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**Restlessness and Domesticity:
Reading Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier**

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Introduction

In American history, the idea of the frontier is both history and mythology. Some scholars approach the topic from a historical perspective, others from a literary one. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner's famous "Frontier Thesis" (1893) occupies that same liminal space, resting somewhere between the quantifiable history of the frontier and the symbolic frontier in American culture. Turner is not responsible for the romanticized ideal of the frontier—that version of the frontier had existed long before he wrote. What Turner produced was an attempt to capture the imagined frontier, during a time when America was moving away from its actual frontier experiences.

The aim of my work is not to debate the historical validity of Turner's thesis. Nor am I arguing that Turner's thesis is the source of the cultural romanticization of the frontier. In this thesis, I will use Turner's ideas about the frontier as a template to explore the idealized version of the frontier as an important feature of American literature. If we treat the Frontier Thesis simply as one version of an ongoing cultural and literary tradition, rather than as a historical hypothesis, it can help us to examine how the myth of the frontier manifested itself in American popular literature.

There are hundreds of American books about the frontier, but here I will focus on three: *Giants in the Earth* (1927) by Ole Rølvaag; *O Pioneers!* (1913) by Willa Cather; and *Little House on the Prairie* (1935) by Laura Ingalls Wilder. These three works share several important features. Each of the three authors lived on and wrote about the Great Plains region; each arrived in the Great Plains within a decade of each other. Instead of the story of a rugged individual or a lone explorer, each tells the story of a family attempting to make a permanent home on the frontier. Each explores a similar tension between the frontier characteristic Turner described as

“restlessness” and the pull toward permanence and domesticity. Turner’s articulation of the idea of the frontier can help us to understand common themes expressed in these three novels.¹

¹ In my work, the terms “Turner’s Thesis” and “the Frontier Thesis” will be used interchangeably

PART I: The History of the American Frontier

Before we can evaluate Turner's Frontier Thesis, an exploration of the history of the American frontier will prove valuable. For the context of this thesis, the "frontier" will be considered the point of European advancement into the continent. Because census data will be referenced frequently in this work, we will rely upon the United States Census Bureau definition of frontier: places which had population densities of less than 2 people per square mile.²

Points of Contact

In the earliest days, the frontier can be considered the points of first contact Europeans explorers had on the American continent. Archaeological evidence suggests that the first European expedition reached North America in approximately AD. 1000. The settlement of L'Anse aux Meadows in northern Newfoundland likely served as a seasonal exploration camp for Leif Eriksson and other Norse seafarers.³ Contact lay dormant for the next centuries, but flared up again at the close of the fifteenth century. Spanish-sponsored Christopher Columbus stumbled ashore in the Caribbean in 1492. The French explored Jacques Cartier made contact with Iroquois people near present day Montreal in 1535 and established the camp Tadoussac. By the end of the sixteenth century, the French had established trading posts throughout the St. Lawrence valley.⁴ The Dutch arrived in present-day New York in 1609. The first permanent English settlement occurred in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. Plymouth, Massachusetts, quickly followed suit in 1620. As the seventeenth century unfolded, European colonizers scrambled up through the salt marshes in Jamestown and over the sand dunes in Plymouth to advance

² US Census Bureau The Website Services & Coordination Staff, "Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890," U.S. Census, 2012, <https://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/001/>.

³ Linda S. Cordell et al., eds., "L'Anse Aux Meadows National Historic Site," in *Archaeology in America: An Encyclopedia* (ABC-CLIO, December 30, 2008)., 78

⁴ Cordell et al., 26.

westward into the continent. French fur trappers had already infiltrated the continent, winding down the waterways of the Ohio River Valley in pursuit of beaver. The French enjoyed mostly amicable relationships with Native Americans, reliant on canoes and native guides to navigate further into the interior. Spain had also established a colonial empire in the south—stretching from present-day Florida into California.

It is also important to note that the “frontier” became associated with Anglo-American movement, especially as other European colonial powers lost their strongholds in America. The British colonial American settlement remained at first mostly tethered to the seaboard, as relative weakness against Native Americans and reliance on European manufactured goods prevented further expansion. The conclusion of the French and Indian War in 1763 enabled more European settlers to advance west (and north). The weakening of France’s continental presence (an ally of the Native Americans) and the English construction of roads and forts eased access into the interior.⁵

The First Frontier

By the onset of the American Revolution, European colonists in North America numbered approximately 2.5 million. Intrepid colonists had nudged further and further into the interior, into the Ohio River Valley, but the Appalachian Mountains prevented widespread expansion. It is in 1783, with the creation of an independent United States, that we see an increase in westward expansion—and also the appearance of a first clear frontier. The Treaty of Paris (1783) not only ended the conflict between Great Britain and the United States, but also defined the boundaries of the new nation, roughly between the St. Lawrence River and the 31st

⁵ Ray Allen Billington, *Westward Expansion*, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1982)., 17

parallel, and from the Atlantic Coast to the Mississippi River.⁶ The new territory ceded from Britain included the Northwest Territory: present-day Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota. This land constituted approximately one third of all the American territory at the time. To regulate this new territory, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance in 1787. The Northwest Ordinance described the process for surveying the new territory, established a precedent for territories to achieve statehood, as well as regulated the procedure for acquiring land from Native Americans: “The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights, and liberty.”⁷ However, this display of supposed good faith was sullied with a further clause justifying future injustices: “they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress; but laws founded in justice and humanity, shall from time to time be made for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with them.”⁸ At the close of the eighteenth century, the American government still pursued a policy of signing treaties with Native Americans to gain their land, a process complicated by Native Americans’ differing perception of land ownership.⁹ A veneer of decorum glazed over the unequivocal goal of settling the new territory. American settlers were attracted by the rich soil, cheap prices, and ease of access provided by the vast waterways of the Ohio River Valley.

The Louisiana Purchase

⁶ “Transcript of Treaty of Paris (1783)” (National Archives and Records Administration, 1783), <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=6&page=transcript>.

⁷ “Transcript of Northwest Ordinance (1787)” (National Archives and Records Administration, 1787), <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=8&page=transcript>.

⁸ “Transcript of Northwest Ordinance (1787).”

⁹ Mark Joy, *American Expansionism 1783-1860* (London: Pearson Longman, 2003), 5

The first United States Census was conducted in 1790, and demarcated the official frontier line as running through the Appalachian Mountains, with small pockets of settlement west of the boundary line.¹⁰ However, the Louisiana Purchase dramatically altered the shape and character of the nation. As Napoleon Bonaparte's rose to prominence at the close of the eighteenth century, plans for a French empire in North America were re-envisioned. At the same time, Spain, a decaying empire, still held the Louisiana Territory. In 1802, Spanish King Charles IV transferred the Louisiana Territory back to Napoleon in exchange for the tiny European kingdom of Tuscany.¹¹ However, with France's inability to subdue the Haitian Revolution, Napoleon's attention shifted back toward the European continent, specifically the threat of war with England.¹² In 1803, United States Secretary of State James Monroe arrived in France to accompany Robert Livingston, United States Minister to France, for diplomatic negotiations. Monroe was sent with the objective of acquiring the port of New Orleans and East and West (the current Florida panhandle) Florida. Finally, the two parties decided that the area of the Louisiana Territory, 827,000 square miles, would be sold for \$15,000,000. Following a six-month delay, Spain formally and grudgingly ceded the territory to France.¹³ The purchase was officially announced on July 4, 1803. The American Senate debated the legality of the purchase. While the staunch constitutionalists in the Federalist Party debated the constitutional legality of Jefferson's purchase, most easily overlooked any sort of misgivings about the political machinations of the sale, and focused only on the potential of the new territory. Following the formal acquisition of

¹⁰ The Website Services & Coordination Staff, "Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890."

¹¹ Gaye Wilson, "Louisiana Purchase," Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia, accessed February 12, 2019, /site/jefferson/louisiana-purchase.

¹² E. Wilson Lyon, *Louisiana in French Diplomacy, 1759-1804* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1934), 194.

¹³ Wilson, "Louisiana Purchase."

the Louisiana Territory, President Thomas Jefferson addressed the House and Senate, extolling the success of the purchase:

On this important acquisition, so favorable to the immediate interests of our Western citizens, so auspicious to the peace and security of the nation in general, which adds to our country territories so extensive and fertile and to our citizens new brethren to partake of the blessings of freedom and self-government, I offer to Congress and our country my sincere congratulations.¹⁴

From the American perspective, the Louisiana Purchase was nothing short of a miracle. More than 828,000 square miles had been added to the nation overnight at a rate of three cents per acre.¹⁵ Immediately, President Thomas Jefferson commissioned an expedition to explore this new territory. Captain Meriwether Lewis and Second Lieutenant William Clark would serve as leaders of the Corps of Discovery. In a secret message to Congress requesting funding, Jefferson revealed two motives for the mission. The first, and more overt, was a diplomatic attempt to promote commerce among the Native American tribes. “In leading them to agriculture, to manufactures, and civilization; in bringing together their and our settlements, and in preparing them ultimately to participate in the benefits of our governments, I trust and believe we are acting for their greatest good.”¹⁶ This idea complemented with Jefferson’s ideal of an agrarian republic, a nation of yeoman farmers. The second motive for the expedition was purely intellectual: “and that it should incidentally advance the geographical knowledge of our own continent, cannot be but an additional gratification.”¹⁷ The expedition was funded, and ultimately

¹⁴ “Thomas Jefferson - Message to the Senate and House of January 16, 1804” (The Avalon Project, 1804), http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/tj006.asp.

¹⁵ Joy, *American Expansionism 1783-1860.*, 21

¹⁶ “Thomas Jefferson - Message to the Senate and House of January 16, 1804.”

¹⁷ “Thomas Jefferson - Message to the Senate and House of January 16, 1804.”

successful, as the Corps of Discovery became the first recorded American crossing of the continent.

Westward Expansion

As the nineteenth century unfolded, a series of wars, treaties, and boundary disputes solidified the borders of the nation. The War of 1812 was resolved by the Treaty of Ghent (1814), which only reaffirmed the boundaries between the United States and British Canada.¹⁸ The Convention of 1818 clarified that the border between the United States and British Canada from Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains would be set at the 49th parallel. The area west of the Rocky Mountains, Oregon Country, was still in dispute, but left open for joint American and British occupancy. In 1818, following various American diplomatic expeditions, Spain ceded the Florida Territory to America in the Adams-Onís Treaty.¹⁹ This treaty also established the boundary between American and Spanish possessions in the southwest. Two years later, the Missouri Compromise created Maine as a free state, enabling Missouri to enter the union as a slave state and preserving the balance between free and slave states. The compromise also established the future boundary between free and slave states at the 36°30' parallel. The diplomatic savvy of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams produced the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. In his last address to Congress, President James Monroe outlined a policy which would oppose European colonization in the American continent. The Monroe Doctrine established American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, and was the justification for future interventionist policy.²⁰ Rounding out the list of expansionist policies was the Webster-

¹⁸ "Transcript of Treaty of Ghent (1814)" (National Archives and Records Administration, 1814), <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=20&page=transcript>.

¹⁹ Joy, *American Expansionism 1783-1860.*, 37

²⁰ Joy., 40

Ashburton Treaty of 1842, which clarified the border between the state of Maine and British Canada.

The early nineteenth century also marked a departure from previous policy regarding Native Americans. President Andrew Jackson enacted a much more aggressive policy aimed at removing Native Americans outright. Jackson was a veteran Indian fighter, and campaigned on a policy of Indian removal. Jackson's 1830 Indian Removal Bill would encourage Native Americans tribes in the east to surrender their lands in exchange for land in the newly created "Indian Territory":

The present policy of the Government is but a continuation of the same progressive change by a milder process. The tribes which occupied the countries now constituting the Eastern States were annihilated or have melted away to make room for the whites. The waves of population and civilization are rolling to the westward, and we now propose to acquire the countries occupied by the red men of the South and West by a fair exchange, and, at the expense of the United States, to send them to land where their existence may be prolonged and perhaps made perpetual."²¹

After negotiation with (and intimidation) of tribes that previously inhabited present-day Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska, the American government created the Indian Territory.²² The "Five Civilized Tribes" (Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek/Muscogee, and Seminole) who occupied territory in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, and parts of North and South Carolina, were offered the chance to move to Indian Territory. But by the mid-1830s, any Native Americans that were going to leave voluntarily had already gone. Factionalism ran rampant

²¹ "Transcript of President Andrew Jackson's Message to Congress 'On Indian Removal' (1830)" (National Archives and Records Administration, 1830), <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=25&page=transcript>.

²² Clara Kidwell, "Indian Removal," in *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* (University of Nebraska, Lincoln), accessed February 14, 2019, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.na.047>.

among the remaining Native American tribes. In 1834, the United States government signed the Treaty of New Echota with the faction of Cherokee that agreed to move, and then extended the treaty to serve on the behalf of all Cherokee. In the fall of 1838, remaining Cherokee, approximately 15,000, were forced at gunpoint by American cavalry to march the 1,200 miles to Indian Territory. Disease, hunger, exposure, and brutality decimated the Cherokee. Approximately one quarter of the Cherokee on the Trail of Tears perished.²³ Relocation of the Native American population proved only to be a temporary solution, as the later annexation of Texas moved Indian Territory from the fringe of the nation to the center of desirable land. Jefferson's vision of Native Americans participating in the agrarian republic was gone. There was no place for Native Americans inside the Jacksonian landscape.

Manifest Destiny

By 1840, census data reveals that the frontier line had swept through the Ohio River Valley.²⁴ Settlers had also pushed further west into the Louisiana Territory. During the next decades, several events precipitated a dramatic increase in westward expansion. The first of these was the phenomenon of "Oregon Fever." Beginning in the 1840s, approximately 400,000 people migrated west to Oregon and California. Lured by temperate climates, fertile lands, and religious freedom, families packed their belongings into covered wagons and began the 2,170-mile trip.²⁵ Additionally, a series of gold rushes in California during the 1840s and 1850s drew even more prospectors west. The journey was extremely hazardous; settlers faced dysentery, cholera, malnutrition, hostile terrain, hostile Native Americans, and violent weather (the most notorious story of the Oregon Trail is of course, the Donner Party). However, from the Oregon Trail

²³ Joy, *American Expansionism 1783-1860.*, 45

²⁴ The Website Services & Coordination Staff, "Following the Frontier Line, 1790 to 1890."

²⁵ Verne Bright, "The Folklore and History of the 'Oregon Fever,'" *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1951): 241-53.

emerged the iconography of the covered wagon as a symbol of westward expansion; a civilizing and domesticating influence.²⁶ In 1846, the Oregon Treaty put an end to joint British and American occupancy in the northwest, establishing American hegemony south of the 49th parallel. Finally, the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 marked an end to the Oregon Trail as the most popular route west, as the railroad now provided a cheaper and safer way to transverse the continent.

The 1860s opened as one of the most significant decades not only for westward expansion, but also for the notion of American expansionism. In this work, expansionism is understood as the westward movement of people driven by the dogma of “Manifest Destiny.” In this decade, we see the emergence of Manifest Destiny as a dominant ideology in the settlement of the West. This was the ideology that Americans were ordained by God to expand across the continent. This term first entered the political arena in 1846, in a speech given by Representative Robert C. Winthrop of Massachusetts (a direct descendent of John Winthrop), regarding the occupation of Oregon Territory, “the right of our manifest destiny to spread over this whole continent.”²⁷ The term spread through the second half of the nineteenth century, vividly personified in John Gast’s 1872 painting “American Progress.”²⁸

One of the most important pieces of legislation regarding expansionism was the Homestead Act. The act, which passed in 1862, granted 160 acres to adult citizens who intended

²⁶ “Basic Facts About the Oregon Trail Oregon/Washington BLM,” March 4, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160304084450/http://www.blm.gov/or/oregontrail/history-basics.php>.

²⁷ Julius W. Pratt, “The Origin of ‘Manifest Destiny,’” *The American Historical Review* 32, no. 4 (1927): 795–98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1837859>.

²⁸ John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872, Painting, 1872, Autry Museum of the American West, http://collections.theautry.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=image;hex=92_126_1.jpg;link=68783.

to cultivate the land. If the landowner improved the plot by cultivation and resided on the acreage for five continuous years, the land would be deeded over to the individual for a nominal processing fee.²⁹ In one case, settlers anxious to establish their claim on land that had not been officially opened to settlement, rushed into Kansas. However, the land they were staking their claim on was not technically up for sale; the federal government was still in negotiations with the Osage tribe over the land. The Osage had begun ceding their land (in present day Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri) in 1825, in exchange for a reserve in southern Kansas, part of the larger “Indian Territory.”³⁰ Already, homesteaders were trickling into the Osage Diminished Reserve. The most famous of these? Charles Ingalls.³¹

Westward Expansion on an Individual Scale

We can observe the pattern of expansion on the individual scale by examining the places that Laura Ingalls Wilder lived. Laura Ingalls Wilder’s family experienced more internal migration than Willa Cather or Ole Rølvaag did, which gives us plenty of locations to use as examples of westward expansion. Additionally, the autobiographical nature of Wilder’s works provides us with the exact locations where she lived, instead of trying to guess the fictive settings in Ole Rølvaag and Willa Cather’s novels.

One of the most effective ways to study expansion is by using census data. Census records enable us to track population trends over time. Detailed reports also provide insight into the demographics of the frontier, allowing us to analyze the patterns of settlement by race,

²⁹ “Transcript of Homestead Act (1862)” (National Archives and Records Administration, 1862), <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=31&page=transcript>.

³⁰ Penny T Linsenmayer, “Kansas Settlers on the Osage Diminished Reserve: A Study of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House on the Prairie,” *KANSAS HISTORY* 24, no. 3 (2001): 18.

³¹ Frances W Kaye, “Little Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve: Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Kansas Indians,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (2000): 20.

national origin, gender, and other qualifiers. By using census records, we can conceptualize expansion as a national phenomenon, but also examine expansion on a localized level.

We can explore the United States as a whole by examining the “center of population.” This metric is defined as the point on which a rigid map of the United States would balance if identical weights were placed in the location of each person.³² (Alaska and Hawaii were excluded from the statistic until the 1950 census.) The first United States Census was conducted in 1790, and reported a total population of 3,929,214. The center of population was located in Kent County, Maryland, about 23 miles east of Baltimore. By 1800, the population center was 18 miles west of Baltimore. Throughout the early nineteenth century, the center of population crept west through Virginia and present-day West Virginia (West Virginia did not become a state until 1861). By 1860, the population of the United States was 31,443,321, and the centralized location could be found in Pike County, Ohio. The population center continued the trend of moving west and slightly south through the end of the nineteenth century, inching through southern Indiana and Illinois.³³ This pattern held true through 1990.³⁴ Two hundred years after the first census, the 1990 census tallied 248,709,873 people in the United States. The population center was located in Crawford County, Missouri.³⁵ Crawford County is located just over 100 miles northeast of Mansfield, Missouri—the town where Laura Ingalls Wilder finally put roots down.

Pepin County, Wisconsin, where Wilder was born, first reported census data in the year 1820 (Wisconsin did not gain statehood until 1848). By 1860, the population in Pepin County had increased from 1,444 in 1820 to 2,392. A decade later, when Laura was three, the 1870

³² U.S. Census Bureau, “Population and Geographic Centers” (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 1990), <https://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/files/popctr.pdf>.

³³ US Census Bureau The Website Services & Coordination Staff, “Center of Population and Territorial Expansion, 1790-2010,” U.S. Census, accessed March 29, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/050/>.

³⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, “Population and Geographic Centers.”

³⁵ U.S. Census Bureau.

census put Pepin County at 4,659.³⁶ Charles Ingalls comments on the increase in population in the Big Woods of Wisconsin: “Pa said there were too many people in the Big Woods now. Quite often Laura heard the ringing thud of an ax which was not Pa’s ax, or the echo of a shot that did not come from his gun. The path that went by the little house had become a road.”³⁷ Feeling crowded in Wisconsin, Charles jumped on the opportunity to claim newly vacant land in Indian Territory.

In 1869, the Ingalls family moved to Montgomery County, Kansas. Montgomery did not report census data until 1870 (the county was not established until 1867). However, a neighboring county, Wilson, reported 27 people at the 1860 census.³⁸ Ten years later, Wilson’s population had reached 6,694. At Montgomery’s inaugural census in 1870, 7,564 people were recorded. (It is also important to note that the census did not account for Native Americans until 1890.) The Ingalls family did not last long in Kansas, returning to Wisconsin in 1871. However, the population boom in Montgomery continued, reaching 18,213 by 1880.³⁹

After nearly a decade of restlessness, the Ingalls family settled next in De Smet, South Dakota. De Smet, which lies within Kingsbury County, was created in 1873. The Ingalls family arrived in De Smet in 1879. Kingsbury’s first county census in 1880 tallied 1,102 people.⁴⁰ Kingsbury County grew throughout the end of the nineteenth century, reaching 9,866 in 1900.⁴¹

³⁶ Richard L. Forstall, “Population of States and Counties of the United States: 1790-1990” (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1996), <https://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/PopulationofStatesandCountiesoftheUnitedStates1790-1990.pdf>. 183

³⁷ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, New Harper Trophy Edition (New York: Harper Collins, 1935).

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³⁸ Forstall, “Population of States and Counties of the United States: 1790-1990.” 61

³⁹ Forstall. 61

⁴⁰ Forstall. 145

⁴¹ Forstall. 145

However, Laura had married and left De Smet by 1894, moving with her husband briefly to Minnesota and Florida, eventually settling in Mansfield, Missouri. Mansfield lies within Wright County, which contained 17,519 people by 1900.⁴² Laura and her husband would remain in Mansfield for the rest of their lives. Three years after her death in 1957, Wright County reported a population of 14,183 at the 1960 census.⁴³ By examining census data, we are able to observe firsthand how population changed, and we can also see how this family formed part of the process of moving the frontier west.

We can also explore the statistics of expansion as they pertain to the gender of the settlers. If we return to Kansas, in 1860, the total population for the state (including “civilized Indians”⁴⁴) was 107,206.⁴⁵ This population was heavily male. Examining solely the white and native-born population, there were 51,174 men and 42,715 women. There were approximately 119 men for every 100 women. For comparison, a much more urban state—Massachusetts—tallied 471,041 white and native born men and 490,928 white and native born women that year. The distribution of genders was approximately 96 men for every 100 women (the advent of industrial textile manufacturing spurred young women to leave their farm homes and find work in the mills of urban New England). Ultimately, the gender distribution of the combined white and native-born population for the entire United States was much more even: 11,643,081 men and 11,226,724 women. There were approximately 104 men for every 100 women.⁴⁶

By 1870, the white and native-born population in Kansas had increased to 298,041. This number can be further classified by gender: 162,259 men and 135,782 women. The ratio of men

⁴² Forstall. 95

⁴³ Forstall. 95

⁴⁴ Francis Walker, “1870 Census: Volume 1. The Statistics of the Population of the United States” (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 1872), <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1872/dec/1870a.html>.

⁴⁵ Francis Walker.

⁴⁶ Francis Walker.

to women remained the same as at the 1860 census; approximately 119 men for every 100 women. In Massachusetts, the gender ratio continued to reflect the demographics of urbanization. In 1870, Massachusetts' white and native-born population had 529,544 men and 561,299 women. For every 94 men, there were 100 women. In the United States as whole, the white, native-born population in 1870 counted 14,806,509 men and 14,009,156 women. The ratio remained relatively even, at 105 men for every 100 women.⁴⁷

The census data displays a frontier that is heavily masculine. However, the masculinity of the frontier was not just limited to the demographical breakdown. In American culture, the frontier was portrayed as a highly masculine place. The settlers of the frontier who were extolled were the trapper, the explorer, the rancher, the miner, the cowboy. Women's occupations on the frontier were much less glamorous: the farm wife, the prostitute. A fledgling frontier town might have employed women as teachers, hotel maids, or seamstresses.⁴⁸

In summation, the physical location of the American frontier can be tracked by census data. The frontier also moved quickly across the landscape, reaching the Pacific Ocean within a century of the first census. The frontier carried with it associations of expansionism and Manifest Destiny. Finally, the census demonstrates that the frontier population was disproportionately male. All these characteristics will play a part in how Turner and the three novelists portray the frontier.

⁴⁷ Francis Walker.

⁴⁸ Margaret Walsh, "Women's Place on the American Frontier," *Journal of American Studies* 29, no. 2 (1995): 241–55. 245

PART II: The Turner Thesis

Before delivering his career-defining thesis, Frederick Jackson Turner was a modest and well-liked professor of American history at the University of Wisconsin. He was a Wisconsin native, born November 14, 1861, in Portage, Wisconsin.⁴⁹ Portage was still a frontier town during his youth, and Turner developed a lifelong appreciation of the natural world. John Muir, renowned naturalist, also had his roots in Turner's region of Wisconsin; the Muir family settled in nearby Montello when they emigrated from Scotland in 1849.⁵⁰ Turner enjoyed a bookish boyhood, as the son of a newspaper editor with a pet interest in local history.⁵¹ In 1884, Turner graduated from the University of Wisconsin. He stayed on to pursue graduate work in history, later gaining a faculty position. It was at Wisconsin that his interest in continentalism and democracy flourished. Turner continued to Johns Hopkins University for a doctoral degree. At Johns Hopkins, Turner first formulated the concept of the frontier as a democratizing influence. Turner's doctoral thesis also reflected his Wisconsin roots; his doctoral thesis was entitled "The Character and Influence of the Indian Trade in Wisconsin."⁵² After receiving his PhD in history in 1890, Turner returned to the University of Wisconsin as a professor of history.

In 1893, the city of Chicago received the bid to host the World's Columbian Exposition. The World's Fair would celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival on the continent. Gritty Chicago, with its roots in the meatpacking industry and memory of the Haymarket Bombing still fresh, had beaten out New York City (supported by Cornelius

⁴⁹ Ivan R. Dee, "On the Frontier, Civilization Was Perennially Reborn," *The New York Times*, March 11, 1973, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/03/11/archives/frederick-jackson-turner-on-the-frontier-civilization-was.html>.

⁵⁰ "John Muir - Yosemite National Park (U.S. National Park Service)," U.S. National Park Service, 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/yose/learn/historyculture/muir.htm>.

⁵¹ PBS, "PBS - THE WEST - Frederick Jackson Turner," The West Film Project, 2001, https://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/s_z/turner.htm.

⁵² Everett Eugene Edwards, ed., *The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner; with a List of All His Works Compiled* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin press, 1938), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000330779>.

Vanderbilt, J. P. Morgan, and William Waldorf Astor) for the nomination. Only twenty-two years before the fair was set to open, the Great Fire of 1871 had razed the city. Twenty-eight years prior to the fair's opening, the Civil War ravaged the nation. Chicago had emerged from the ruin of fire and factionalism as a booming western city, the pinnacle of American industrial potential. World class architect Daniel Burnham was commissioned as Director of Works of the fair, laying plans for the "White City." Landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, the visionary behind Central Park, configured the grounds of the venue. Construction of the World's Fair was short on time, money and manpower. The one thing the Chicago World's Fair did not lack was vision. Here was a chance to demonstrate to the world the cultural magnificence of the United States.⁵³

In conjunction with the World's Fair, the American Historical Association held its annual meeting in Chicago. Frederick Jackson Turner was invited to address historians. The speech that Turner put forth was a confluence of economic theory, Darwinism, environmentalism, political science, and history. In it, Turner argued that a continually evolving frontier boundary produced a uniquely American form of democracy. Turner covered the history of American expansionism, differentiated styles of advancement, analyzed the effects of the frontier on national legislation, and explained the growth of democracy, culminating with a description of the character traits created by the frontier. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" was artful, almost eulogistic in the way Turner mourned the end of the frontier.

In this paper, the text used for analysis is an abbreviated version of the essay later published in Turner's 1920 essay collection, "The Frontier in American History." This version of

⁵³ Robert W. Rydell, "World's Columbian Exposition," in *Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Chicago: Chicago History Museum and the Newberry Library, 2005), <http://encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1386.html#>.

the essay most closely resembles the original speech Turner delivered at the American Historical Association conference.

Turner begins the essay on a dire note, citing the 1890 census, in which the frontier was declared officially closed. He explains his thesis: that the continual return to the primitive frontier provided ripe conditions for American democracy to emerge.

...a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.⁵⁴

Turner then supports his claim with a historical progression through phases of westward expansion, then an analysis of the American institutions that have emerged out of an ever-evolving frontier. The historical account that Turner summarizes is articulate and evocative. He moves from the early colonists nosing their way through the Atlantic tidewater to the settlement of the Ohio River valley. Turner demonstrates how the frontier takes a European, turns him into a savage, and then a frontiersman, and then how he finally emerges as an American:

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with

⁵⁴ Frederick Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893) | AHA," accessed January 30, 2019, <https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/the-significance-of-the-frontier-in-american-history>.

a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion.⁵⁵

Throughout, Turner's language is absolutely poetic. He relies heavily upon extended metaphor to describe the frontier. The imagery he conjures is majestic. Turner examines the varied experiences of the frontier in the "The Indian Trader's Frontier," "The Rancher's Frontier," "The Farmer's Frontier," and "Army Posts," at each turn displaying his artistry as a writer:

At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. As successive terminal moraines result from successive glaciations, so each frontier leaves its traces behind it, and when it becomes a settled area the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics.⁵⁶

Turner's veneration for the natural world is repeatedly demonstrated in his writing, especially in his depictions of landscape. The variations in the different frontiers are exquisitely described.

Turner then examines how the qualities of the frontier in turned shaped American democratic institutions. The frontier, he argues, decreased the early colonists' dependence upon British manufactured goods. However, westward expansion also created a need for internal infrastructure. As the boundary line of the frontier advanced westward, infrastructure to transport goods west was required, and so an intricate network of canals, roads, and later, railroads developed:

Thus civilization in America has followed the arteries made by geology, pouring an ever richer tide through them, until at last the

⁵⁵ Turner.

⁵⁶ Turner.

slender paths of aboriginal intercourse have been broadened and interwoven into the complex mazes of modern commercial lines; the wilderness has been interpenetrated by lines of civilization growing ever more numerous. It is like the steady growth of a complex nervous system for the originally simple, inert continent.⁵⁷

Here again, we see Turner's skill in describing both place and process. The frontier is repeatedly personified by his rich language. Turner then turns towards the legislative influence that the frontier had upon American democracy.

According to Turner, as more and more states joined the Union, the role of the federal government evolved. Developments such as the Louisiana Purchase and the annexation of Texas altered strict constitutionalism. Purchase and annexation of lands placed the government in a position to then distribute the land. Turner draws contrasts to Europe—especially in the eventual American policy of distributing land at little or no cost. He quotes Secretary of the Interior Lucius Q. C. Lamar speaking in 1887 at the dedication of the John C. Calhoun monument in Charleston, South Carolina, as Lamar explores the relationship between the federal government and frontier states: “In 1789 the States were the creators of the Federal Government; in 1861 the Federal Government was the creator of a large majority of the States.”⁵⁸ Additionally, Turner argues that continual westward expansion and internal migration provided an end to sectionalism, citing the example of how conflict over slavery in new states culminated in the abolition of slavery at a national level.

Turner next argues that the most important impact the frontier had upon American democracy was individualism. “As has been indicated, the frontier is productive of

⁵⁷ Turner.

⁵⁸ Turner.

individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control. The tax-gatherer is viewed as a representative of oppression.”⁵⁹ Throughout the course of American history, Turner argued, eastern bureaucracy has attempted to check the frontier, but the individualism of the frontier prevailed. This rugged individualism is what has shaped American democracy, especially as men born of the frontier rose to prominence in American politics—Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, John Calhoun, and Abraham Lincoln—and subsequently left their own mark on American democracy.

Turner ends his “Frontier Thesis” with the assertion that it is the frontier’s “perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society,” which provided “the forces dominating American character.”⁶⁰ Turner’s list of idealized traits call to mind the legislators who had their roots on the American frontier as well as the men of frontier lore: Daniel Boone, Davy Crocket, Kit Carson, and others.

The thesis Turner presented was sensational and provocative. The implication posed—what would happen to American democracy now that the frontier was closed? Turner’s thesis was enormously well received. The paper served as a refreshing departure from the traditional “germ theory” which had previously dominated the study of American (and British) history. Germ theory suggested that American democratic institutions evolved directly from the institutions of their Germanic and Anglo-Saxon predecessors (by way of their English roots).⁶¹

⁵⁹ Turner.

⁶⁰ Turner.

⁶¹ Martin Ridge, “Frederick Jackson Turner and His Ghost: The Writing of Western History,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 101, no. 1 (April 1991): 65–76. 66.

As Turner put it, “Our early history is the study of European germs developing in an American environment. Too exclusive attention has been paid by institutional students to the Germanic origins, too little to the American factors.”⁶² The Turnerian approach to history became an enormously popular way to study American history. The thesis provided relevance to local history, an understanding of how events fit into a larger national trend. Under the influence of the Turner thesis, historians turned toward local studies of frontier regions. The framework of interpretation that Turner provided enabled historians to contextualize local history into a larger, national history. For the first time, the frontier came to be considered an important part of American history. History textbooks in the early twentieth century devoted whole chapters to the frontier, Jacksonian democracy, and the westward expansion.⁶³

The first grumblings of disagreement with Turner’s thesis flared in the 1920s. The Great Depression of the 1930s shook people’s faith in individualism, the factor which Turner had identified as crucial to American democracy. The Dust Bowl, a result of over-farming, led many to question the righteousness of settlement on the prairie. However, the 1940s and 1950s provided a resurgence in the popularity of the Frontier Thesis, as the moral superiority of American democracy prevailed over fascism. That sense of superiority ebbed during the Cold War and proxy wars of the 1960s, as more and more scholars and citizens doubted the grandiose expansion rhetoric that had dominated the historiography of the American frontier. The new western historians in the 1970s reevaluated the study of American history by examining race, gender, and other factors that influenced the experiences of both the pioneers and the Native Americans. Turner’s thesis largely ignored Native Americans, and instead presented a very conquest-oriented narrative. Turner also downplayed the significance of events such as the

⁶² Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893) | AHA.”

⁶³ Ridge, “Frederick Jackson Turner and His Ghost.” 70.

Revolutionary War and the Civil War, only mentioning slavery in the context of westward expansion.⁶⁴ Modern western historians also consider the exploitation of natural resources in the study of westward expansion, a factor that Turner does not discuss.

However, if we take Turner at his own word, his intent was to present the frontier as a topic that had been previously overlooked in the study of American history. Turner's answer to these criticisms would be that his work had been intended to facilitate further historical analysis. "This paper will make no attempt to treat the subject exhaustively; its aim is simply to call attention to the frontier as a fertile field for investigation, and to suggest some of the problems which arise in connection with it."⁶⁵ Turner was interested in how the collective experience of a continual westward expansion influenced the national character. However grandiose and all-enveloping the thesis may seem, Turner's thesis provides a potential field for further study. In the thesis we see the first inklings of what would become the field of American studies—and the rise of interdisciplinary approaches to studying national development. History, anthropology, economics, political science were all combined when Turner attempted to stretch the history of the frontier into an analysis of the character of the nation.

The aim of my thesis is not to analyze the historical validity of Turner's thesis. Turner's version of a frontier history was presented as a historical argument in an academic setting, but it is really more a literary account of a process. The leaps that Turner makes would be frowned upon in current historiographic practice, but a compelling narrative is constructed. The collective social experiences Turner describes produce a single, idealized "American" character. The

⁶⁴ Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893) | AHA."

⁶⁵ Turner.

characteristics of this individual, depicted below, represent a romanticized version of the individuals who settled the frontier:

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.⁶⁶

This sentence beautifully describes how the frontier is stylized in American culture. Turner's list of characteristics was not completely his own invention; in fact, we find that these very characters are widespread in the literature of the frontier written both before and after Turner's thesis was presented. But Turner's description of these well-known ideas is both forceful and precise, and that makes it a convenient baseline for comparing different literary texts about the frontier. The traits that Turner extolls—strength, practicality, inventiveness, restlessness, individualism, and resilience—will be referred to as “Turnerian traits” in the following literary analysis.

⁶⁶ Turner.

PART III: Literary Traditions

The final step in establishing the framework for analysis of the selected fiction to Turner's Frontier Thesis is a brief discussion of literary traditions of the frontier. As the history section previously outlined, the actual frontier was many different places at many different time periods. Accordingly, within the realm of frontier fiction, there are many different subcategories of frontier fiction. In this essay, I chose to focus on frontier fiction that explored the pioneer experience of the frontier. I also chose to limit my selection by region—the Great Plains. *Giants in the Earth*, *O Pioneers!*, and *Little House on the Prairie* all rely heavily on their authors' experiences in the Great Plains. And, as previously indicated, all three authors experienced the Great Plains in the same time period. Ole Rolvaag arrived in South Dakota in 1896, Willa Cather moved to Nebraska in 1885, and Laura Ingalls Wilder lived throughout the Great Plains from her birth in 1867 until 1894.

The University of Nebraska at Lincoln has produced an excellent guide, *The Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, which serves as a useful resource for assigning classification to the different literary concepts that this thesis encounters. Within the spectrum of literature of the Great Plains, many traditions emerge, including Native American oral traditions, Mexican folk literature, explorer narratives, Westerns, and others. One of the most popular Great Plains literary genres is the “Dream of the Garden.”⁶⁷ This class of fiction considers the stories of the ordinary people who settled the Great Plains with agrarian dreams. “They deal with the details and hardships of farm life on the “middle border,” the area running from Wisconsin and Iowa through the Dakotas, and contrast the beauty of the natural landscape with the squalor of the built

⁶⁷ Frances W. Kaye, “Literary Traditions,” in *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, ed. David Wishart (University of Nebraska, Lincoln), accessed January 30, 2019, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.lt.001>.

landscape and the demeaning and destructive demands of organized society.”⁶⁸ The University of Nebraska’s *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains* classifies *Giants in the Earth*, *O Pioneers!*, and *Little House on the Prairie* into the “Dream of the Garden” genre.

While all three of the works vary in plot and intended audience, they all align with the conventions of the “Dream of the Garden” genre. Additionally, all three selected works contain a main character who personifies the ideal characteristics of the people of the frontier as expressed by Turner. In *Giants in the Earth*, we find Per Hansa. In *O Pioneers!*, it is Alexandra Bergson. And in *Little House on the Prairie*, we have Charles Ingalls. The tension between the “restlessness” set forth by Turner and the pull of domesticity is one of the most important narrative components in the three works of fiction. We see this tension best in the process of “building house” that is enacted over and over again in the fiction of the Great Plains.⁶⁹ The process of home building and home making provides insight into the gendered tension of the frontier. Within the Dream of the Garden tradition, gendered tropes emerge. Typically, these center upon the “the woman’s dream of the amenities realized in a clean, fashionable frame house, while the man focuses on the acquisition of land and the equipment necessary to realize financial security.”⁷⁰ Each of the three works selected explores this tension in different ways.

With the historical context established, the Turner thesis examined, and the literary traditions outlined, we are now equipped to explore *Giants in the Earth*, *O Pioneers!*, and *Little House on the Prairie*. Three sections will follow—one for each book. Each section will proceed in an identical fashion. The first part will contain a brief biography of the author, to demonstrate

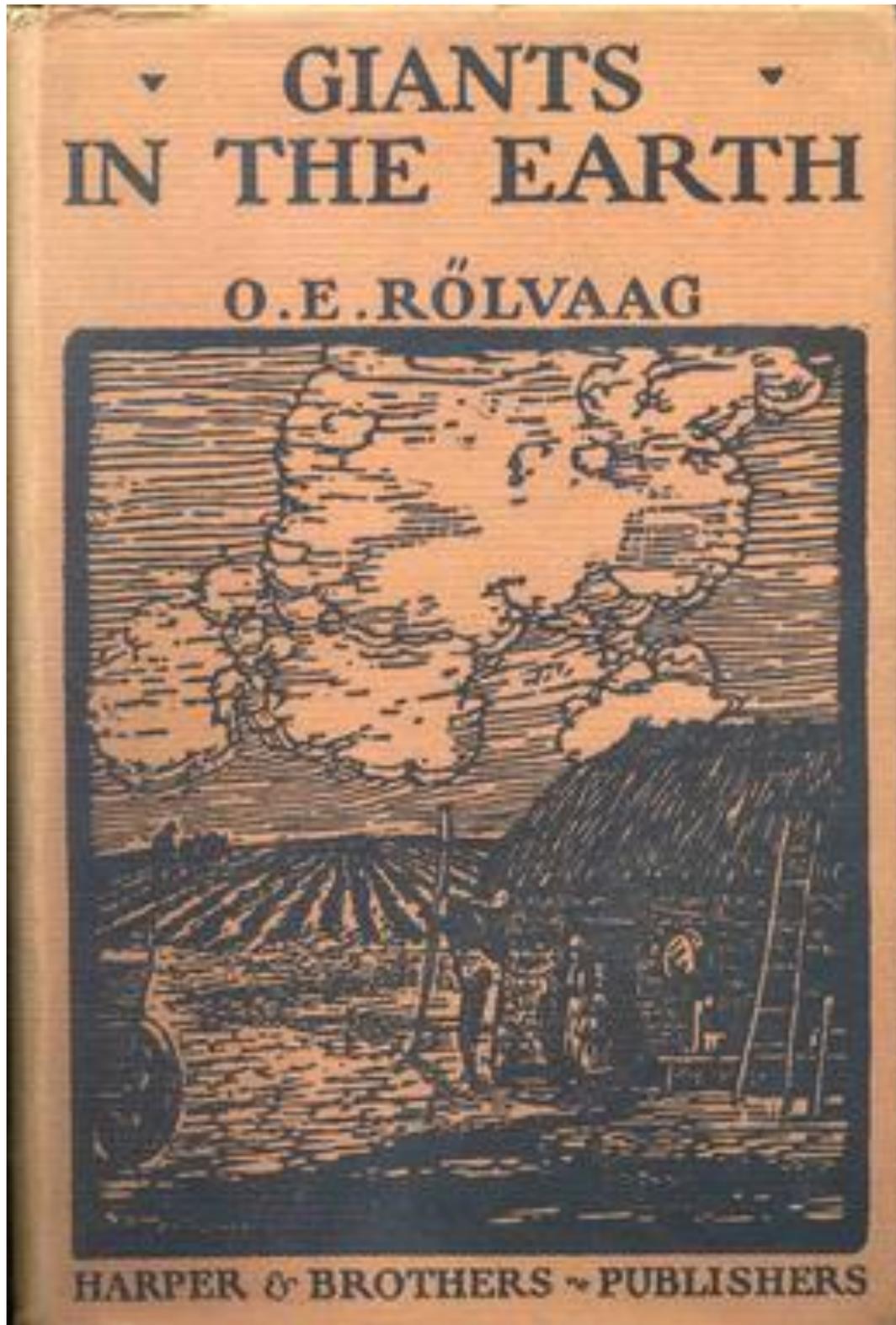
⁶⁸ Kaye.

⁶⁹ Ann Romines, “Writing the ‘Little House’: The Architecture of a Series,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (1994): 107–15.

⁷⁰ Diana Dufva Quantic, “Literary Architecture,” *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, accessed April 11, 2019, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.arc.033>.

how the author experienced the frontier. The second part will contain a plot summary of the work, to provide context for the forthcoming analysis. The third part will critically analyze the work and its adherence to the cultural identity articulated by Turner. The analysis will be accomplished in two parts. The first will be an exploration of the adherence of a selected character to the Turnerian traits. This in turn will lead to a discussion of how that selected character contributes to the tension between restlessness and domesticity in the work.

PART IV: Ole Rølvaag and *Giants in the Earth*



We begin our fiction analysis with Ole Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*. *Giants in the Earth* is many things: an epic, an intense psychological exploration, and a testament to the beauty and power of nature. *Giants in the Earth* interacts with Turner's frontier thesis in two important ways: in the embodiment of the idealized characteristics of frontier settlers, and in the tension between domesticity and restlessness. A brief biography of Rølvaag and a plot summary of *Giants in the Earth* will help to contextualize the novel.

Biography

Ole Rølvaag was born on April 22, 1876, in a small fishing village on the island of Dønna, off the Norwegian coast. The hamlet, also named Rølvaag, crouches just south of the Arctic Circle. Fishing was the lifeblood of the community, a tradition that was passed down for innumerable generations. Rølvaag grew up in a literary family, a family that supplemented formal education with a semireligious one. For seven years, for nine weeks out of those years, Rølvaag walked seven miles to school, then seven more back home. A state supported library gave Rølvaag access to classic works of fiction from Norway, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, England, and beyond. The first book Rølvaag ever read was a Norwegian translation of James Fennimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*.⁷¹

When Rølvaag was fourteen, his father told him that pursuing an education was no longer worthwhile. So, Rølvaag followed in the footsteps of his father and brothers and uncles and grandfathers and generations prior and began to fish. He endured five years on the fishing boats; tiny boats crewed by four or five men, heading out to the famed fisheries of the Lofoten Islands. Rølvaag established himself as an able fisherman, but the life was one of danger and hardship, a

⁷¹ Lincoln Colcord, "Introduction," in *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927). xiii

constant gamble with the forces of nature.⁷² Many biographers of Rølvaag mention an auspicious storm in the winter of 1893. In the light of Rølvaag's later literary emphasis on the power of nature, it seems fitting that a magnificent and deadly storm would feature prominently in his life story. In the wake of the storm's devastation and Rølvaag's loss of friends and countrymen, his faith in the life of a fisherman was shaken. Rølvaag wrote to an uncle who had left Norway and gone to America—to South Dakota. He asked for a ticket for passage to America. The ticket arrived two years later, and Rølvaag arrived in New York in 1896.⁷³

In New York, Rølvaag spent the last of his money on a train ticket to South Dakota. He spoke no English, had no food, and his uncle failed to meet him at the train station in Elk Point, South Dakota. After wandering through the night, Rølvaag stumbled upon other Norwegian immigrants, who directed him to his uncle's farm. Rølvaag spent three years farming, which was long enough to establish that it, like fishing, was not the life for him. He next went south, to Sioux City, Iowa, in search of work. When nothing availed, he returned to the farm, and, faced with no other prospect, enrolled in Augustana College, a Norwegian-Lutheran preparatory school in Canton, South Dakota.⁷⁴ It was in school that Rølvaag began to thrive, and a sense of purpose as a scholar developed. He graduated from Augustana in the spring of 1901, then promptly enrolled at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. St. Olaf, a Lutheran college, was founded in 1874 by Norwegian immigrants. Four years later, Rølvaag graduated with honors and a job offer for a faculty position at St. Olaf. He was twenty-eight.⁷⁵

⁷² Colcord. xv

⁷³ Gerald Thorson, ed., *Ole Rolvaag: Artist and Cultural Leader* (Northfield, Minnesota: St. Olaf College Press, 1975). 72

⁷⁴ Colcord, "Introduction." xvii

⁷⁵ Thorson, *Ole Rolvaag: Artist and Cultural Leader*. 72

Immediately, Rølvaag borrowed money to return to Norway for a year of graduate studies at the University of Oslo. When that year was up, Rølvaag went back to St. Olaf and began to teach Norwegian and other liberal arts subjects. In 1908, Rølvaag became a naturalized citizen of the United States, and married Jennie Berdahl. Written under a pseudonym, Rølvaag's first book *Letters from America from P.A. Smevik to his Father and Brother in Norway* was published in 1912. In the years before *Giants in the Earth*, Rølvaag published many smaller works, mostly exploring the Norwegian-American immigrant experience and all written in Norwegian.⁷⁶ In 1916, Rølvaag was promoted to head of the Norwegian department at St. Olaf, then in 1925, he was named the first secretary and archivist of the Norwegian-American Historical Association.

In 1923, acclaimed Norwegian novelist Johan Bojer began researching material for an upcoming novel on the Norwegian-American immigrant experience. While Bojer had written extensively about the lives of plain Norwegians—farmers, fishermen—he was now looking outside Norway for inspiration. Rølvaag felt that the immigrant experience could only be articulated by someone who had actually endured the process.⁷⁷ Rølvaag obtained a year of sabbatical and retreated to his cabin in northern Minnesota and began to write what would become *Giants in the Earth*. The first half, titled *In Those Days: A Story of Norwegian Immigrants in America*, was published in Norway in 1924. The second half, *In Those Days: The Founding of the Kingdom*, quickly followed in 1925.⁷⁸ Both novels were well received in Norway. In 1927, *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie* was published in the United States, after undergoing meticulous translation into English by Lincoln Colcord. *Giants in the Earth* would be followed with two sequels, *Peder Victorious* in 1928 and *Their Father's God* in 1931.

⁷⁶ Thorson. 72

⁷⁷ Colcord, "Introduction." xix

⁷⁸ Thorson, *Ole Rolvaag: Artist and Cultural Leader*. 73

The English translation of *Their Father's God* reached Rølvaag shortly before his death later that same year.

Of all Rølvaag's works, *Giants in the Earth* became the most popular. Rølvaag's descriptions of the Dakota prairie are vivid and breathtaking. Norse mythology and Old World literary traditions are paralleled with the tensions of an immigrant family in a strange land. The work has its roots in Norway and America, eludes pigeonholing into either nationality, and can only be defined as an epic.

Plot Summary

Giants in the Earth tells the saga of Per Hansa, his wife Beret, and their three children as they leave Norway and immigrate to the Dakota Territory. Rølvaag begins the story in 1873 with Per Hansa leading his family's wagon train to the site of their land claim. The family had travelled from Norway, to Quebec, to Detroit, to Milwaukee, to Fillmore County, Minnesota, where they briefly resided before setting out to their homestead claim. Fillmore was a particularly popular destination for Norwegian immigrants to pause in before they set out for the Dakotas. Per Hansa and his family finally settle in Spring Creek, founding a community with three other Norwegian families.

From the outset, Per Hansa is highly optimistic about the potential the family has in their new home. Beret, however, is much more apprehensive about the prairie, and is homesick for Norway. Her fears are heightened when the children discover that their claim is staked out on top of an old Indian burial ground. Per Hansa believes that the grave is a symbol of luck. He repeatedly dreams about the "kingdom" he is building, and works himself ragged to build it. The

settlers encounter Indians, claim jumpers, and other challenges during their first summer in Spring Creek.

The first winter is brutal for the settlers, especially so for Beret, who is pregnant and spirals into depression and homesickness. Beret gives birth to a boy on Christmas Day, and names him Peder. Per Hansa insists on calling the boy “Peder Victorious” as an auspicious symbol of the family’s future success. This upsets Beret, who feels that such a name is sacrilegious. As the winter wears on, supplies dwindle, and the cheer Beret felt following the birth of Peder dissipates. Per Hansa attempts a daring trip into town, seventy miles away, and gets caught in a blizzard. Thoughts of Beret and his kingdom are just enough to motivate Per Hansa to keep moving, and he finally finds shelter, barely escaping death.

In the coming summer, two events shake the community’s faith in their decision to settle. The first is the Spring Creek settlement’s encounter with Kari, a woman who had to leave her dead son’s behind, body unburied, on the way to their claim. Driven insane with grief, Kari is tied by her husband to the immigrant chest in their wagon to continue the journey to their claim. The family stays with the Hansas for the night. During the night, Kari, deranged, steals the Hansas’ daughter and runs with her onto the open prairie. While the daughter is eventually found, Beret’s paranoia about the emptiness of the plains only heightens. The second tragedy of the summer happens as the men in the community begin to harvest the wheat. A swarm of locusts, large enough to blot out the horizon, descends on their crops and devours everything possible. Shaken, Per Hansa returns to his sod house, but cannot find Beret or the two youngest children. Beret, overcome with fear of divine retribution for their sins, has climbed into her immigrant chest, intending it to be her coffin.

The narrative advances years forward from here. The settlers have weathered years of locusts, ruthless winters, disease, and poverty. The arrival of a traveling minister gives Beret a new spark of energy, but also increases her religious fervor. Per Hansa has also aged during this time, worn from years of toil. The narrative has shifted emphasis from Per Hansa's dreams of an agrarian kingdom to Beret's fear of eternal damnation. It is revealed that Per Hansa and Beret had their first child out of wedlock, and that Beret's parents were opposed to her leaving Norway. The final tragedy of the story happens when Hans Olsa, a founding member of Spring Creek and Per Hansa's closest friend, becomes sick after spending the night outdoors in a blizzard. Hans Olsa, on his death bed, asks for Per Hansa to fetch a minister, instead of a doctor. Per Hansa is reluctant to make the journey into town, as another blizzard is bearing down. Beret believes that is a horrible thing for "a soul to be cast into hell when human beings can prevent it"⁷⁹ and goads Per Hansa into undertaking the journey, by questioning his ability to make the trip. Per Hansa's stubborn belief that he can conquer nature through hard work is his fatal flaw, and he dies in the blizzard, alone on the prairie. *Giants in the Earth* ends with a description of local boys finding Per Hansa's body that next spring:

On the west side of the stack sat a man, with his back to the mouldering hay. This was in the middle of a warm day in May, yet the man had two pairs of skis along with him; one pair lay beside him on the ground, the other was tied to his back. He had a heavy stocking cap pulled well down over his forehead, and large mittens on his hands; in each hand he clutched a staff. . . . To the boys, it looked as though the man were sitting there resting while he waited for better skiing. . . His face was ashen and drawn. His eyes were set toward the west. . . .⁸⁰

Analysis

⁷⁹ Ole Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth*, trans. Lincoln Colcord (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927). 453

⁸⁰ Rolvaag. 464

Per Hansa is precisely the kind of figure the Turner thesis suggested would be found on the frontier. Per Hansa is clever, industrious, and eager to settle his land and build his kingdom. Hansa sleeps less so he can work his land more, driven by his vision for his land. Per Hansa is also quick to “find expedients,” to hasten the process of cultivating his land. Hansa barter with Indian fur traders, purchasing furs at a low cost, then flipping them to make profit. Turner’s description of how frontiersmen work “for good and for evil” is especially well reflected in Per Hansa’s decision to remove the claim stakes of the rival settlers. While Per Hansa was acting in his own best interest, meddling with other people’s landmarks was a cardinal sin in Norway. Beret is highly distressed by this decision, as she views herself as the guardian of morality for the family. “It was so hideous, so utterly appalling, the thought which she harboured; God forgive him, he was meddling with other folks' landmarks! . . . How often she had heard it said, both here and in the old country: a blacker sin than this a man could hardly commit against his fellows!”⁸¹ Throughout the course of *Giants in the Earth*, Per Hansa repeatedly transgresses his Norwegian cultural values, to Beret’s horror.

The word “restlessness” that Turner uses in his description of the idealized settler of the frontier is interesting to explore in the context of *Giants in the Earth*. Per Hansa is repeatedly described as restless. Whereas in other frontier literature, “restlessness” is often used to describe the unwillingness to settle in one place, in *Giants in the Earth*, the word restlessness is used to describe Per Hansa’s frantic pace of work: “A divine restlessness ran in his blood.”⁸² Per is fueled by visions of the kingdom he will build:

But dearest to him of all, and most delectable, was the thought of the royal mansion which he had already erected in his mind. There

⁸¹ Rolvaag. 124

⁸² Rolvaag. 112

would be houses for both chickens and pigs, roomy stables, a magnificent storehouse and barn . . . and then the splendid palace itself! The royal mansion would shine in the sun--it would stand out far and wide! The palace itself would be white, with green cornices; but the big barn would be as red as blood, with cornices of driven snow. Wouldn't it be beautiful--wasn't it going to be great fun! . . . And he and his boys would build it all!⁸³

Per sleeps less and works more, desperate to actualize the vision of his kingdom.

However, this vision that consumes him is far from their reality. Beret does not share her husband's joy in the potential of the prairie. In the case of Beret, the isolated nature of the prairie is not something to be exalted, but rather, part of the cause of her depression. She feels tormented for the sins she has committed, and the starkness of the prairie only makes her feel more exposed to divine judgement. Beret is continually distressed about how isolated and vulnerable she feels on the prairie. The "lack of something to hide behind" becomes a theme over the course of the novel, as Beret feels she cannot hide from the wrath of God:

The infinitude surrounding her on every hand might not have been so oppressive, might even have brought her a measure of peace, if it had not been for the deep silence, which lay heavier here than in a church. Indeed, what was there to break it? She had passed beyond the outposts of civilization; the nearest dwelling places of men were far away. Here no warbling of birds rose on the air, no buzzing of insects sounded; even the wind had died away; the waving blades of grass that trembled to the faintest breath now stood erect and quiet, as if listening, in the great hush of the evening. . . . All along the way, coming out, she had noticed this strange thing: the stillness had grown deeper, the silence more depressing, the farther west they journeyed; it must have been over two weeks now since she had heard a bird sing! Had they travelled into some nameless, abandoned region? Could no living thing exist out here, in the empty, desolate, endless wastes of green and blue? . . . How could existence go on, she thought, desperately? If life is

⁸³ Rolvaag, 111.

to thrive and endure, it must at least have something to hide behind! . . .⁸⁴

Beret's role as a homemaker on the frontier goes beyond upholding the morality of the family. Beret is expected to cook, clean, care for the children, make clothes, and other household tasks. Most significantly, she tasks herself to uphold their native Norwegian culture. However, she feels inadequate and is often unable to complete chores because she is too overwhelmed by the infinitude of the prairie. Beret is unable to validate her self-worth as a housewife in the ways that she had in Norway. One of the most telling scenes is when the boys procure "bear" meat from their neighbor. They bring it home to Beret. Desperate to eat something other than porridge, and desperate to validate herself as a wife and mother, she eagerly cooks the meat. However, the boys cannot keep the secret, and tell their mother it is actually badger. Beret is sickened by the prospect of eating badger meat, considering it subhuman. She pours the pot out onto the ground: "they were no longer ashamed to eat troll food; they even sent it from house to house, as lordly fare!"⁸⁵ Beret fears that the family is straying further and further from their Norwegian heritage, that America is corrupting their culture and that she is powerless to stop it.

The very house the Hansa family lives in is representative of the tension between restlessness and domesticity that characterized the pioneer experience. Per dreams of building Beret a castle, "The finest castle on earth I was going to build her—and here we're still living in a mole's hole..."⁸⁶ In *Giants in the Earth*, Per builds his sod house and sod barn along the same wall, to save labor and rely on the animals to generate heat during the winter. To him, the trick is ingenious, and also puts him ahead of his neighbors who have not yet constructed a barn. Beret

⁸⁴ Rolvaag, 38.

⁸⁵ Rolvaag, 187

⁸⁶ Rolvaag, 417

objects, “Man and beast in one building? How could one live that way?”⁸⁷ She eventually acquiesces because she thinks the animals will provide companionship in the lonely prairie. Per builds the house, but Beret is responsible for making it a home. Beret hates the sod house. She feels as if they are animals, living inside the earth. “No matter how good care you take of a sod house, it's never very satisfactory--dust and dirt keep falling from the ceiling all the time.”⁸⁸ Beret labors under the irony of keeping their house clean when the house is made out of dirt. Per helps in small ways, by whitewashing the walls to make the house seem cleaner, but Beret feels overwhelmed by the whiteness, and habitually lowers her gaze, so that she only looks toward the earth floor.

In “Gendering the Frontier in O.E. Rølvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*,” John Muthyala suggests that the “domestic sphere in which Beret is made to define her identity as a woman in Norway and its transplantation in America without any significant transformation in its demands and obligations that eventually drive her to a form of madness.”⁸⁹ The burden Beret faces of making a home on the inhospitable frontier, and her husband’s williness to repeatedly transgress Norwegian cultural norms to actualize his American frontier kingdom, leads to the decay of their marriage. Per’s restless striving to settle his land overtakes his desire for his wife: the land becomes the “site of fertility to Per.”⁹⁰ Especially after her depressive episodes, Per ceases to think of her as a sexual being: “To him she was still the delicate child that needed a father’s

⁸⁷ Rølvaag. 55

⁸⁸ Rølvaag. 420

⁸⁹ John Muthyala, “Gendering the Frontier in O. E. Rølvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*,” *Great Plains Quarterly*; *Lincoln* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 229–44. 234

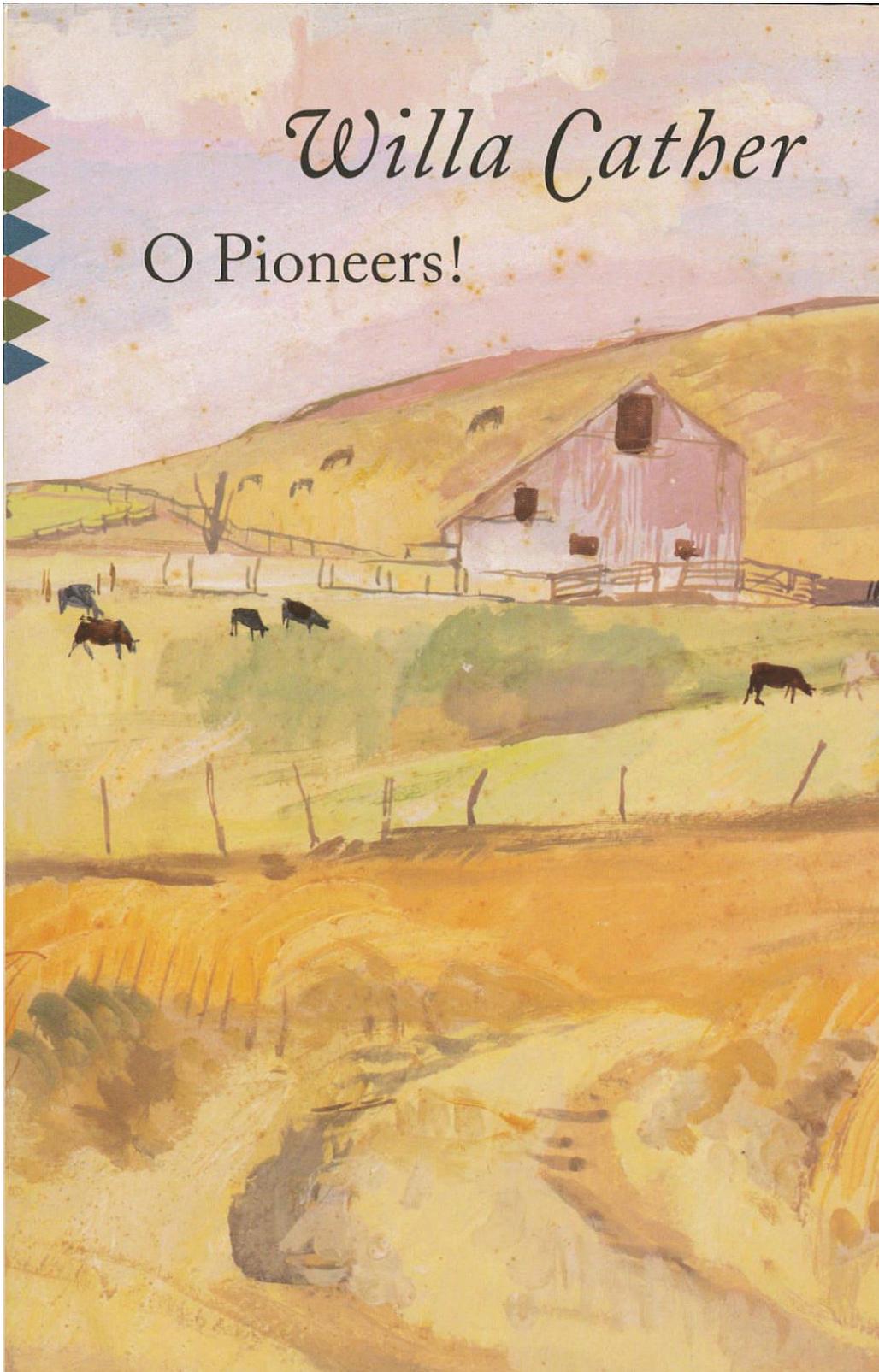
⁹⁰ Muthyala. 235

watchful eye. To desire her physically would be as far from his mind as the crime of incest.”⁹¹
Here, Beret loses another aspect of her role as a woman.

Analyzing *Giants in the Earth* through the lens of the Turner Frontier Thesis provides insight into the way gender is portrayed in the fiction of the frontier. The tension between Per Hansa’s restlessness and Beret’s domesticity reveals a broader commentary about the masculine nature of the frontier. Rølvaag answers the Turner thesis with both an embodiment (through the character of Per Hansa) and a rejection (through the psychological despair of Beret) of the mythological nature of the frontier.

⁹¹ Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth*. 451

PART V: Willa Cather and *O Pioneers!*



The next work to be considered is Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* Cather has transcended any limitations of regionalism to be considered among the elite among American authors. Whereas Ole Rolvaag and Laura Ingalls Wilder are still confined by critics to the category of regional literature, Cather's works range in size and scope. Cather was also much more cosmopolitan than Rolvaag or Ingalls; she traveled extensively throughout the United States, Canada, Latin America, and Europe. For most of her adult life, she lived in Pittsburgh and New York City. Regardless of setting or situation, Cather excels at portrayals of individuals within their worlds. Cather's works are extolled for their ability to give life to landscape and voice to women. Cather's life is well documented, especially so by the Willa Cather Foundation in Red Cloud Nebraska and The Willa Cather Archive at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. In the following sections, I will provide a biography of Cather, a summary of the plot of *O Pioneers!* and conclude with an analysis of *O Pioneers!*. Specific attention will be called to the adherence of a selected character to the character traits that Frederick Jackson Turner lists, and an analysis to that character's contribution to the tension between domesticity and restlessness.

Biography

Willella "Willa" Cather was born in 1873 in Back Creek Valley, Virginia. She was the first of seven children. When she was nine, her family relocated, by train, to Catherton, Nebraska, where Cather's aunt and uncle had moved six years prior. The Cather family later settled in Red Cloud, Nebraska, in 1885. That region of Nebraska, which perches on a plateau between the Little Blue and Republican Rivers, was known as "The Divide." Cather had grown up in the rolling mountains and lush forests of her grandparents' Virginia farm, and was awed by

the enormity and expanse of the Great Plains.⁹² The experience of stepping off the train in Red Cloud is well described by the narrator Jim Burden in the opening lines of *My Antonia*:

There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land—slightly undulating, I knew, because often our wheels ground against the brake as we went down into a hollow and lurched up again on the other side. I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction. I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it.

The Divide was heavily populated with European migrants, whose stories would later influence Cather’s writing, especially her discussion of the Bohemians in *My Antonia*.⁹³ Cather’s family farmed briefly, but her father found more stable employment in Red Cloud as a farm insurance and loan officer. Cather graduated from Red Cloud High School in 1890, and delivered the commencement speech at her graduation (graduating class of three) entitled “Superstition v. Investigation.”⁹⁴

In September of 1891, Cather enrolled in the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. She originally intended to study medicine, and to practice as a family doctor. However, after one of her professors submitted a paper Cather wrote to a newspaper in Lincoln, Cather’s academic trajectory changed.⁹⁵ While at the University of Nebraska, Cather served as the managing editor of the university’s newspaper *The Hesperian*, composed short stories, wrote theater criticism,

⁹² Amy Ahearn, “WCA: Willa Cather: A Longer Biographical Sketch,” Willa Cather Archive, accessed March 10, 2019, <https://cather.unl.edu/life.longbio.html>.

⁹³ “Willa Cather’s Biography,” Willa Cather Foundation - Red Cloud Nebraska (NE), accessed March 10, 2019, <https://www.willacather.org/willa-cathers-biography>.

⁹⁴ “WCA: Willa Cather: A Chronology of Her Life,” Willa Cather Archive, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://cather.unl.edu/life.chronology.html>.

⁹⁵ Ahearn, “WCA: Willa Cather: A Longer Biographical Sketch.”

and worked as a columnist for the *Nebraska State Journal* and the *Lincoln Courier*. After her graduation in 1895, Cather briefly returned to Red Cloud before moving east.⁹⁶

In 1896, Cather accepted a job as the managing editor for the magazine *Home Monthly*, a women's interest magazine published in Pittsburgh. Cather also wrote reviews of theater, and enjoyed the burgeoning arts scene in Pittsburgh. It was in Pittsburgh that Cather met Isabelle McClung, forming a lifelong friendship. Cather even moved into the McClung family home, giving herself the space she needed to foster her creative writing. From 1901 to 1906, Cather paused in her work in journalism to teach English and Latin at a high school in Pittsburgh.⁹⁷

In 1903, Cather published her first work, *April Twilights*, a short book of verse. This was followed in 1905 by a collection of short stories, *The Troll Garden*. In 1906, Cather moved to New York City, joining the editorial staff at *McClure's Magazine*. Editor S.S. McClure published two of Cather's longer works, *Paul's Case* and *Sculptor's Funeral*, in serialized format in the magazine.⁹⁸ While working for *McClure's*, Cather met another woman who would influence her artistic development, Sarah Orne Jewett, a successful author who specialized in "local color" works about Maine. Another woman soon joined Cather's cadre—Edith Lewis, a Lincoln native, an editor, and a source of inspiration for many of Cather's works. Cather and Lewis rented an apartment together upon Cather's arrival in New York; the two would go on to share a home for nearly forty years.⁹⁹

Dazzled by the literary scene in New York, and feeling increasingly constrained by her responsibilities as an editorialist, Cather took the advice of Jewett and McClung and left

⁹⁶ "Willa Cather's Biography."

⁹⁷ "Willa Cather's Biography."

⁹⁸ "WCA: Willa Cather: A Chronology of Her Life."

⁹⁹ "Willa Cather's Biography."

McClure's to pursue her own fiction. In 1911, Cather and McClung rented a house in Cherry Valley, New York, and Cather began her career as an author in earnest.¹⁰⁰ In 1912, Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, appeared in serial form in *McClure's*. This was quickly followed by *O Pioneers!* in 1913 and *The Song of the Lark* in 1915. During this time, Cather travelled extensively, sometimes with McClung, sometimes with Lewis, and sometimes alone. A 1916 visit to Red Cloud inspired Cather to begin *My Ántonia*, which would round out her "prairie trilogy."¹⁰¹

Throughout the early twentieth century, Cather wrote a variety of novels, essays, poems, and short stories. These include *One of Ours* (1922), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940).¹⁰² Cather sought inspiration from the places she visited, and the people that lived there. Her books sold well; accolades and honorary degrees were bestowed.¹⁰³ In 1947, Cather died at the age of 73. Edith Lewis outlived Cather, but the two are buried beside each other in Jeffery, New Hampshire. In the decades after her death, Cather's works grew in popularity, partly due to heightened academic interest in her works, and partly due to the timeless nature of her writing, "Seamless enough to draw in the casual reader and nuanced enough to entice the literary scholar."¹⁰⁴ Institutions like the Willa Cather Foundation were founded as a way to honor Cather's legacy, as well as foster the next generation of Great Plains literature. Today, the Willa Cather memorial prairie lies just south of Red Cloud, 612 acres of undisturbed grassland.

Plot Summary

¹⁰⁰ "WCA: Willa Cather: A Chronology of Her Life."

¹⁰¹ "WCA: Willa Cather: A Chronology of Her Life."

¹⁰² "WCA: Willa Cather: A Chronology of Her Life."

¹⁰³ Ahearn, "WCA: Willa Cather: A Longer Biographical Sketch."

¹⁰⁴ Ahearn.

O Pioneers! opens in a frigid January day in Hanover, Nebraska: “the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away.”¹⁰⁵ The date is uncertain, but can be placed approximately in the mid-1880s. Alexandra Bergson has come to town, to ask the doctor to visit her dying father. We are introduced to Emil, Alexandra’s younger brother, and Carl Linstrum, Alexandra’s friend. Cather describes Alexandra as confident, thoughtful, and powerful. The Bergson family are Swedish immigrants, and have been in Nebraska for eleven years. Alexandra is the oldest child, the smartest, and the one her father trusts the most.

When John Bergstrom dies, he leaves Alexandra in charge of the farm, telling her never to lose the land. This decision stokes tension between Alexandra and her younger brothers Oscar and Lou, who doubt the ability of a woman to run a farm. Mrs. Bergson, who never quite forgave her husband for leaving Sweden, is heartsick for the old country, and weary after years of trying to conquer the land. However, Alexandra approaches the task of managing the farm with vigor. She travels throughout The Divide, learning of unconventional farming methods, new crops, and ways to mortgage her land to make a profit. We meet Crazy Ivar, a recluse who lives away from people but has skill with treating sick animals. Alexandra respects Ivar’s talents and quirks, and values his abilities.

O Pioneers! then flashes forward. In the first three years after John Bergson’s death, the farm prospered. However, in the last three years, The Divide has been wracked with drought, poverty, and foreclosure. One day, Carl comes to the Bergson farm, with news that he and his family are selling their farm and leaving for St. Louis. Alexandra is sad to have her friend leave, as Carl is the person she feels the closest to. Alexandra and her brothers clash again, when

¹⁰⁵ Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 2003 Edition (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 1913). 5

Alexandra proposes they re-mortgage their homestead to buy more land. Eventually, Alexandra convinces her brothers to go forward with her plan, claiming she can sense that success is coming to The Divide. “She had never known before how much the country meant to her. The chirping of insects down in the long grass had been like the sweetest music. She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring.”¹⁰⁶

Time moves forward again, and it is now sixteen years after John Bergson’s death. Alexandra’s farm has weathered the hardships of the prairie, and now emerges as one of the most successful farms on The Divide. Both Oscar and Lou have married, but Alexandra remains independent. Mrs. Bergson has also died, and the youngest brother Emil has been away at the University of Nebraska. Emil has now returned, and is cutting the grass in the Norwegian graveyard when he meets Marie Shabata, a beautiful and spirited Bohemian. Marie is married to Frank, a gruff and rugged man. Marie is charmed by Emil. By now, Alexandra has taken in Ivar, who lives in the barn and tends her horses. Alexandra has hired men to work her land, and has brought over Swedish girls to work in the farm house, cooking and cleaning for the farm hands. The farm has flourished, and Alexandra was able to send Emil to university, setting him on a different path than his rustic brothers.

The tranquility of the farm is interrupted with the arrival of Carl Linstrum. Carl had been away for thirteen years, living in cities, and working odd jobs. Carl decided to stop in Hanover on his way to the west coast. Carl stays with Alexandra, and their friendship is rejuvenated. Alexandra and Carl visit Marie’s farm. Marie tells them how she used to be in love with Frank—

¹⁰⁶ Cather. 38

she ran away from the convent in Omaha to be with him—but she knows now that she is not the right woman for him.

Carl extends his stay on the farm, triggering another fight between Alexandra and her brothers. Oscar and Lou feel it is improper that Carl remain in Alexandra's house. The brothers are especially concerned with the possibility that Carl and Alexandra would marry, which would give Carl legal control over a farm he did not develop. Oscar and Lou are also annoyed by Alexandra's insistence that Ivar live on the farm, as well as her decision to send Emil to university. As his flirtation with Marie escalates, Emil decides to leave for Mexico City to avoid any further temptation. Carl leaves as well, heading for the goldfields in Alaska. Alexandra is lonely with her two closest confidants gone. A daydream comes to her more and more frequently, especially when she is weary. "Sometimes, as she lay luxuriously idle, her eyes closed, and she used to have an illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by someone very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carries her, but he was like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she was a sheath of wheat."¹⁰⁷

Time moves forward again, and Emil has returned from Mexico City. Alexandra and Emil go to the nearby French church for a fair, where Marie is telling fortunes. Emil reconnects with his childhood friend Amedee Chevalier, who now has an infant son. However, as Emil and Marie orbit closer together over the course of the night, Emil realizes that even his time away could not kill the infatuation he has for Marie. When the lights turn out in the church, Marie and Emil kiss, and Frank grows suspicious. Emil asks Marie to go away with him, but she refuses. Emil then plans to leave, to go to Omaha and work as a law clerk before enrolling at the

¹⁰⁷ Cather. 106

University of Michigan to study law. Before he leaves, Emil visits Amedee to say goodbye. Amedee is sick, disoriented, and overworked. Emil leaves Amedee, even more convinced that he is not destined to stay and endure the hardships of a farmer. However, Amedee has a seizure and dies in the night. Emil stays in Hanover for the funeral.

At the funeral, everyone in town is present except Marie. Emil sits through the service; increasingly tortured by thoughts of Marie and anguish over the death of Amedee. Tormented into frenzy, Emil flees the church and goes to Marie's farm. He finds her lying in repose under the white mulberry tree. Marie awakens, and tells Emil that she was dreaming of that moment.

Frank arrives back from the funeral, and cannot find Marie in the house. Confused, angry, and acutely aware of which two individuals were absent from the funeral, he grabs his Winchester 405 and charges out onto his property. He finds two people under the white mulberry tree. He hides in the hedge, and when his worst suspicions are confirmed, fires in a blind rage into the brush. Emil dies instantly, but Marie, shot through her lung and carotid artery, crawls towards Frank. Terrified of being seen, Frank flees. With her last bit of strength, Marie drags herself back to Emil, and bleeds out in his arms. Emil's horse eventually returns to Alexandra's farm, and Ivar discovers the lovers' bloody bodies.

The narrative moves forward again, to a stormy night in October. Signa, one of Alexandra's house girls, goes running to Ivar in a panic, Alexandra is missing. Ivar lets Emil's horse lead the way, and he finds Alexandra at the grave of her father. Alexandra says that she has found comfort now, for the first time after Emil's death. After recuperating, Alexandra decides to visit Frank in prison. In the Lincoln State Penitentiary, Frank has deteriorated. Struck with sympathy, and convinced that the entire incident was Marie's fault, Alexandra vows to fight for

Frank's pardon. When she arrives back at her hotel in Lincoln, Alexandra receives a telegram from Carl, "Arrived Hanover last night. Shall wait here until you come. Please hurry."¹⁰⁸

Alexandra had sent a telegram to Carl following Emil's death, but it never arrived. Carl had read about the incident in a San Francisco paper, and came as soon as he could.

Back on Alexandra's farm, she takes comfort in Carl's presence. "I needed you terribly when it happened, Carl, I cried for you at night. Then everything seemed to get hard inside of me, and I thought perhaps I should never care for you again. But when I got your telegram yesterday, then—then it was just as it used to be."¹⁰⁹ Carl too had been lonely without Alexandra, and was struck by the love he had witnessed between Emil and Marie, "Simply, when I was with those two young things, I felt my blood go quicker, I felt—how shall I say it?—an acceleration of life."¹¹⁰ Carl and Alexandra decide to marry, even though Carl knows she belongs to the land first.

Analysis

To evaluate *O Pioneers!* through the lens of Turner's Frontier Thesis, two factors will be considered. The first is the analysis of Alexandra Bergson, the character who most embodies the idealized characteristics of the frontier set forth by Turner. The second factor is the tension between domesticity and restlessness, and how gender influences that tension. As a character, Alexandra shows a number of traits that are associated with frontier men within the Turner thesis framework, but one key factor is absent: restlessness. The way that Alexandra expresses domesticity deviates from the traditional role of women on the frontier as homebuilders and

¹⁰⁸ Cather. 157

¹⁰⁹ Cather. 158

¹¹⁰ Cather. 159

mothers. This suggests that Cather has used traditional ideas about men, women, and the frontier but created a narrative that does not adhere to those ideas.

Alexandra Bergson is a remarkable character. At first brush she is described as intelligent and confident, traits that only become more ingrained over her development. Her farm succeeds because of her intelligence, her willingness to take risks, and her relentless energy. Her willingness to find inventive solutions to the crises that The Divide faces sets her apart from other farmers. In comparison, her brothers Lou and Oscar have stagnated: “Neither Oscar nor Lou has changed much; they have simply, as Alexandra said of them long ago, grown to be more and more like themselves.”¹¹¹ They are envious of Alexandra’s success, especially because she is a woman who owns a more prosperous farm than they own. The characteristics that Alexandra displays are in line with the ones that Turner suggests belong to the idealized settler of the frontier: intelligent, willing to take risks, and industrious.

The fact that the character in *O Pioneers!* that most adheres to the Turner Thesis is a woman is also relevant. Gender is a complicated topic in the study of Cather—popular enough to generate an entire industry of scholars devoted to exploring the conflation (or lack thereof) between the author and her characters. “Long read as a sunny and feminist hymn of praise to the land and to the pioneer tradition, Cather's work is now being reinterpreted, not least importantly as lesbian literature.”¹¹² Cather’s works consistently contain female characters that are intelligent, outspoken, and confident. Alexandra is no exception, but in the traditional gendered dynamics of frontier fiction, she is distinctive.

¹¹¹ Cather. 52

¹¹² Kaye, “Literary Traditions.”

Turner's inclusion of the word "restlessness" in his list of the intellectual traits of the frontiersmen is an interesting one to explore in the context of Alexandra. Alexandra embodies every other one of Turner's qualities: "acuteness and inquisitiveness," "inventive turn of mind," "lacking in the artistic"—except restlessness. Alexandra remains deeply attached to the land; she repeatedly says that she can never leave The Divide. In contrast, the most important male characters in the story, Emil and Carl, repeatedly leave The Divide, then return, only to leave again. Emil travels first to Lincoln, then to Mexico City, and plans to leave again for Ann Arbor. Carl leaves when he is young, traveling to New York, and then returning to Hanover on his way to Seattle, with the intent of continuing on to the goldfields of Alaska, "The Last Frontier." Continually, Alexandra's farm is considered home for both Emil and Carl as well as for herself. The home that Alexandra makes is an aberration from the traditional gendered way women in the fiction of the frontier make home.

Alexandra's domesticity is not expressed through her actual home, but rather her land. The house comes across as more of a byproduct of domesticity, rather than the objective. "If you go up the hill and enter Alexandra's big house, you will find that it is curiously finished and uneven in comfort...you feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best."¹¹³ Alexandra not only subverts the tradition of the pioneer as a masculine man, but she also subverts the tradition of the pioneer woman as the home maker within the home.

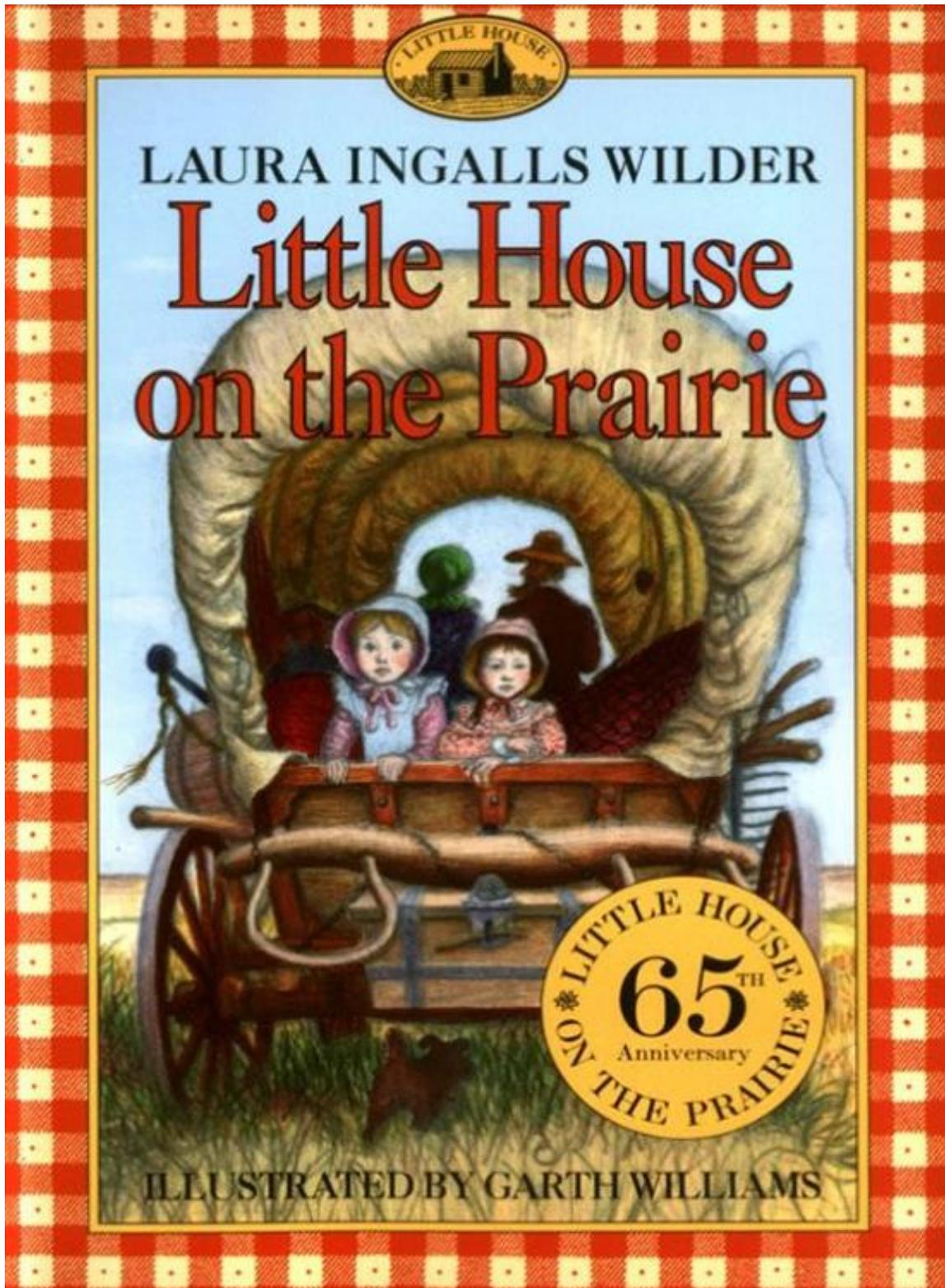
Overall *O Pioneers!* blurs the boundaries of gender as they are usually expressed in frontier literature. Femininity and implied domesticity are not included in Turner's description of the frontier, but Alexandra is neither traditionally feminine nor traditionally domestic. By the

¹¹³ Cather, *O Pioneers!* 45

time she marries, she is well past the age when other women would have children. Alexandra has even hired other women, the Swedish house girls, to complete the domestic tasks in her home, distancing herself from the traditional roles of housewife. “The three pretty young Swedish girls who did Alexandra’s housework were cutting pies, refilling coffee-cup...”¹¹⁴ Additionally, Crazy Ivar does a better job of upholding religious tenets and their Swedish heritage than Alexandra does. Alexandra occupies a place between restlessness and domesticity. Cather loves to explore the interconnected nature of people and their landscape, and Alexandra’s connection to her land rather than her home sets her apart from the traditional role of home maker that is so present in the fiction of the frontier.

¹¹⁴ Cather. 46

PART VI: Laura Ingalls Wilder and *Little House on the Prairie*



Laura Ingalls Wilder's childhood may be one of the best known in the United States. Her series, *Little House on the Prairie*, has sold more than 60 million books, been published in forty languages, and has entertained readers for decades. In exquisite detail, Wilder recalls her childhood during the settling of the Great Plains. However, for the sake of creating an appealing narrative, many elements in Wilder's life were smoothed over, placed anachronistically, or omitted entirely. The core story remains truthful: a pioneer family trying to settle the prairie.

In 2018, Laura Ingalls Wilder fans and western history scholars alike were blessed with Caroline Fraser's book *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder*. The work—which won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize in Biography for its efforts—is an excellent chronicle of Wilder's life placed within the greater historical context of her times. Fraser is both meticulous and vivacious in her documentation of Wilder's life from the Big Woods of Wisconsin to Rocky Ridge Farm in Missouri. The biography of Wilder discussed below is a culmination of historians' efforts to piece together an accurate timeline. Notable places where Wilder's series deviates from her own life will be indicated. The plot summary of *Little House on the Prairie* will be included within the biographical sketch. A discussion of *Little House on the Prairie's* adherence to the traits called out in the Turner Thesis and the subsequent tension between domesticity and restlessness will follow Ingalls's biography.

Biography and Plot Summary

Laura Ingalls was born on February 7, 1867 in a log cabin outside Pepin, Wisconsin. She was the second daughter of Charles and Caroline Ingalls, who would go on to have two more daughters (and a son that died in his first year). When Laura was two years old, the Ingalls family travelled by covered wagon to stake their claim in Indian Territory, near present day

Independence, Kansas. The Ingalls family lived on their claim in Kansas for just under two years. These years are memorialized in the book *Little House on the Prairie*, the second book in the *Little House* series. *Little House on the Prairie* details the Ingalls family's arrival in Kansas, and their process of building a house and farm on their claim. During their time in Kansas, the Ingalls family encounters wolves, Indians, disease, fire, and other hardships. They did not stay in Kansas for long. As Laura tells it, the Ingalls family left Kansas because "the government is sending soldiers to take all us settlers out of Indian Territory."¹¹⁵ However, the Ingalls likely left because their homestead was actually within the boundaries of the Osage Reservation, and white settlers were actually forbidden from occupying it.¹¹⁶ The return to the Big Woods of Wisconsin is where the *Little House* series begins with the book *Little House in the Big Woods*, and marks the first significant divergence in Laura's chronology. In the *Little House* series, Laura is approximately four to five while she is in Wisconsin, but in actuality she lived there from birth to two, and then again from four to seven. For the sake of consistency within her fictional chronology, she portrayed herself as seven to nine years old during the timespan of *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, the fourth book in the *Little House* series.¹¹⁷

The Ingalls family moved again, from Wisconsin to Plum Creek, Minnesota (in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, the family arrives in Minnesota directly from Kansas). They lived in a sod dugout, and Charles filed a claim for 172 acres. Plum Creek was yet another place where Charles began a new farm, constantly borrowing money and speculating on the potential of his land. The

¹¹⁵ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, New Harper Trophy Edition (New York: Harper Collins, 1935). 316

¹¹⁶ Caroline Fraser, *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017). 56

¹¹⁷ The *Little House on the Prairie* series contains nine volumes, the book *Little House on the Prairie* is the third in the series, and the second in Wilder's series (*Farmer Boy*, the second book written, details Almanzo's childhood in upstate New York).

first year was idyllic; the girls went to the Congregationalist Church in Walnut Grove, attended Sunday school, and even saw their first Christmas tree.¹¹⁸ However, in 1875, the largest swarm of locusts ever recorded descended on the United States. Devastation stretched across the entire Midwest. The swarm was 110 miles wide, 1,800 miles long, and nearly a half mile thick. Farmers were powerless. Approximately \$200 million (estimated to \$116 billion today) worth of crop was eaten by the locusts. Along with tens of thousands of other farm families, the Ingalls were destroyed—Charles lost his entire wheat crop. To keep his family from starvation, Charles sold their horses and found labor more than two hundred miles away—harvesting on fields that had not been lost to locusts. Charles even capitalized upon the demoralizing Relief Act, which had been passed to aid farmers who had lost their crops. Swearing that he was “wholly without means,” he received two half barrels of flour.¹¹⁹ Desperate, the Ingalls family sold their farm, and moved east, to Bur Oak, Iowa, to work in a hotel. As always, they travelled by wagon.

In the *Little House on the Prairie* series, Laura does not discuss their time in Iowa. The hotel the family worked in was seedy, and the girls were exposed to the sort of grimy realities they had never experienced on the farm. Laura, now nine years old, was old enough to work odd jobs in the hotel. For the first time, the Ingalls family relied on her for income. Alcoholism, corruption, and violence surrounded the family. The girls were sickened with measles. Convinced that a hotel was no place to raise a family, Charles, deeply in debt, uprooted the family again, returning to Walnut Grove. During the winter, Mary came down with a fever, one that would not leave her for months. Ultimately, scarlet fever took Mary’s vision. Laura assumed a new role—Mary’s eyes. Mary came to rely upon Laura’s vivid descriptions to orient her as the family moved from home to home. The Ingalls did not stay for very long in Walnut Grove; in

¹¹⁸ Fraser, *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder*.70

¹¹⁹ Fraser. 77

1879, Charles filed for a homestead and found work as a bookkeeper on the Chicago & North Western Railroad.

By the Shores of Silver Lake, the fifth book in the series, opens with the Ingalls family arriving by train in Dakota Territory. Laura's narrative has now caught up with her actual chronology. From this point out, the books and her life story remain relatively consistent. At first, the Ingalls family lived in a tar paper shanty, in the railroad town of De Smet, just north of Silver Lake. They stayed in the surveyor's house for the first winter, as caretakers. On February 19, 1880, Charles travelled forty miles to the county seat to formally file claim on his preferred homestead lot.¹²⁰ Charles built a house in town, where the family would stay during winters in years to come. Despite this winter being mild by Dakota prairie standards, one memorable scene endures—overnight, in a blizzard, snow had drifted under cracks in the roof and covered the girls in bed at night. Cheerful as ever, Charles whistled while he shoveled them off.¹²¹

That spring, the family moved onto their claim, to begin to clear the prairie and to stave off potential claim jumpers. The first summer was hectic and frantic, the family working to break their new land, and grow enough to sustain themselves through the next winter. Winter would come early—on October 14 a freak blizzard blanketed the plains, wreaking devastation upon unprepared famers. The Ingalls left their homestead shanty, and moved back into the town. Approximately one hundred homesteaders huddled in De Smet, leaving behind their flimsy claim houses to wait out winter in town. This winter, memorialized in the *Little House* books as *The Long Winter*, was one of the most vicious on record. The trains stopped running, food rations dwindled, and coal was quickly burned through. Sod dugouts would have provided better

¹²⁰ Fraser. 105

¹²¹ Fraser. 105

insulation against the cold and biting wind, but the houses in the town were built of cheap planks and tar paper. By January, the town was starving. Rumor spread of a farmer who was holed out to the south of town, and hoarding his seed wheat. The survival of De Smet hinged on the acquisition of the wheat. Only two men were willing to risk the trip: Cap Garland and Almanzo Wilder.

Almanzo Wilder had arrived in De Smet with his brother, Royal, the year before the Ingalls family had. The Wilder brothers had grown up on a prosperous farm in upstate New York; their father bred horses, a passion that Almanzo had inherited. When drought ruined the family farm, the Wilders relocated to Minnesota. Lured by cheap land, Almanzo and Royal continued west into Dakota Territory. They established homesteads, traded horses, and Royal opened a general store in town. During that long winter, Almanzo and Garland secured the wheat and saved the town from starvation. The first train did not arrive in De Smet until May.¹²²

The next year of Laura's life is recorded in *Little Town on the Prairie*, the seventh book in the series. Laura has begun to work in town as a seamstress, and feels responsible to contribute to her family's income, especially now since Mary has enrolled at a boarding school for the blind in Iowa. Laura has also developed friendships with girls in town, and attends school. In *Little Town on the Prairie* we see Laura mature, but also wrestle with her conflict between obligation to her family and her own independence. The book ends with Laura receiving her license to teach school, a testament to her intelligence and industriousness.

The eighth instalment of Laura's childhood, *These Happy Golden Years* opens just before her sixteenth birthday. Laura has begun teaching in a one-room schoolhouse in a neighboring

¹²² Fraser. 116

town. The family she boards with, the Brewster family, are a stark contrast to the cheery home Laura left behind. The tension between Brewster and his sullen wife shock Laura, awakening her to the familial strife rampant on the prairie that she had been insulated from in her own home. During that winter, Almanzo Wilder provides Laura with respite, driving her home to De Smet and back to the Brewster's' every weekend. *These Happy Golden Years* ends with Laura and Almanzo marrying, and moving into the house Almanzo built on his claim. The *Little House on the Prairie* series concludes with *The First Four Years*, which chronicles the early years of Laura and Almanzo's marriage and the birth of their daughter, Rose.¹²³

The later years in Laura's life are less known, especially the hardships she and Almanzo suffered. Almanzo was nearly paralyzed by diphtheria, and left reliant upon a cane for the rest of his life. The Wilders' second child died as an infant, a fire razed their house and barn, and drought crippled the farm. The Wilders decided to cut their losses and leave De Smet, moving first to Florida in hopes that the warmer climate would help Almanzo's health. However, neither the humidity nor the local culture agreed with the Wilders and they returned to De Smet in 1892. Two years later, the Wilders left De Smet, this time for the last time. They settled in Mansfield, Missouri, on a piece of land they named "Rocky Ridge Farm." Slowly, the farm proved to be profitable, relying upon a diversified spread (apples, poultry, and dairy) instead of the monoculture of the Great Plains.¹²⁴

It was in Mansfield that Laura began to write, first as a columnist for the *Missouri Ruralist*, a farm life interest magazine. Throughout the early twentieth century, Laura gained popularity among her rural Ozark readers. Still, the Wilders were financially vulnerable, and the

¹²³ Fraser. 139

¹²⁴ Fraser. 196

Great Depression destroyed all their investments. During the Great Depression, Laura began to write an autobiographical sketch of her pioneer childhood. Rose Wilder had long since left Rocky Ridge, and was employed as an editor and a free-lance author in San Francisco. The professional relationship between Laura and Rose remains contested, as the pair collaborated to produce a story of a pioneer girl. Nevertheless, Rose's connections in the publishing world opened a door for Wilder's story. In 1932, Harper & Brothers published *Little House in the Big Woods*. The commercial success of the *Little House* series continued, and endures today as one of the quintessential narratives of pioneer life.

Analysis

When we turn to evaluate *Little House on the Prairie* through the lens of the Turner Frontier thesis, two themes become apparent: the first, the adherence of Charles Ingalls to the idealized characteristics described by Turner; the second, the ensuing tension between Charles' restlessness and Caroline's domesticity on the frontier. The motif of "homebuilding" becomes the best way to explore this relationship. The entire series can be tracked through a series of houses that Charles built; Caroline made into a home, and then was abandoned for the next one. Laura also presents an interesting avenue for analysis into the gendered nuance between homebuilding and homemaking.

Charles Ingalls faithfully and cheerfully embodies the idealized characteristics of the frontier settler that Turner sets forth. Charles is intelligent, practical, coarse yet inquisitive, and perhaps most important, restless. "Wild animals would not stay in a country where there were so many people. Pa did not like to stay either. He liked a country where the wild animals lived

without being afraid.”¹²⁵ The *Little House* series can cynically be read as Charles’ inability to maintain a stable job, and his cavalier willingness to uproot the family. However, Charles’ wanderlust comes across as endearing, an energetic personification of the Turnerian ideals. However, Charles pales in comparison to Mr. Edwards, the spirited bachelor homesteading nearby the Ingalls during their time in Indian territory. “He told Laura he was a wildcat from Tennessee.”¹²⁶ Mr. Edwards, unhindered by a family, works to help Charles build the house.

The act of homebuilding is highly significant in *Little House on the Prairie*. Charles meticulously builds a log cabin on the family’s claim in Kansas. Wilder provides us with a fantastic description of the process. The process of homebuilding is highly gendered in *Little House on the Prairie*. Charles attempts to construct the home himself, but comes to realize he cannot finish the task himself. At first, he requests help from Caroline. Caroline is able to help at first, but a brutal accident almost severs her leg. “It was only Providential that the foot was not crushed. Only a little hollow in the ground had saved it.”¹²⁷ Despite the accident, Caroline still continues to make home in the camp: “She could not get her shoe on. But she tied more rags around her foot, and she hobbled on it. She got supper as usual, only a little more slowly. But Pa said she could not help to build the house until her ankle was well.”¹²⁸ Charles then relies on Mr. Edwards to help him finish building the home. The scene in homebuilding reaches its climax when the family is able to move into the cabin. As the last step in the process, Caroline places her china woman on the mantel. “As soon as it was done, Ma set in the middle of the mantel-shelf the little china woman she had brought from the Big Woods.”¹²⁹ The china woman serves

¹²⁵ Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*. 2

¹²⁶ Ingalls Wilder. 63

¹²⁷ Ingalls Wilder. 61

¹²⁸ Ingalls Wilder. 61

¹²⁹ Ingalls Wilder. 117

as an excellent narrative element as well as an excellent nod to the gendering of domestic spaces in the frontier. The tidy little figurine presides over the inside of the house, the female domain.

The gendering of spaces is also called into attention when we turn to examine Laura Ingalls herself. As a narrator, Laura occupies an interesting space between masculine and feminine and adult and child. Laura always trends a little more traditionally boyish than her sisters. At times, she chafes with her older sister Mary (the golden child). “Laura didn’t want to say anything. She wanted to keep those pretty beads. Her chest felt all hot inside, and she wished with all her might that Mary wouldn’t always be such a good little girl. But she couldn’t let Mary be better than she was.”¹³⁰ Laura is less domestically inclined, less traditionally feminine than Mary. Laura is also much more comfortable outside of the house, repeatedly characterized by her tendency to throw off her sunbonnet: “Laura’s sunbonnet hung down her back. She pulled it up by its strings, and its sides came past her cheeks. When her sunbonnet was on she could only see what was in front of her, and that was why she was always pushing it back and letting it hang by its strings tied around her throat.”¹³¹ Laura is also much closer to Charles than Mary is. In turn, Charles relies on Laura for manual labor in a way that he does not with her other sisters. “He let Laura stir the mud while he laid a row of rocks around the three sides of the space he had cleared by the house-wall.”¹³² Here, we see a slight subversion of the typically masculine responsibility of homebuilding. Laura is successfully able to help Charles construct the house, specifically the hearth, when the task of homebuilding is usually done by men.

The Little House on the Prairie presents perhaps the most optimistic literary version of the Turnerian frontier. In *Little House on the Prairie*, the gendered tasks of homebuilding and

¹³⁰ Ingalls Wilder. 179

¹³¹ Ingalls Wilder. 123

¹³² Ingalls Wilder. 113

homemaking are cheerfully adhered to. Charles's restlessness comes across as an affectionate characteristic. Caroline cooks and cleans and completes other domestic chores with cheer. Laura understands Charles' wanderlust in a way that sets her apart from the other female characters in the story. As a result, Laura deviates from the other female characters in her life. Caroline Ingalls, the perfect pioneer mother never fails to cultivate a happy home for herself and her children. However, it is important to remember that *Little House on the Prairie* is a children's book. Events are fictionalized, bleaker narrative elements are downplayed, and Rose Wilder was a heavy handed editor. Nevertheless, the entire series is remarkable for its portrayal of a truly loving family. Throughout, Charles and Caroline work in their own ways to build a home, Charles's fiddle playing serves as an endearing and enduring symbol of the family's happiness. Laura is caught between the domesticity Caroline represents and the restlessness Charles embodies, but is able to exist in both spaces. That tension is representative of the time period, as the end of the frontier meant the increase of settlement and domesticity.

In the context of the Turner thesis, *Little House on the Prairie* provides the most cheerful interpretation of the Turnerian myth. *Little House on the Prairie* has none of the tragedy of *Giants in the Earth* or the angst of *O Pioneers!*. What *Little House on the Prairie* gives us is a romanticized version of the individuals who settled the frontier. The popularity of the *Little House* series in turn shows just how saturated American popular culture is with the idealized version of the frontier settler, an idealized character that we find first articulated by Frederick Jackson Turner.

PART VII: Conclusion

In closing, the selected works about the frontier give us insight into a larger phenomenon: American culture is deeply permeated by the mythos of the frontier. It is important to acknowledge that my work is not exhaustive, nor does it attempt to be. The significance lies in the juxtaposition of three iconic works of fiction alongside an equally iconic work of historiography.

By exploring the history of expansionism, it becomes apparent that the continual advance of the boundaries of the nation meant that the frontier was many different places at many different times. There was no one place that was permanently the frontier—the line demarcating the frontier was always evolving. We also see just how masculine the frontier was, especially in the first stage of advance. It is also important to recognize that Turner did not create the iconography of the frontier. The frontier was already a celebrated American institution—Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show began touring in the 1880s, countless works of fiction had been published about the frontier, from *The Leatherstocking Tales* to drugstore dime novels. What Turner managed to produce was an artful articulation of an existing phenomenon.

The spirit of the frontier was something that was felt in American culture, but had previously eluded articulation. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner put forth what was the most comprehensive attempt to evoke the nature of the frontier. The time period in which Turner delivered the speech was crucial in our interpretation of his work. Examination reveals a larger demographical trend in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century: the shift from a rural population to an urban one. Once again, census data provides an easy way to quantify this shift. In 1790, the United States' total population was 3,929,214. Of this, 5.1% of

Americans lived in urban areas, and 94.9% lived in rural areas. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the percentage of Americans living in rural areas declined. By 1890, the centennial anniversary of the first census, the total population was 62,979,766. Of that number, 35.1% lived in urban areas, and 64.9% lived in rural areas. By 1920, the percentage of Americans living in urban areas exceeded the population of Americans living in rural areas (51.2% and 48.8% respectively).¹³³ What Turner wrote was a grasp to preserve what he believed to be the most essential of all American institutions that he saw slipping away. Turner's thesis also opened the door into the study of the frontier as a legitimate part of American history.

We can trace the omnipresence of the version of the frontier Turner articulates in American culture by considering the identities of the works where Turner's thesis is present. While all three of the works align with the conventions of the "Dream of the Garden" genre, they also can be classified into many other literary niches. University of Vermont's library search engine provides different tags for each of the three books. *Giants in the Earth* uses the tags "Norwegian Fiction," "Translations," and "Historical Fiction." *O Pioneers!* is tagged as "Swedish Americans – Fiction," "Women farmers – Fiction," "Brothers and sisters," and "Nebraska – Fiction." *Little House on the Prairie* is flagged as "Juvenile fiction," "Frontier and pioneer life," and "Great Plains – Fiction." By using popular literature about the frontier, we can see how Turner's thesis sets the framework for an idealized character who embodies the myths of the frontier. These characters, the spaces they inhabit, and the people they interact with give us insight to the way the frontier manifests in popular culture. Additionally, all three selected works contain a main character who personifies the ideal characteristics of the people of the frontier as expressed by Turner. In *Giants in the Earth*, we find Per Hansa. In *O Pioneers!*, we

¹³³ "Population and Housing Unit Costs" (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 1993), <https://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/files/table-4.pdf>.

have Alexandra Bergson. And in *Little House on the Prairie*, we have Charles Ingalls. The author's creation of a character that would have thrived at any stage of frontier advance only goes to show how saturated American culture is with the mythological nature of the frontier. *Giants in the Earth*, *O Pioneers!*, and *Little House on the Prairie* are certainly not the only examples of frontier fiction. Other, iconic, works of fiction about the American frontier contain the same tropes found in the works examined in my thesis. *The Leatherstocking Tales* (1827-1841) by James Fennimore Cooper, *Roughing It* (1872) by Mark Twain, *Call of the Wild* (1903) by Jack London, and *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) by John Steinbeck all contain characters that adhere to the Turner thesis.

Giants in the Earth, *O Pioneers!*, and *Little House on the Prairie* all explore the concept of the frontier in different ways. The author's biographies also provide insight into the way that the authors were shaped by their experiences on the frontier. Each of the three authors experienced the frontier in different ways. Ole Rølvaag came to the United States as an adult, and experienced the frontier as a young man before seeking a career in academia. Willa Cather experienced the frontier as a child, and spent most of her adult life in the cities of the east coast. Laura Ingalls Wilder was born on the frontier, and spent her childhood and most of her adult life moving into and out of the frontier. All three authors experienced significant mobility during their lives, and the tension between restlessness and domesticity is echoed in the works that they created.

In *Giants in the Earth*, Ole Rølvaag answers the Turner Thesis with both an embodiment (through the character of Per Hansa) and a rejection (through the psychological despair of Beret) of the mythological nature of the frontier. Per Hansa is precisely the kind of figure the Turner

Thesis suggested would be found on the frontier. Per Hansa is clever, industrious, and eager to settle his land and build his kingdom. However, the burden Beret faces of making a home on the inhospitable frontier, and her husband's willingness to repeatedly transgress norms to actualize his frontier kingdom, leads to the decay of their marriage. She feels inadequate and is often unable to complete chores because she is too overwhelmed by the infinitude of the prairie. Beret is unable to validate her self-worth as a housewife in the ways that she had in Norway.

In *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather's character Alexandra adheres to the Frontier Thesis in many ways, but also deviates in significant ways. Alexandra not only subverts the tradition of the pioneer as a masculine man, but she also subverts the tradition of the pioneer woman as the home maker within the home. Alexandra's connection to her land rather than her home sets her apart from the traditional role of home maker that is so present in the fiction of the frontier. Continually, Alexandra's farm is considered home for both Emil and Carl as well as for herself. The home that Alexandra makes is an aberration from the traditional gendered way women in the fiction of the frontier make home.

Finally, in *Little House on the Prairie*, Laura Ingalls Wilder presents her readers with an energetic and endearing personification of the Turnerian ideals in her description of Charles Ingalls. As both a narrator and a character, Laura is caught between the domesticity Caroline (and the china woman figurine) represents and the restlessness Charles embodies, but is able to exist in both spaces. We see a slight subversion of the typically masculine responsibility of homebuilding. Laura is successfully able to help Charles construct the house, specifically the hearth when the task of homebuilding is usually done by men. Laura presents an interesting avenue for analysis into the gendered nuance between homebuilding and homemaking. That

tension is representative of the time period, as the end of the frontier meant the increase of settlement and domesticity.

As proven in the history section, the frontier meant many different things at many different places and times. Each of the three authors experienced the frontier in different ways. Laura Ingalls Wilder, in particular, experienced several different frontiers over the course of her lifetime. As Turner indicates, fear over losing part of the national identity only intensified as the population grew more urban. What we get from Turner is an attempt to unify these frontiers, create a collective experience, to curate a collective identity. By exploring popular works of frontier fiction we see how this collective identity manifests in American culture. The mythological nature of the American frontier only became more powerful with the closure of the frontier.

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