



Colorado Book Club Resource

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR O PIONEERS! BY WILLA CATHER

1. The title of the novel, *O Pioneers!*, is taken from a Walt Whitman poem. Why might Willa Cather have chosen this poem as her title? How does the poem relate to the novel's action or characters? Do we see Whitman's poem reflected in the novel itself?
2. Cather opens the novel with a poem of her own, "Prairie Spring." How does this poem relate to the novel and characters? How do the two poems work together, or do they?
3. How does Cather's portrayal of Hanover compare to her portrayal of The Divide? How does Hanover compare to Cather's other Nebraska towns--Blackhawk in *My Antonia*, Frankfort in *One of Ours*?
4. The land itself figures large in this narrative. How does Alexandra Bergson feel about the land? Compare her outlook to that of her brothers, for example. How might Alexandra's feelings toward the land be considered a fore-runner of a more modern land ethic (a la Aldo Leopold, for example, or the Christian belief in stewardship)?
5. Alexandra's came from a family of sailors and shipbuilders, while other settlers on the Divide had been factory workers and storekeepers. Why might this distinction be relevant to the story?
6. Alexandra was a single woman farmer; homestead records suggest that roughly 10%-12% of all homesteaders were single women. Because of, or in spite of this, Alexandra is sometimes considered ambiguous in her gender roles; is that a valid criticism, considering a homesteader's life? Were gender roles something that Cather wanted us to debate when she wrote this novel?
7. Consider Cather's extensive use of plants and animals in the text. How might a discussion of native versus non-native species enhance the meanings in the novel?
8. What does the orchard suggest to you in this novel? What are some allusions that the orchard calls to mind?
9. Is there a symbolic meaning associated with any of the birds in the novel? Does Cather use any of the birds to impart meaning that is specific to *O Pioneers!*?
10. In a 1921 interview, Willa Cather was quoted, "I knew every farm, every tree, every field in the region around my home, and they all called out to me ... My deepest feelings were rooted in this country because one's strongest emotions and one's most vivid mental pictures are acquired before one is 15. I had searched for books telling about the beauty of the country I loved, its romance, and heroism and strength and courage of its people that had been plowed into the very furrows of its soil, and I did not find them. And so I wrote *O Pioneers!*." What were Cather's contemporaries writing about instead?

Discussion questions provided by The Willa Cather Foundation.



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