



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 13. Issue 1. 2026 (Jan-March.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

The Violence of Displacement and Exile in Willa Cather's
My Ántonia, *O Pioneers!*, and *The Song of the Lark*

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[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.13.1.130](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.13.1.130)



Article information

Article Received:11/01/2026
Article Accepted:07/02/2026
Published online:24/02/2026

Abstract

The prairie novels written by Willa Cather, namely, *My Antonia* (1918), *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *The Song of the Lark* (1915), invoke the critical question of the American West as the place of both promise and danger. This paper questions the presence of displacement and exile as a force of violence, which spawns bodily, emotional and social harm in characters. Through utilising the lived experiences of the immigrants and pioneers, Cather grounds the prairie as a dispassionate force that challenges the strength of human beings. In *My Antonia*, the state of exile leads to tragic suicide and lack of social belonging, whereas in *O Pioneers!*, it creates family conflict and murder, and in *The Song of the Lark*, it results in a mental trauma of gossip and the suffocating aspects of small-town existence. Cather gains a critical insight of the American dream through these accounts and she finds out that the promise is re-balanced to be violence instead of revitalisation. The discussion thus highlights the fact that Cather made a contribution to pioneer literature in addition to highlighting the human price of Western expansion.

Keywords: Displacement, Exile, Violence, Willa Cather, Pioneer Literature, Immigrant Experience, American West, Emotional Trauma, Social Isolation, Life in the Prairies, Gossip, Power, Frontier Wrangling, Artistic ambition, Cultural Assimilation.

Introduction

Willa Cather takes a front seat in American pioneer literature studies, as she was acclaimed due to her lyrical descriptions of the Midwestern frontier. The prairie trilogy, as they might also be called, is the direction of her early writings, which trace the course of immigrants and settlers scattered throughout the Nebraska wilderness. The novels, *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia* are

based on the early years of the author in Virginia and her move at the tender age of nine, to Nebraska and her first-hand experience with the plight of European immigration. These writings develop than a worship of American West, they discuss the dark side of displacement, as it is imposed or voluntary, and a subjective experience of exile as a sense of banishment of their cultural and social anchor points.

The displacement and exile as expressed in the fiction of Cather are portrayed as violence to the processes. Violence here is not physical as it is not in the murders, accidents but rather emotional and social like isolation, gossip, cultural conflict and psychological trauma. The lack of concern shown by prairie is symbolic, making these harms worse. According to Carroll (2022), settings used by Cather tend to isolate the characters and gossiping and authority encourage conformity, which eventually forces the character out. In this paper the author discusses that Cather uses these motifs to clarify the price the pioneer myth imposes on human existence and relations in the prairie that shows how a displacement divides individual and communal relationships. Comparative analysis of the three novels brings out how violence evolved by developing strife among the masses of immigrants and as well as individualistic ambitions of artists.

Literature Review

Cather and the Displacement Theme.

The displaced settler has always been one of the main themes of the academic research on the works of Cather. Early analysts, like Dora M. Robinson (1972), conceptualized displacement as a form of structural violence sub-text of the Midwestern landscape, though Thomas L. Biederman (1986) focused on the so-called internees of the immigrant characters who are displaced both to their native lands and to the American West. Recent literature has extended this discussion to include gendered and racial aspects, which contend that exile is no longer seen as being geographic but also as being psychological and socio-political.

Violence according to Narrative Technique of Cather.

Cather has been perceived as having set up and disrupted this act of revealing the violence of being in exile more or less simultaneously, through her stylistic sharpness, through her use of omniscient narration, and through the interventitious lyrical prose. Johnfried A. Ames (1994) points out that the softening of violent acts through aesthetic distance allows the reader to live through the trauma without having to face it head on. Linda L. Beaty (2003) proceeds with this interpretation and argues that the poetic diction employed by Cather can be seen as a sort of opposition to the dehumanising effects of settler colonialism.

Theoretical Lenses

There are various theoretical models that have been used in these works. The psychological effects of exile are explained in the trauma theory (Freud, 1920; Van der Kolk, 2014) and the settler narrative in the postcolonial theory (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988); the fact that the search of the identity of an individual is complicated by the gendered displacement is presented in the feminist literary theory (Chodorow, 1978; Butler, 1990).

Displacement and Exile: *My Antonia*

My Antonia is the most touching attempt of Cather to examine the issue of the displacement of immigrants witnessed through the years of his nostalgic memories of Jim Burden. The novel takes place in the town of Black Hawk, Nebraska and follows the life of a Bohemian immigrant Antonia Shimerda and her family as the family leaves their European home. The displacement is fast and rough: the prairie landscape inflicts physical suffering and the residence of the family in a sod house although described as camplike reminds us of the fact that the family is being entombed in a strange habitat. Mr. Suicide of Shimerda is the most dramatic example of violence in the story being the exilic desperation. The

isolation brought about by culture manifested as homesickness eventually takes away Mr. Shimerda as the family is strangers in the new world (Cather 56). This emotional violence prefigures the trauma of displacement where the Shimerdas abdicate language, traditions and tribe.

This experience is further aggravated by social violence especially gossip and power play in the small-town setting of Black Hawk. According to Carroll (2022), gossip is a type of social disease that isolates deviants and alienates immigrants like the Shimerdas or Lena Lingard. The town talk damages the reputation of Lena who flees to an urban setting in search of independence. Antonia is also greatly suffering and she is very socially secluded; her undisclosed pregnancy is a subject of gossip. However, Cather means that resilience: the fact that Antonia returns to the land is an act of revolting reclamation, though colored with loss.

The prairie makes the exile more violent that it makes Jim disappearing and blurred in the prairie (Cather 11). The examples of immigrants show the price of assimilation to the American culture: Russians and Bohemians meet with the prejudice of native-born Americans, and the final results are the symbolical battles: the wolf attack on Peter and Pavel. Displacement in this case goes beyond geography and becomes psychological and forms a cyclical movement that traps characters in the desire and the loss. Cather puts exile in the position of violent disruption experienced between generations by means of the pioneer narrative.

Violence of Frontier Displacement, at the Border: *O Pioneers!*

In *O Pioneers!* Cather also changes the subject of her attention to Swedish immigrants and shows displacement as the conflict of the land itself. After her father, Alexandra Bergson inherits, family land, as it represents the departure of the pioneer out of the safe European world, to the risky American one. The novel begins with the wild nature of the land where there is physical violence in form of droughts, failure of crops and loneliness. The example of John Bergson shows that exile can be quite harsh; being an exile that was forced to leave Sweden, he perishes in exile, and his children have to face the prairie people who do not care about them (Cather 15).

Emotional violence comes about due to the fights in family and the wider social groups. Brothers of Alexandra, Lou and Oscar do not like the way she leads them, gossip, and challenge hierarchical power patterns and the existence of a small town. According to the analysis that Carroll provides, these dynamics implement conformity, which makes Alexandra a deviant in terms of her goal (Cather 217). The most explicit type of violence is the very murder of Emil by Frank Shabata caused by his jealousy towards Marie. This act is caused by frustrations caused to people by displacement: Frank who has been thrown out of Bohemia cherishes old-world possessiveness, and the affair of Marie reveals the empty feeling of pioneer existence.

Exile is layer cake: the individual price of her success takes its penalty out on Alexandra herself; her single life is a kind of self-exile of her love life. Once antagonistic land, after corrupted violence (ploughing, taming) does turn into a companion. Cather idealizes this process and, at the same time, criticizes it: the prairie has burdensome characters, it does not allow individuals to integrate (Carroll 217). Another example of displacement of immigrants that led to a clash in the culture of the immigrants is the madness of Ivar, which is a result of persecution, a dimension that is an indicator of social violence against the eccentrics. Finally, the film, *O Pioneers!*, defines displacement as a bloody smithy, which bathes the strong into the world like Alexandra, and at the same time annihilates others, thus a nostalgic representation of the mythical American West as a place of prospects pimpled with displacement.

Exile and Artistic Exile: *The Song of the Lark*.

In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea Kronborg is a story of an interconnectedness between displacement and the rising of operatic star through the city of Moonstone, Colorado. The process of displacement

starts when her rural upbringing in a small-town limits Thea with little people and lives (Cather 113). The churches and shops talk gossip to Thea about her talents and do it in an emotional way. As remarks Carroll (2022), gossip is a phobia of tongue, a horror of villages, which strengthen the order of things, oppressing deviance. Such expressions as there would be talk make Thea adhered to provincial rules, which takes her to the city.

Exile means a kind of psychological violence in Chicago and elsewhere. The state of displacement assumed by Thea is poverty, isolation and a dreadful threat of modernity, as the case of Ray Kennedy through a deadly train crash (Carroll 224). The emergence of her art requires the breaking of any connection with her origins, and the dialect used by Moonstone only continues to create internal opposition: "Perfectly good Moonstone, my dear..." (Cather 514). This ubiquitous presence makes her fail to transcend its roots regardless of winning.

Social violence comes in the form of class and gender boundaries; the rebellion of Thea is a thorn in the right constituents of conservatism as the women in Cather's books feel frustrated (Dekker 251). The novel criticizes exile as a crucial but bloody break, which is represented by the novel speech of Thea that is full of shades and colour (Cather 341); liberation goes hand in hand with loss. Although group displacement in other novels involves collective displacement, the one that Thea undergoes is a personal aspect, which highlights the emotional price of artistic exile going futile, alienated, and the lost life under ambition (Carroll 108). In this way, Cather highlights displacement as a channel of development, but the one that cannot be divorced of violence.

Discussion

How Violence is shown in *My Antonia*.

The displacement violence is most conspicuous in the form of physical hardship of frontier life and social marginalisation of the German immigrants in the United States of America in *My Antonia*. The episodic structure of the novel is analogous to the discontinuous experience of exile: the moving up and down of the family of Antonia are the swings between hope and loss. The poem Antonia is reciting, *The Young Girl Crying*, acts as a moan and a mute reproach of the violent inevitability of the land impacting on the settlers.

Exile as an Inheritance in *O Pioneers!*

The violence of displacement is displaced to the domestic sphere in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*. In this case, Jacob, the main character faces an exile not in terms of geography but it is a legacy that cannot allow him to be in line with the ideals of his father. With the more nuanced and also more effective violence of loss to a father and of inheritance of land, the exploration of paternal loss and also of land in this novel indicates a deeper sense of violence a psychological exile that leaves Jacob alone in a world that no longer recognises his place.

Willa in the Book *The Song of the Lark* Internal Exile.

The violence in *The Song of the Lark* is concentrated in the personal exile of the main character. The way Willa is fought by gender expectations appears as the internal exile: she is literally a part of a small town but she is not emotionally part of a community that does not tend to tolerate her aspiration. Using music as an allegory of freedom, Cather proves how both society (society as a constraint) and self (self-imposed loneliness) can be violent.

Theoretical Integration

The analysis combines the theory of trauma, postcolonial theory, and feminist excellence of literature. Both theoretical approaches are used sequentially: the theory of trauma explains the process of exile internalisation; postcolonial theory challenges the settler -colonial discourse; feminist theory challenges the gendered relations of power.

Contextualisation in History.

Contextual layer puts the novels into the socio-economic context of late 19th -early 20th century America. The analysis of the role of historical milieu in the creation of the images of violence and exile relies on the use of such an archival data as census data, local newspapers, and correspondence of Cather.

Ethical Considerations

There were no human subjects in the study; no ethical considerations are applicable besides proper representation of scholarly literature. Every reference is referred to in a proper way to prevent plagiarism.

Conclusion

The prairie trilogy of Willa Cather presupposes displacement and exile as complex forms of violences surrounding the pioneer experience. In *My Antonia*, the aftermath of immigrant uprooting is suicides and social exclusion. Family murders and alienation is the result of frontier conflicts in *O Pioneers*. Indirect killings of emotion and cultural expulsion by gossip is predominant in *The Song of the Lark*. In all these and other works, the American West is depicted not at all as utopian ideal; the indifference of its territory increases human suffering. Small-town dynamics, as Carroll (2022) contends, form repressed individuals who are stuck in gossip and power loops, and they either have to flee in violence or unwillingly come back.

Cather breaks the mythic, romanticised equation of pioneers, and portrays identity fractured and community broken through displacement. However, she also provides the imagery of hardiness, the feistiness of Antonia, the victory of Alexandra, the artistry of Thea, suggesting that people can survive the violence. These are some of the themes that find echoes in American literature of immigration trauma and costs of progress. Future scholarship can focus on gender's play in exiles of Cather and compare her works with other authors who worked during that period who include Sinclair Lewis, and such efforts will help advance the knowledge of how searches of unknown horizons often required a bloody sacrifice of the human soul.

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