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Title	"A Rich Mine of Life": Cather and Steinbeck as Farm Novelists
Author(s)	Han, John J.; Kubota, Aya
Citation	文化学園大学紀要. 人文・社会科学研究 20(2012-01) pp.85-96
Issue Date	2012-01-31
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10457/1330">http://hdl.handle.net/10457/1330</a>
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# “A Rich Mine of Life”: Cather and Steinbeck as Farm Novelists<sup>1</sup>

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**要 旨** 田園というセッティングは、ウィラ・キャザーとジョン・スタインベックの創作に、多大なインスピレーションを与えた。キャザーの自然観の礎には確固としたクリスチャニティがあり、スタインベックの自然へのアプローチには汎神論的要素が垣間見られるものの、両者は自然の中で土地に根ざして生きる人々の暮らしを高く評価して描いていた。都会にあつて転石と化した人々と、彼らの制御を失った欲望は、両作家の好まざるところであった。本稿は、二作家の農園生活に関わる深い知識と、田園美をめぐっての卓越した描写、土地に対する霊化、方言の生き々とした効果的使用と、都会に向けられた否定的な見解という五つの共通点に着目して、社会派として世に知られるスタインベックのファーム・ノベリストとしての一面を発見していくことを目的としている。

## Introduction

One of the landmark studies on the development of American farm fiction appeared in 1965, when Roy W. Meyer published *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century*. Although the work is limited mostly to the fiction from the Midwest, from Ohio in the east to Kansas in the west, it still offers an excellent window into the world of American farm fiction in the first half of the twentieth-century. According to Meyer, farm fiction treats rural life “seriously, realistically, and as the main subject” (13).<sup>2</sup> Specifically, he identifies several characteristics of farm fiction:

accurate handling of the physical details of farm life; the use of the vernacular; and the reflection of certain attitudes, beliefs, or habits of mind often associated with farm people, of which the most important are conservatism, individualism, anti-intellectualism, hostility to the town, and a type of primitivism. (7)

In other words, a novel that is set in the countryside yet treats rural life incidentally, tangentially, or sentimentally is not a genuine farm novel.

As a fictional genre, the American farm novel appeared in the mid-nineteenth century. However, genuine farm fiction, which portrays life on a farm without distortions, did not appear until near the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> In a farm novel, the main characters are farmers,

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the setting is a farm, and the writer deals with agrarian or agricultural issues. Additionally, the writer chronicles “the labor and struggles and mores of the farmer” (Flanagan 113) without romanticizing or despising farm life.

Willa Cather (1873-1947) and John Steinbeck (1902-68) are important twentieth-century novelists in their own right whom scholars approach from many critical perspectives. However, there are few comparative studies on the two authors, not to mention the two authors as farm novelists.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, many of their works are set on farms and reflect the characteristics of farm fiction as identified by Meyer and Flanagan. This essay seeks to contribute to our understanding of Cather and Steinbeck as farm novelists with particular attention to five areas: the two authors’ intimate knowledge of the farm and farm life, their portrayal of the beauty and wonders of the countryside, their spiritualization of the land, their use of the vernacular, and finally, their negative view of townfolk and town life.

Specifically, we will focus on Cather’s two Nebraska novels, *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), and on four of Steinbeck’s 1930s works set in California, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), *To a God Unknown* (1933), *The Long Valley* (1938), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). In *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, Cather portrays the hardships, struggles, and triumphs of immigrant farmers as typified by the female protagonists Alexandra Bergson and Ántonia Shimerda, respectively. Set in the Salinas Valley, *The Pastures of Heaven*, *To a God Unknown*, and *The Long Valley* reflects Steinbeck’s intimate knowledge of the rural world and his mystical, spiritualized view of the land. *The Grapes of Wrath*, an epic novel chronicling Midwestern farmers’ westward migration and their struggles in California during the Dust Bowl, also showcases Steinbeck’s expert knowledge on the farm and its inhabitants.

### **Intimate Knowledge of the Farm and Farm Life**

Cather’s and Steinbeck’s novels evidence their first-hand knowledge of the farm and the farmer’s life. In *O Pioneers!*, Cather describes the challenges recent settlers in Nebraska face—through narration or through the mouths of her characters. Early in the novel, Alexandra’s father is too weak, and her siblings are too young, to work on the farm. Droughts, mounting debts, crop failures, loneliness, and boredom demoralize the farmers. On his deathbed, Mr. Bergson advises his children, “Try to break a little more land every year; sod corn is good for fodder. Keep turning the land, and always put up more hay than you need” (16). Cather also offers a snapshot of the farm life by portraying part of Mrs. Bergson’s daily activities:

Preserving was almost a mania with Mrs. Bergson. Stout as she was, she roamed the scrubby banks of Norway Creek looking for fox grapes and goose plums, like a wild creature in search of

prey. She made a yellow jam of the insipid ground-cherries that grew on the prairie, flavoring it with lemon peel; and she made a sticky dark conserve of garden tomatoes. She had experimented even with the rank buffalo-pea, and she could not see a fine bronze cluster of them without shaking her head and murmuring, "What a pity!" (17).

Oscar, one of Alexandra's siblings, endures backbreaking farm labor. He works "like an insect, always doing the same thing over in the same way, regardless of whether it was best or no" (32). The use of an insect image is not incidental here; as a farm novelist, Cather depends on an agricultural figure of speech.

Cather also displays her keen knowledge of rural life in *My Ántonia*. In the "introduction" to the novel, Cather and the narrator, Jim Burden, travel together on a train. In Iowa, the train "flash[es] through never-ending miles of ripe wheat, by country towns and bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun" (n.p.). The two characters share their knowledge of country living as follows:

We were talking about what it is like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the colour and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and grey as sheet-iron. We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry, we said. (n.p.)

In the novel, Cather chronicles the hard life, endurance, and success of Bohemian immigrants in rural Nebraska; the title character represents the indomitable spirit of settlers on the Nebraska frontier. The author vividly details some of the elements that challenge new settlers: the destructive weather, stubborn land, grasshoppers, rattlesnakes, dangerous farming machinery, prairie fires, cholera, poverty and starvation, loneliness, homesickness, and dishonesty. In one episode, a tramp jumps into the threshing machine and is cut into pieces. The suicide of Mr. Shimerda—modeled after Francis Sadilek, father of Cather's friend Annie—arises from his homesickness. The barrenness of the land is also noted by Jim Burden. As he approaches the Shimerdas' shed-like dwelling, he can see "nothing but rough red hillrocks" (21). Peter Krajiek, a fellow Bohemian, overcharges the Shimerdas for their infertile land, and in their first year in Nebraska, the family survives barely on ground-cherries.

Similar to Cather, Steinbeck showcases his knowledge of farming and the farmer's life. *The Pastures of Heaven*, a collection of interrelated stories, allows us to see many aspects of the rural world. Regarding the lack of privacy in rural communities, Steinbeck observes, "This secret

staring is developed to a high art among country people” (12). He also notes farmers’ tendency to engage in agricultural conversations: “When one farmer meets another they seldom go into a house. Instead, they walk slowly over the land, pulling bits of grass from the fields, or leaves from the trees and testing them with their fingers while they talk” (143). Finally, Steinbeck knows the two topics that sour the congeniality of a rural community: “[F]erocious politics and violent religious opinions . . . usually poison rural districts” (184).

Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* dramatizes the obstacles mid- and lower-Plains farmers face in their native states and California: severe dust storms, the loss of land, the invisible hand of the banking system, and the unfriendliness of California farmers. Early in the novel, the author explains how farming has changed in the twentieth century: agriculture has become more mechanized, large corporations have taken over many family farms, and the banking system has victimized small farmers. Farmers are uprooted from their land after failing to repay the money they borrowed from the bank, which now owns the land. The bank replaces manual labor with tractors, which now serve as both effective agricultural tools and lethal weapons. Steinbeck describes what happens when one loses the land: it leads to starvation, to sickness, to the loss of human dignity, to stealing, and eventually to violent action. More importantly, farmers lose their identity when they are driven from the land.

### **The Beauty and Wonders of the Land**

In their works, both Cather and Steinbeck describe the beauty and wonders of the rural landscape. At the beginning of *O Pioneers!*, the land is barren and intractable much like “a horse that no one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces” (13). With hard work and resoluteness, Alexandra subdues it, transforming it into a productive farm. At the novel’s end, in which Alexandra and Carl plan for their future together, they are surrounded by the beauty of nature which embraces and rewards those who are willing to live close to the soil. As the couple enters the house, they “[leave] the Divide behind them, under the evening star. Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra’s into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!” (180).

Further, *O Pioneers!* masterfully captures the sights and sounds of the prairie in its portrayal of the scenery outside Crazy Ivar’s dilapidated homestead: “If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land, the smiling sky, the curly grass white in the hot sunlight; if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant” (23). Here, the shabbiness of Ivar’s dwelling place is contrasted with the beauty of the natural surroundings. In another passage, Carl Linstrum observes the beauty of a prairie sunset:

Carl sat musing until the sun leaped above the prairie, and in the grass about him all the small creatures of day began to tune their tiny instruments. Birds and insects without number began to chirp, to twitter, to snap and whistle, to make all manner of fresh shrill noises. The pasture was flooded with light; every clump of ironweed and snow-on-the-mountain threw a long shadow, and the golden light seemed to be rippling through the curly grass like the tide racing in. (75)

The use of colorful action verbs—including “leaped,” “tune,” “chirp,” “twitter,” “snap,” “whistle,” and “rippling”—makes the whole scene alive to the reader. The prairie is not a static, dead place; instead, it is a place full of life and action.

In *My Ántonia*, Cather also portrays the pristine splendor and wonders of the land. At the end of Book 1, Chapter 2, Jim Burden fondly remembers the Edenic moment when he lay on top of warm soil: “The earth was warm under me, and warm as I crumbled it through my fingers.... I was entirely happy” (18). In Book 1, Chapter 6, Jim also recalls his youthful days outdoors. In late autumn, he and Ántonia spend their time together on the sunny bank. On “a day of amber sunlight,” they have a reading lesson “on the warm, grassy bank” which is inhabited by the badger (38). As they lie against the embankment, they observe nimble rabbits that “[keep] starting up all about [them], and dashing off down the draw as if they were playing in a game of some sort” (39). Ántonia rescues a little insect out of the buffalo grass, makes a nest for him in her hands, and then speaks to him in Bohemian. Then the insect “[begins] to sing for [them]—a thin, rusty little chirp” (39).

Likewise, Steinbeck’s fiction is replete with passages that portray the beauty and wonders of the countryside. In *To a God Unknown*, the author portrays the mystical self-sacrifice of Joseph Wayne, who kills himself to cure the barrenness of the homestead in the Valley of Nuestra Señora. Although his land is stricken with a long drought, we can still find glimpses of natural beauty in it. In Chapter 4, Steinbeck describes the splendor of the surroundings of his homestead as follows:

The grass was damp with dew, sprinkled with fire. Three meadowlarks with yellow vests and light grey coats hopped near the tent stretching their beaks, friendly and curious. Now and then they puffed their chests and raised their heads like straining prima donnas and burst into a rising ecstasy of song, then cocked their heads at Joseph to see whether he noticed or approved. (16)

Later in Chapter 8, Steinbeck describes, “The sycamores along the creek were beginning to drop their leaves on the ground. The road was deep in the crisp brown fragments. Joseph lifted the lines and the horses broke into a trot, and their hoofs crashed softly in the leaves” (42). These and many other passages in the novel evidence Steinbeck’s keen attention to natural scenes.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Oklahoma land is dusty, and part of the California land is submerged under flood waters. Despite a succession of natural disasters, the land still maintains its natural beauty. Many of Steinbeck's descriptions of the land contain a haiku-like moment that sees the extraordinary in the ordinary. For example, in Chapter 28, which describes a crowded camp for the migrant workers, Steinbeck offers a glimpse of picturesque nature: "The narrow stream slipped by, out of the willows, and back into the willows again" (425). In Chapter 29, the land is beautiful despite the flooding: "The rain stopped. On the fields the water stood, reflecting the gray sky, and the land whispered with moving water" (451). In the same chapter, Steinbeck describes the renewal of the land this way: "Tiny points of grass came through the earth, and in a few days the hills were pale green with the beginning year" (452). In the last chapter of the novel, torrential rains pour, and the Joads flee to higher ground. Amidst sickness and starvation, a flower asserts its beauty: "Ahead, beside the road, Ruthie saw a spot of red. She raced to it. A scraggy geranium gone wild, and there was one rain-beaten blossom on it. She picked the flower. She took a petal carefully off and stuck it on her nose" (470).

### **The Spirituality of the Land**

In Cather's and Steinbeck's novels, nature and humans are not separate but unified. Ceasing to be a mere land, nature sometimes acquires human and even godly qualities. In *O Pioneers!*, Cather characterizes the land as something eternal, something that is larger than life, something that humans can call their home. In her conversation with Carl, Alexandra remarks, "I might as well try to will the sunset over there to my brothers' children. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while" (179). Alexandra knows that, through her hard work and her unwavering faith in the land, she has become part of the land.

In *My Ántonia*, Cather also spiritualizes the land. In Chapter 6, the narrator recalls the majestic beauty of the landscape of his childhood on the Nebraska prairie as he and Ántonia observed it:

All those fall afternoons were the same, but I never got used to them. As far as we could see, the miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sunlight that was stronger and fiercer than at any other time of the day. The blond cornfields were red gold, the haystacks turned rosy and threw long shadows. The whole prairie was like the bush burned with fire and was not consumed. That hour always had the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero's death—heroes who died young and gloriously. It was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting-up of day. (*My Ántonia* 40)

Here Cather alludes to Exodus 3:2 (on the burning bush) and Mark 9:2 (on the transfiguration of Christ), thereby elevating her story to an epic level.

Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown* is a mystical tale of a farmer who lives in communion with—and humanizes—nature. At the news of his father's death in Vermont, Joseph Wayne feels that his father's spirit enters the magnificent oak tree on his farm. To him, his homestead and his deceased father are identical. He considers the trees his children and regards the land as his child and wife. He not only personalizes the land but also feminizes it: it excites him so much that he even copulates with it: "His thighs beat heavily on the earth" (8). Of course, it is risky to equate Joseph Wayne, a fictional character, and Steinbeck, the author. However, it would be safe to say that Joseph is somewhat similar to Steinbeck in his intense love for the soil.

Steinbeck's spiritualization of the land is also evidenced by *The Grapes of Wrath*. In Chapter 11, an inter-chapter, he explains what the land tilled by a horse means to humanity: it represents a life, a vitality, a breathing, a warmth (118). In contrast, the land tilled by a tractor is dead like a corpse: "[M]an who is more than his elements knows the land that is more than its analysis. But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself" (118-19). In the novel, humans and nature are even blended, as in Chapter 28: Ruthie "rushed [Winfield] out the door, into the evening" (426). A merging of nature and humanity—this is Steinbeck's poetic way of indicating the existential inseparability between the two.

## The Use of the Vernacular

Both Cather and Steinbeck reproduce the kind of speech used by rural people in their fiction, thereby adding realistic touches to their stories. In *O Pioneers!*, Cather successfully reproduces the vernacular used by early immigrants from Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. Old Mrs. Lee speaks English with a heavy Swedish accent and with a poor command of English grammar. Here is an example of her typical speech style: "No, yust las' night I ma-ake. See dis tread; verra strong, no wa-ash out, no fade. My sister send from Sveden. I yust-a ta-ank you like dis" (111). Frank Shabata, a Czech immigrant, speaks equally poor English. In the penitentiary, he tells Alexandra, "I never did mean to do not'ing to dat woman [Marie]. I never mean to do not'ing to dat boy [Emil]. I ain't had not'ing ag'in' dat boy. I always like dat boy fine. An' then I find him—" (171).

In *My Ántonia*, Cather continues to showcase her keen observation of the rural speech. In Book 1, Chapter 5, Ántonia speaks broken English, which is typical of new immigrants from non-English-speaking countries: "My papa find friends up north, with Russian mans. Last night he take me for see, and I can understand very much talk. Nice mans, Mrs. Burden. One is fat and all the time laugh. Everybody laugh. The first time I see my papa laugh in this kawn-tree. Oh, very nice!"

(32-33). Like many non-native speakers of English, she has little command of the plurals, word order, and verb tenses. After living in the New World for decades, however, Ântonia learns to speak perfect English. This is how she speaks near the end of the novel: "I thought you'd come, Jim. I heard you were at Mrs. Stevens's last night. I've been looking for you all day" (319). It shows not only Ântonia's mastery of a new language but also her successful adaptation to life in America.

Similar to Cather, Steinbeck skillfully recreates the kind of speech his rural characters use. When Tom Joad meets Muley Graves in *The Grapes of Wrath*, he asks him for the whereabouts of his family. Muley replies,

Well, they was gonna stick her out when the bank come to tractorin' off the place. Your grampa stood out here with a rifle, an' he blowed the headlights off that cat', but she come on just the same. Your grampa didn't wanta kill the guy drivin' that cat', an' that was Willy Feeley, an' Willy knowed it, so he jus' come on, an' bumped the hell outa the house, an' give her a shake like a dog shakes a rat. Well, it took somepin outa Tom. Kinda got into 'im. He ain't been the same ever since. (46)

The way Muley speaks allows us to see how Oklahoma farmers spoke in the 1930s—they spoke fluently, but they disregarded (more likely were unfamiliar with) grammar rules and used chopped words for the sake of convenience.

Unlike Muley, who speaks with a Southern accent, Jody's grandfather in "The Leader of the People" speaks in a speech type that dominates modern California:

It wasn't Indians that were important, nor adventures, nor even getting out here. It was a whole bunch of people made into one big crawling beast. And I was the head. It was westering and westering. Every man wanted something for himself, but the big beast that was all of them wanted only westering. I was the leader, but if I hadn't been there, someone else would have been the head. The thing had to have a head. (*Long Valley* 224-25)

The grandfather's speech style reflects the kind of dialect imported from New England and the Midwest which forms the basis of California English. According to the text, he crossed the Great Plains, which means that he came either from the East Coast or the Midwest.

### **A Negative View of Townsfolk and Town Life**

In addition to the use of the vernacular, Cather and Steinbeck fictionalize some of rural people's mannerisms and beliefs in their works. Many of Cather's rural characters defend their

way of life, sometimes displaying hostility toward the town (or the city) and its inhabitants. Early in *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra deplors the way townsfolk slight rural people: “Sometimes I feel like I’m getting tired of standing up for this country” (31). Lou and Oscar distrust Emil, who went to college in Lincoln and thus has embraced ideas that are incompatible with country life; the two brothers also scoff at a young college-educated farmer’s advice on alfalfa because his knowledge is supposedly untrustworthy.

In Cather’s farm fiction, the town represents impersonality, temptation, and unbridled passion. In *O Pioneers!*, Frank Shabata works on his farm “like a demon” except when he visits Omaha or Hastings “on a spree” once a year (86). In other words, his existence is rooted in the soil, while he visits cities for an emotional release. In *My Ántonia*, the main character falls from grace when she follows Larry Donovan, a train conductor, to marry him. He impregnates her and then, the night before the wedding, he deserts her. In disgrace, she returns to her farm along with her baby. She has paid a heavy price for renouncing her rural roots; her destiny was to live close to the soil.

In the same novel, Black Hawk—a town—is portrayed as an unpleasant, unwelcoming place to live. Jim Burden describes the little downtown houses he observes at night:

Yet for all their frailness, how much jealousy and envy and unhappiness some of them managed to contain! The life that went on in them seemed to me made up of evasions and negations; shifts to save cooking, to save washing and cleaning, devices to propitiate the tongue of gossip. This guarded mode of existence was like living under a tyranny. People’s speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed. Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was bridled by caution. (219)

It is no wonder that evil characters such as Wick Cutter, the lecherous moneylender, inhabit Black Hawk.

Carl Linstrum, Alexandra’s dear friend in *O Pioneers!*, leaves his native countryside but returns permanently to it by the end of the story. During one of his early visits to her farm, Alexandra envies him for his life of freedom in the city. In a lengthy response, he confesses the emptiness of urban life:

Freedom so often means that one isn’t needed anywhere. Here you are an individual, you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody, we own nothing. When one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him. . . . We have no house, no place, no people of our own. We live in the streets, in the parks, in the theatres. We sit in restaurants and concert halls and look about at the hundreds of our own kind and shudder. (72)

Although the voice in the passage sounds more like Cather's own, rather than a character's, what Carl says is still relevant in establishing *O Pioneers!* as an agricultural novel. The city is a place of impersonality, alienation, and rootlessness.

In Cather's fiction, the town is a place of vice, yet it is also a place of high culture and refinement. In Steinbeck's fiction, however, the town has little redeeming value: it is a place of temptation, moral depravity, and violence. In *The Pastures of Heaven*, poverty forces two sisters, Rosa and Maria, to leave the countryside to become prostitutes in San Francisco. Rosa declares, "See, Maria! I will go to San Francisco and be a bad woman." In response, Maria cries, "Rosa, I will go to San Francisco with you. I, too, will be a bad woman—" (109, 110). In the short story "Flight," teenager Pepé runs an errand to Monterey, where he quarrels with a man. As the man tries to attack him, Pepé reflexively hurls his knife at him, thereby killing him. In another story, "The Vigilante," the setting is a town park. An excited mob lynches a black inmate, and "the flame curl[s] about the feet of the grey naked body hanging from the elm tree" (*Long Valley* 93).

Finally, the setting of "Johnny Bear" is Loma, a town of less than 200 residents. In this story, the narrator focuses on an intellectually challenged man who eavesdrops on people's conversations and then recreates them with remarkable accuracy. Every evening, male residents of the village come to the bar for socialization. One night, the narrator drops in the bar and encounters Johnny Bear, who looks more like an animal than a human. As someone buys him whiskey, he begins to imitate a conversation he secretly overheard.

Despite his need for pervasive support and protection, Johnny Bear is neglected and abused by society. When Johnny Bear exposes a woman's hidden love life, Alex shows anger at him with a judgmental remark, "You ought to be ashamed. Miss Amy gave you food, and she gave you all the clothes you ever had" (*Long Valley* 119). Clearly Johnny Bear needs intensive support, but no one in the story, except Amy, seems to show compassion for him or protect him. We do not know how he meets his essential needs as a human being. For the audience at the bar, he is little more than a clown—a so-called idiot—who satisfies their voyeuristic appetites; that is, he is a human parasite living on the fringe of society. A victim of circumstance, Johnny Bear will probably continue to live an undignified life, but his auditory gift allows him to expose the hypocrisy and illusions of the seemingly upright community.

## Conclusion

As farm novelists, Cather and Steinbeck similarly turn to the rural setting for fictional inspiration, reproducing the sights and sounds of the countryside with keen attention to detail. They also portray the lives of those who live close to—and pursue meaning in—the soil. They

similarly express their appreciation for agricultural labor and their sympathy for hard-working people in the countryside. Their works are significant not only in their aesthetic values, but also in their social and historical values.

The works we discussed above showcase the maturity of the farm novel as an American literary type. The two authors are contrasted with some of their fellow American novelists who turn to a rural setting incidentally. For instance, in Flannery O'Connor's fiction set in the rural South, the author reproduces the speech of her characters and describes some of the rural mannerisms. However, she uses the Deep South as a setting mainly because she is familiar with it; her main interest is to portray the grace of God that unfolds incidentally in the countryside.

Despite their similarities as farm novelists, Cather and Steinbeck are different in one area—in their visions of the land. For Cather, the land is an object that needs to be cultivated, conquered, and utilized to benefit the needs of humanity. In general, her idea of the land reflects the Christian conception of nature as described in the first two chapters of the book of Genesis: it is a reflection of God's richness.

While Cather's depiction of the life on the farm is largely realistic, she is also a romanticist in her representation of her protagonists as heroic figures—figures who are larger than life. Undaunted optimists, they typically overcome enormous difficulties in their lives and on their farms. Jim Burden even elevates Antonia as a symbol of life itself: "She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow reveals the meaning in common things . . . She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (*My Antonia* 353).

In contrast, Steinbeck's approach to nature is tinged with pantheism. Whereas Cather's vision of the land is based on Christianity, Steinbeck's is based on Eastern philosophy, especially Indian and Chinese thought. In his world, the land cannot be objectified; rather, it is a vital part of human existence that inspires awe and even deserves worship. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, people lose their identity once they leave their land. That is why Muley Graves refuses to leave his land: "'I'll be aroun', I says, 'I'll be aroun' till hell freezes over. There ain't nobody can run a guy name of Graves outa this country.' An' they ain't done it, neither" (46). And that is why Jim Casy says at Grampa's funeral that Grampa died at the moment he was uprooted from his land: "He was that place, an' he knowed it . . . He's jus' stayin' with the lan'" (150).

Steinbeck is also predominantly pessimistic in his vision of the land. No matter how hard they try, his characters are victimized by nature and the capitalist system—they are victims of circumstances beyond their control. Unlike Cather, he is a naturalist whose farmers struggle in vain to make a decent living. It is no wonder that in *The Pastures of Heaven*, the narrator opens the second chapter with his comment on both the fertility and cursedness of the Battle farm: "[L]and and houses that have been tended, loved and labored with and finally deserted, seem always

sodden with gloom and with threatening” (6). The land is charming enough to attract people there, yet it is sinister enough to destroy their lives.

#### Notes

- 1 This essay developed out of John J. Han’s “Cather and Steinbeck as Farm Novelists,” a paper delivered at the 37th annual meeting of the Arkansas Philological Association, University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, 7-9 Oct. 2010.
- 2 In his book, Roy W. Meyer uses the terms “farm fiction,” “farm novels,” “the farm novel,” and “rural fiction” interchangeably.
- 3 In her 1938 essay published *Agricultural History*, “The Development of American Rural Fiction,” Caroline B. Sherman writes, “Only three novels published before 1900 are now considered to be genuine studies of rural life” (qtd. in Meyer 21). The three novels are Edward Eggleston’s *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* (1871), Edgar Watson Howe’s *The Story of a Country Town* (1883), and Hamlin Garland’s *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891), which happens to be a collection of short stories, not a novel. Garland himself identified Eggleston’s and Howe’s novels as valuable predecessors to his own work and added Joseph Kirkland’s *Zury: The Meanest Man in Spring County* (1887). In addition to these titles, Meyer states that Harold Frederic’s *Seth’s Brother’s Wife* (1886) and Maurice Thompson’s *Hoosier Mosaics* (1987), a collection of short fiction, are worthy of mention. Meyer considers Garland’s *Main-Travelled Roads* the first work of genuine farm fiction in the United States—it is a work written by “a man who knew farm life at first hand, who understood and sympathized with the rural population, and who handled his materials in a thoroughly realistic fashion” (33).
- 4 For a comparative study of Cather and Steinbeck, see John J. Han’s essay “Steinbeck and Cather: The Divergent Religious Visions” in *John Steinbeck and His Contemporaries* (Eds. Stephen K. George and Barbara A. Heavilin. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007), pages 95-101. See also Jason Cangialosi’s brief note entitled “Literary Symbolism of Flowers in Willa Cather and John Steinbeck: Willa Cather’s *The Chrysanthemums* and John Steinbeck’s *Paul’s Case*” ([http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/1131262/literary\\_symbolism\\_of\\_flowers\\_in\\_willa.html?cat=38](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/1131262/literary_symbolism_of_flowers_in_willa.html?cat=38)).

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