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Czechs, the Heroes of the Wild West

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V Praze dne 14.srpna 2009

I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned.

Prague, August 14, 2009

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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Introduction

Ever since its discovery, America has been a favorite “second chance” destination in lives of many people. For white East coast “old stock” Americans, as well as for European immigrants, the westward movement became a symbol of opportunity, freedom and a better life. As the United States acquired new territories, the Wild West with its frontier settlements kept moving towards the Pacific Ocean. One of the greatest colonizations of formerly “Virgin Land” took place during the 19th century and among its participants were also immigrants of Czech origin. Czech emigration to the U.S. happened in a few waves, but the one that occurred around the year of 1848 was especially significant.

The process of immigration and settling on wild lands of the West was a challenging task. Since many Czechs participated in it, I attempt to inquire into their experience as well as the roles they played in building up the prosperous and well-functioning communities of the Midwest of today. A great number of Czechs settled in the newly opened area of the then West, and this fact connects them with another group of people who were typical for the Western fiction stereotype image of the Wild West: independent, dauntless cowboys. During the 19th century the Myth of a hero did not offer for the area of American West any alternative besides the heroic cowboy or trapper. The symbol of the West, fighting extreme conditions and taming the wilderness was he exclusively, the attractive, white, and self-sufficient man.

It is the purpose of this thesis to explore the historic reality of the life in the Wild West when the West still included states of Iowa, Nebraska and Minnesota, with emphasis on personal stories of Czech immigrants. Also, since the American Myth, connected with the Wild West, became an important instrument in shaping the desired national character qualities, I want to map the changes of the Myth, or rather its extension, during the 20th century. The research of a disproportion between portraying strong, self-reliant, and courageous men and women as representations of a model hero will be part of the procedure. At the same time, I attempt to inquire into the impact of the Czech immigrants on the formation of the new country, and their role within the

American Myth.

The chapters of my thesis will cover the following themes and problems: Chapter 1 embraces the history of the settlement of the American West and defines the commonly used terms West, Frontier and Wild West. At the same time, it explains the starting conditions of Czech immigrants, firstly within the European context, and secondly upon their arrival in the United States. Chapter 2 makes use of contemporary as well as period sources, and maps the arrival and life of the first Czech settlers in the states of Iowa and Nebraska. Chapter 3 considers the literary portrayal of the American West and its heroes in the works of Ole Edvart Rolvaag and Willa Cather. It also touches upon the phenomenon of the American Myth and its subjects. Chapter 4 brings attention to the gender imbalance when portraying the Wild West pioneers and American Myth heroes. At the same time it acknowledges the importance of Willa Cather's regional writing. Her realistic and detailed depiction of the roles and accomplishments of pioneer women presents valuable information that can hardly be found or deduced from other sources. With the help of Cather's fiction, an alternative but accurate picture of the West and its inhabitants arises.

Chapter 1: Go West, young man: History of the settlement of the American West

The motto “*Go West, young man*” did not become famous until 1856, when it was employed as a catchphrase in Horace Greeley's editorial in New York *Weekly Tribune*, the most influential newspaper in the nineteenth-century United States. The slogan embraced a universal validity for all the attempts and accomplishments carried out by European settlers in America since the year AD 1000. It has always been the movement from East to West that aroused hopes and ambitions for improving one's material and living conditions.

As early as the 10th century, the Viking Leif Ericson and his men sailed West from Europe in order to fulfill their natural curiosity for exploration. They managed to reach the shores of American continent and although their settlement was not a permanent one, evidence remains of its presence. Since 1492, people of different nationalities, namely Spanish, French and English, started to appear in the New World for trade or settlement. Reaching land in the New World and claiming ownership was one of many goals, but actually successfully making it one's legal property was a second, more complicated step. The only way for distant European powers to ensure their rights to the newly acquired land was to establish settlements of their own people there. The first English settlement to successfully endure west of Europe was Jamestown. It was founded in 1607 by a small group of Englishmen on the East coast of the new continent. Shortly after 1620, the Jamestown settlers were followed by English Puritans, who are also known as the Pilgrim Fathers, and within the next few years, thousands of people from other nations, mainly Dutch and French, accompanied them. By 1733 settlement in America was still limited, and recently founded colonies stretched from North to South along the East coast, all within fifty miles¹ of the shore. During this “tidewater” period, as it was so called, there grew 13 separate English colonies along the Atlantic coast.

The desire of many a “young man, going West” to explore, capture and colonize

¹ Bryn O'Callaghan, *An Illustrated History of the USA* (Harlow: Longman, 2005) 21

did not cease, and the original frontier continued expanding westward. Soon, this movement toward the West became a symbol and an inseparable part of the history of America. In literature this hero is often the subject of the “American Myth”. The connotations implied by such mythical being are: West or American West, Frontier and Wild West. The idea of the audacious and determined Man does not need further explanation but the notions of West, Frontier and Wild West deserve one.

The interpretation of the term “American West” is not an easy one, because the area it refers to never had a fixed set of external boundaries, and its location has changed over time. It is unique in the sense that the area that was regarded by one generation as “West”, was later to become the Midwest or Upper South for the generation of their children. Walter Nugent in *The Oxford History of American West* explains:

The American West itself has not always been where it is now. To the U.S. Census Bureau, the twentieth-century West meant thirteen westernmost states, with Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico forming the eastern tier. [...] In the eighteenth century the term referred to any place west of the Appalachians, and in the seventeenth century it included the area west of the Tidewater in the Chesapeake or a few dozen miles from the Atlantic farther north.²

According to Clyde A. Milner, professor of history at Utah State University the American West is an idea that became a place.

The definition of “frontier” would be even more vague, regardless that the notion of “frontier” is such an important component in the history of American settlement. As an example of different approaches to the term “frontier”, the historian F.J. Turner is cited in *The Oxford History of American West*, regarding his idea of the frontier in the year 1893 as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization.”³ In *The American West: A new interpretive history*, the writers Hine and Faragher described it as the “...frontiers of European settlement in previously non-European areas, with

2 Clyde A. Milner, et al., *The Oxford History of American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 803.

3 Milner, 4.

some allowance also for frontiers of resource exploitation.”⁴ The ambiguity of the word “frontier” lies in the fact that during much of the U.S. history, the notion of frontier meant a moving zone of contact, referring to the series of places which became settled and lately turned into rural and urban regions. From the 1490s to 1600 we can hardly speak about any frontiers at all, and around the year 1700, one hundred years after the first English settlement on the East coast, the original frontier zone penetrated less than hundred miles inland. By 1800, the settlement stretched westward across the Appalachian mountains, reaching to 300 miles at some places and up to 500 at others. Since that time, a number of frontiers have existed, each of them dealing with its own social and economic problems while cultivating and governing the virgin territory. The “virginity” of the territory could be questioned, for most of the areas were the original home-land for many Native American tribes. The question of the relations between Native Americans (Indians) and white settlers is a very complicated one, and there is not sufficient space here to do it full justice. However, relations with the Indians were varied and as such, they were part of the challenge of westward expansion.

The explanation of the term, or rather, phenomenon of “the Wild West” is probably the easiest to understand. In general, the Wild West can be defined as the place that “...comprises the history, geography, peoples, lore, and cultural expression of life in the Western United States, most often referring to the period of the latter half of the 19th century, between the American Civil War and the end of the century.”⁵ “The Wild West” is the main theme, and at the same time, the concluding name for a long-term process of the creation of a national epic. It came into existence through songs and legends, real events and tall tales, larger-than-life characters with their heroic deeds, and the violent acts of others, both good and evil. These became subjects of the transformation of reality into the simplified but colorful and exciting American Myth. By the nineteenth century, “The Wild West” had already become a part of a popular culture, including one of its inevitable stereotypes: independent white males. It was these men who explored and tamed the wilderness, who settled and fought extreme

4 Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A new interpretive history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 807.

5 Wikipedia, “American Old West”, 30 Aug.2008, 30Aug. 2008, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Old_West >

conditions and who, according to Anne M. Butler: "...won the West and handed over to the nation more than vast lands."⁶ It was not until the 20th century that the historic reality made its way into literature and began to show women as serious subjects of western fiction. The unsentimental portrayal of life on the wild open prairies, of Czech, German and Norwegian settlers, and tough pioneer women as the main protagonists, brought wide recognition to the work of Willa Cather. Her novels, published during the first half of the 20th century, take the readers back to the period when the phrase "Go West" meant traveling in ox wagons to the newly opened lands of Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, the Dakotas and Kansas.

When Czech immigrants started "Going West" in the 19th century, important political changes had already taken place in America. By the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the colonies, which were under British rule, gained their independence, becoming the United States of America. The new United States quickly adopted laws and formed the institutions necessary to support of its democratic development: the Constitution and the federal government, which included the three separate, but equal and balanced, branches of power. The Congress was set up as the legislative branch, the Supreme Court as the judicial branch and the Office of the President as the executive branch.

One of the most important acts of the early federal government lead by President Thomas Jefferson, was acquiring the Louisiana purchase. In 1800 the western boundary of the United States was the Mississippi river, but due to the Louisiana purchase, by 1803 it stretched to the Rocky mountains, doubling the size of the country. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the development of Western America was tied to the shifting balances of power in Europe. Located in the territory named for King Louis XIV of France, "Louisiana", the city of New Orleans became a vital connection to the sea in the days of water transport and growing settlement west of the Mississippi river. Jefferson, realizing its strategic position, together with the unpredictability of the French leader, Napoleon Bonaparte, made an offer to purchase New Orleans. To Jefferson's surprise, France was willing to sell not only New Orleans, but the whole Louisiana Territory for fifteen million dollars. France was at war, and the money would

6 Milner, 774.

serve to rebuild Napoleon's armies. The United States acquired more than five hundred million acres for less than three cents an acre.

Hoping to find easy access to the Pacific Ocean across North America and investigate the new land, president Jefferson initiated the exploration of the purchased territory and its adjacent areas. The Lewis and Clark expedition set off from St. Louis on the Missouri River in 1805, and returned after two and one-half years in which they covered 4,000 miles exploring the new land. The expedition succeeded in setting up diplomatic relations with the Indians, drawing new detailed maps, and naming and describing significant rivers, creeks and other landmarks. Additionally, it proved that the journey to the Pacific Ocean, the route later known as the Oregon Trail, though difficult, was possible.

The need of the newly established country and its people for more land, had been evident even before the Louisiana purchase. The problem that was still preventing massive migration of descendent European Americans could have been predicted but was not taken into consideration. The land that was the subject of sale and purchase was still occupied by American Indians, who were the original inhabitants and its rightful owners. Although the government generally tried to keep peace with Indians, it was not always possible. In 1787 the government issued the law of "Northwest Ordinance", which was designed to prevent lands and property being taken from the Indians. The law granted them their property, rights and liberty, and at the same time, was a promise that they were never to be invaded or disturbed. Unfortunately, many new settlers had already been moving to the areas previously granted to the Indians and those encounters were not always on friendly terms.

The American government soon changed its approach to the property rights of the original inhabitants of America, and regarding president Jefferson's policy towards the Native Americans, one may use the term hypocrisy. Thomas Jefferson often stands as an icon of freedom and personal liberty. He is often described as the gentle man of letters, a scientist, architect and politician who made sincere attempts to civilize Indians. Unfortunately, his declaration "All men are created equal" was not applied to the rules of law by which property was held. Based on research and various conclusions brought

out in the works *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and Manifest Destiny*⁷ and *The Roots of Democracy: American Thought and Culture*⁸, a wide gulf between Jefferson's words and his conduct in Indian affairs can be observed. One goal, not very often highlighted, achieved by president Jefferson made it possible for Americans to capture Indian land and assets. The myth of Jefferson's idealistic attempts to “assimilate”, “educate” and “civilize” Indians, making them the “yeomen farmers” is based only on his own public proclamations. The discrepancy between his words and deeds indicates that Jefferson was not interested in Indian assimilation, but primarily in the tribal land. He ignored the fact that most of the Indian nations in the eastern United States actively practiced agriculture, so they had already been “farmers” when first Europeans arrived on the continent. The president's secret commands to his subordinates sharply differed as well from his official statements. One such command was the letter to William Henry Harrison, who was the military governor of the Northwest Territory. In the letter, marked as strictly confidential, Jefferson instructs Harrison on how to get rid of every last independent tribe between Atlantic states and the Mississippi. Robert J. Miller argues that Jefferson was one of the most aggressive and expansionist presidents to hold office, and does not hesitate to state that: “Jefferson was the father of Indian Removal and he worked diligently to take Indian property rights and to move Indian nations and Indian people out of America's way.”⁹

In 1830 the Indian Removal Act¹⁰ ordered the removal of Native Americans for the settlement of the new western land. The law made official what the federal government had already begun. By the 1840s, with the exception of a small number of Seminole tribes still resisting removal in Florida, no Indian tribes resided in the American South from the Atlantic to the Mississippi. Through a combination of enforced treaties and the contravention of treaties and judicial determination, the United States Government succeeded in destroying the original structure, culture and way of

7 Miller.

8 Robert E. Shalhope, *The Roots of Democracy: American Thought and Culture* (Lanham,: Lowman and Littlefield, 2004).

9 Miller, 95.

10 O'Callaghan, 37-38.

life of Native Americans. The entrance for the westward expansion had been opened.

The distribution of government land in newly incorporated territories was another burning issue. Settlement had already started despite the fact that the lands had not been surveyed and auctioned by the U.S. government. At first, the pioneer claims were not recognized, but in 1841, squatting became officially permitted by the Preemption Act. The new federal law granted pre-emption rights of the originally public land and it specifically:

... permitted squatters on government land who were heads of households, widows, or single man over 21; who were citizens of the United States, or intended to become naturalized;[]and who had lived there for at least 14 months to purchase up to 160 acres (65 hectares) at a very low price (not less than \$1.25 per acre) before the land was offered for sale to the public.¹¹

The law basically allowed settlers to select and farm any public land with the guarantee that when the land was officially “opened”, they would be able to buy it at the minimum price.

Another boom of settlers was brought about by The Homestead Act, the law approved by Congress on May 20, 1862. It was this law that]subsequently signaled the process of western settlement. A publication by the Iowa Board of Immigration explains the effect of the law:

It entitles any person who is the head of a family, or has arrived at the age of twenty-one years, and is citizen of the United States, or filed a declaration of his intention to become such, to the right of a homestead on any surveyed government lands not previously disposed of. This right extends to one hundred and sixty acres of land.¹²

The new law established a three-fold homestead acquisition process: filing an application, improving the land, and filing for deed or title.¹³ A homesteader would simply move onto a piece of land owned by the government, inhabit and improve the

11 Wikipedia, “Preemption Act”, 26 Nov. 2008, 11 Apr. 2009,

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preemption_Act>

12 William J. Petersen, ed., *Studies in Iowa History. Iowa: The Home For Immigrants* (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1970) 58.

13 U.S. National Archives and Record administration, “Teaching with documents: The Homestead Act of 1862”, 11 Apr. 2009, 11 Apr. 2009, <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/homestead-act/>>

land and build a house or other type of a dwelling. After living on it for five years, submitting proof of residency and paying a \$10 fee, the land would become his. Alternately, after six months of residence, it was possible to exercise a “commutation clause” and purchase the claim at the minimum cash price \$1.25 per acre.

As a result of the three above laws, more farmland was opened during the second half of nineteenth century than in all of the America's previous history. The Preemption Act and The Homestead Act were later severely criticized for becoming a tool for land speculators, helping them to accumulate large holdings. However, they still succeeded as a stimulants for westward migration and as an alluring and coveted goal for European immigrants. Americans, as well as Europeans, were responding to a sentiment expressed years later by President Franklin D. Roosevelt when he said: “at the very worst there was always the possibility of climbing into a covered wagon and moving west, where the untilled prairies afforded a haven for man whom the East did not provide the place.”¹⁴

Some of the most productive of the newly opened lands were the prairies of Iowa, Eastern Nebraska and Minnesota, which offered rich topsoils combined with adequate rainfall. It is not surprising that Czech, German, Scandinavian and other emigrants escaping the turmoil of revolutionary Europe around the year 1848, decided to settle right there. People of different nations, nations at war in Europe, became neighbors living in peace, helping each other to succeed in their new lives. Among those who wanted to avoid wars and economic problems in Europe was 14 year-old Adolf Schmidt from Prussia, who arrived in the USA in 1858. Prussia was a German kingdom from 1701 to 1918 and, from 1871 until the defeat of Germany in World War I, the leading state of the German Empire. Attempts to form a single German nation led to the creation of the German Customs Union (Zollverein) in 1834, excluding the Austrian Empire (together with Austrian Germans) and adding to the revolutionary wars and changes in 1848¹⁵. The fight for power, together with food shortages and land pressure within the German Kingdom, as well as in the whole Europe, went on in

¹⁴ Hine and Faragher, 334.

¹⁵ Wikipedia, “Kingdom of Prussia”, 20 July 2009, 23 July 2009,
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Prussia>

following years and led to extensive overseas emigration.

The written family history of Schmidt - Heck family, handed down from generation to generation, gives us the following details: J. Wilhelm Schmidt was 20 years old and his brother Adolph Schmidt was 14 years old when they left their parents farm home in Detmold, Lippe, Prussia and sailed to the United States. They paid someone on board ship to hide them, to escape conscription into the German army. When they first landed in the U.S., Wilhelm and Adolph found work in a brickyard, possibly in the East. Later they came to Amana, Iowa, a farming community. Little is known about their lives, the only details preserved refer to their participation in local dancing events: When these two brothers went to dances, they liked to dance together. With their leather boots, they kept time to the music. In Amana Adolph met and married his wife, Anna Kinslová. They farmed in Johnson County, Iowa, where their oldest son William was born. In 1874 Adolph bought 80 acres of farmland in Lincoln township, Iowa County, Iowa and lived there until his death in 1915. The farm is located 9-1/2 miles south of Ladora. Adolph died in 1915, his wife in 1934. It was after Adolph died, during World War I, that his children decided to Americanize the spelling of their German name and changed it to Smith.

For many European immigrants, the state of Iowa became their new home, but to make it official, they wanted to become citizens of the USA. The importance of this legal step in their lives is demonstrated by the Certificate of naturalization of Adolf Schmidt from 1877. It states: "Adolf Smith, a native of Prussia and at present residing within said State (Iowa), appeared in open Court and makes application to be admitted to become a Citizen of the United States. [...] It is bona fide his intention to become a Citizen of the United States, and to renounce and abjure forever all allegiance to any foreign Prince, Potentate, State or Sovereignty whatsoever, and particularly to The King of Prussia [...]." The decision to become a citizen was made by the immigrant, but it was the court that would have the last say. Mr. Adolf Schmidt was fortunate, in his case the court acknowledged that: "It further appearing to the satisfaction of this court that during that time (5 years) he has behaved as a man of good moral character, attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States and well disposed to the good

order and happiness of the same.”

When the new settlers arrived and decided to make it their new home, Iowa had already undergone numerous regional and political upheavals and modifications. Such process was common for the newly acquired land and as such, and Iowa is an excellent example to demonstrate the slow and complicated process of forming a new state.

Iowa had become a part of the United States in 1803 due to the Louisiana purchase. During the following years, Iowa was part of the Indiana Territory, then the Territory of Louisiana, the Territory of Missouri, and then a free Territory. In 1834 it became a part of the Michigan Territory and in 1836 of the Wisconsin Territory. Two years later, the western part of Wisconsin Territory split off and the area was organized as the Territory of Iowa.¹⁶ Finally, on December 28, 1846 Iowa became the 29th state of the union. The state of Iowa had been originally divided into 44 administrative districts called counties. Each county was created in accordance of the Iowa Constitution as an area at least 432 square miles (1,120km²) that cannot be reduced below that size by boundary changes.¹⁷

The counties with the highest Czech population were Iowa County, Johnson County, Linn County and Winneshiek County. The greatest number of Czechs who settled in these counties came from two different areas of former Czech lands: catholics from South Bohemia around the towns and villages of Bechyně, Tábor, Týn nad Vltavou, and Koloděje; and protestants from the boundary lands between Bohemia and Moravia Litomyšl, Polička, Sádek, and Telecí. According to Martinek, the priest for the diocese of Polička and its seven adjacent villages, in 1887 there was not a single family in his parish which did not have any family member in America.¹⁸ How many people left exactly, and from where, is difficult to determine, since many left the country without the official permit and there are no records of such departures (see Adolph Schmidt, page 9). Father Martinek estimates that about 800 people left his parish between the years 1830-1879. How these people chose a destination, and how they

16 Iowa History project “Stories of Iowa”, 6 Mar 2005, 14 Apr 2009,
<http://iagenweb.org/history/soi/soi31.htm>

17 Wikipedia, “List of counties in Iowa”, 13 Apr 2009, 14 Apr 2009,
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_counties_in_Iowa>

18 Alena Schauerová a Pavel Filipi, *Telecí, historie a současnost* (Telecí: Obecní úřad v Telecím, 2003) 37.

travelled and lived in the new country is described in the autobiography of Josef Dvořák, written in 1906. The autobiography is a part of volumes kept in the Library of Czech International Genealogical Society in Golden Valley, Minnesota. Josef Dvořák describes difficult conditions for persons living in the villages of Široký Důl and Telecí near Polička, where he grew up with his widowed mother and four siblings. From the age of 12, he had to take care of himself and work to support his family. After three years of living in misery and poverty, he decided to look for better life in America. His friends who had already moved to the USA explained the possibilities of acquiring land there and when Dvořák found out in 1868 that another man from nearby village was leaving for America, he joined him. After arriving in New York, they set out for St. Paul and Winona, where their journeys split. Dvořák, who could not speak a word of English[,] recalls his first steps in the USA:

I had no money for a hotel, so I kept walking. In the evening, I reached Chatfield, where I was able to stay overnight in the house of a native Czech. In the morning I went on walking again. It was during a harvest, and I could immediately start working for my acquaintance once I reached him. After two years my mother came to stay with me. I settled down in Chatfield, and in 1875 I bought 45 acres of land.[...] There were no buildings and no water, only thick bushes. For 15 dollars I bought a wooden shack and changed it to a farm. In 1877 I married Kateřina Mandilová from Nedvědice near Skuteč. I bought a pair of horses, some old tools and started to farm... In 1892 we bought another 100 acres on loan. Now we have 145 acres without any debts. We have good helpers and two sons and a daughter. They are already strong enough for any hard work. In 1903 we built a new house for 1200 dollars. I cannot even express how hard I had to toil. But now, we are happy in America.¹⁹

Another immigrant, Thomáš Koráb of Polička, who came to Iowa with his parents in 1856, described a similar experience to Dvořák's. After their arrival in Iowa, they were to share the log cabin with three other families. In 1862 Koráb bought a farm of eighty acres in Section 29 of Linn County for four dollars per acre. His land, in which he invested his time and labor, was valued about 250 dollars per acre in 1925.²⁰

¹⁹ Schaurová a Filipi, 40.

²⁰ Thomas Korab, "Paměti Českých osadníků v Americe", *Amerikan Národní Kalendář 1925*: 298.

The former Prussian German, Adolf Schmidt, was working hard and doing well in the same way. His wife Anna was a daughter of native Czechs, Tom (Tomáš) and Katherine (Kateřina Netolická) Kinsel. Their farm in Lincoln township, Iowa County, was providing a good living to the German-Czech family, which in time grew to 11 children. Later on, the sons and daughters of the Schmidt family often married their neighbors of Czech origin: the son of Adolf Schmidt and Anna Kinsel, William, married Mary Dlouhý. Their son William John fell for Emma Mae Kožíšek. Daughter of William John Smith and Emma Mae Kožíšek, Barbara Ann, married a man with seemingly German or Dutch name and ancestors, Ronald Eugene Heck. Closer research in American and Czech archives proved that grandmothers of Ronald Eugene Heck were both Czech: Mary Maličský and Blanche Krofta. Mr. And Mrs. Heck moved to Iowa City and their children were the first generation of the Smith family which did not grow up on the farm. The circle has closed when their son, Ronald John Heck, travelled back to the Czech Republic, and married the author of this thesis, Lucie Coufalová (now Hecková).

That Czechs were doing very well in America can be observed from a survey reported in Nebraska in the Czech newspaper “Hospodář” in the 1890s by Jan Rosický, the paper's publisher. The immigrant farmers, originally poor laborers from Telecí village, declared the following ownership of land: Humbolt town: Jan Dobrovolný 320 acres, Howells town: Fr. Filipi, 200 acres, Josef Makovský 80 acres, Antoním Kunhart, 240 acres, Clarkson town: Josef Filipi 200 acres, Josef Jonáš 80 acres, Huen Town: František Zrůst 240 acres, Josef Šmatlán 640 acres.²¹ The list is not complete, it only illustrates the position and living conditions of Czech farmers a few years after their arrival from Europe.

When Czech settlers selected land, the purchase or claim itself was imaginably a most significant and exhilarating occasion, underlining the reasons they withstood the dangerous journey West. Most experienced for the first time in their lives the feeling of ownership, since they were from families that had been peasants for generations. To possess land, work and live peacefully and independently on it, meant the fulfillment of

²¹ Schauerová a Filipi 41.

their ambitions and dreams. They believed in their future in the new state and were ready to live up to the second part of the Greeley motto: “*Go West, young man, and grow up with the country.*”

Chapter 2: History and experience of the Czech immigrants – from Bohemia to the American West

The history of America, from first contact between native Americans and European explorers, to its formation later into the United States has been shaped by people coming from elsewhere. These immigrants decided to make this land their new home, and carried the hope that they would make better homes than they knew. They had the courage and willingness to risk losing everything they owned and achieved in their lives “before America”. They were people who took the opportunity to fulfill their dreams and desires for liberty, and tried to live their lives with greater contentment. The famous inscription on the Statue of Liberty refers to these newcomers:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

The immigrants began coming to the U.S. in waves. The revolutionary year of 1848 in Europe brought another wave of people of European descent, many of whom were Czechs. The arrivals had been influenced by the myth of the American West and they hoped to participate in the bright future of America. The Czechs, who had committed to pursue their dream by going West and settling in America, had to be prepared to fight for their survival even before reaching the shores of the U.S.. To achieve their goal, they had undergone a long and arduous journey. First, carrying all their belongings, the travelers had to come from elsewhere in Bohemia to Prague. The next destination to be reached was Hamburg or Bremen, which at that time were the nearest and the most convenient connections to the sea. This part of their journey was done either on foot or by wagon, few could afford to take a train, or travel by boat on the Elbe river. It was this last part of the journey they had some control over. As soon as they reached Hamburg and paid approximately 20 dollars per person for their boat ticket, they could but hope for good luck. Boats departed irregularly and so, for many, lingering in Hamburg was long, the wait tiresome and expensive. As a result, immigrants often went for the first transatlantic boat not knowing which port in

America they would arrive in. An average voyage took between 5 to 8 weeks, but in winter it could as well be three months. Due to the spartan equipment on the converted freight boats, the atrocious hygienic conditions, and a lack of food and water, which was accompanied by harsh weather on open decks, many passengers suffered contagious illnesses and died before reaching their destination. Fraud and theft were among the other disastrous and potentially life-threatening events that the immigrants might encounter before reaching America. Driven by the urge to settle down and start supporting themselves, a desire to succeed at farming, and feeling an urgency to begin as soon as possible, they were limited by their poverty and travelled with all their property and only a little money. Their belongings were usually either sent ahead or stored somewhere in the boat and it was not unusual for the boat crew to help themselves. The loss of property, combined with a lack of money, an inability to speak English, and the lack of a supporting social network in a foreign country could have been fatal.

Upon the immigrants' landing in America, their names were registered by U.S. officials, but identification of individuals of various nationalities arriving and especially of those from former Czech lands was not an easy project. Due to the historical context prior to the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, the immigrants from Bohemia were hardly ever identified as Czechs, but rather as Austrians, Germans or Hungarians. Another challenging task were Czech proper names, or rather, the inability of English speaking Americans to recognize and correctly pronounce some of the consonants typical to the Czech language. Cyril M. Klimesh in his work *They Came to This Place* illustrates:

It is possible to find a name Ptáček written as Tayich and Tozak, Dvořák as Worchek, Šilháček as Shellhatchet and Klimeš as Clemons or in genitive as Climcoh. Some of the immigrants translated their names into English or changed their spelling in order to match English. From Krejčí became Taylor, Jan became Johann or John, Václav Wenceslaus, Zdenka became Sidonia, Švehla was spelled as Swehla or Swella, from Mašek became Mashek, from Slepíčka Slebiska, from Brukna Brookner.²²

The places where the new incoming immigrants chose to settle were, up to a

²² Cyril M. Klimesh, *They Came to This Place* (Sebastopol, California: Methodius Press, 1992) 10.

certain point, suggested by the geo-political situation of the United States, but at the same time, the final decision was most often made by the newcomer. Besides settling in big industrial cities on the East coast, many Czech, German and Scandinavian immigrants arriving between 1850 and 1900, traveled and settled in the Wild West, namely in Iowa, Nebraska and Minnesota. This area around the Mississippi river is today called the Midwest. The first settlers, their experiences and the tough life on the wild prairie became the topic of many successful novels written and published during the 20th century.

However, the stereotypical representation of conquerors and later inhabitants of the Wild West portrayed in literature and film are rough, fierce cowboys; fighters with gun-belts full of Colt revolvers and bullets. It is the masculine cowboy, the hunter, the trapper, the outlaw or the Indian who is given traditional, romanticized western qualities, and who is the central focus for such writers as James Fenimore Cooper, or William Gilmore Simms. Compared to such heroic archetypes, the Czech immigrant arriving to begin a new life on the frontier in that period of time, was typically a farmer or a craftsman. He arrived with his wife and their numerous children, and in many cases had never shot a gun in his life. Martha E. Griffith, in her work *The History of Czechs in Cedar Rapids*²³ cites *The Cedar Rapids Directory* as the earliest available source of information in regard to the occupation of the Czech settlers. Cedar Rapids can be seen as a typical frontier city. It was founded in 1849 and is currently the second largest city in the U.S. state of Iowa. *The Directory* in 1870 lists 23 laborers, 20 shoemakers, 8 blacksmiths, 8 clerks, 5 tailors, 6 wagon makers, 4 salesmen, 3 tanners, 3 collar makers, 3 saloon keepers, 2 cigar makers, 2 harness makers, 2 seamstresses and 2 bookkeepers. One person was listed for each of the following occupations: cabinet maker, butcher, teacher, lawyer, hotel keeper, manager of a billiard hall, editor of the Czech newspaper, mechanical engineer, carpenter and a stone cutter. Such a roster of Wild West inhabitants is far away from an attractive picture of the indomitable, rampant hero conquering the Wild West.

Considering the constitution of occupations of Czech immigrants, there rises a

²³ Griffith, 10.

question of what brought Czechs, generally unadventurous people from a developed and civilized central European country, to the harsh and dangerous American frontier. There are three main reasons that should be discussed. First of all were historical inducements. Bohemia, located in the middle Europe, enjoyed religious freedom in the years between 1436 and 1620, and became one of the most liberal countries of the Christian world. In 1526, when Ferdinand I of Habsburg took up the Czech throne, fortunes began to worsen and subsequently influenced the political and social situation of Czechs in 1620, the year of the battle of White Mountain. In the battle, the Bohemian Protestants were severely defeated by the Habsburgs, twenty-seven estate leaders were executed and the rest were exiled from the country. Their lands were then given to Catholic loyalists, mostly of Bavarian and Saxon origin. Other Czech Protestants were forced to leave the country or to convert to catholicism, and many aristocrats lost their property, which was transferred to foreign nobility loyal to the emperor. The loss of that battle was the lowest point of the history of the Czech Lands since it initiated Habsburg rule over the country that lasted until 1918 and ended the pro-reformation movement in Bohemia, which meant further destruction for Czechs as a nation.

In 1848, numerous revolutionary wars were being waged throughout the whole of Europe, and many Czech nationalists called for Bohemian autonomy from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy hoping to bring the Czech culture and national identity back to life. However, the Czech revolutionaries were defeated and the 1850s brought about the centralization of polity, the restriction of political rights and a shift toward the Catholic Church. The old Bohemian Diet, one of the last remnants of independence, was dissolved. After living for so long in oppression, being ruled by German and Austrian aristocracy, many Czechs welcomed the possibility of escaping an ominous fate as second-class citizens in their own country. When opportunity came from across the sea, many were ready to make the most of the individual freedom that was being presented by their soon-to-be home country, America.

The second reason for Czech immigration was economic: After the Battle of White Mountain, Austrian lords and other foreign nobility captured the most valuable land, leaving Czech peasants with individual holdings of approximately thirty-five to

forty acres of undesirable land.²⁴ After several local misfortunes such as floods or droughts that consequently caused crop failures and hunger, the desire of Czech farmers for land as way of securing their sustenance, intensified. Most of them were only leaseholders and although their families cultivated and lived on the same land for generations, purchasing it was beyond their financial resources.

The third reason for vast immigration was the fact that in 1850s and 60s the American congress passed laws which were to encourage immigration from Europe and, coupled with the attractive and quite reliable immigration information being published and spread all throughout Europe, made America a destination of great interest. The most significant laws were The Preemption Act of 1841 and The Homestead Act, approved by Congress on May 20, 1862. In 1864 in order to encourage Europeans to migrate to the United States, president Lincoln signed the bill providing for the appointment of a Commissioner of Immigration. Immigration to individual states was stimulated by the work of their own State immigration agencies. The effect of the agencies can be observed through the example of the state Iowa, one of the regions with the largest percentage of Czech immigrants. The Territory of Iowa was established on the 4 of July 1838, and on December 28, 1846, Iowa became the 29th state in the union. From 1860 to 1862 Iowa had its first Commissioner of Immigration who maintained an office in New York. There he made contacts with new immigrants and published description of Iowa in foreign newspapers. From 1870 to 1873 a State Board of Immigration not only published handbooks in several foreign languages and put advertisements in European newspapers, but also sent agents to European ports to persuade foreigners to relocate to Iowa. The state spent a total of 29,500 dollars to encourage immigration.²⁵ The success of these efforts and strategies is shown by data obtained from the Commissioner of the General Land Office. The population of Iowa was 674,913 people in 1860. Nine years later it was already 1,040,819 inhabitants.²⁶ According to the Ninth United States Census Report (1870), Bohemia was named first as the native country of foreign-born Czechs in the United States by 6,766 new

24 Griffith, 2.

25 Griffith, 9.

26 Petersen, iv.

Iowans.²⁷ A similar state of affairs had been observed in Nebraska, the state on Iowa's western border and very similar to Iowa, as well as in other states in the part of the United States nowadays called the Midwest.

The American government had many reasons to be satisfied. Their efforts and propaganda worked: Large numbers of people were arriving from Europe or moving from the eastern United States to settle on the western frontier; the Wild West. Their success could be proclaimed, but what about the newcomers who were the direct participants of this success? Were they satisfied as well?

For Czechs, settling down on the wild open prairie meant the coveted end of the long, exhausting Europe-America journey. At the same time it was the beginning of a new challenge; the cultivation of land that had never been farmed before. Their expectations of living conditions in the American West were based on contemporary materials published by The Iowa Board of immigration²⁸ which were being spread throughout Europe. According to these official materials, the newcomers could expect to find soil of great fertility on the Western frontier in 1870, promoting a luxuriant growth of grain and vegetables. Climate had four seasons with temperatures similar to the states east of Iowa, with winter temperatures a bit lower, but at the same time the winters are “equally as pleasant and more healthful than in the Eastern and Middle States.” (p.35) The time recommended as the best for coming to the West was fall, September or October:

They [i.e. immigrants] will have time to select their locations, build houses, and make other necessary preparations before winter. During the winter months they can do much in the way of fencing and preparing for work in the spring. Those who come in the spring [...] may still have time to do much towards opening a farm. A small house, that will do for summer, may be built in a few days. (p. 69)

Information about the necessity of bringing farming tools is similarly optimistic, assuring immigrants of no need to bring with them any machinery or implements, because: “[...] everything in that line can be obtained here more cheaply [...] and of a

²⁷ Griffith, 3.

²⁸ Petersen,

quality much better adapted to Iowa farming...”(p.70). Besides the overly optimistic description of living conditions in the West, the book offered the potential newcomers a lot of useful information. However, it could not have spared them from the culture shock they experienced after they had arrived. Frontier life was in many respects was utterly different from the life in the established European communities where most of the immigrants had come from. The American reality was hard, work was toilsome and pioneer life was tough. Although claiming farming land from the state was a truly revolutionary, exciting and euphoric moment in an immigrants' lives, many had difficulty in adjusting themselves to the new problems and conditions. As a result, about one fifth of the European migrants to the New World in 19th century returned to Europe.²⁹ Those who had strength and will to fight the hardship stayed. Being tough, independent and self-reliant was vital, yet people had to help each other and co-operate with such tasks as breaking the sod into farmland and building houses. Their life could be quite lonely since the frontier farms were often separated by unsettled land and their nearest neighbors could be a day's journey away. For Czechs, used to living in the pleasant safety of close village communities, with neighbors around, the solitary life on the vast open prairie was psychologically very hard.

If people had arrived in the fall, as was commonly recommended, they had little time, equipment or tools to build even the simplest house, and they had to spend the harsh winter in dug-outs or sod huts, called “soddies”. Historians Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher explain the structure of a soddy:

[...] families worked together slicing the tough, grassbound sod into bricks about a foot wide and three feet long. Then they placed them end to end to form walls three feet thick to make an enclosure about eighteen by twenty-four feet. Two forked tree trunks held the ridgepole. Over the rafts went tar paper, if the builder was lucky enough to afford it – then a layer of sod bricks [...] Dirt showered down from the ceiling and the soggy roof was in constant danger of caving in.³⁰

The dug out was easier to make, since they were simple cave-like rooms, dug into the

²⁹ Economist.com, A provocative report on immigration”, 31 May 2008, 28 August 2008
<http://www.economist.com/blogs/certainideasofeurope/2007/05/a_provocative_report_on_immigr.cf
m>.

³⁰ Hine and Faragher, 343.

side of draws or were built entirely of sod chunks from the prairie. Many families in Nebraska had to live like the gophers they found there, burrowing into a dark cave in the earth. To many immigrants the inhospitable new land brought feelings of sheer despair and loneliness, in which they perished.

If the immigrants survived the first winter buried underground in the frozen dirt, and overcame the loneliness and disconnection from communities they enjoyed in their home villages in Europe, another challenge was waiting for them in the spring: breaking the sod. It was the only way to get to the soil of prairie that had never before been plowed. Willa Cather, the Pulitzer Prize winning American writer, known for her partly autobiographical novels about pioneers' lives, writes about the landscape as seen from the perspective of a nine year old immigrant boy: "This cornfield, and the sorghum patch behind the barn, were the only broken land in sight. Everywhere, as far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but rough, shaggy, red grass, most of it as tall as I."³¹

The government land was given to people for very little money or free, but actually, they paid for their new homesteads with their health, a willingness to toil and their ability to withstand hardship. Every acre of soil was a laboriously won victory and the women had to work as hard, if not harder, than any man. Still, their hard work did not mean that the pioneer family would escape hunger or other backbreaking difficulties. There were perils of prairie fires, droughts and ill-timed frosts. Anything could go wrong, nothing was certain, and thus the position of newcomers was a very fragile one. Staying, and dedicating their life to the new country required patience, perseverance and above all, hope.

As soon as immigrants ensured their basic needs, they started to establish schools. Out of all the nationalities that came to America from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, according to Klimesh, Czechs were the most educated ones and they were also the most qualified workers.³² They were used to sending their children to schools, and not having the proper school buildings could not have stopped their want for education. The first schools were run in private houses, quite often in rooms that had many other uses at the same time: warehouses, workrooms or barns with just dirt for the

31 Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994) 10.

32 Klimesh.

floor. The first public village schools appeared around the 1870s and they were supported by funds arising from several different sources, mainly by taxes collected by counties and districts for school purposes. The information manual for potential European immigrants, *Iowa: The Home For Immigrants*, explains another source of money that was to be invested into education:

In the first place, the sixteenth section of every congressional township was set apart by the Government for school purposes – being *one thirty-sixth* part of all the land in the State. Congress also made to the State an additional donation of *500,000* acres, and an appropriation of 5 per cent on all the sales of public lands in the State. The State also gives the proceeds of the sales of all lands which escheat to it. The money derived from these sources constitutes our *permanent school fund*, and, including the proceeds of the land still unsold, will amount to over *four millions* of dollars.³³

However, each school differed from another, and there were different rules and almost no teaching aids. Because paper was scarce, the wall of a house served as a blackboard and since no curriculum existed, instead of textbooks, pupils were taught using whatever books happen to be available at their parents' households. Some schools operated only in summer while others only during winter and school attendance was not obligatory. Despite deplorable conditions, the teachers succeeded in furnishing their pupils with essential knowledge and some of their wards were able to continue their education at more advanced schools.

Understanding the conditions that surrounded life on the prairie that determined the quality of lives of the first settlers, it is astonishing that they were able to achieve so much in such a relatively short period of time. The difference in quality of life of the Czech immigrants between 1850 and 1900 is enormous. They progressed from dug-outs to log cabins, from log cabins to the well-constructed farm houses with barns and gardens. Little scattered communities turned into towns, of which some of the most important in the state of Iowa for Czechs include: Cedar Rapids, Iowa City, and Spillville. Cultural isolation and economic challenge was replaced by well-functioning institutions, and by the growth of cultural and fraternal organizations. The Reading

³³ Petersen, 36.

Society was founded to cultivate the Czech mother tongue and promote Bohemian literature. The Council of Higher education provided loans without interest for students. The Bohemian Savings and Loan Association helped the acquisition of property and the building of houses. Musical activities were supported by many musical organizations, and dramatic organizations presented their plays and dances in those new buildings.

In 1893 when the renowned Czech composer Antonín Dvořák visited Iowa, he stayed for three months in the town of Spillville, where he was able to enjoy the comfort of the established Czech community. Finding and borrowing a good quality piano for composing music was not a problem. When the piano did not suffice for the outline of his work, he could use, and often enjoyed playing, the pipe organ in the church of St. Wenceslaus.

The list of newly founded institutions is almost endless but it would not be complete without the Sokol society whose original purpose was physical fitness. Sokol was founded in Bohemia and later the organization brought and spread its ideals to the United States. Its founder, Dr. Miroslav Tyrš, summarizes them:

The word “Sokol” means “falcon”, a bird which typifies swiftness and freedom. [...] Sokol does not mean physical training only – Sokol's aim is to educate our people to the highest physical efficiency, to nobleness, and to morality [...] When we address a Sokol the response will come from a man in the truest sense of the word – a man physically, mentally and morally – a Patriot who is ever ready to respond to the call of his country, ever ready to draw the sword in defense of Democracy, Liberty, and Humanity.³⁴

As described above, the influence and contribution of the Czech immigrants is preeminent in forming the modern functional states of Nebraska and Iowa. The Czechs were resourceful, self-made people, with a sense of purpose and accomplishment. Together with other immigrants, they were able to survive all the unavoidable hardships and successfully conquer the Wild West. Instead of guns, they used their wit, energy and perseverance. Their sturdy determination to build up a new and prosperous country is an enduring legend, and makes them worthy protagonists in American literature. The achievements of the settlers places them among the true heroes of the American West.

³⁴ Griffith, 38.

Chapter 3: Participating in the American Myth

Immigrants from Europe who followed the advice “*Go West, young man*” and settled in Wild West, joined Americans in becoming the subjects and participants of the “American Myth”. In addition, they earned their place in twentieth century literary fiction. Songs, legends, real events and tall tales appeared in contemporary newspapers, magazines and books, creating the national epic. There is no doubt that the American Myth, as a national symbol, was willfully constructed, and according to Clyde A. Milner, professor of history at Utah State University, Americans often attributed moral and intellectual dimensions to the western physical topography and the hardships it imposed.³⁵

However, the creation of the American Myth, as will be later illustrated in the work of Willa Cather and Ole Edvart Rolvaag, has been essential for the development of a national pride in the United States. The new American identity was supported by positive values that were an open invitation to anyone from Europe who wanted to participate. In comparison to nineteenth century European nationalism, which in its extreme form excluded people from other nations in spite of their racial and religious sameness, the American conviction was inclusive. People of protestant faiths were especially welcomed, but for those of other religions (principally catholics) who wanted to participate, the door was open, too. In line with the myth, the literary portrayal of the immigrants of different religion and nationality who settled in the West is pleasantly optimistic. As opposed to those who settled in New York, Pittsburgh and other big industrial cities during the nineteenth century, they were able to live peacefully as neighbors, cooperating and helping each other to survive in severe conditions. On the east coast, immigrants had to compete with Americans (especially African Americans) for work positions, which was not a problem of farmers coming to the West. An example of this “Wild West melting pot ideology” can be found for instance in Willa Cather's novel *My Ántonia*.³⁶ The Burdens, Americans of German origin, are protestants who came to the West from Virginia. They are already well settled and help the

³⁵ Milner, 774.

³⁶ Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*.

Shimerdas, Czechs and Catholics, to live through the first hard winter on prairie, providing them with food and other essentials. When “papa Shimerda” commits suicide, it is old Mr. Burden who Mrs. Shimerda chooses to hold a speech and say a prayer during the burial of her dead husband.

America provided its immigrants “a sense of kinship with the place and purpose of the West.”³⁷ Once this new identity became established, it grew stronger with every year and each new wave of settlers. In the quest for a standard defining quality of national character which could be spread to other parts of America or the world, it was necessary to present a strong-minded, winning hero. In the American Myth, the struggle for survival, although tough, became romanticized, giving its participants the aura of vigorous, almost supernatural beings.

Gaining popularity during the nineteenth century was a tendency towards a regional type of literature. It was focused locally and included specific characters, dialects, customs and topographical features. However, the picture drawn by realist and local-color or regional writers was incomplete, since female Americans were not included. Despite the fact that at least half of the then Americans were women and many of them strong, energetic and self-sufficient pioneers, the mythical “supernatural being” was always a man. It was the independent white man exploring the wilderness who became the favorite protagonist of western fiction and it was he, who “conquered” the West, leaving no space in literature for his possible counterpart: strong, independent woman. According to Anne M. Butler, women in men's writings only appeared as background décor for the mighty male hero, and as such, their character repertoire was very limited. Either they represented “good women”, white, middle-class and usually married, or “bad women”, such as prostitutes, dance-hall girls and female outlaws.³⁸ In an extensive work on American regionalism published in 2003, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse write:

Canonical American literature and culture almost exclusively tell the stories of boys growing up; bonding between young men; [...]men's travels, interests, obsessions, hopes, and dreams for America; and men's images of what women want and what

37 Milner, 799.

38 Milner, 776.

the “American girl” should become. While these stories have created much of what we understand as American, we believe that American culture is impoverished by the imbalance, even the surfeit of “heroic” stories about men and boys [...]”³⁹

The works of J.F. Cooper, Mark Twain, Jack London or Herman Melville could be listed as an examples of this approach.

By the twentieth century, regional writing has been acknowledged as a crucial source for the development of many different, yet equally significant American identities, and has gradually ceased being undervalued by literary scholars. Unconventional regional novels brought about an alternative set of new stories, as well as other character types and values. Each of them is unique, evoking a sense of belonging as well as, according to Charles L.Crow, feelings of a “spirit of place”. Regional writing helped Americans realize that their nation was composed of discrete and complex subcultures. “Without understanding the literature of regions, it is difficult to understand larger issues of American culture and literature”, argues Crow.⁴⁰

At the same time, new hero and a different theme, based on American history, made its entrance into Western regional fiction. Roy W. Meyer even came up with the compendious title for such a theme, calling it “The Middle Western Farm Novel”. In his broad critical study, *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century*⁴¹ published by the University of Nebraska, Meyer evaluates and puts into context and perspective the books and writers dealing with this theme. In the chapter called “The Farm in Nineteenth Century Fiction” he deals thoroughly with various writers who were exploring the theme, but considered only two of them as having any major importance: Willa Cather and Ole Edvart Rolvaag. However, only Cather, is currently included in the standard U.S. High School Curriculum, whereas Rolvaag is almost unknown.

In a quick survey, I asked twenty current or former university students of American Literature if they knew who O.E. Rolvaag was, and only one person was

39 Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing out of Place, Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2003) 30.

40 Charles Crow, ed., *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

41 Roy W. Meyer, *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).

familiar with the name. The same question about Willa Cather resulted in eighteen of the students knowing her name, and most even recognizing her as a Midwest pioneer fiction writer. The sample group of respondents were students at different universities: Charles University in the Czech Republic, Oxford University in England, and the University of Iowa in USA. It is mostly the scholars of this particular field who know O.E. Rolvaag and his work. In the same way, the volume of scholarship on Cather is much greater than on Rolvaag. For example, in the Czech National Library, it is possible to find four copies of Rolvaag's novels, but no critical study or biography exclusively on him. Willa Cather, on the other hand, is listed as the author of 28 books and as the sole subject of 12 critical or autobiographical studies. A similar ratio can be observed when searching Amazon⁴², the leading American on-line book shop. Amazon offers for sale 17 critical studies and 50 different biographies on Cather exclusively. In contrast, critical studies on Rolvaag consist only of four and only two biographies are listed as available. In 2003, *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*⁴³, one of the most comprehensive contemporary critical anthologies focusing on regional literatures, was assembled by editor Charles L. Crow. Again, it presents us with a familiar picture. In the anthology both writers are presented, but it is Willa Cather who receives her own, nineteen-page-long chapter in the section called "Some Regional Masters". Only Mark Twain and three other writers were given as much space.

Nevertheless, those who acknowledge Rolvaag agree on the high standards of his novels. Literary critics and scholars such as Neil T. Eckstein, Curtis D. Ruud, Percy H. Boynton or Carrol D. Laverty highly respect his work, and some of them give it higher praise than Cather's. Diane D. Quantic, the contributor of *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America*, goes so far as to say: "If 'reality' is the touchstone, then Rolvaag's novel [*Giants in the Earth*], with all of its grim disasters, is closer than Cather's novels to the experiences recorded in biographies, diaries, and other nonfiction works."⁴⁴ Despite this fact, the discrepancy between the prominence of Cather and unfamiliarity of Rolvaag is enormous today, and the causes therefore worth examining.

42 Amazon, 15 June 2009, 18 July 2009 <<http://www.amazon.com>>.

43 Crow.

44 Crow, 222.

It is my intention to analyze Willa Cather's and O.E. Rolvaag's work and present my own reasons for what elements played important roles in only one of these writers having gained public recognition and inclusion in U.S. High School Curriculum.

At the beginning of the comparison, it is helpful to outline the writers' backgrounds together with other facts, which could have affected their points of view. Cather's education was completed by graduation from the University of Nebraska in 1895 and afterwards she worked as a journalist. Rolvaag, who started writing upon his emigration at 17, subsequently earned his degree from St. Olaf College in Minnesota in 1910. In 1916 he became a professor and the Head of the Norwegian Department at the St. Olaf College. Although Rolvaag wrote in Norwegian and his novels appeared first in his native language, both his and Cather's novels were published in English.

The key works of the two writers portray the first generation of immigrants and their lives in the newly opened lands of Iowa, Nebraska and Dakota. These include *Giants in the Earth*⁴⁵ by O.E. Rolvaag, published in 1927, and *O Pioneers!*⁴⁶ and *My Ántonia*⁴⁷ by Willa Cather, published in 1913 and 1918. Both writers look back to the second half of nineteenth century when prairies were wild, unsettled far-off places, which could only be reached by new settlers in ox or horse wagons. They present an unsentimental and realistic depiction of everyday life. Both lead the life of the 2nd generation of settlers, giving clear insight into the hardships of the first generation. Similarly, they made their novels partly autobiographical and drew the plots and characters from their own prairie experience. While Rolvaag's heroes are mainly of Norwegian origin, Cather's settlers are Czech, Scandinavian, French, German and Russians. Rolvaag's novel focuses on the pioneer experience on the Dakota plains in the 1870s; Cather's in Nebraska during 1880s.

Cather and Rolvaag are also both skillful writers, capable of lyrical descriptions of the country, without the use of unnecessary sentiment, as shows this excerpt from Rolvaag:

Bright, clear sky over a plain so wide that the rim of the heavens
cut down on it around the entire horizon... Bright clear sky, to-

45 O.E. Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1929).

46 Willa Cather, *O Pioneers* (New York: Bantam Dell Random House, 2008).

47 Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*.

day, to-morrow, and for all time to come... And sun! And still more sun! It set the heavens afire every morning; it grew with the day to quivering golden light--then softened into all the shadows of red and purple as evening fell... Pure color everywhere. A gust of wind, sweeping across the plain, threw into life waves of yellow and blue and green.⁴⁸

Cather provides the following description of the late afternoon:

As far as we could see, the miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sunlight that was stronger and fiercer than 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 that burned with fire and was not consumed.⁴⁹

The lyrical portrayal of nature is often used to support the feelings and states of mind of the heroes. The nature and landscape is not an idea or analogy of something, but it keeps changing itself into the signs of the situation and existence of the “romantic subject”. This poetic manifestation of individualism subjugates the landscape, turning it into something that later became known as “elevated quotidian” – “the landscape of soul”, or more accurately the landscape as a condition of a soul.⁵⁰ Rolvaag expresses the condition of the settlers' souls when they first arrived to the vast, open area of West, with the following words:

[...] they all felt it strongly; now they had gone back to the very beginnings of things. [...] the heart of untamed nature about them [...] the very vastness and endlessness surrounding them on every hand.⁵¹

Cather's picture of settlers' amazement and consternation could easily follow the above quote:

There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. [...] I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over to the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction.⁵²

48 Rolvaag, 3.

49 Cather, My *Ántonia* 22.

50 Zdeněk Hrbata and Martin Procházka, *Romantismus a romantismy* (Praha: Karolinum, 2005) 52.

51 Rolvaag 32.

52 Cather, My *Ántonia* 7.

Likewise, both authors often compare the movement through the prairie grass to movement of the sea, a favorite metaphor already used in American literature before (e.g. Melville, *Moby Dick*). Cather writes:

As I looked about me, I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the color of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it, the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running.⁵³

Whereas Rolvaag says:

It reminded her strongly of the sea, and yet it was very different... This formless prairie had no heart that beat, no waves that sang, no soul that could be touched...or cared.⁵⁴

Their ability to express deep emotional moments is comparable, although each uses different poetic techniques to help the reader experience the mood and personal impressions of the first settlers. As the above example suggests, Cather concentrates on concrete sensuous perception and its emotional content, putting emphasis on the expressiveness of colors. Rolvaag is often more abstract, accentuating the emptiness of space, together with absence of spiritual sense and emotional energy. Despite preferences for different technique, Cather and Rolvaag could complement one another in providing the reader with a complete picture. In some cases, it seems possible that a passage from one writer could be inserted into the work of the other without the reader noticing.

The two writers also show an ability to convey fear and despair, as well as other negative personal sensations, of the immigrants through lyrical descriptions of nature.

Cather's hero's cheerless situation is presented flowingly :

In eleven long years John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame. It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods; and no one knew when they were likely to come, or why. Mischance hung over it, Its Genius was unfriendly to man.⁵⁵

53 Cather, *My Ántonia* 10.

54 Rolvaag, 37.

55 Cather, *O Pioneers*, 13.

Again, this passage could easily be followed with one from Rolvaag:

Monsterlike the Plain lay there - sucked in her breath one week, and the next week blew it out again. Man she scorned; his works she would not brook. . . . She would know, when the time came, how to guard herself and her own against him!⁵⁶

Finally, the similarity of events taking place in the two authors is striking; on the other hand such events were a common part of an immigrant farmer's everyday life, and underlined the consistency of the pioneer story in western fiction. Their lives consisted of daily of hard toil on unbroken land sucking off their human energy, the danger of death from overworking, homesickness, despair and depression that came out of the animal-like living conditions and poverty. Even the self-reliant had to come to terms with a sense of isolation in an epic struggle with nature.

As demonstrated, the quality of the writing cannot be the decisive argument for the popularity of Cather's nor the unfamiliarity of Rolvaag's work. For some resolution to the enigma of long-term recognition and success, it is necessary to evaluate criteria, besides looking strictly at stylistic qualities.

As was already explained, the whole area of the Midwest today where Rolvaag's and Cather's novels are set, used to be the frontier and location of American West. Therefore, after the period of the actual reign of the cowboys as the archetype and symbols of the West, the first self-reliant settlers, fighting the hardships of nature and building up a well-functioning society with their bare hands from nothing, became a new national symbol. Along with the cowboys, the settlers became the personification of the American national character and temperament, completing the heroic picture in the American Myth. Anne M. Butler in *The Oxford History of American West* comments: "In this national mythology, westerners became larger-than-life figures, and the details of their humanity blurred. Gone were the fine lines of visage, the elements of personality, the shadings of culture."⁵⁷ In this area rests one of Cather's key strengths: acculturation, in its original meaning, is presented in her works as something generally exciting and positive. Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary⁵⁸ defines

⁵⁶ Rolvaag, 249.

⁵⁷ Milner, 774.

⁵⁸ *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, (Springfield: Merriam -Webster Inc., 1983).

acculturation as “cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture, *also*: a merging of cultures as a result of prolonged contact.” The exchange of cultural features may have many forms, and one of them is the well known analogy of the “melting pot”. In accordance with this theory, where heterogeneous societies become more homogeneous, Cather's heroes do not perceive the blending of their original European culture with the “American one” as something harmful or dreadful, but rather as an opportunity to create something new and better. Additionally, they show the true pioneer spirit, not worrying about the temporary disconnection and isolation from the “civilized” world.

On the other hand, Rolvaag's heroes often display fear of acculturation, and their pessimism permeates the whole book: “This mood brought vague premonitions to them, difficult to interpret... No tellings what might happen out here... for almost anything *could* happen!”⁵⁹ With time, as they expect the alternation and assimilation of their old, familiar cultural patterns, their feelings of abandoned hope deepen and are emphasized:

Ah no, this wasn't a place for human beings to dwell in... And then, what of the children? Suppose they were to grow up here, would they not come to be exactly like the red children of the wilderness – or perhaps something worse?... It was uncivilized; they would not learn the ways of man; no civilization would ever come...⁶⁰

Such comments can be found in many passages of *Giants in the Earth*. Although they provide the reader with the a good deal of insight into the psychological state of mind of Rolvaag's protagonists, at the same time they support the impression that the work is a gloomy elegy.

The fact that Cather's protagonists are strong women as opposed to the stereotypical Wild West male heroes that Rolvaag employs, has also significantly contributed to her work endurance. It is true that even Rolvaag's novel includes characters of brave immigrant women, but their possibilities are still restricted, following the stereotypical gender division. Also, they are not central characters or heroes. On the contrary, Cather's radical shift concerning the gender role stereotype

59 Rolvaag, 32.

60 Rolvaag, 102.

“weak women – strong man” brings into existence a new concept of “strong heroine - peripheral man”. Instead of the typical woman's sphere or place (home, cooking, cleaning), Cather puts heroines in her novels *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* into the extra-domestic spheres of men, specifically the one of a farmer, and lets them devote their lives and energy to something larger. Ántonia, referring to being freed of stereotypical gender roles of Victorian society, announces with enthusiasm: “I like to be like a man.”⁶¹ Being a dependent, submissive and passive Victorian female (i.e. stereotypical nineteenth century fiction portrayal) is not appealing to her.

Another difference can be seen in the description of feelings that the prairie and nature provoke in the settlers. Curtis D. Ruud, from The Norwegian-American History Association, in his essay about pioneer life points out: “When the pioneer settlement is looked at as it attempts to conquer the prairie, one discerns that each settler must come to terms with the prairie and himself as it competes for his body and soul.”⁶² Rolvaag's view of the land is notably different from Cather's and could be another reason why he has not earned a place in the U.S. curriculum. For his heroes, nature is often a symbol of menace, reflecting the state of their souls: “Had they travelled into some nameless, abandoned region? Could no living thing exist out here, in the empty, desolate, endless wastes of green and blue?”⁶³ In contrast, Cather's view is very peaceful, harmonic, and almost pastoral. The two authors also created diametrically different emotions when their heroes experience quiet prairie time, either during the day or evening in solitude. Rolvaag's heroes fear the eternity and loneliness that could be felt on the open prairie. After describing the beautiful evening of the country, Rolvaag adds:

“Such evenings were dangerous for all life. To the strong they brought reckless laughter – who had ever seen such moon-nights?... To the weak they brought tears, hopeless tears. This was not life, but eternity itself.”⁶⁴

To them, nature seems to be an abandoned place, the eternity that could only be fulfilled by receiving the souls of the dead (themselves), making it a “vast cemetery, marked by

61 Cather, *My Ántonia*, 68.

62 Curtis D. Ruud, “Beret and the Prairie in Giants in the Earth”, NAHA On Line, Spring 2009, 27 Jun 2009 <http://www.naha.stolaf.edu/pubs/nas/volume28/vol28_09.htm>.

63 Rolvaag, 38.

64 Rolvaag, 213.

the evidence of gone-by life”.⁶⁵ The title of last chapter of Rolvaag's novel, called “The Great Plain Drinks Blood” is symptomatic, supporting W.C. Bryant's symbolic perception of empty land, which would only be completed with bodies and souls of the dead.⁶⁶

Cather's hero, on the other hand, enjoys his solitude, feeling pleasantly embodied in surrounding nature:

I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I didn't expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I didn't want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge.⁶⁷

The difference in tone and point of view with regard to life and the land are essential for understanding the contemporary divergence in the reception of their works. These differences in tone reflect the spirit of the American Myth. This Myth is an essential part of contemporary American identity and, according to Henry Nash Smith, it: “concerns the image of themselves which many-- perhaps most --Americans of the present day cherish, an image that defines what Americans think of their past, and therefore what they propose to make of themselves in the future.”⁶⁸

In her work, Willa Cather follows this demand, confirming the American Myth, in contrast to Rolvaag, who fulfills the grim premonition of the tragic ending, and lets his struggling hero die. While Cather resolves all doubts, hardships and negative feelings about life on the prairie in the West in a winning way, Rolvaag shows despair with occasional glimpses of optimism, but without the light and victory at the end. Cather's novels contribute and help to develop the American Myth. She is able to connect and make use of her heroines within the bigger picture of the development of the American nation, including the popular conception of the melting pot. Such a viewpoint can hardly be said for Rolvaag. He is mostly occupied with the human cost of

65 Hrbata and Procházka, 52.

66 William Cullen Bryant, *Thanatopsis*, The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol.1 (New York: W.W.Norton and Company, 1994). 972.

67 Cather, *My Ántonia*, 12.

68 Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as a Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1950) 4.

emigration, which he described as “the tragedy behind the triumph.”⁶⁹ It is the subtle psychology in which he excels, and although it is an outstanding technique for understanding the hardships of the first settlers, it does not fit the optimistic concept of the American Myth. It can be even said that Rolvaag violates it, bringing up the stories, situations and characters from the past that go against it.

Perhaps just as important to Cather's continued place in the U.S. curriculum and the minds of Americans is the way she puts women into the American Myth. The fact that it is a strong woman, who is the source of power, optimism and energy, surviving and changing wild nature into a pleasant place for life, only adds another dimension. Willa Cather's reinterpretation of the Wild West motto into her own version, “*Go West, young woman*”, will be the subject of the next chapter.

Nevertheless, heroes of myths, whatever sex they might be, serve as reflections of ourselves, taking the active, conscious part of the creation of something bigger and better. During this era of immigration, it was a new country and a new nation. When America and its people willed the nation into existence, the myth that was created along with it is preserved and nurtured by proud people who don't see themselves as feeble or weak, but strong and winning.

⁶⁹ *Letters from America: The Life and Times of O.E. Rolvaag*, prod. Tim Schwab and Christian Craton, 1989, 30 min.

Chapter 4: Go west, young woman

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The famous part of the preamble of the United States Declaration of Independence, adopted on July 4, 1776, has been cited ever since its creation. Considering that those words were written by Thomas Jefferson, who owned about 200 slaves at the time and is sometimes referred to as the “father of Indian Removal”, it should not be surprising that the discrepancy between what was proclaimed and reality was significant. In 18th and 19th-century America existed, besides African Americans and American Indians, another “less than equal” group of people: white women. Although living in incomparably better conditions than other inhabitants of America, the rights of American women to pursue happiness according to their own choice was considerably restricted until 20th century.

Rigid Victorian American society ruled by white men had its own ideas about what was meant by “Liberty” and “Happy Life” for an American woman, as is demonstrated in Sharon O'Brian's work *Willa Cather: The Emerging voice*⁷⁰. According to O'Brian, the crucial period for a woman's “Happy Life” socialization was adolescence, when Victorian girls were taught the feminine virtues of dependence, submissiveness, selflessness, and passivity. As an example of popular beliefs and social pressure concerning young women, O'Brian cites Dr. John Kellogg, a 19th-century medical authority. He argues that in puberty, a turning point between a relatively gender-free childhood and conventional womanhood, the girl naturally abandons the woods and fields where she once played with her brothers. According to Dr. Kellogg, the reason is found in a girl's inability to resist the lure of more compelling spaces: the kitchen, washroom and the garden, which he grandly proclaims “nature's gymnasium” for adolescent girls. Together with Dr. Kellogg, another doctor is cited, explaining the “natural” state of things: “The emerging man then regarded his former playmate as the weaker being whom he is bound to protect, while the emerging woman acquiesced in

70 Sharon O' Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

her subordinate role with a sense of gratified vanity.”⁷¹ Such opinions were not extreme but common in their time, as could also be confirmed by the press of the day. In the mid-1880s, in the Nebraska paper the *Webster County Argus*, a sober, industrious, submissive girl who devotes herself to domesticity is praised: “Lovable girls are girls without an undesirable love of liberty and craze for individualism; girls who will let themselves be guided; girls who have the filial sentiment well developed.”⁷²

Therefore it is possible to believe that the 1856 slogan that encouraged “Go west, young man” referred indeed exclusively to the male, the only individual who was allowed and supported to show qualities such as individuality, independence, dauntlessness and wits. Similar exclusion of bright and independent women also left its imprint in the contemporary literature. As has already been said in chapter 3, authors of the 18th and 19th- century works were predominantly men, and if a woman character appeared in their writing at all, she was given just a peripheral role. The same asymmetry can be observed in portrayal of women as participants and heroines in the American Myth. However, although not publicly celebrated, women who settled and struggled for survival in the Wild West together with supposedly self-reliant, strong and clever men, often surpassed them in every respect. One of the first authors who decided to challenge the stereotypical picture of the “hero of the West” was Willa Cather. Making use of nontraditional life stories of pioneer women she knew, she drew quite a different picture of a female than had been so far common in canonical American literature. In the 1910s when Cather's first four novels were published, H.L. Mecken and a few other contemporary critics (H.W. Boynton, Randolph Bourne) appreciated her regionalism as “something American literature had not seen before.”⁷³

Together with others, it was also Cather's work that later motivated Fetterley and Pryse to write the following description of regional literature:

Regionalism offers unconventional, non canonical and counter hegemonic stories of female (and male) development across the life cycle; and because these stories are so rich in the texts of regionalism, and so absent from texts generally understood as “American literature,” regionalism calls attention to the paucity

71 O' Brien, 98.

72 O' Brien, 99.

73 Crow, 513.

of cultural locations in which women and non white and non dominant men might find affirmation.⁷⁴

In this part of my thesis I will examine how the regional writing of Willa Cather opened and broadened the narrow spectrum of 19th- century women characters in literature, and subsequently in the American Myth. I chose two characters from different novels, Alexandra Bergson, the heroine of *O Pioneers!* and *Ántonia* Shimerda from *My Ántonia*, to demonstrate Cather's alternative vision of heroes of the Wild West. Both *Ántonia* and Alexandra were brought by their families to America as young girls, and both had to deal with the hard life on the frontier after their fathers' deaths. As Cather implies, if they (as good Victorian women) practiced then praised and recommended submissiveness and waited for guidance in their prairie life, they would either be very miserable or dead within a few months. To show the true life on the frontier, Cather presents the nation a new hero, a self-reliant woman.

By giving her heroines liberty to organize their lives according to their own individual wishes, Cather does not make them men in skirts. She simply does not deny them, since they are women, the positive qualities of directness, intelligence and strength of will. At the same time, she emphasizes their feminine point of view together with a different approach, when dealing with the land and transforming the wilderness into prosperous farms.

When Alexandra realizes her father's approaching death, she confides in her friend: "I don't know what is to become of us, Carl, if father has to die. I don't dare to think about it. I wish we could all go with him and let grass grow back over everything."⁷⁵ When the dreadful situation is realised, Cather's heroine, instead of waiting for a manly saviour, shows her strength and courage and takes the situation in her own hands. Being a "tall, strong girl who walked rapidly and resolutely, as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next"⁷⁶, her chances to succeed and survive are high. Cather's Alexandra and *Ántonia* are everything but submissive and passive.

74 Fetterley and Pryse, 30.

75 Cather, *O Pioneers*, 10.

76 Cather, *O Pioneers*, 5.

Although Alexandra has three brothers, it is she, who from the age of twelve, became her father's right hand:

[...] he had come to depend more and more upon her resourcefulness and good judgment. [...] It was Alexandra who read the papers and followed the markets, and who learned by the mistakes of their neighbors.⁷⁷

Similarly, *Ántonia's* husband admits who is the motor of the family:

It was pretty hard job, breaking up this place and making the first crops grow. Sometimes I git awful sore on this place and want to quit, but my wife she always say we better stick it out. [...] I guess she was right, all right. We got this place clear now. We pay only twenty dollars an acre then, and been offered a hundred.⁷⁸

Likewise, both *Ántonia* and *Alexandra* prove that they are not “weaker beings”, when they decide to accept their pitiful starting position as a challenge, and then with their own pragmatism and strength, transform it into a success. At the end of the novel, *Ántonia* and her family enjoy pleasant life in a spacious house on their large, well-kept farm with two orchards. She has worn herself to fulfill her dream, but her friend Jim realizes that she is still the same vital girl he used to know: “She was there, in the full vigor of her personality, battered but not diminished.”⁷⁹

Alexandra, after many years of working hard, borrowing money, and developing the farm, builds her own house. When her childhood friend, an artist, visits her, he is amazed with her achievement, thinking about everything as a piece of beautiful art:

Do you know, *Alexandra*, I've been thinking how strangely things work out. I've been away engraving other men's pictures, and you've stayed at home and made your own. [...] How in the world have you done it?⁸⁰

When writing about Cather's work, O'Brien points out that woman and artist, *Alexandra* represents both the American pioneer's story of inhabitation and cultivation and the woman writer's attainment of authorship and authority.⁸¹

77 Cather, *O Pioneers*, 15.

78 Cather, *My Ántonia*, 172.

79 Cather, *My Ántonia*, 157.

80 Cather, *O Pioneers*, 73.

81 O'Brien, 422.

Together with the focus on a new literary hero (the woman heroine), Cather made use of another literary novelty: perceptiveness in the treatment of land and nature. The typical male heroes of Western fiction felt the need to “conquer”, “subdue” or “tame” the Virgin Land: “Many and incredible are the tales the grandfathers tell from those days when the wilderness was yet untamed.”⁸² Compared to this typical masculine approach, Cather's female heroines deal with land very differently. For them, nature represents a rudimentary substance or maternal entity, which as a whole, carries spiritual significance and content. Instead of fighting it, Alexandra and Ántonia desire to connect and become one with it. With their care and love, they turn the wild, inhospitable land into a beautiful garden, pleasant for life:

Ántonia kept stopping to tell me about one tree and another. “I love them as if they were people.[...]We planted every one, and used to carry water for them too – after we'd been working in the fields all day. Anton, he was a city man, and he used to get discouraged. But I could n't feel so tired that I would n't fret about these trees when there was a dry time. They were on my mind like children. Many a night after he was asleep I've got up and come out and carried water to the poor things”.⁸³

Sometimes in Cather's writing nature takes the centre of attention and can even be seen as a favorable fundamental heroine itself: “There is something frank and joyous and young in the open face of the country. It gives itself ungrudgingly to the moods of seasons, holding nothing back.”⁸⁴

The traditional male attempting to dominate nature is conveyed in the character of the patriarch, John Bergson. For him, land is “like a horse that no one knows how to break to harness”.⁸⁵ On the other hand, his daughter Alexandra, instead of attempting to dominate, perceives her relationship to land as a partnership and an act of love: “For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her [Alexandra], rich and strong and glorious.”⁸⁶ Later, Alexandra explains the success of such an

82 Rolvaag, 424.

83 Cather, *My Ántonia*, 161.

84 Cather, *O Pioneers*, 50.

85 Cather, *O Pioneers*, 14.

86 Cather, *O Pioneers*, 42.

alliance with the land, as opposed to its unsuccessful rough male treatment. When her friend Carl expresses surprise over the change of the landscape and admires the beautiful lively fields, she tells him: “It [the land] pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right...”⁸⁷

With the land is closely connected the image of a garden, a domesticated agricultural paradise. It had been embedded in American thought for a long time, although the fully articulated pastoral idea of America did not emerge until the end of the eighteenth century. Leo Marx, in his work *The Machine in the Garden*, refers to this early image of pastoral America as “Jeffersonian pastoral”, based on one of its first ideologic propagator, and describes three preoccupations of the age that contributed to the pastoral idea of America: “the landscape, agriculture, and the general notion of the 'middle state' as the desirable, or at any rate the best attainable human condition.”⁸⁸

The master symbol of the garden itself was constructed as a cluster of metaphors, which were, according to Henry Nash Smith, “expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow.”⁸⁹ Cather employs this image, and adds her own attributes of a hero farming the Wild West land: “A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves.”⁹⁰ Cather's heroine, the brave woman in the centre of a wilderness, who can first imagine the desired result and then spend her whole life creating her “garden” fits perfectly within the other individuals of national mythology.

The original motto “*Go West, young man*” in the context of Cather's writing therefore acquired another dimension. It not only refers to improving one's material and living conditions, but also connects with the Myth of building up the nation and the country. The meaning of its second part “... *and grow up with the country*” is explained at the end of her novel by Cather herself:

Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like
Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow

87 Cather, *O Pioneers*, 74.

88 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 89.

89 Smith, 138.

90 Cather, *O Pioneers*, 31.

wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!⁹¹

At the same time, Cather's fiction is equally important for its realistic depiction of women's roles and merits during the period of colonization of the American West. Most of the sources of the time or preserved family histories of the pioneers provide us with sufficiently detailed financial issues and family relation informations. For the purpose of studying the woman question, including the lifestyle, dress, gender roles or economic opportunities in the American West, it is possible to consult many excellent contemporary publications. Works such as *Women of the West* put together by editor Marks Binheim⁹², *Westerning Women and the Frontier experience 1800-1815* by Sandra L. Myers⁹³ or *Women and Gender in the American West* by editors Mary Irvin and James Brooks⁹⁴ provide an extensive amount of historical facts and details. The available official archival documents are also very useful for backtracking the progress in development of newly established American communities. Unfortunately for the purpose of my thesis, these sources do not supply enough information about deeds of particular people, especially Czech women, and their roles, activity and development within the individual family.

Cather on the other hand offers the missing explanation, and is able to provide the whole picture where other sources are silent. Both Cather's heroines and their roles within the family are clearly described and, due to the possibility of following them in their everyday life, it is natural to see them at the end of the novels as embodiments of triumph. In *Alexandra* and *Ántonia*, Cather has created archetypal figures of heroic women: the far-sighted homesteader and the earth mother⁹⁵. By replacing the traditional American hero with a powerful pioneer woman who actively participates in building up a prosperous country, Cather helped Americans develop another form of identity in the national mythology. Although her heroes are useful members of society, it is their particular, individual deeds that make them “heroic”. By understanding and interpreting

91 Cather, *O Pioneers*, 198.

92 Marks Binheim, ed. *Women of the West* (Los Angeles: Publishers Press, 1928).

93 Sandra L. Myers, *Westerning Women and the Frontier experience 1800-1815* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).

94 Irvin, Mary A. and Brooks, James F., eds *Women and Gender in the American West* (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 2004).

95 Crow, 220.

the true role of immigrant women, she anticipates an alternative history of the West, as if then not yet written.

Conclusion

The motto “Go West young man” functioned not only as encouragement for Americans to move from the East coast of the U.S. to the western frontier, but also as an expression of hope for better life for many immigrants from Europe. The acquisition of the new lands of the Louisiana purchase in 1803 gave impetus to the westward movement. In the second half of the nineteenth century, more farmland was opened than in all of America's previous history. In 1830, the Indian Removal Act ensured the easier expansion of the white settlers to the West. The opportunity to become a land owner for very little or no money became especially appealing to Europeans when the American government issued two important laws: in 1841 the Preemption Act and in 1862 The Homestead Act. These laws and well developed U.S. propaganda, together with bad economic conditions and war turmoil in 1848 throughout Europe, brought large numbers of European immigrants to the American West. Especially popular were the rich lands of Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, the Dakotas and Kansas. Among others, large numbers of Czechs left Europe to settle and farm on the frontier in the American West, where Germans, Scandinavians and Americans became their neighbors. The people of nations at war in Europe, such as Prussia and Bohemia, had a common goal in the new country and therefore first became friends and later, due to the common intermarrying, even families.

The course of events of the whole process of colonization of the West from the beginning; i.e., acquiring new land by the U.S. Government; to the end, i.e., turning the wilderness of the frontier into a prosperous farming region, is shown in the example of the state Iowa and individual Czech immigrants. The immigrants settling on the frontier experienced incredible hardship while changing the vast, grassy prairie, which had never before been plowed, into fields that would secure sufficient living. In the relatively short time of fifty years, they succeeded in building up a prosperous society and, by contributing to forming the modern well-functioning states in Midwest, they became true American citizens. However, in comparison to the rough cowboys with his glamorized western attributes, who were the stereotypical representation of conquerors

and inhabitants of the Wild West during the 18th and 19th century, they might not seem as heroic figures on first sight. It took more than another fifty years to change the traditional literary portrayal of the “Wild West hero” and admit that Wild West was won not only by guns, but mostly by plough.

In the quest of the American nation for a standard defining quality of national character, it was necessary to present strong-minded, winning heroes. The courage of the frontier settlers and their sturdy determination to survive and build a prosperous new country made them worthy protagonists in American literature and, at the same time, mythical heroes representing desired qualities of national character. In the American Myth, the pioneers' struggle for survival, although tough, was romanticized, giving its participants the aura of vigorous, almost supernatural beings. The persistent problem was that such a celebrated self-sufficient mythical being was always a male, leaving only a peripheral role for a woman. In the 20th century, with the rise of regional literatures, the true picture of life and heroic deeds in the West was finally revealed. It was a change of focus from male to female that brought recognition to the regional writer Willa Cather and, at the same time, Cather, due to her writing, supported the creation of a new hero, or rather heroine, in the American Myth. In her work, Cather shows that the typical masculine approach to the land, characterized by manly expressions such as “subduing” the land or “taming the wilderness”, was not always the successful one. It was the female way of dealing with such challenges which often worked much better and met a well-earned victory.

Cather's fiction is important for understanding the role of women during the colonization of the American West. The fact that Cather's hero is a strong, dominant woman is significant, because previously, when dealing with the history of the West, the accuracy of the gender picture was not taken into a consideration. Her heroines show real qualities of a pioneer woman such as independence, self-sufficiency and determination to pursue their dreams, which sharply differ from their previous, 18th and 19th-century literary portrayals.

Thanks to her own prairie experience, Cather had a clear insight into the everyday lives of the first generations of pioneers, and in her partly autobiographical

novels she employed Czech immigrant women as main or major characters. Knowing the background of Cather's writing, it is striking that, in many cases, it was pioneer women of Czech origin who were to come to represent typical desired qualities in the heroes of the American West. Simultaneously, Cather connects her heroines' private lives with the bigger picture, in this case creating a new nation, and therefore she transcends the framework of a regional writer. She willingly brings into existence a strong, triumphant heroine, who could serve as a mirror image of an "American" in the American myth. By portraying true women and life on the frontier, she provides Americans with another crucial set of values, and helps to pass an alternative vision of the American West to the next generations.

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Summary

Od okamžiku svého objevení se Amerika stala oblíbenou “druhou šancí” v životě mnoha lidí. Ať už se jednalo o evropské mořeplavce-objevitele, emigranty anebo Američany žijící na východním pobřeží Ameriky, symbolem změny, lepšího života a svobody byl pohyb směrem na západ. V souvislosti s Amerikou a její kolonizací jsou velmi často používány následující termíny: West nebo American West, Frontier a Wild West. Vysvětlení terminologie je důležité pro pochopení vzniku tzv. “Amerického mýtu” a také literárního zobrazení hrdinů, kteří se s těmito výrazy pojí.

Jasná definice termínu “American West” – “Americký Západ” není snadná, protože tak, jak se zvětšovala rozloha Spojených Států od původního osídlení 13 kolonií na pobřeží Atlantického oceánu směrem k Pacifiku, posouval se i “Západ”. Oblast která pro jednu generaci znamenala Západ, již byla pro další “Midwest” tj. Středozápad. Význam slova “Frontier” je ještě méně jednoznačný než termín Americký Západ, protože hranice Ameriky, a později Spojených Států se neustále měnila. Pokusů jak definovat “hranici” bylo mnoho a jeden z nejpřesnějších říká, že se jedná o “hranice osídlení Evropany v původně neevropských oblastech”. Zároveň lze dodat, že se jednalo o zónu kontaktu s původními obyvateli Severní Ameriky, Indiány. Hranice byla vždy nejprve osídlena bílými osadníky a postupem času přeměněna na zemědělské oblasti, vesnice a města, samozřejmě za současného využití přírodních zdrojů. Název “Wild West” neboli “Divoký Západ” je asi nejméně rozporuplný. Je možné ho pojímat jako označení místa, které v sobě zahrnuje historii, geografii, obyvatele, tradici a kulturní vyjádření života na Západě Spojených Států v období od roku 1849 (začátek zlaté horečky v Kalifornii), během Občanské války, až po rok 1910 (konec zlaté horečky na Klondiku). Počátky období jsou někdy kladeny už do roku 1836 (odtržení Texasu od Mexika) nebo do roku 1845 (připojení Texasu k USA).

“Divoký Západ” se stal tématem a zároveň souhrnným názvem pro vznikající národní epos. Zpočátku se jednalo o legendy a písně, které byly propojovány s reálnými příběhy a událostmi té doby. Jejich hlavními hrdiny se staly postavy s téměř nadlidskými schopnostmi, jejichž činy byly z reality transformovány do barevnějšího,

více vzrušujícího, ale zároveň i zjednodušeného, Amerického Mýtu. V 19. století byl již “Divoký Západ” pevně zakotven v popkultuře Spojených států, včetně nezbytného stereotypního představitele: bílého nezávislého muže. Byl to právě on, hrdinný kovboj, kdo dokázal zkrotit americkou divočinu, bez problémů přežíval v extrémních podmínkách a kdo nakonec pokořil a pro americký národ díky své odvaze vybojoval rozsáhlá území Amerického Západu.

Pravdivý a realistický obraz historie osidlování Divokého Západu včetně zpodobnění žen jakožto schopných, odvážných a úspěšných členek nově vznikajících společností se prvně objevil až v literatuře 20. století. Jednou z autorek, která získala široké uznání díky svým schopnostem reálně a bez zbytečného sentimentu vykreslit život prvních osadníků v době, kdy “Americký Západ” představoval území dnešní Iowy, Nebrasky, Minnesoty, Dakoty a Kansasu, je Willa Cather. Ve svém dílech prezentuje jako hlavní hrdinky samostatné, silné, tvrdě pracující a zároveň úspěšné ženy, evropské emigrantky, které se na “Divokém Západě” ocitly v polovině 19. století.

V období české přistěhovalecké vlny v první polovině 19. století již v Americe proběhlo několik významných změn. Amerika byla od roku 1783 Spojenými Státy Americkými s vlastní ústavou a funkční vládou, a také několikanásobně rozšířila své území směrem do vnitrozemí. Za vlády presidenta Jeffersona došlo v souvislosti s koupí Louisiany od Francie (Napoleona) v roce 1803 ke zdvojnásobení rozlohy Spojených států. Nově nabytá území se stala předmětem průzkumných výprav a neorganizovaného osidlování bílými osadníky bez ohledu na jejich původní obyvatel, americké indiány. Přes několik snah upravit legálně soužití starých a nových obyvatel došlo nakonec v roce 1830 na základě zákona přijatého americkou vládou k odsunu indiánů z nově nabytého území směrem dále na západ, a “otevření” nových území k usazení bílých osadníků.

Rozdělení vládní půdy novým osadníkům-farmářům se stalo další prioritou. Dva zákony, the Preemption Act z roku 1841 a the Homestead Act z roku 1862 významnou měrou zvýšili zájem Američanů z východního pobřeží a emigrantů z Evropy stát se “pionýry” a farmáři na nově otevřených územích. Zákony garantovaly osadníkům za přesně specifikovaných podmínek převedení obdělávané půdy zdarma nebo za velmi

malý poplatek do jejich vlastnictví.

Velmi kvalitní půdu nabízela území Iowy, východní Nebrasky a Minnesoty a tam také směřovala značná část evropských emigrantů, kteří se rozhodli opustit revoluční a válečný zmatek Evropy kolem roku 1848. Tak se také stalo, že se občané národů, které spolu v Evropě válčily, stali sousedy, kteří si navzájem pomáhali přežít a uspět v prvotních těžkých podmínkách. Jako příklad je uvedena rodina Němce z Pruska, Adolfa Schmidta, který do USA emigroval jako čtrnáctiletý a do Iowy přišel v roce 1858. Za manželku si, tak jako většina následujících mužů v rodině, vybral ženu českého původu a společně po počátečních těžkostech vybudovali prosperující farmu.

Samotný stát Iowa zároveň slouží jako příklad zdlouhavého vývoje a přeměny nově nabytého území v samostatný funkční stát. Mezi okrsky ve státě Iowa s nejvyšším procentem české populace od poloviny do konce 19. století patřily Iowa County, Johnson County, Linn County and Winneshiek County. Čeští imigranti pocházeli z různých částí tehdejších Českých zemí a Moravy a jejich sousedy se v Iowě stali nejčastěji Němci, Skandinávci a Američané, kteří přišli z východního pobřeží USA. Pro většinu českých imigrantů bylo vlastnictví půdy a vybudování prosperujícího hospodářství naplněním snů a ambicí, kterých by v Evropě nemohli dosáhnout.

Vlastnictví půdy a získání amerického občanství bylo zaslouženou odměnou po předchozích útrapách, které emigranti a budoucí osadníci museli prožít. Na finančně, psychicky i fyzicky náročnou cestu do Ameriky se většina Čechů vydávala z Hamburgu. Jejich cesta pěšky, povozem, vlakem či lodí do Hamburku byla také poslední částí cesty nad kterou měli nějakou kontrolu. Jakmile se, někdy i po měsíčním čekání v přístavu, nalodili s veškerým svým majetkem a zaplatili 20 dolarů za lístek, neměli již šanci ovlivnit co se bude odehrávat dále. Často ani netušili do kterého amerického města loď zamíří a úmorná plavba, při které díky chorobám způsobených hladem, nedostatkem vody a otřesnými hygienickými podmínkami běžně mnoho cestujících umíralo, trvala pět až osm týdnů, někdy však i až tři měsíce. Často také docházelo ke krádežím, což v případě přepravy veškerého vlastnictví mohlo být pro emigranty fatální. Nově příchozí do USA byli americkými úřady zaregistrováni a díky komplikovanosti českého jazyka a špatnému porozumění úředníků někteří z Čechů

nechtěně získali i nové příjmení.

Ti kteří se rozhodli usadit na nově otevřených územích dnešního Středozápadu pak pokračovali v náročné cestě dále. Tito lidé byli prvními osadníky a jak je zřejmé, do idealizované představy drsných, nespoutaných kovbojů s kolty za pasem měli velmi daleko. Jak ukazují archivní záznamy, typický osadník měl ženu, několik dětí, byl buď řemeslníkem nebo zemědělcem a často nikdy v životě žádnou zbraň nedržel v ruce. Důvodem pro emigraci u těchto lidí nebyly romantické ideály o zkrocení “Divokého Západu”, ale prozaická rozhodnutí vycházející z politické situace a tím pádem i špatných životních podmínek určitých vrstev obyvatelstva v Evropě. Jako pobídka k emigraci také fungovala dobře propracovaná propaganda americké vlády, která v Evropě inzerovala a činila atraktivními neomezené možnosti svobodného života v Americe, včetně získání půdy do vlastnictví. Většina informací o podmínkách života v Americe a popis charakteristik jednotlivých států byla přesná a velmi detailní, i přesto však nově příchozí zažívali kulturní šok.

Pro Čechy uvyklé životu v komunitě vesnice byl prvotní osadnický a osamocený život na rozlehlé prérii se vzdálenými sousedy psychologicky velmi těžký. Pocitu odtržení přispívalo i to, že jim chyběl “domov” tj. dům, tak jak na něj byli zvyklí z Evropy. Většina emigrantů strávila rok i více v tmavých obydlích vykutaných částečně pod úrovní země se střechou z drnů, připomínajících prostornější noru. Veškeré síly bylo třeba věnovat orbě travnaté prerie, která nikdy předtím jako pole nebyla využívána. Jen neskutečná dřina mohla prerii s tuhou houževnatou trávou přeměnit v pole a zajistit obživu a ženy musely pracovat stejně tvrdě jako muži.

Je těžké uvěřit, že se osadníkům během necelých padesáti let podařilo přeměnit divokou neobdělanou zemi v úrodná pole, a rozptýlená obydlí ve funkční komunity, vesnice a města. Již okolo roku 1870 se začaly oběhovat první improvizované školy, následovaly kostely. Drnové příbytky nahradily dřevěné sruby a ty pak domy se stodolami a dalšími hospodářskými budovami. Potřebu komunity a vzájemné pomoci poskytly nově založené spolky. Jak je možné vyčíst z archivních materiálů, čeští emigranti se díky své odvaze, zručnosti a vytrvalosti stali důležitým elementem při budování států na tehdejší “Americkém Západě”, a jako takoví se zařadili po bok

literárním hrdinům “Divokého Západu”.

Přistěhovalci kultivující divočinu Amerického Západu se zároveň stali i subjektem tzv. “Amerického mýtu”, kde zaujali pozici vedle původních hrdinů, kovbojů a traperů. Samotný “Americký mýtus” byl vědomě stvořen jakožto symbol amerického národa, jeho hrdosti a identity. Morální a intelektuální součást národní hrdosti byla propojena s tématem a fyzickou topografií Amerického Západu a zároveň i se strádáním, které jeho první bílí osadníci museli překonat.

Osobnosti imigrantů a Američanů kolonizujících Americký Západ sehrály důležitou úlohu při hledání základních osobnostních kvalit definujících národní charakter, jež by bylo možné šířit do ostatních částí Spojených Států či jinam do světa. K vytvoření národní identity bylo třeba prezentovat rozhodného, vítězího hrdinu. Výsledkem se stal romatizující obraz náročného zápasu o přežití na “Divokém Západě”, který dal v rámci Amerického mýtu svým participantům auru téměř nadpřirozených bytostí.

Během 19. století začal v Americe nabývat na oblíbenosti regionální typ literatury, který byl zaměřen lokálně a zahrnoval specifické charaktery, dialekty, zvyky a topografické znaky. Bohužel i v tomto případě nebyl obraz americké společnosti úplný, neboť ženy se stále vyskytovaly pouze jako periferní postavy a jejich zpodobnění bylo buď poplatné doznívajícímu viktoriánskému ideálu nebo ukazovalo ženské hrdinky jako bezcharakterní bytosti.

Ve 20. století se genderová asymetrie v regionální fikci začala pozvolna měnit, a definitivní tečku za idealizovanými a výhradně mužskými hrdiny udělala Willa Cather svými romány “My Ántonia” a “O Pioneers!”. Pro ilustraci naprosto odlišného přístupu Willy Cather k vykreslení hrdinek pionýrské fikce a jejich postavení a rolí v rámci rodiny i širší společnosti je její dílo srovnáno s tvorbou dalšího významným regionálního spisovatele, Ole Edvarta Rolvaaga. Jeho nejznámější dílo, “Giants in the Earth” se také zabývá životem prvních osadníků v oblasti dnešního amerického Středozápadu a bylo prvně vydáno ve stejném období jako fikce Willy Cather. Oba spisovatelé velmi realisticky a částečně autobiograficky popisují drsné zkušenosti osadníků-imigrantů..

Dílo Cather vychází z provedeného srovnání jako podporující a rozšiřující

“Americký mýtus”, zasazující hlavní hrdinky do širších souvislostí v rámci budování amerického národa. Naproti tomu Rolvaagovo dílo, jakkoli vynikající, vyznívá jako temná elegie, popisující vysokou cenu kterou lidé platí za emigraci, bez konečného světla na závěr knihy. Neméně důležitým faktem je, že v případě Cather jsou popisovány na základě vlastní zkušenosti jako hlavní postavy ženy. Jsou to ženské hrdinky, které jsou zdrojem síly, energie a optimismu, a které nakonec díky své vnitřní síle a tvrdé práci slaví vítězství. V ideologii Amerického mýtu se tak staví po bok až dosud výhradně uznávaným bílým mužům.

Význam fikce Cather je důležitý i ze dvou dalších důvodů. Prvním je pochopení rolí, které ženy při kolonizaci Amerického Západu sehrály a druhým realistický popis vlastností kterými ženy opravdu disponovaly. Ještě během 19. století existoval na základě společenského tlaku soubor charakteristik které se pro správnou viktoriánskou ženu nehodily: nezávislost, odvaha, individualita, a naopak těch, kterými oplývat měla: slabost, poddajnost, závislost, pasivita. Tento rozdílný přístup k preferovaným a záměrně adorovaným ženským vlastnostem se samozřejmě odrážel i v dobové literatuře, jejímiž autory byli v té době převážně muži. Willa Cather nepokračuje ve stereotypním zpodobňování žen typických pro tehdejší kanonickou literaturu, naopak ukazuje netradiční portrét hrdiny “Divokého Západu” jímž je mladá, odvážná a sebevědomá žena. Ve své alternativní vizi hrdiny dává Cather svým románovým ženám svobodu organizovat si svůj život podle vlastních individuálních přání. To samozřejmě neznamená, že by z nich dělala muže v sukních, pouze jim neupírá právo (protože to jsou ženy), být přímé, inteligentní a mít silnou vůli. Současně také klade důraz na ženský úhel pohledu a odlišný přístup při kultivaci půdy a přeměně divočiny v prosperující pole a usedlosti.

Začleněním žen-hrdinek do historie a mýtu Amerického Západu je také nastíněn a zrovnoprávněn odlišný mužský a ženský přístup k půdě jako entitě. Zatímco mužští hrdinové cítí potřebu půdy a přírodu “zkrotit”, “porobit si” nebo “dobýt”, ženy svůj kontakt cítí a prožívají jinak. Místo boje kdo z koho touží se zemí splynout a svou péčí a láskou ji proměnit v příjemnou zahradu a místo pro život. Na symbol zahrady, domestikovaného venkovského ráje, který je v amerických představách zakořeněn

velmi dlouho, Cather také navazuje, a to včetně pastorální imaginace. Typická hrdinka Willy Cather, odvážná žena v žijící srdci divočiny, která je schopná si nejprve představit výsledek a poté strávit celý život vytvářením své “zahrady” tak perfektně zapadá mezi ostatní individuality národní mytologie.

Dalším přínosem Cather je realistický obraz kolonizace Amerického Západu, neboť na základě své vlastní zkušenosti s životem na neosídlené prérii je schopna poskytnout informace o každodenním životě a rolích žen, které v jiných dílech, zabývajících se ženami na Americkém Západě, chybí. I díky tomu, že je bez příkras popsáno jakými těžkostmi hrdinky prošly a jak si poradily, jsou na konci knihy přirozeně vnímány jako zosobnění úspěchu. Ačkoli jsou tyto ženy platnými členkami společnosti, jsou to jejich individuální činy, které z nich dělají triumfujícími hrdiny. Cather výměnou klasického a ve své době jediného možného modelu “muže-hrdiny” za silnou ženu, pomohla rozvinout další formu identity v rámci národní mytologie. Zároveň je fascinující zjištění, že v případech mnoha románů Willy Cather byly předobrazem hrdinek reprezentujících pozitivní kvality hrdinů Amerického Západu, imigrantky českého původu. Sepsáním osudů opravdových žen a života na Americkém Západě poskytla Cather alternativní vizi Amerického Západu dalším generacím.