

# The Unifying Thread: Connecting Place and Language in Great Plains Literature

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For more than 150 years, writers have been describing the plains and prairies with remarkable similarity, not only in setting and theme, but in images, metaphors, symbols and patterns of language that have evolved from the writers' relationship with the land itself.<sup>1</sup> Most Great Plains novels focus on the conflicts that arise between farmers and the land, between farmers and small town businessmen, and within families. Although the best known Great Plains novels by Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, Ole Rølvaag and Mari Sandoz are set in pioneer times, contemporary writers such as Wright Morris, Frederick Manfred and Larry Woiwode have explored the legacies of this attraction to the land in the third and fourth generations.<sup>2</sup> This relationship between place and language is not a mere stylistic device, designed to embellish an otherwise banal plot; rather, these works spring from the authors' recognition of the relationship between place and language.

Since the Puritans first looked into the forest, American writers have been exploring the meaning of place and the human community, but on the plains and prairies, this relationship seems especially significant, perhaps because the landscape is so sparse that, to some observers, it seems non-existent: by its apparent absence, landscape overwhelms. As Yi-fu Tuan explains in his study, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, in regions of vastness, the ocean or the plains, with their distant horizons, the mind construes space, "which depends on the power of the mind to extrapolate far beyond sense data."<sup>3</sup> The challenge, for many twentieth-century writers, and especially for Great Plains

authors, is to convey the universal truth that readers respond to in words that reflect a deceptively simple reality. Willa Cather and Wright Morris address this challenge in their comments on the writers' craft. Cather expresses her frustration over the problem of control in her introduction to *The Song of the Lark*. In the later parts of the novel, when Thea, who has succeeded as an opera star, is in the richer world of art and culture, far from simple Moonstone, Cather felt that her prose got out of control and that she overwrote the novel (it grew to almost six hundred pages). In contrast, her earlier novel, *O Pioneers!* is half as long and a better novel, most critics would agree. She explains her purpose and, by implication, her problem:

[*The Song of the Lark*] set out to tell of an artist's awakening and struggle; . . . It should have been content to do that. I should have disregarded conventional design and stopped where my first conception stopped . . . What I cared about, and still care about, was the girl's escape; the play of blind chance, the way in which commonplace occurrences fell together to liberate her from commonness (*Song ix*).

In a sense, Cather is admitting that, like Thea, she cannot wholly rid herself of Moonstone, Colorado, or Red Cloud, Nebraska. It is the commonplace that she wants to convey in her prose.

In *The Home Place* Morris's narrator Clyde Muncy, a Nebraska native and ex-New Yorker who is also aware of these contrary attitudes and feelings, explains the plainsman's focus on the concrete surface:

I tell you, these crude looking people are delicate. They're soft when it comes to real vulgarity. I'd say the whole myth of the city slicker is built around that softness, and the fear they have of this complicated kind of indecency. They take a man at his face value, as they figure it's his own face, a fairly private affair, and the only one he has. They don't roll the eyelids back to peer inside of it. They don't leer at you with the candid camera eye. They lead what you call private lives, which is not so much what you know about them, as what you know is none of your dam business. (35-37).

Morris is saying here that this focus on the surface is a deliberate quality of character on these prairies, a result of the sparse nature of things, not a fault or a frivolous literary convention. Nor does this emphasis on the surface of things spring from an ignorance of their deeper significance, as Morris says near the end of *The Home Place*. Clyde tries to connect things and their meanings:

For thirty years I've had a clear idea of what the home place lacked, and why the old man pained me, but I've never really known what they had. I know now. But I haven't the word for it. The word beauty is not a Protestant thing. It doesn't describe what there is about an old man's shoes. The Protestant word for that is character. . . Perhaps all I'm saying is that character can be a form of passion, and that some things, these things, have that kind of character. (141-43)

Morris, as usual, gets to the heart of it. These qualities of frugality, these time-worn things, are not symbols of poverty or hardship or narrow materialism or a mean existence. They are the very core of the middle of America. That a literature of stark images and frugal characters should arise from this place and produce a body of literature so unified in language and image is not astonishing at all.

In Great Plains literature, the writers' struggle to focus on the commonplace, yet reveal deeper character of place and people in often overwhelming space, has resulted in common images, symbols and language. There is a unifying thread that ties Great Plains literature to place. Leonard Lutwack, in his study *The Role of Place in Literature*, points out that, like sounds in poetry, the physical qualities of place must be made to seem appropriate and symbolic. The writer uses language to establish the meaning of place. Even the most ordinary places take on symbolic meaning when they become associated with themes and tones.<sup>4</sup> Lutwack contends that although they may be rooted in fact, all places in literature are finally used for symbolic purposes. Some become archetypal: mountains symbolize aspiration; forests, peril and entrapment.<sup>5</sup>

Although the relationship between land and language is not unique to Great Plains literature, the vast expanses force writers to create meaning from an apparent void. Not surprisingly, writers return again and again to the same images and metaphors. One of the most pervasive of these prairie metaphors, that of prairie as ocean, can illustrate this relationship between place and prose. It is a rare plains writer who does not invoke the image of the sea of grass and a rare critic or observer who does not comment upon its ubiquity. Why this recurring comparison? One obvious factor is the space itself. The undulating, palpable emptiness and the absence of landmarks forced the pioneers to describe the vast space before them in the only terms they knew. There are more important symbolic similarities: both the prairie and the ocean can give a bountiful harvest of fish or grain, and both can destroy human's tiny ships and towns with capricious storms. Both present a featureless face of indifference, a sense of eternal possibility or annihilating isolation that can lead to madness. The image is, in yet another sense, ironic: the prairie begs for water; the life-giving element that threatens to destroy people at sea is withheld on the prairie with the same ultimate possibility. As a result, both voyagers and settlers must come to terms with water on the ocean or the prairie: the resulting layers have become not merely metaphors, but archetypal symbols.

The sea metaphor appears in the earliest descriptions of the region. The first explorers, men with no conscious literary aspirations, compare the unfamiliar rolling prairie with familiar seas. Colonel Richard Irving Dodge, an early arrival, opens his work, *The Plains of North America and Their Inhabitants* with this description: "Like an Ocean in its vast extent, in its monotony, and in its danger, it is like the Ocean in its romance, in its opportunities for heroism, and in the fascination it exerts on all those who come fairly within its influence." The first experience of "the Plains like the first sail with a cap full of wind is apt to be sickening."<sup>6</sup> Walter Prescott Webb points out that Josiah Gregg even suggested using maritime law to govern early prairie trading caravans. The early explorer Pike said, "I saw in my route, in various places, tracts of many leagues where the wind had thrown up sand in all the fanciful forms of the ocean's rolling wave, and on which not a speck of vegetable matter existed."<sup>7</sup>

By the time men and women began to write fictional accounts of the Great Plains, the image had become a conscious metaphor. The Norwegian writer O. E. Rølvaag, drawing on his years as a fisherman in his native land, weaves the familiar images into the opening pages of *Giants in The Earth*: "the track that [the caravan] left behind was like the wake of a boat—except that instead of widening out astern it closed in again."<sup>8</sup> The cow at the end of the wagon is "the rudder of the caravan" (5). They are advancing "deeper and deeper into a bluish-green infinity" (16). Per Hansa uses his watch, the sun and the stars—mariner's tools—to take his bearings (7).

The symbol persists in contemporary plains literature. For example, in his 1976 novel, *Beyond The Bedroom Wall*, Larry Woiwode uses the image to describe the immigrant Otto Neumiller's first reaction to the "virgin Dakota plain, as limitless as the sea to look upon. . . ." At first I didn't think there was such a place, seeing so much timber in Minnesota, but once I came across the Red River, I could feel the current of its waves"<sup>9</sup>

As Lutwack points out, a place is not emotional: space and climate in themselves have no fixed values. Rather, the qualities of a place are determined by the subjective responses of people.<sup>10</sup> Or, as Tuan explains, "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value."<sup>11</sup> It is not surprising that works identified with a specific place often evoke similar responses. The literature of a particular region does indeed acquire distinctive features that derive from place: the land—that emotionless space and climate—shapes the region's literature as writers and residents attempt to conceptualize their place with symbols.<sup>12</sup>

The land becomes a metaphorical mirror of the emotions of those who respond to it. On the Great Plains, the land is full of sharp contrasts: sudden changes in weather from hot to cold, wet to dry; a flat horizon cut by vertical grain elevators or isolated trees; bustling towns, isolated farms. The region's most persistent metaphors—the garden and the desert—reflect these climatological extremes. The first impression is often of the desert, ironically reflected in the ocean metaphor: a treeless, arid land, inhabited by dull people who live isolated

lives on scattered farms or in sterile small town societies. The garden—a metaphor that recurs even more frequently than the ocean motif—is an image of the future: the promise of the soil’s hidden fertility, the gradual appreciation of a simple life on the land. These contraries exist together in time and so provide symbols and often the source of conflict in Great Plains literature.

While the influence of place upon metaphor and symbol is obvious, the relationship between place and language is more difficult to establish. When writers use words to evoke images of space and climate, the words accumulate connotations and patterns that help to define a specific place. The way an author views the reality of place will control the language he or she uses: when a writer tries to describe a place with only two seasons and no rain, even the words dry up. Great Plains writing is direct and plain. The reasons are in part historical, part the result of literary tradition. Yankee and European immigrants who settled an open land (where, as Wright Morris repeatedly reminds us, the sky’s the limit) believed that a person could succeed regardless of linguistic sophistication. Although settlers valued learning, out of necessity their schools emphasized educational essentials. It was important to understand and to be understood, especially for the immigrant, but learning for its own sake took workers away from more important tasks.

## I

The style of Great Plains writing reflects the writers’ visions of space, light and wind, a place of sharp contrasts where the land can yield sudden success or failure. Such a place must be tied down firmly with words that convey a sharp image. Where the emphasis is on physical labor, words must be chosen carefully, even as one conserves physical energy, time and money. No need for three synonyms when one word suffices.

Passages from works by three writers, separated by time and place and therefore representative of the full range of Great Plains literature, can serve as models for analysis of some essential stylistic features of this literature. These novels focus on the artist, the sensitive individual who is isolated from the commonplace. The pattern is especially common in Great Plains literature, although of course it is not unique to the region. On the Great Plains, the artist, the sensitive individual, feels especially vulnerable. In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather’s Thea Kronborg avoids the constricting demands of her role as a member of the minister’s family by turning to music and to the small society of nonconformists she finds on Moonstone’s fringes. Sinclair Ross’ Mrs. Bentley, in *As for Me and My House*, has only her journal to talk to in her attempt to fathom the dried-up town, and the silent, discontented minister who is her husband. In Wright Morris’ *The Home Place*, Clyde Muncy is set apart as a returning “emigrant” with a family of strangers in tow. Like other isolates in Great Plains literature—Beret in Rølvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*, Sharon Rose in Morris’ *Plains Song*, Alpha Neumiller in Larry Woiwode’s *Beyond The Bedroom Wall*, Claude Wheeler in Cather’s *One of Ours*—Thea, Mrs. Bentley and Clyde symbolize the authors’

awareness of the struggle to reconcile place and character. All three novelists establish this separation through rather lengthy descriptions of towns that reveal some of the essential qualities of the language of Great Plains literature.<sup>13</sup>

The first passage is from Willa Cather's *Song of the Lark*, written in 1915.<sup>14</sup> In the first section, "Friends of Childhood," Cather uses the omniscient narrator to recount the childhood of Thea Kronborg in Moonstone, Colorado.

Seen from a balloon, Moonstone would have looked like a Noah's Ark town set out in the sand and lightly shaded by grey-green tamarisks and cottonwoods. A few people were trying to make soft maples grow in their turfed lawns, but the fashion of planting incongruous trees from the North Atlantic States had not become general then, and the frail, brightly painted desert town was shaded by the light-reflecting, wind-loving trees of the desert, whose roots are always seeking water and whose leaves are always talking about it, making the sound of rain. The long, porous roots of the cottonwood are irrepressible. They break into the well as rats do into granaries, and thieve the water. The long street which connected Moonstone with the depot settlement traversed in its course a considerable stretch of rough open country staked out in lots, but not built up at all, a weedy hiatus between the town and the railroad. When you set out along this street to go to the station, you noticed that the houses became smaller and farther apart, until they ceased altogether, and the board sidewalk continued its uneven course through sunflower patches, until you reached the solitary, new brick Catholic Church. The Church stood there because the land was given to the parish by the man who owned the adjoining waste lots, in the hope of making them more saleable—"Farrier's Addition," this patch of prairie was called in the clerk's office. An eighth of a mile beyond the church was a washout, a deep sand gully, where the board sidewalk became a bridge for perhaps fifty feet. (46-47)

In this account, Cather invites the reader into the story, to walk down the board sidewalk. Moonstone, seen from above, is a toy town on the vast landscape. Between the main town and the railroad, the link to the world, the town almost melts into the land, a "weedy hiatus." At the washout, the gully, someone has built a bridge in order to force a connection that will maintain the link between community and the outside world. Ark-like in the painted desert, the town is protected by the shade of native trees. This natural landscape invigorates Thea, who finds the society of Moonstone, in contrast, as shriveled and dry as the desert winds (32-40).



Cather, Ross and Morris emphasize the small marks of man against the sky. Cather's *Moonstone* is a "Noah's ark town" seen from a balloon. Ross emphasizes the "bare essentials of a landscape, sky and earth," and Morris calls the prairie a "rolling sea of grass." Photos by Diane Quantic.

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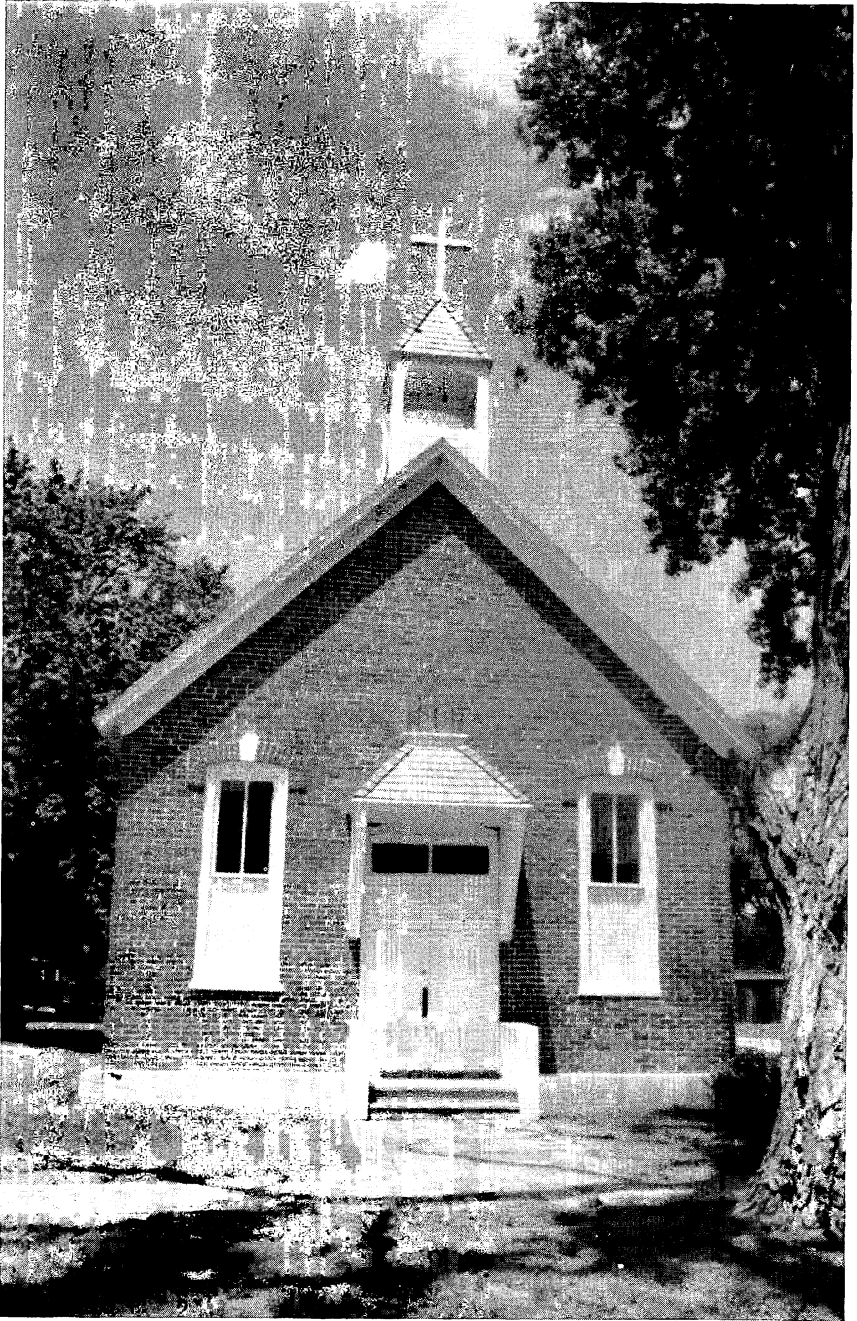
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The second passage is from Canadian writer Sinclair Ross' novel *As for Me and My House*, first published in 1941.<sup>15</sup> Here there is not an omniscient narrator, but Mrs. Bentley, a lonely and frustrated minister's wife, and the form is a diary in which she records the failure of her marriage, a result of her frustrations with her role in the small prairie town of Horizon, and with her husband's religious hypocrisy and hidden artistic nature. Despite the undercurrent of fear that reflects her disaffection with her physical and social situations, this passage occurs early enough in the novel that her bitterness has not yet clouded her objectivity entirely:

I turned and looked back at Horizon, the huddled little clutter of houses and stores, the five grain elevators, aloof and imper-turbable, like ancient obelisks, and behind, the dust clouds, lapping at the sky.

It was like one of Philip's drawings. There was the same tension, the same vivid immobility, and behind it all somewhere the same sense of transcendence.

I walked on, remembering how I used to think that only a great artist could ever paint the prairie, the vacancy and stillness of it,



**St. Juliana Catholic Church still stands between the depot and the town of Red Cloud, Nebraska, the town Cather calls Moonstone in *The Song of the Lark*.**



the bare essentials of a landscape, sky and earth, and how I used to look at Philip's work, and think to myself that the world would some day know of him.

I turned for home at the ravine where we sat in the snowstorm just a month ago. A freight train overtook me, and someone waved a towel from the caboose. When the clatter died away I sat down on a pile of ties to rest a few minutes. . . . The dust clouds behind the town kept darkening and thinning and swaying, a furtive tirelessness about the way they wavered and merged with one another that reminded me of northern lights in winter. It was like a quivering backdrop, before which was about to be enacted some grim, primeval tragedy. The little town cowered close to earth as if to hide itself. The elevators stood up, passive, stoical. All around me ran a hurrying little whisper through the grass. I waited there till nearly suppertime. (59).

Ross' town, like Cather's, is a "huddled little clutter": in fact, Ross uses the word *transcience*, the feeling that many Great Plains authors attempt to evoke in their descriptions of place. Ross' description of space is harsher than Cather's, where the town is replaced for a distance by colorful sunflower patches. Ross uses the image of dust clouds "like a quivering backdrop" to convey the vacancy and stillness, the bare essentials of sky and earth, that threaten to engulf the town. The uncertain continuation of human existence that Morris and Cather allude to with metaphors of the sea, Ross symbolizes with dust.

In Ross, space is quite literally nothing. The passing train is only a freight carrying things, not people. There is no ark to protect the town that huddles and cowers. In Mrs. Bentley's eyes, the false fronts are symbols of the residents of Horizon who present a hypocritical façade to the town, especially to the preacher and his wife, which they reciprocate. The dust clouds forebode not only physical tragedy but also reflect the narrator's state of mind as well: the land is to a large extent the source of her depression and impending personal tragedy. In this passage, Mrs. Bentley is talking to herself, unconscious of her reader-listener. The focus is on her, and on her indifferent husband, Philip. She is alone physically and emotionally with her inner thoughts, and the heavy use of first person pronouns reflects this self-absorption.

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The final passage is from *The Home Place*, Wright Morris' 1948 novel narrated by Clyde Muncy, one of Morris' self-effacing narrators, who returns with his family to Lone Tree, Nebraska, searching for a place to raise his family.<sup>16</sup> Like Morris himself, Clyde views the plains with a trace of irony that gives emphasis to his literal and metaphorical images:

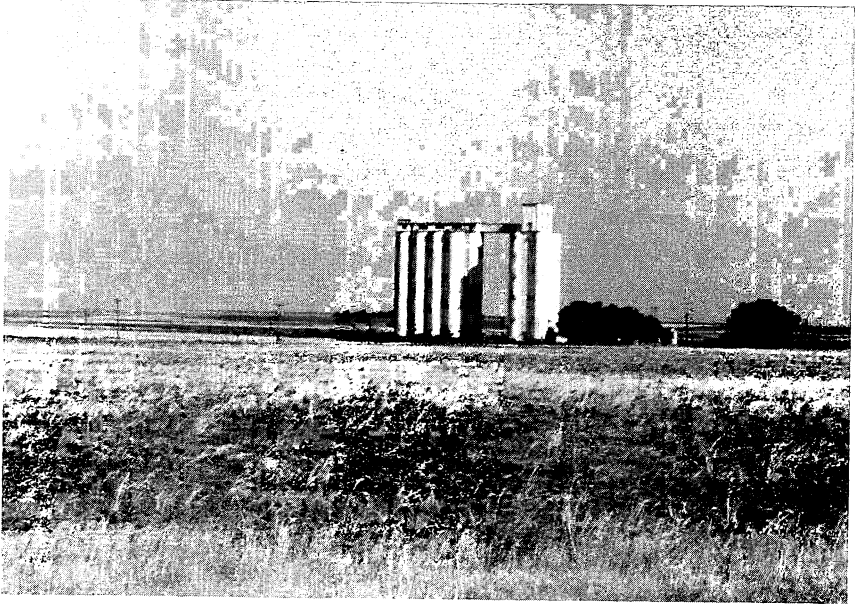
When the old man first came to the plains there was a rolling sea of grass, and a lone tree, so the story goes, where they settled the town. They put up a few stores, facing the west and the setting sun like so many tombstones, which is quite a bit what a country store has in mind. You have the high, flat slab at the front, with a few lines of fading inscription, and then the sagging mound of the store, the contents, in the shadow behind. Later, if the town lasts, they put through some tracks, with a water tank for the whistle stop, and if it rained, now and then, they'd put up the monument. That's the way these elevators, these great plains monoliths, strike me. There's a simple reason for grain elevators, as there is for everything, but the force behind the reason, the reason for the reason, is the land and the sky. There's too much sky out here, for one thing, too much horizontal, too many lines without stops, so that the exclamation, the perpendicular, had to come. Anyone who was born and raised on the plains knows that the high false front on the Feed Store, and the white water tower, are not a question of vanity. It's a problem of being. Of knowing you are there. On a good day, with a slanting sun, a man can walk to the edge of his town and see the light on the next town, ten miles away. In the sea of corn, that flash of light is like a sail. It reminds a man the place is still inhabited. I know what it is Ishmael felt, or Ahab, for that matter—these are the whales of the great sea of grass. (75-76).

Morris, like Cather, addresses the reader directly, inviting “you” to view the slab front of the country store. He wants the reader to know what is on the surface.

The town is, ironically, created in images of death: the stores of the new town look like tombstones, the country store, like the slab and mound of a grave. But Morris also points up the striking contrast of nature's horizontal and man-made vertical: the false fronts and the water tower are proofs of being. The elevator provides an exclamation point: we are here. This is not a mere gesture, a casual wave of a towel from a train, but an attempt to *change space*: “it reminds a man that the place is still inhabited.” Morris directly asserts the influence of the land: humans invent vertical lines to counteract horizontal space. Without such symbols, Morris believes, humans would be lost in the flat, unshaded landscape. The passage ends with yet another variation on the ocean metaphor, evoking specifically the nameless terror of the great white whale that lurks within the soul and threatens to surface not only in seas of water but in seas of grass as well: the sail or the elevator signifies its failure to completely engulf humanity.

## II

The images in these passages reveal an important element in these deceptively simple words. Like dust, they accumulate. Even in these three brief

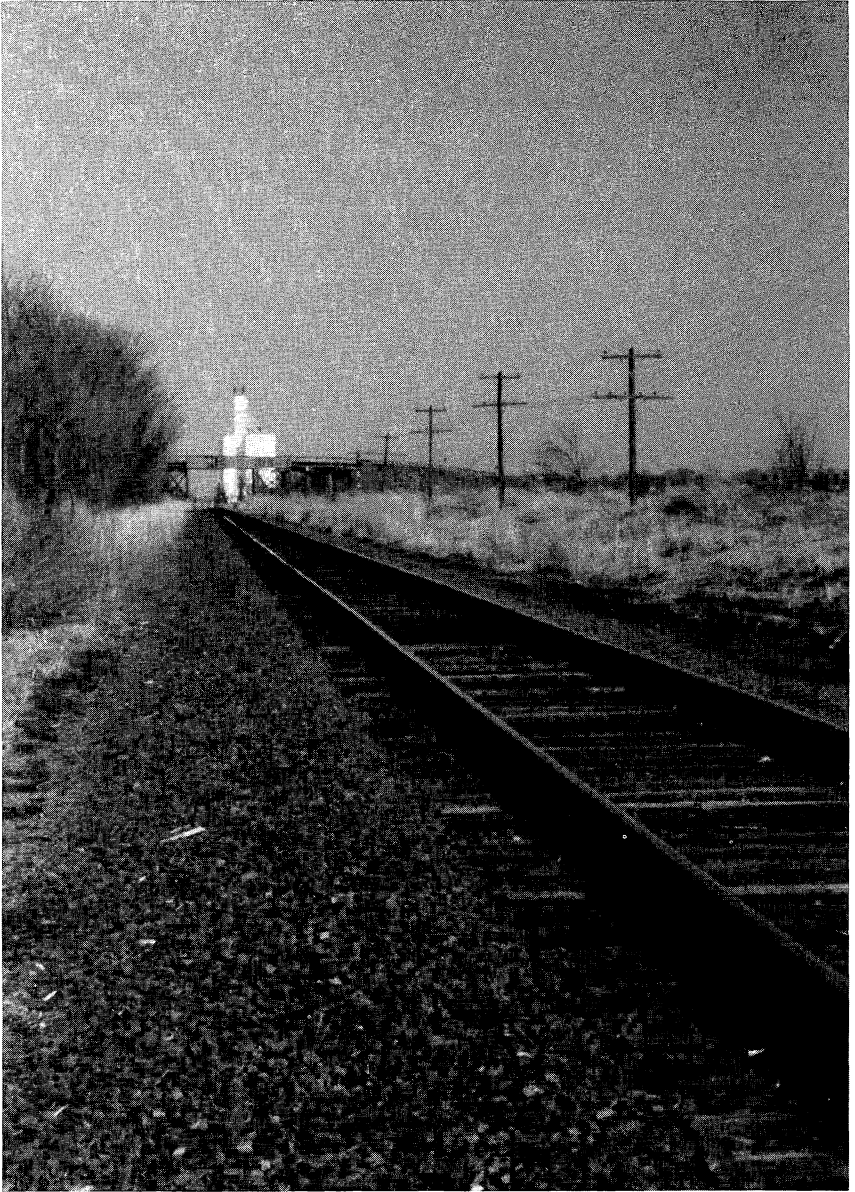


**Ross calls grain elevators “aloof and imperturable, like ancient obelisks,” and Morris refers to them as “monuments . . . great plains monoliths.”**

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passages, images recur: the sea, the town, the elevator, the train, the store, the trees. One might assume that in a landscape supposedly bereft of concrete detail authors would merely describe again and again what *is* there, and yet it is clear that Cather, Ross and Morris mean for these objects to be more than descriptions of what is on the surface. Their images are of fragile, transient human existence: the familiar ocean metaphor serves two of them, and in all three the depot and the train symbolize a weak link to civilization. But it is the human relationship to space that is the focus of these descriptions. In Great Plains literature, one must first come to terms with the land.

In all three passages, these tenuous clusters are tied to civilization by the slim thread of the railroad. The depot at the edge of Cather’s town, the casual wave of greeting to Ross’ Mrs. Bentley from a passing caboose, the tracks, tank and whistle stop that signal permanence in Morris’ Lone Tree affirm the existence of these places engulfed in space. For these novelists and other Great Plains writers, the train is a recurring symbol. It is a link to the outside: a provider of goods and employment, proof that the town itself has a reason to be and, perhaps most importantly, a means of leaving the dust, the wind and the horizontal. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea’s friend, a railroad man named Ray Kennedy, is killed in a train wreck and it is his insurance policy, naming Thea as beneficiary, that ironically provides the means for her to leave Moonstone—by train. In Morris’ fiction, the depot, the track and the sometimes violent collision of man and machine are



The railroad tracks provide an escape from the town for Mrs. Bentley in Ross' *As for Me and My House*, and Morris refers to them as a sign of faith, put there "if the town lasts" in *The Home Place*.

persistent symbols of the sharp distinctions between here and there (space), and then and now (time). To Ross' Mrs. Bentley, trains that come and go represent an escape, however brief, from the stifling town society. In another incident in *As for Me and My House*, Mrs. Bentley and a friend hitch a ride on a hand car and pull up at the station just as the ladies are leaving the tea she has excused herself from, feigning illness. The scene is a brief instance of comic relief in Ross' grim novel.

However, the transient train is not the symbolic center of these and other Great Plains novels. It is the land, and, more specifically, the life-giving water that is the source of the most persistent symbols in Great Plains literature. In Cather, the cottonwoods, boring deep into the soil, symbolize what must be done to persevere. If people insist on transplanting not only trees but also attitudes about what is appropriate for this land, they will shrivel and die as surely as the turfed lawns and incongruous trees will die in summer's heat. Like cottonwoods and thieving rats, plains inhabitants must learn to derive their subsistence from the land's hidden resources. For Morris, the water tower and the elevator—symbols of life-giving water and food—remind him that he is there, existing. In Ross's novel the dust, a result of the absence of water, threatens to obliterate everything as surely as a storm at sea would sink a ship.

These recurring symbols of water, and the prairie-sea metaphor are significant, but Great Plains writers draw upon other distinctive characteristics of the plains and prairies. They create flat towns, hidden by trees or lost in space to contrast small man with the immensity of nature. As indicators of a human presence, Ross and Morris use the grain elevator and Cather uses the church. While Cather's church, new and solitary, provides a simple note of optimism, the elevator is more problematical. In Ross' passage, the elevator, aloof and impenetrable, rises like an obelisk to a faded civilization. To Morris, it is a monolith that symbolizes human presence. Only a passing reference in Ross's novel, it is a persistent symbol in Morris, just as the cottonwood is in Cather. The elevator, in Morris's view, symbolizes attempts to control the horizontal that threatens to flatten not only the horizon but the inhabitants themselves.

Great Plains literature is full of similar symbolic applications of ordinary objects. The point here is that the writers' response to the land itself and to the tenuous signs of human habitation on the plains and prairies are the sources of particular metaphors and symbols. Once again, the act of *naming* creates definable place from apparently undefined space.

To evoke these images and describe this featureless landscape, a Great Plains style has developed, a subset of the plain prose style that is evident throughout American literary history. Although other writers are just as adept at creating scenes with a minimum of words, the Great Plains novelists consciously (and perhaps ironically) focus on the minimum to reveal essential emotions in a spare setting. Wright Morris' sparse prose reflects his view of the plains where people and words dry up. "The shield of the country. . . features a pleated upper lip," he has often said.<sup>17</sup> As Morris has explained, in *Lone Tree* the appropriate details "settled into their places, their roles, as icons: a hotel, a lone tree, a railroad, a cattle

loader. These artifacts constituted 'the scene' in the way movable props located a Western movie. . . . It is the emotion that is strong, not the details."<sup>18</sup> In her essay "The Novel *Démeuble*," Cather spoke of her attempt to write the "unfurnished novel": "How wonderful it would be. . . if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and. . . leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre. . . for the play of emotions."<sup>19</sup>

Cather's images of trees and street are sustained by simple concrete words; strings of adjectives—"the frail, brightly painted desert town. . . shaded by the light-reflecting, wind-loving trees"; appositives—"a washout, a deep sand gully"; restrictive phrases—"the long street which connected Moonstone with the depot settlement"; and concrete subjects and verbs: "Moonstone looked," "people were trying," "the town was shaded," "the church stood."

Sinclair Ross' prose reflects the narrator's journal form. Some paragraphs are only one sentence long. He uses parallel structure—"the same tension, the same vivid immobility . . . the same sense of transcendence"; clauses—"remembering how I used to think . . . and how I used to look"; and appositives—"Horizon, the huddled little clutter of houses and stores," to draw out sentences that reflect the narrator's meditations on the town and her husband. He ties these short paragraphs together by repeating the same subject-verb pattern in five sentences: "I turned and looked," "I walked on," "I turned for home," "I sat down," "I waited." Ross' sentences start abruptly and focus on the narrator. Oxymorons such as "vivid invisibility" underline the narrator's embittered statements and contradictory emotions. Even single words can pile up meaning in Ross' prose. The word *behind* gains force with repetition and near references: the dust clouds are behind: they obscure the town, the people, the land and ultimately life itself. Repeated twice, this image of dust behind the village adds to the portrait of the cowering, stoical town.

Wright Morris' description of Lone Tree seems more loosely written than the other two examples. He begins six sentences with *there*, *that* or *it*, pronouns that have no clear antecedents. Four sentences begin with introductory clauses or phrases: "In the sea of corn," "On a good day." He interrupts his sentences with conversational tags, "now and then," "as there is for everything," and with other devices that separate subject and verb or delay both until the end of the sentence. The effect of all this is that when the parts come together, they have greater weight. The first sentence in the passage illustrates all these devices. There is an introductory clause ("When the old man first came to the plains"), an expletive and verb ("there was"), and a conversational interrupter ("so the story goes"), before the long-delayed subject that is the point of the sentence: "where they settled the town." He repeats this rambling pattern in other sentences: "Anyone who was born and raised on the plains knows that the high false front on the Feed Store, and the white water tower, are not a question of vanity." Indeed, Morris uses these devices—often with the same clichés—repeatedly, just as Cather gathers layers of long descriptions up into her orderly sentences.

Great Plains writers draw most of their images and symbols from what is there—lone trees, trains, towns, elevators, water towers, windmills, low houses, barns and the patchwork of farm fields. Images are held together by comparisons and allusions. Ross uses similes to compare grain elevators to obelisks, the town to a painting, the dust to the northern lights. Cather's similes are of Noah's Ark and trees that are thieving rats. Morris compares stores to tombstones and elevators to monuments, sails on the sea, or whales in a sea of grass. The vast emptiness moves Cather to personify the trees, with talking leaves and robber roots, and Ross to give human qualities to the ironically named town of Horizon itself as it huddles and cowers, and to the passive, stoical grain elevators.

Sparse conversational language unifies a society because it is accessible to everyone. We know how Mrs. Bentley, Clyde Muncy and Cather the narrator feel about their towns and their places in their respective societies. Morris' narrator, Clyde Muncy, is a writer who has been living in New York, yet he can converse with his Aunt Clara and the codgers in the barber shop with an easy familiarity because he was born in Lone Tree. How long he has been gone and where he has been, as long as he speaks plainly, are immaterial to Lone Tree. Individuals, whether in conversation or narration, focus on the immediate present, on the scene before them or the task to be completed. Philosophical speculations on good and evil, social niceties or class distinctions are insignificant against the reality of a landscape created from space.

This prose gathers emotional power from accumulated detail until the image, the attending metaphor and the deeper symbol become apparent. This language is an especially fitting vehicle for expressing values. In Great Plains literature, work is one's primary purpose, and the source of any reward is satisfaction with the effort, not material gain. To underline this fundamental Great Plains attitude, characters are often suspicious of words or ideas that do not reflect practical reality.<sup>20</sup>

Most Great Plains writers describe the vast space between land and sky in terms very like those that Ross, Cather and Morris use: space scarcely touched by natural or man-made landmarks. This image often becomes a part of the motivation in these novels. Characters are drawn to the open spaces or repelled by them. The resulting conflict causes events to occur or not occur. Conflict is often represented by tangible things much smaller than trains and grain elevators. In most Great Plains novels, *things* take on significance beyond their actual value for the characters because they bring relief from the stifling, concrete town and annihilating abstract space. In *The Song of the Lark* Thea values the German tailor Fritz Kohler's tapestry as a representation of a fantastic world of color unimaginable in Moonstone. While Thea realizes fulfillment in music, Mrs. Bentley in *As for Me and My House* finds in music a retreat that symbolizes her unfulfilled sexual desire as her husband's bleak drawings reveal his deep aversion to the town and to his wife. In *The Home Place* and the companion novel, *The World in the Attic*, Clyde Muncy's pilgrimage to Lone Trees is a search for himself in two old houses, symbols of the past he is trying to recreate for his children.<sup>21</sup> But simple

things—a rug, a rocker, a pair of overalls—have collected smells and shapes that cannot be lightly cast aside. All of these images that become symbols are drawn from the surface of the world, an empty space that men and women fill with objects that reveal intricate relationships and conflicts.

The language used to create the setting of these plains and prairie novels is often stark. The author creates something almost palpable out of words that describe empty space and light. As we have seen in this analysis of only three short passages, in which the same images recur, the number of devices, like the sparse landscape itself, seems, in one sense, limited; however, the writers' variations and interpretations of these realities are infinite like the prairie horizon itself, so that the setting, while always familiar, is at the same time always different: Horizon huddles, Lone Tree stands perpendicular, Moonstone floats in a sea of sunflowers.

The important point, finally, is not the simple language or the stark prairie landscape. Nor is it merely the recognition that commonalities exist. Similarities could arise from an endless stream of imitation. Certainly, the influence of literary tradition influences these writers even as they work to create language from what they *see*. But, in Great Plains literature, the common elements that inform symbols and images, language attitudes, and values, arise from the land itself and the emotional significance that people assign to place. As Wright Morris says, it is emotion that generates image-making: it is emotion that processes memory of place and experience.<sup>22</sup> The language of a prairie or plains novel springs from that memory of the region, not from imitation or convention.

Like a piece of quilt, these Great Plains writers impose order on their works that only hints at the disorder that such simplicity arises from. Laid out flat, the intricate design seems too simple even to be noticed, but each tiny detail reaches down through all the layers to the back of the design. The work that fit each piece into the larger pattern has tied the pieces into a whole. The intricate blocks come together to create the mosaic of literature about the plains and prairies, a collection of works as distinct as each quilt square, held together by language, the unifying thread.

## Notes

A version of this paper was presented to students and faculty at Sofia University in Sofia, Bulgaria, in March 1987.

1. Great Plains literature originated with the early reports of explorers and travellers. In the late nineteenth century natives of the region such as Hamlin Garland, E.W. Howe and William Allen White gained national attention with their grim stories of hard work and disillusionment. For literary history and criticism of this literature, see especially Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950); Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (1984); and these related studies: Annette Kolodny, *Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975) and *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontier*



1630-1860 (1984); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea* (1964); John Milton, *The Novel of the American West* (1980); Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: the Myth of the Frontier* (1985) and *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier* (1973).

2. A representative sample of Great Plains works in addition to those analyzed in the text, includes: Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1918), *O Pioneers!* (1913), *One of Ours* (1922), *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), *A Lost Lady* (1923); Hamlin Garland, *Main Travelled Roads* (1891), *Boy Life on the Prairie* (1899); Haldeman-Julius, *Dust* (1921); Ron Hansen, *Nebraska: Stories* (1988); Kent Haruf, *The Tie That Binds* (1984); E.W. Howe, *The Story of a Country Town* (1883); John Ise, *Sod and Stubble* (1936); Phillip Kimball, *Harvesting Ballads* (1984); Eric Larsen, *An American Memory* (1988); Mela Meisner Lindsay, *Shukar Balan: The White Lamb* (1976); Frederick Manfred, *The Chokecherry Tree* (1948), *The Golden Bowl* (1944); Wright Morris, *Ceremony in Lone Tree* (1959), *Field of Vision* (1956) *Works of Love* (1949), *The World in the Attic* (1949), *Plains Song for Female Voices* (1980); Edwin Moses *An Astonishment of Heart* (1984); Ole Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (1927); Mari Sandoz, *Slogum House* (1937), *Old Jules* (1935); Dorothy Scarborough, *The Wind* (1925); Hope Williams Sykes, *Second Hoeing* (1935); Douglas Unger, *Leaving the Land* (1984); William Allen White, *The Real Issue: A Book of Kansas Stories* (1897), *In the Heart of a Fool* (1918), *A Certain Rich Man* (1909); Larry Woiwode, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* (1976).

3. (Minneapolis, 1977), 17.
4. (Syracuse, 1984), 34.
5. Lutwack, 31.
6. Ed. Wayne Kime. (Newark, Delaware, 1989), 59.
7. Webb, 155.
8. (New York, 1927), 3. Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
9. (New York, 1976), 26.
10. Lutwack, 35.
11. Tuan, 6.
12. See Tuan, "Introduction," 3-7.
13. These passages were selected as typical of the individual authors' prose and other Great Plains authors. To facilitate comparison, the author selected narrative descriptions of towns. Similar passages are found in nearly every Great Plains novel. The focus of this paper is on what the words on the page convey to the reader. For this reason, factors relating to the larger contexts of the individual novels have been largely omitted from this discussion.
14. Rev. 1937 (Boston, 1963). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
15. (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1978). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
16. (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1968). Subsequent references will be cited in the text.
17. See, for example, *God's Country and My People* (New York, 1968)
18. "Origins: Reflections on Emotion, Memory and Imagination," in *Conversations with Wright Morris*, ed. Robert Knoll (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1977), 154-55.
19. *Not Under Forty* 1922 (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1988) 51.
20. The image of the silent husband who speaks only about his work and the wife or child who longs for something more is not unique to the Canadian writer Ross. Hamlin Garland, Ole Rølvaag, Mari Sandoz, Martha Ostenso, and contemporary writers such as Morris, David Unger, Larry Woiwode, Ed Moses, Kent Haruf and Eric Larsen have created variations upon this theme.
21. 1949 (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1971).
22. Knoll, 155.