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A Critical Inquiry into the Character Strengths of Alexandra Bergman in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*

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Abstract:

The paper focuses on the strengths and virtues of Alexandra Bergson, the central character of Willa Cather's novel O Pioneers! (1913). The novel deals with the harsh life of immigrants in America at the turn of the 20th century and describes the ways by which the pioneers sought to establish their existence and cope with their life's tragedies. Using the VIA-IS (Values in Action Inventory of Strengths) classification, the paper attempts to show how Alexandra Bergson's character strengths contribute to the value-based paradigm represented in the novel.

Introduction

In his perceptive article 'Epilogue. Why Willa Cather? A Retrospective' (2021), John J. Murphy, an influential American scholar of Willa Cather, recalled his experience of a three-day symposium on Cather organized in Rome in 2014.

"What dawned on me at the end of the three days", Murphy writes, "was that none of the papers, including my own, asked or attempted to answer why we would want to promote the reading of Cather. Is it for her art? Her humanity? For the life principles manifest in her fiction?" (2021, p. 300)

Although the present article does not aim at answering Murphy's questions directly, it has been inspired by his provocative inquiries which encourage us to study the traditional aspects of

Cather's work anew, from fresh perspectives which rely on current knowledge of positive psychology and ethics.

Willa Cather's widely accepted place in the classic canon of Western literature suggests that her works are timeless and worthy of continuous re-examination by readers and critics. Although the many critical approaches (feminist, multiculturalist, biographical, etc.) through which her work has been studied have successfully convinced us about the depth and value of her writing (Frus – Corkin, 1997, p. 207), this article attempts to shift attention to a more conservative perspective of Cather's work. By combining the traditional methods of literary analysis and interpretation with the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), the classification borrowed from the modern field of positive psychology, the paper examines the protagonist's character strengths in *O Pioneers!* (1913), one of Cather's best-known works. Described as "a foundational text in Cather's canon" (Rabin, 2007), *O Pioneers!* is the first novel in her Nebraska series which includes *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *My Ántonia* (1918), and it initiates the themes, characters, conflicts and style for which Cather has become admired and appreciated.

While VIA-IS has been used primarily as a psychological assessment measure, our attempt is to apply it in the analysis of a character of classic literary work. Literary classics are expected to model universal human values and their characters frequently possess virtues and traits which are generally regarded as positive and life-forwarding. Our goal is, therefore, to re-read Cather's novel and to offer an in-depth look into its protagonist Alexandra Bergson. Our ambition is not to create a general summary of all her character strengths, but rather to recognize major ones and discuss the meaning they have and the patterns they create in the novel.

Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) and literary analysis

Designed by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman in cooperation with numerous other scholars and researchers in the early 2000s, Values in Action Inventory of Strengths measures and identifies character strengths and virtues - the qualities of moral excellence. Peterson's and Seligman's typology recognizes 6 main virtues and 24 corresponding strengths of character, which are, in fact, "pathways to those virtues" (Niemić, 2013).

The following table shows 6 virtues and their corresponding strengths as they are identified in VIA-IS.

VIRTUES	STRENGTHS OF CHARACTER
Wisdom and Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity • Curiosity • Judgment • Love of learning • Perspective
Courage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bravery • Perseverance • Honesty • Zest
Humanity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love • Kindness • Social intelligence
Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork • Fairness • Leadership
Temperance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forgiveness • Humility • Prudence • Self-regulation
Transcendence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciation of beauty and excellence • Gratitude • Hope • Humour • Spirituality

While one's individual inventory of strengths is usually found through the questionnaire, the identification of a fictional character's strengths will be done through the close examination of their behavior, responses and communication as they are represented in direct textual evidence of literary work.

Hope as Alexandra's dominant strength

Hope is the most vision-oriented virtue, closely connected with the life of pioneers whose second generation Alexandra represents. As one of the basic emotional and motivational states of mind, hope is oriented toward the future, and indicates a strong belief that upcoming events will bring rewards and happiness which will outweigh the struggles and challenges of the present and the past (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 572). Seligman's classification defines hope as "expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 30). According to Rick Snyder's Hope Theory, hope is a cognitively based construct that consists of two components:

agency, the willpower to achieve a goal, and pathways, the perceived ability to generate ways to achieve that goal. (Gallagher & Lopez, 2018, p. 220) Hope is therefore not based on the passive faith in the best possible future but it is deeply grounded in *taking action* towards achieving it. This is how hope functions also in Alexandra Bergson's life. As her major strength, hope helps her navigate through difficult life circumstances, when she must take responsibility over the lives of others or, at the end, when she finds herself in despair and abandoned by life. Alexandra's father, her advocate and supporter, dies quite early in the story. There is strong evidence in the novel of their close relationship; he openly admires her wisdom and love of learning and relies heavily on "her resourcefulness and good judgment" (Cather, 1991, p. 16). Alexandra is very different from her industrious brothers Lou and Oscar who use their hands but rarely their heads as Alexandra does, and her father compares her to his own father, with his "simple direct way of thinking things out" (Cather, 1991, p. 17).

After John Bergson's death the family bonds are shaken and doubts concerning the future become more acute than ever before. The central question of what to do with the land which has no likely prospect to be fertile becomes the fixed point around which the opinions of the family members rotate. Alexandra's strong conviction not to sell the land and her even more outlandish dream to *buy more* show her as much full of hope as of courage. In an emotionally charged conversation, Lou and Oscar try to persuade her to sell their property, supporting their convictions by the information that Chris Arnson traded his land. Quick-witted Alexandra argues back that the current owner of the land, the real estate agent Charley Fuller, knows what he is doing. She is sure they must keep the land, hoping that "Some day the land itself will be worth more than all we can ever raise on it." (Cather, 1991, p. 44) As it happens, her hopes will come true and Alexandra will become a wealthy woman and respected leader of the community. From the hindsight, all the past decisions with uncertain outcomes suddenly look different, as part of the hopeful vision and a direct road to prosperity. Readers sympathise with Alexandra's intuition and hope because they know that they would lead her to a flourishing future and expansion of her wealth; they would probably think about her actions differently, had there been a less optimistic ending to her story.

Although she has always been a strong-willed woman, it is amidst the circumstances which follow the death of her father when Alexandra grows most in endurance and resilience. She fully embraces her new position and responsibilities in the family, and always has a positive attitude towards the future. She is brave, unafraid to risk, and her acts are guided by the powerful

combination of intuition and rationality. She is a visionary who always provides people around her with care, hope, positive energy and the will to sustain hardships.

An important scene in which hope is central to Alexandra's action also takes place in the last part of the book. This may sound contrary to what is in fact described in the novel: Alexandra is weaker than ever before, and she almost gives up on life after the death of her brother Emil and her prison visit to his murderer Frank Shabata. Throughout the novel, there are abundant scenes of Alexandra's zest, perseverance and resilience. She is a courageous woman, open to new challenges, who strongly believes in the power of hope. Yet, in the final part of the novel, she suddenly appears very delicate and vulnerable, as a woman who has failed to cope with the mixed emotions of guilt, regret and shame. The scene when worried Ivar finds Alexandra by the grave of her father is aptly illustrative of the sadness which permeates her story until Carl returns. "As she lay alone in the dark, it occurred to her for the first time that perhaps she was actually tired of life", writes Cather about Alexandra's feelings (Cather, 1991, p. 206). This tiredness actually never ceases and although her shared future with Carl gives hope for the life of peace and inner freedom, her story as a daring pioneering woman is over. "Do you feel at peace with the world here? I think we shall be very happy," (Cather, 1991, p. 227) says Alexandra to Carl. There is hope, but of a very different kind than the hope she possessed when she embarked on her life quest of changing the land she loved and lived for.

Though there is a degree of sentimentality in those last pages, Cather manages to create here a symbolic bridge, an overarching motif of hope that connects the vision of her youth with the mature hopeful vision of an aging woman. Both visions contain an unceasing faith in the promises of the land, but differ significantly in Alexandra's personal prospects. While the young Alexandra's hope has no borders and her vision of the future includes both her own story and the story of the land, the mature Alexandra is fully aware of her mortality and of the fact that her personal life is unimportant compared to the ever renewable gifts of the earth. Yet, human mortality is not a burden or obstacle for her but rather an accepted part of the great life circle of nature which she fully embraces and recognizes as meaningful. By her openness and ease with which she accepts the finality of life, Alexandra becomes a true representative of transcendence, the virtue which forges connections to the larger universe and provides meaning to a person's existence. During her entire life Alexandra showed that her values reach outside the individual and are concerned to a great extent with the lives of others, yet in the final pages of the book she proves to be ready to embrace the ultimate universal condition of life.

Alexandra's virtue of humanity and temperance

Although hope, the virtue of transcendence, is in our interpretation Alexandra's major strength, the virtue of humanity, represented by the strengths of love, kindness and social intelligence, is also very important. Seligman defines the strengths of humanity as "interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others." (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 30) Alexandra's conduct towards other people is the most significant evidence of these strengths. She frequently shows her social intelligence and, as a result, is able to get on with most people despite holding opposite views on the world. One of the most significant traits of her personality is empathy; she treats people with respect and she has the ability to perceive the world from multiple angles. Amidst the abundant textual evidence of Alexandra's kindness to others, her relationship with Ivar stands apart and reveals fully her compassion and care. Ivar, whose strange life style combines deep spirituality and love of nature with the exceptional skill of animal-doctoring, has always been a socially excluded man. At the beginning of the novel, he is just a harmless immigrant with eccentric ideas and opinions, who lived alone in a distant and secluded place and believed that "the fewer neighbors he had, the fewer temptations." (Cather, 1991, p. 25) As his health deteriorates, Alexandra invites him to live in her household. Similar to the situation after the death of her father when Alexandra had to advocate for her decision to keep and expand the land, at this painful moment of Ivar's social isolation, she becomes his forceful protector. Ivar's presence in Alexandra's household is perceived as a threat by her brothers who accuse him of aggressive behaviour and seem to be anxious about his uncanny ability to give controversial advice which always brings rewards. When they mention Ivar's unconventional ways as an argument to convince Alexandra to put the old man into an asylum, she refuses to accept it and continues to treat Ivar with kindness and understanding:

"Mistress," he began faintly, without raising his eyes, "the folk have been looking coldly at me of late. You know there has been talk." "Talk about what, Ivar?" "About sending me away; to the asylum." Alexandra put down her sewing-basket. "Nobody has come to me with such talk," she said decidedly. "Why need you listen? You know I would never consent to such a thing." (Cather, 1991, p. 67)

Ivar's life wisdom and kindness must have reminded Alexandra of her father's personality and his unfailing energy to cope with life's difficulties. Her protection of Ivar was her most natural response and self-less expression of gratitude. It was an act of love, of the kind which a daughter

feels towards her father, or a man to their faithful and devoted friend. Another example of a relationship in which Alexandra becomes a shelter for the person who feels estranged and unwanted because of their otherness, is Alexandra's attitude towards Mrs. Lee, the mother of her sister-in-law Annie. Just as with Ivar, Alexandra allows Mrs. Lee to be different and accepts her otherness with compassion and understanding:

"Alexandra shook with laughter. "Poor old Mrs. Lee! They won't let her wear nightcaps, either. Never mind; when she comes to visit me, she can do all the old things in the old way, and have as much beer as she wants. We'll start an asylum for old-time people, Ivar."

(Cather, 1991, p. 70)

Thanks to her social intelligence, Alexandra is capable not only of showing kindness but also of recognizing social prejudices, and her position and authority allow her to intervene in cases when harm is done or when others are treated unfairly.

Another example of Alexandra's rightful conduct can be seen in her attitude towards the hired Swedish girls who become her helpers, devoted companions and members of the family. Her kindness and respect give them the opportunity to find secure work positions and her genuine engagement in their lives proves to be a great impetus for them to better their future.

The final chapter of the novel, in which Alexandra experiences a heavy turmoil of emotions, including self-guilt, regret and shame, shows another key virtue of hers, temperance. Seligman defines the strengths of temperance as "strengths that protect against excess." (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 30) Temperance is represented by forgiveness, humility, prudence and self-regulation, all of which feature significantly in the concluding part of the book. After Emil's death, Alexandra realizes how mysterious a human condition it can in fact be. She feels responsible for the life of Frank Shabata who becomes a crucially important catalyst of her emotions in the final part of her story. Her dedication to Frank's condition, her compassion and heartfelt sympathy prove her to be a moral winner in the tragedy of human life.

The virtue of temperance is further observable in Alexandra's attitude towards money. In her novels, Cather intentionally and repeatedly criticized the materialistic concerns of the society she lived in and frequently incorporated morally blemished characters into her stories to highlight the difference between their approach to life and the values represented by the idealists who adhere to the timeless and culturally universal moral ideas (Bash, 1973, p. 157). In *O Pioneers!*, Cather uses Alexandra as an idealist character opposed to her greedy and quick-tempered brothers. Alexandra is very direct about her disinterest in money, and she states it

explicitly in her words addressed to Carl whom she wants to persuade to stay regardless of her brothers' objections. "I don't need money. But I have needed you for a great many years", (Cather, 1991, p. 139) she says, emphasizing that she treasures relationships and social interaction above all.

Conclusion

The character of Alexandra is a hallmark of virtuosity and it is easy to find the evidence of all 24 character strengths in her personality. Although some of them are less obvious, or rather less presented in the textual evidence of her descriptions, speech or conduct (such as humour or spirituality), there are relatively many strengths that can be identified in several places. What makes the analysis demanding, is that similarly to the real life, strengths rarely appear as separate and easily recognizable qualities in fiction and boundaries between them are frequently blurred which makes their identification challenging. This happens, for example, when Alexandra acts as a leader, yet she also uses her social intelligence, kindness and fairness. Her love of learning is combined with curiosity and teamwork, her humility with gratitude and forgiveness. This is not to undermine the merit of our approach, but rather to admit that exactness and rigor in such an analysis are difficult to achieve and the suggested interpretation should be seen primarily as an invitation to future discussion and further inquiries into the psychology of Cather's characters and into her novel in general.

In our reading, Cather's novel begins and ends with hope identified as Alexandra's central character strength. Hope serves her as a tool for overcoming the hardships of everyday life and consequently makes a crucial difference between success and failure. Hope is also, above all, a representative strength of transcendence, the virtue which Cather highlights at the end of the novel and creates a powerful value paradigm based on the transcendence of an individual life. Its meaning becomes thus embedded in the universal condition of mankind and its willingness to accept individual's ephemerality.

Alexandra's value system has been further analysed by focusing on another virtue – humanity. Undoubtedly, it is one of her most distinctive personality traits and Cather incorporates it into many situations of her protagonist's life. Alexandra's social intelligence helps her to defend her own convictions and navigate successfully in the many complicated events she is forced to endure.

Cather's depiction of temperance, the last virtue of Alexandra analysed in this paper, gives further emphasis on the character's impeccable personality. Alexandra's attentive behaviour to Frank Shabata, her humility and willingness to forgive both him and herself, contribute to the reader's perception of Alexandra's character as a representative of a virtuous person whose conduct is worthy of following. Although she becomes a wealthy and prosperous woman, Alexandra never neglects social connections and interactions. Cather's ethical philosophy presented in the book may therefore imply that life rewards man's moral conduct through material prosperity, though moral excellence does not depend on wealth and money.

Cather's compassionate portrait of Alexandra appealed to the author's many readers during the 20th century and although life conditions of today are incomparable to those from more than a century ago, the values which Cather represents with passion and strong conviction are easy to identify with even at this time. Now, when the voices of contemporary thinkers and philosophers, among whom Jordan Peterson's sounds especially urgent, remind us of the importance of moral values in the age of constant change and disruption, Cather's novels can be read as thought-provoking narratives which, due to their humanistic and ethical messages, deserve serious attention and can be very relevant for the today's seekers of authentically lived experiences who wish to live well, in peace with themselves and with others.

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