripley faces bleakness in an anticlimactic future.

At the conclusion of her trip, Mrs. Ripley returns to a kitchen in disarray: “a lot of dirty dishes were on the table, the table-cloth was a ‘sight to behold,’ and so was the stove—kettle-marks all over the table-cloth, splotches of pancake batter all over the stove” (141). Her trip, her dream, had ended and she must awaken to the honest reality of continual, endless housework until her death. Though she may have pride in that she did indeed accomplish her dream, she can no longer look forward to it or anything else besides her daily responsibilities. Mrs. Ripley’s tale ends solemnly with “She took up her burden again, never more thinking to lay it down” (141). Georgetown, and the dream of Georgetown, will no longer be a means of escape for Mrs. Ripley. Mrs. Ripley may escape into nostalgia as a means of distraction, but for Garland and his audience, Mrs. Ripley lives on hopelessly without dreams or goals. Bleak as it may be, the life of a

prairie woman, as this text stresses, must be recorded and should not make use of falsities that may lighten or soften the reality of her situation.

The most common format for recording this reality, particularly in the late nineteenth century, had been the short story. Garland, evidently, saw the need for a realistic local-color novel. Through *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, published in 1895, Garland sought to fulfill this need. His works prior to *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* consisted mainly of short stories and essays. As Pizer notes in his introduction to *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, this may indicate Garland's unease with the novel form (vii), regardless of his call for a local-color narrative longer than the traditional short story. The basic structure of the novel, in which Rose lives in the Plains and then Chicago, might even suggest that Garland pieced his novel together through integrating two related short stories, long though they may be, to fully construct an extensive study of the Plains experience. Despite his previous unfamiliarity with creating a novel proper, the form allowed him the opportunity to develop themes and characters to a greater extent. This lengthier development only adds to the naturalistic elements of the novel, which includes, most famously, sexuality as an amoral force and increasing self-awareness as a woman in a prairie community.

The careful detail given to Rose's surroundings closely matches the description of Garland's own childhood, and critics like Donald Pizer have identified the autobiographical elements in the novel. Autobiographical detail can assist in establishing reality in a text, yet the author must be ever-conscious, as Garland was, regarding the detrimental effects that sentimental reminiscence can have upon recollection. Because Garland is able to remain relatively objective in describing the Plains in *Rose of*

Dutcher's Coolly, he stays faithful to his veritist responsibilities. So honest are his observations, particularly with the sexual development of Rose unconsciously awakened by the circus performer William de Lisle, that the critical reception of the novel was primarily negative, citing Garland's attention to sex as offensive and inappropriate (Pizer xiii). This negative reaction was likely a contributing factor to Garland's later leave of veritism, as his audience was steadily proving its refusal to accept the grittier elements of life. Consequently, this audience rejection connected Garland to his contemporaries, Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris, whose work with sexuality and physicality in their fiction also caused initial critical discredit. Indeed, the popular rejection of these novelists, however fleeting, may indicate the contemporary audience's incapacity to acknowledge truth or reality; to many, literature still held the social responsibility of promoting appropriate social order.

Garland's novel additionally addresses another matter topical in the 1890s: the rise of the New Woman. Donald Pizer notes that "during the years [Garland] worked on the novel he was much absorbed in one of the major issues of the 1890s, the nature and role of the New Woman" (xi). Before venturing into the evolving role of the socially-minded woman, it may be prudent to remember that modest Victorian philosophies, though their zenith had passed, continued to thwart Naturalism's attempt to garner attention to determinism and scientifically-founded modes of thought. The emergence of a movement that promoted women's rights would only further the debate of literature and its social responsibilities. The term "New Woman" originated in 1894 by Sarah Grand with her essay "The New Aspect of the Woman in Question" (Nelson ix). Quickly, the image of the new woman, who "was educated...rode a bicycle, insisted on rational dress,

and smoked in public” (Nelson ix), clashed with the conservative Victorian ideology of men and women occupying separate spheres determined by biological sex. In addition to sexual development, Rose Dutcher’s intellectual development is a powerful theme in the novel, demonstrating Garland’s endeavor to maintain an interaction between his text and his times.

Donald Pizer expands upon sexuality in the novel with his essay, “Sexuality in Hamlin Garland’s *Rose of Dutcher’s Coolly*.” Rose, he states, is “a large, handsome young woman [and] is sexually vibrant—men are attracted to her, and she to them—and it would seem that she is destined, within the ethos of her farm world, to an early marriage and child-bearing” (289). Her childhood, perhaps based on Garland’s tomboy sister, Jessie, who died shortly before Garland began work on the novel, seems to be relatively carefree after her mother’s death. Yet the girl is exposed to sexuality early in her schooling, as “there was no escaping [it]. The apparently shameful fact of sex faced her everywhere” (23). Chided for being aware for such things, Rose ignores her developing consciousness until encountering the sensual circus performer, William de Lisle, who causes her to ponder extensively on how the man affects her mentally and physically. Garland is careful, though, to demand respect from characters and from his audience as he records Rose’s development; she is aware, not immoral.

Though Garland is careful to present Rose as a respectable individual with personal freedom, there are, as Pizer notes, unresolved sexual themes to consider. First, there is a subtle connection drawn between Rose’s father and her future husband, Mason, who “is older, a mentor of her artistic ambitions, and is almost asexual—a father figure, in short” (Pizer, “Sexuality” 290-291). This is not to suggest that Rose embodies any sort

of Electra complex, in which a daughter is unconsciously attracted to her father; instead, this is to reveal Rose's guilt for leaving her widowed father in the Plains. Secondly, there is a quiet homo-erotic quality about *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, in that "every woman Rose meets, it would seem, wants to hug and caress the 'splendid' creature before them" (Pizer 291). Remembering, again, that Garland creates Rose to maintain her wholesomeness, the homo-eroticism causes something of a complication to moralist readers. Instead of accepting Rose's sexuality as rampant, though, audiences should regard her physicality as natural. The sexuality of the Prairie woman that Rose represents need not be feared nor repressed; it should be recognized in order to liberate her into individual discovery.

Prior to the rise of the New Woman and prior to *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, Garland showed an intense sensitivity to prairie women and their subservient role on the farm. Recalling "Mrs. Ripley's Trip" and Garland's accuracy in presenting the duties of a farm wife, an audience can view a relatively objective experience of an older woman who is fated to die in endless work and family upkeep. Bleaker than this, Garland's "A Day's Pleasure" portrays the Markham family, likely more destitute than the Ripleys, and their fatigued mother who anticipates an exciting day in town. Though she is exhausted from running a farm and raising a family, "the thought of the long, long day, and the sickening sameness of her life" drives her to venture into town with her husband (250). Once in town, though her husband "was having a good time and had forgotten her," she had little to do but sit in the grocer's and reflect upon everything the family needed but could not afford; however, "she would not need a dress, she thought bitterly, because she never went anywhere" (253). The dusty, bitter wife ends up in the home of Mrs. Hall, a tasteful

young wife who consoles Delia Markham with her comforting home filled with music and pictures—culture, in a sense. Again, in Garland’s unfortunate habit, the story ends on an emotional note, as “the day had been made beautiful by human sympathy” (259), but the majority of the story’s focus on the injustices suffered by the prairie woman certainly amplifies the story’s impact on its audience.

Ripley and Delia Markham, then, represent two different points within the prairie woman’s life. Delia Markham is relatively young, though already she is weary from a life plagued with stagnancy, repetition, and continuous work. Her husband is cold and distant, with little care taken to give her adequate attention or recognition for the work she puts into the household. Jane Ripley, on the other hand, is much older with a stronger voice than Delia’s, perhaps a consequence of experience in controlling power within the household, though she, too, faces stagnancy. Mr. Ripley differs from Mr. Markham in that, after reflecting on Jane’s value to the farm and family, he demonstrates caring and generosity by sacrificing livestock to earn money for a ticket to Jane’s hometown. This massive attention to the feminine elements of the farm likely stems from Garland’s affection for his mother, who endured her husband’s harsh personality and constant relocation of the family. In *A Son of the Middle Border*, Garland moulds his condemnation of the effects of Prairie life upon women “through the prism of a son who blames his strong-willed father for exposing the Garland family to these conditions and who feels intense guilt toward the beloved mother whom he has been unable to save from their effects” (Pizer, “Sexuality” 290). Appearing at the conclusion of “A Day’s Pleasure,” though, the introduction of Mrs. Hall to Mrs. Markham perhaps shows Garland’s preliminary thoughts towards feminine progress. Mrs. Ripley and Mrs.

Markham's stories describe truthful events without suggestions of social reformation; however, through Mrs. Hall and Rose Dutcher, intellectually and physically aware individuals, Garland demonstrates a growing interest in progress and reformation.

Garland echoes the typical life-cycle of the Plains woman in *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*. As Rose continues to recognize her wish for personal freedom and intellectual development, Garland describes the general feminine population of the Midwest:

At sixteen they had beaux, at seventeen many of them actually married and at eighteen they might often be seen riding to town with their husbands, covered with dust, clasping wailing babes in their arms; at twenty they were often thin and bent in the shoulders, and flat and stiff in the hips, sallow and querulous wives of slovenly, careless husbands (83).

The passage echoes nearly verbatim the exact point of "A Day's Pleasure," in that the young wife is worn quickly with childrearing and a detached husband. This, then, is Rose's fate should she not pursue her drive for education and writing. Rose's decision to leave the Plains, despite her father's attempts to make the homestead comfortable and appealing, is representative of a larger issue that Garland wishes to express. Through *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, Garland suggests that the New Woman cannot be found in the Prairie. Agrarian lives and families would deter the liberated woman, who would necessarily need to devote her life to her family in order for the group to survive. The New Woman is concerned with the survival of the individual; the Prairie woman is concerned with the survival of the family. One type cannot be deemed better or of higher moral character than another, as both pursue personal survival but through different means.

In addition to femininity, Garland also subtly addressed formal religion in his fiction. Morality is often explored in naturalism as authors seek to prove it as a societal force upon individuals; formal structures of religion, however, are less commonly examined. Garland gently approaches attitudes toward religion in the Plains, as to ignore this would be to present an unrealistic portrayal of life there. The Plains culture certainly acknowledges formal religion, yet Garland focuses instead on religion found in the values of the community and of the people, a theme that Steinbeck explored in greater detail in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Garland does not explicitly discredit orthodoxy; instead, he examines the intense faith that prairie communities held in their neighbors and fellow men as means of survival and compassion.

Garland explores positions of religion and values first in “Under the Lion’s Paw.” The Council couple represents the foundation of values inherent in many prairie families. When the jovial Mrs. Council greets and cares for Mrs. Haskins and her children, it is her kindness, not the investment in an unseen force, which leads her to believe that “The world was not so desolate and cold and hopeless, after all” (119). Later, Haskins, startled with the Council family’s generosity, demands that he cannot accept any more help, to which Council claims “When I see a man down, an’ things all on top of ‘m, I jest like t’ kick em off an’ help ‘m up. That’s the kind of religion I got, an’ it’s about the *only* kind” (124). This use of religion is echoed in Council’s denial of repayment because his “religion ain’t run on such business principles” (124). The specific choice of the word “religion” is not accidental for Garland; Council is the first of his characters to describe a religion based mainly on altruism and kindness, not any set of formally-approved theological standards.

Garland would suspend discussion on religion until *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*. Early in the novel, the young Rose, indifferent towards formal religion, tests her fellow students and “their childish superstitions” (8), wherein she curses God and points to the sky to see if lightening would strike her. Garland states that “she went on exploding these strange superstitious fancies, which are only the survivals in civilized children of savage ancestry” (8). The bold child, then, recognizes early her desire for sound reasoning, leaving little room for the superstitions of children elicited by their family’s religion. That the superstitions belong to “civilized children of savage ancestry” is indeed commentary inserted by Garland, who was, biographer Keith Newlin explains, “an agnostic, inclining toward atheism after later study in Boston” (33). Though Garland would later experiment in psychic phenomena, whose nature could not be examined with conventional scientific procedures (Newlin 159), his atheism intrudes upon his novel in the guise of rational thought. Whether representative of prairie culture or not, the investment of faith and beliefs, in Garland’s work, went into goodwill and logic, not organized theology.

Hamlin Garland, following his works in naturalism, would ultimately depart from his veritist studies and drift into romanticism. Regardless of this departure and the critical disapproval of *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*, Garland’s deflating of mystified visions of the Prairie farmer, either idolized or ignored, proved successful. Garland had a profound impact upon contemporary and later authors alike. Neil Gustafson notes that Garland was in intermittent communication with Willa Cather, who, though thirteen years Garland’s junior, began her writing career just four years after he was first published in 1888 (11). This is not to say that the two authors were on amiable terms in their early careers, as Cather “at least a few times criticized Garland’s descriptions of pioneer life,” stating that

Garland's fiction handled "barren, wind swept prairies; fields of stunted corn, whose parched leaves rattle like skeletons in the burning south wind" (Gustafson 11). However concerned Cather was with Garland's approach to the prairie's "peaceable and inoffensive country," the two would later have a better connection (11), perhaps as a result of their maturation and realization of their status in embedding the Great Plains in American literature. Later, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* would echo the themes of prairie culture and calls for social reform as seen in *Main-Travelled Roads*.

Hamlin Garland was a son of agrarian and prairie life, and his pursuits in fairly representing the region he knew so well earned him recognition amongst his contemporary naturalists. He gave voice to the agrarian workers who toiled under the brutal conditions both of the environment and of social controls. Hamlin Garland's legacy rests in the success of defending the true nineteenth-century independent farmer against erasure from American memory.

Notes

1. The original 1891 edition of *Main-Travelled Roads* included six stories: “The Return of a Private,” “Under the Lion’s Paw,” “Among the Corn-Rows,” “A Branch Road,” “Up the Coolly,” and “Mrs. Ripley’s Trip” (McCullough, *Main-Travelled Roads* Introduction xi). In 1895, Garland added to the collection “The Creamery Man,” “A Day’s Pleasure,” and “Uncle Ethan Ripley” (xi). In 1922, the collection again expanded with “God’s Ravens” and “A Good Fellow’s Wife” (xi). This study uses the 1995 University of Nebraska Press edition of *Main-Travelled Roads*, reprinted from the 1922 edition with added introductions by William Dean Howells and Joseph B. McCullough, and includes all eleven of these stories.

CHAPTER 3

EQUILIBRIUM IN WILLA CATHER'S NATURALISM

Continuing the development of regional and representative expression, Willa Cather's fiction both supports and challenges the naturalist traditions set forth by Garland and other *fin-de-siècle* writers. Because Cather includes both agrarian and urban environments in her "prairie novels," *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*,¹ she provides a better idea of the types of people inhabiting the American Plains—namely Nebraska—from 1900 to 1915. Though the naturalist literary movement was gradually losing its momentum prior to the 1913 publication of *O Pioneers!*, authors such as Theodore Dreiser and Jack London continued, like Cather, the exploration of writing works with foundations in intellect and observation. There is, however, a distinctive need for describing Cather as a naturalist author, as critics still disagree on the precise classification of her works and her style. In comparing *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, and comparing these novels with Cather's earlier stories in *The Troll Garden*, this discussion outlines Cather's stylistic development. Cather's use of stylistic elements is both unique and new to naturalism, and this utilization preserves the immigrant and feminine experience in America's Prairie in the early 1900s.

There may be a need to initially explain the classification of Cather as a naturalistic author. Indeed, her novels accurately present the lives of the Great Plains dwellers in both farms and townships, almost photographically, but her use of romantic qualities leads some critics to classify the author's work as solely romantic. This includes biographer James Woodress, who claims that "Cather belongs in the tradition of American Romanticism" (243), as her work "is very much different from realism as

defined by Howells and other writers of his school” (242). Moreover, Susan Rosowski emphasizes Cather’s schooling as intellectual and founded in the pastoral tradition, in which writers celebrate “the artistic imagination, with its power to bring order out of disparate materials” (46). While Woodress is arguably the primary authority on Willa Cather’s biographical background and Rosowski is widely known in Cather studies as influential, further investigation into Cather’s prairie works warrants a critical need to move beyond this constrictive classification of Cather as solely a romantic author.

Cather’s earlier works based in Nebraska are heartily observant with portrayals of the land and the people on it, and Cather likewise limits moral judgment inherently built in the narration. Because Cather sought to construct realistic and truthful representations of the prairie, and because she included precise detail on the harsh conditions of agrarian life, Cather earns a place in the naturalism conversation.

To place Cather with naturalistic authors such as Hamlin Garland and John Steinbeck, this discussion will necessarily focus on Cather’s fiction set in a region similar to the settings of other authors’ prairie naturalism. Cather’s work that incorporated the prairie is considered by readers and critics as her best. When she explored the American Southwest and beyond, she eventually departs from the elements of the kind of truthfulness that gave her earlier works authenticity. This may be due to Cather’s close familiarity with Nebraska, causing an authorial awareness of the effects that misrepresentation beget, leading her to seek a fiction that hosts a balance between scientific thought and nostalgic sentimentality. Willa Cather, an avid traveler, would eventually capture literary images of regions beyond the prairie, but her novels set in her familiar Nebraska are prime examples of how an author maintains a balance between

nostalgia-based values and representative objectivity in texts that function as scientific inquiry using an objective vision.

Willa Cather was born on December 7, 1873 in Back Creek Valley in Virginia. Although Cather was not born on the prairie, her familiarity with the region began early in her life. When Cather's extended family moved to Nebraska when she was nine years old, Cather's immediate family, fourth-generation Virginians, decided to follow suit.² Though Charles Cather, the family's patriarch, was not exactly prepared or elated to move to the Prairie, upon returning from a visit to his relatives in Nebraska he found that his four-story sheep barn had caught fire and was destroyed. Believing that this was a supernatural sign for his family to join the rest of the Cathers in Nebraska, the clan moved to "the Divide," an agrarian region just outside of Red Cloud. Regarding those who lived close to the Cather farm, Willa Cather, in a 1913 interview with the *Philadelphia Record*, explains that they "had very few American neighbors. They were mostly Swedes and Danes, Norwegians and Bohemians" (Bohlke 10). This close contact to immigrants on the Plains, as well as this early move to Nebraska, would undoubtedly impact Cather's future work, as she was clearly well-informed on the issues and challenges that faced her neighbors and her own family. Yet the Cather family farm was short-lived; in 1884, Charles Cather relocated his family into Red Cloud proper where he would open a real estate office. James Woodress suggests that the move was due to Jennie Cather, Willa Cather's mother, growing weary of the isolation inherent in Prairie farm life (43). This, in addition to young Willa Cather's need for proper schooling, caused the family to leave agrarian life when the author-to-be was nearly eleven.

After many years of quality education, and a career in daily journalism, Willa Cather began writing poetry and short stories for publication in magazines such as *Harper's Weekly* and *Everybody's*. Cather's experience in journalism and correspondence was not absent in her early writing styles, nor absent from her later theories on literature's inherent purpose and functions. Within these early short stories, we see Cather's first exercises in developing her authorial voice and her practices in naturalism. Though some of her short stories would indeed incorporate the prairie setting, many of her early stories take place in the East, namely New York and Boston, as at this point in her career her interests in travelling were stronger than her impulses to focus on her home state. Two of her short stories, however, are powerful illustrations of life and culture in a Nebraska-like region. Republished in her collection *The Troll Garden*, "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "A Wagner Matinee" specifically portray the American Prairie and juxtapose it, through either character or place, with the intellectually- and aesthetically-grounded Boston. The two stories feature similar themes of the intellectual and cultural drought in agrarian life, but in the two there is a reversal. One includes a return to the prairie from Boston, and the other includes a return to Boston from the prairie. Both convey the young author's emotions regarding the Prairie's views on artistic development, or the lack thereof.

The second story found in *The Troll Garden* collection, "The Sculptor's Funeral" paints various portraits of prairie types in the early twentieth century. Published in 1904, this story arrived at the height of the naturalistic movement. Because of certain authors' presence in the American culture at the turn of the century, it may be that Cather attempted to fashion her works in a style similar to that of Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, and Frank Norris, if only to encourage their publication.³ Like

other naturalistic works, “The Sculptor’s Funeral” is a brief, though solemn, study of the inescapability of heredity, location, and native culture. Set in “a little Kansas town” (57) in the heart of winter, the story opens with local men casually discussing funerals and includes a hearty attempt to capture local color: a character comments that “Jim’s ez full ez a tick, ez ushel” (57). Henry Steavens, the man from Boston arriving with Mr. Harvey Merrick, the deceased, quietly laments that none of the departed’s family had come to the train station to collect the body. After travelling over frosted country, Steavens comes upon the Merrick household, the exterior of which “was an icy swamp, and a couple of warped planks, extending from the sidewalk to the door, make a sort of rickety foot-bridge” (63). Overall, Steavens feels that “there had been some horrible mistake, and that he had somehow arrived at the wrong destination” (64).

Inside the residence, a number of characters have gathered to mourn the dead and Cather takes the moment to record the types of people found in the prairie. The women in the residence are tall and generally unattractive: the deceased’s mother is a rotund woman with a knobbed nose, deep wrinkles, thick eyebrows, and teeth “large and square, and set far apart—teeth that could tear” (65); his sister, on the other hand, is “flat and angular” (63) with large knuckles. There is also “a mulatto woman, evidently a servant in the house, with a timid bearing and an emaciated face pitifully sad and gentle” (65). The lawyer, meanwhile, “was red as his beard, with features swollen and blurred by dissipation, and a hot, blazing blue eye” (68). The minister is “pale, feeble-looking,” while the real estate agent has “a smiling, hypocritical face” (74). These moments of characterization function as snap-shots of the common folk; their flippant attitudes

toward the deceased Merrick, as well as their evident misplacement of emotional priorities, are chilling messages about how the plains culture copes with social anomalies.

Juxtaposed with Harvey Merrick's life, the lawyer Jim Baird, unlike the rest of the people inside the Merrick house, is well-educated and sympathetic toward the dead artist. He attempts to convince that he and Harvey simply yearned to please and impress their neighbors and family members: "Harvey Merrick and I went to school together, back East. We were dead in earnest, and we wanted you all to be proud of us some day. We meant to be great men...I came back here and became the damned shyster you wanted me to be" (81-82). Though Harvey, a genuine artist and teacher, lived a respectable life, the lawyer receives better social recognition solely because of his contributions to the others' benefits, which would gain advantages in keeping a legal contact. The conversations reveal that, despite a speech defending the deceased's way of life and his personal decisions, ones that withdrew him from traditional farm life and consequently from patriarchal reverence, he will be forgotten. The only regret attached to the talented sculptor's death is the fact that his father "spent money enough on Harvey to stock a dozen cattle-farms and he might as well have poured it into Sand Creek" (75). The story's brutal, cold nature maintains its authenticity as readers realize that Harvey, educated and cultured though he may be, could escape neither his heredity nor his local environment. Ultimately, Harvey could not escape the bonds of his narrow-minded family, or the constrictive boundaries of his Kansas home. Haunting the story's inherent theme, Harvey Merrick gives his pupil, and Cather's readers, one sobering final thought from his death bed: "it rather seems as though we ought to go back to the place we came from in the end" (78).

Further in *The Troll Garden*, Cather places more emphasis on studying the culturally-barren environment of the prairie, especially when comparing it to the culturally-rich environment of Boston. After marrying a poor man and spending years of life on the prairie, the elderly Aunt Georgiana, who at one point in her life was a skilled pianist, returns to her native Boston to collect a legacy left by a deceased relative. Placing the story in the perspective of a masculine character, Cather uses the first-person voice to recollect the upbringing of a young boy on a homestead in Red Willow County, Nebraska. Young Clark, Georgiana's nephew, had arrived in Nebraska after Georgiana and her husband developed the homestead from a mere cave dugout and the family was no longer drinking water "from the lagoons where the buffalo drank" (198). Georgiana, clinging to her educated rearing, taught the boy how to play piano and read Latin. Her warning, though, that "Don't love it so well, Clark, or it may be taken from you...pray that whatever your sacrifice may be, it be not that" (200), resonates coolly, as Georgiana, years ago a young artist lighting out for the frontier, learned the truth about prairie life, in that it is void of artistic values. Instead of sowing promises of freedom and independence, Georgiana would remain grounded for thirty years, never going further than fifty miles from the homestead (198). Her hands, once tools for melody, were slowly destroyed, "stretched and twisted into mere tentacles to hold and lift and knead with" (206), by the "pitiless wind" and "alkaline water which hardens the most transparent cuticle into a sort of flexible leather" (199).

This wind and water imagery helps develop the story to its climactic final portrait. Once reintroduced to the sentiments resurfaced by musical escape, all within a grand Bostonian concert hall, Georgia sobs to her young nephew, imploring that she does not

want to leave. Clark understands why, and his stark realization finishes the story and bequeaths to the American naturalist canon an unforgettable picture of true prairie life:

For her, just outside the door of the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs; the tall, unpainted house, with weather-curved boards; naked as a tower, the crook-backed ash seedlings where the dish-cloths hung to dry; the gaunt, moulting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door (210).

Not only does this image entirely deconstruct pre-conceived romantic notions of the Middle West, but it also provides commentary on life on the prairie farm. Even if someone, like Georgiana, were fluent enough in literature and the arts to convey lessons to a youth, it would always be while cooking, ironing, or participating in some other household chore. Instead of anticipating an afternoon of musical appreciation with a dear and distant relative, the plains woman must concern herself with underweight calves and canned fish.

These two short stories, candid though they may be, caused Cather to endure critical resistance akin to what Garland experienced and to what Steinbeck would also confront years later. Following the publication of "A Wagner Matinee," Will Owen Jones, editor of the *Nebraska State Journal* and Cather's advisor, wrote to Cather: "If the writers of fiction who use western Nebraska as material would look up now and then and not keep their eyes and noses in the cattle yards, they might be more agreeable company" (Woodress 177). Dwellers on the plains, it seems, opposed Cather's representations of the region and its people. Cather defended herself with her intentions, which were certainly free of malice and ill-will. Responding to Jones, she claimed that she genuinely intended to pay tribute to the farm women of the plains (Woodress 177-178).

Yet Cather still received backlash from both her critics and her family for what they saw as misrepresenting the region. From paraphrased letters, we may note that these opinions affected Cather greatly, though not necessarily instantaneously.⁴ In a letter to Jones in March of 1904, she reported that her family was offended by “A Wagner Matinee,” as many family members regarded Aunt Georgiana as Cather’s Aunt Franc (Woodress 178), and that she did not intend to disparage Nebraska (Stout 17). Contrary to this, in likely the same month as this letter to Jones, Cather stated to her writer-friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher that the story “has stirred up a hornet’s nest, led by Will Jones” and that she “will write another and make them even madder” (17). Cather’s resolve would be fleeting; following the publication of the story collection, she wrote to Witter Bynner, a Harvard-graduated poet working as an editor at *McClure’s*, that she recognized the grim nature of her stories, though they, especially “A Wagner Matinee,” were based on memories from the Cather Ranch in Nebraska, which, in its first years, were bleak and spotted with neighbor suicides (Stout 19). Cather was conflicted: how was she to write representative images of her prairie yet still incorporate stylistic elements that would make them her own? These two stories are stylistically similar to those of Hamlin Garland, whose fiction Cather considered a “sort of rot” (Gustafson 11). Could it be that these early stories’ bitter portrayal made Cather uneasy in establishing a unique voice, one that reflected Cather as truthfully as she wanted to reflect her prairie?

As for the critics’ reception of *The Troll Garden*, the consensus split between mild appreciation on the one hand and distaste for an unbalanced picture of the plains on the other.⁵ Though the collection earned popular and critical attention, it was not enthusiastic enough to take her book to a second printing. By 1905, the naturalist tide was

beginning to wane, and Cather's naturalist attempts had been less successful than she had originally planned. Though six years later the collection would receive a renewed appreciation, Cather would return to "A Wagner Matinee" to substantially soften its impact, and, much later in her life, she would withdraw the rights for reprinting "A Sculptor's Funeral" due to her own feeling that it was an unfair and ineffective representation of the prairie and prairie towns (Woodress 176). Forced to return to teaching after the lackluster critical and commercial response to her first collection, Cather must have been frustrated and disheartened. She soon gained recognition once more in 1912 with her first novel *Alexander's Bridge*, set in Boston and London, far from the harsh environment and reception of the prairie, but she would still struggle to earn respectable credit from readers and reviewers.

In a 1913 interview with the *Philadelphia Record*, Cather candidly admits that "it is always hard to write about the things that are near to your heart, from a kind of instinct of self-protection you distort them and disguise them" (Bohlke 11). Despite her careful avoidance of this emotional distortion to depict a realistic image of aging and death in the Plains, and despite the national acclaim awarded to Cather and her talent, the two stories were not wildly accepted by those from Cather's home. Due to the native backlash against her grim depictions of prairie life, Cather felt that her short stories representing the prairie "were so poor that they discouraged me" (11). From this, she explained: "I decided that I wouldn't write any more about the country and people for which I had such personal feeling" (11).

Cather's change of heart came after becoming acquainted with Sarah Orne Jewett. The two authors met in 1908 while Cather was working for *McClure's* (E. Smith 476),

and though Jewett would pass away in June of 1909, the time they spent together would inevitably influence the developing writer. While Cather expressed her concerns with pausing or stalling her career and talent due to periods of little to no productivity, Jewett urged her to take time for introspection and reflection (477). What's more, in a letter to Cather, Jewett, who herself contributed greatly to the development of the regionalist movement, advised: "I want you to be surer of your backgrounds—you have your Nebraska life" (477). Jewett also encouraged Cather by writing, "one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can. One must know the world *so* well before one can know the parish" (Woodress, 223). This short but powerful friendship inspired Cather to return to that which she knew best, leading her to return to the prairie for a realistic setting. When drafting *O Pioneers!* Cather would again make use of naturalist elements, yet now with a balance that matched her drive to write. This newer version of naturalism would consequently satisfy both her family and her critics, but, more important to Cather's idea for the purpose of her fiction, she would create a new avenue of naturalism, one that incorporated an appreciation of beauty and a recognition of the spiritual, along with the truthful representation of the material and the true physicality of a particular region.

O Pioneers! began as two separate short stories: one, "The White Mulberry Tree," concerned a couple's affair and untimely death; the other, "Alexandra," followed a woman striving to maintain the farm following her husband's death. The former's conception, as well as both stories' merger, occurred while Cather spent five weeks in Red Cloud in 1912 (Woodress 231). By expanding "Alexandra," as well as making the character unwed and much younger, Cather connected both stories by designating Emil,

the young man in the affair, as Alexandra's young brother. Cather finished the novel in Pittsburgh and gave it to Houghton Mifflin for publication in 1913 (Woodress 237). With this novel, Cather expands her practice of realistic portrayals of the prairie as seen in short stories such as "The Bohemian Girl" and "On the Divide," and furthermore attempts to find a balance between naturalism and transcendentalism.

Alexandra Bergson, the first main character of the novel, is primarily rational; the impulses of economic survival on the plains drive her to successfully manage a farm. Unlike the other feminine characters surrounding her, "she had never been in love," and, even more important, "she had never indulged in sentimental reveries" (205). Against her brothers' desires, she controls the farm after their father's death, whose passing was a relief to the Old-World farmer who "was quite willing to go deep under his fields and rest, where the plow could not find him" (13). Though Alexandra achieves financial success, the familial and personal aspects of her life suffer as a consequence of her devotion to work. Her brothers demonstrate strong resistance to their sister's patriarchal-challenging power, her decisions to hire immigrant workers, and her choice in allowing Carl Linstrum, a roving artist and Alexandra's alleged lover, to live with her at her farm.

The novel's five-part structure begins with "The Wild Land," the chapters of which illustrate the commonalities of the prairie. Though the Bergson family succeeded with relative prosperity for the first three years after the father's death, there "came the hard times that brought everyone on the Divide to the brink of despair; three years of drought and failure, the last struggle of a wild soil against the encroaching plowshare" (25). Because of failed crops and total losses of investments, "farmers who were already in debt had to give up their land." In this picture of economic failure caused by natural

force, Cather draws upon an entirely-settled and established urban setting, Chicago, for comparison. The Bergson uncle, Otto, owns a bakery shop in Chicago, in which the “Bergson boys, certainly, would have been happier” (25). Instead of battling environmental powers, the boys could have had “a steady job, a few holidays, nothing to think about.” In short, instead of consistently vying for survival, the family could have lived comfortably in a developed and urbanized region. There is a small exodus out of Hanover, leading all of the American-born settlers oftentimes to the urban comfort of Chicago. This notion, of course, contradicts the images of Chicago popularized eternally by naturalist Theodore Dreiser, but the essence of Cather’s argument rings true: “It was no fault of their own that they had been dragged into the wilderness when they were little boys” (25).⁶ The current Bergson generation, brought to the prairie by the father whose death immobilizes the mother and, by extension, everyone else, did not choose to be in the prairie nor could they leave the prairie; consequences of familial decisions ground them in discomfort and toil.

The second part of the novel, “Neighboring Fields,” is substantially softer than its preceding counterpart. Following chapters of inescapable work and failure driven by natural and familial forces, Cather inserts transcendental elements into the novel through her style. Instead of portraying Alexandra as subject to uncontrollable, exterior forces, as well as a farmer chained to the land through familial obligations, she now has a bond with the environment, as “it is in the soil that she expresses herself best” (43). Alexandra grows increasingly comfortable as she manages her farm, hiring immigrants to help cultivate her crops. The second part of the novel introduces narrative elements that become the chronicle of an illicit romance, significantly marginalizing the emphasis on

Alexandra's survival. With Alexandra portrayed as economically well-established, the second storyline continues with little interruption. This new storyline's conclusion eventually brings one of the major points of naturalistic theory in the novel, enveloping much of the novel's focus. Consequently, Alexandra falls from the narrative attention, with the resulting de-emphasis of the naturalistic qualities in the novel.

Naturalistic works tend to avoid the inclusion of a forthright hero, as heroic figures in the classical vein are not typical in life. Alexandra stands as a potential heroic figure but ultimately cannot meet the criteria of a classical hero. Though Alexandra certainly has admirable qualities, such as dedication to work and compassion for strangers and familiar people alike, she ultimately cannot meet the responsibilities of maintaining her community and her family. The character has very little control over her fate and decidedly less control over the fate of others, and her attempts in rescue either fail or never commence. In the case of rescuing her brother, she is too late in recognizing the illicit situation occurring in front of her; in the case of rescuing Frank Shebata, she cannot overcome the rooted institution of the law. Cather uses Alexandra as a symbol of divided values, as, despite her evident affection for her family, nearly the entire unit separates: in the case of her brothers Lou and Oscar, a fear of social misunderstanding drives them away from their beloved sister; in the case of her brother Emil, sexual drive leads him to his death. Alexandra cannot overcome exterior forces of society and psychological reaction to salvage those surrounding her. Naturalistic theory's purpose of objectivity and scientific reasoning would demote *O Pioneers!* as a candidate for its canon should Alexandra's composition be solely that of the prairie hero. Instead of creating a prairie hero, then, Cather created a heroic prairie woman whose admirable

qualities lead her to success but despite her efforts cannot bring her to the rescue of her family or community.

Alexandra is depicted as a master over the land, but is Alexandra successful because of her work ethic or through natural coincidence? To illustrate Cather's position on effort as the key to environment-mastery, a comparative study with Amédée Chevalier's farm may prove to be useful. Amédée, who began as an amorous youth eager for passion and an idyllic farm, complete with a wife and children, is relatively successful as a farmer, though his wife, Angélique, expresses minute financial concerns: "I hope he can rent [the new wheat header] to the neighbors, it cost so much" (124). In portraying Angélique, though, Cather uncharacteristically presents an ironic instance of foreshadowing. Discussing the health of her husband, Angélique says to Emil that the man should be resting inside rather than working in the field, but she says this with a distinct hint of pride in her husband's dedication. For "Angélique did not speak with much anxiety, not because she was indifferent, but because she felt so secure in their good fortune" (124). Above all, she had the confidence that "only good things could happen to a rich, energetic, handsome young man like Amédée with a new baby in the cradle and a new header in the field." This overexertion of effort, driven by the self-imposed work ethic, kills Amédée in the form of a ruptured appendix.

The example of Amédée, who is clearly mortal, proves that Cather did not completely abandon naturalism's indifference theory or the belief that the land's ambivalence does not actively support or harm the humans who live on it. Amédée's fate demonstrates that he is subject to biological deterioration and death brought about by great effort. Though Alexandra's farm may be a paradigm of successful farms

dualistically functioning as means of income and personal expression, Cather makes it clear at the conclusion of the novel that “We come and go, but the land is always here” (158). *O Pioneers!* demonstrates that the prairie cannot be maintained, controlled, or dominated by one figure; instead, the prairie indifferently hosts multiple figures whose destinies are determined first by their heredity and place of origin and second by their social standings.

Unlike the environmentally-involved concerns of Alexandra and other farmers, the case of Emil Bergson and Marie Shebata focuses on the social aspects of the novel. The relationship between the two characters challenges the standard structures of morality in the community as the two seek to satiate their passion regardless of social constraints and the traditional structures of marriage. Like they do with their sister, the Bergson brothers have a cool relationship with Emil. Furthermore, in their view his educational and romantic drives make him a lesser man. Upon finding the two, Frank Shebata, Marie’s sour husband, bloodily murders them in an emotional and irrational rage. He is then imprisoned regardless of his repentance, and even Alexandra’s forgiveness and attempts at pardoning him cannot reverse the expected result of going to jail. These two characters cannot regain control over these aspects of their lives, as the institution of the law, and perhaps even common sense, holds Frank in prison to serve for his crimes.

Additionally, though they are but marginal characters compared to the Alexandra and Emil stories, Oscar and Lou Bergson assume a crucial role. Their perspectives are the normative vision typical of the Prairie people. They are, then, figures of the social determinism that affects all characters in the novel. Their disapproval of a woman

managing a farm drives them to an emotional and physical distance from their sister, who insists on allowing an unmarried man to stay at her house and hiring immigrants from the Old World to help with the farm work. The brothers' disliking of the immigrants, representative of the rest of the small society in Hanover, causes the immigrants to face supplementary social challenges as they attempt to assimilate into the Nebraskan culture. The brothers' disapproval of their younger brother's hunger for education, experience, and women leads them to assume a superior air around Emil, who seemingly will never meet their standard for consideration as a strong prairie man. Through these two Bergson brothers, Cather establishes typical prairie sentiment of social standing and relations.

Cather would again renew her skills in mingling the deterministic with the romantic in her next prairie novel, *My Ántonia*. The work extends more precise detail on the immigrants' situation in the prairie, more exact than the detail in *O Pioneers!*, and, while still generated in part by Cather's memories of her childhood, presents what seems like a more honest depiction of common prairie lives and burdens. Indeed, Cather still demonstrates no reservation in incorporating modes of romanticism that male contemporaries, such as Norris or London, avoided in their naturalistic works depicting specific regions of the West and the Klondike. Yet this sentimentality also helps readers establish a closer connection to the immigrant farmers and farm workers and helps to portray the exact predicaments constituting their efforts to survive in an unforgiving environment, both naturally and socially. In the tradition of naturalists like Hamlin Garland, Cather creates a genuine portrait of a type of people living at a specific point in time in an equally specific space. Changing the tradition of other naturalistic works, such as Norris's *McTeague* or London's "To Build a Fire," Cather incorporates moderate

sympathy for her characters, moderate enough not to disrupt the theory of objectivity that aids in the portrayal of a particularly difficult existence.

After a six-month sojourn in Nebraska in 1916, a sojourn spent primarily visiting neighbors and family with little room for writing, Cather began work on *My Ántonia* in New York (Woodress 284-285). Just as she presumably did for her earlier short stories, Cather utilized family or friends from the prairie as models for her characters. In returning to Nebraska, she visited a friend whom she knew in her childhood known as Annie Pavelka, married with ten children. Annie, like many of Cather's Nebraska contacts, was of Eastern-European descent. In *My Ántonia* Cather attempts to capture the lives, cultures, and challenges of the Old World meeting the New World prairie.

In *O Pioneers!*, the immigrant farmers functioned more as material to help develop the overall setting of the Prairie and were not necessarily pertinent to the stories of Alexandra and Emil. Still, Cather admired her incorporation of Swedish farmers into the novel, because, "At that time, in 1912, the Swede had never appeared on the printed page in this country except in broadly humorous sketches" (Pers 15). Instead of creating a humorous image of the Swede, one in which he cannot pronounce certain consonants and exaggerates his physical strength, Cather creates an image of an individual homesick for the Old World but aware that he cannot return. The Swede, then, must find the balance between survival and assimilation with nostalgia and longing for a land which drove them away, either for financial or social reasons. The primary example of the Old World immigrant in the novel is Alexandra Bergson's father, who endured frozen cattle, horses with broken legs, pigs ill with cholera, and, of course, failed crops. In addition to these agrarian tragedies, Bergson lost two sons to childhood illness. When Bergson finally

managed to climb out of debt, he dies. The second example of immigrants on the prairie is Ivar, known as “Crazy Ivar” to many of the Hanover residents. Ivar is a prime example of the immigrant Other, who is “despised because I do not wear shoes, because I do not cut my hair, and because I have visions” (47). His resistance against assimilation into standard prairie culture stirs suspicion. Many want to put him in an asylum. Through him Cather explores a key trait in prairie culture: “The way here is for all to do alike,” Ivar claims, and that “if a man is different in his feet or in his head, they put him in the asylum” (47). Indeed, Cather painted an honest image of the immigrant in the prairie. Yet this image is secondary to the construction of Alexandra and the deconstruction of Emil and Marie. Conversely, with *My Ántonia*, Cather restructured and paced the plot so as to allow a greater image of the immigrant, one with far more detail.

The primary examples of immigrant life in the plains comes through Ántonia and the Shimerda family. In chapter three, the novel’s first-person narrator Jim Burden meets the new Bohemian neighbors living near him. Here, Cather takes the opportunity to introduce characters who are disenchanted with the West as well as to deflate the mythic West. Young Jim Burden waits with eager anticipation and imagination “to see what lay beyond that cornfield,” but much to his chagrin “there was only red grass like ours, and nothing else” (15). The immediate gossip surrounding the first Bohemian family to Black Hawk, which once again can be considered a spatial equivalent to Cather’s Red Cloud, involves their financial affliction caused by linguistic and cultural differences. The Shimerdas, evidently, paid “twenty dollars for [an] old cookstove that ain’t worth ten” and bought oxen and “two bony old horses for the price of good workteams” (16). For the Shimerdas, who experience a deflation of both the mythic West and the glorified

American Dream of wealth and independence, the introduction to candid cultural and economic brutality began early.

Once again emphasizing balance in content, Cather carefully assembles elements of youthful innocence and union against this grim picture of immigrant prairie life. This abandon in objectively portraying the immigrants' lodging and provisions alone reveals naturalistic elements. Mrs. Shimerda's broken English and coarse cultural differences come across as unappreciative comments directed towards unsuspecting parties, as some of her first words to her new neighbors are "House no good! House no good!" (17), but immediately following this unpleasant introduction to the family who "had been living on corncakes and sorghum molasses for three days" (17), the children cavort in the prairie. This initial equilibrium of the grim and the placid is representative of the novel as a whole; indeed, Cather carried over the practice of keeping pessimism in check with optimism, but with this novel the balance persists at a deeper level of truth.

Cather continues to chronicle the plight of the immigrants to show that their struggles were far from mere surface struggles. Winters, clearly, were particularly strenuous. Their poverty drove them to eat a "sour, ashy-grey bread" mixed in an old tin can with fermented residue (22). Their potatoes, frozen, rotten, and stolen from the post man's garbage, caused Mrs. Shimerda to laugh "scornfully, a kind of whinny-laugh, and, catching up an empty coffee-pot from the shelf, shook it at" the Burden family "with a look positively vindictive" (49). Grandmother Burden does not judge this behavior; she simply pays the woman no heed. In this scene, the sick Mr. Shimerda, once lively and musical, sits "on a stump behind the stove, crouching over as if he were trying to hide" (48), and "the crazy boy," *Ántonia's* mentally underdeveloped brother, sits "stretched on

a gunny-sack stuffed with straw” (49). Mr. Shimerda rises, though, to escort Mrs. Burden to a small cave within the shanty-house; the cave, “warm like a badger hole” (50), was no bigger than an oil barrel and was little more than bare, black earth. Because it was warmer than the shanty’s cold floor, this bare-earthed cave was the sleeping-place for the Shimerda children.

Mr. Shimerda makes it clear that in the Old World the family was comparatively wealthy: they made good wages and earned general respect from the community. Once in Nebraska, they are swindled by the one member of the community who can act as a passable translator. The family’s slow progression towards poverty reduces them to conditions which drive the elderly man to suicide. Mr. Shimerda “had been so unhappy that he could not live any longer” (67). The allure and subsequent failure of the Western myth claimed Mr. Shimerda’s life; the unbearable living conditions hosted by prairie poverty drove Mr. Shimerda to his death. The ambiguity of exactly who caused the physical murder removes emphasis on morality, which, no doubt, erupts in the community’s debate regarding the body’s burial, and refocuses audience attention on the circumstances which directed Mr. Shimerda to his death. Regardless of morality, the deflation of the dream destroys Mr. Shimerda’s spirit from its onset.

Another crucial instance of determinism, or at least a presentation of an individual’s inability to control her destiny, shifts attention away from Cather’s Bohemians to the prairie woman, *Ántonia*. This shift occurs first with *Ántonia*’s gradual assimilation into the popular culture; once away from the farm, where masculine work dulled her femininity, and her identity as a woman, she gains an artificial sense of control over her self. Though farm work, in general, draws little attention upon the genders of its

laborers, *Ántonia* functioned as a masculine worker in the fields, causing her to eat and behave like her brother and other male laborers. Removed from the farm and into the homes of urban and suburban well-to-do women, *Ántonia* assumed the roles prescribed to her both as an immigrant vying for Americanization and as a woman attempting to develop her identity surrounding her gender. Indeed, years of living in the town of Black Hawk with other thoroughly-assimilated immigrants, whose accents and cross-cultural habits have been long-eradicated, *Ántonia* closely followed fashionable woman by wearing gloves, “high-heeled shoes and feathered bonnets” (137). In contrast to the farm, *Ántonia* reveled in the fashionable and pleasurable life that the town offered.

At this stage in her life, then, *Ántonia*’s youthful sense of freedom, from both her bleak agrarian upbringing and her international Otherness, leads her to social frolic. Though her character revels in her evident adaptation and consequent immunity from failure, she is not immune from basic biological principles that tether humans to their natural ancestry; society, in turn, accepts natural consequences of individuals’ actions and prescribes judgment, and therefore condition, upon consequence. In short, *Ántonia*’s extra-marital pregnancy terminates her artificial sense of destiny control and drives her back to the farm.

After an exile in her brother’s farm, *Ántonia* marries and produces a rather large family, which, despite its initial wealth in affection and companionship, eventually wears *Ántonia* into the classic-naturalistic image of the typical prairie housewife. No longer vivacious, *Ántonia* is hardly recognizable: “she [is] a battered woman now, not a lovely girl” (226). The role of prairie housewife transformed *Ántonia* into “a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested” with grizzled hair (213-214). Her husband, Cuzak, is neither

affectionate nor particularly kind, though relatively effective as a patriarchal leader of the family. The household is poor with bare floors, but, satisfying her honed sense of balance, Cather presents the warmth of the family through their story-telling. Not to disparage the prairie housewife, Cather is quick to compliment the character with joyful and spirited children; yet, like *Antonia*, their youth and beauty cannot shield them from inevitable mortality.

The genius of Willa Cather results in a type of fiction capable of multiple classifications. This fluidity between genres should not be ignored nor discouraged amidst critics seeking to pin Cather to one style or another. She is not a romantic like Byron, or a transcendentalist like Emerson, or a realist like James: she has parts of all of these classifications. For the purposes of her naturalism, she did not change the perspective in order to satisfy her critics, nor did she follow the naturalist tradition in order to be considered in the ranks of contemporary naturalist authors. Katherine Anne Porter, in her afterword from *The Troll Garden*, insists that “certainly here is a genius who simply will not cater to our tastes for drama, who refuses to play the role in any way we have been accustomed to seeing it played” (Murphy 37). Cather was decidedly not an artist vying for critical appraisal, though this would indeed aid her career as a professional writer. Instead, she, like other naturalist artists, continued the search for truth in literature, though she allowed room for spiritual growth in her characters.

The underlying intent of the author, though, ultimately warrants her as a welcome candidate in the naturalist canon: she sought to portray the truth of a region, its environs, and its people. For Cather, there “was no arranging or ‘inventing’; everything was spontaneous and took its own place, right or wrong.”⁷ Cather, unlike her fellow

naturalists, had no underlying social agenda for her works: she did not seek reform for Old World immigrants in the West, she did not address how to improve the plight of the farmers, nor did she announce a call for women's rights. This is not to say that her works did not have a social effect, but whatever effect occurred occurred as a result of honest depiction, not through a construction of artificial detail for persuasion. She merely tried to create an organic image of her Nebraska.

Notes

1. This study utilizes the 1992 Vintage Classics edition of *O Pioneers!* and the 1995 Mariner Books edition of *My Ántonia*. Also, because *The Song of the Lark* is set in Colorado, which is outside the realms of the southern Plains region with which this study works, it will be reserved for another study.
2. See Woodress 31.
3. Cather was quite fond of Stephen Crane. For more, see Lawlor 169.
4. Willa Cather, in her Last Will and Testament, ordered that her personal letters never be published to the general public. Though the rights of public domain may concede her letters to the public, Cather scholars, as well as this discussion, maintain strict respect for the artist's wishes and rely solely on detailed paraphrases of Cather's letters. For more, see *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather*, ed. Janis P. Stout.
5. See Woodress 179-180.
6. Theodore Dreiser fully illustrates the social and economic complications hosted by Chicago in *Sister Carrie*, published in 1907.
7. See Cather's "My First Novels" in *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*.

CHAPTER 4

“THERE AIN’T NO SIN AND THERE AIN’T NO VIRTUE”: THE PRAIRIE

NATURALISM OF *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

While his works undergo continued critical dissection, investigation of authorial agency, and stabilization in the American literary canon, John Steinbeck’s contributions to American culture include more than mere additions to best-seller lists. *The Grapes of Wrath* is more than an eminent literary classic begotten of its chronological context, it is more than a textual undertaking that would physically and emotionally exhaust its author. It is still more than an aesthetic masterpiece hosting several layers of interpretive value. *The Grapes of Wrath* serves also as a climactic contribution to the naturalists’ catalogue, being a related product of the naturalist traditions set forth by previous authors. Though only about one third of the novel actually takes place in the southern plains, it functions as the representative depiction of prairie experiences in the late 1930s and earns a respected place in the Plains Naturalism canon. John Steinbeck and his novel present prairie livelihoods as they existed in the height of the Depression and the Dust Bowl, and additionally signifies the ultimate passing of Jeffersonian ideals with an exodus from the bonds of failing Plains agrarianism.¹

Prior to the late twenties, naturalism had since faded in the realms of popular literature. In his collection *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism*, Donald Pizer explains that, for some, the importance of morality and ethical persuasion took precedence over naturalism’s inherent call for accuracy and scientific application in textual representations. Moreover, as Malcolm Cowley explains in his *Exile’s Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s*, the expatriate movement resulted in a literary revolution

in which authors cast off their national and hereditary lineages in an escape from the familiarity of common American types. Authors with journalistic backgrounds, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald or Ernest Hemingway, sought international locales for personal contemplation and textual development. But as the Great Depression gradually fell upon the country in 1930 after the Stock Market Crash in October of 1929, the same year in which John Steinbeck published his first novel, naturalism regained momentum in literary fashion. This economic turmoil would serve as a call to action for authors seeking to renew naturalistic traditions, namely scientism, amorality, and objectivity, set forth by such authors as Dreiser and Garland. Indeed, authors of the 1930s had strength in resurfacing naturalism's primary tenants, as "the average man of the period, whatever the rhetoric of freedom in which he lived, was imprisoned in a world of machine industrialism, untrammelled great wealth, and huge anonymous cities" (Pizer, *Documents* 184). This next wave of naturalists, then, established a reconnection and re-familiarization with the common American citizen and the pattern of behaviors and occurrences that they shared collectively.

The sense of powerlessness that individuals endured during the Depression was not dissimilar to that felt in America's *fin-de-siècle*. The 1890s featured the nation's worst depression prior to the 1930s and drove many authors to document the effect that economic collapse had on American and international citizens. It is likely, then, that economic strain in itself is a contributing factor towards naturalism's own drive. Through economic and ecological strain, such as those in both the 1890s and 1930s, authors are susceptible to national sentiments towards deterministic powers and general loss of control. Yet the Great Depression was more detrimental in part because of the Dust Bowl,

which, according to Donald Worster, directly coincides with the Depression's economic plight. Worster explains that the Dust Bowl "was the inevitable outcome of a culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself that task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth" (4), perhaps directly caused by the myth of the West and the nation's ever-growing investments in capitalistic theory.

Steinbeck was certainly not alone in the resurfacing of American literary naturalism in the 1930s. Most of the naturalism occurring in the thirties followed the naturalistic tradition of a concentrated study of urban settings. Once again, Pizer's commentary in *Documents of American Realism and Naturalism* assists in carefully outlining the course naturalism followed leading to the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*. First, James T. Farrell published his Studs Lonigan trilogy: *Young Lonigan* in 1932, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* in 1934, and *Judgment Day* in 1935. This trilogy, following the Dreiserian tradition of fashioning a naturalistic work set in Chicago, reexamines man's existence in the context of a Depression-era Chicago. John Dos Passos, too, had reestablished naturalism in the American consciousness, though earlier than had Farrell, and also directed focus on the industrialism and mechanism that enclosed man in strictly urban settings, such as New York. In this naturalistic resurfacing of the 1930s, though, the plains remained relatively unexamined, despite its compounded issues of economy and ecology.

John Steinbeck's attention to agrarian cultures and lifestyles was neither immediate nor spontaneous. His first novels were romantic, spiritually-founded, and poetic in their structure and execution.² First published in 1929, *Cup of Gold* follows Henry Morgan, a pirate, as he seeks a woman and riches. *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932)

centers its focus on a family whose occasional immoral behaviors directly correlate to environmental response, implying that human activity has a mythical bond with the land. *To a God Unknown* (1933) is mystical in that its primary character believes his deceased father, incarnated in the form of a tree, to be the driving factor behind a California farm's success; consequently, when other family members demolish the tree, the farm fails. That these first novels link behavior and morals to environmental consequences bars them from a naturalistic classification, but this does not reduce their importance. They function quite well as pieces indicative of Steinbeck's extensive reading practices and awareness of current and historical events, despite a few introductory writing techniques which he later abandoned. More importantly, both *The Pastures of Heaven* and *To a God Unknown* exhibit Steinbeck's growing attention to average people as they function within specific regions and landscapes, namely the Californian countryside. Still, both novels are too mystical to qualify as naturalistic. To encourage Steinbeck, who seemed to always have a journalistic passion, into the naturalistic school, a combination of events would forever alter his authorship and creative perspective: he married Carol Hennings, and he befriended Edward Ricketts.

Steinbeck biographer Jackson Benson best elaborates the effect that Carol Hennings and Edward Ricketts wrought upon Steinbeck prior to the creation of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck met Hennings in the summer of 1928 in the fish hatchery where he worked. Approximately a year and a half later, a Glendale judge married the two on January 14, 1930 (Benson, *Adventures* 169). Hennings, significantly different than her husband, was "outspoken and aggressive...hard-nosed and sarcastic...[and] had a very strongly developed social conscience" (Benson, *Adventures* 162). The young

woman's traits awarded her a dignified position in Steinbeck's creative drive as a source of inspiration and as a critical editor. Displeased with the fantastic and the mythic, she drove Steinbeck towards work with a heightened social purpose and awareness.

Later, in October of 1930, Steinbeck met Ed Ricketts, likely in the house of a shared friend (Benson, *Adventures* 184). Throughout the 1930s, Steinbeck would maintain a close friendship with Ricketts, a marine biologist whose Monterey Bay laboratory housed opportunities of scientific exploration for both men. Together in their studies they developed a thorough understanding of non-teleological theory. Both writers explain non-teleology sufficiently in their joint project *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, published after *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1941. In this project, they note that "Non-teleological ideas derive through 'is' thinking, associated with natural selection as Darwin seems to have understood it" (112). This pattern of ideas implies "depth, fundamentalism, and clarity—seeing beyond traditional or personal projections" and considers events "as outgrowths and expressions rather than results" (112). At its core, "Non-teleological thinking concerns itself primarily not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually 'is'" and it exceedingly "questions *what* or *how*, instead of *why*" (112, original emphasis).

Non-teleology explores actualities as they occur alongside and following evolutionary activity. It places emphasis on humans as subject to evolutionary consequence, opposing notions of environmental favoritism towards people over animals. This intensity of non-teleological theory, alongside the newfound emphasis on social awareness, improved Steinbeck's drive towards realistic documentation in his works. With non-teleological thought, Steinbeck began to apply scientific theory and practices to

physical observations and eventual textual chronicling of the people and events surrounding him in his native California. He departed from his romantic roots towards close, detailed studies of particular regional affiliation. His experience with Ricketts in studying marine species translated well into studies of the human species. Through Ed Ricketts and non-teleology the author gained a consciousness of exploring the functions of humans and their behaviors as results of environmental and social forces.

Steinbeck, born in Salinas and reared amidst farming communities, had a particular interest in the Californian agricultural issues in the thirties, but would not become an active voice in them until 1934. Until then, he was successful in numerous writing projects including short stories and novellas such as “The Red Pony” and *Tortilla Flat*, both closely adhered to specifically Californian settings. Unlike the urban concentration of other naturalist authors, Steinbeck turned to agrarian settings and began investigating labor issues early in his career to satiate his ever-constant search for potential content material. Steinbeck initiated his focus on the growing labor issues for both natives and migrants when, upon insistence of a friend, he visited two detained labor activists (Benson, *Adventures* 292). Consequently, he gathered material, awareness, and interest in laborers’ rights, most notably evident in *In Dubious Battle*, and on the culture of roaming farm workers, such as George and Lennie from *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck’s connection to the American Plains, and likewise the traditions of Plains naturalism, would develop as a result of his contact with migrant workers from the Plains states.

Upon invitation from George West, an editorial writer for the *San Francisco News*, Steinbeck toured the Californian migrant camps to report on the migrant situation, particularly that of the workers who had emigrated from regions most affected by

mechanization, foreclosure, or drought and other environmental factors contributing to the Dust Bowl. In the summer of 1936, Steinbeck embarked upon a connection with migrant workers that lead him to draft *The Grapes of Wrath*. First, however, he chronicled, with biting social commentary and calls to action, the lamentable camps and treatment given to migrants from Arkansas, Texas, and, of course, Oklahoma. To Californian citizens, these “Okies” posed not only a threat to the agricultural economy of California, whose farm owners oppressed the migrants with obscenely poor wages, but also as a threat to Californian culture, which seemed apathetic to the plight of the environmentally- and socially-oppressed. In a series of newspaper articles entitled *Their Blood Is Strong*, Steinbeck presented distinctive details of migrant families and their attempts to survive amidst camp squalor, famine, and poverty. Charles Wollenberg, who much later compiled the articles in a short book *The Harvest Gypsies* (1996), notes that Steinbeck saw “the migrants as displaced Jeffersonian yeomen who needed and deserved their own small plots of land” (x). Though this is certainly the primary theme of *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck had yet to view this theory in a broader, national context. Close association with Oklahoman farmers ignited an irrepressible rage in Steinbeck that he would later translate into a fierce anger against unidentifiable and blameless forces affecting the Joads and other farmers, based closely upon the migrants he met in the camps. Watching the migrants’ plight would not only provide justification for a grand work of social observation, but would also compel Steinbeck to maintain objectivity and journalistic representation in revealing the suffering of a marginal group of displaced Americans.

The novel emerged after a series of attempts to translate the newspaper articles into a novel delineating the migrant plight. The article series was, as Robert DeMott describes in *Working Days*, “written mostly in a measured, restrained style” (xxxv), but the first attempt at the novel form, “The Oklahomans,” seemed uncomplicated and dispassionate (DeMott, *Working Days* xxxvii). The second attempt, “L’Affaire Lettuceberg,” had substantially more content than the first attempt with the novel, but its structure was inherently satirical, even vicious. DeMott notes that it was “the angriest, most thesis-ridden book Steinbeck ever attempted” which Carol Hennings decidedly disliked due to its distraction from the primary purpose of the social cause (*Working Days* xxxix). After destroying “L’Affaire Lettuceberg,” Steinbeck began, in late May of 1938, what would later, and finally, develop into *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The Viking Press published the novel in April of 1939. Prior to the novel’s publication, Oklahoma, whether the state’s residents liked it or not, had become the regional poster state for the economic suffering of the Great Depression and the environmental impact of the Dust Bowl. *The Grapes of Wrath* explores this suffering with an alternation of micro- and telescopic lenses, depicting Oklahoman farmers and the general region’s reaction to the ecological downfall that drove inhabitants to flight. With the novel’s publication, Oklahoma was, once again, stationed in the center of American popular attention. Yet concerns of accurate representation shrouded the novel’s reception both immediately and in its later readership, as Steinbeck likely did not visit the plains until well after *The Grapes of Wrath*’s publication. Animosity flared in both California and Oklahoma audiences, who banned the book due to potential interpretations of the states’ citizens as either inhumanely cruel or savagely impoverished. Neither state wanted

to air its ongoing challenges on a national level, let alone with negative dramatic emphasis on economy and social conflict. But because Steinbeck relied so closely on the actual experiences of migrants to draft the novel, its realistic foundation is generally conceded as it awards voice to an oppressed populous.

The Grapes of Wrath has, not surprisingly, generated a mountain of critical interpretation. To start, there are the five “layers” of the novel to which Steinbeck alluded in a letter to Pascal Covici: “There are five layers in this book, a reader will find as many as he can and he won’t find more than he has in himself” (178). Then there is the analogy of the land turtle of Chapter Three to the entire Joad journey. It could be a novel of a dying god; it could be a novel of a god regenerated. It could also be a story of an infant, unborn into a failing livelihood. At its core, it is a novel of a specific time and region. *The Grapes of Wrath* works well in conveying an authenticated image of the Prairie at the height of the Great Depression, vacillating between chapters dedicated to the account of the Joads and chapters, known as intercalary chapters, committed to the portrayal of the broader migrant experience. Furthermore, it meets the primary tenants of naturalism that had been long-since established but not yet so poignantly executed.

From its onset, *The Grapes of Wrath* closely examines the relationship between the environment and those who inhabit it. The Oklahoma characters demonstrate a profound strength of character rooted in the land. The first chapters of the novel, those set in the town of Sallisaw, establish the characters as devoted and dedicated to their property and its dying legacy. The fifth chapter, an intercalary chapter, is a powerful first installment of the developing Oklahoma perspective, forcing the novel’s audience to assume a position alongside an anonymous voice representative of any and all

dispossessed migrants. Within this chapter, the tenant farmer laments the family's forced removal from the land, as this separation of individual from environment is an innate destruction of communal and individual identity: "it's our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours. That's what makes it ours—being born on it, working it, dying on it" (45).³ At the heart of their lament, the farmers recall occurrences of birth and death, which, as Ma Joad explains much later in the novel, are the major installments of experience that masculine farmers best recognize. These tenant farmers were not only born on the land, but they also intended to die upon it, much like their ancestors had. Here, then, is a two-fold naturalistic quality of the novel: the characters are products of their environment, which assumes an explicit role in the characters' development; and their internal drive is to follow the behavioral patterns set by their familial, or hereditary, predecessors. That they are aware of their dependence upon hereditary forces speaks to the characters' awareness of natural forces.

Despite the characters' close affiliation with nature, the uncontrollable forces of weather that contributed to the Dust bowl—namely drought—found them existing on overused and undernourished crop land. The fifth chapter, again, cites the decreasing quality of the land: "You know what cotton does to the land; robs its, sucks all the blood out of it" (43). If only the farmers could "rotate the crops they might pump blood back into the land" (43). The land's failure to produce poses as a natural consequence of nutrient depletion; the drought and constant windstorms would only intensify the disallowance of nutrient replenishment. The land's failure also demonstrates a close relationship between human and environment. Man had successfully manipulated the

surrounding land for his own gain; however, once the land no longer functioned as a benefit to him, he consequently suffered exponentially. The land stands as an entirely indifferent entity next to man; the land continues regardless of its previous benefit to man and regardless of man's sorrow or emotional capacity. In non-teleological terms, the land simply persists. While there are indeed environmental changes occurring from human activity and interaction, the land endures more drastic changes due to the weather and environmental events that equally effect man. Man, then, has little power over his habitat.

The novel's general perspective explores, on a scientific and journalistic level, the specific details and processes the Oklahomans endured in their situation and migration. Steinbeck alludes to the background, or the "why," of the Okie situation, but does so in order to provide adequate background for a thorough comprehension of the events portrayed in the novel. Indeed, Steinbeck demonstrates an honorable attempt at maintaining a journalistic tone, one which strives to limit authorial opinion or sentimental persuasion, throughout the Joad saga. The persuasion comes instead through the form of expressing the migrants' plight. The novel's intercalary chapters, meanwhile, play an equally crucial role in constructing a photographic depiction of the Plains exodus. Though the Joads' tale may be representative for most of the Oklahoma migrants, or even the Arkansas or Texas migrants, the intercalary chapters function as chronicles of specific instances that constitute the evacuation. These instances include illustrating what audiences unfamiliar with the migratory experience would otherwise overlook: the process of selling the entirety of a family's possessions for far less than anticipated; the struggle to maintain dignity in communicating with strangers who are prone to pity and charity; entertaining one another with traditional folk music or stories; or the challenge in

approaching a new region whose inhabitants exhibit instant animosity and prejudice. The intercalary chapters furthermore include attention to landscape, documenting how the land fluctuates between periods of abundance or leanness.

The intercalary chapters underscore how the characters could hardly foresee the changes that affect them so acutely, but their intimate connection to the land helps them understand the environmental changes. Yet the characters are decidedly not prepared for the societal forces that would compound the environmental issues they faced. These economic forces, resulting from a combination of agricultural mechanization and commercialization, are the apex of the novel's demonstration of ambiguity in locating a sole entity to blame for the migrants' plight. Steinbeck excels in illustrating the faceless nature of the agrarian exodus. There is no one figure to claim fault for driving the tenants from the land: to ease his situation, the farmer cannot kill the tractor engineer, or the engineer's supervisor, or the president of the bank, or the bank's board of directors. "Where does it stop?" an anonymous tenant farmer, or Muley Graves in John Ford's 1940 film adaptation, laments in an intercalary chapter, "Who can we shoot?" (52).

The fact remains that no one person's death would amend the issue, and instead the fault rests with "the monster" figure, the bank: "Men made it, but they can't control it" (45). This bank, this monster, "isn't men, but it can make men do what it wants" (46). The ultimate figure of financial organization and structure, despite being created by human innovation, drives tenants away from their farms and eventually drives communities and families apart from their roots. With the construction of the bank as a monster figure, *The Grapes of Wrath* fulfills two primary criteria for a work's consideration as naturalistic. On one level, it erects a monstrous figure, a natural

abnormality, such as Norris's McTeague or Steinbeck's own Lennie, which disrupts the natural order of occurrences in a more or less violent fashion. On another and significantly larger level, the bank poses as an unstoppable deterministic power. The very fact that men cannot control the bank implies that they have little to no control over their farms', and consequently their families', fates or destinies. The bank takes part in Steinbeck's complex construction of determinism, and this bank figure, alongside the environmental, sociological, and technical forces, drives Plains inhabitants away from their land and livelihood.

The migration away from the Plains was hardly an effective means to regain a sense of renewed agency or control over the migrants' fates. Landowners investing in mechanical innovations, such as that iconic tractor, drove the tenant farmers to seek alternative housing locations. These inhabitants do not have control over their land, whose ownership lies with either a landowner or a bank, and they similarly have little control over the patterns of movement enforced upon their lives. Because of the lack of self-proprietorship and agency, the Okies in *The Grapes of Wrath* encapsulate the Jeffersonian dream, or what could be a fallacy. Through mechanization, which reduces the number of laborers necessary to operate a successful farm, and through capitalism, which encourages competition and the consequent failure of the individual farm, the Okies could never attain the Jeffersonian ideal of enlightenment through self-sufficiency and independence. Much like earlier naturalistic works that examined the gradual collapse of the dream of the independent farm, *The Grapes of Wrath* chronicles the evident demise of Jeffersonian ideals as farmers continually failed to achieve them. Through little or no fault of their own, the Prairie inhabitants needed to endure an exodus

in order to escape the environmental and financial nightmare that came of America's agrarian dream.

This exodus, driving prairie farmers from their native regions, resulted in the novel's careful recording of an experiment in regional otherness. This experiment's foundation or background comes with the latter half of the nineteenth's century regionalist movement in which authors worked diligently to nationally present and personally preserve the uniqueness of a multitude of regions. Utilizing a crucial mixture of local color and attention to unique environs, Sarah Orne Jewett succeeded in capturing the American Northeast, Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce excelled in recorded the American West and South, Kate Chopin detailed specifically the Louisianan South, and Hamlin Garland, too, contributed with his portrayal of the often-overlooked Great Plains. With this movement, American literature gained a record of the customs, dialect, and cultures of various areas in the nation; furthermore, the movement proved that the country, whose own literary voice was still developing, did not contain one "type" of citizen, but instead a variety of individuals shaped by the distinctive regions wherein they were born and raised.

Thus, the country demonstrated a previously-constructed awareness of the differences between citizens based on regions, but by the late 1930s, this awareness was magnified. Though the development of national transportation, such as railways and the emergent highway network system, seemingly closed the divides between distant regions, the tradition of regional identity was deeply-seated in regional cultures. Through advancements in media conveyance, namely the radio, citizens' awareness of national events as occurrences outside of their close surroundings also contributed to the

continuation of regional differences. With radio and photojournalistic chronicles describing the Dust Bowl to the rest of the nation, Oklahoma became synonymous with poverty, unemployment, and struggle. To evade this tangle of socio-environmental bondage, many Okies, like the Joads, had little choice but to leave. Historian Douglas Hale notes that 1936 began a five-year span in which 309,000 state residents left Oklahoma to escape unemployment and drought (68). California would receive nearly 100,000 of these migrants and this would decidedly highlight the regional differences between Californians and Oklahomans (68). In this case of regional displacement, two quite dissimilar peoples came in direct contact with one another, and the differences between them would instigate an animosity not easily remedied.

Steinbeck was sure to fully illustrate this instance of regional and residential otherness in *The Grapes of Wrath*. It arguably may be the sole reason that brought Steinbeck to craft the work. The Joads and other Okies seem to be displaced even while in residence in Oklahoma; their farms, no longer prosperous or similar to those of their predecessors, are dusty, dry, and dilapidated. The best example of residential displacement comes through Muley Graves, the character who decides to remain in Oklahoma despite the mass exodus. Muley stays when others leave, including his own family. Trespassing on what used to be his own property, Muley experienced “a funny thing...when they tol’ me I had to get off the place. Fust I was gonna go in an’ kill a whole flock a people. Then all my folks went away out west. An’ I got wanderin’ aroun’...jus’ wanderin’ aroun’ like a damn ol’ graveyard ghos’” (69). Compared to Tom and the rest of his family who rely on movement for survival, Muley’s station on the plains represents the plains identity that cannot survive transport to another region.

Muley's experiences define his character and these experiences are inseparable from the land. As such, his removal from Oklahoma would signify the death of his personality and character. The land, to Muley and others, holds its value in experiences such as the births and deaths of loved ones; to the bankers who inherited the land, the land's value is worth only a slim margin of profit. According to the musings of Muley, this profit killed the Okies. Instead of moving on to the utopian afterlife promised by Californian fliers, like everyone else experiencing the death of their identities, he remains as a phantom feeding on memories.

Another strong example of character development through regional identification is in the example of Grampa Joad. Grampa, like Muley, implicitly understands the connections that the land has with identity; unlike Muley, he initially anticipates the move away from the plains joyously, as he's "got a feelin' it'll make a new fella outa me" (126). Just before their flight, though, Grampa sides with Muley, demanding to stay. "This here's my country," he cries: "I b'long here...This country ain't no good, but it's my country" (154). Grampa's sense of regional belonging parallels Muley's polemic; conversely, Grampa's sense of the Promised Lands leads him to desire the trip to California, if only because of the lure of the grapes and oranges. Eventually, the family assuages Grampa with "soothin' syrup" and uproots him from the place where he belonged. Like the dream of the Promised Land, Grampa would die soon after leaving the homestead.

Though the connection between all of the characters and their land remains indescribably resilient, those who do move on instantly experience regional and financial Otherness elicited through social comparisons. The first of these major comparisons

comes in Chapter Fifteen with a scene where, after driving for some time on Route 66, a set of anonymous-yet-typical migrants (the Joads in Ford's cinematographic version of the novel) stop at a diner for bread. Instantly the waitress, typically perky and warm so as to encourage return business from professional travelers, is instantly irritated with the migrants' stained hats and "curious humility" (216-217). The migrant boys stare at the diner's candy, scratching their dusty ankles with their toenails and placing their hands in their overalls (217-218). Amidst the delicate battle between the diner's charity and the migrants' pride, the images of the dissimilar types of people remain clear: there are the stable diner workers and truck drivers, and then there are the sullied migrants with half-naked children. There are, as Mae so poignantly puts it, "Truck drivers...an' after them shitheels" (220).

This, though, is but a mild occurrence in which the migrants' appearances stand out compared to the appearances of surrounding individuals. The larger differences come with the juxtaposition of Oklahomans and Californians. The differences between the two regional identities coalesce with regional profiling and stereotyping, particularly in the Californian perspective regarding the coming onslaught of Oklahomans. In Chapter Eighteen, Tom learns the meaning of "Okie," which "use' ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you're a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you're scum" (280). The overarching point is expressed through a gas station attendant and his aid: "They ain't human. A human being wouldn't live like they do. A human being couldn't stand it to be so dirty and miserable" (301). The novel's twenty-first chapter describes the impact that the cultural collision had for both groups. For the Oklahomans, "The movement had changed them...the children without dinner changed them...they were migrants" (385).

For the Californians, “there was panic...Men of property were terrified for their property. Men who had never been hungry saw the eyes of the hungry” (385-386). In this chapter, Steinbeck assumes a clear position in that the Californians were unreasonable and fearful in their refusal to welcome or aid the Oklahomans. Steinbeck best illustrates the regional animosity by recording the Californian assumption that “These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant. They’re degenerate, sexual maniacs. These goddamned Okies are thieves. They’ll steal anything. They’ve got no sense of property rights” (386). Ultimately, as denoted by the final words in the chapter, the anger between both groups ferments due to frustrations intensified by otherness; the Oklahomans demand dignity, and the Californians demand authority.

Steinbeck had originally intended to reemphasize the differences and animosity between the Oklahomans and the Californians through a metaphoric paragraph that drew parallels between a Germanic invasion of Rome.⁴ This original paragraph, appearing in the novel’s manuscript and typescript, includes a powerful line, in that “the barbarians came, naked, across the border, humbly, humbly” (Steinbeck, *Typescript* 462).⁵ The paragraph, in an usual instance of alteration between the novel’s typescript and published version, would not reach publication, perhaps due to the author’s uncertainty of his audience’s metaphoric comprehension or a discomfort with drawing parallels between Oklahomans and “barbarians.” Despite its unpublished status, the paragraph and this particular line speaks to a generalized implication of the Oklahoman-Californian conflict the regional and financial differences between the citizens wrench their common nationality apart. The Oklahoman-Californian clash reached a drastic point in which they are seemingly no longer countrymen. Regional otherness, in *The Grapes of Wrath*,

presents a national identity crisis: though these two types of people reside in one country, they may as well not be considered countrymen, for their regional differences have finally grown so profound that their common nationality has disintegrated. The Californians have no sense of compassion towards the migrants, whose humanity they reject out of hand, and the Oklahomans have no sense of place with which they may identify.

Grapes of Wrath additionally explores religious themes similar to those found in the works of Prairie naturalism previously examined. The delicate handling of religious themes creates a religious awareness and elicits a theology based on community and altruistic behavior as opposed to traditional, orthodox religion. The prime initiate to this tradition of community theology comes in the form, of course, of Jim Casy. Through Jim Casy Steinbeck examines the spiritual identity that best matches authentic Prairie sentiments. This close attention to religious themes does not necessarily discount the novel's naturalistic integrity. By implementing and supporting theories on religion and spirituality based on natural human behavior, Steinbeck dismantles popular notions towards religion and follows suit in the semi-transcendental traditions set forth by previous Plains authors. As did Hamlin Garland, Steinbeck emphasizes the importance of community and altruism over organized structures of religion and underscores the need to recognize humanity, not the individual, and its need for communal support.

The failed preacher may first appear to readers as a pitiful figure. As a religious authority, Jim Casy was not capable of restraining his behavior to deny physical temptation. This perverted figure of an adulterous preacher is initially disgraceful, but when he continues to theorize on true religion, he emerges as a figure who demands

respect from readers. His first conclusion comes with, “There ain’t no sin and there ain’t no virtue. There’s just stuff people do” (32), denoting a sentiment that perceives religion more as social control and less as genuine inspiration. Next, Casy questions, “Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe...it’s all men an’ all women we love; maybe that’s the Holy Sperit—the human sperit” (32-33). This naturally leads into the overriding theme of the novel, the theme of continuous interrelation between all souls and corporeal experiences: “Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of” (33). Instead of utilizing this powerful theological expression of communal respect and honor as a vehicle for a destruction of orthodoxy, Steinbeck establishes Casy’s theology as a means to propel the importance of human devotion for the survival over individuals and communities alike.

Within his speech, Casy specifically cites the need for compassion between both men and women; this attention to the feminine community leads to the next structure in the novel which satisfies a criterion for a work’s consideration in the Plains naturalism canon. While Steinbeck was hardly an expert in completely understanding the female psyche and experience, and less so an expert in representing this experience, he captures with Ma Joad a precise model of the American Prairie woman. The first sight of Ma appears in Chapter Eight, in which Tom regards Ma for the first time after serving his prison sentence: “Ma was heavy, but not fat; thick with child-bearing and work. She wore a loose Mother Hubbard of gray cloth in which there had once been colored flowers...Her thin, steel-gray hair was gathered in a sparse wispy knot at the back of her head” (99-100). Underneath a worn physical exterior, Ma Joad possessed an absolute strength that could not be questioned: “she seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her

position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken” (100). Ma understands the importance of both joy and calm, and “from her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as an arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgment as a goddess” (100).

In fact, the glory that Steinbeck bestows upon the prairie mother approaches romantic elaboration; the pedestal upon which Steinbeck places Ma Joad does not allow for mention of stagnancy or loss of identity. Quite to the contrary, at this point in his naturalistic prairie portrayal, the mother figure has come to embrace her position and has evolved into a being who thrives in the centered position that she has come to assume in the family dynamic. While the men squat in the dust to desperately coordinate their next method of survival, the women stand in the background, controlling the children so to not further disturb the men’s thought processes. While the masculine psyche fades with the failure of the farm, the feminine sense of observation heightens to a critical degree. Steinbeck notes that “Woman can change better’n a man...Woman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head” (577). Whereas men live in “jerks—baby born an’ a man dies, an’ that’s a jerk—gets a farm an’ loses his farm, an’ that’s a jerk,” women consider long-term implications on a more fluid level: “it’s all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on...We ain’t gonna die out” (577).

Steinbeck’s approach to Plains women is indeed a bit romantic or exaggerated as he emphasizes their strengths and seems to overlook their weaknesses; however, this is not to say that Ma Joad is analogous to all Prairie women. Steinbeck demonstrates his clear understanding of this fact through Ma’s daughters, Ruthie and Rose of Sharon. Ruthie, a child, possesses juvenile traits such as incessant giggling and gossip. Rose of

Sharon, older and expectant, exhibits physical and emotional weaknesses. Ma, at her age and her experience level, is the apex of endurance and encouragement in the novel. She desperately tries to maintain “the fambly,” since she understands it is, as a cohesive unit, vital to the survival of its individual members.

Before publishing the novel, Steinbeck’s editors suggested altering some of language utilized in the dialogue, in addition to altering the soon-to-be-renowned conclusion of the novel. The author greatly opposed to changing his work, and in a letter to his editor, Pascal Covici, on January 3, 1939, he states that he “went over the mss and made some changes. I made what I could....This book wasn’t written for delicate ladies...I’ve never changed a word to fit the prejudices of a group and I never will” (*Life in Letters* 164). As such, the novel’s vulgar and violent dispositions remained intact. Though the novel’s film, directed by John Ford, would adjust the final scene to inspire hope for the Joad family and other migrants, the novel ends with the harrowing image of Rose of Sharon breastfeeding a starving man. There is no present hope or fear for either individual, sitting quietly in a barn. The book simply ends with this image, drawing ambiguity for an audience who may be seeking an answer at the novel’s finale. Rose of Sharon’s feeding the man could ultimately symbolize the human endeavor to survive and seek survival through others, as well as Rose of Sharon’s contention for embodying the prairie matriarch; however, the scene also stands as an example of Steinbeck’s non-teleological practices. The powerful scene simply observes without authorial input or journalistic sway. It forces audiences to watch a reality that may be entirely uncomfortable and awkward for them. Feeding the starving man in the spirit of survival

and compassion finalizes the migrants' humanity and eternally blurs the line between natural power and socially-acceptable behavior.

Despite its initial divided reception, as some critics appreciated the novel while Oklahoma and California citizens alike deplored it, *The Grapes of Wrath* arrived as a naturalistic novel complete with an underlying social purpose. Steinbeck attempted to withhold the authorial rage that appeared in *Their Blood Is Strong* and *In Dubious Battle*, placing his confidence instead in the novel's exposition of abysmal migrant treatment. In creating an exposition that wove chapters of general migrant experiences with chapters of a family who likely attracted audience sympathy, Steinbeck trusted that truthful detail alone would elicit social change. Much like his predecessor Hamlin Garland, Steinbeck sought one way to somehow alter the one deterministic force that commanded power over so many: social determinism. Forces of greed and capitalistic competition could somehow be reduced in order to help the migrants. Camps and associations similar to the Weedpatch Camp could improve the lives of the displaced. This call for social change, though, is complicated. At times, Steinbeck could not avoid authorial outcries caused by his outrage with the migrants' plight. To avoid the assumption that social change could help humans defeat deterministic forces, Steinbeck pushes the Joads away from the governmentally-managed camp in hopes of finding work, proving that financial forces have a stronger precedence over social forces. Furthermore, extreme weather again plagues the migrants, serving as a reminder of the ever-present environmental forces that still had an uncontrollable power. If there were one force that could be altered, according to Steinbeck and Garland, it could be the political and social structures.

The Grapes of Wrath, in addition to granting a marginalized people an extraordinarily necessary voice, functions as a conclusive point in the history of Prairie naturalism. Though Steinbeck was not native to the Plains, the stories he recorded were, and with these stories he contributes to Prairie naturalism a piece that will pose as a recorded experiment in regional contact and a portrayal of the effects of ignoring a region, its inhabitants, and its struggles. Prairie life would certainly endure past *The Grapes of Wrath's* publication, and furthermore past the Dust Bowl and the Depression, with an increased focus on higher education and stabilized economy; yet, in 1939, this novel, in the tradition of other Prairie naturalist authors, ensured that the Prairie inhabitants' experience would never fall prey to American disregard or neglect. Through the family Joad, Steinbeck secured the southern plains' migrant voice a lasting place in American literature and memory.

Notes

1. As with the previously discussed authors, this study emphasizes fiction involving the plains; as such, *The Grapes of Wrath* will constitute the majority of the textual analyses found in this discussion as it is Steinbeck's main work involving the Great Plains. Because this is a study in naturalism's evolution into the twentieth century, much of the criticism will involve either critics who are noted authorities on the novel or author, or sources that discuss specifically the naturalistic side of the novel or author.
2. See Jackson Benson's "Steinbeck as Scientist" page 253.
3. This study utilizes the 1976 Viking Critical Library edition of *The Grapes of Wrath*, edited by Peter Lisca and published by Penguin Books in New York.
4. The original paragraph reads on page 462 of *The Grapes of Wrath* typescript:

Once the Germans in their hordes came to the rich margin of Rome; and they came timidly, saying 'we have been driven, give us land.' And the Romans armed the frontier and built forts against the hordes of need. And the legions patrolled the borders, cased in metal, armed with the best steel. And the barbarians came, naked, across the border, humbly, humbly. They received the swords in their breasts and marched on; and their dead bore down the swords and the barbarians marched on and took the land. And they were driven by their need, and they conquered with their need. In battle the women fought in the line, and the yellow-haired children lay in the grass with knives to hamstring the legionaries, to snick through the hamstrings of the horses. But the legions had no needs, no wills, no force. And the best trained, best armed troops in the world went down before the hordes of need.
5. Page 462 of *The Grapes of Wrath* typescript is courtesy of the Library of Congress. Page 94 of Steinbeck's manuscript for *The Grapes of Wrath* is courtesy of the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies, San Jose State CA.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: COMPARING PRAIRIE NATURALISMS

The Great Plains has a subtle appeal that requires a skillful hand in rendering its unique cultures and environments into the American literary theater. While regionalism and local color movements have definitively recorded unique cultures on a national level, representations of the Great Plains flourishes with added traits of literary naturalism. Naturalism serves as an exceedingly effective vehicle in dismantling unquestioned or pre-conceived notions about American experiences, yet it also composes aesthetic masterpieces that apply scientific logic to characters and occurrences in an effort to examine the genuine human experience. Among the other criteria that constitute naturalistic works, the essence of naturalism coerces audiences into the recognition of man as a biological creature which, like any other species, is subject to uncontrollable and ambivalent forces. There is a pressing need, then, to marry the theoretical foundations constituting regionalism and naturalism. The resulting fusion of literary genres helps center a focus on a specific time, place, and respective sentiments, all constructed in the spirit of scientific exploration and objectivity.

Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, and John Steinbeck identified this precise need to join the two literary movements, though perhaps not explicitly so. For each of these authors, the prairie offered experiences that simply could not be ignored. These experiences, whether dreary daily chores or overt pressures towards assimilation or financial crises, demanded authentic details that could additionally function as presentations of humans as organic creatures striving for survival in an ambivalent habitat. In examining specifically the Great Plains, the authors prompted a national

readership to turn its attention to a region which might otherwise have been overlooked. They furthermore dismantle deeply-rooted notions of the dignified farmer, and with this they contribute to national anxieties over a closed frontier. In thoroughly detailing prairie life over a span of nearly fifty years, these authors pose as spokespeople for a region prone to outside imagination and nostalgia. Admittedly, their authorship was not universally approved by prairie audiences; however, in contributing these antithetical texts, these authors, at the very least, establish a crucial balance between idealism and realism in representations of the prairie.

Naturalism's predisposition towards examining man in urban settings is inexplicably important as it deconstructs the sense of human immunity towards natural forces. Urban naturalism exterminates notions that imply human's special superiority, falsely elicited through man-made metropolitan settings. Moreover, it documents the increasing sentiments of metropolitan encroachment and constriction, trapping inhabitants within its symbolic walls. As crucial as this is, it detracts attention away from the human experiment as it occurs in direct contact with natural settings. Meanwhile, Jack London's naturalism emphasizes man's evolved distance from vital instincts while famously including the frontier in the Yukon. Unlike urban naturalism, this Yukon naturalism examines man in environmentally-extreme settings in order to prove human vulnerability to nature. Yet this Yukon setting is generally unfamiliar to the vast majority of readership, and as such the novelty of the setting takes precedence over the fundamental purpose of reminding readers of their own subjection to biological and environmental forces. Prairie naturalism, or even agrarian naturalism, withdraws its subjects away from the technological distraction of the metropolis into a locale of earnest

familiarity. Even if the greater part of prairie naturalism's readers never personally experienced farm life, their ancestors, and therefore hereditary predecessors, likely had worked for or owned a working farm at some point in time. As America continued towards metropolitan and mechanical progress, captured so well in urban naturalism, the constraints of modernized life encouraged citizens to embrace a faulty nostalgia or incorrect image of agrarian life. Farm-dwellers, in the urban perspective, could either be noble Jefferson yeomen or ignorant local bumpkins. Prairie naturalism sought to correct this.

In addition to a number of authors who contributed naturalistic works centered on this particular region and who also warrant further study, Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, and John Steinbeck best expressed prairie naturalism. These three dedicated their immense efforts to construct truthful works to convey the Great Plains human experience. Though their works may not be exactly accurate, as accuracy can and will always undergo debate through critics and audiences alike, they strove to present to America realistic experiences of farm life for both men and women. These experiences vary slightly from author to author, but the three authors' texts complement one another. The connections between these authors rest more in their texts than their biographies, but the similarities in these texts compose the essential tenants of Prairie Naturalism; conversely, the differences in these texts demonstrate how each author contributed a unique style or trait within their representative works.

The biographical connections between the three authors are relatively limited. Willa Cather's biting criticism of Hamlin Garland's works prevented any early relationship from developing; however, towards 1919 the two arranged a meeting, though

it is uncertain as to whether or not the meeting actually occurred (Gustafson 11). Yet later Hamlin Garland read, and potentially misinterpreted, Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) and consider Cather's work part of "a concession to the people who want female libertines in their books" (Garland, *Letters* 309). Conversely, John Steinbeck greatly favored the works of Willa Cather. Although his reading choices were admittedly centered on Anglican men, Steinbeck certainly had a fondness for Willa Cather, his favorite woman writer (DeMott, *Typewriter* 48). Steinbeck evidently read Cather's *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *The Professor's House*, and because of such works he considered that "Willa Cather writes the best prose in America" (DeMott, *Reading* 24). Steinbeck's clear appreciation of Cather's texts resounds in his own prose, which exhibits an equal attention to recording the beautiful alongside the downtrodden. This, though, seems to be the limit to the biographical connections between Steinbeck and Cather.

Thus the strongest relations between the authors come through similarities in their writing and their passion, and their regional subjects. The stride towards authenticity in textual representations is but a basic foundation upon which the other similarities grow and embellish. Close authorial familiarity with the region is also crucial if the authors are to truly guide understanding of a specific region and people. Garland, the only author of these three who was actually born in the prairie, first escaped to the Northeast in hopes of finding literary acclaim in modeling contemporary Bostonian writers. From the guidance of well-established authors, Garland returned and embraced the prairie, the region he knew best, in his writing and consequently discovered that his most powerful authorial outlet came through depicting the prairie. Cather, similarly, gained momentum in her career by gathering material with which she was most familiar, and this familiarity

brought her texts a valuable quality that demonstrated careful observation mingled with regional spirit. Like Garland, Cather explored regions beyond the plains, but her prairie fiction continues to be recognized as her best work. Though Steinbeck was by no means native to or reared in the prairie like Garland and Cather, the bonds he established with the southern prairie migrants ignited a passion for the region, driving the author towards a unique regional depiction devoid of nostalgia. The migrant experience constitutes all of *The Grapes of Wrath*, not just the prairie portion. Steinbeck supported these migrants with his own writing talents. Steinbeck was, in effect, the textual liaison between prairie migrants of the 1930s and national media coverage. His familiarity with the region through the people who knew it so well gave him justification in drafting his work; though the migrants with which he corresponded were indeed the people who vacated the state, they still knew, through and through, the trials that prairie life demanded.

Following authorial association with the region, textual representations constituting prairie naturalism hold at least four primary criteria. The first is the close attention to detail the daily lives of prairie dwellers: this detail must be specific and likewise representative of actual scenes and habits, such as a tractor engineer eating a canned ham sandwich underneath a tree. Second, there is a close attention to displaced individuals, who may be locally displaced as were the Haskinses, or nationally displaced as were the Joads, or internationally displaced as were the Shimerdas. The third trait common to all three authors' works is the particular focus on prairie women and how they strive to both maintain personal identity and survive in the Plains. Fourth, though not necessarily last, is the approach to emphasize community and altruism over formal orthodox religion.

Methods of documenting realistic and regionally-specific detail likely arise from the traditions of local color and regionalism, which sought to illustrate works with vernacular dialects and unique imagery so to emphasize the growing cultural disparities between national citizens. This absorption of the realistic also contributes to the journalistic style of naturalism, though naturalism includes the luxury of greater length and allowance of what would otherwise be irrelevant in a journalistic piece. Garland, in “A Day’s Pleasure,” includes as much detail as possible in convincing readers of the drudgery of housewifery by commenting on a woman’s shopping list, including thread and fabric. Before travelling to town, where she arrives in the back of a wagon with farm supplies, she prudently packs a meager meal of fried dough for lunch. Cather’s works likewise record the specificities of prairie farm life: in *My Ántonia*, for example, Jim Burden learns from his grandmother which snakes he should kill and which snakes he should ignore, based, of course, solely upon how much of a nuisance or help the snake is to the farm. Steinbeck, too, follows this tradition. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck explores specific social interaction such as common behaviors with unfamiliar people or typical conversations around the dinner table. These details are necessary to illustrate prairie naturalism, including an attention to household items or dialect, to the documentation of typical prairie life.

The examination of the displaced additionally contributes to the scientific nature of the texts. In its essence, the study of the displaced regards a specimen’s attempt at identifying and settling in its habitat. On a socio-biological level, the examination focuses on personal interactions that function as examples of humans communicating in terms of their natural conditioning. The majority of these communications demonstrate an unkind

animosity towards aberrations as they present a threat to the status quo and the normative way of life. On even another level, a historical or literary level, this perpetual search for settlement dissolves the image of the noble pioneer, bravely crossing dangerous territories to dominate the virginal land. Instead, the authors present the displaced as those with few choices and fewer opportunities for success in farming and must evacuate their homes and consequently lose their identity. Overall, though, the study of the displaced emphasizes the human need to socially adapt for survival purposes. Should the culturally displaced adjust and reduce their otherness, such as the Shimerdas did, they increase their chance for help from the community, weary of strangers. Should the culturally displaced lack the opportunity for change, such as was the Joads' situation, their battle for survival will continue to endure the added struggle of regional antipathy.

Central to the survival of the prairie folk, the prairie woman stands as a powerful structure in prairie naturalism as she provides an additional voice to a group susceptible to marginalization. Without the close study of prairie women, there would be little documentation of an authentic feminine prairie experience, and the lives of overworked women would fade in the American consciousness. There are, indeed, a variety of feminine types included in these works. Garland and Steinbeck, like Cather, create images of younger prairie women. Garland's Rose Dutcher, most unlike any other character of his or the other two authors, comes into *New Womanhood* through sexual and regional liberation. Steinbeck's Rose of Sharon, meanwhile, has yet to develop into a matriarchal figure, but her experiences as a young woman whose husband flees and whose infant is stillborn denote that if she is to reach the level of matriarchal power of her mother she must endure further personal tragedies and familial setbacks in order to

condition her for loss. These younger prairie women often face a bleak future, one which will grow stale with housework and childrearing, yet they must endure, or else attempt to escape the prairie.

One foundational figure, however, remains consistent throughout the works of the three authors: the prairie matriarch. Garland identifies the exhausted woman bound within the farmhouse. Cather succeeds in chronicling the growth of young girls developing into future matriarchs capable of household management and does so without excessively exaggerating the image of a woman who dominates the environment and community. Thirdly, Steinbeck's pinnacle feminine character captures the best in Garland and Cather's types in that his Ma Joad has worked her whole life for her family but seems somehow to thrive under the working conditions. Ma Joad is not a revolutionary image but instead a climactic character in a series of prairie matriarchs. She is quite similar to Garland's Mrs. Council, who also sees special attention towards children and the wellbeing of the family unit as the most effective strategy towards survival. Ma Joad is not unlike Cather's Emmaline Burden, Jim's grandmother, who also strives to support both the family and the surrounding community. Though there is a closer financial relation between Ma Joad and Mrs. Council than Mrs. Burden, all three women establish a tradition of matriarchal powers, ones which thrive under communal support, unconditional love, general altruism. Indeed, the three authors exhibit a pattern of locating the prairie woman's role in the household, but the characters' underlying priorities of altruism and community lead into the next primary focus of prairie naturalism, permanently linking women with spirituality and religion on the prairie.

Despite the close attention to organized religion, given particularly in Cather's works, altruism and community take precedence over any religion's orthodox. This tradition begins with Garland, whose Council family make it clear that they place their faith in general kindness and support. Cather's transcendentalist leaning, infiltrating a greater portion of her prairie works, lessens the impact that altruism has in her plots and amidst her characters. Still, in characters such as Mrs. Burden and Alexandra Bergson, Cather follows this tradition through the belief that community must hold a priority over personal religious experience. Steinbeck enlarges this theory of altruism and communal support to strengthen the emphasis that people need each other more so than any unproductive belief founded blindly by those who have not experienced any large degree of strife. With *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck works skillfully with irony in that he strives to prove through a renounced Christian that Christianity needs to operate through individuals, whose ignorance and ambivalence is less Christian than the ex-preacher's vulgar-yet-powerful theorizing on faith in humanity. Moreover, the truer tragedy underlying the novel comes through the Californians' refusal to aid the migrants, which concurrently proves their own lack of humanity and, more importantly, signals the death of altruistically-founded community religion and spirituality.

From authors with a profound familiarity with a specific region comes literature that contains minute details to fully illustrate the lives of prairie dwellers, in which the women, especially, have an inclination towards survival through community. This is not to say that the masculine members of the prairie are blind to the importance of altruism; instead, masculine characters demonstrate a careful attention towards helping their farms' neighboring properties and workers to benefit both themselves and others. Yet masculine

types, such as Tom Joad, have a tendency to seek survival methods through individual efforts. The feminine types, such as Ma Joad, seek survival through communal connectivity.

This emphasis on survival cannot be overstated. Returning to Charles Walcott's theory in naturalism, the characters, indicative of human types, must endure environmental ambivalence. The environmental ambivalence that is present in all three authors' works proves that human emotion or spiritual belief has no effect on natural properties. Because they endure the natural forces found specifically on the prairie and the farm, including locusts, drought, and extreme temperatures and weather patterns, characters in these texts demonstrate that they are products of this environment, which can easily destroy their livelihoods regardless of previous success. The naturalistic theory of characters' humanity, that is their human-like essence which makes them biological creatures, is consequently exaggerated in the plains. In this region, characters are dependent upon natural forces for economic survival, and though communal altruism may temporarily ward off failure, deterministic forces pull these characters into region-specific situations and constitute character development dependent upon regional cultures.

Some characters, though, seek escape from these deterministic forces and likewise the prairie; closely paired with the attempts of exodus, the theme of movement underscores characters' attempts at overcoming determinism and gaining control over their livelihoods. The theme of movement and connection saturates each story in Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads*, and in "A Branch Road" Will Hannan successfully escapes the foreseeable future of perpetual, unchanging farm labor that grinds men's

characters down to little more than upright workhorses. In a somewhat romantic ending, Will returns to the farm to rescue Agnes from the housework notoriously familiar with Garland's works. This branch road expands to the railway for Cather's *My Ántonia*, in which Jim Burden moves into the prairie and later departs for higher education and higher modes of living. Finally, the branch road and the railway lead to Route 66, upon which the migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath* flee the economic and environmental enclosure hosted by prairie in the 1930s. With each author the method of exodus evolves from horse cart to train to truck, but there is a reverse correlation with each of these advances and the effects wrought by the characters' movement. For Garland, characters traditionally fare better wherever they go, so long as it is not in the prairie, but are still subject to outside forces. Cather includes a similar effect, but her characters maintain an association with the prairie that correspondingly improves their sentiments towards the region. For Steinbeck, the exodus proves to be detrimental and includes one crucial point: inhabitants were determined to be displaced whether on the prairie or off.

Prairie naturalism does not approach its termination with Steinbeck's interpretation of the mass exodus away from the Plains. It is, though, a peak in prairie naturalism's popularity; with *The Grapes of Wrath* prairie naturalism was suddenly centered in American popular culture, if only temporarily. Thus, Hamlin Garland commenced the traditions in prairie naturalism with his intense fusion of literary naturalism with specified regionalism. Willa Cather later polished these traditions, identifying the need to balance negative aspects of prairie life with positive aspects. Finally, John Steinbeck amplified the traditions when he felt the prairie community and the national community both needed it most. Though prairie naturalism began in the late

nineteenth century, it carried into the twentieth century quite easily as reoccurring socio-economic issues grounded in the plains created a need for updated and continuous prairie documentation. Though this focus on the lives of true agrarian folk elicited both a laudatory and denigrating audience reception, these authors succeeded in capturing a literary snapshot of a specific time, a unique place, and an unforgettable people.

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