Gothic Trends in Contemporary Great Plains Literature

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Aaron J. LaDuke
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This dissertation titled
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by
AARON J. LADUKE

has been approved for
the Department of English
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Paul C. Jones
Professor of English

Robert Frank
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
Abstract

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Gothic Trends in Contemporary Great Plains Literature

Director of Dissertation: Paul C. Jones

This study argues for the emergence of a Gothic literature in the Great Plains region. Plains fiction has long been dominated by the pioneer ideal put forth by authors such as Willa Cather. I posit that a thread of contemporary authors of the region are now challenging these myths and creating works that engage a repressed history of the plains through the use of a Gothic style. The study begins with a look at Cather as a writer who perhaps most famously establishes the pioneer myth. Cather writes in praise of the yeoman farmer with her use of the garden myth and democratic utopia, but she also plants some seeds of the Gothic with the dark eruptions that occur in her narratives.

Wright Morris is an author who challenges ideal versions of Great Plains history through his plains expatriate characters but also struggles with nostalgic conceptions of the region. He serves as the bridge between Cather and the primary writer of the study: Annie Proulx. In her three collections of Wyoming stories, Proulx creates a sober picture of the plains that focuses on more painful aspects of the region’s history such as the widespread failure of small farmers and ranchers. Her fiction makes use of a wide range of Gothic, stylistic techniques and builds on the previous regional Gothics of New England and the South. The conclusion to the project explores other contemporary Great Plains writers working in a Gothic mode. Several of these writers take a particular focus on the repressed history concerning the oppression of Native Americans. The final chapter looks
at an additional text in the form of current media coverage of the region, which provides a unique perspective on the cyclical nature of the history that has defined the plains.
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: &quot;Hell to the Rescue&quot;--A Gothic Arrival on the Plains</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Cather's Nebraska--Pioneer Myth, Plains Tensions, Seeds of the Gothic</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Edge of Nostalgia--Wright Morris and the Plains</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: &quot;Dangerous and Indifferent Ground&quot;--Annie Proulx's Gothic Wyoming</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: A Cyclical History Revealed--Contemporary Gothic on the Plains</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Wright Morris Photograph, <em>The Inhabitants</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Morris Photo, <em>The Inhabitants</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Morris Photo, <em>The Inhabitants</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Morris Photo, <em>The Inhabitants</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Morris Photo, <em>The Home Place</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Morris Photo, <em>The Home Place</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>Morris Photo <em>The Home Place</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>Morris Photo, <em>The Home Place</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: “Hell to the Rescue”—A Gothic Arrival on the Plains

Grant Wood’s 1930 painting “American Gothic” has long stood as an icon of the austere nature of people on the plains. The stern (and famously ambiguous) couple stands in front of a white farmhouse with a prominent, Gothic styled window in its gable (curtains drawn); a corner of red barn is visible over the father/husband’s shoulder; he holds a pitchfork. The viewer immediately ponders several elements of the painting: How is the couple related? Why is the woman looking off to the left instead of straight ahead, as the man is? The critic John E. Seery voices another popular question: “What goes on behind those closed curtains?” (Biel 11). Robert K. Martin writes that this “sense of prim propriety may conceal a haunted heritage, with a pitchfork that can do more than toss hay,” and that the painting “may also serve to remind us of what lies beneath the landscape, of the flatness that conceals the secrets of the prairie” (Biel xi).

In the way that viewers have struggled to see what lies beneath the surface of Wood’s painting to uncover a history that will tell them more about the couple’s nature, “American Gothic” reflects early literary depictions of the Great Plains region. Readers did not get very far past the stern, pioneer spirit that defined early literary inhabitants of the plains; however, as Great Plains literature has progressed through the twentieth century, readers have seen the curtains parted on some of the repressed history of this region. If one understands the literary Gothic as a return of the repressed, as an unearthing of a buried history, then a trend of the Gothic has clearly found its way into contemporary Great Plains literature. It should be noted, this is the first scholarly work to
apply the genre of the literary Gothic to the plains.\(^1\) In this study, I claim that Annie Proulx and a thread of other contemporary plains authors have brought the genre of the Gothic to the Great Plains to create a new regional Gothic.

In a recent online article for *National Geographic*, John G. Mitchell writes of the contemporary Great Plains region:

The people of the plains have a warm affinity for the past, perhaps to an extent greater than that of a regional folk anywhere in the United States outside the Old South. It isn’t exactly history that excites them, for much of that—and especially the darker side—tends to get pinched in the plainsmen’s fervor to celebrate the rodeos, stampedes, and mythic reenactments that perennially stroke their collective psyche. Call it nostalgia for times gone by, or for times that might never have been exactly as grand as people would paint them.

Mitchell’s description of this current mindset of many on the Great Plains explains the reasons that a Gothic trend has emerged in the region’s current literature. The people now living in the Great Plains cling to historical myths that define and affirm their region. The “darker side” of this history is repressed in favor of the myths that “stroke the collective psyche.” However, because of the economic problems and population loss, this mindset, an attitude Charles Bowden calls “willful amnesia” (2), is being forced to clash with the reality of present life on the plains.

\(^1\) Matthew J.C. Cella’s recent book, *Bad Land Pastoralism in Great Plains Fiction* (2010), explores the emigrant myth and seeks to replace it with a “new pastoralism.” Cella’s text, with its primarily ecological approach, uncovers some of the more repressed histories on the plains, and he engages the texts of Willa Cather and Proulx, but his study does not engage any facet of the literary Gothic. Rodney P. Rice’s article,
A brief look at two works, Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* and Annie Proulx’s short story “What Kind of Furniture Would Jesus Pick?” (*Bad Dirt*) reveals how this perceptible historical shift is being reflected in the region’s current literature. Most evident with these two works are the differences in the depictions of the physical landscapes and attitudes towards those plains environments. Cather’s narrator Jim Burden describes the Nebraska plains during a July harvest: “It seemed as if we could hear the corn growing in the night; under the stars one caught a faint crackling in the dewy, heavy-odoured cornfields where the feathered stalks stood so juicy and green” (88). Cather’s plains are a land that is ready to richly reward those who are faithful enough to work them successfully. Burden looks out over the plains and observes, “[…] all the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea” (197). These perspectives of the Nebraska plains highlight Cather’s main focus in her writing of this region: a depiction of the vigilance and optimism of an archetypal pioneer spirit and the rewards that come with it.

Proulx’s Gilbert Wolfscale shares an intense love of the land as well: his “feeling for the ranch was the strongest emotion that had ever moved him, a strangling love tattooed on his heart” (Proulx 72). But unlike Cather’s characters, Wolfscale has to come to grips with the realities of the post-Dust Bowl landscape: “It had always been dry country, and no one born there expected more than a foot of annual rainfall in a good year. The drought halved that, and he could see the metamorphosis of grazing land into desert. The country wanted to go to sand dunes and rattlesnakes, wanted to scrape off its
human ticks” (68). With Proulx we see a landscape that rebuffs all efforts to gain profit from it; resourceful, hard working people with a love for the land still find themselves frustrated and forsaken. Along with this repressed history of the region, there is clear Gothic machinery present in Proulx’s stories. From haunted houses to doppelgangers to half-skinned steers that rise from the dead, these stylistic trappings of the Gothic reveal in Proulx’s work the repressed history that haunts the region and demands to be dealt with.

Before discussing earlier regional Gothics, explaining in more detail the actual history coming to light in later plains writing, and addressing the authors this study will encompass, it is necessary to explain my definition of the Gothic itself, as a literary genre and a critical perspective.

_A Theory of the Gothic_

My view of the Gothic hinges on four main points: First, as previously mentioned, the Gothic acts as a return of the repressed in the way it recovers painful truths that have been hidden; in the case of a regional Gothic, these truths are the history that haunts the specific region. Second, the Gothic must be recognized not as an escapist, fanciful genre but as an active, political literature that insists upon probing the anxieties of a specific society. Third, the Gothic has a very specific method of dealing with these anxieties, which can be most clearly defined as psychoanalytic. That is, the Gothic can create a healthier, present view of the region by dealing with a repressed, painful past through a psychoanalytic process experienced by the literature’s characters and shared by the reader. Finally, a Gothic literature must make use of a clear distortion in style. This final point will often prove critical in determining whether a work is indeed Gothic. What
qualifies as a stylistic “distortion” will unfold as the various authors addressed in this study are introduced.

Teresa A. Goddu, in her illuminating text *Gothic America*, provides an important explanation of the way in which the Gothic opposes selective American myths:

The nation’s narratives—its foundational fictions and self-mythologizations—are created through a process of displacement: their coherence depends on exclusion. By resurrecting what these narratives repress, the Gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history. […] the American Gothic exposes the cultural contradictions of national myth […] it serves as a primary means of speaking the unspeakable in American literature. (10)

At its basis, the Gothic needs to be understood as an oppositional literature that seeks to exhume what has been buried by a culture and society. Michelle Masse further explains the Gothic’s interest in what remains hidden: “These latent unconscious materials have the weight of truth: what is sequestered in the dungeon seems to have more significance than what is on display in the drawing room, the present to have less import than the individual, familial and social past” (234). It makes sense that a history “sequestered in the dungeon” would be repressed for critical reasons, and illuminating both that history and the reasons for its suppression are key to the way the Gothic makes sense of the present.

Fred Botting goes a long way in explaining this highly complex relationship the Gothic holds with the past and the present:
Gothic remains ambivalent and heterotopic, reflecting the doubleness of the relationship between present and past. Indeed, Gothic continues to stand as the trope of the history of the present itself, a screen for the consumption and projection of the present onto a past at once distant and close by. The play of distance and proximity, rejection and return, telescopes history, both condensing the past into an object of idealized or negative speculation and unraveling and disarming the gaze of the present with its ambivalent return. (12)

Botting accurately explains that the Gothic is a literature that understands how critical the past is to the present, how the present is constantly defining itself by the past and therefore keeps that history very close by (even if it is repressed). At the same time, the past is being defined by the present, being shaped by those who want to mold history so that their present makes more sense. Overall, the Gothic has no illusions of any chasm between past and present; rather, it recognizes, as Botting says, the constant “play of distance and proximity, rejection and return.” Critical as well is Botting’s conception of the past as an “object of idealized or negative speculation.” This is indeed the critical struggle that the Gothic takes up with the past. Though some literatures try to keep history at a distance as an object of idealized speculation (such as Cather’s), it is the Gothic that strives to uncover and deal with the elements that make a history an object of negative speculation (such as the Southern Gothic, as we will see).

I will later explain in more detail the specific history buried on the plains. What is important to understand from a theoretical standpoint is that these kinds of histories, those that elide the uncomfortable facts of the past, are exactly the histories with which
the Gothic finds itself locked in a bitter combat. The Gothic can be seen as a firebrand in disguise. The Gothic machinery of its surface (darkness, death, and decay along with elements of madness and the supernatural) often distracts readers from its identity as a socially engaged, political (and actually socially beneficial) literature. In her study Goddu “contests traditional assessments that classify it [the Gothic] as an escapist form. Instead of fleeing reality, the Gothic registers its culture’s contradictions […]” (2-3). She also further defines Gothic authors in the role of firebrand: “By writing their own Gothic tales, these authors combat the master’s vision of their history; by breaking the silence, they reclaim their history instead of being controlled by it” (155). The “master’s vision” of history can be seen as the history put forth by those in power, those who stand to gain a profit by denying past realities (especially as the Gothic relates to specific regions like the South and the plains). Leslie Fiedler, in the seminal text *Love and Death in the American Novel*, explains some of the intensity of the Gothic’s conflict with history, saying that the Gothic views much of history as the “sense of something lapsed or outlived or irremediably changed […] Gothic novels looked on the Gothic times with which they dealt as corrupt and detestable. Their vision of the past was bitterly critical, and they evoked the olden days not to sentimentalize but to condemn them” (137). Though Fiedler rightly recognizes the Gothic’s grim view of much of history, he also brings up the point that the Gothic wants to condemn these times in order to bring about a present less haunted by the past. In this way, the Gothic, especially a regional Gothic, can be seen as beneficial, a kind of psychotherapist for a region or culture.
David Punter recognizes in the Gothic a psychoanalytic impulse that he refers to as a “movement of the mind that seeks to exorcise the ghost, to clean out the house, ruined though it may be, and assert the possibility of a life that is not haunted as it situates itself resolutely in a present that strains toward the future” (ix). America in particular has embraced the Gothic in this manner with good reason. Jean Baudrillard called America “a utopia which has behaved from the beginning as though it were already achieved” (Fiedler 28). Beyond the plains and a pioneering spirit, there has been a well-acknowledged belief in America as a democratic utopia where anybody willing to work hard can carve out their fruitful existence. Of course it is in this manner that those of higher socio-economic status justify both their success and the struggles of those of lower standing. These generalities make the important point that an idealized version of America or its regions encourages the repression of any history that may cast speculation on the culture, therefore making it particularly ripe for a psychoanalytic (Gothic) critical lens. Masse notes, “The defense mechanisms most invoked by both metaphoric and allegorical psychoanalytical criticism are repression and resistance” (234). It is the job of the Gothic, then, to “assert the supremacy of the ‘rational or real’ to which Gothic protagonists have little access. Resisting characters and texts are then said to be repressing their own truths” (234). In this way the Gothic, filled as its narratives are with darkness and violence, can act as an exorcizer of demons and bring a culture or region back into touch with what has been repressed. As Masse states, “We cannot understand individual and cultural expression—or effect lasting change—without careful consideration of the hinted-at, the hidden and denied” (230). Perhaps the Marquis de
Sade puts it best when he says of the Gothic’s function during revolutionary Europe, “It was necessary to call hell to the rescue” (Fiedler 136).

*The Gothic as Regional Literature*

In America the Gothic has functioned to help reveal flaws in particular historical foundations that have finally begun to crack under their own weight, and these histories are often regionally specific. The Great Plains Gothic is an emerging regional Gothic that has been built on the traditions of other, well-defined regional Gothics, and it is important to chart these influences. New England and the South are the two critical regions that provide a pattern for the plains Gothic. Examining these two traditions and two of their primary practitioners, Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Faulkner, is important in a broad sense for establishing benchmarks for what comprises a legitimately Gothic work. My overall study will proceed by analyzing plains authors chronologically to trace the formation of a Gothic in the region. The established regional Gothics of New England and the South will provide the standard by demonstrating clear use of a Gothic style and also a thematic return of the repressed. It is important to note specific stylistic techniques for each region because the plains Gothic borrows stylistically from both New England and the South. The Great Plains Gothic also shares thematically with these two regions: specifically, New England’s failed utopia from a values standpoint and the South’s loss of personal codes due to a shifting economy. The plains has its own, specific painful history that has been repressed by most of the region’s literature, and the region’s thread of Gothic works have their own take on a Gothic style, as well; however, establishing the plains Gothic’s literary inheritance from New England and the South helps, as mentioned,
to establish clear standards for the genre as well as to highlight national issues that have fostered an American Gothic from the beginning.

New England’s role as the first region settled in the new America is the most critical factor that drives the region’s identity within a Gothic framework. Overall, the formation of the Gothic in New England can be seen as the response to a failed political utopia haunted by the sins of its founding fathers. Founded by those fleeing persecution and seeking to create a political utopia based on moral purity, the New England region bore perhaps the heaviest burden of hope of any of the American regions. (I will eventually argue that the plains have taken over the burden of a set of mythic, moral values.) Goddu states that “America’s self-mythologization as a nation of hope and harmony directly contradicts the Gothic’s most basic impulses”(4). In New England this self-mythologization functions with a special intensity, compared to other American regions, because of New England’s earliest founding and subsequent lack of American history and experience to challenge these myths. Puritan communities quickly developed a history of the brand of harsh persecution from which they had fled. The strict enforcement of this already rigid covenant led to the harsh castigation of many Puritans in New England2. These tyrannies on the part of the Puritan community form the precise history that was repressed and then resurrected by Nathaniel Hawthorne to create his regional Gothic in New England.

2 The plains region does not inherit this tradition of imposing values on others, but more so shares with colonial New England the expectation of embodying a specific set of positive values. As it occurred in New England, we will see that the unrealistic optimism of these values on the plains makes them mythic, and the attempt to affirm these values in the region creates the repression of the more painful parts of the region’s history, eventually fostering a Gothic return.
Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is a text thoroughly grounded in the tradition of the New England Gothic. Though published in 1850, Hawthorne takes Puritan New England for the basis of his historical concerns. Even though the United States had not reached the century mark as a country, Hawthorne still wanted to emphasize (and criticize) America’s foundations. In *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne is primarily concerned with the new country’s belief in a utopian society based on Enlightenment ideals and the ways in which that desire goes awry with Puritan fanaticism, exposing the darkness in the supposedly democratic settlers of New England. We see this phenomena appear most clearly in the “Custom House” introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*. In this opening scene the narrator (closely linked to Hawthorne biographically) finds a manuscript buried in the custom house where he works and proceeds to share with the reader this story, the story of Hester Prynne, an inhabitant of an early New England village. The narrator relates to Hester because of their mutual feelings of persecution. In the narrator’s case, he feels persecuted not only by his cruel co-workers, but also more importantly by his Puritan ancestors. He says of his earliest Puritan ancestor that his “hard severity” will last longer than “any record of his better deeds” (12). This ancestor’s son was so violently active in the Salem Witch Trials that “their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him,” a stain so deep that his bones “must still retain it” (12). And here the narrator introduces the theme of the ancestral curse: He is not sure whether his ancestors have repented for their crimes or whether “they are now groaning under the heavy consequences of them” (13). The narrator says that he shall “take shame upon myself for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by them […] may be now and henceforth removed” (13). The
narrator then relates the details of the found manuscript (in what becomes the narrative of
the novel) in a manner that resurrects and exposes the cruel hypocrisy of his Puritan
ancestors as they oppress and castigate (with the famous symbol of the scarlet letter)
Hester Prynne within a community that is a supposed political utopia. As he works to
exhume the repressed sins of his ancestors, Hawthorne makes use (as plains Gothic
writers will as well) of a number of traditional stylistic devices of the Gothic, inherited
from his British predecessors: ancestral curses (as mentioned), Gothic architecture (in the
transposed location of the forest), and the supernatural. Compared to his British
predecessors, Hawthorne puts his own imprint on the use of the supernatural by
straddling the line between the real and unreal (Hester’s letter “may have” glowed red at
night, to many a meteor in the sky “appeared” to be a letter A, etc.).

A discussion of Gothic style and its tendency to shift, as evidenced by some of the
adaptations made early on by Hawthorne, provides an important transition into the
regional Gothic of the South. Hawthorne’s decision to write “romances,” which stood in
contrast to the English novel, serves as a critical point in the development of the Gothic
style in America. Hawthorne described his approach in this way:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he
wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he
would not have felt himself entitled to had he professed to be writing a Novel.
The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not
merely to the possible, but to the probable and the ordinary course of a man’s
experience. The former […] has fairly a right to present the truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation. (13)

As we have seen, Hawthorne responded to New England with “circumstances” involving Gothic architecture, ghosts, the supernatural, and hauntings, inherited from American writers like Brown and English Gothicists rather than practitioners of the “Novel”.

Equally important, is his claim that a writer should be able to choose the “fashion and material” that best suits their purpose. If a regional Gothic is to respond to and challenge the history of that region, then it must, as Hawthorne advised, be able to select the stylistic devices that prove most effective – as histories and regions shift, so must the style. Savoy writes, “American Gothic is, first and foremost, an innovative and experimental literature. Its power comes from its dazzling originality and diversity in a series of departures that situate the perverse—as forms, techniques, and themes—inside the national mainstream” (168). Savoy emphasizes the fact that as an active, political literature that responds directly to the “national mainstream,” the Gothic must have at its disposal a wide variety of stylistic techniques and the discretion to use those diverse techniques freely. To be sure, there must always exist in any regional Gothic a language of haunting, a ghostly history that revisits a region and causes distinct anxieties, and, as I have mentioned before, a distortion in style—a clear departure from reality. At the same time, different aspects of the Gothic style and its repertoire may be emphasized as those working in particular regions see fit.

Steven Bruhm notes a key difference in earlier Gothic novels, such as those of the Romantic period, and later Gothic texts. He shares the kind of circumstances that demand
change in a Gothic style: “With the ravages of the unconscious continually interrupting one’s perception of the world, the protagonist of the contemporary Gothic often experiences history as mixed up, reversed, and caught in a simultaneity of past-present-future” (267). Though Bruhm speaks of the contemporary Gothic, this same phenomenon of fragmentation occurs with the modern period and the development of the Southern Gothic. The specific historical conditions of the South during this period produce literary characters that experience the “past-present-future” conflict that Bruhm describes. A brief explanation of these historical conditions will allow for an understanding of the style shift in the Southern Gothic.

Broadly, these circumstances revolve around the South’s past economic reliance on slavery, the loss of the civil war, and most importantly, the region’s loss of the archetypes that defined a way of life—a set of codes and archetypal personalities that have historically defined the region and its white inhabitants; at the turn of the century, characters of the Southern Gothic find it difficult to either affirm the continued value of these codes or to deconstruct them completely. The Southern gentleman and his attributes of chivalry, the purity and gentility of the Southern belle, aristocracy and the preservation of family status, the wealth of the plantation by slave labor—these are the modes of living that brought pride to the ante-bellum region, and it is these codes that now haunt its post-war inhabitants (just as the pioneer will prove to be the primary archetype that will haunt the plains region after many widespread failures in farming and ranching).

These lost modes of living and the ensuing confusion and frustration over how to move past a painful history lead to the formation of a distinct stylistic technique in the
regional Gothic of the South: the use of the Grotesque. The Grotesque defines, more than any other element, the style of Southern Gothic writers like William Faulkner. Uruburu defines what lies at the heart of the Grotesque when she describes it as “a genre which derives its effectiveness from paradox, from the fusion of numerous and seemingly incompatible elements” (8). These elements can range from repulsion and sympathy to the dark and the comic to the perversion of an expected and accepted order. As Gothic style shifts necessarily while moving from region to region it makes sense that Southern Gothic writers would draw on the intense contrasts of the Grotesque to depict the lives of characters that are themselves so torn between a lost past and a daunting present, characters equally afflicted by disparate feelings of guilt, resistance, disorientation and anger.

Uruburu explains the way the Grotesque can take shape, stylistically—the most common Grotesque technique being the repulsion-fascination response. Readers are often moved to both repulsion and sympathy when encountering a character Grotesque in either appearance or behavior. Uruburu states that the repulsion-fascination response is most important for “its ability to get our attention, to attract us, or to get us to laugh at something considered obscene, cruel, or violent, because this raises the possibility that even in the best of us […] there exist unholy, unconscious and ‘sadistic impulses’ which are very much alive and which threaten to break loose when given the chance” (13). Authors of the Southern Gothic call upon these “unholy” impulses, the strong urge to look at something horrific, in the effort to demand attention for important thematic

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3 Annie Proulx shares deep ties with another Southern Gothic writer, Flannery O’Connor, who will be discussed specifically in the Proulx chapter.
elements, such as, of course, the history suppressed by a region. Characters of the Southern Gothic can be forced to let go of the familiar past they cling to when, as Uruburu says, “the safe and familiar world we know seems on the verge of disintegration” (15). The use of the Grotesque, rooted in paradox, works to expose the contradictions that Southern Gothic characters face as they struggle with their region’s history.

This element of paradox contributes to Faulkner’s ability to address Southern codes and the way that characters try to deal with their relevance in both the past and present. In addition to his use of the Grotesque, an amplified use of a language of haunting is also present in Faulkner’s work. Ryan Friedman claims that Faulkner’s novel Absalom, Absalom! is “supported by a gothic metaphorical design—a framework of ghosts and demons and shades—that accounts for its characters’ generally inhuman treatment of one another […] using the raw materials of the gothic, Absalom, Absalom! constructs an underlying ghostly edifice of its own” (195). It is true that characters in the novel are constantly referred to as either “demons” or “ghosts,” and Faulkner also centers his narrative on the trope of the haunted house, translated in Faulkner’s Southern Gothic as the haunted plantation built on lands stolen from Native Americans.

In Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner depicts the rise and fall of the “Sutpen hundred,” the plantation that Colonel Sutpen builds. Quentin Compson imagines Sutpen as a distorted physical presence, a “demon,” in the way that he enters the sleepy town of Jefferson, Mississippi: “Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur—reek still
It is important that Sutpen is introduced with such a striking, Grotesque image, because he will serve, himself, as the story of the South—Sutpen is the history repressed. Characters in the novel often refer to specific histories of the South as “demons” they must lay to rest. During his lifetime, Sutpen “tore violently a plantation,” (5) as one character puts it, strives to become a gentleman in his community, grossly mistreats women, and tries desperately to carve out a family legacy while violently expelling the traces of miscegenation in his family. Sutpen’s story is retold by both the character of Miss Rosa (a brief, dishonored fiancé to Sutpen) and, more prominently, Quentin. The retelling of Sutpen’s story becomes complicated when Quentin narrates the violent tale to Shreve, a Canadian. Shreve does not feel the weight of the history as Quentin does. Shreve says of this painful history, “it’s something my people haven’t got. Or if we have got it, it all happened long ago across the water and so now there aint anything to look at every day to remind us of it. We don’t live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves […]” (289). Shreve provides the counterpoint to Quentin, the outsider against which Quentin will measure the impact of his region’s history. Concerning Miss Rosa’s narrative, we are told that Miss Rosa “refused at last to be a ghost. That after almost fifty years she couldn’t reconcile herself to letting him lie dead in peace” (289). Miss Rosa makes Quentin go with her to the Sutpen mansion, saying that there is, “Something living in it. Hidden in it. It has been out there for four years, living

4 It is interesting to note that Shreve is from Edmonton, Alberta, a prairie region—a region that Shreve feels has no history, or at least, a history that is concealed by the distance of an ocean, separating his home from the lands from which his European ancestors emigrated. Shreve can perhaps be viewed as an interesting point on the regional Gothic timeline—situated during the Southern Gothic, with no clue as to the history that may haunt his own plains region.
hidden in that house” (140). Quentin discovers that the hidden ghost haunting the plantation is Henry Sutpen, Colonel’s Sutpen’s son, who killed his own mixed blood brother. Quentin is not prepared to confront his past as boldly as Miss Rosa eventually does. When Shreve asks Quentin if he understands the South, Quentin answers, “I don’t know […] Yes, of course I understand it” (289). But a moment later says again, “I don’t know” (289). In the final lines of the novel, Shreve asks Quentin, “Why do you hate the South?” (303). Quentin answers, “panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!” (303). Quentin has just told to Shreve the story of Sutpen as the story of the South. Quentin is surprised by the assumption in Shreve’s question, and he does not realize that the story he has told of his home is one of incredible violence and suffering. Thus, his immediate reaction is denial. As mentioned, the plains shares with the Southern Gothic the questioning of long held archetypes that have defined the region. As evidenced by Quentin’s reaction at the end of Faulkner’s novel, this questioning can be difficult. In the work of Cather and Wright Morris, we will see just how difficult it can be for characters to overcome their own conceptions of the region and how this resistance (often seen in the form of nostalgia) can provide a barrier to the open examination of painful pasts that defines the Gothic.

**Historical Origins of a Great Plains Gothic**

In his theoretical discussion of the American Gothic, Savoy states that it “does not exist apart from its specific regional manifestations; the burden of a scarifying past is more typical of New England and southern Gothic than, for example, that of the prairies, yet common to all is a narrative site that tends to be an epistemological frontier […] The
Gothic cannot function without a proximity of Otherness imagined as its imminent return […]” (6). Although Savoy recognizes the American Gothic’s tendency to manifest itself in specific regions, what he does not realize is that the requisite “epistemological frontier” that he speaks of has indeed arrived on the actual frontier, on the Great Plains. Through a select thread of authors that confront the phenomena, there is evident a repressed history on the plains, characteristic of an “Other,” that is making its “imminent return.”

Part of the difficulty in recognizing a Great Plains Gothic lies in the fact that the region’s literature has been tightly defined, thematically, since its inception into the national geography. When comparing the regional literatures of the South and the Great Plains, they have differed in the past because the South is characterized by its idyllic, lush and pastoral landscape, but also by its tragic past defined by the original sin of slavery, while the plains, on the other hand, is defined not only by fierce, present conflict with the unforgiving landscape, but also by the seemingly unlimited potential of the future, agriculturally. This constant focus on the future effectively makes the plains a region without a past. This opposition, that has been recognized since the 19th century, is stated succinctly by David Holman in his book *A Certain Slant of Light: Regionalism and the Form of Southern and Midwestern Fiction*: “The past of the South is tragic and complete […] The Midwestern mind is characterized by a belief in the possibility that the promise of the past can be realized in the future […]” (17). Holman points out that even when the plains region does experience conflict and struggle, those inhabitants typically remain

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5 Holman chooses to use the term “Midwestern” to discuss a regional literature that includes Great Plains states as well as more typically Midwestern states.
focused on a future that they believe will eventually reward them, while those in the South have experienced and accepted a very tangible defeat through the Civil War. To speak more specifically to the history of these regions, the history of the South, to many of its literary inhabitants, is filled with guilt and despair. The original sin of slavery has driven them from the garden. In the mode of the Southern Gothic, as we have seen, Faulkner shows the disintegration of the distinguished Southern family and culture in a decaying, Grotesque, absurd world. The characters of the Southern Gothic are haunted by a history tainted by slavery and subsequent racial prejudice. Settings of pastoral perfection are inextricably linked to a history of corrupt morality. The plains, on the other hand, by the nature of its unconquered wilderness, has no past, only a future for those with the values to make it—pioneer values of hope, hard work, and honesty. Unlike the sensuous rural paradise of the South, in Great Plains writing the landscape has been depicted as a character of supernatural force that must be conquered. Characters do not commune with nature but seek to tame it into production. Consequently, because of their faith in pioneer values and various myths of the region (to be defined below), the past of the Great Plains has really been the future. That is, the uninhabited and unconquered plains have had no history, only the myths of potential that continually drive characters’ hopes and wills.

The belief in the myths of the Great Plains is the primary means by which the history described above has repressed realities of the region. Goddu has already stated America’s tendency toward self-mythologization; nowhere is the instinct stronger than in the Great Plains. In her book *The Nature of Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction*, Diane
Quantic defines the following as the primary myths of the region: the garden myth (the belief that the plains can be cultivated and can sustain one richly) and the democratic utopia (any person of any background can become prosperous on the land with hard work) (47). These myths have been readily substituted for the history of the region, obscuring any history in opposition to the defining optimism of the plains. The three main historical phenomena that have been repressed in Great Plains literature are the ecological damage done to the landscape, the violence against Native Americans and the theft of their lands, and the failure of homesteading and farming.

Ecologically, the fact that the Great Plains is a semi-arid landscape leads back to the discussion of the “new history” of the region, in the way that it relates to a misunderstanding of the Great Plains environment by farmers. The failure of farming and its methods ties directly into the history perhaps most repressed by the region—the damage done to the land itself. Being defined by the garden myth means that the landscape of the Great Plains has been seen as a provider, as the “breadbasket” of the nation. One of the environmental issues to receive very little attention in America, however, is the detriment to this region by the methods used to farm it. The first and most severe form of damage done to the land was the breaking of the ground itself. As a grasslands environment, the land of the plains had to be plowed and turned under to grow crops. The arduous process gave early farming pioneers the admiring nickname of “sodbusters.” Though a famous saying of the pre-dust bowl plains was “rain follows the plow,” the opposite proved true. The destruction of the grasslands led to the dust bowl because an environment with so much wind could not contain a land with so much
exposed soil. John Price explains that “Cultivation wreaked havoc on prairie plants, shredding their root systems, eroding topsoil, and introducing invasive species—a process that culminated in the worst environmental disaster in American history, the dust bowl of the 1920s and 30s. Today native grasslands that once covered 40 percent of the nation have been reduced to a splotchy 10 percent” (8). Mitchell describes one dust bowl storm that “powdered Chicago with 12 million tons of Wyoming and Montana dirt. A day or so later the fallout dirtied the rooftops of New York City and the decks of ships a hundred miles at sea.” A frequent response to the droughts after the dust bowl was irrigation, especially large-scale, central pivot irrigation. This has led to the current depletion of the Oglala aquifer in the Great Plains. Overall, the environment of the Great Plains has seen a barrage of farming methods that ignore the natural features and reasonable potential of the land.

In approaching the violence toward Native Americans and the theft of their lands, one can see a shift in plains literature from Native Americans as a literal source of terror to a later source of guilt in 20th century works, though not always consistently. To some extent I have found that Native Americans are not a source of source of repressed guilt making its way to the surface but rather are largely absent or viewed as a spectacle or humor of an often culturally insensitive nature. In O Pioneers! Carl informs Alexandra that he will be making a trip to Alaska. Alexandra replies, in astonishment, “Are you going to paint the Indians?” (68). Later in the novel Carl meets a dark-haired newborn child of his friend and makes a joke that one of his grandmothers “must have been a squaw. The kid looks exactly like the Indian babies” (155), to which old Mrs. Chevalier
reacts with a “fiery stream of patois” (154). In other plains authors, though, like Louise Erdrich, the repressed history of Native Americans becomes much more central. Though it is perhaps the most complex thread of plains history to pursue, tracing the violent history of Native Americans on the plains is crucial in defining the emergence of a Gothic literature on the plains. Goddu refers to “one of our most comforting critical illusions” as the belief that “the terror of race exists only in the South. We need to ask how regional stereotypes allow a particular racial discourse to be canonized […] We need to be able to articulate regional differences across color line while also recognizing the pervasiveness of white racism” (93). I plan to take up the task Goddu outlines by examining how Native American history is perceived in the Great Plains authors writing one hundred years or more after the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

Dan O’Brien, a writer of fiction and creative non-fiction, refers to the original homesteading of the plains as “the crackpot scheme to turn the northern plains into a grand matrix of small prosperous farms” (49). This assessment comes in sharp contrast to Cather’s original awe and reverence toward the first settling farmers and can be based more on documented history of that region—critical events like the breaking of the grasslands, which resulted in the dustbowl and subsequent droughts; the fact that since the depression the government has paid farmers to grow food; and most recently, the general regional trend of depopulation. In the following, O’Brien gives an encapsulated, myth-resistant version of the history of the plains. He starts with a popular impression of the region: “It’s a place with plenty of room to roam, great sunsets, clear lines between
right and wrong, and lots of horses. It’s also a place that does not exist and never has”

(95)—and continues to claim:

The truth is that there has never been much fairness out here. The homestead acts were mostly ways to get serfs onto the fees of eastern and European industrialists. When the land, the economy, and the climate revolted, these people had to suffer or be supported by the government. Self-reliance went out the window. As for toughness, the vast majority of homesteaders failed and either gave their land back to the government or sold out to the neighbor […] There wasn’t all that much honesty out here, either. From cheating the Indians out of their birthright and culture to pervasive homestead fraud […] pioneers proved to be just as human as the next man, maybe more so. (95-96)

O’Brien’s description punctures the credence given to pioneer values that have defined the region for over a century. It also depicts Cather’s Alexandra and Antonia as anomaly rather than archetype. O’Brien’s perspective and tone are characteristic of a thread of contemporary Great Plains authors, especially Proulx.

Before continuing with an overview of the progression of plains literature leading to the emergence of a Gothic trend, it is necessary to define my geographic use of the term “Great Plains.” A good starting point is the general, broad definition of the Great Plains provided by the United States Geological survey which defines the region as the area east of the Rocky mountains that encompasses all or parts of the following states: Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas and Wyoming. There are debates as to the borders of the Great Plains,
which is understandable when discussing such a massive region. Mitchell discusses the sheer size of the region: “For starters, wrap your head around half a million square miles, an area about one-sixth the size of the lower forty-eight, embracing more than 400 counties in parts of 10 states stacked between the Canadian border and the mesquite of south Texas.” Mitchell goes on to say that the western border of the Great Plains has been set by a fair consensus of opinion as the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The eastern border of the Great Plains has been debated more frequently. In 1931 historian Walter Prescott Webb fixed the border at the 98th meridian, but a few years later President Franklin Roosevelt’s Great Plains Committee moved the border to the 100th meridian, about a hundred miles farther west (Mitchell). The 100th meridian has the distinction of being the rough border between humid and semi-arid country—areas that receive more or less than twenty inches of rainfall a year. This division makes sense in the way that it divides the Great Plains from some of the wetter, more fertile farmlands of states like Wisconsin, Illinois and Iowa. This division can also lead to discussions of the Great Plains as a region that are based more on the thematic and literary than on geology or geography. For example, it can be argued that the contemporary Great Plains in literature has been defined to a great extent by absence and the barren. The Great Plains do not contain robust Midwestern cities like Chicago, and its farmlands and ranches have proved much less fertile than those in the “Midwest.” On the Western side, a literary Great Plains has not been defined by adventure or picturesque beauty. In both *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, in fact, characters go to “the West” to seek fortune and adventure. The lands of the Great Plains, on the other hand, are much more consistently
defined by their (frustrated) use as ranch and farmlands and by their stark openness and overall lack of urbanity and culture. Though they appear to be general claims, these thematic observations can be useful when combined with geographic fact to determine whether a particular text should be defined as a Great Plains regional literature.

_Great Plains Authors and a Gothic Development: Cather to Morris to Proulx_

To trace the development of a Great Plains Gothic, Willa Cather, as previously mentioned, provides a valuable starting point. The defining characteristic of her plains novels are the affirmation of the myths that Quantic defines, thereby making her works a point from which a change in the region’s literature can be discerned. There are, however, traces of the Gothic even in Cather’s work. The second chapter of this study, devoted to Cather, will begin with an examination of Cather’s novels _O Pioneers!!_ (1913) and _My Antonia_ (1918) and will transition into a discussion of two of her later novels, _One of Ours_ (1922) and _A Lost Lady_ (1923). The theme consistent in both _O Pioneers!!_ and _My Antonia_ is the success of yeoman farmers and their families through a transcendent fortitude and faith in working the land. After difficult clashes with the resistant landscape, those who believe in the land and “love” it are those who seem to be rewarded most by it. This action encompasses both the garden myth and the democratic utopia, and together, the strength of the characters depicted and the fulfillment of these myths enabled works like Cather’s to establish the archetypal “pioneer spirit” that would profoundly affect the region’s literature through the century. The challenge of taming the landscape into production is highlighted early on in both of Cather’s earlier novels, but the primary focus is clearly on the characters who succeed on the land, thus underscoring
the historical perspective of the region’s literature at the time—that the history of the plains is one of potential; its history is the future.

It can be ascertained from the brief example shown at the beginning of this chapter that Cather is obviously a far cry from Proulx in her treatment of the region, and, as mentioned, effectively establishes an identifiable point from which regional writing has evolved. There exist, though, some seeds of the Gothic in her work, primarily in the darker and more complex *My Antonia*. A number of characters do struggle with their own sense of the past and the myth promising them more hope and prosperity on the plains than the European homes they have left. Europe can serve as either a lost Eden or a repository of secrets for some of Cather’s characters. Some of Cather’s female characters, especially, can suffer as they endeavor to establish homes and communities in the void of the prairie. Their perception of the sprawling, empty landscape can depict the prairie as Gothic architecture—the limitless openness leading to a terrifying architecture of absence. In a broader stylistic sense, Cather’s narratives are certainly not free from gruesome violence. Thematically, Cather’s later novels express a disdain for the materialism that begins to crop up and threaten the pioneer ideal—an ideal for which these later novels express a clear nostalgia.

Carl and Jim, two characters of *O Pioneers!!* and *My Antonia*, respectively, come to embody the archetype of the plains expatriate, one who has left the country but is still somehow haunted by its landscape and people. This archetype receives increasing prominence as the regional literature of the Great Plains progresses. These Gothic elements in Cather will prove to be clues in the development of a Great Plains Gothic;
however, as I will show, Cather ultimately contains all of these dark eruptions. What will prove most important in her novels is the aforementioned power of the mythologies surrounding the plains, which may be the hardest to displace, because they are perhaps the most important to the country. Scott Russell Sanders states in his book, *Writing from the Center*, “the Midwest would eventually become in our mythology something of an agrarian theme park, a repository for values that Americans wish to preserve but not live by […]” (39). Thus, even though these pioneer values are not readily apparent in all of the contemporary Great Plains (which Sanders includes in the “Midwest”), they still define perceptions of the region. Savoy states, “[…] logocentric historiography is an essentially nostalgic mode, if nostalgia is understood as a will to sustained cultural coherence, a desire for the seamless authenticity of national narrative…” (7). Thus, it is easy to see why plains novels like Cather’s achieve such prominence in the canon of Great Plains literature with the work they do to sustain a unified historical and cultural narrative for the plains, even if it lacks focus on a variety of experiences in that region.

Two decades later, Wright Morris, the focus of the third chapter, begins to challenge this unified history by tempering his own characters’ nostalgia for a mythical history of the plains with the non-romanticized, contemporary challenges of the region.

My examination of Morris’s work will begin with three shorter works defined as his “Nebraska Trilogy” and then move on to focus on two of his novels, specifically. In his works *Ceremony in Lone Tree* (1959) and *Plains Song: For Female Voices* (1980) Morris’s characters show a variety of responses to the plains region. These responses vary from oblivious love to nostalgia to rejection. All of these characters, though, are
depicted in Morris’s candid portrayal of the contemporary region that, unlike Cather’s plains, both affirms and challenges plains myths and the pioneer spirit. This push and pull with the region’s history moves Wright’s work into Gothic “territory,” but the lack of specific Gothic techniques in Morris’s style does not warrant a classification of his work as a plains Gothic. Morris allows his characters to grapple with, but not fully deal with, the history of their region. Morris was a photographer, as well, and it will prove interesting to examine some of his photos as the conclusion of that chapter given that the photos visually display a Gothic style. Unlike Morris’s literary work, Proulx’s Wyoming stories, the focus of my fourth chapter, and their more highly developed Gothic machinery, allow for a fully cognizant approach to the history of the plains.

These Proulx collections, *Close Range* (1999), *Bad Dirt* (2004), and *Fine Just the Way It Is* (2008) counter the mythologies of the Great Plains with anti-nostalgic depictions of contemporary plains life. The yeoman farmer, garden myth and the democratic utopia are replaced by depictions of isolation, intolerance, failed farming and poverty, and a complex plains population outflux and influx. A survey of Proulx’s stories will reveal these elements and the ways in which they fully confront past and contemporary history on the plains. These thematic concerns are brought to light by Proulx’s style and its full complement of Gothic techniques. Fiedler writes that for a literature to be considered Gothic, it must contain “a technical achievement as well as a statement of important theme; indeed, its technique is keyed to the world of absurdity and violence which it projects, and its author rejects the last falsification of irrelevant or inert form” (494). This is an efficient definition for a Gothic literature—a display of violence
in both the work’s theme and style. As mentioned before, Gothic literatures confront the past and present through a violent confrontation, but, as Fiedler says, this violence must carry over to the stylistic techniques employed in the narrative. As mentioned, a Gothic work must employ a style that contains a violent intensity, or even abnormality, one might say. When defining the practitioner of the Southern Gothic, O’Connor stated, “[…] the kind of writer I am describing will use the concrete in a more drastic way. His way will much more obviously be the way of distortion” (42). Though still subjective, I think “distortion” is the best term to describe what a literature’s style must contain to be defined as Gothic—examples of distortion being Hawthorne’s supernatural elements or Faulkner and O’Connor’s use of the Grotesque. When we arrive at Proulx and a Great Plains Gothic, this distortion is clearly evident. Proulx even opens back up the palette of Gothic technique, creating a style that is more violent, varied and ornate than either the New England Gothic or Southern Gothic. Proulx’s use of several classic Gothic elements, Gothic architecture, the Grotesque through graphic violence and black humor and also her engagement of the supernatural in postmodern ways, gives her stories the intensity to dig up and expose the repressed history of the plains, completing the task that Cather and Morris start.

Before introducing Proulx’s work further, it is perhaps necessary to explain her place and inclusion in the regional writing of the Great Plains. Proulx is sometimes identified as a Western writer (often by those responsible for marketing her work), but the stories in these Wyoming collections clearly address the concerns of the plains region. There are three main reasons that I identify as clearly placing Proulx within the realm of a
Great Plains literature. First, the technical geography mentioned before does define Proulx’s Wyoming setting for these stories as Great Plains with areas east of the Rocky Mountains being included in the plains region. Wyoming’s western half does feature ranges that are included with the Rockies, but Proulx’s stories are clearly set in the eastern half of the state and its grassland environment. Some of Proulx’s lumping in with Western writers may have something to do with the common conflation of Western and plains regions. In a more informal sense, many think of any rural area west of the Mississippi River as “Western,” regionally, when in fact areas as culturally “Western” as Montana are still predominantly plains, geographically. Secondly, Proulx’s depictions of Wyoming environments are clearly creating plains environments. The mountains of the state sometimes appear on the horizon, but the plots of all these stories revolve around the flat, grassland environments of the plains, with her language continually building the openness and isolation of the plains.6 The third, and perhaps most convincing reason, is the use of the land by Proulx’s characters. Proulx’s characters are predominantly ranchers, and this is the primary method by which they relate to the land. As mentioned before with Cather’s novels, the West in plains literature is often a source of adventure and a mythical location in which to seek one’s fortune. This is not Proulx’s Wyoming. Her characters are by and large hard pressed, hardscrabble ranchers trying to eke out a living on the bleak setting of the plains. Her stories often hearken back to homesteaders

6 “Brokeback Mountain” is of course the exception to this claim, being set in the Bighorn mountain range. Even this setting, though, is not a home place for its characters. Both main characters live on ranches on the plains and come to Brokeback only for seasonal work. Further, the mountain setting of the story functions in a very specific way an escape from, an alternative to, the realities of the plains.
on the plains, as well. The fact that almost all of her characters ranch instead of farm makes sense as well, as the shifting agricultural economy of the twentieth century gradually turned to ranching as one of the only ways to turn a profit on the plains.

In *Close Range* the primary themes Proulx confronts are the isolation and intolerance that stand in place of the mythical democratic utopia and fertile garden of the plains. Further, when characters try to escape this current reality or return to their nostalgic visions of the plains, they discover an extreme lack of fluidity in movement either out of or into the region. In Gothic terms, this could be seen as the resulting difficulty of trying to escape a region’s past and also the complications inherent for those entering a region with a painful past they do not understand. Proulx’s conception of the history of the plains region is one that resists not only myth but also any move toward a unified, grand narrative. Proulx is vigilant about creating stories that overturn the pioneer ethos that has defined the region’s literature for the majority of the 20th century. In a number of her stories, Proulx highlights a common thread of intolerance among people of the plains, another sharp contrast to plains myths and pioneer values. Proulx describes the land in a way that shows its permanence and points out that any discussion of plains past or present must start with the land itself. This description imbues the land with a power that is actually reminiscent of Cather’s Nebraska landscapes; however, as previously stated, Proulx does not ignore the many different lives being lived on the plains, and she does not replace the bleak struggle with a romantic triumph fueled by pioneer values. Proulx expresses through her sarcasm the fundamental idea that runs through all of her Wyoming stories: the plains were always a difficult place to live, and they still are—that
is the closest that Proulx comes to an encompassing narrative of the region. Proulx’s second Wyoming collection, *Bad Dirt*, continues to focus on the difficulty of living on the plains by traditional farming and ranching methods, contrasting these struggles with romantic visions of those first coming to the region. Proulx’s most recent collection of Wyoming stories, *Fine Just the Way It Is*, is populated by stories that appear almost wildly disparate from each other. They are set in the time when only Native Americans populated the plains, in pioneer days, in the present day plains, and also in contemporary hell itself. With this third collection, though, readers begin to see how all of Proulx’s Wyoming stories work together to form an overall Gothic treatment of the Great Plains. The title of the collection itself reflects a progression in this Gothic treatment, a coming to grips with the reality of plains life as the rejection of previous mythic depictions.

*Regional Literature and a Gothic Cycle*

This Gothic trend in Great Plains literature, spearheaded by Proulx, coming after the previously mentioned New England and Southern Gothic examples, reveals another inception of the regional Gothic. Proulx’s Wyoming stories provide another example in which a region’s history reaches a specific point at which it lends itself to, even needs, the interrogating gaze of the Gothic. The concluding chapter, in addition to discussing Gothic works of Cormac McCarthy, Jim Harrison, and Louise Erdrich, will comment on the particular movements that lead to plains Gothic. Savoy claims, “[…] the Gothic is a fluid tendency rather than a discrete literary mode, an impulse rather than a literary fact” (6). The Gothic has indeed moved easily between literary periods, authors, countries and regions of the U.S. in particular. Its “impulse,” as Savoy says, is to respond to the
aforementioned climate of crisis in an area. And, I believe, this is why the Gothic in America is so often associated with a particular region. In a country as large as the U.S., historical trends and cultural shifts are more easily identifiable within specific regions. The Gothic is free, then, to move from region to region as those regions are forced to deal with various histories. What is unique about the Great Plains Gothic, as I will argue in the conclusion, is the cyclical nature of the history to which it responds.

In the final chapter, a look at the media’s coverage of the conditions of the plains region during the time of this study reveals this cycle of history. At the beginning of my research, multiple media sources highlighted issues similar to those dealt with in Proulx’s stories. A common topic to many of these articles is the region’s “decay,” overall, through economic struggle and the loss of population, and also the refusal of many to acknowledge the reality of the challenges facing Great Plains states. Logic would dictate that this is why the Gothic has taken so long to come to the Great Plains region, because of the reliance on the plains region as a long-standing bastion of optimism. The Gothic tone that runs throughout these articles on realities of the plains is easily perceptible with language like “dying towns,” “depopulation and decay,” “economic death spiral,” and abandoned shops described as “giant tombstones.” The confrontation of mythical past and this troubling present forces a return of the repressed and creates the climate of crisis (the same climate Faulkner took advantage of) that moves authors like Proulx to utilize the Gothic in regional writing of the plains. Indeed, my encounters with these articles were a catalyst that put me onto the trail of the plains Gothic. What proves to be most interesting, concerning the media’s coverage of the plains, though, is that at the time of
the conclusion of this study, five years later, headlines are dominated by the oil boom occurring in the Bakken formation located primarily in North Dakota. The language of these headlines is decidedly not Gothic; however, a look at this varying media coverage, only five years apart, actually defines most fully the individual nature of the Great Plains Gothic among other regional Gothics as the region responds to this cyclical but repressed history—a boom and bust history that has defined the plains since its settling.
In her novel *My Antonia*, Willa Cather draws perhaps her best known symbol as she describes a group of young Nebraskans observing the sun setting over the fields: “On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun […] There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun” (156). The message of this transcendent image of the plow, this “picture writing,” is the critical theme in Willa Cather’s early Great Plains work—the plow will conquer all. In *O Pioneers!!* and *My Antonia* Cather uses her version of the pioneer myth as the central device to characterize her protagonists. Alexandra (the central character in *O Pioneers!!*) and Antonia are the (mythic) proof in these novels that with tireless labor and undaunted faith one can harvest a rich yield, a rich life from the plains. Just as the plow is relentless in breaking the sod of the plains, so Cather’s protagonists are relentless in their clash with the landscape and their desire to tame it into productivity. This Romantic, pro-pioneer depiction of the plains that Cather creates in her early novels is precisely the kind of literary history with which the Gothic clashes. Cather’s exaltation of the pioneer and the plow in these early works embodies the “foundational fictions” and “self-mythologizations” that Goddu points out as the kind of narratives that dangerously exclude and repress elements of history that pose a threat to “the dream world of national myth” (10).

The first goal of this chapter is to point out the ways that Cather’s early plains novels depict the Great Plains with a Romantic, pastoral treatment that exalts the pioneer
and creates a mythic history of the region that will eventually be challenged by contemporary plains writers working in a strain of the Gothic—writers more interested in exposing cultural contradictions with the acknowledgement and description of what Goddu calls the “nightmares of history” (10). Cather’s first and best known writing persona is that of an author who holds up the plains pioneer as an example of the transcendent human spirit, and, as mentioned in the introduction, her early plains novels did more to define the region—in this Romantic fashion—than perhaps any other Great Plains works. Nevertheless, a second and equally important goal in this examination of Cather will be to point out the presence of a host of troubling historical issues that are alluded to by the context of Cather’s plains fiction. These dark eruptions, though they are clearly deemphasized in comparison to Cather’s privileging of the pioneer myth, are proof of even Cather’s conscious acknowledgement that the ideal she is setting up is perhaps not entirely accurate or overwhelmingly prevalent. Though it will prove possible to explore some of the more painful issues of plains history through Cather’s novels, I will also point out the critical ways in which Cather’s work clearly falls short of a Gothic treatment of the region. The tensions that Cather acknowledges in relation to the myth of the pioneer and the plains are seeds of the Gothic—seeds that will germinate with other, later plains writers.

Myth Construction and Cather’s Pioneer Heroines

Diane Quantic writes of Cather’s *O Pioneers!!* and *My Antonia*, “These two novels, full of pastoral allusions and heroic women, are often cited as models of Great Plains literature” (220). These are indeed Cather’s and, to a great extent, the region’s
foundational works. Quantic accurately highlights the importance of Cather’s use of the pastoral mode. It is important to define in detail Cather’s use of the pastoral as one of various elements and influences that create her unique and influential vision of a Great Plains history. This history is driven by Cather’s use of what can be referred to, in a larger sense, as the pioneer myth, and it is necessary to explore the anatomy of the myth that Cather uses to create the kind of regional history to which the Gothic is directly opposed.

As stated in the introduction, the “pioneer myth” can be understood as a combination of the garden myth (the belief that the plains can be cultivated and sustain one richly) and the democratic utopia (any person of any background can become prosperous on the land with hard work). Cather layers upon these two myths a widespread use of the pastoral. In his book *The Midwestern Pastoral* William Barillas defines the use of the pastoral in a classic sense as “[…] the characterization of intelligent and resourceful farmers, shepherds, and other country people, and description of landscapes, plants, animals, and natural phenomena such as weather and seasonal changes. Pastoral often entails a contrast between urban and rural life, usually but not exclusively in favor or rurality, to which special virtue is attributed” (12). Cather uses the pastoral in this classic manner, with Alexandra as the intelligent, resourceful farmer, Nebraska as the source of in-depth natural description, and the characters of Carl Linstrum in *O Pioneers!* and Jim Burden in *My Antonia* serving as examples of those who have had less favorable urban experiences. An archetype that often operates within Cather’s pastoral settings is that of the yeoman farmer. This portion of Cather’s pioneer
myth can be identified as a historical influence. The archetype of the yeoman farmer, which factors heavily into the characterization of Alexandra and Antonia, was articulated first and foremost by Thomas Jefferson in the late eighteenth century. Jefferson famously claims in his *Notes on Virginia*, “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God” (176). Thus, the idea of the yeoman farmer extends beyond the farming economy. It becomes a conceptual lifestyle that involves a humble, hard-working and honorable existence by the land, and its tenets are easily related to those of the pastoral mode. Barillas makes the logical connection between the historical and literary here: “Jefferson’s vision, then, was pastoral; an ethical, aesthetic preference rather than an economic principle underlay the yeoman farmer archetype” (25). And this is the most influential element of the yeoman farmer to Cather’s overall pioneer myth: a clearly drawn, moral component that dictates that her protagonists love the land more than any economic gain it might offer them. This connection to the land, then, brings up a final element in Cather’s mythic vision: a Romantic approach to the Great Plains landscape and characters’ responses to it. (The title of *O Pioneers!* is itself an allusion to the Whitman poem praising Westward expansion.) Cather’s characters, especially Alexandra and Antonia, have strong emotional responses to the region. Their connection to the land is elevated to a mystic or religious level, and it is possible to trace transcendentalist influences to some of Cather’s descriptions of the landscape. Nature—the plains of Nebraska—becomes the ideal setting in which Alexandra and Antonia can fulfill the self. Cather’s overlapping use of this combination of elements: the garden and democratic utopia myths, the pastoral mode, the archetype of the yeoman farmer, and a Romantic
approach to characters’ interactions with the landscape, becomes her pioneer myth—a powerful amalgamation, a lethal cocktail, from the view of a Gothic literature, that drives Cather’s mythic depiction of the pioneer and Great Plains region and overpowers the presence of darker elements in her narratives. I will trace these myths and their establishment of Cather’s archetypal heroines in *O Pioneers!!* and *My Antonia* before pursuing, in the following section, readings that explore the conflict between a more realistic plains history and Cather’s pioneer myth.

In *O Pioneers!!* and also *My Antonia* Cather’s detailed descriptions of the land hinge on the pastoral and the garden myth. *O Pioneers!!* is primarily the story of Alexandra Bergson, her inheritance of the family farm, and the tremendous success she enjoys as a landowner on the plains while many other families are giving up and moving back East. In *O Pioneers!!*, after the death of Alexandra’s father and her subsequent taking over of the farm’s affairs, Cather jumps past the years of struggle to a rich description of the now fruitful plains: “The Divide is now thickly populated. The rich soil yields heavy harvests; the dry, bracing climate and the smoothness of the land make labor easy for men and beasts. [...] in good seasons there are scarcely men and horses enough to do the harvesting. The grain is so heavy that it bends toward the blade and cuts like velvet” (49-50). Cather’s detailed descriptions of “landscapes, plants, animals, and natural phenomena such as weather,” elements of the classic pastoral that Barillas defines, are often used in an effort to describe how richly the plains have rewarded Alexandra. Cather’s luscious imagery here—“rich soil,” “smooth land,” and grain that harvests like “velvet”—works to emphasize the incredible bounty the plains are ready to
yield. When Alexandra’s friend Carl, gone from Nebraska for an extended period, comes to Alexandra’s farm for a visit, he is astounded by her agricultural success. Alexandra responds to Carl’s astonishment by praising the land itself rather than her own skill: “The land did it. It had its little joke. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep […] and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still” (74).

Alexandra modestly backgrounds the strategy and hard work that have gone into her farm but is eager to praise the land itself and testify to its natural, inherent value. In a passage that hyperbolically personifies the land, Cather writes, the soil now “yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness” (50), as though the land was waiting to be farmed by those who would come and settle on the plains. In *My Antonia* Cather’s narrator Jim Burden describes the Nebraska plains during a July harvest: “It seemed as if we could hear the corn growing in the night; under the stars one caught a faint crackling in the dewy, heavy-odoured cornfields where the feathered stalks stood so juicy and green” (88). Again, lush, pastoral descriptions serve the purpose of depicting the plains as an almost supernaturally fertile land, the country’s garden, where one can literally hear crops growing.

On the plains of Cather’s Nebraska, though, there are definite character traits required for being rewarded by the land. Through the archetype of the yeoman farmer and Romantic depictions, Cather creates clear portraits of those who are successful on the plains—the best examples being Alexandra and Antonia. These characters prove to be
resourceful and hard working but more importantly exude a moral respect and Romantic love for the land. Early in the narrative of *O Pioneers!!*, John Bergson, Alexandra’s father, lies on his deathbed and ponders which of his three eldest children should be left with the care of his farm. He concludes that it should be Alexandra: “In his daughter, John Bergson recognized the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out, that had characterized his father in his better days. He would much rather, of course, have seen this likeness in one of his sons, but it was not a question of choice” (16). When Bergson informs Alexandra of his decision, he tells her to keep her brothers from becoming discouraged with the challenges of farming on the plains because he wants them to keep the land. “We will, father,” Alexandra replies, “We will never lose the land” (17). This unwavering devotion to the land is consistent with Alexandra’s character throughout the novel as she resists any efforts on her brothers’ part to make her abandon the land. At one point, Alexandra’s brother Lou says to her, “You see, Alexandra, everybody who can crawl out is going away. There’s no use of us trying to stick it out, just to be stubborn. There’s something in knowing when to quit” (37). But Alexandra keeps her faith in the land, and during the time when she and her brothers struggle to make their inherited farm turn a profit, she decides to take a trip to look at the other farmlands that border hers in an effort to expand their landholdings. During this trip, Alexandra experiences a strong, emotional response to the landscape, a typical reaction of the yeoman farmer archetype in the Cather mold: “It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eye drank in the breadth of it, until tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great free spirit which breathes across it, must have
bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before” (42). In the mold of the yeoman farmer, Alexandra displays her aesthetic tie to the beauty of the land, and, with a Romantic depiction, Cather allows the land to move Alexandra to a state of elevated emotion. With the capitalization of the “Genius” of the land, Cather also intimates a Romantic, religious regard for the plains landscape.

_My Antonia_ is a novel similar to _O Pioneers!!_ in the way that Antonia ultimately enjoys great success through working the land, though Antonia’s success arises more through pure strength of will than the planning and management skills Alexandra displays. Though perhaps not to the extent that Alexandra does, Antonia also displays a clear connection to and love of the land through her narrative. In a conclusion quite similar to that of _O Pioneers!!_, Antonia tells her friend returning from the city, Jim Burden, how much the land means to her: “I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here” (206). Cather does not reflect a Romantic sensibility in her depictions of Antonia and her interactions with the land but rather emphasizes the yeoman farmer’s aesthetic preference for country life. Also, Cather does not infuse Antonia with the pastoral “resourcefulness” she does Alexandra, concerning her farming decisions. Most of Alexandra’s success is predicated on her ability to speculate on land and build up her farm into a large conglomeration of acquired sections. Alexandra is also open to new forms of agricultural technology like grain silos, while others in the novel cling to traditional methods. These practices result in great wealth for Alexandra, and these gains and the “resourcefulness” used to acquire them are handled very carefully by Cather (as we will see in the next section). Antonia,
instead, relies more on her work ethic and will to succeed, and her actions support most the democratic utopia myth—the belief that anyone can succeed through perseverance. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Cather uses the plow, “heroic in size,” silhouetted against the sunset as a controlling symbol for the novel. The plow comes to stand for the task the pioneers have taken on by farming the plains and the tremendous effort it takes to work the land successfully. Antonia expresses to Jim her love for hard, outdoor work and also her indifference to those who feel a woman should not be in the fields: “I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man” (89). Jim says that Antonia would then “toss her head and ask me to feel the muscles swell in her brown arm” (89). Pure labor rather than intelligence allows Antonia to succeed. She works “like a man” and, in fact, the only thing that can take Antonia out of the fields is childbearing, and then not until as late as possible. Antonia tells Jim at the end of the novel after she has developed her own thriving farm, “We’d never have got through if I hadn’t been so strong. I’ve always had good health, thank God, and I was able to help him [her husband] in the fields right up to the time before my babies came” (220). In My Antonia Cather depicts the Nebraskan plains as a place where anyone willing to work and love the land can reach a Romantic fulfillment of oneself. When Jim returns to his hometown he is astounded, like Carl in O Pioneers!!, by the progress the pioneers have made: “[…] all the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea” (197). Jim realizes that those with the fortitude to stay on the plains have been rewarded. For characters like
Alexandra and Antonia, the clash with the land is a glorious, mythic one that rewards them for the attributes they possess.

Cather further exalts Alexandra and Antonia by depicting them as the positive example in the pastoral’s contrast between rural and urban living. Alexandra and Antonia are held up as examples of those who have remained with the land and led more rewarding lives because of this choice, as opposed to those who have moved to urban and more exotic locations. In *My Antonia* the characters Otto and Jake, the hired hands of Jim’s grandparents, decide to pursue silver prospecting when Jim’s grandparents retire from their farm and move into the small town of Blackhawk. After they board the train, Jim says that he “never saw them again” (94). He does receive a postcard from them saying that they had been down with mountain fever but are now working in a mine and doing better, though, when Jim writes them back his letter is returned “unclaimed.”

Through Otto and Jake, the West is characterized as a place of adventure but also a dangerous void. Lena Lingard, an adolescent friend of Jim and Antonia’s, grows tired of the farm life and moves to Lincoln, making a successful and lucrative career as a dressmaker. She visits Jim when he is at the university in Lincoln, and she speaks to him of her memories of the farm. Jim says that when Lena spoke of home she usually “dismissed it with a single remark, humorous or mildly cynical,” and that “She remembered home as a place where there were always too many children, a cross man and work piling up around a sick woman” (186). Jim sees Lena’s life in Lincoln as isolated, though, and Lena does admit, “I like to be lonesome” (186). Tiny Soderball is a character similar to Lena. Tiny moves from Blackhawk, starts a hotel in Seattle and
eventually cashes in on the gold rush in Alaska. Tiny becomes cynical toward the end of her life, though, and, like Lena, is depicted as shallow in the way that she cares for her appearance and material wealth. Both characters are defined as, above all, isolated—both foils to Antonia.

On a deeper level this isolation affects Jim as well and also Carl in *O Pioneers!* in their lives off the farm. Though Carl has traveled extensively and lived in New York City, and Jim has led a successful career as a lawyer for the railroad, both return to Nebraska at their respective novels’ conclusions spiritually empty and world weary, nostalgic for their earlier lives lived closer to the land. Carl seeks the solace of a marriage to Alexandra while Jim suffers from a failed marriage and his transient lifestyle. When Jim makes a visit back to Blackhawk at the end of *My Antonia*, Antonia expresses her curiosity about Jim’s experiences in the city, but she makes no equivocation with her own feelings about the urban and rural divide. She says, “I’d always be miserable in a city. I’d die of lonesomeness” (206). After Antonia expresses her own ties to the land, as mentioned above, she gives Jim a tour of her thriving farm, and this connection to the land seems to become contagious. As they walk across the fields at sunset, Jim gives this description of the landscape:

> In that singular light every little tree and shock of wheat, every sunflower stalk and clump of snow-on-the-mountain, drew itself up high and pointed; the very clods and furrows in the fields seemed to stand up sharply. I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there. (207)
Again a Romantic influence colors Cather’s description, and one can see a transcendentalist influence here through the mystic connection to the land. Emerson’s concept of the “transparent eyeball” in his essay “Nature” provides an interesting critical lens to this passage. As Jim’s focus falls away from himself and to the land, it is the landscape that becomes the physically active element, even as Jim walks through it. All the varieties of vegetation draw themselves up and point, even the soil itself seems to “stand up sharply.” Jim feels the “pull of the earth” and the “solemn magic” of the fields—allowing himself to view the landscape without the fetters of his own desire to be in another location, engaged in a specific activity. Jim feels the natural weight of the earth and the lesson it has to teach about existing naturally. Finally, Jim feels as Antonia always has, that his “way” could start and end with Nebraska.

The conclusion to My Antonia is a near replica to that of O Pioneers!! Carl returns from his wandering in Alaska to find Alexandra as connected to the land as she ever was. Alexandra has just returned from a brief trip to Lincoln to visit her brother’s murderer, and, unlike characters such as Lena, she finds no allure in urban life and is eager to escape back to her farm. She tells Carl, in words that echo Antonia’s, “I was glad to come back to it. I’ve lived here a long time. There is a great peace here, Carl, and freedom” (198). Carl acknowledges, “You belong to the land […] as you have always said. Now more than ever,” to which Alexandra replies, “We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little

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7 In this essay, Emerson writes of his own experiences in nature, “I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (189). Jim’s heightened vision of the landscape and desire to return to a simpler self (“a little boy again”) seem to reflect this transcendentalist notion.
while” (198). Indeed, earlier in the novel the narrator says of the Nebraska plains, “Its Genius was unfriendly to man” (14), but Alexandra has come to understand the “Genius” of the plains as her father’s farm has become a sprawling complex with multiple tracts of land, and, as Carl tells her that she “belongs” to the land, Alexandra shifts his diction to perhaps make in a subtle way the point that those who choose to love the land enough to “belong” to it will also find that they in turn “own” the land, which has of course benefited Alexandra.

Cather’s feminization of the pioneer has been well explored critically, and it is clear in these passages that both Alexandra and Antonia are identified as “mythic earth mothers,” as Reynolds calls them, as their love for the land contrasts sharply with a masculine domination of the land. This use of Alexandra and Antonia as feminized, representative pioneers also works to take some edge off the garden myth itself, focusing attention on the two characters’ nurturing love for their individual farms rather than the more violent breaking of the grasslands and overall taming and shaping of the land.

Returning to *My Antonia*, after Jim is shown a cave hollowed into the side of a hill that houses all of the family’s preserved food, he describes Antonia’s children’s exit from the cave as a “veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight. It made me feel dizzy for a moment” (218). The imagery suggests a birth of Antonia’s children from the earth itself. In the last lines of *O Pioneers!!* the narrator’s exaltation once again speaks to the transcendental: “Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra’s into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!” (199). One can think of a poem such as Whitman’s
“What is the Grass?” portion from *Song of Myself* that argues for this cyclical nature of life. Cather’s Romantic take on this cycle claims that the good people of Nebraska and the fertile farm lands are intertwined: Alexandra’s connection to the land will reach its culmination (as does the praise of the pioneer) when the land takes her back in order to return her to the crops and children of the plains. Carl and Jim are the negative representatives of the pastoral, urban and rural divide, and they become the witnesses to the profound self-fulfillment that Alexandra and Antonia have achieved by remaining on the plains.

*The Pioneer Myth vs. Historical Realism*

Cather uses an engaging mix of historical and literary influences to emphasize and empower her pioneer myth, and exploring her approach to crafting characters like Alexandra and Antonia makes it easier to see how myth is able to hold such influence over the regional literature of the Great Plains. Through a pastoral setting Cather crafts Alexandra and Antonia to prove that those with a work ethic fueled by a love and devotion to the land will be rewarded by the agricultural riches the plains hold. The region, in turn, becomes for readers a recognizable landscape—the “breadbasket” of the country. This look at Cather’s early plains novels also reminds us that the nation’s foundational narratives are often constructed from fiction and myth. To keep in mind the task of the Gothic, returning to Goddu, she says that it is to “expose cultural contradictions of national myth,” to deconstruct the nation’s “self-mythologization as a nation of hope and harmony,” and, more dramatically, to “disrupt the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history” (10). Cather’s use of her pioneer myth is
her legacy to the region’s literature, and it is precisely the kind of idealized, mythic history that the Gothic opposes.

In reference to the function of myth and the pastoral mode in writers like Cather, Barillas cites Robert Clark’s comments on myth in classic American novels and how in these works “complex social, economic and political actualities (‘history’) are condensed and displaced into ‘myth’” (17). In her work Cather treats the more complex and traumatic topics of materialism, Native American removal, the hardships of plains settlers, and ecological damage with various degrees of acknowledgement, from open recognition to outright silence. What is key to understanding Cather’s treatment of plains history, however, is that while Cather does recognize some of the negative aspects of the region’s evolving history, these facts cannot compete with the emphasis she places on the pioneer myth. Hence, there is essentially no room for this more painful history to gain any traction in Cather’s narratives. Clark says that the use of myth can often stem from a “wish-fulfilling drive; the American writer turns history the ‘other way round’ to create a myth of what America should be like” (18). Cather turns plains history around by allowing the pioneer myth to dominate and subvert the more realistic depictions of plains history that intrude on her narratives. Alexandra and Antonia, the highest embodiment of Cather’s pioneer myth, remain unquestioned heroines, while those who experience more negative aspects of plains history are cast as outsiders and misfits. I will examine Cather’s more up front dealing with materialism and her averted dealing with Native American history below. In the next section I will move on to some environmental issues as well as her treatment of those who suffer on the plains and do not fare as well as
Alexandra and Antonia. In the examination of characters that experience personal hardships on the plains, a nostalgic view of plains history will emerge, and the understanding of the repression caused by this nostalgia experienced by Cather’s characters will prove critical in revealing just how Cather’s work falls short of the Gothic. Overall, outside of a recognition of a Native American history, all the issues that a Great Plains Gothic will take on are actually present in Cather’s work; however, though they lend overall realism to her fiction, they are clearly not treated in a Gothic manner. These inclusions of uncomfortable aspects of the plains past, because they are not accompanied by any distortions in style but rather an emphasis on myth, do not stimulate the reader to the point of recontemplating a previous notion of history. Rather than allowing “hell to come to the rescue,” the allure of Cather’s pioneer myth prevents a recontemplation of plains history as “utopia achieved.”

In regard to Cather’s dissatisfaction with growing materialism on the plains, Barillas states that by the early 1920s Cather felt that materialism “now dominated American society to the detriment of aesthetic ideals she associated with the pioneer era” (79). Specific characters in both *One of Ours* and *A Lost Lady* will come to directly embody this kind of unchecked materialism on the plains. There are places in her earlier plains novels as well, though, where Cather must negotiate the conflicts between material gain and the ideal pastoral mode she employs. This tension is most clearly revealed in *O Pioneers!!* with Alexandra’s role as a speculator and in *My Antonia* with Jim Burden’s career as an attorney for the railroad. As mentioned above, during the time when Alexandra and her brothers struggle to make their inherited farm turn a profit, Alexandra
decides to take a trip to look at other bordering farmland and experiences during the trip a strong, emotional response to the landscape, typical of the yeoman farmer archetype in the Cather mold. However, on the same page of the novel, Alexandra transitions to the savvy economic principles that will allow her to profit from the plains. Alexandra makes an argument to her brothers, who are on the brink of leaving Nebraska altogether, to re-mortgage their farm to buy more land:

We borrow the money for six years. Well, with the money we buy a half-section from Linstrum and a half from Crow, and a quarter from Struble, maybe. That will give us upwards of fourteen hundred acres, won’t it? You won’t have to pay off your mortgages for six years. By that time, any of this land will be worth thirty dollars an acre [...] then you can sell a garden patch anywhere, and pay off a debt of sixteen hundred dollars. [...] we can sit down here ten years from now independent land owners, not struggling farmers any longer. (42-43)

Alexandra’s brothers resist her efforts but give in, and the success of her plan is realized in the timeline she indicates as the novel jumps to the farm sixteen years after Alexandra’s father’s death (ten years from Alexandra’s speculation proposition). This section opens with the description of spring plowing—with the soil that “yields itself eagerly to the plow” (50)—that sets the agricultural tone for the rest of the novel. When Carl returns to Nebraska, the compound Alexandra has built astounds him. As mentioned, she responds to Carl’s astonishment by praising the land itself rather than her own speculative skill: “The land did it. It had its little joke. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out
of its sleep” (74). Alexandra must navigate a precarious boundary between her love for the land and her economic gain from it, and this boundary reveals tension between her characterization as yeoman farmer and mythic earth mother and the implications of her economic savvy and aggressive speculation. Cather’s main strategy for handling this conflict is to frame any success Alexandra experiences agriculturally through her love for the land and her faith in it, rather than any desire for economic gain.

Cather accomplishes this, to a large extent, by depicting Alexandra’s wealth primarily through the farm itself and not her home or other material goods. The narrator describes the experience of strangers who approach the farm and notice a “big white house” and also “so many sheds and outbuildings grouped about it that the place looked not unlike a tiny village” (53). However, the narrator notes that the stranger also notices “There was something individual about the great farm, a most unusual trimness and care for detail” (54). We are told that hedges line the road into the farm and that the property features a large orchard. These features seem to be Alexandra’s way of “decorating,” since Alexandra’s house “is curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort. One room is papered, carpeted, over-finished; the next is almost bare” (54). But again, moving out of the house and into the garden, “there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds […]” (54). Hedges, trees and ponds seem to be more natural to Alexandra as furniture, and the purpose of the passage is to show that “Alexandra’s house is the big-out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best” (54). Alexandra must be characterized as uncomfortable with her wealth, as
someone who is unsure how to make the material purchases her expansive farm allows her. Outside of the mention of buying her niece a piano, Alexandra’s instinct is to put this material gain back into the land itself. As Reynolds states, “Alexandra’s wealth becomes a happy accident, the fortuitous spin-off from sound pioneering” (57). An additional issue that further complicates Alexandra’s success within the context of a pioneer myth stems from the fact that she did not (as opposed to Antonia) expend a great deal of hard labor to make her gains. Alexandra’s brothers fear that she will be swindled out of her land through a budding romance with Carl, and during the ensuing argument, both brothers try to lay claim to the fate of Alexandra’s land because of the labor they contributed to it. Lou comments, “Alexandra, you always took it pretty easy! […] There’s no woman anywhere around that knows as much about business as you do, and we’ve always been proud of that […] But, of course, the real work always fell on us. Good advice is all right, but it don’t get the weeds out of the corn” (106). Alexandra responds by reminding her brothers that they wanted to sell everything “for two thousand dollars” before she convinced them to expand their holdings and take on more mortgages. The fact remains, though, that Alexandra comes into significant economic gain through aggressive business tactics, not through her own physical labor, as Antonia does. Cather’s only tactic in deflecting this characterization, as mentioned, is to emphasize Alexandra’s genuine love for the land.

Cather’s depiction of Alexandra’s wealth as “happy accident” elides the historical context of land speculation that Reynolds points out: “The land speculator was resented for his mercenary relationship to the land. The Jeffersonian ideal of a farmer working...
with the soil was supplanted by a commercial model where tenant farmers did the work” (55). After noting the ways in which Cather maintains Alexandra’s closeness to the land through rich and poor times, Reynolds continues, “It is almost as if Cather believed that mythic characterization could offset the entrepreneurial basis of pioneering, where farming is simply a matter of cents and dollars” (55-56). When Cather makes mention of the families that are forced to leave the plains and sell their land, they are characterized as either lacking faith (like her brothers) or as unskilled farmers. During an argument in which Alexandra’s brothers urge her to allow the family to leave, Lou claims “everybody who can crawl out is going away” (37). Alexandra has just told her brothers that Carl’s father, Mr. Linstrum, is going back to St. Louis to work in a cigar factory, and Lou adds to this by relating that another neighbor is “going to let Fuller take his land and stuff for four hundred dollars and a ticket to Chicago” (38). Alexandra responds by saying, “But all these fellows who are running off are bad farmers, like poor Mr. Linstrum. They couldn’t get ahead even in the good years […]” (38). Cather attributes the hardships and eventual departure of families on the plains to a lack of faith and a lack of agricultural skill and not to any false notion of the democratic utopia on the plains. However, as Alexandra’s yeoman farmer love for the land is foregrounded, it is clearly her ability as an entrepreneur and speculator that has allowed her to remain and thrive on the plains. The Homestead Act of 1862 said that any citizen could claim 160 acres and own it outright after living on it for five years. Ian Frazier says in his book of travel writing, Great Plains, “To expect a person to make a living on a little square of this vast region where animals and Indians used to travel hundreds of miles looking for food, where
clouds slide all over before the winds, where you have to import many necessities—it was like expecting a fisherman to survive on just a little square of ocean” (72).

Alexandra’s and her family’s experience in *O Pioneers!!* supports Frazier’s historical claim. Alexandra had already received land from her father four times the size of a homestead claim.\(^8\) The speculative plan above described by Alexandra (the plan we can assume she makes good on) dictates the accumulation of 1400 acres between Alexandra and her brothers. After Alexandra splits this land with her brothers after Lou gets married, we learn that Alexandra continues to expand her holdings\(^9\). Thus, while Cather does not state exactly how many acres Alexandra ultimately comes to hold, we do know that it dwarfs the 160 acre Homestead Act allotment. Ultimately, *O Pioneers!!* posits that it is the speculator and not the homesteader that best thrives on the plains. While a close reading can reveal Cather’s acknowledgement of this unromantic reality, Cather, again, does her best to shift focus from this reality to the mythic dimensions of Alexandra’s character.

In *My Antonia* Jim Burden’s move to New York and work as a railroad attorney provide another tension between the ideal pioneer and the exploitation of the plains for material gain. Alexandra was characterized openly as a lover of the land and more covertly as a speculator. In a similar fashion, Jim is characterized as someone who holds

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\(^8\) Alexandra’s father passes on 640 acres to the family. He had originally made his claim and a timber claim that amounted to 320 acres and also received his brother’s claim for the same number of acres, after the brother left Nebraska to return to Chicago. (14)

\(^9\) We learn through conversation between Carl and Alexandra that she purchased Carl’s parents’ farm after their return to St. Louis. (75)
a deep love for the plains but is also employed in the moving of material gain from the plains to the East. Joseph R. Urgo states in his work on Cather and migration that American expansion moved west throughout the nineteenth century, transporting energies, resources, and labor to develop and settle new towns, cities, and states. At the same time, or as a result, the idea of an American empire moved east. As the West became settled, as the economic effects of Great Plains agriculture and livestock production became apparent, as gold and oil reserves were developed, as mines began to produce, and populations soared, the ideas, the wealth, and the power generated by expansion flowed back to urban centers in the East. (42) Urgo’s main argument is that during the movement of Manifest Destiny, as Americans poured west into the plains to settle the frontier, even more energy, ideas and especially material goods were flowing back East. Jim is a product of this “reverse migration.” He shows his future ability as a developer with his first glance at the plains of Nebraska: “There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (7). The purpose of Jim’s career will be to get the “materials” out of the Nebraska “country” back East to improve the nation overall. Urgo states that in “the Cather thesis, movement east, not west, is what strengthens the nation’s idea of itself, and, not incidentally, what strengthens the power and establishes the legitimacy of the American empire” (41). Jim is a part of this movement east toward empire, but Cather does not acknowledge this phenomenon encompassed by Jim’s career. Instead, Jim is primarily characterized as someone who longs for the plains and defines his identity by their influence—especially his relationship with Antonia. Jim says to her at the end of the
The idea of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don’t realize it. You really are a part of me” (206). Jim states early on in the novel that Antonia is the person he most associates with the plains, so we can assume that his comments to Antonia also connote his understanding of the region’s influence on him. However, while Jim sees his connection to the plains as a kind of nostalgia for a simpler, purer time, he doesn’t realize that his childhood and adolescence on the plains were instrumental in developing him into the person that would allow him to thrive in his work with the railroad, as Urgo describes him, “a successful capitalist, with the kind of mind that has driven American expansion for two centuries” (40). Jim’s praise of Antonia’s life on the plains and her attitude toward the region creates a tension in the novel in the way that it conflicts with Jim’s career as a developer of the plains for material gain.

The drive for material gain in the Great Plains region becomes, as mentioned, a much more acknowledged fact in Cather’s later plains novels. In both One of Ours and A Lost Lady Cather portrays characters that are comparable to Alexandra in their skill with speculation but are sharp contrasts in their attitudes toward the land. Nat Wheeler is the father of Claude Wheeler in One of Ours, a novel that focuses on Claude’s disenfranchisement with plains life that leads him off the farm to fight in World War I. Nat Wheeler has gained his wealth in ways similar to Alexandra: “In the early days he had homesteaded and bought and leased enough land to make him rich” (8). The narrator goes on to say, though, “Now he had only to rent it out to good farmers who liked to work—he didn’t” (8). Nat Wheeler spends his time reading newspapers, traveling about
his holdings in his buggy, visiting with people and telling amusing stories. He is, in short, a man of leisure and a far cry from Alexandra and her devotion to her farm. The class of the working farmer that leases land instead of owning it becomes clearer in these later novels, as well. On the first page of *A Lost Lady* (a work that highlights the downfall of the character of Mrs. Forrester along with changes in plains life) the narrator informs us that “There were then two distinct social strata in the prairie States; the homesteaders and hand-workers who were there to make a living, and the bankers and gentlemen ranchers who came from the Atlantic seaboard to invest money and to ‘develop our great West’ as they used to tell us” (3). Alexandra is characterized as falling between these two classes, but it is made clearer, from reading between *A Lost Lady* and *O Pioneers!!*, that Alexandra was profiting from this lower class by lending them land to work.\(^\text{10}\) In *One of Ours* Claude expresses clearly his anxieties about his father’s gain by speculation:

> He knew his father was sometimes called a “land hog” by the country people, and he himself had begun to feel that it was not right that they should have so much land,—to farm, or to rent, or to leave idle, as they chose. It was strange that in all the centuries the world had been going, the question of property had not been better adjusted. The people who had it were slaves to it, and the people who didn’t have it were slaves to them. (68)

\(^{10}\) When Alexandra’s brothers argue that they won’t be able to work all the land she acquires, Alexandra responds to Oscar, “You poor boy, you won’t have to work it. The men in town who are buying up other people’s land don’t try to farm it. […] I don’t want you boys always to have to work like this. I want you to be independent, and Emil to go to school” (43). Judging from the fact that Emil does eventually attend the local university in Lincoln and that Lou, later in the novel, becomes involved primarily in business rather than the actual farming of his land, it can be assumed that Alexandra and her family hired others to work their expansive holdings.
From Claude’s view, it would be easy to view Alexandra as a “land hog” as well, though her love for the land and Cather’s Romantic depiction of the pioneer archetype through Alexandra works to cover this tension. Claude’s view of the land is extremely grim compared to those in Cather’s earlier novels—he sees people as either slaves to the land or slaves to those who own it; the economic potential ties people to the region for the pursuit of wealth or merely to make a living, a contrast to the pastoral ideal in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, particularly in Alexandra’s claim to the “peace and freedom” that come with close ties to the land and Carl’s romantic observation to her, “you belong to the land” (198). Successful farmers in *One of Ours* also lie in contrast to Alexandra in the ways that they do not resist the consumption of material goods with the profits from their labor. Alexandra, as we saw, put her profits back into her farm, but, according to Claude, successful farming leads to the purchase of “manufactured articles of the poorest quality; showy furniture that went to pieces, carpets and draperies that faded, clothes that made a handsome man look like a clown” (84-85). This kind of reckless consumption eventually helps to drive Claude from the plains.

Susan J. Rosowski says that the descendants of Cather’s earlier plains novels have become “evil geniuses beneath which the land suffers” (202-203). One of the clearest examples of this kind of character, an even sharper contrast to Alexandra than Nat Wheeler, is Ivy Peters of *A Lost Lady*. Ivy Peters speculates with regard only to material wealth and becomes a tyrant in the town of Sweet Water. When Niel urges Mrs. Forrester to stand up to Ivy, she insistently declines and replies that everyone must get along with Ivy because of the power and wealth he has established for himself. She notes that he has
a lease on her land for five years, and, further, “He’s invested a little money for me in Wyoming, in land. He gets splendid land from the Indians in some way, for next to nothing. […] Ivy Peters is terribly smart, you know. He owns half the town already” (105). Here we can also see the reach of the speculator’s power—the hold Ivy has on Mrs. Forrester’s land and also his ability to dominate small town economics. Ivy’s speculation and the fact that he is getting land from “Indians in some way, next to nothing” also brings up the topic of Cather’s work in the context of a Native American history on the plains. Before moving on, though, I should note that Cather’s extensive recognition of growing materialism on the plains, the uncomfortable aspect of plains history that Cather acknowledges most, does not lead to a re-examination of history on Cather’s part (as a Gothic literature would), but rather, as we will see, to a growing attachment to the supposed pastoral ideal that existed earlier. This is made more evident by the way that Cather creates openly materialistic characters in her later novels but resists any association of materialism with an earlier character like Alexandra.

As mentioned, the historical fact most suppressed in Cather’s works is undoubtedly the theft of Native American lands or even the previous presence of Native Americans on the Great Plains. This is one element of a painful plains history that Cather does not make an effort to include, even for the sake of realism. In the previously discussed scene in which Alexandra is touring the land to decide whether or not to buy more land, Cather uses a conspicuous word choice. As Alexandra enjoys a transcendental moment with the land, the narrator tells us, “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” (41-42).
The statement that Alexandra’s face is the “first face” to look upon the plains landscape with love is obviously problematic. The most general grasp of history dictates that Native Americans were the first to look out on the plains, and Cather either chooses to ignore this fact or holds the belief that the Native Americans were not capable of the same transcendent feelings that Alexandra holds for the land. Barillas echoes this view: “Nebraska’s history did not begin with Swedish farmers. Cather not only ignores ten thousand years of Native American inhabitation on the plains, she also turns her back on recent history” (68). Barillas goes on to say that though the novel’s timeline (1883-1900) directly overlaps with the removal of a number of Nebraska tribes, “That disturbing reality interfered with the story Cather wanted to tell, one of a peaceful pastoralization of an unsettled region” (68). In a similar scene in My Antonia Jim comes upon a large circle “marked faintly in the grass […] where the Indians used to ride” (42). Antonia’s hired men Jim and Otto think that Native Americans used to torture prisoners in this circle, while Jim’s grandfather thinks that they merely raced or trained horses there. To Jim, the circle is primarily a feature of natural beauty: “[…] it came out with wonderful distinctness […] The old figure stirred me as it had never done before and seemed a good omen for the winter” (42). Not only does Jim refrain from pondering where the Native Americans went that were violently removed from the land he is walking, he also goes as far as to interpret the circle as good luck for the upcoming season. Mike Fischer reiterates the fact that Cather’s novel, focused on a pastoral ideal, did not have room for Native American history: “[…] it does not try to account for their removal—nor explain how peoples who roamed the prairies ‘undisturbed’ were eventually disturbed enough to
disappear and make possible the agricultural paradise that she proclaims Nebraska to be” (55). Another example exists in the site for Captain Forrester’s home in *A Lost Lady*, found on an Indian encampment near Sweet Water. We are not told how Captain Forrester obtains the land, only that he was “greatly taken with the location and made up his mind that he would one day have a house there” (42). The fact that the Indians once held onto what Captain Forrester needs to build his pioneer dream is of little consequence. The land is the most important element for Cather’s pioneer works, and the acknowledgement of an unfair theft of that land would undercut her form of the pioneer myth.

To give a fair portrayal of Cather’s complete treatment of Native Americans in her writing, it is necessary to pause and consider briefly a few of her Southwestern works. A consideration of novels like *The Professor’s House* (1925) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) offers a different treatment by Cather of an indigenous population, and, more importantly, sheds further light on the exclusion of Native Americans from her plains works. Caroline M. Woidat’s essay, “The Indian Detour in Willa Cather’s Southwestern Novels,” is very helpful in explaining Cather’s approach to Native Americans after she shifts her setting from the plains to the Southwest. Woidat states that her essay’s title is a metaphor for the way in which the reader (and Cather) is allowed to experience Native American sites in the Southwest. Woidat writes, “Cather’s experience of the area was shaped by her identity as an outsider and her willingness to ‘go native’ by vicariously living as both cowboy and Indian” (23). Cather’s identity as an “outsider” immediately shifts her ability to engage in the indigenous culture of the Southwest versus
that of the plains. Cather must bear some responsibility for any elements of the Native American experience on the plains she engages because of her identity as a plains native.

In the Southwest, Cather, theoretically, has more freedom in exploration without the risk of uncomfortable truths coming to the surface. Woidat claims, however, that there is not much chance of this in the Southwest, anyway, due to the fact that the majority of Native American sites visited by tourists (and Cather is included by Woidat among them), are empty: “These sites appeal to white visitors because the empty dwellings allow them to escape their own country’s history of conflict with Native Americans; here tourists can enjoy a fanciful escape from racial politics and imagine their own affinities with romanticized Indians” (29). This kind of romanticized encounter would not have been possible for Cather on the plains. As mentioned, the historical setting of *O Pioneers!* directly overlaps with the removal of multiple, Nebraska tribes, and, continuing into the 20th century, there would have been no location “empty” for as long as those in the Southwest. Any consideration of the Native American condition on the plains during the time Cather set her novels would have become immediately charged. As Woidat writes, Native Americans on the plains were “part of a legend of bloodshed, and modern tribes still posed sensitive political dilemmas” (31).

Tom Outland, in his narrative section from *The Professor’s House*, experiences some of the “tourist gaze” Woidat describes, but Cather also introduces some tensions in the confrontation with a Native American past. Specifically, Outland is troubled by the sale of Indian artifacts that come into white possession through his exploration. Cather ascribes in this novel some of her misgivings about growing materialism directly to the
problematic meeting of white and indigenous cultures (rather than to speculation by white settlers, as in her plains fiction). In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather goes even further to, as Woidat puts it, engage the “cultural differences and conflicts” that the tourist experience in the Southwest elides. Father Latour, the protagonist of the novel, which is set during the establishment of New Mexico’s statehood, interacts directly as a missionary with Native Americans of the region and is thus not allowed the “Indian Detour” that Woidat defines in her essay. Throughout the narrative, Latour admires in many ways the Native Americans he encounters and, more importantly, reflects openly upon the repression they have faced. Again, though, what is most important to emphasize about Cather’s treatment of Native Americans in her Southwest novels is the fact that it is her outsider status and also the less antagonistic relationship between whites and Native Americans in that region that allows Cather to more fully acknowledge the history and culture of those peoples. This particular Southwestern dynamic emphasizes the contrasting conditions on the plains that silenced any acknowledgement by Cather of the painful part Native Americans play in her mythic depiction of Nebraska.

*Cather’s Tortured Souls: Outsiders and Misfits on the Plains*

Unlike her suppression of Native American history on the plains, Cather devotes more attention to the hardship and suffering that some plains settlers experienced, which fell well short of a pastoral ideal. Again, it is important to explore how exactly Cather handles this aspect of a more painful history on the plains. A number of characters—a collection of tortured souls—have a more complicated relationship to the Great Plains than that of Alexandra and Antonia. Carl and Ivar in *O Pioneers!* as well as Mr.
Shimerda and Jim in *My Antonia* all experience difficulties in their lives on the plains and function as foils to Alexandra and Antonia. There are common deficiencies among these characters that keep them from conforming to the pioneer myth. These characters all possess sensitivity and a reflective nature. Though these seem like positive qualities, they do not help these characters reach personal fulfillment as Alexandra and Antonia do.

Further, all of these figures—all characterized in some way as outsiders—admire and have positive relationships with either Alexandra or Antonia and are basically judged by the pioneer ideal that the two women have achieved. It is Jim, in particular, who is most haunted by his uneasy relationship with the plains and provides a transition to the discussion of nostalgia and repression in Cather’s work. Jim suffers from being dislocated from his childhood home of Virginia while also experiencing culture shock from the harsh plains environment. Instead of dealing with his sense of loss, Jim displaces his suffering onto a fascination with the dark traumas that others experience—most notably Mr. Shimerda’s. Lisa Marie Lucenti calls these violent events that Jim keenly observes, “eruptions that he can, quite easily, contain” (202). Lucenti’s observation is an important one and can be related to a wider context: Though the tortured souls named above experience some of the darker moments in Cather’s work, moments that border on the Gothic, all of the dark “eruptions” that occur in Cather’s works are “contained” in various ways that relate to an inability to live up to the paradigm of the pioneer ideal.

Though Ivar and Carl of *O Pioneers!!* do not exhibit outlooks and tendencies as dark as Mr. Shimerda or Jim in *My Antonia*, they do show a pronounced resistance to the
changing and taming of the land that Alexandra and Antonia devote themselves to in order to extract profit from the land. Ivar sticks out from the novel with what strikes the reader as surprisingly modern attitudes toward conservation and green living. Ivar is consistently characterized by his oneness with nature, a transcendentalist who is reminiscent of Whitman himself, with his “shaggy white hair, falling in a thick mane” (24) and preference for going barefoot at all times for “the indulgence of the body” (181). Ivar is said to “understand animals” (22) and makes some of his living doctoring them, in addition to weaving hammocks from twine. He lives beside a large pond, is an avid bird watcher and is hurt and frustrated by Alexandra’s brothers’ hunting practices. We are told that Ivar “never ate meat, fresh or salt” (28). Near the beginning of the novel, as soon as Carl, Alexandra and her brothers drive up to Ivar’s, he comes out of his dwelling shouting, “No guns, no guns!” (26). Ivar chooses to live in a cave, carved into a hillside, and approaching Ivar’s home, the narrator says that “you could have walked over the roof of Ivar’s dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation. Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done” (24). Ivar detests the “litter of human dwellings” and expresses his preference for his “wild homestead” by saying that his “Bible seemed truer to him there” (25). The narrator affirms Ivar’s attitude and lifestyle preferences, and makes his connection to the landscape comparable to Alexandra’s: “If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land, the smiling sky, the curly grass white in the hot sunlight; if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence,
one understood what Ivar meant” (25). This reflective moment in the novel, taken from the perspective of Ivar’s doorway, seems in line with the perspective and feelings Alexandra has when she looks out over the divide at the landscape and is overcome with emotion. However, while Ivar has not disturbed the landscape anymore “than the coyote,” Alexandra’s gaze over the landscape also sees the potential to develop the land agriculturally and increase her holdings. Ivar’s home does not resemble anything “near a human habitation” and is a stark contrast to the description of the plains at the beginning of the second part of the novel, the flash forward after Alexandra has made good on her speculation plans: “The shaggy coat of the prairie […] has vanished forever. […] one looks out over a vast checkerboard, marked off in squares of wheat and corn […] Telephone wires hum along the white roads, which always run at right angles” (49).

Under the hand of pioneers like Alexandra, the land is changed, heavily developed, and though admiration is given to Ivar’s love of the landscape, there is a definite conflict between how the two choose to treat the land.

Cather’s handling of this conflict that threatens a pastoral ideal is not complicated. Ivar is depicted from the beginning of the novel as mentally unsound. He is called “crazy” Ivar by Alexandra’s brothers (and the narrator) from the beginning of the novel. Emil has heard the rumor that Ivar “runs about the country howling at night” (21). Alexandra eventually takes Ivar into her home after he “lost his land through mismanagement” (56) (which provides another clear contrast between the two characters: as Alexandra expands her holdings through savvy management, Ivar loses the little land he has). Alexandra’s brothers now become more serious in their attitude toward Ivar. Lou
says to Alexandra that he has consulted a doctor that surmised Ivar is “likely to set fire to the barn any night, or to take after you and the girls with an axe” (64). Ivar does admit to having “spells” but says that they come from God. Ivar feels that “everyone should worship God in the way that is revealed to him. But that is not the way of this country. The way here is for all to do alike” (59). In addition to his conservationist attitudes toward the landscape, Ivar also provides an example of one who is victimized by the conformity of the people of the plains. Alexandra proves to be the only character that is sympathetic to Ivar, and she is successful in keeping him from being taken to “the asylum.” Even though Ivar is respected by Alexandra, the embodiment of the pioneer paradigm, he is characterized as an eccentric, at best, a sideshow in the novel, and his beliefs toward an unchanged landscape and his resentment of conformity on the plains are severely undercut (contained) by the level of his eccentricities.

Carl provides another interesting and rare conservationist voice in *O Pioneers!!* When he first enters Nebraska, Carl says that he feels “that the land wanted to be left alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness” (10). Further, at the end of the novel, even as he takes in the grandeur of Alexandra’s farm, Carl says, “I even think I liked the old country better. This is all very splendid in its way, but there was something about this country when it was a wild beast that has haunted me all these years” (75). Carl feels that perhaps the land was not meant to be settled and speculated but should have been left as a natural grassland, and he is even “haunted” by this feeling. Though Carl’s “haunting” by the older state of the land seems to underpin a Gothic movement in the text, this haunting is never explored
and does not reach a complexity (as, in some ways, Jim’s does in *My Antonia*), and Carl is only fulfilled, transcends his outsider status, when he returns to Nebraska to marry Alexandra and share her way of life. Before his permanent return home at the end of the novel, Carl makes a visit back to see Alexandra, and she offers to show him his parents’ former farm that she has purchased. Carl says that he should see the place but says to Alexandra, “I’m cowardly about things that remind me of myself” (77). Carl goes on to tell Alexandra that he is deeply dissatisfied with the lack of success he has experienced in his profession as an engraver and is unsatisfied overall with the state of his life. He says, “You see […] measured by your standards here, I’m a failure. I couldn’t even buy one of your cornfields. I’ve enjoyed a great many things, but I’ve got nothing to show for it at all” (77). Alexandra then says to Carl that she (at this point in the novel) admires Carl’s freedom, but Carl replies, “Freedom so often means that one isn’t needed anywhere. Here you are an individual, you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody, we own nothing” (77). It is clear that Carl judges himself by Alexandra’s brand of success—living the dream of the democratic utopia and the garden myth. Carl’s phrase, “measured by your [Alexandra’s] standards,” can really be applied to Cather’s plains work overall. The primary characters in Cather’s pastoral narrative, Alexandra and Antonia, are characters that have not left the land alone but have developed it as intensely as they love it, and they are the characters that reach personal fulfillment—the characters against which all others are judged. The dominating, pioneer paradigm of Cather’s two heroines works effectively to dull the significance of rare
moments with characters like Carl and Ivar when they express a longing or preference for the original state of the land. Further, Ivar’s mental state and Carl’s decision to judge himself by Alexandra’s standards further dilutes the relevance of their opinions that conflict with the pioneer ideal. They cannot compete with images like the aforementioned larger than life image of the plow on the sun—Cather’s most overt affirmation of the magnitude of the work ethic and spirit of the pioneers who settled the plains—a symbolic encapsulation of her aim in both *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!!* With regard to the landscape itself, Cather’s main purpose is the glorification of the breaking of the land so it can yield rich harvests to the pioneers.

Antonia’s father, Mr. Shimerda, is a tragic character that roundly resists life on the plains; he is not redeemed as Carl is at the end of *O Pioneers!!*, nor does he receive the protection that Ivar does. Depicted as sensitive and intelligent, a weaver by trade and also a musician, Mr. Shimerda is ill suited for the rigors of life on the Nebraska plains and shows a profound homesickness for Bohemia. Early in the novel Antonia catches an insect to listen to its chirping, which reminds her of a beggar woman, “Old Hata,” in her hometown in Bohemia; “Old Hata” would sing songs if you offered her lodging. Antonia presents the insect to her father and reminds him of the beggar lady. As Mr. Shimerda listens to the insect’s chirping, Jim observes: “The old man’s smile, as he listened, was so full of sadness, of pity for things, that I never afterward forgot it” (29). Antonia later explains to Jim her father’s apparent emotional inability to play music in their current home: “At home he play violin all the time […] Here never. […] Some days he take his violin out of his box and make with his fingers on the strings, like this, but never he make
the music” (59). As Antonia continues to explain her father’s unhappiness and his
dissatisfaction with his new country, Jim replies, “People who don’t like this country
ought to stay at home […] We don’t make them come here” (59). Antonia then protests,
“He not want to come, nev-er! […] My *mamenka* make him come” (59). Antonia
explains further that her mother wanted to bring their family to America for the amount
of land and potential earnings and for husbands and wives for her children: “All the time
she say: ‘America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for
my girls’” (59). Even leaving Bohemia with “a thousand dollars in savings” (50) did not
enable Mr. Shimerda to start a prosperous life for his family on the plains. Jim says that
Mr. Shimerda is “old and frail and knew nothing of farming” (16). Additionally, Krajiek,
the Shimerdas’ cousin who settled in America before them, is their only translator and
only contact upon arrival, and Krajiek swindles them out of money through the sale of
livestock and farm machinery. Unable to work the land successfully, and living with his
family in what Jim’s grandmother calls a “badger hole,” Mr. Shimerda is a clear example
of someone who found the Great Plains to fall well short of the democratic utopia and
garden myth. Through the perspective of *My Antonia* overall, it is really Mr. Shimerda’s
sensitive disposition that seems to do him in on the plains. Early on in *O Pioneers!*,
Alexandra’s intellect is described as such: “Her mind was slow, truthful, steadfast. She
had not the least spark of cleverness” (39). This proves to be, for both Alexandra and
Antonia, the successful pioneer state of mind. This is not to say that Alexandra is not
intelligent, as she has clearly been depicted as such, but her intellect is of the most
practical nature. Mr. Shimerda’s emotional depth and reflective personality cripple him
with homesickness, and he is not able to make the transition to Nebraska and eventually ends his life in a grisly suicide.

Mr. Shimerda’s suicide is recounted with a shocking degree of detail, and the description provides one of a number of darkly violent events that Cather includes in her plains novels. Jim as narrator chooses to draw upon the hired men Otto and Jake to bring out these details. When Jim’s grandmother expresses her disbelief that Mr. Shimerda could have killed himself with his gun, Otto misunderstands her and thinks she does not comprehend how he actually shot himself: “Why, ma’m, it was simple enough; he pulled the trigger with his big toe. He layed over on his side and put the end of the barrel in his mouth, then he drew up one foot and felt for the trigger. He found it all right!” (63). Otto continues, “I seen bunches of hair and stuff sticking to the poles and straw along the roof. They was blown up there by gunshot, no question” (64). Finally, Jake describes Mr. Shimerda’s body as “just as stiff as a dressed turkey you hang out to freeze” (67). Jim also recounts that Antonia and her and brother take turns going to the barn to pray beside the frozen corpse.

Before Mr. Shimerda is able to be buried, before his body is cut “loose from the pool of blood in which it was frozen fast to the ground” (74), there is a great deal of debate on where Mr. Shimerda should be, and can be, buried. The Norwegian cemetery will not accept Mr. Shimerda because he has committed suicide, and it finally develops that Mrs. Shimerda wants her husband buried at a corner of their land. Jim’s grandfather notes that when fences are eventually put up around people’s land, roads will be built along the section lines and meet directly at Mr. Shimerda’s grave. Though he is not
completely sure, Jim’s grandfather also believes he has heard of a custom in Bohemia that dictates that a suicide should be buried at a cross-roads so that people travel over the grave. Mr. Shimerda is ultimately buried at the corner of his land, and Jim, speaking from his present perspective, gives the following description of Mr. Shimerda’s grave and how the land is developed around (but not over) it:

The road from the north curved a little to the east just there, and the road from the west swung out a little to the south; so that the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island; and at twilight, under a new moon or the clear evening star, the dusty roads used to look like soft grey rivers flowing past it. I never came upon the place without emotion, and in all that country it was the spot most dear to me. (77)

The description of Mr. Shimerda’s grave highlights the fact that, though the landscape is developed around the grave, Mr. Shimerda’s burial plot always maintains its own space. As the plains become civilized and productive, the marker for a homesick, failed pioneer still remains highly visible. In reference to a repressed history, this scene presents an interesting reading. While it would seem that the painful life of Mr. Shimerda is not repressed by roads that might have been built over him, at the same time, his honorable burial and the sentiment created by the reverence paid to him by Jim can also be seen as safely containing the eruption that Mr. Shimerda has provided in the narrative. Jim feels that “Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, I am sure, without wishing well to the sleeper” (77). The hardships that Mr. Shimerda experienced on the plains are contained not only by the fact that he was clearly not “cut out” for life on the plains, but also by the
fact that his suffering has been paid due reverence. It is also important to note that it is Jim, an outsider from the plains himself, who is depicted as paying the most tribute to Mr. Shimerda. Another graveyard scene in *O Pioneers!!* replicates this dynamic of outsider paying tribute to those who have suffered on the plains.

At the beginning of the novel, when Alexandra expresses her anxiety over her father’s approaching death, she says, “I don’t dare to think about it. I wish we could all go with him and let the grass grow back over everything” (10). Carl, immediately after Alexandra’s comment, spots the Norwegian graveyard ahead and notes that “the grass had, indeed, grown back over everything, shaggy and red, hiding even the wire fence” (10). Later on in the novel, after Alexandra’s farm has prospered, she talks to Carl about thinking about her father and how much things have changed for the better on the plains. She says, “We can remember the graveyard when it was wild prairie, Carl, and now—” (75). Carl interrupts her at this point, saying, “And now the old story has begun to write itself over there […] Isn’t it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before […]” (75). Alexandra responds to this with, “Oh, yes! The young people, they live so hard. And yet sometimes I envy them” (75). Alexandra then begins to discuss how much she admires young Marie and her spirit and work ethic. In this scene Carl is attempting to point out to Alexandra how tough times, like those her father experienced on the plains, keep returning to each generation, and the graveyard is proof. The human stories that “keep repeating themselves” on the plains, from Carl’s perspective, are the lives filled with struggle all the way to the grave. Alexandra, though, deflects this assertion with
ascension and then a focus switch to Marie and the ways in which she embodies what is basically the pioneer myth, how Marie effectively reminds Alexandra of herself.

Alexandra does not forget Carl’s comment about the graveyard, though, and she returns to it at the end of the novel, saying to Carl, “You remember what you once said about the graveyard, and the old story writing itself over? Only it is we who write it, with the best we have” (198). Alexandra is correct, she does “write the story,” but when she says we, she is really referring to a select group. Within the context of the conversation, she can include Carl at this point, as he has returned to Nebraska and seems to have internalized the way Alexandra feels about the land. But those who write the story “with the best we have” are those who understand the pastoral ideal as Alexandra does. “We” can probably best be understood as Alexandra and Antonia, because, as this chapter has claimed from the beginning, it is these two women who write Cather’s story on the plains. These graveyard scenes from both *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* prove the power of Alexandra and Antonia’s authorship. Mr. Shimerda’s grave is hastily honored by Jim, and his story is just as quickly overtaken by Antonia’s; Alexandra, similarly, shifts Carl’s attention to the graveyard by deflecting the painful histories there to the freedom people on the plains have to write their own stories. Instead of serving as functional sites for commemorating the suffering of plains people, the graveyards and what they represent are “contained.”

Among Cather’s plains characters that are judged against these two women, it is Jim, in particular, who is as haunted by the ideal that Antonia’s life presents as he is haunted by his own complex relationship with the plains. Very early in the novel the reader learns that Jim comes to Nebraska from his home in Virginia after losing his
parents. There is a profound silence that surrounds all the facts and feelings concerning Jim’s Virginia home. Most of the feelings he does have are projected onto Mr. Shimerda and the suffering he experiences from his own move to a harsh, unfamiliar landscape. Jim’s fixation on Mr. Shimerda’s suffering is a key clue to Jim’s own sense of loss. Anne Goodwyn Jones writes in her essay on *My Antonia*, “Displacing Dixie,” “Jim’s displacing his own melancholia onto Mr. Shimerda suggests that he sees homesickness as fatal and so refuses to face his losses and grieve his Virginia past […]” (99). Indeed, the proof of the danger of homesickness lies in Mr. Shimerda’s frozen corpse that Jim observes. Jim himself never directly says that he misses Virginia, in fact, upon his Nebraska entrance, says, “I don’t think I was homesick” (8). The reader does not even find out how Jim’s parents died, only that he has come after their loss to live with his grandparents (who are also from Virginia, originally). When Jim first arrives in Nebraska he describes the feeling of literally not being physically present in such a vast land: “Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be” (8). Jim does not feel that the spirits of his parents will be able to watch down on him here on the plains; instead, they will be watching for him back in Virginia, “looking for me at the sheepfold down by the creek, or along the white road that led to the mountain pastures” (8). Though Jim never speaks of his home place, fragmented details concerning Virginia do seep through the text and depict his Southern home as ideal. Jim’s grandmother says at one point of Nebraska that “this country was not like Virginia; and that here a cook had […] very little to do with” (44). During one Christmas, Jake the hired man cuts a cedar tree for Jim, and Jim recalls, “He used to help
my father cut Christmas trees for me in Virginia, and he had not forgotten how much I liked them” (54). After this Christmas, Mr. Shimerda comes to the Burden house to thank them for the presents they have given his family. While observing Mr. Shimerda, Jim supposes that “in the crowded clutter of their [the Shimerda’s] cave, the old man had come to believe that peace and order had vanished from the earth, or existed only in the old world he had left so far behind” (57). It is a glass of “Virginia apple-brandy” that brings the color back to Mr. Shimerda’s cheeks and gives Jim a sense of Mr. Shimerda’s “utter content” (57). Jim privileges the springtime in the South as compared to the plains, saying, “There were none of the signs of spring for which I used to watch in Virginia, no budding woods or blooming gardens” (78). Finally, after Jim leaves the farm to pursue his studies in Lincoln and begins to spend more time with Lena Lingard, her pleasing voice is described as reminiscent of “Southern voices” (182). These fragmented details make up the sum total of references to Jim’s Virginia home, but they do work metonymically to conjure an ideal setting of comfort, beauty and charm, which stands in stark contrast to Jim’s new home on the plains, a home he only comes to appreciate in hindsight when he returns as an adult.

Jim’s relationship with Nebraska is much different, and the memories he chooses to recall, outside of Antonia herself, contribute to some of the darkest passages in Cather’s work. These violent, macabre and uncomfortable memories that Jim chooses to share in his recollection of his late childhood and adolescence in Nebraska are strewn throughout the narrative of My Antonia. These stories all have in common the fact that they do not involve Jim directly but befall others. Two of these important narratives include the
aforementioned suicide of Mr. Shimerda and also the “bride to the wolves” story of the Norwegian farmers Peter and Pavel. Earlier in the novel, Jim and Antonia hear a fantastic story involving Peter and Pavel, brothers who have come to Nebraska from Norway. Relating the story from his deathbed, Pavel’s narrative starts at a wedding. After a reception filled with much drinking and dancing, the wedding party, including Peter and Pavel, start out in the snow for their homes in a nearby village. Traveling in a caravan of sleighs, those at the wedding are gradually overtaken and killed by a pack of wolves, until there is one sleigh left, containing the bride and groom and the two brothers. Pavel says that they “must lighten” and points to the bride. The groom “cursed him and held her tighter. Pavel tried to drag her away. In the struggle, the groom rose. Pavel knocked him over the side of the sledge and threw the girl after him” (40). After the incident the brothers are run out of their village and asked in whatever new town they come to “[…] if they knew the two men who had fed the bride to the wolves” (40). Pavel is continuously haunted by this story and dies shortly after unburdening himself to Mr. Shimerda as Antonia and Jim listen. The two are not upset by the story but guard the secret jealously, “as if the wolves of the Ukraine had gathered that night long ago, and the wedding party been sacrificed, to give us a painful and peculiar pleasure” (41).

Jim does not recoil from these stories but uses them as an important conduit for his own suffering—a conduit that allows him to keep his specific memories of his Virginia home repressed. While Jim will not comment on his own pain suffered from being removed from his childhood home, the composition of his memory of Nebraska gives clues to his own uneasiness with his new home. Lucenti speaks to this uneasiness: “Jim
Burden’s house of memory is certainly haunted. Although he structures his narrative as a return to Antonia and spends much of the early sections recalling homes, his memory ultimately strays away from its center, abandons its homes, and returns again and again to images of violence, death, and horror—images from which Jim elicits a painful pleasure” (195). Jim’s relation to his own move north to the plains is repressed and oblique. Jim says after hearing Peter and Pavel’s story, “At night, before I went to sleep, I often found myself in a sledge drawn by three horses, dashing through a country that looked something like Nebraska and something like Virginia” (41). Here, Jim’s displacement is even more apparent. He can share the pain of the brothers’ exile while enjoying the macabre details of a story that is not his own. Lucenti (as referred to at the beginning of the section) explains further Jim’s brand of therapy: “Violent deaths and casual buryings give Jim the same type of pleasure that he found in Pavel’s wolves. Since these deaths are not only unrelated to him but also mediated through someone else’s memories, they figure as eruptions that he can, quite easily, contain” (202). As with the other characters discussed here, Jim’s dark eruptions are all contained. As is consistent with his “haunted house of memory,” Jim will encounter ghosts of memories but keeps them repressed with the painful stories of others. The most complex of Cather’s misfits, Jim clearly suffers mental anguish from a sensitive and reflective nature. Additionally, and on a deeper level than Ivar, Carl or Mr. Shimerda, Jim offers insight into a nostalgic view of plains history.

Nostalgia as Repression on the Plains

Jones describes *My Antonia* as “a novel that, while it openly embraces Nebraska and Antonia, keeps a closet date with Virginia […] The buried text of *My Antonia* is the
story of the burden of Jim’s, and Cather’s, Southern history, of how to relieve—and how to be broken by—that burden” (107). It is not difficult to find comparisons between Jim and Cather herself, and the “closet date” with Virginia comes closest to fulfillment in Cather’s last novel and only novel to be set in the South, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). As we will see, Cather is only as successful as Jim is in relieving herself of the burden of her Southern history. Jim’s haunting in *My Antonia* is characterized most by displacement and a profound silence. Unlike a Gothic haunting, Jim cannot bring back repressed memories of his Southern home and use them to make more sense of some of his dissatisfaction with his current home on the plains. This becomes a pattern of repression for Jim, as he then buries feelings about Nebraska just as he does with Virginia. Despite all the anxiety, fear and loss of home place that surround Jim’s upbringing in Nebraska, what he chooses to communicate are Romantic memories that take Antonia as their center. Jim’s version of plains history is defined immediately by the frame tale of the novel. The narrator that receives Jim’s “legal portfolio,” containing all his documented memories of Antonia, recounts at the beginning of the novel her meeting with Jim on a train headed across the plains. The narrator and Jim recall in Romantic language their memories of the landscape: “burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky […] the colour and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests […]” (1). They both agree that “no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it” (1). The narrator notes of Jim that “disappointments have not changed him” or his “romantic disposition” (2). Most importantly, both Jim and the narrator agree on their thoughts and recollections of Antonia: “this girl seemed to
mean to us the country” (2). Thus, Jim’s memory of Nebraska, fueled by nostalgia, is
Antonia, and she comes to represent the plains for the reader as well. Jim has judged the
country and himself by her standards and is taken in completely by her embodiment of
the pioneer ideal. Jim is, like Carl, a sensitive, reflective individual who struggles to find
fulfillment on the harsh plains. Jim lives a haunted childhood on the plains, but the dark
eruptions that Jim experiences in his childhood in Nebraska are contained by his own
ideal, nostalgic conception of Antonia, and these memories come to drive the entire
narrative of the novel.

The concept of nostalgia is an important one to define in Cather’s works. While she
may acknowledge more of the negative aspects of a changing history on the plains,
Cather still has a lot in common with Jim in their perspectives on the region. Merrill
Maguire Skaggs compares *O Pioneers!!* and *One of Ours* in this respect: “*O Pioneers!!*
more strongly suggests the creative opportunities a young woman develops in
successfully cultivating her Nebraska farmland; while conceding some hopeful
interludes, *One of Ours* more strongly emphasizes the deadening qualities in Nebraska
farm life that destroy a young man’s imagination” (27). Skaggs draws a specific
distinction between *My Antonia* and *One of Ours* as well, in respect to the landscape: “In
*My Antonia*, Nebraska dominantly symbolizes fertility and constantly returning rebirth; in
*One of Ours*, the state dominantly suggests brain death, meaningless waste and labor, and
frustrating fragmentations” (28). The distinctions that Skaggs draws here between the
Nebraska in Cather’s earlier and later novels are important—the pastoral ideal and the
redemptive power of the land seem less prevalent in her later novels, and Cather does
change in her attitude toward the plains and the yeoman farmer; however, while Cather
becomes nostalgic toward these pioneer myths, she does not deconstruct them and still
infuses them with power. While Cather may eventually acknowledge some of the
changing history on the plains, she does not recognize the past as false and repressive and
attempt to bring it into line with a more traumatic history as a way of creating a healthier
present. This is the work of a Gothic literature. Nor does Cather achieve any of the
Gothic’s fluidity between past and present. Her gaze faces one direction—backwards,
longingly, toward an idealized past.

Joyce McDonald helps in understanding the nature of Cather’s nostalgia as it
functions through the pastoral mode. McDonald applies her definition of the pastoral to
an examination of Cather’s Southern roots and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Cather was
born in Back Creek, Virginia eight years after the end of the Civil War and lived in the
South until moving with her family to Nebraska at the age of ten. Though slavery was
abolished by the time Cather was born, McDonald explains that Cather still developed an
acute consciousness of class distinctions, “an awareness that most likely evolved from
her childhood relationship with household servants (both black and white) in Virginia”
(11). McDonald also states, “the families of both her parents, whether or not they
condoned chattel slavery, were part of a culture whose economic stability had been based
on the slave system” (11). Thus, Cather undoubtedly had some knowledge and
experience of the tensions and historical troubles of the South and felt at least some part
of the legacy of the Civil War and Reconstruction.
McDonald builds on Barillas’s traditional definition of the pastoral and claims that Cather’s use corresponds “to a paradigm unique to Southern literature” (3). McDonald defines three stages in this more complex use of the mode: “[…] the need to reclaim the pastoral ideal, followed by disillusionment and alienation, leading to a deep desire to reconcile human experience within a historical context” (3). It would be fascinating to witness Cather create a work that moves through these steps and confronts the past of the South in the way that she is unable to come to grips with the past of the plains; however, this is unfortunately not the case in *Sapphira*. The novel has often been dismissed if not roundly criticized by most Cather scholars. Many critics start with the fact that the African-American characters in *Sapphira* lack the depth of characterization that Cather consistently displays in other works. Toni Morrison, in her well-known critique of the novel, calls *Sapphira* a “fugitive from its author’s literary estate” (19). Most importantly, Cather does not reach in *Sapphira* the third, reconciliatory step that McDonald defines. Marilyn Mobley McKenzie surmises, “Willa Cather’s rendering of enslavement invokes the Africanist presence only to leave much of the unspeakable matters unspoken and the power relations and their attendant racial ideologies that sustain them intact” (88). McDonald concludes more generally, “At the heart of Cather’s ‘mixed emotions’ toward her Southern heritage is an inability to reconcile her childhood pastoral vision of the South with her adult awareness of the post-Civil War Reconstruction reality” (22). In the introduction we saw in the work of Faulkner, as he created characters continuously torn between past and current times while confronting the traumatic past of the South and its effect on the present, the kind of literature that reaches the reconciliation that Cather’s
cannot. In short, Cather cannot do in the South (or the plains, for that matter) what Faulkner did.

The most that Cather’s Southern novel can show us is that she treats the history of the South in similar ways to her handling of plains history. Nevertheless, this conclusion concerning Cather’s Southern roots is not entirely without value. I believe it is useful to apply this mode to Cather’s plains works as well. *O Pioneers!!* and *My Antonia* “reclaim the pastoral ideal” with the traditional approach that Barillas outlines (on a Romantic level, as we saw), while in her later novels, *One of Ours* (1922) and *A Lost Lady* (1923), Cather acknowledges the loss of a pioneer spirit on the plains and includes in her use of the pastoral a sense of nostalgia for the lost ideal. It is clear, though, that Cather does not fulfill through her work the third stage McDonald outlines, “a deep desire to reconcile human experience within a historical context” (3). To reach this third step is to create a Gothic literature, a socially engaged work that moves freely between the past and present and attacks mythic histories to reveal painful events in an attempt to create a more accurate present. Recalling the discussion of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* it is clear how his work moves through all three stages that McDonald lays out, especially the third. Though she does not make the connection, I believe that McDonald’s description of the function of the pastoral in the South can actually be seen as a Gothic process, at least thematically. In another section of her essay, McDonald describes her third step as a “strong desire to understand the past, no matter how painful, and the part it plays in the ongoing human drama” (7). This is akin to the Gothic creation of a healthier present by confronting a repressed past, as described in the introduction. I would like to adopt
McDonald’s third step as a useful test for defining a work as Gothic. Thus, McDonald’s definition of the pastoral provides another critical path by which to define a Gothic literature and uses Cather’s shortcomings with a Southern setting to show, from another perspective (another region), exactly how Cather falls short of a Gothic treatment of plains history: she is stuck in the second step of disillusionment expressed through her nostalgic tone. Alexandra and Antonia remain her fading but unblemished pioneer heroines.

This sense of nostalgia stemming from the erosion of the pioneer myth is clearest in *A Lost Lady*. Not long after Niel learns that Ivy has drained his beloved marsh on the Forrester’s property, he concludes in a moment of reflection, “The Old West had been settled by dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence […] Now all the vast territory they had won was at the mercy of men like Ivy Peters, who had never dared anything, never risked anything. […] The space, the colour, the princely carelessness of the pioneer they would destroy and cut up into profitable bits” (90). Beyond the changing control of the land itself, Niel realizes at the end of the novel, as he meets his breaking point with the discovery of the sexual liaison between Mrs. Forrester and Ivy Peters, that “He had seen the end of an era, the sunset of the pioneer. He had come upon it when already its glory was nearly spent. […] the men who had put plains and mountains under the iron harness were old: some were poor, and even the successful ones were hunting for rest and a brief reprieve from death. It was already gone, that age; nothing could ever bring it back” (144-45). Only five years after Cather wrote *My Antonia*, Niel declares an end to the pastoral ideal that both Alexandra
and Antonia fulfilled—the current historical conditions of the plains no longer able to support the vision of this archetype of the pioneer. Though it seems like a sudden change in outlook in only a half decade, between the writing of My Antonia in 1918 and A Lost Lady in 1923, World War I had a profound effect on the plains. According to Frazier, this war “changed the Great Plains more than any event in recent history” (195). Frazier explains that at the beginning of the war, the U.S., Canada and Russia were the top wheat producing countries in the world; however, when the Turkish Navy blockaded the Dardanelles in 1914, it stopped the movement of Russian wheat down from the Black Sea, and, as Frazier states, “Suddenly, like one kidney when the other is removed, the Great Plains had to work twice as hard. [...] hundreds of thousands of acres of marginal land went under new lightweight tractors. [...] Farmers became rich, bought better equipment and more land [...]” (195). In other words, farming became a big business, and it is people like Ivy Peters that are able to operate successfully within the massively expanding market. Thus, Cather turns her attention to characters like Ivy Peters and Nat Wheeler, those growing wealthy on the plains without the kind of romantic outlook Alexandra has for the land. Beyond these historical issues, though, what is most important to note is that Niel never questions the pioneer ideal. A Gothic literature would bring back the history of the pastoral ideal and examine its legitimacy. Niel, instead, mourns the “sunset” of the pioneer and never questions their mythic history.

As detailed earlier, Claude Wheeler resents the materialism that has developed on the plains, and he seems to have, at the beginning of the novel, a grasp on the current anti-pastoral conditions of the plains. He does not express the same faith in and
appreciation of the plains landscape as do Alexandra and Antonia. However, when Claude is in France during the war, he takes notice of the vegetation there that reminds him of his Nebraska home. We are told that nothing astonished Claude more than “the familiar cottonwood, growing everywhere. Claude thought he had never before realized how beautiful this tree could be. […] they stood in pointed masses, seemed to grip deep into the soil and to rest easy, as if they had been there for ever and would be there for ever more. […] He felt they were a real bond between him and his people” (275). Claude starts to recognize some of the beauty in the natural features of Nebraska, though only in hindsight, when he recognizes them thousands of miles away. In a similar manner, Claude notices flowers of the “primrose family” and says, “He had never thought it very pretty, but he was pleased to find it here” (313). Claude’s Romantic attitude towards the landscape he recognizes parallels that of Alexandra and Antonia. This new look at the landscape is really the same kind of nostalgic feeling that Neil (and Jim) experience in their narratives. Reynolds connects further the feelings Claude finally experiences for the plains back to those depicted in Cather’s earlier two plains novels: “Claude’s France, a pastoral and anti-materialistic community proudly rooted in its cultural tradition, is a variant of the Utopia projected in My Antonia and O Pioneers!” (119). Though Claude begins the novel with an oppositional relationship to the current history of the plains, by the narrative’s end he has fallen back to a nostalgic view of the region as it appears in Cather’s earlier works.

Nostalgia is a device that strengthens but does not overturn myth. Because myth serves as such a common tool of the kind of repression that the Gothic seeks to expose, it
is important to explore the historical elements that Cather’s narratives repress. Frus and Corkin write that this kind of mystification that has been applied to the West and Great Plains “has been the center of a certain form of jingoism feeding imperialist, anti-environmentalist, and racist actions in the late twentieth century” (42) and feel that “Cather has been part of this mystification, rather than part of its critique. That is, her fiction contributes to a ‘master narrative’ of American history when it is read in terms that still prevail in American literary studies” (42). The pioneer myth, the “terms,” one might say, through which Cather’s plains are created, create an appealing narrative built on ideals like faith, hard work and equal opportunity—ideals many readers inherently want to identify with at least part of the United States. However, the readings above have shown how a literature like Cather’s, one that relies heavily on myth, can obscure the realities of personal hardships, environmental damage, economic exploitation and racial oppression in the history of the plains region. Even when these realities are included in Cather’s narratives themselves, as they frequently are, the pull of pioneer ideal characters like Alexandra and Antonia distract readers’ attention from a contemplation of the more painful aspects of Great Plains history. Cather’s plains novels become a clear example of the way that myth can repress history.

This being said, Cather goes a long way in showing that the Great Plains is a region primed for a Gothic literature. Though, as I have shown, Cather contains in various ways the dark eruptions in her novels, they are still prevalent in her work. Outbreaks of violence are common to all of Cather’s novels. In addition to Mr. Shimerda’s suicide and Peter and Pavel’s wolf story, there is also the freakish transient suicide in *My Antonia*, in
which the “tramp” jumps head first into a threshing machine after waving goodbye to Antonia. Even *O Pioneers!!*, not nearly as dark in tone as *My Antonia*, still ends with the shocking murders of Emil and Marie. There is no doubt that Cather depicts the plains as a turbulent, violent region, even if she keeps careful control over who suffers these outbreaks. In all four novels studied in this chapter, the pioneer myth is consistently threatened, and the darker realities of the plains history continually leak to the surface of the narrative. Though Cather’s pioneer heroines reign supreme through her Great Plains work, she plants the seeds of the Gothic.

Even Cather’s transcendent symbol of the pioneer ideal, the plow on the sunset, is colored by a repressed history. Before they witness the sunset and the huge shadow of the plow, Antonia asks Jim to recount the story of Coronado’s exploration of the plains. Jim says that in school in Nebraska they learned that Coronado never progressed north of Kansas; however, Jim believes that he had because of an artifact he has seen. Jim says, “A farmer in the county north of ours, when he was breaking sod, had turned up a metal stirrup of fine workmanship, and a sword with a Spanish inscription on the blade” (155). Whether Coronado himself had made it into Nebraska is questionable, Jim acknowledges, but the finding of the stirrup and sword do provide early elements to the narrative of the settling of the plains. Fischer recounts that “Coronado was accused by his own men of inhumane treatment of the Indians” (57). In this context, the immediate and grand appearance of the plow on the horizon can be viewed as a parallel to Coronado’s violent activity on the plains, through an agrarian rather than imperialistic approach. Fischer writes, “Plowing, in Nebraska, is inextricably intertwined with the sword. And in a
paradigmatic example of the return of the repressed, the sword and everything it stands for ‘turns up’ in Cather’s narrative at the very place where she most powerfully calls forth the symbolic plow” (58). Though Cather wants the plow to be viewed as the transcendent symbol of pioneer triumph, it is this tool, used by the farmer Jim mentions, that literally turns up a violent symbol of the imperialistic founding of the Great Plains. The agrarian and the imperialistic can be connected further. At the onset of the 1930s, roughly two decades after the publication of *O Pioneers!*!, the rains stopped on the Great Plains. Though the region had experienced drought before, Frazier states that “This time, much of the native sod of grasses and roots which had held the soil in place since the last Ice Age were gone. […] So began the first of the great modern eco-catastrophes […]” (196). The tool responsible for tearing the earth, turning under the native grasslands and bringing on the Dust Bowl is the plow. So, in this scene, so memorable for its symbolic praise of the pioneer, the plow and the sword are linked. It seems then that even in Cather’s idealized treatment of the pioneer settlement of the plains, some portions of the past cannot remain buried.
Chapter 3: Edge of Nostalgia—Wright Morris and the Plains

In her 1923 essay “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,” Willa Cather acknowledges the passing of a generation on the plains. She writes, “[…] we must face the fact that the splendid story of the pioneers is finished, and that no new story worthy to take its place has yet begun” (337). As the last chapter established, Cather is dismayed with the materialism that has grown on the plains since the beginning of the twentieth century, and she focuses on this phenomena in her essay: “The generation now in the driver’s seat hates to make anything, wants to live and die in the automobile, scudding past those acres where the old men used to follow the long corn-rows up and down” (338). Cather has hope for the future of the plains, though, and expresses this optimism in her essay from a point of view similar to Carl’s at the ending of *O Pioneers!*. She writes, “When I stop at one of the graveyards in my own country, and see on the headstones the names of fine old men I used to know […] I have always the hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again” (336). Cather’s wish for a return of the repressed sharply contrasts the Gothic’s unearthing of a painful truth. Instead, Cather views plains history as a positive, transcendent truth that will hopefully rise again. Cather poses the following question toward the close of her essay: “Will the third generation—the full-blooded, joyous one just coming over the hill—will it be fooled? Will it believe that to live easily is to live happily?” (338).

Wright Morris was thirteen years old when Cather wrote these words, and he can be placed within the “third generation” that Cather outlines. Born in Central City, Nebraska in 1910, Morris is described by Leslie Fiedler as an author who, throughout his
career, “has been trying to convince his readers that Nebraska is the absurd hell we all
inhabit” (494). Morris is probably not what Cather had in mind when envisioning a “full-
blooded, joyous” new generation “just coming over the hill.” Like Cather, though, Morris
pursues in his novels Cather’s question of whether plains people believe that “to live
easily is to live happily.” Morris rephrases this question by asking if people in Nebraska
are “asleep or awake?”—a phrase that becomes a motif in Morris’s *Ceremony in Lone
Tree* (1960). *Ceremony in Lone Tree* and *Plains Song* (1980) feature protagonists,
Gordon Boyd and Sharon Rose, respectively, that find that those who have grown up on
and stayed on the plains largely ignore the bulk of its painful history, and these main
characters wonder whether or not people lead happier lives on the plains with this
approach—an approach that is characterized more as obliviousness and less as a healthy
simplicity and heartiness. Morris does acknowledge the pioneer values that Cather
praised so heartily. He refers to these values as the “plains trinity of abstinence, frugality
and independence,” and while these values receive some admiration in Morris’s work,
they also receive complex scrutiny as to the specific effect they have on those who
embrace them. Both Cather and Morris’s works feature violent eruptions on the plains,
but Morris’s novels offer a greater effort to explain why the region can be prone to
violence.

Adornments*, “It is of interest to me, personally, that Cather came to the plains at the age
of nine, the year that I left them […] I would experience the first tantalizing vicarious
glimpses of the West I came too late for, and must therefore re-create” (67). Morris was
not able to enjoy the “open plains” of the later 19th century in the same way that Cather did in her childhood. The fact that Morris left the plains at age nine—moving to the city of Omaha and then out of the state permanently at fourteen (“No Place to Hide” 290)—is also certainly of interest to the study of his plains work. The plains expatriate, embodied by *Ceremony*’s Boyd, *Plains Song*’s Sharon, and also *The Home Place* (1948) and *The World in the Attic*’s (1949) Clyde Muncy, is the archetypal linchpin to Morris’s plains novels. Morris’s exit from the plains at such an early age moves his nostalgia for the region to perhaps an even deeper level than Cather’s. The defining perspective of Morris’s characters on the plains is the look back to the region. Morris’s characters are reminiscent of Cather’s Carl and Jim, but they are even more intensely rooted in their outsider status, and they are clearly more self-conscious in their reflections on their separation from the region. Another phrase that serves as a motif in Morris’s work is “nostalgia to nausea” as it relates to the expatriate’s look back to the region. Boyd, Sharon, and Muncy acknowledge the strong pull back to Nebraska, but they do not receive with their return the positive affirmation that Carl and Jim do and experience, instead, both attraction and repulsion as they struggle to rectify the plains of childhood and adulthood.

And it is the complex and conflicting thought with which Morris’s protagonists approach the history of the plains that most differentiates them from Cather’s main characters. The cast is extremely similar, with Tom Scanlon (*Ceremony*), Cora Atkins (*Plains Song*) and Uncle Harry and Aunt Clara (*The Home Place*) playing Alexandra/Antonia—those that remain on the plains, work hard, and lead stable lives in
the region—while Boyd, Sharon and Muncy play Carl/Jim—characters who leave the plains to seek fulfillment elsewhere but find themselves constantly looking back homeward. However, there is a fundamental difference in the two sets of characters. Reginald Dyck writes when comparing Sharon with Jim, “The difference in their attitudes results from the depth of consciousness that the authors give them” (31). More specifically, Boyd, Sharon and Muncy display the ability not only to criticize their region (not idealize it as Carl and Jim do), but they are also able to scrutinize their own desire to return to their home even as they are making the trip. Cather’s work featured some unconscious, dark eruption on the plains, and she made some begrudging acknowledgment of growing materialism in the region, but as Morris wrote in his essay on Cather, she was reluctant to confront these topics: “The shallowness and vulgarity of the ‘business’ culture, with its bitch goddess Success, did not arouse her to ridicule or satirize it […] Its effect on Cather was that of a blight she must escape” (66). As Morris claims, while Cather does acknowledge the decline of the pioneer as a material culture grows on the plains, she does not focus on this conflict but, instead, eventually transplants her later fiction to the American Southwest. Morris’s darkly comic novels, instead of evading these more uncomfortable topics, take on directly the mythic past of the plains region in all its negativity and also wage fully a battle with nostalgia.

Morris’s 1998 obituary in the New York Times interestingly described his novels as “American Gothic” and described Morris as an author who “plumbed the mysteries of the stark Nebraska landscape” (Blumenthal). While Morris’s characters, as mentioned, certainly take an in depth (and, at times, harsh) look at the plains of Nebraska, I will not
go as far as to characterize Morris as a plains Gothic writer. His novels challenge but do not fully replace a mythic history of the region with the repressed material they confront. (Interestingly, Morris, also a photographer, actually accomplishes this task with his photos, some of which will be examined at the end of the chapter.) Morris’s work lacks consistency in maintaining the kind of stylistic distortions a Gothic literature requires. Thematically, though, Morris does wrangle with the history of the plains in a fully conscious manner that continues to clear a path to a Gothic fiction in the plains region.

Cather wrote in 1923 that the population of Nebraska “is as clean and full of vigor as the soil; there are no grudges, no heritage of disease or hate” (338). This would not be, though, the plains that Morris inherited. Joseph Wydeven writes in Wright Morris Revisited, “By the time Morris reached adulthood, the pioneer era had ended, the Great Plains was fast becoming the Dust Bowl, and the dreams of the heroic past were being cruelly censored by Great Depression realities” (295). It is this later era and heritage, hate and grudges included, that Morris consciously takes on.

This chapter will be structured through the individual journeys of the three plains expatriates—Muncy, Boyd and Sharon—the main players in Morris’s cast of plains characters. Each follows a similar narrative arc in their respective work: brought back to the plains by a nostalgic pull, these characters examine contemporary plains life through a variety of elements—age old values, myth, violence and the relative wisdom or obliviousness of a simplified plains lifestyle—while trying to balance their own sentimental conception of the region. All of these characters confirm their own outsider status at the outset and attempt to temper their nostalgia with an honest look at current
life on the plains, and though the conclusions they reach may not be fully formed, the questions that their narratives provoke illuminate a path toward Proulx and a plains Gothic.

Nostalgia is an element that is central to these characters’ narratives, and it is worth restating the importance of dealing with nostalgia as a path to the Gothic develops. Nostalgia can be understood as no less than the inverse of the Gothic. While the Gothic strives to dig up the uncomfortable past and bring it to light in the hopes of a healthier present, nostalgia represses the uncomfortable past and privileges myth for the creation of a pleasing but oblivious present. Morris, in an interview, shows an awareness of the prominent role nostalgia plays in his novels:

Nostalgia, the past, which I first had to rediscover as a matter of self-discovery, can be traced in the novels, I think. First the infatuation with the past, a conviction that the past was real and desirable, and should be the way life is. Then a somewhat scrutinious and skeptical attitude toward the past. Then a serious questioning of the past. After which the present begins to come into the picture…In a way my books show a development of an escape from nostalgia. (Bluefarb 45)

The development of an “escape from nostalgia” that Morris describes seems to parallel the progression of a Gothic treatment of history: the identification of myth, then the intense questioning of mythic history to gain a different perspective of both the present and the past. The question this chapter will eventually engage is whether or not, despite the author’s own claims above, Morris’s characters actually escape nostalgia and just
how much the present “comes into the picture” and changes as a result of characters’ “scrutinous and skeptical attitude toward the past.” There is no doubt, though, that Morris provides an alternative to Cather’s perspective on the plains, and even where Morris falls short of the Gothic, these shortcomings make clearer what a plains Gothic requires and how Proulx will eventually reach it.

_Clyde Muncy, The Nebraska Trilogy, and “Nostalgia to Nausea”_

Three of Morris’s earlier works are loosely referred to as his “Nebraska Trilogy”: _The Inhabitants_ (1946), _The Home Place_ (1948), and _The World in the Attic_ (1949). The first two of these works are referred to as “photo-texts,” a term that Morris coined to describe his books that incorporate his photographs into the text. _The Inhabitants_ is a non-linear work that consists of fifteen stark photos of various homes and structures across the plains and accompanying, short prose passages that consist of Morris’s somewhat fragmented projections of the thoughts and interactions of the inhabitants of these places—the seeming purpose of the work to give voice to these dwellers. Morris communicates a detailed theoretical rationale for his “photo-texts” that Alan Trachtenberg explains: “The theory is that conjoining word and image in the eyes and mind of the reader will bring forth an experience of what is unseen yet present in the image. […] Coupled with a text on the facing page […] the image loses its fixity as a picture of its subject alone, becoming more mobile and revelatory” (67). Morris argued that his play between text and image could create a “third view” for the reader, one that reached beyond the limits of what the text and image could achieve on their own. In _The Home Place_, though, Morris’s photos seem to function more traditionally, as they
generally make reference to the linear, fictional narrative of the novel. Trachtenberg calls this use “pure cinema: a book of stills with commentary, or a book of words with running pictures. It works either way” (72). While some critics admire the ambition of Morris’s photo-text experiment, others doubt its effectiveness. G.B. Crumb claims, “Often the photos are just photos, mercifully free of picturesque prettiness but not conveying much ‘mystic meaning’ let alone anything specific about the inhabitants. Often a photo seems a redundant illustration of the text; more often the text seems a superfluous explanation of the photo” (56). In any case, Morris’s photo-text experiment did not last long, as his publishers stripped *The World in the Attic* of its photos, preferring that the text appear on its own (*Morris Revisted* 71).

It is important to explain Morris’s short use of photo-text because, as mentioned earlier, the photos themselves will be examined toward the end of the chapter as a legitimately Gothic view of the plains. The movement from the highly theoretical use of photos in *The Inhabitants* to their more traditional use in *The Home Place* to, finally, their absence in *The World in the Attic* also reveals Morris’s increased focus on the craft of fiction which seems to establish for him his literary agenda for his Great Plains work: his characters’ attempted reckoning with their nostalgic views of the region. And, as stated earlier, it is this struggle that allows Morris, to a great extent, to clear a path toward the Gothic by puncturing myths of the region and, at the very least, laying bare the kinds of questions that must be faced concerning the history of the region. This shift of Morris’s view of the region, the inception of his disillusionment, is accomplished by the
character of Clyde Muncy, the protagonist of both *The Home Place* and *The World in the Attic*.

Morris picks up on the optimistic tone of *The Inhabitants* and carries it into *The Home Place*. Morris’s first photo-text was dedicated to the inhabitants themselves, “Who know what it is to be an American.” This sentimentality continues to the book’s final lines, when Morris answers the question he has been pursuing (in Crevecoeurian fashion)—What it is to be an American. Morris writes, “There’s no one thing to cover the people, no one sky […] no one way or one word for the people […] For these people are the people and this is their land. And there’s no need to cover such people—they cover themselves.”11 Muncy will come to a similar conclusion at the end of *The Home Place* concerning his perspective on the people of Nebraska, though his tone will shift significantly in *The World in the Attic*. As Boyd and Sharon are, Muncy is established early on in *The Home Place* as an outsider. The premise of the novel is that Muncy has come with his wife and two children to his Uncle Harry and Aunt Clara’s farm in Nebraska after falling on rough times financially in New York City. Muncy refers to himself and all others who have moved away from the country to the city as “Small town expatriates, all of us” (59). Thus, Muncy establishes the fundamental archetype in Morris’s plains work—the outsider returning to discover what was lost from an idealized childhood on the plains. Muncy was born in Lone Tree, a town close to his aunt and uncle’s farm. He idealizes the summers he spent on the farm before moving from Nebraska: “Something happened out here, in four or five summers, that thirty years of

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11 *The Inhabitants* does not contain page numbers.
hell and high water, and twenty years of the city, has not changed in me. That’s what I want for my kids. […] that’s what they deserve” (37). Muncy repeatedly refers to himself as being born and raised on a farm, even though Uncle Harry disagrees with this. At one point Muncy speaks to his ability to teach his son about farm life and says, “After all, his daddy was born on a farm” (8), to which Uncle Harry replies, “I thought you was born in Lone Tree?” (8). Muncy maintains that his family “had a horse and some chickens” (8), but his status as an outsider remains consistent throughout the two works. At the beginning of *The World in the Attic*, during a country drive, Muncy explains to his son that all of the landscape used to be grass. When his son questions whether or not the land is still grass, Muncy replies that it is now wheat: “Can’t you tell wheat from grass?” (2). Later, as they walk the ditch, they run into a twelve-year-old boy who is tending his cows on horseback. When Muncy exclaims, “The wheat surely looks fine, son!” (6), the local boy explains that they are in fact looking at rye not wheat. Muncy, who has been reiterating consistently to his family that he was “born and raised out here,” is deeply embarrassed and feels that even the cows are staring at him, “As if to see for themselves that fellow who didn’t know wheat from rye” (6). Muncy tries hard to cast himself as the farm boy, but he is primarily trying to tap back into mythic conceptions of the plains, much like Carl and Jim of Cather’s work. Muncy ultimately realizes, though, that, as Trachtenberg states, his home place “turns out to have been more imagined or invented than remembered” (70).

For the duration of *The Home Place*, however, Muncy admires and praises the hard working values of the rural people he meets, despite their reinforcing of his outsider
status. When Ivy, a cousin of Muncy’s, criticizes Uncle Harry for his outdated farming methods by claiming, “It’s men like him […] who made this goddam dust bowl” (25), Muncy reflects to himself, “True enough—but it was men like him who were still around when the dust blew away” (25). The Home Place ultimately becomes Muncy’s dedication to the endurance of those who live and work on the plains. In Ceremony in Lone Tree Boyd will view this endurance through the question of whether people on the plains are “asleep or awake,” but Muncy’s perspective in The Home Place is one of pure praise.

The conclusion of the novel consists of Muncy and his family’s questioning whether or not they should move into the house of another uncle who has just died. As the family moves through Uncle Ed’s recently vacated house, Muncy takes notice of the man’s battered possessions and the well worn surfaces of the farmer’s home, and the language Muncy uses in his extended rumination on these objects and his feelings about them is spiritual and reminiscent of the optimism at the end of The Inhabitants. Muncy explains,

For thirty years I’ve had a clear idea what the home place lacked, and why the old man pained me, but I’ve never really known what they had. I know now. But I haven’t the word for it. The word beauty is not a Protestant thing. It doesn’t describe what there is about the old man’s shoes. The Protestant word for this is character. […] Perhaps all I’m saying is that character can be a form of passion […] that kind of Passion has made them holy things. That kind of holiness, I’d say, is abstinence, frugality and independence—the home-grown, made-on-the-farm trinity. (141-143)
Muncy is swept up by the simplicity and commitment that Uncle Ed’s residence reflects upon his life. The plains “trinity” of values—“abstinence, frugality and independence”—is similar to the virtues extolled through Cather’s Alexandra and Antonia. When Muncy goes to close up Uncle Ed’s house, he says, “I felt like a man whose job it was to close up a church. In this passion, that was the word for the man’s house. The citadel, the chapel, of his character” (145). None of Morris’s characters overtly retract the praise paid to the endurance of those who live a rural life on the plains, but this tone of reverence is never approached again. Muncy acknowledges the toll the farm life takes on those who live it, claiming, “Out here you wear out, men and women wear out, the sheds and the houses, the machines wear out […]” (176). Muncy can even feel the presence of Uncle Ed’s hard working life still lingering in the house, reflecting, “My own feeling is that only vacant houses are occupied, or haunted, which is a better word” (130). Muncy is haunted by the pioneer ideal and the trinity of values embodied by Uncle Ed’s life. Ultimately Muncy and his wife do not feel that they measure up to this ideal, and they decide that it is not right to live in Uncle Ed’s house. While Muncy is strongly moved by the past through this haunting, there is not an actual, Gothic return of the repressed. Muncy equates only the mythic pioneer lifestyle with the haunting; it does not create a distortion that brings back a hidden truth of the past. Later, I will point out that the photos of Uncle Ed’s house do reflect an alternate history of the plains, but Muncy does not recognize it within the text’s narrative. Muncy recognizes only a distinct purity to the simplicity and dedication of the plains lifestyle. He states, “The carpet wears out, but the life of the carpet, the Figure, wears in. the holy thing, that is, comes naturally. […] After you have lived your
own life, worn it out, you will die your own death and it won’t matter. It will be all right. It will be ripe, like the old man” (176). This sentiment hearkens back to the end of *O Pioneers!*, when the narrator expresses the good fortune of the country, to be able to “receive hearts like Alexandra’s into its bosom” (199). It is important to recognize fully the emotional response that Muncy has in *The Home Place* to Nebraska and its denizens, for it represents the short wave of optimism that will crash a year later in *The World in the Attic*—the novel that sets Morris on the anti-nostalgic course that the rest of his plains works will follow.

In his experiences outside of Uncle Ed’s “chapel,” Muncy has a much different reaction to the plains region he revisits. He becomes aware of the fiction he has built up in his own mind about the plains he spent time in as a child. In *The World in the Attic*, the collision between past and present receives much more emphasis than it does in *The Home Place* as Muncy begins to interrogate his feelings about Nebraska. As stated, this last entry of the “Nebraska Trilogy” sets up for Morris the task he will pursue in the rest of his plains works—exploring the difference between a place remembered and a place revisited.

At the beginning of *The World in the Attic*, Muncy recalls a memory about his grandfather that stands in stark contrast to his experience in Uncle Ed’s house. He recalls visiting his grandfather on the way out to college, and on the morning he stopped in, his eighty-six year old grandfather had hitched himself to his plow. Muncy reflects, “The line between himself and the horse had disappeared” (11). Muncy’s Uncle Dwight comments “that the old fool […] had driven himself to death” (11). Muncy reflects more deeply on
the bizarre scene: “When the time came, as he knew it would, he had put himself in the harness, hitched himself to the plow, and stood there with the reins in his hands. A madman, more than likely, mad all his life with the incurable vagueness, the receding promise, of the next frontier” (11). As mentioned in the introduction, the past of the plains has often been viewed as the future—the past is hope and limitless potential. In this scene, though, Muncy witnesses a man who, in his pursuit of this future, only recedes into the past, becoming a literal incarnation of a beast of the field. With all of the work he puts in, spurred on by the promise of plains, Muncy’s grandfather does not prosper and build up his farm as Alexandra and Antonia do. Instead, his condition stays the same and even deteriorates, as he regresses to become the animal as well as the farmer. Muncy observes, “It was no easy thing to be the horse, and the rider, at the same time” (12). A stark alternative to the prosperous lives of Alexandra and Antonia, this memory, when recalled, seems to be Muncy’s first clue that the plains are perhaps not all he remembers them to be. Perhaps he had previously let the memory of his grandfather fade as he privileged the emotional response to a region he imagined to be superior to his struggling life in New York. Muncy claims that the contents of his grandfather’s will could be viewed as “the splintered fragments of three frontiers—Paradise won, Paradise lost, but never regained” (12). Chronologically it is only the day after Muncy leaves Uncle Ed’s house at the end of The Home Place, but for whatever reason (perhaps the sting of the insult of not knowing wheat from rye), Muncy has begun to question just how full a life can be created through the trinity of abstinence, frugality, and independence.
Muncy’s epiphany about the nostalgia he has been experiencing takes place early on in the narrative and is the crux of the novel. After the drive in the country, Muncy sits by himself in a local lunch room in the town of Junction and reflects on how his feelings have changed in a day:

[…] I suddenly felt a little weak. In the past two hours I had felt it quite a bit. Something I might call home-town nausea. I can get it in a lunch room like this, or at the bend of a road, any country road, where a telephone pole tips out of a clutter of dusty-heavy weeds. […] At such times it’s hard to tell where the nostalgia stops, the nausea begins. While you’re in the grip of one, the other sets in. Before you know it you’re whipped, you’re down and out, you’re sick with small-town-Sunday-afternoon. This sickness is in your blood, like a latent fever […]. (26)

As Muncy acquires more direct experience with his home ground, these experiences begin to temper the ideal (and mythic) plains he has built in his mind before returning. Muncy uncovers the conflict that both Boyd and Sharon will equally pursue in Morris’s later novels: It is the collision between fondness of memory and reality. Morris’s focus on this tension is key because it works against a mythic depiction of the plains and moves the region’s literature toward a Gothic treatment of history. Wydeven also privileges Muncy’s conclusion about nostalgia and nausea. He writes, “With this acute diagnosis, Morris begins his attack on American cultural nostalgia, one of the central themes of his career” (Morris Revisited 73).
As the novel progresses, Muncy continues to reflect with more skepticism on the history of the plains. He recalls a suicide story his father had told him from earlier times in Nebraska about a man who walked in front of a passing train, his corpse ending up hanging from the telephone wires. The grisly anecdote is reminiscent of the vagrant who jumped into the threshing machine in *My Antonia*, but Muncy ponders the story further: “And for reasons of their own all kinds of men […] figured there was no finer place in the world to walk than the ties. Right down the center, right down the middle, to Kingdom Come. Men who didn’t seem to give—as my father said—a good goddam” (44). Emil Bickel, the suicide in question, was a successful man, had a wife and three children, and the people of the town couldn’t understand why he did it, some saying, “that was just a way of leaving town. Of getting away, so to speak, from what you had on your mind” (45). These reflections question the fullness of the idealized, earlier plains life. Muncy also questions what all the hard work of the pioneers led to, after the passing of the frontier, for those living on the plains now: “[…] had we been victimized by the fact that abstinence, frugality, independence were not the seeds of heroes, but the roots of the great soft life. Out of frugality—in this rich land—what could come but abundance, and out of abundance different notions of a brave new world” (66). Here Muncy seems to allude to the material gain and spiritual loss on the contemporary plains, inverting his reverence for the plains trinity that he expressed in *The Home Place*.

The bulk of *The World in the Attic* concerns Muncy and his childhood friend Bud Hibbard (who has become a rather mundane adult, in Muncy’s opinion) and their being pulled into funeral plans for Miss Caddy—a well-known socialite, the person everyone in
the town gravitated toward, during Muncy and Bud’s childhood. At the end of the novel, after Miss Caddy’s funeral, Muncy concludes of her life (and it seems the rest of her generation), “The folly of it. They were witless. And now they were dead. In the morning the Dead Wagon would come and for the first and last time put an end to the witlessness of all these years. They were dead. It was time to bury them” (188). Muncy seems to be speaking more of the burial of his own conceptions of those who settled and thrived on the plains rather than the people themselves. As Arthur Waterman comments, “The world in the attic is upstairs, the life we live is down. Clyde climbs up to the past but finds a dark room lit only by the brightness of memory” (27). Clyde ultimately has a better understanding of the power of his own nostalgia, comparing it with derision but also respect to a snow globe: “When I was a boy is just a way of saying that though other things change, and though another time passes, these things are like the castle in the ball of clear glass on the sewing machine. They are there forever. They will spring to life if we so much as handle them” (50). Clyde’s fully conscious reflection on nostalgia paves the way for both Boyd and Sharon to take up this conflict in the later novels. Wydeven writes that “In The World in the Attic Morris […] transformed the American penchant for nostalgia into subject; with this book, he completed his conversion from an incipient pastoral regionalist to an inquiring modernist” (Morris Revisited 71). Indeed, in Ceremony in Lone Tree, Boyd will harbor none of Muncy’s initial reverence for the ways things used to be on the plains, and though he is still pulled by nostalgia, he returns to the plains equipped with the critical eye it takes Muncy two novels to develop.
“Asleep or Awake?”—Gordon Boyd and the Trip to Lone Tree

In his acceptance speech for the National Book Award (won for his 1956 novel *The Field of Vision*, involving Nebraska characters but set in Mexico), Morris stated that in this novel he had begun to at least gather the fragments of his plains literary region: “They are segments of a jigsaw, fragments of a larger picture, seeking a pattern in which they can take rest” (74). Morris also expressed his desire to put these fragments in some kind of order, to “put them to rest, indeed, is what the author had in mind. To establish a field of vision in which these parts would find their rightful place. A beginning was made in the book of that title, and something resembling a solution may now be in sight” (74). And, speaking of this solution, Morris stated, “Not an end, mind you. [...] But let us say a homecoming, a return to that center, that navel of experience from which the author has never departed [...] In the province of his works that great good and empty place will be known as Lone Tree” (75). Morris appears to be alluding to his 1960 novel, *Ceremony in Lone Tree*, which many argue is his most fully formed depiction of his literary plains.

Wydeven, who in 1998 wrote the most recent book length study of Morris’s entire body of work, offers much praise to the novel: “*Ceremony in Lone Tree* is the most refined in dealing with the Nebraska milieu, an inquiry into [...] myth of the heroic West carried into mid-century present. It is a complex portrait of Midwestern-Western life, carried on amidst—and deeply affected by—increasing evidence of social disorder and its effects on American consciousness” (*Morris Revisited* 111). Having shaken his earlier sentimental feelings for the plains and developed a more critical eye for the history of the plains, in *Lone Tree* Morris depicts on the part of protagonist Gordon Boyd a full exploration, as
Wydeven says, of myth, plains values (present and past), violent eruptions in the contemporary region, and also the pitfalls of nostalgia for place.

*Lone Tree* begins with the perspective of Tom Scanlon, a soon-to-be ninety year old resident of the Nebraska plains. The central event of the novel is a gathering for the celebration of Scanlon’s birthday. Scanlon is referred to specifically as a “pioneer” in the novel and is the primary representation of this era on the plains. Living by himself in a west-facing room in the Lone Tree hotel, Scanlon’s “vision” receives in-depth focus at the novel’s beginning. Scanlon looks west through his window and prefers to look through a flaw in the glass. The narrator wonders, “Is it a flaw in the eye, or in the window, that transforms a dry place into a wet one?” (3). Scanlon’s imagination is the primary contributor to his view out over the plains. With this view, “There is little to see, but plenty of room to look” (4), and this seems to be a common factor with nostalgic views of the region—the relative emptiness of the plains makes it malleable in characters’ minds. The narrator says that what Scanlon sees are “the scenic props of his own mind” (4). The narrator then switches to the hypothetical view of a stranger to Lone Tree, saying, “A man accustomed to the ruins of war might even feel at home. […] pieces of farm machinery, half-buried in sand, resemble nothing so much as artillery equipment, abandoned when the dust began to blow” (4). The stranger would see the plains as essentially a war-torn wasteland, but there is “little evidence that Tom Scanlon sees it” (5). The narrator continues, “The emptiness of the plains generates illusions that require little moisture, and grow better, like tall stories, where the mind is dry. The tall corn may flower or burn in the wind, but the plains is a metaphysical landscape and the bumper
crop is the one Scanlon sees through the flaw in the glass” (5). The narrator concludes of Scanlon, “The fact that there is little to see seems to be what he likes about it. He can see what he pleases” (7).

Though it is not entirely clear exactly what Scanlon sees on the plains, it is evident that it is based on a mythic past. Scanlon, whom Wydeven describes as “addicted to nostalgia” (“No Place to Hide” 287), is the character most locked into a frontier identity of the plains, the one he developed from his own pioneer days. He will serve as the anchor, difficult to dislodge, back into the plains past. Scanlon’s hotel room, though, lies in sharp contrast to Clara and Uncle Harry’s farm and the “cathedral” of Uncle Ed’s home and their relation to the plains trinity of values. Morris’s view in Lone Tree of those representing the past on the plains will be more critical from the start. Wydeven says that Morris’s outlook on the plains in Lone Tree “is founded on a compensatory logic in which inhospitable elements conspire to haunt the imagination” (“No Place to Hide” 287). This kind of “haunting” clearly affects Scanlon; however, Scanlon’s view, his shifting of reality to fit the “scenic props in his mind,” certainly does not conspire with the Gothic since it is so locked into a mythic past. The overall view of the novel, though, is not configured with Scanlon’s. The narrator describes an artifact of Scanlon’s past in this way: “At the back of the stable, inhabited by bats, is the covered wagon Scanlon was born in, the bottom sloped up at both ends like a river boat. Strips of faded canvas, awning remnants, partially cover the ribs” (16). Thus, the narrator’s view can be viewed as relating to the Gothic, as the wagon that brought Scanlon to the plains, the structure providing his first home, has become a form of Gothic architecture—decayed and
populated by bats. Scanlon’s view, established vividly and purposefully at the beginning of the novel, will be tempered with protagonist Boyd’s, who will take a more skeptical view of the plains and will endeavor (as best he can) to resist his own imagination when perceiving the region and his past as he tries to form a new conception of Nebraska.

Boyd, unlike Scanlon, is described as being nothing like a pioneer. The narrator says of Boyd, “In the middle of life, Morgenstern Boyd had everything to live for, everything worth living for having eluded him. He was that rare thing, a completely self-unmade man” (145). Most recently, Boyd attended a bullfight in Mexico (the setting of *The Field of Vision*) with his childhood friend Walter McKee and McKee’s family. Boyd “had acted like a fool” (25) in Mexico and has since been in Acapulco, where he has “gone to sulk” (25). As a child, Boyd was sent East for school by a woman in town, the wife of a wealthy businessman, who had taken an interest in him: “She sent him, when he proved to be smart, to those high-toned schools in the East that indirectly led to the ruin he made of his life” (12). Not much is mentioned about Boyd’s actual past. There are vague references made to his being a writer but little in addition. What is clear is that he is languishing in his current life and feels a pull back to Nebraska. From the start, though, it is made clear that Boyd has become an outsider to the plains, and, unlike Muncy, he is clearly aware of this status.

Boyd is different from Muncy in the fact that his case of Nebraska nostalgia does not seem to be as acute. Boyd receives with surprise an invitation from McKee to Scanlon’s birthday and decides, lacking any better plan, to go. He picks up a young girl along the way and brings her with him on a lark. Stopping along the way at a hotel for the
night, the two discuss Boyd’s return to Lone Tree. Boyd asks the girl, whom he calls “Daughter,” how she feels when she returns home. She replies, “Awful. Sweet Jesus” (42). Boyd then responds, “Daughter, you share my own feelings” (42). The girl then asks why Boyd would want to return home, and Boyd replies, “I want to know if it’s there, or all in my mind. […] Daughter, I’m scared they might be real—I mean realer than I am” (43). Boyd is beyond Muncy’s nostalgic stage in *The Home Place* and does not conceive of Nebraska as a pastoral paradise that he unwittingly left behind. He is, though, pulled back to the plains by the thought that people may be leading lives there that are more grounded and somehow more authentic. Boyd finds himself in a conflict that involves a theme that runs throughout Morris’s work (and literature of the plains overall)—the ambivalence created by the youthful desire to leave the plains and the adult desire to return; however, Boyd seems to be fairly self-conscious of this ambivalence before he returns home to enter the conflict.

This self-awareness can be tied to the development of Morris’s view on nostalgia as expressed in his critical work published in 1956, after his own perspective changed on the plains as shown in the previous discussion of “The Nebraska Trilogy.” In his critical work *The Territory Ahead*, Morris expresses the crucial role he believes nostalgia plays in America, writing, “If we should ask ourselves what it is that the common and the uncommon American have in common, the man in the street and the sophisticate, the hillbilly and Ivy Leaguer, I think we have the answer. Nostalgia” (19). Morris goes on to explain the negative effects of nostalgia by devoting an entire chapter titled “Abuse of the
Past” to the work of Norman Rockwell. Morris feels that Rockwell is, more than any other, the artist that feeds into America’s desire for nostalgia:

We might say that Mr. Rockwell’s special triumph is in the conviction his countrymen share that this mythic world he evokes actually exists. This cloudland of nostalgia seems to loom higher on the horizon, as the horizon itself, the world of actual experience, disappears from view. […] The present exists, if at all in Rockwell, as a frame that heightens the nostalgia—the doctor’s crisp waiting room where the tomboy with her black eye smilingly waits. (125)

Morris feels that Rockwell’s images are so compelling that they have the power to replace reality with mythic history, much as Cather’s work did with conception of the plains region. And the present, as Morris says, only functions to strengthen the hold on the more positive (mythic) history. Morris later makes a more general but equally harsh critique of the use of nostalgia by artists: “Nostalgia is a limbo land, leading nowhere, where the artist can graze like a horse put to pasture, feeding on such clover of the past as whets the appetite” (159). Morris’s critical work makes clear the devastating effects that nostalgia (the kind of nostalgia he expressed in The Inhabitants and The Home Place a decade earlier) can have on an artist that is trying to maintain some measure of truth in their depiction of reality.

As stated, Morris has equipped Boyd with more awareness and wariness of his own nostalgia, and this allows Boyd to approach his own history in a more combative manner. Boyd realizes the conflict (and risk) that must occur between past and present to avoid a nostalgic view, and this is expressed through the well-developed metaphor of
atomic bomb testing in Nevada where he picks up his young traveling companion. When Boyd arrives in Nevada, he notices that people are wearing small metal tags clipped to their clothing, and, upon inquiring, finds out that they test fallout from the atomic bomb tests. The clerk at his hotel asks Boyd if he would like to be woken before the bomb test at dawn, and Boyd (along with the narrator) then picks up “wake before bomb” as a motif for much of the novel. Upon first hearing the phrase, Boyd conducts a lengthy reflection on what it means to be woken before the bomb. He feels that “McKee has been asleep most of his life” (32) and that back in “Lone Tree no bomb was expected” (32). Boyd comes to see the bomb as the catalyst to awaken people, such as those he is returning to in Nebraska, to a more fully conscious reality, but Boyd is unsure of the risks involved in this kind of “explosion”:

The past, whether one liked it or not, was all that one actually possessed: the green stuff, the gilt-edged securities. The present was that moment of exchange—when all might be lost. Why risk it? […] To wake before the bomb was to risk losing all to gain what might be so little—a brief moment in the present, that one moment later joined to the past. Nevertheless, as the lady said, it was a wonderful sight. There was this flash, then the pillar of fire went up and up as if to heaven […] The meeting point, the melting point of the past confronting the present. Where no heat was thrown off, there was no light—where it failed to ignite the present, it was dead. […] To wake before bomb was tricky business. What if it scared you to sleep? […] When the pillar of fire went up and up, what would be revealed? (32-33)
This clearly speaks to the violence involved in a Gothic collision between past and present. Boyd acknowledges that one could gain “a brief moment in the present, that one moment later joined to the past,” and this language relates to Botting’s comments in the opening chapter about the relationship the Gothic has to history, the “doubleness of the relationship between present and past” and the Gothic’s historical “play of distance and proximity, rejection and return.” But Boyd feels that in this kind of confrontation with the past “all might be lost” as well. He exhibits trepidation about entering the kind of conflict required for a Gothic treatment of history. Boyd feels that those back in Nebraska, like McKee, are insulated, comfortably so, by their limited view of history, the definition they have made for themselves. For them, the risks of the bomb are clear. Even Boyd himself says that “To wake before bomb was tricky business.” When he returns to Lone Tree, Boyd attempts to be the bomb to wake McKee and the rest that gather there. “Wake before bomb” becomes connected to the phrase and motif “asleep or awake?”—the question Boyd holds for those back in Nebraska. Though Boyd is not entirely sure what the conflict will involve, he clearly describes the kind of intensity involved in a Gothic connection between past and present.

In my initial definition of the Gothic, I stressed the need for a distortion in style that leads to a return of the repressed. The bomb, as described by Boyd, can be seen as a distortion that could be strong enough to shock people into a reevaluation of the past. As Boyd states, there is no bomb in Lone Tree. Boyd wishes to return and be the bomb himself, to act as that agent, but the Nebraska Boyd returns to has been experiencing eruptions of violence that already threaten those “asleep” there—distortions in the plains
culture that are strong enough to encourage reevaluations of the region. A mass murderer, Charlie Munger, has recently been captured in the sand hills not far from Lone Tree after killing ten people. Munger is an allusion to Charles Starkweather, who in 1958 went on a similar, two-month killing spree across Nebraska (MacHann 165). Munger has set the Nebraska characters on edge. In the McKees’ new home in the Lincoln suburbs, “the lights were kept burning most of the night” (48). Ginny Brown MacHann comments, “While using few of the facts of the Starkweather case, Morris expects his audience to know its rough outlines; they are prodded into remembering Parade magazine’s enthusiastic headlining of Starkweather’s confessions and reliving the tensions of the overloaded telephone lines and defiantly lit homes” (166). The Munger murders have a different effect on the older Scanlon: “The very thing that scared the wits out of other people had given him a new lease on life. Those fool pistols he had from his father, that hadn’t been fired for half a century, he oiled and polished, and carried one in a holster on his hip” (49). Scanlon, who has at this point been moved in with the McKees, sees the presence of Munger as some kind of return to “wild west” pioneer days as opposed to the way in which the McKees see Munger as a violation to the peaceful, pastoral region.

Munger’s explanation for these murders receives repeated attention in the novel. Munger states that he went on the killing spree because, “I want to be somebody” (48). Another character that commits murders in the book, Lee Roy Momeyer, also has his explanation highlighted. Momeyer, a relative of McKee’s by marriage, runs down two of his high school classmates with his car and explains that “he just got tired of being pushed around” (21). Munger’s desire to be someone and Momeyer’s refusal to be
pushed around both lead to acts of violence, and these acts can be linked to a history of violence on the plains. Diane Quantic, commenting on this violent history, believes that two events began a legacy of violence on the plains: the ruthless and bloody removal of Native Americans and the following, violent confrontation with the landscape to tame it into productivity.\(^{12}\) The span of these two events can be traced over a period of seventy-five years, at the very least, from the 1862 Homestead Act to the end of the Dust Bowl—a period capable of creating an intense legacy of violence. And in 1960, with Native Americans relegated to reservations and the yeoman farmer long gone, Munger and Momeyer are evidence that the legacy of violence still exists and must find an outlet. Without a wide-open landscape to battle or on which to find adventure, Munger chooses to make a name for himself through his murders. It is conceivable that Momeyer’s classmates, imbued with a pioneer mindset but with nothing to play it out against in suburban Lincoln, pushed against what they could find until Momeyer pushed back. The narrator speaks to Munger’s desire to “be someone”: “Didn’t everybody? Almost anybody, that is, but who he happened to be? McKee’s little grandson thought he was Davy Crockett, and wore a coonskin hat with a squirrel’s tail dangling, and Tom Scanlon, the great-grandfather, seemed to think he was Buffalo Bill” (21). Through the generations, characters in the novel share an outdated mindset toward the plains and create mythic identities to satisfy it. In extreme cases, this identity seeking results in eruptions of violence. Jack Brenner writes that the killers demonstrate “the hatred for the

\(^{12}\) These comments are taken from Quantic’s keynote address “They Would See Nothing: The Deep Roots of Violence on the Plains,” given at the University of Nebraska-Omaha 2008 symposium “Death, Murder, and Mayhem: Stories of Violence and Healing on the Plains.”
present born of a nostalgia for a time when a man ‘could live as he pleased.’ The dead hand of an imagined past becomes in them literally deadly” (70-71). Brenner speaks to a desire for freedom on the part of Momeyer’s tormentors and Munger, the freedom perhaps to roam a wide open landscape and test one’s mettle in a masculine fashion, but this possibility has been shut down with the closing of the frontier on the plains, and the domestication of the landscape, the growing town life in opposition to the rural, does not reduce the desire to impose oneself on the region. As Jonathan Baumbach writes, “Morris points out that the smoother […] the surface of life becomes, the more the primordial forces erupt into meaningless violence” (64). In addition to recognizing these acts as a legacy of violence on the plains, it is also important to keep in mind their primary function, mentioned earlier, as a stylistic element of distortion that can shock characters into deeper levels of contemplation.

McKee contemplates one of these violent distortions, a face of “primordial evil,” as Baumbach writes, after he is harassed at a stoplight by some rowdy youths who taunt him and lean out of their car to light matches off the hood of his new station wagon: “McKee had recognized the nameless face of evil—he recognized it, that is, as stronger than the nameless face of good. Everybody talked about Good, but had McKee ever set eyes on it? Had he ever felt pure Good? No, but he had come face to face with evil. He had seen the underside of the rock” (50). McKee is probably affected by the recent news of the murders along with this encounter as he contemplates the presence of evil on the plains. He recognizes its power. Munger and Momeyer, as forces of evil in the novel, do serve as a return of the repressed. Though not framed this way directly by the novel,
when viewing the two characters within the history of the region and conducting a close reading through this perspective, they dig up the legacy of violence on the plains and illustrate the ways in which this violence continues to play itself out in the region. The character of Munger is never examined closely, and Momeyer is depicted as primarily a victim, so some of the edge is taken off their roles as Gothic forces, but they can be seen as a singular example of a return of the repressed in Morris’s plains literature.13

Boyd, earlier identified as a possible agent of the Gothic, is linked to Munger by McKee immediately upon reading about Munger’s “I want to be someone” explanation: “[...] when McKee read that statement in the paper there was just one person he thought of. His old boyhood chum, Gordon Boyd” (21). McKee sees Boyd as someone trying to make a mark on the world, someone living a life far from ordinary. As previously noted, Boyd has not made his mark but become a “self-unmade man,” though he does have the desire to determine whether people back home are “asleep or awake” and is willing to be the “bomb” to wake them. As Baumbach states, “he has a sense of mission as conscience and Doomsday prophet to bring truth to the citizens of Lone Tree—to wake them before the bomb” (69). Boyd will not come as close, however, as Munger and Momeyer do to breaking the nostalgic spell the Nebraskans are under. Boyd tells “Daughter” concerning those who know him back home, “They take me for a clown. We’re going to go clown it up” (42), and this does characterize to a large extent Boyd’s interactions once he returns.

Before entering the Lone Tree hotel, where the reunion and party is being held, Boyd buttons his shirt and combs his hair, notices his travel companion staring, and says,

13 Cormac McCarthy creates a thoroughly Gothic treatment of the killer as Gothic agent in his novel No Country for Old Men, to be discussed in the concluding chapter.
“Daughter, you forget I’m the one who’s scared?” (144). Upon entering the hotel and meeting the group, Boyd is strangely quiet, to the point that McKee notes that he “had never seen him so silent” (159). Later, McKee’s wife is chiding Boyd for acting like a “clown” back in Mexico when he squirited a bull with soda pop, to McKee’s grandson’s delight, during one of the bull fights they watched. “Daughter” walks in on this conversation and asks, “you clowning it up already?” (172), to which Boyd responds, “Daughter, it’s later than you think. I’m clowning it up before the bomb” (172). Boyd drops his “bomb” just a bit later in the form of a prayer before dinner. Asked by one of the party members to “say something” before the meal, Boyd unleashes an extended diatribe that constitutes his most overt action to shock the Nebraskans gathered there:

Ak-sar-ben […] spells Nebraska backwards. It’s a lovely country. Know it well. Game, wild fowl and snotweed abound. Traveling from east to west, one gets the impression of a verdant grassland, congenial to man, along with bones of the wooly mammoth and dinosaur. […] The people of Nebraska, being conservative by nature, living close to the soil and the round of seasons, are not swept by the tide of shifting opinion and still refer to most Negroes as coons. A predictable percentage of women go mad, books are sold in most of the drugstores, and Mr. Charles Munger, celebrated gunman, is a native son. A restrained optimism characterizes the outlook and inlook of a pioneer people who welcome the visitor with a “Howdy, stranger” and a friendly smile. Until a man proves himself bad he is considered good. Dust, as seen in Life magazine, continues to blow, and the
state emblem, a stiffly pleated upper lip, symbolizes the spirit of its people resolutely carried forward into the new age. (179)

With his satiric speech, Boyd conducts a fairly extensive deconstruction of contemporary Nebraska. He moves from “living close to the soil” right into the close mindedness of the people (“not swept by the tide of shifting opinion”) to a charge of racism. He notes that many women go mad (and one is reminded of Mr. Shimerda’s wife in My Antonia), the fact that the dust still blows, a certain lack of intellect (“books are sold in most drug stores”), the presence of violence (Munger), and finally the overall lack of emotion of those in the state. He calls Nebraskans a “pioneer people,” but certainly his speech runs contrary to most of the ideals connected to the pioneer life. It is difficult to tell whether Boyd is serious about the few positives he brings up (optimism, friendliness, acceptance), because the overall speech is driven by such an overtly mocking tone. This is Boyd’s attempt to rouse those “asleep” in this party; however, satire (at least not in this narrative) does not seem to be an effective tool in displacing, as a Gothic approach would, a mythic past to make room for a more realistic history of the region. The guest who asked Boyd to offer up some words before dinner simply responds by asking another guest to say something, offering no comment whatsoever on Boyd’s extended speech (179). Though Boyd has serious claims about the contemporary plains, his “clowning” seems to get in the way, and he does not shock those gathered, certainly not to the extent that Munger and Momeyer do. Dyck refers to Boyd’s clowning as a “carnivalizing” of the ceremony in honor of Scanlon: “Although Boyd’s carnivalizing exposes the severe limitations of McKee’s and Lois’s lives, it also reveals the pathos of his own self-positioning on the
margin of that middle-class life which haunts him with repulsion and desire” (“Carnival and Ceremony” 295). Dyck believes that Boyd’s speech is more indicative of Boyd’s own position in life rather than that of those back in Nebraska, and Dyck’s claim of Boyd’s “repulsion” and “desire” would seem to make sense in the contexts of Boyd’s earlier wish to find out if those back home are “realer than he is” and of his admittance of fear before entering the party. Dyck goes on to further explain the ineffectiveness of Boyd’s speech: “[…] it has all the limitations of a drag show. It allows Boyd to create situations that ease his discomfort (by transferring it to others) rather than confront his dilemma. It also does not present an alternative way of being in society for the McKees or himself” (“Carnival and Ceremony” 300). Boyd’s mission was to confront his own nostalgia concerning the plains, and his speech does resist nostalgia by roundly criticizing the region, but, as Dyck notes, the satire does not offer a healthier version of history, as a Gothic literature would. As seen in the introductory chapter with Hawthorne, the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* admonishes the reader, “Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!” (220) as a way of offering an alternative to the hypocritical castigation carried on by the Puritans. With Boyd and his satire of the plains, though, there is merely the joke. Humor, then, cannot be viewed as a possible distortion in style that is capable of inciting a return of the repressed. From Boyd’s weak attempt at displacing accepted conceptions of the plains, it becomes clear that a Gothic displacement of history requires as catalyst a shocking element characterized by terror and a threat of violence.

The way in which Boyd’s speech falls short makes more sense as Boyd continues to reflect internally on his home place. Sitting in the lobby alone at night, Boyd picks up
an old newspaper from 1927 and reads about Charles Lindbergh’s voyage over the Atlantic. He seems to replace his fascination with the atomic bomb testing in Nevada with the older story concerning Lindbergh:

Lindbergh had to be somewhere. Over the Atlantic was where he belonged. There in Lone Tree the future still hung in balance, the moonlit plain was like the stormy Atlantic, something to be crossed, a stage in a journey, with the gold fields the great good place at the end. Lone Tree, like the *Spirit of St Louis*, was up there in the wild blue yonder, the cuckoo-land between the end of your dreams and wherever you are from. (230)

Boyd fades back into the historical perception of the plains where the past is the future—the plains as unlimited potential. He calls Lone Tree a “cuckoo-land” and has a grasp of the fact that nostalgia reigns there, but Boyd steps back from replacing that version of history with one of his own, even a satiric one. Boyd thinks back to his previous obsession with “wake before bomb” and wonders, “How did one go about it? Was it, indeed, advisable? If the clock had stopped, if the dreams had crossed, and if one couldn’t be happier—why wake?” (232). These are the same questions that Boyd asked at the beginning of his trip, and his last question seems to be his answer.

*Lone Tree* ends with a climactic, fantastic chain of events. One of Scanlon’s teenage grandsons, Calvin, has rented a team of mules to pull the old wagon Scanlon was born in as an entertainment for his grandfather, whom he idolizes. Calvin is described earlier as living in “rebellion against a world where he couldn’t ride horses, shoot guns and live just as he pleased” (93). As the team pulls in front of the hotel, McKee’s wife
accidentally fires one of Scanlon’s pistols, the team bolts, and Scanlon himself has a heart attack and dies. Before firing the gun, Lois comments that she is “wide awake” and has a desire to act out in a way she never has. Lois thinks to herself, “If the only way to leave an impression was to do something crazy like Boyd, she would do it—she would leave them with one they would never forget” (267). Though the gun goes off accidentally before Lois actually takes aim at anything, the shot does, as mentioned, bring about the passing of the plains relic Scanlon, and it also causes the throwback team of mules to “race off with the buggy to the West” (283) in a great cloud of dust. It seems that Lois’s action, in the moment, has dispatched a character that embodied the pioneer ideals of the past and also a youthful character (Calvin) that has strived to bring these ideals into the future. However, when Lois comes downstairs to see what has happened, Boyd says to her, “You missed the bomb, my dear […] The past is dead, long live the past” (284). And immediately after Boyd’s utterance, the narrator describes, “Coming in from the west, in the weeds along the tracks […] a team of mules” (284). Boyd’s pronouncement seems to be accurate as Calvin and the mules make a hasty return to the scene. Boyd’s reply and the action indicate that, despite Lois’s attempt, there will be no catalyst to dislodge the mythical history of the plains; the scene ends not with a passing of an icon but with a changing of the guard.

In the morning a small group puts a car seat into Scanlon’s wagon and piles in to take the body to a nearby town’s funeral home. During the trip, McKee speaks to the potential of the towns springing up in Nebraska and urges Boyd to join him in a venture to build an air-conditioned hotel, which could do a great business, according to McKee.
When he gets no response, he turns to Boyd and his companion and sees (in the last lines of the novel), “The two on the car seat were asleep” (304). Boyd, who had come to Nebraska to find out if those there were “asleep or awake,” has fallen asleep himself, fallen under the spell that keeps those that live there safe in their own slumber.

The images of violence associated with Munger and Momeyer haunt the novel, but by the conclusion of the narrative, these violent eruptions fade into the background and are upstaged by the kind of typical plains optimism that McKee displays. Baumbach writes, “Nostalgia is their anesthetic against the pain of living. For the sleep-walkers, the surface of life is quiescent; but the lava of violence underneath it, suppressed by euphemism, erupts at the slightest provocation, waking them momentarily into a Bomb-haunted nightmare” (59). Baumbach also feels that “As quickly as they are awakened, however, they drift off again into the ‘couldn’t be happier’ dream which sustains them […]” (59). Baumbach makes the important point that Lone Tree does bring to the surface a lurking evil on the plains, a violence ready to “erupt” at any moment, but with Boyd’s “drag show” at Scanlon’s party, as Dyck calls it, and his eventual lapse into sleep himself, the novel does not fulfill Morris’s earlier pledge to bring together the fragments of the plains region into a larger picture.

It is also debatable whether Lone Tree is, as Wydeven argues, Morris’s most fully formed depiction of the region. I would argue that Plains Song makes more progress toward, at least gets closer to, a resolution concerning the conflict between nostalgia and the reality of the plains. Nevertheless, Lone Tree makes the important step of depicting the plains as a region that holds the possibility for Gothic narratives even if it doesn’t
fully make good on its own. Another feature of the novel that does at least some Gothic work is the way in which *Lone Tree* makes very clear the insulating power of nostalgia. Though the characters cannot break free from it at the novel’s conclusion, it is important to know the function of nostalgia and the extent of its power. Wydeven writes, “In some ways, the novel is a defense of the myth-making imagination Morris had earlier criticized in Scanlon. If Starkweather and the bomb represent the quality of life in the future, then return to myth may be a desirable alternative […]” (*Morris Revisited* 112). A Gothic literature would not agree with this sentiment, this giving into nostalgia as safeguard. Were *Lone Tree* to be a plains Gothic work, it would have needed to stay with the characters of Munger and Momeyer and fully developed them as Grotesque figures capable of shocking those around them into different visions of the past and present. Though the bomb never went off in *Lone Tree*, the novel does make clear the kind of explosive conflict a Gothic agent would need to cause in a fully formed confrontation between the present and the past.

*Sharon Rose and the Challenge to the Pioneer Woman in Plains Song*

Ostensibly, the narrative arcs of *Ceremony in Lone Tree* and *Plains Song* look very similar. In *Plains Song*, written in 1980, twenty years after *Lone Tree*, Sharon Rose plays the expatriate role that Boyd does, leaving the plains and then returning to try to make sense of the power the region still holds over her. Sharon also contemplates the life back on the plains as one that is “half-submerged,” echoing Boyd’s “asleep or awake” line of questioning. However, there are distinct differences in the return to the region as it is played out through *Plains Song*. Sharon is not prone to the “clowning” Boyd often
exhibits, and her reflections on Nebraska are less satiric and more sober. Once she leaves the region, Sharon becomes a music teacher in Wellesley, Massachusetts and is not similar to Boyd in his self-identification as the “self-unmade man.” Sharon also remains in the region much longer, through high school, and the depth of her knowledge of the people and landscape is less imagined and more grounded in experience, though she still falls prey to nostalgic feelings about the plains, as Boyd does, but to a lesser extent. The biggest difference between *Plains Song* and *Lone Tree* is the focus on the role of the pioneer woman on the plains. Morris received widespread praise for his depiction of female characters in *Plains Song* (and the novel earned him a second National Book Award). The trio of women that comprise the main characters in the novel are Cora (in the pioneer woman role), her daughter Madge, and Cora’s niece, the aforementioned Sharon. The switch in focus from *Lone Tree* to *Plains Song* is not just in gender but more specifically in the depth of the look into gender. Cora does serve primarily as a dinosaur on the plains, as Scanlon does in *Plains Song*, but her character is thoroughly explored over the course of more than five decades. Cora’s character is essentially an inversion of Cather’s Antonia: the outcomes of their lives are vastly different, and Morris shares a great deal more gritty detail as he follows Cora’s character. Dyck goes as far as to argue that *Plains Song* is specifically a conscious re-writing of Cather’s *My Antonia*. While *Plains Song*, Morris’s last work of plains literature, presents in Sharon a character that comes closer than Boyd does to successfully re-evaluating a personal history on the plains, the novel ultimately lacks the Gothic machinery (at least presented) in *Lone Tree* with the characters of Munger and Momeyer. Further, while taking an anti-sentimental,
Gothic approach to Cora’s character, I will argue that Morris’s preoccupation with emotional states, consciousness, and imagination cause him to fall short of a Gothic treatment of the region as a whole.

The first half of *Plains Song* consists of a traditional pioneer narrative told with a sharper edge of realism. Cora, a six-foot-tall woman “taller and stronger than most” (3), accepts a marriage proposal from Emerson Atkins and moves to Nebraska with him to homestead. From the beginning, the marriage between Cora and Emerson is one of practicality based on the demands of farming. Cora “welcomed the demands of a useful nature, such as the chores of a household, the mending of clothes, the care and hoarding of limited resources […]” (13). Cora has no aversion to work and only requires the particular task at hand to have some potential for completion. The narrator states, “There are […] women who hate work who push themselves to exhaustion, hardly knowing and never learning that work, in itself, is gratifying. That work was never done reassured Cora. She knew how to work, and asked only that she work to an end. Having worked, she had need to look around her and see what she had done” (19). The trinity of plains values introduced in *The Home Place*—abstinence, frugality, and independence—return with Cora, and her work ethic and conservative values make her successful on Emerson’s farm. At the state fair in Lincoln, Emerson is pleased to hear from many people that “no other woman, known to them personally […] [is] more highly respected than Cora. She churned the best country butter, she raised the best sweet corn, and her new white Leghorn eggs ran larger and cleaner than those from the dairy people in Columbus. Of all she made, she never spent a nickel on herself” (68). But the fulfillment Cora finds in farm
work does not approach the reverence with which it is treated concerning Uncle Harry and Aunt Clara in *The Home Place*; rather, Morris’s approach to Cora’s character also includes the stifling emotional aspects of life on the plains.

Cora’s first sexual experience with her husband is described as follows: “When he moved upon her […] she had already put her clenched fist into her mouth and stared sightlessly at the ceiling. […] Horror exceeded horror. The time required by her assailant to do what must be done left her in shock. In the dawn light she found that she had bitten through the flesh of her hand, exposing bone” (14). The next day at the doctor, Emerson explains the wound by claiming, “Horse bit her” (15). The scene is returned to several times, and the scar, “blue as gun metal between the first and second knuckle” (2), is included in the description of Cora on her deathbed. The scar represents the extreme lack of physical love between Cora and Emerson. Further, there is very little emotional intimacy between the two, their relationship being characterized most profoundly by “repose” (13): “[…] what was not shared in this unspoken manner seemed to strain the efforts of speech. Cora could frame the thought, she could choose the words, but his reposeful silence made her reluctant to speak” (13). Cora is also ambivalent about child rearing and shows little interest in her own daughter, Madge, as well as her niece Sharon, outside of the care they require. Unlike Antonia and Alexandra’s lives, which seem to ripen as the years pass, as their productive farms do, Cora’s life remains static from her arrival on the plains to her death. Dyck surmises, “Morris shows Cora’s inner struggle to cope with both a land and people that do little to nurture the spirit. Consequently, although Antonia can embrace and find harmony with the plains, Cora endures by
limiting her awareness to what she can manage and by making improvements that are more an act of colonization than an act of belonging” (“Revising the West” 35). Thus, while Antonia and Alexandra draw on the productivity of their own landscapes as a method to sustain the spirit, Cora labors on her farm in an effort to merely make logical sense of a day-to-day experience, and her overall characterization shows a resistance to the pioneer myth and ideal established with Cather. Cora’s existence comes to represent what Sharon calls the “half-submerged” life. When Sharon leaves the farm for Lincoln, “she had emerged from an oppression so habitual she had hardly suspected its existence. On returning she sensed her submergence to that lower level of feeling. As if drowsy with ether, she observed their movements and listened to their voices” (102). As stated before, this can be compared to the way Boyd feels in *Lone Tree* that people on the plains are “asleep”. In *Plains Song*, though, it is the specific life of a pioneer woman that is equated with the mind numbing, daily existence of farm life. Dyck writes, “By understanding Morris’s work, we gain perspective for seeing the omissions and contradictions in *My Antonia* that cast doubt on its common interpretation of the pioneer past” (“Revising the West” 28). While Cather’s novel does include a depth of description concerning the way in which Antonia’s father and mother suffer from the separation from their homeland, it omits the kind of emotional toil *Plains Song* emphasizes—the drudgery of life defined by difficult daily labor and the typical suppression of emotions on the plains.

Sharon recoils from the “half-submerged” life on the rural plains and frequently criticizes the lifestyle there. Sharon’s deepest reflections about her home place frequently come as she leaves to return to her current location. On one train ride, the narrator
reflects, “It seemed incomprehensible to Sharon that people continued to live in such places. Numbed by the cold, drugged by the heat and the chores, they were more like beasts of the field than people. [...] Only work that could not be finished gave life purpose” (124). Cora’s own reflections reveal the truth that the non-stop stream of work did give her life purpose, but Sharon does not see honor or peace in this lifestyle but instead classifies the rural inhabitants of Nebraska as “beasts of the field” (bringing back to mind the image of Muncy’s grandfather hooking himself up to the plow). During another visit, when Madge’s future husband Ned shares the fact that he likes animals, Sharon responds, “Then you’d just love farming [...] since everybody on the farm is an animal” (129). Sharon resents losing Madge, who was essentially a sister to her after Sharon’s mother passes, and asks Madge, in front of Ned, “Is he looking for a wife or a housemaid?” (75). In a rare display of emotion, Cora then seizes Sharon by the wrist “and whacked her palm with the back of a hairbrush, sharply” (75), exclaiming, “That will teach you!” (75). Cora recognizes that Sharon is attacking the lifestyle Cora herself has been leading her entire life, but Sharon’s comment stems more from the loss of her childhood friend: “It mortified her to realize that in all their years together Madge lived in wait for marriage. [...] She was like a calf, bred and fattened for the market, and the buyer had spoken for her. In Sharon’s humiliation, the loss of Madge troubled her less than the ease with which Madge had surrendered Sharon” (86). Through multiple uses of animal imagery, Sharon reflects her frustration at how little women on the plains value relationships with each other and also how easily they submit to a life of rural servitude.
While Sharon sheds light on the harshness of the plains wife lifestyle and roundly criticizes it, she is surprised by the feelings revealed to her concerning Cora when she returns to Nebraska for her funeral. One of Madge’s daughters, Caroline, picks Sharon up from the airport, and they drive out to Cora and Emerson’s farm to observe what is left of it: “[…] tree stumps torn out by the roots were heaped at the center of the clearing. The deep pits left in the earth had not been filled. It brought to mind the craters left by bombs” (200). The post war zone description of the plains is reminiscent of those in *Lone Tree*, and Sharon is shocked by how little remains of the farm upon which she grew up. In the presence of this absence, Sharon’s thoughts turn to Cora: “Was it the emptiness that evoked the presence of Cora? Not her image, not her person, but the great alarming silence of her nature […] Cora Atkins had been for silence […] When she felt the deep silence of her soul threatened she had struck out with her hairbrush. All those unanswered questions were now asked of Sharon” (201). Sharon is haunted by her memories of Cora, and she is moved to exclaim, “Poor Cora!” (201). After all of Sharon’s criticism of rural women on the plains, she is moved to pity at Cora’s death. Sharon is then taken aback by Caroline’s response: “I’ll never forgive her […] Never” (201). Though Sharon rebukes her for this response, Caroline continues, “She never complained. An animal would have complained. She would still be in all that rubble if they hadn’t moved her” (201). At this point, Sharon “felt her head was splitting” (201). Caroline uses the animal imagery that Sharon herself used so frequently to criticize Cora, Madge and others back on the farm, but at this point, Sharon is shocked to hear this assessment from Caroline. Earlier, on the drive out to the farm, Sharon inquires as to whether Caroline’s sister Blanche had
married, to which Caroline responds, “Aunt Sharon […] we don’t get married anymore unless we want to. We all had your example” (196). Sharon is surprised by this view of herself as a mentor for independence: “Her lips parted, Sharon let the wind dry her mouth. After a moment she said, ‘My example?’” (196). Sharon has not consciously thought of herself as a role model for independence, and she isn’t entirely sure why she herself never married, after Caroline inquires. Cora’s passing causes Sharon to confront her past life on the plains and to attempt to come to grips with how this past has affected the path her life has taken.

After Cora’s funeral Sharon attends a troubling dinner at Madge and Ned’s home in Lincoln during which Sharon observes that Madge and all of those in her extended family have rejected Cora’s way of life but remain narrow minded and provincial. Sharon experiences a moment of “nostalgia to nausea” very similar to Muncy’s in The World in the Attic. Like Muncy in the road side café, Sharon’s moment occurs within the context of food: “Sharon had been hungry when she sat down, but the oven fumes on the draft from the kitchen, the sight of mouths chewing, the platter of fried chicken with the side bowl of pan gravy, made her slightly nauseous. The disturbance was physical, one of displacement, with objects and persons in the wrong places, at the wrong time” (210-11). Her experience at the dinner table reminds Sharon of the ways in which she has always felt “displacement” among her family members on the plains. After undergoing, during her visit back to the plains, swings of emotion, “head-splitting” feelings, Sharon reaches her deepest reflection as she is driven back to her hotel near the airport:
On the darkening plain her eyes searched for lights in the farmhouse windows. A sweet sadness, a longing touched with dread, filled her with a tender, pleasurable self-pity. Whatever life held in the future for her, it would prove to reside in this rimless past, approaching and then fading like the gong of a crossing bell. [...] Sharon was at once incredulous and believing, at one with the world and fearlessly detached. Did the young orbiting in space feel a similar bafflement and elevation? (217)

Sharon’s reflection is defined by its ambivalence—the “longing touched with dread,” “pleasurable self-pity,” “incredulous and believing,” “at one with the world and fearlessly detached.” The moment is undoubtedly an epiphany for Sharon, as her elevated state evidences. And Sharon’s mindset is a far cry from Boyd’s at the end of Lone Tree when he falls prey to the plains “sleep” he has criticized in others. The thrust of Sharon’s realization seems to be her acknowledgement that whatever happens to her in the future, she will always be tied to the plains in some way; the region is a part of her. Dyck gives Sharon much credit for the progress she makes by the end of the novel: “Sharon’s movement back is an act of maturity rather than denial. Morris is suggesting that a rejection of the past is as constricting as an immersion in it. The past needs to be confronted imaginatively so that one can shape its influence rather than be overpowered by it” (“Revising the West” 36). Dyck’s assessment seems to be accurate. Sharon does confront her past in visiting the farm, interacting with her extended Nebraska family and reflecting deeply on all of this. And her grappling with the plains as an outsider contrasts with Jim Burden’s in My Antonia. Where Jim retreats into the past at the end of that novel
to realize a fuller life for himself, Sharon leaves the plains but does not deny the future or repress the past, confirming her lack of compatibility with the plains region but also acknowledging the force it still holds over her. This assessment of the region, though reached with a legitimate depth of consciousness on Sharon’s part, falls short of a Gothic treatment. The deconstruction of the plains woman archetype is certainly progress toward a plains Gothic. Just as Starkweather represents the flash of the Gothic in *Lone Tree*, the sobering look at the plains woman (contrasted to Cather’s Antonia and Alexandra) reveals the Gothic flash in *Plains Song*; however, in protagonist Sharon’s case, for a character to realize that they have deep ties to a place they thought they detested does not constitute a return of the repressed. Beyond the obvious absence of any Gothic machinery in *Plains Song*, Sharon does not actually repress any of her own or Cora’s history on the plains. Her character is more concerned with making personal sense of her own emotions related to her home.

Joe Hall describes the kind of personal progress Morris’s protagonists such as Sharon strive to make: “On rare occasions when a character connects with the past through images that challenge and transform him or her, the result is an ‘imaginary gain’ that is a true gain. A consciousness that is expanded through this transformation is one form consciousness takes in Morris’s work” (291). Hall goes on to outline the other two forms of consciousness displayed by Morris’s plains characters: those submerged in the past and in their daily work (Cora, Uncle Harry and Aunt Clara) versus those who denigrate the past and feel the present is superior (Madge and her family and also McKee). And Hall does outline an effective framework for viewing the extent to which
Morris’s cast of characters reflect on the history of the plains and their place in the region, but it is this extended focus on consciousness and the probing of internal states that steers Morris away from the history itself and a Gothic treatment of the region. Thematically, Morris’s work has much in common with the Gothic. Myths of the region are certainly confronted: the plains trinity of values, the solidarity of lives led on the plains, the hallowed archetype of the pioneer woman, but in the case of Muncy, Boyd and Sharon, the perspective of the plains expatriate proves useful but also limiting. While these characters are willing to work to deconstruct mythic conceptions of the plains, they ultimately fall short of fully digging up a repressed past and exposing it completely because of the way their own emotional battle with nostalgia complicates and obscures their view of the region’s history. Both Dyck and Hall refer to the most successful confrontation with the past, as far as Morris’s characters are concerned, as a “re-imagining” of the region. Dyck writes, “The most significant gain for these new interpreters of the West may not be a more accurate picture of the past than their predecessors left them […] Rather, they gain a ‘useable past’ and thus free themselves from the longing look back that only can see the present in terms of loss” (“Revising the West” 37). Dyck seems to outline the nature of Sharon’s successful battle with nostalgia. But for all the progress Morris makes in confronting nostalgia and myth on the plains, a “re-imagining” of the region, a “useable past” without “a more accurate picture of the past” does not fulfill the regional Gothic’s purpose of using intense distortions in style to dig up a buried past to replace mythic conceptions with a truer sense of history. Goddu stated in a passage quoted in my opening chapter that the Gothic serves as the “primary means
of speaking the unspeakable,” and *Plains Song* achieves this in the way that it demystifies the life of the pioneer woman; however, it is also useful to return to Fiedler’s claim concerning the kind of combative attitude the Gothic needs to hold toward a repressed history: “Gothic novels looked on the Gothic times with which they dealt as corrupt and detestable. Their vision of the past was bitterly critical, and they evoked the olden days not to sentimentalize but to condemn them” (137). While Sharon does not sentimentalize her vision of the plains, her questioning of the region reaches only as far as ambivalence, and the novel does not ultimately accomplish the kind of Gothic condemnation Fiedler describes.

“To the boundary”—Morris and Plains Gothic Literature

The opening lines of *Plains Song* raise the following question: “Is the past a story we are persuaded to believe, in the teeth of the life we endure in the present?” (1). The question does well to encompass the overall thematic approach of Morris’s plains novels: Characters are driven back to a plains past that becomes alluring within the context of a less than fulfilling present. The question of whether the past is just a story, a myth, is one that Cather, through Jim Burden and Carl Linstrum, her own plains expatriates, would not pursue. The conflict this question creates, the conflict traced throughout this chapter, is a battle with nostalgia, and Morris’s characters wage it fully. Thus, despite the mixed results Morris achieves in his interrogation of plains history, he provides a fitting bridge between Cather and the Gothic work of Proulx.

In evaluating the progress that Boyd makes in *Lone Tree* with his own fight with nostalgia, Dyck writes, “The farthest a character or reader is allowed to stray from the
center is to the boundary, for there is no denying the desire either to be a part of society or to look for a unifying story (i.e., to make sense of the fragments) even if (or especially because) that desire is continually deferred” (“Carnival and Ceremony” 302). According to Dyck, Morris’s characters can pursue a break with their own nostalgic conceptions of their home place, but they can only get “to the boundary,” unable to fully displace the ideal conceptions they have formed of the plains, especially when those conceptions are a comfort to the disappointments of the present—as Boyd says in response to the “Now you see it, now you don’t” perspective of visions on the plains, “Nevertheless […] You know it’s still there” (302). Muncy reaches perhaps more progress with his “nostalgia and nausea” reaction to coming home to Nebraska, and Sharon perhaps even more with her “longing filled with dread,” but both characters fall short of a complete break with the plains past they have formulated. As a way of explaining the continued critical attention Morris receives, Wydeven writes, “Certainly, despite the length of his career, it is not because Morris is able to explain the historical significance of particular events in the twentieth century […] Morris’s major importance lies in his emphasis on nuance of consciousness and on his meditative approach […]” (Morris Revisited 173). Indeed, Morris strays from historical circumstance and gravitates toward the inner struggle, creating characters interesting from a psychoanalytic perspective, but less informative from a historical standpoint. But, again, the raising of the question itself holds definite importance. Speaking of Lone Tree, Brenner writes:

[...] not many Westerners have asked themselves “why” as Boyd does here.

Again, that “why” becomes Morris’s subject: while many have written from an
unshakeable conviction that the Western past makes sense, time having zipped ambiguity into satisfying coherence […] Morris has focused on the process and not the belief itself. As a consequence, you will not find in Morris’s pages evocations of the West-That-Was, with events and calibers and personages factually accurate; instead you witness the West that lives into the present in the minds of those for whom the fictions have become enduring truths. (68)
Brenner highlights again the importance of the question, of asking “why” in regard to the power myth holds over the history of the plains region. Cather is easily included in the “many” that accept plains history as it is, but Brenner states that Morris focuses on the “process” of how a mythic past comes to form the nostalgic view in the present. Implicit in this comment is the belief, as I have claimed, that Morris’s characters do not displace completely the mythic past; however, by focusing on the process by which these “fictions” become “truths” for those in the present, Morris’s focus on this process provides an important step toward the Gothic: an anatomy of the nostalgic view. Morris illuminates the why and the how involved with the internalization of myth, and the dissection of this process makes the nostalgic view more recognizable and holds it up to at least a modicum of scrutiny. Within Morris’s focus on and critique of nostalgia, other steps to the Gothic take place. As the chapter has shown, Morris points out the way in which the plains values of abstinence, frugality, and independence can provide for an honorable life but also a brutal, deprived one. Morris shows the possibility for the eruptions of extreme violence on the plains and the power they could hold to dislodge the benevolent myths of the region. The plains expatriate is a fixture in Morris’s plains
world, taking the reader only so far in the examination of the plains past but also defining an important archetype in relation to the propensity for nostalgia towards the region. Another archetype, that of the pioneer woman, is vastly expanded beyond the superhuman form it takes with Cather’s Alexandra and Antonia. Overall, Morris provides a much more realistic, challenging depiction of the contemporary plains and the people living there that are so often “worn down,” “half-submerged,” and “drowsy with ether.”

In the introduction to this project, I named a distortion in style as a mandatory element of a Gothic literature. Though he comes close with the Starkweather allusions in *Lone Tree*, Morris’s lack of a Gothic, stylistic machinery ultimately causes him to fall short of a full assault on the history of the region. “The bomb” in Morris’s literary work never detonates. Thus, observing Morris’s work as a photographer can be fascinating in the way that many of these images achieve stylistically, as well as thematically, the anti-nostalgic project Morris set out for himself on the plains. Morris’s photos of the region actually do achieve a Gothic perspective of the plains.

The mention of a fictional photo in another one of Morris’s novels, *The Works of Love* (1952), sets up an important context for the photos included in *The Inhabitants* and *The Home Place*. In *The Works of Love* (taking place primarily in the urban settings of Omaha and Chicago), the protagonist’s father, Adam Brady, moves west onto the prairie and lives in an isolated sod house. To attract a wife, Brady rides eight miles to town to have a photo taken: “The picture shows Brady standing, hat in hand, with a virgin forest painted in behind him, and emerging from this forest a coyote and a one-eyed buffalo. […] This picture might have given any woman pause, but there was no indication,
anywhere in it, of the landscape through the window that Brady faced. There was not an inkling of the desolation of the empty plain” (5). The narrator goes on to say that “There was no indication that the man in the picture had on nearly everything that he owned […]” (6) and that in Brady’s letters to his potential wife there was no room to mention “grasshopper plagues like swirling clouds in the sky, or of the wooden shapes of cattle frozen stiffly upright on the range” (8). Brady needs an iconic image of the plains that will attract a woman to the region, and this need moves Brady to fabricate an image of the landscape that is more romantic and attractive—the kind of image many plains authors have created in their own works. This fictional image is interesting because of the way it sharply contrasts with the actual photos Morris took on the plains.

The photos that accompany The Inhabitants and The Home Place are black and white and can be generally described as stark, candid, realistic photos of mid-century Nebraska. Only a few photos of the entire collection feature people, with the Uncle Harry character from the Home Place appearing in a small number. The photos themselves contain nothing that would encourage the nostalgia that the outsiders in Morris’s fiction feel for the region. More than Morris’s fiction, the photos connect more directly with the history of the region in the way they depict an unfiltered reality of life on the plains. And the life depicted tends to be the gritty, hardscrabble existence of those who live by the land. The effect of the landscape on objects and structures is evident throughout the photos. Laura Barrett states that the purpose of Morris’s photos is “to signify the historical artifact, and not the aestheticized image” (47), and this summation is indeed consistent with the harsh surfaces and well-worn appearances of the spaces and objects
featured in the photos. Barrett also states, “Morris’s own photographs attempt to rescue those icons and artifacts that are passing away, replaced by machine-made objects that roll off assembly lines. His intimate portraits, straightforward frontal views of buildings, rooms, pieces of furniture leave little room for the construction of cultural myths” (45). Thus Barrett outlines the basic Gothic functioning of Morris’s photos. These “rescued icons” are a return of a history repressed. Instead of images of pioneer grandeur inspired by Cather’s heroines, Morris delivers in these photos (despite what may be occurring in the accompanying narrative) a visual depiction of what it looks like to struggle on the plains—the physical reality that accompanies a life of brutal labor.

I will separate the photos I discuss into the following broad categories: structures, interior, portrait, and landscapes. Rodney P. Rice’s article, “Photographing the Ruins: Wright Morris and Midwestern Gothic,” is a useful resource in examining Morris’s non-literary work (and also the only instance that the research for this project revealed a coupling of Gothic and the Midwestern or plains region). Though Rice does not examine any of the photos that I have selected, his theoretical take on Morris’s photography is helpful in defining the visual aspects of the photos that make them both stylistically and thematically Gothic. Rice’s theory of the Gothic concerning Morris’s photos is based primarily on the concept of limit and transgression through the use of extreme contrast. Relying on Botting, Rice states, “[…] the function transgression plays within the Gothic is to question received rules and values so as to identify, reconfigure, and transform commonly accepted limits” (130). This transgression is achieved in Morris’s photos, according to Rice, by the use of extreme contrast:
Because the Gothic sensibility assumes that reality is an expanded domain that also includes the irrational, the primitive, and the supernatural, polar opposition affords a useful way of simultaneously emphasizing spatial and temporal extremes. In other words, polar opposition helps alert the mind to the notion that what is commonly thought of as real by society and language is merely a smaller portion of a larger reality that can only be apprehended through expanded consciousness, heightened perception and refined sensitivity. (131)

Through this explanation, Rice has effectively offered another method of defining the “distortion” I mentioned in the opening chapter as the necessary stylistic element of the Gothic. The “distortion” for which Rice argues features polar opposites that expand the limits of what the viewer perceives to be reality, thereby allowing for a new perception of reality (a reality of a plains history in the case of Morris’s photos). These polar opposites are very evident in Morris’s photos of structures and his use of light and dark and also spatial contrasts. Rice states that the structures in these photos, “[…] open toward a past in which the limits of reason and rationality have apparently been violated by destructive natural and supernatural forces. […] the palpable expression of failed dreams, loss, and alienation are the bleak houses themselves, which rise hauntingly upward like tombstones, as if to signal the violation and demise of an American dream” (134). In Morris’s structure photos, the destructive effects of natural forces (which Rice mentions) are very evident. The effect of nature on human made structures emphasizes the extreme contrast between the physical realities of the plains environment and the human desire to dwell there. As I move to Morris’s portrait and interior photos, I will then identify what I
believe to be supernatural elements in the images, though I will rely less on Rice’s idea of extreme contrast and claim other forms of transgression in those photos. The first four photos I examine come from *The Inhabitants*, and the remaining four appear in *The Home Place*. (Photos appear at the end of the chapter.)

Morris’s photo of a two story, dilapidated home (figure 1) gives the appearance of the classic haunted house. The front porch is crooked and gives the entire home an off kilter appearance, as if it were about to topple. This feature shows the precariousness involved with building any structure of height on the wind swept expanses of the plains. Though light shines on all the windows, they block any view into the house. The diamond shaped window at the peak of the roof is open, with three of its glass panes missing, but the view through the window is dark. The roof of the porch also casts light over half of the front door. Overall, the withholding of views into the home arouses suspicions of what may lie inside. The dead, decaying tree that flanks the front of the house mirrors the crumbling state of the home itself. The prosperous ranch home turned abandoned shack is evidence of a dream denied on the plains. The desire for a home of such stature is prevented by natural weather elements on the plains or, perhaps, through some conjecture by the viewer, the inability to turn enough profit on the rural plains to keep up such a home. The text that accompanies this photo concerns an older man who has begun to walk “side saddle” like the off kilter home, presumably. Other than this superficial connection, though, there does not seem to be any more correspondence between photo and text. Overall, as mentioned earlier, the text of *The Inhabitants* consists of Morris’s fragmented projections of the dwellers of the spaces pictured, and it is not
overly rewarding to examine the text itself as it relates to the accompanying image. It will be of interest, though, to eventually speak to the overall tone of the work in comparison to the images it contains.

Another photo of a home (figure 2) reveals the same effect of natural elements on the structure as the previous “haunted house.” The roof shows a mess of sliding shingles, unable to maintain their place in the face of wind and harsh weather conditions. Like the previous home, this house appears to sag on its foundation. The home is not able to maintain straight (rational) lines in such a harsh environment. Most interesting in this photo is the telephone pole that seems literally bent by the wind—a testament to the incredible power of natural elements on the plains. The pole also resembles a cross and can be seen as lending a kind of sacred element to the image, as if the human presence was trying to bestow some kind of virtue on the landscape by maintaining a presence there. The photo of a barn (figure 3) also takes on this element of the sacred in the way it resembles a chapel. Like the pole, this structure, so isolated but making a stand on the empty plains, seems to express an element of human virtue. The barn/chapel is a contrast to the exterior home photos in the way that it maintains extremely straight lines, its height emphasized by the Gothic arched window in its loft, but what is also noticeable is the weathered condition of the vertical boards. These long, discolored, running vertical lines take away from the grandeur of the structure and add a withered, melancholy element to its height. Again, the view into the barn is withheld by darkness. Like the bent telephone pole, the barn seems to indicate that any structure built on the plains will pay some kind of price to the harshness of the environment. The text of this photo, the first in The
Inhabitants, defines Morris’s view on the importance of empty spaces. The speaker says, “Sometimes I think only vacant houses are occupied […] An inhabitant is what you can’t take away from the house.” Morris feels that only when a space is empty can you really observe the ways in which someone has lived in that space. The image of the barn does not actually speak much to this concept, as it does not invite any inward view at all; however, this phenomenon will be picked up again in The Home Place.

The photo of a schoolhouse (figure 4), a panned out image, is different from the previous photos. This structure seems to emphasize most strongly the intense isolation created by the expanse of the prairie. The building draws no real attention to itself but serves primarily as a signifier of how massive and empty the plains are. The snow on the roof matches the building to its environment and further prevents the structure from creating any real space of its own. The long line of the snow fence also emphasizes the flatness of the land. Overall, the expanse of the snow covered plains, matched chromatically to the sky, and the sense of extreme absence they create, can be viewed as terrifying.

As a whole, the images of The Inhabitants are a stark contrast to the eventual point the text of the work attempts to make. As quoted earlier in the chapter, the book ends with the following claim: “There’s no one thing to cover the people, no one sky […] no one way or one word for the people […] For these people are the people and this is their land. And there’s no need to cover such people—they cover themselves.” All along, The Inhabitants has been speaking about people “Who know what it is to be American”—a diverse collection of people who lead challenging lives but use their
toughness to get by. It is interesting to note that *The Inhabitants*, a work that contains Morris’s most sentimental outlook on the plains, the outlook furthest from the Gothic, is the same work that contains these gritty images that in themselves achieve Morris’s only true Gothic treatment of the region. This paradox between text and image continues with *The Home Place*.

To me, the most interesting Morris photo focuses on the inside of Uncle Ed’s house in *The Home Place*. The interior views repressed by the previous structures return with this image. One can imagine, through this photo, getting a look behind the curtained windows of Grant Wood’s “American Gothic” painting mentioned in the opening chapter. The photo (figure 5) features a bed. The light of the image, which appears ethereal in nature contrasted to the darkness of the room, along with the curvature of the bed itself, makes it seem that the bed itself is still very much inhabited. The inhabitant’s shoes, in fact, are still placed neatly beneath the bed, ready for work. Though the bed is empty, a presence is observed, and this comprises the haunting. Whoever used the bed is gone, but his presence is still felt. At this point in the narrative of *The Home Place*, Muncy’s wife steps into the bedroom: “Then she backed away, as if she saw someone in the bed” (135). As mentioned previously, the photos of *The Home Place* correspond much more literally with the text of the narrative. At this point, Muncy and his wife begin to feel that the house is still inhabited by Uncle Ed. While observing the home, Muncy speaks to the phenomena defined early on in *The Inhabitants*. Muncy says, “What is it that strikes you about a vacant house? I suppose it has something to do with the fact that any house that’s been lived in, any room that’s been slept in, is not vacant any more”
Muncy and his wife realize that Uncle Ed’s house, even without him in it, still speaks strongly to his presence. Muncy goes as far as to call the house “haunted.” But Muncy chooses this moment in the house to define the “plains trinity” and to call the house a chapel. Thematically, the visual image of the bed seems to evoke a ghostly existence and a weariness—a contrast to any glorification of the pioneer lifestyle. Muncy admits in *The Home Place* that people “wear out” on the plains, but his response to Uncle Ed’s “haunted house” is not to acknowledge the difficult and Spartan nature of life on the plains—the message the image of Uncle Ed’s bedroom delivers—but to spin the haunting impression into a sentimental appreciation of the hard working values of the region.

The remaining photos from *The Home Place* don’t speak as directly to Gothic hauntings as the interior of Uncle Ed’s house, but they do speak to a harsh history of the plains not acknowledged directly by the text. One of the few photos to feature a human presence, Morris’s image of a farmer seated in front of his barn (figure 6) appears almost comically Gothic. The faceless farmer (his hat seems to float above nothingness) seems to guard the void of the barn’s interior, pitchfork at the ready. In the narrative, Muncy and Uncle Harry have just gone to town to run errands, and Uncle Harry has forgotten the flour. Aunt Clara remarks, “If it wasn’t fastened to his shoulders […] he’d forget his own head.” The photo seems a humorous comment on Aunt Clara’s statement. However, the lack of face signals a literal ghostliness, similar to the previous interior image. Morris denies a literal presence to those that inhabit these spaces, preferring that they haunt the spaces instead. The effect of this photo is not as clear as the previous—is the farmer (Uncle Harry) a demon or merely someone who has been worn away by life lived on the
plains? What is clear is that the image, with its use of transgression through the faceless human presence, resists aligning with myth by the sense of absence, both in the farmer and the interior of the barn.

Morris’s photo of soil (figure 7) can be interpreted as Gothic by the way it transgresses traditional views of earth, especially the soil of the plains. The soil is dry to the point that it has fragmented into a network of cracks, resembling desert ground. This image runs contrary to the classic image of the farmer running rich soil through his hands as a visual representation of a connection to the land. The photo retrieves a history that is more closely aligned to the dustbowl and the struggle to make productive a landscape that is actually barren. In the narrative that accompanies this image, Muncy speaks about his failure to find deep “connections” in his life. In finding these kinds of connections, Muncy states, “you can’t get over the feeling that your Grandma, or the old man, were very much wiser in the matter than you managed to be” (59). Again, there is more praise for those who have lived out their lives deeply on the plains, but the image of the dry, barren ground speaks more directly to a difficult, unyielding past.

The final photo I have selected, that of a plow (figure 8) is less Gothic than the others, but provides an interesting counterpart to Cather’s image of the plow in My Antonia. This is the point in The Home Place when Muncy has his disagreement with cousin Ivy about farmers like Uncle Harry. As previously quoted, Ivy criticizes Uncle Harry for his outdated farming methods by claiming, “It’s men like him […] who made this goddam dust bowl” (25) and Muncy reflects to himself, “True enough—but it was men like him who were still around when the dust blew away” (25). Cather’s image
features the plow—huge on the horizon—as supreme tool of the plains, casting its shadow over the entire landscape, and as Muncy pictures his Uncle Harry at work, he sees the plow in just the same way. He connects the pioneer myth to his uncle through the work he accomplished with the plow and also his ability to remain on the plains after that work was completed. Morris’s photo of the plow, however, depicts the tool realistically. It is a simple tool, relatively small and somewhat ragged with its composition of mismatched pieces of wood. The plow’s shadow is only as long as the tool itself.

Throughout *The Home Place*, Muncy’s inflated, romantic conceptions of the plains region conflict with the harsh, Gothic nature of the photos that accompany the narrative. I had previously characterized *The Inhabitants* and *The Home Place* as “the short wave of optimism” before the crash in *The World in the Attic*. The photos of these texts would fit more logically with Morris’s later works in which he takes a much more challenging view toward nostalgia for the plains, but the images, in themselves, still achieve a brief but fully Gothic treatment of the region.

At the conclusion of his article, Rice surmises of Morris’s photos, “[…] one story told by these texts is actually a ghost story, an evocation of the empty spaces and remote vacancies of a tenuous past for which Wright Morris’s feelings are ambivalent and polarized between nostalgia and nausea, gain and loss, belonging and alienation” (139). While my analysis of Morris’s photos has indeed revealed a ghost story, I believe Rice conflates Morris’s photos too closely with his fiction in classifying them as ambivalent in their outlook on the plains. The photos create a depiction of the plains that is completely resistant to both myth and nostalgia, and with their use of extreme contrast (as Rice
notes) through dark and light, space, exterior and interior and also through the use of supernatural elements in the interior image, Morris’s photos create their own Gothic narrative of the plains. A history that has been repressed returns through the transgressions in the style of the photos.

Thematically, Morris’s fiction seems aligned with a Gothic sensibility throughout. His expatriates have a self-awareness about their own nostalgic connections to the plains, and they struggle (albeit with limited success) to overcome those mythic perceptions. What is perhaps most useful about analyzing Morris’s photos is the way in which they display the Gothic stylistic qualities that are absent in his fiction, the kind of distortions that enable an unearthing of a buried past. A look at Morris’s work overall also makes it clear, when observing Proulx’s fiction, the elements in her work that allow her to achieve a plains Gothic. The extreme contrasts, the cognitive dissonance, the distortion in style, to rename the ways this chapter has referred to a Gothic style, are fully present in Proulx’s stories. While Morris moves the region’s literature “to the boundary” of the Gothic, Proulx will take the final step and achieve the unflinching gaze on the plains that Morris could achieve only through the lens of his camera.
Figure 1: Morris Photo, *The Inhabitants*
Figure 2: Morris Photo, *The Inhabitants*
Figure 3: Morris Photo, *The Inhabitants*
Figure 4: Morris Photo, *The Inhabitants*
Figure 5: Morris Photo, *The Home Place*
Figure 6: Morris Photo, *The Home Place*
Figure 7: Morris Photo, *The Home Place*
Figure 8: Morris Photo, *The Home Place*
Chapter 4: “Dangerous and indifferent ground”—Annie Proulx’s Gothic Wyoming

As mentioned in the previous chapters, Willa Cather and Wright Morris both spent a number of formative years on the plains. Cather moved to Nebraska at age nine and stayed through college while Morris spent his first fourteen years in the state. Annie Proulx does not share this link of childhood or adolescence spent on the plains. Born in Connecticut, Proulx studied and worked primarily in New England and Quebec before moving to Wyoming at the age of sixty. While Cather and Morris wrote about Nebraska from New York City and California, respectively, Proulx lived in state while writing all three of her Wyoming short story collections: *Close Range* (1999), *Bad Dirt* (2004), and *Fine Just the Way It Is* (2008). Through the first two chapters of this study, nostalgia has received much attention in the way that it strengthens myth and tempered both Cather and Morris’s depiction of the plains. Proulx’s lack of a personal history with the region would seem the likely reason she is free from the pull of nostalgia, but whatever the case, it is clearly not a factor in her literary depiction of the Great Plains. Julie Scanlon writes that “Proulx has, inevitably, been criticized for writing about places of which she is not a native” (105) and quotes Proulx as saying, “some people in Wyoming object mightily to my stories which do not always project upright, noble, pure characters. I lean toward realism, not myth” (105).

Because she is decidedly resistant to mythic conceptions, Proulx’s outlook on the region is directly opposed to Cather and Morris’s. As the last chapter detailed, Morris took a much more critical view of his home state, but his characters still battled the nostalgic pull through all of his novels. Proulx has stated that she was attracted to
Wyoming as a fictional setting because of the upheaval occurring in its present history. Proulx says in a *Missouri Review* interview, “The failure of the limited economic base for a region, often the very thing that gave the region its distinctive character and social ways, is interesting to me. I frequently focus on the period when everything—the traditional economic base, the culture, the family and the clan links—begin to unravel” (84). The kind of period Proulx describes is the point at which a Gothic literature can enter the region. Faulkner found the condition of post-bellum South just as Proulx describes Wyoming above: economic realities had changed drastically, causing social traditions to follow suit. Proulx says in the same interview, “I watch for the historical skew between what people have hoped for and who they thought they were and what befell them” (79). Proulx describes the point at which myth conflicts with reality—the Gothic collision that reveals the more uncomfortable history that has been repressed by the mythic conceptions people want to ascribe to their own region. Proulx states in an *L.A. Times* interview that she is attracted to “cultures in their death throes,” another way of saying that a culture or a region is on the verge of change and ready to reveal a truer history in the face of current struggles. Unlike Cather, who sought to praise what was pure on the plains, and Morris, who tried to understand why a stifling region like the plains could still hold such a nostalgic pull, Proulx, not giving any credence to myth from the beginning, generates all of her stories with the harsh reality she recognizes in the past and present. For Proulx, a culture in the “death throes” is the pull to the region.

In the *Missouri Review* interview, Proulx states that many of her stories begin with “the ironies that fall out of the friction between past and present” (83). From the
introduction, I have repeatedly noted the importance of the Gothic’s fluid approach to history—the ability to move back and forth between the present and the past. Compared to Cather and Morris, Proulx’s historical settings are much more varied. Though she will move rapidly between the present and past within some of her stories, Proulx’s choice of the short story form—the genre itself, affords her much of this historical fluidity in her Wyoming fiction. In the primary stories that I will allude to here, Proulx makes use of the following historical settings: two stories set in the mid to late 1800s and then brought forward to the present; three stories set in late 1800s or early 1900s that maintain that setting; four stories beginning in the present and then flashing back to the early 1900s; four stories set in the present or later 1900s that maintain that setting. Thus, Proulx’s stories cover basically every decade on the Wyoming plains from the Civil War up to the present. Between the three collections, the stories weave a considerable tapestry of history. Because Proulx is able to move so fluidly between past and present, she can juxtapose periods in time to reveal how a painful past has remained a legacy on the plains. The past stories are the repressed history of the later stories. Thus, Proulx can both create the past realities repressed by future generations and show how those later plains inhabitants are haunted by that past. The stories of the three collections are able to work together in this manner to create the Gothic treatment of the region.

Another of Proulx’s abilities that allows her to achieve a Gothic treatment of the plains is her unwavering focus on the landscape itself. In the last chapter I discussed Morris’s tendency to delve into character consciousness as an element that distracted him from the region’s history and the effort to allow a repressed past to come to light. Proulx
clearly avoids this pitfall in all of her Wyoming stories. In an article she wrote about
landscape in American fiction, Proulx notes that it is most often nonfiction writers that
engage in a serious treatment of landscape itself. She states, “Fiction, meanwhile, has
taken a narrower path, exploring the personal interior landscape and the family. What is
out there seems increasingly irrelevant” (12). This interior path accurately describes
Morris’s characters Boyd and Sharon and their deep, personal contemplation of their
Nebraskan homes. Proulx, on the other hand, sees her characters as cogs in the machine
of the story and does not appear to indulge them as Morris does. A Missouri Review
interviewer, perhaps unwittingly, asks Proulx if she has ever “fallen in love with one your
characters?” to which Proulx responds: “The notion is repugnant. Characters are made to
carry a particular story; that is their work. The only reason one shapes a character to look
as he or she does, behave and speak in a certain way, suffer particular events, is to move
the story forward in a particular direction” (83). The direction for Proulx as a regional
writer is to evoke the nature of a place, and in her Wyoming stories, the protagonist is
always the landscape itself. In a region as large as the Great Plains, the approach makes
sense. Proulx gets back to the focus Cather had on the land, and she takes up again the
central conflict of human versus nature, but the outcome is clearly the opposite. O. Alan
Weltzien writes of Proulx’s Wyoming fiction, “Landscape looms large—‘looms’ is the
right verb here—and characters rarely rise to its challenge, instead emerging as small,
invariably beaten up by it” (102). Proulx’s plains thesis is not complicated. Her Wyoming
stories work to express the fact that the plains was always a difficult place to live and
make a living, and they remain that way. In the pioneer versus landscape conflict, Proulx
reverses Cather’s stance and depicts the land as winner. Proulx writes at the beginning of “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water”: “Dangerous and indifferent ground: against its fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing although the signs of misadventure are everywhere. No past slaughter nor cruelty, no accident nor murder that occurs on the little ranches or at the isolate crossroads [...] delays the flood of morning light” (99). No matter how much her characters repress the reality, past and present, of a harsh Wyoming landscape, in Proulx’s stories, the plains are the rock that people break themselves against, and the fortitude of the landscape itself is the only transcendent truth of the region.

As this project has shown, though, this has not been the dominant literary identity of the region. The literary identity of the plains has been based to a great extent on various myths—the success of the yeoman farmer, the garden myth, etc. The largest factor that kept Cather and Morris from achieving a Gothic treatment of the region, as I have said, is the absence of stylistic techniques that provide the distortion necessary for displacing these long held plains myths. Multiple elements of a Gothic style are, finally, clearly present in Proulx’s Wyoming stories. Further, what makes Proulx’s contemporary Gothic style an interesting example is the way she borrows elements from the Gothic traditions that came before her. To return to the introduction for a moment, Savoy (and Hawthorne) noted the importance of authors adjusting the style of their work to suit their own historical and cultural circumstances. Savoy writes, “American Gothic is, first and foremost, an innovative and experimental literature. Its power comes from its dazzling originality and diversity in a series of departures that situate the perverse—as forms,
techniques, and themes—*inside* the national mainstream” (168). I repeat Savoy’s assertion here to emphasize the importance of a Gothic style as a changing style, shifting to fit the task at hand—the historical circumstances of a particular region. Proulx’s Gothic style borrows elements from her Gothic predecessors to create a varied style that composes a near survey of Gothic style. Proulx makes use of classic Gothic elements, more aligned to British Gothic, like the haunted house, doppelgangers, wolves, and sins of the father. She straddles the supernatural in multiple stories much the way that Hawthorne did with the New England Gothic. Proulx may be most clearly an inheritor of the Southern Gothic style with its use of the Grotesque and the freak, and many of her stories elicit comparisons to the work of Flannery O’Connor. Finally, Proulx does add her own contribution to the palette of Gothic style with a contemporary use of magical realism. All of Proulx’s stories make use of the Gothic paradox, that is, the use of the unreal to shed light on the real. In her acknowledgements in *Close Range*, Proulx writes, “The elements of unreality, the fantastic and improbable, color all of these stories as they color real life. In Wyoming not the least fantastic situation is the determination to make a living ranching in this tough and unforgiving place” (11). This note is probably an explanation for readers not expecting such a break with realism in a collection of stories about rural Wyoming, but the fantastic, Gothic elements of Proulx’s style, like Hawthorne and Faulkner’s, work to shock and expand the reader’s mind so that it can become aware of a more authentic history of the region. As the epigraph to *Close Range*, Proulx quotes a “retired Wyoming rancher” as saying, “Reality’s never been of much use out here.”
Another technique worth noting is Proulx’s well-documented, rigorous approach to research for her fiction. Proulx has mentioned in multiple interviews her connection to the French Annales School of history—influential within the history department at Sir Williams University (Montreal), where Proulx pursued doctoral studies. The Annales School basically broadens the scope of research beyond primary sources such as official written documents to include a variety of less formal sources. In the Missouri Review interview Proulx names as some of her sources, “manuals of work and repair, books of manners, dictionaries of slang, city directories, lists of occupational titles, geology, regional weather, botanists’ plant guides, local histories, newspapers” (83). Proulx’s influence by the Annales School is important because it is another way in which her perspective on the region differs from Cather and Morris’s. While the personal influences of Nebraska on Cather and Morris have been documented in the previous chapters, Proulx’s approach to Wyoming is much more that of the literary technician with her purpose clearly in mind. Thinking about the close look Cather takes at such quotidian research elements, as listed above, one can compare her view to that through Morris’s camera as he obtained his brief, Gothic look at the plains in his photos for The Inhabitants and The Home Place. With the help of her research Proulx is able to achieve this Gothic perspective in the literature itself.

A thematic approach is probably best in looking at the various stories of Proulx’s Wyoming collections. The themes of Proulx’s stories can be lined up effectively against the myths that have so influenced the plains regions up to the contemporary period. In the Cather chapter, I dissected the “pioneer myth” by dividing it into the following main
parts: the garden myth and the yeoman farmer, the romantic love of the land that forms part of the pastoral influence, and the democratic utopia. In the *L.A. Times* interview, Proulx referred to *Close Range* as a "backhand swipe at the mythology of the West—the old beliefs that aren't really true [...] Everyone here is playing some role: the brave pioneer woman, the cowboy." This is the goal of the Gothic—to take down the myths and replace them with a more accurate history. Thus, as I proceed, I will move through Cather’s myths and the alternate, repressed history that Proulx brings out in their place. Instead of the yeoman farmer and the garden myth, Proulx focuses on the widespread failure of farming and ranching on the plains. Rather than a romantic love of the land (so pronounced with Cather’s Alexandra and Antonia), Proulx documents instead the loneliness experienced by so many in the region. Finally, in place of the democratic utopia and the morality that goes with it, Proulx’s characters often encounter closed-mindedness and extreme cruelty. Additionally, I will discuss a few of Proulx’s stories that address elements ignored or downplayed by Cather, such as the plains expatriate and the plight of Native Americans.

As I stated in the introduction, no one has previously argued for the existence of a Great Plains Gothic literature. Further, no one has applied Gothic readings to Proulx’s fiction. Though there are other convincing examples of plains Gothic writers, several of whom I will discuss in the next chapter, I believe that Proulx is the best exemplar of this new regional Gothic. Her stories, as described above, engage multiple thematic elements of plains history and also utilize a dynamic set of Gothic stylistic techniques. Proulx is the author that first alerted me to the possibility that a Gothic literature may have arrived
on the plains, and she is a striking example of a violent return of the repressed in the region.

“The Old Badger Game”—Failure of the Yeoman Farmer

From the beginning of the region’s literature, the combination of the yeoman farmer and the garden myth has been integral to the definition of the literary plains. Cather’s work makes very plain the rewards of hard work by homesteading characters. Proulx’s stories work against Jefferson’s belief, as quoted in the Cather chapter, that “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God” (176). Proulx also exposes the myth that the plains landscape will eventually yield to and reward those who work it. The clearest idea to come from Proulx’s stories may be the assertion that the land is, in fact, unyielding, and that the enduring trait of those living on the plains is their struggle to make a living. In her story, “Them Old Cowboy Songs” (Fine Just the Way It Is), Proulx writes a straightforward note to directly contradict the long held notion of the yeoman farmer and the garden myth on the plains. She writes, “There is a belief that pioneers came into this country, homesteaded, lived tough, raised a shoeless brood and founded ranch dynasties. Some did. But many more had short runs and were quickly forgotten” (47). One can think of Cather’s Alexandra and her speculative abilities and sprawling farm when Proulx mentions “ranch dynasties.” Here, though, Proulx makes clear her purpose to recount the more common plains story by recovering a repressed part of the region’s history—clearly a Gothic project, thematically. Stylistically, “Them Old Cowboy Songs” takes its cues from the Grotesque and the Southern Gothic. Though Proulx uses a variety of Gothic stylistic techniques, her biggest influence comes from the
Southern Gothic genre, especially the work of Flannery O’Connor. Because of the depth of this influence and the frequency with which the Grotesque enters Proulx’s stories, it is necessary to pause and briefly examine Proulx’s link to the Southern Gothic.

Like O’Connor and Faulkner in the Southern tradition, Proulx makes frequent use of a Grotesque style. As stated in the introduction, the Grotesque draws its main power from the use of paradox, whether it be from the contrast of repulsion and sympathy or the use of the darkly comic. The Grotesque style uses extreme, often horrific contrasts to demand attention from the reader, and this non-realistic, exaggerated style works to uncover feared, hidden realities. Thus, a Grotesque style is very much in line with the Gothic itself. As Anthony Di Renzo claims, “the Grotesque’s ultimate purpose is therapeutic: it is a comic shock treatment. Even at its most menacing, it seeks to liberate” (5).

O’Connor deals in her literature with the struggle of lost modes of living in the South and the moral implications these dealings with the past and the present engender. Her stories are violent, humorous in a macabre fashion, and often involve characters defined by extreme contrast, such as the well-known, killer-philosopher “The Misfit” from her story “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” In response to frequent questions about her use of the Grotesque, O’Connor responded, “Whenever I’m asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one” (44). In O’Connor’s fiction there is, indeed, nearly always a tormented character, a “maimed soul” (43), that receives the focus of the narrative. Proulx can be seen as providing the Great Plains counterpart to these Southern freaks in
some of her stories. Perhaps the clearest connection between O’Connor and Proulx is the way in which their stories seemed to be tipped toward disaster from the beginning, their plots often resolving themselves with a violent, horrific death. A cataloguing of the variety of deaths in her stories shows how Proulx turns the plains itself into a house of horrors: freezing to death (multiple), drowning (multiple), broken necks (bucked off horse and falling down stairs), eaten by animals (post-death), beaten with tire iron, gangrene (from castration), I.E.D. explosion, falling out of moving vehicle, falling into Grand Canyon, mauled by emu, tractor rollover, plane crash. Karen Rood believes that Proulx actually uses the Grotesque with more intensity than O’Connor herself:

Proulx’s intermixture of the humorous with the horrific bears comparison to Flannery O’Connor’s. Yet, for O’Connor, a devout Roman Catholic, her bizarre characters and frequent use of violence were part of an attempt to show her readers how far the modern world has strayed from Christianity […] Because Proulx’s world of shifting values has no such guideposts, it is a more frightening place than O’Connor’s world […] Proulx’s characters sometimes become what may be called secular versions of O’Connor’s Grotesques. (12)

The “guideposts” of Proulx’s world, as we will see, are the realities of trying to make a living and survive in the harsh environment of the plains, and, as Rood states, Proulx’s “secular” characters do not seem pointed toward the enunciation of a moral lesson, but are more so carriers of the kind of paradoxical (Grotesque) experience that defines the plains for Proulx. However, Proulx does challenge the archetype of the pioneer much the same way that O’Connor questioned the archetypes of the Southern Gentleman and the
Southern Belle. Both authors deconstruct these character types to call into question past definitions of their respective regions. Finally, it is important to note that Proulx’s use of the Grotesque and emulation of authors like O’Connor build on the tradition of the already established regional Gothic of the South.

To return to “Them Old Cowboy Songs,” the narrative is essentially a love story between Archie and Rose McLaverty. Set in 1885, the story initially views the two homesteaders in a romantic light. At the beginning of the story they make a homestead claim and build a small cabin. It is said that “Archie had a singing voice that once heard was never forgotten” (49), and he insists on singing the “metes and bounds” of their new property; he and Rose walk the entire perimeter of their claim while Archie sings song after song. Proulx writes, “There is no happiness like that of a young couple in a little house they have built themselves in a place of beauty and solitude” (50). Even at the beginning of the story, though, there seem to be hints of trouble. When the couple stacks a large woodpile, it is “immediately tenanted by a weasel” (48). Rose observes the animal will keep the mice down. Archie comments, “Yeah, if the bastard don’t bite somebody” (48). On another evening, early in the couple’s time at the homestead, Archie notices at sunset “Rose in the doorway burning an unearthly color in the lurid glow” (56). And later, after Rose picks wild strawberries and stains her hands red, Archie says, “Look like you killed a griz bear by hand […] It could be a bear might come down for the berries, so don’t you go pickin no more” (55). Beneath the tranquil and happy homestead, there seems to lie a threatening undercurrent.
After the couples’ first winter, food has dwindled and Rose is pregnant. At this point Archie must go out looking for work, and the story begins its downward trajectory. Archie finds work in Cheyenne, but must lie about his wife because the ranch owner won’t hire a married man. Archie is able to come back to the homestead briefly and explain the situation to Rose: he must be away for months with no certain way to communicate. He advises her to go up to her parents or get her mother to come down for the expected baby. As Archie leaves, Proulx writes, “for the first time she recognized that they were not two cleaving halves of one person but two separate people, and that because he was a man he could leave any time he wanted, and because she was a woman she could not. The cabin reeked of desertion and betrayal” (60). At this point the challenges of the land have come between the happy pioneering couple, and the rest of the narrative covers their two, separate fates.

Alone in the cabin, Rose miscarries far before her September due date. The description of her ordeal is gruesome: “She was glued to the bed and at the slightest movement felt a hot surge she knew was blood. She got up on her elbows and saw the clotted child, stiff and grey, the barley-rope cord and the afterbirth” (65). Rose struggles outside to bury the child: “she crawled out the door and toward the sandy soil near the river, where, still on hands and knees, still spouting blood, she dug a shallow hole […]” (66). Rose makes it back into the cabin to die and, “Struggling through the syrup of subconsciousness in the last hour she heard coyotes outside and knew what they were doing” (66). The reader is horrified by the description and sympathetic to Rose’s fate as Proulx works the Grotesque. Archie meets a similar fate, though not as bloody or painful.
On his way back to the homestead, he and a man he has befriended at the ranch get stuck in severe weather, and they eventually freeze to death in a shack. They become just one of the casualties of the storm: “A serious blizzard and fatal cold began to slide down from the Canadian plains that night, and when it broke twelve days later the herds were decimated, cows packed ten deep against barbwire fences, pronghorns congealed into statues, trains stalled for three weeks by forty-foot drifts and two cow punchers in a line shack frozen together in a buffalo robe” (73). The grisly details of Archie and Rose’s deaths are not over at this point, however. A neighbor, Tom Ackler, comes to check on Rose, and “What he found sent him galloping for the stage station” (74). When Ackler reaches the station he exclaims, “Rose McLaverty was raped and murdered […] sometime in the winter, god knew when” (75). Ackler’s previous observation before entering the cabin, however, wraps up the ending for the reader: “The weasel’s tracks were everywhere, and right up into the eaves. Clear enough the weasel had gotten inside […] As he squinted at the tracks the weasel suddenly squirted out of a hole in the eaves and looked at him […] It was the largest, handsomest weasel he had ever seen, shining eyes and a lustrous coat” (74).

Proulx no doubt makes her point that not all homesteaders on the plains “founded ranch dynasties.” Rose and Archie are the example of the “many more” that “had short runs and were forgotten,” but Proulx’s approach to the narrative goes beyond mere contradiction of the pioneer myth. The deaths are grim: Rose bleeding to death from a miscarriage, Archie frozen solid in a blizzard, but Proulx adds details to these deaths—the coyotes digging up the stillborn baby and the weasel feeding on Rose’s corpse—that
create a clear distortion in style, a break with reality. The use of the Grotesque is strong enough to break mythic ideas about pioneers and how they settled the land. Significantly, Proulx puts the animals and humans of the plains on the same level in the story. Earlier in the narrative, Archie and Rose survive to a great extent on the elk and deer that Archie hunts. Later in the story, animals literally feed on Rose and her child. Archie is frozen in the blizzard right along with the antelope and cattle. Proulx seems to say that as far as survival on the plains during the homesteading days, humans do not have much of a leg up on their animal counterparts. The reality created in “Them Old Cowboy Songs” brings to mind Sharon’s humorous comment from *Plains Song*: “everybody on the farm is an animal” (129). At the end of the story, neighbor Ackler wonders if his cat, Gold Dust, made it through the winter while he was away prospecting for gold in Taos. Thinking about Archie and Rose, Ackler reflects, “Some lived and some died, and that’s how it was” (77)—human and animal alike. It is a far cry from Alexandra and Antonia and the rich farms they build up; Archie and Rose’s story is not as appealing, but Proulx, with the weasel in the woodpile, makes a strong enough impression to take some of the luster from the pioneer myth and bring back a more unsettling truth about the plains.

“The Wamsutter Wolf” (*Bad Dirt*) carries an animal metaphor that, like the previous story, works to deconstruct the pioneer myth while painting a more realistic picture of life on the plains. The story, set in the present, involves Buddy Millar, a down on his luck twenty-something who has drifted from job to job—hand on his father’s farm, roughneck, grouter, construction worker, etc. At the beginning of the story Buddy has given up on the unpleasant city of Denver and returned to Wyoming. After a botched
attempt to live at home, Buddy moves to Wamsutter, a town “enjoying a methane gas
boom that promised to equal the happy oil years of the ’30s and ‘70s” (147). Buddy does
not find work, however, and the rest of the story, covering only a few days, chronicles
Buddy’s entanglements in the rough and tumble town.

As Buddy encounters tough characters from his past, he also manages to reflect
on Wyoming and the town of Wamsutter. He observes the town as he enters it for the first
time as a “huge trailer park” full of people looking to make a living in the gas fields:
“This, he thought, was the real Wyoming—full of poor, hard-working transients, tough as
nails and restless, going where the dollars grew” (148). Much of the story (and many of
Proulx’s stories) hinge on how little work is available on the plains, and how hard it is to
turn a profit with any job or venture. After Buddy rents a trailer on the outskirts of
Wamsutter, he explores a similar trailer, abandoned, next to his. In the crumbling
structure, taken over by rats, Buddy makes an interesting discovery:

In the tiny bedroom a yellowed newspaper story dated 1973 was tacked to the
wall. It told of several families who had bought land south of Wamsutter from a
fly-by-night development company. In the story one of the buyers was quoted as
saying, “This is our dream come true, to own our own ranch. We’re the new
pioneers.” […] But, the story reported, townspeople said the “pioneers” would
never make it through a single winter and no crops would grow in the desert.

The newspaper article tells the same story: Whether it is 1885 in “Them Old Cowboy
Songs” or 1973 in this narrative, the repeated experience is coming to the plains and
being frustrated at trying to live off the land. In this case the return of the repressed history is a literal text uncovered by Buddy.

The rest of the story is concerned with answering the question of who can survive on the tough plains. Buddy’s neighbor, Rase, seems a good bet. Buddy had a fight with Rase, the high school bully, as a fourteen-year-old and ended up with a “broken nose and broken cheek bone” from Rase “repeatedly slamming Buddy’s face onto the cement sidewalk” (163). Rase’s friend, Craig, a proclaimed “mountain man,” seems the alpha male as well. When Buddy agrees to go over to the Wham trailer for an antelope cookout, Craig speaks about running for governor of Wyoming and the first change he would make: “First thing I’d do is make the wolf the state animal, put the wolf on the license plate, get rid a that damn buckin bronco” (158). Craig claims a bit later that “if I was to be a animal that’s what I’d want a be—a big grey Canadian-Wyomin wolf. I look at a wolf, I look at myself” (159). Wolves, as mentioned, are a running motif in the story. At the beginning of the story, we are told that Buddy’s cousin Zane, a wildlife biologist assigned to Denali National Park, takes wolves as his area of specialty. When Buddy’s mother comments that it is nice that Zane helps “preserve the balance of nature,” Zane responds, “Nothing is really balanced. Try to think of it as an ongoing poker game, say five-card draw, but everything constantly changes—the money, the card suites, the players, even the table, and every ante is affected by the weather, and you’re playing in a room where the house around you is being demolished” (144). This comes to be an apt description of Buddy’s navigation of his time in Wamsutter, and, in many other stories, the general experience of living on the plains. On his first night in his trailer, Buddy hears
the “yip and yodel of coyotes, but near morning, the 5:00 a.m. light milky in the windows, he heard deeper howling. Someone’s dog, he supposed [...]” (149). But the reader, already contemplating wolves, senses the foreboding attached to Wamsutter. After Craig’s discussion of wolves at the cookout, the events of the story begin to spiral. Buddy leaves the cookout after Rase gets into an argument with Cheri, his wife. When Buddy returns to his trailer late that night, Cheri is inside with her son, whose “arm seemed to have an extra elbow” (165). The boy has been beaten by Rase, and Buddy takes the family to the hospital. Once they return to the trailer, a drunk Buddy reluctantly sleeps with Cheri. Over the course of a few days, Buddy is able to extricate himself from the situation and is headed up to Alaska where his cousin can get him a job.

After he comes back to his trailer to clear out his things, Buddy runs into Craig, Cheri, and her family in town. Her son Vernon, the one whose arm was broken by Rase, comes up and whispers in Buddy’s ear, “Buddy, the wufs ate Daddy” (175). Vernon continues, “And Craig says not to tell nobody. Craig is our daddy now. And no wufs can eat him because he is their friend! And they won’t eat us because he is our new daddy” (176). When Buddy looks at Craig he observes, “The old merry twinkle was extinguished. A hard, alpha stare had taken its place” (176). Buddy begins to “back away” and manages to say, “I see you got your own pack now” (176).

The not so subtle point Proulx makes through the wolf analogy is that on the plains, everything is scarce. The atmosphere of the story is constantly filled with details of the squalor of poverty. And, it is the wolves, the predators, that survive. Buddy, desperate to leave Wamsutter, does not want to be a wolf or perhaps cannot be. The
choice of wolves as analogy in the story is significant (wolves in fact appear in multiple stories). Wolves are of course often placed within horror narratives. In a wide sense, wolves are perceived as dangerous predators. On the plains the biggest threat they pose is to livestock. But in a cultural sense they are thought of as ruthless attackers, voracious feeders. To replace the bronco or the bison with the wolf as the plains mascot communicates a much different message about the environment of the plains. It is not the breadbasket where the yeoman farmer can flourish; it is the domain of survival of the fittest. In My Antonia, Peter and Pavel fled Norway and came to Nebraska because of the wolves that chased them the dark night they pushed the bride and groom off the sleigh. On Proulx’s Wyoming plains, however, it is the wolves themselves that signify what life is like in the region.

Proulx’s outlook on making a living on the plains can be summarized by a very brief story, “The Old Badger Game” (Bad Dirt). Proulx has a handful of very short, off-beat stories in each of her collections. They, in a way, provide brief intermissions between the more serious, longer stories. In this tale, three badgers are sitting out in the sunshine discussing “the vagaries of life” (89). One of the badgers with a reddish tinge to his fur informs the other two that yesterday, as a ranch owner and his wife drove by him, the wife remarked, “Good looking badger” (90). “Well, Great Badger Almighty, the rancher’s wife has fell in love with me” (90), the badger exclaims. While the other two badgers “made coarse jokes about possible and impossible sexual conjunctions between the red-haired badger and the rancher’s wife” (91), the red-haired badger drags himself through the bushes to shine up his fur and prepare himself for another encounter. After
several, though, including one in which the badger is almost shot, the red-haired badger
gives up, claiming that the “Rancher caught on and he’s crazy jealous” (92). It is the last
line of the story that encompasses a good deal of Proulx’s outlook. One of the badgers, a
retired professor who has been “denied tenure,” claims, “that was how the old badger
game went—what seemed imminent somehow never came to pass. Life, in short, was a
shuck” (92). The three stories above follow characters that struggle mightily but lose out.
Their dreams and goals, be it just the desire to hold a job, never come to pass. The
Grotesque stories are filled with horrific violence and deaths, and they work to dislodge
the impression that the great plains are a fertile garden and that hard work is always
rewarded, when, more often it is the predator or the scavenger: the coyote, the wolf, or
the weasel in the woodpile. The university badger feels that it is just luck, but it seems
that in “the old badger game,” in Proulx’s Wyoming, it is the land that always wins.

“Too Far to Anything”—The Lonely Plains

A characteristic commonly related to the yeoman farmer is a deep love for the
land itself. A strong literary example is Alexandra’s love for the plains landscape—a
theme that runs throughout *O Pioneers!!*. The lesson in Alexandra’s narrative is that if
one loves the land enough (and that involves to a great extent remaining faithful and
staying in the region), one will eventually be rewarded. A romantic love for the land is
also a feature in several of Proulx’s Wyoming stories; however, the lover is not rewarded
as they are by Cather. Also, some of Proulx’s characters do not love the open plains at all
but yearn for human interaction and dream of living any place else. They do not share
Alexandra’s deep belief in rural superiority. An emotional love for the land is integral to
the pioneer myth, and in Proulx’s plains world, this love often does not exist, or if it does, it does not change the fact that the land does not love back, does not “yield itself easily to the plow […] with a deep sigh of happiness” (50) as Cather describes in her Nebraska. The crop that Wyoming consistently yields throughout Proulx’s stories is loneliness. Cather featured lonely characters like Mr. Shimerda, but in several of Proulx’s stories, lonely characters such as these take center stage, and they are not depicted as weak or unable to adapt but instead illustrate the reality of living and working in an unforgiving landscape.

In “The Bunchgrass Edge of the World” (Close Range), Ottaline, “the family embarrassment,” is a young woman who has just finished school and works on her father’s ranch, unable to find work elsewhere. Ottaline is “distinguished by a physique approaching the size of a hundred-gallon propane tank” (125). She has no friends, few love interests, and is generally ignored by her family. Unlike Alexandra or Antonia, Ottaline does not take an interest in the ranch or landscape: “Ottaline had seen most of what there was to see around her with nothing new in sight. Brilliant events burst open not in the future but in the imagination” (130). Ottaline dreams of going other places and meeting other people. The nights are especially difficult for her: “She was no one but Ottaline in that peppery, disturbing light that made her want everything there was to want. The raw loneliness then, the silence of the day, the longing flesh led her to press her mouth into the crook of her own hot elbow” (130). Ottaline has a scanner in her room that she uses to listen to random cell phone conversations, and the story features lines of
random, unconnected conversations, which prompt Ottaline to fill in the blanks and
create the rich lives of these people in her own mind.

She reaches a low point: “Ottaline was dissolving. It was too far to anything.
Someone had to come for her” (130), and at this point in the story, someone, in bizarre
fashion, does. As Ottaline walks past a collection of junked tractors, she hears a voice
say, “Sweetheart, lady-girl” (131). The voice comes from a John Deere 4030 tractor and
signals Proulx’s use of magical realism. As Ottaline continues conversing with the tractor
over the course of the story, the fantastic nature of the relationship lends a distortion to
the story that imparts to the reader just how lonely one can become on the plains before
befriending talking farm machinery. Critics have often discussed Proulx’s use of the
technique. Scanlon writes, “In terms of subject matter, Proulx’s fiction can shift into
magical realism on occasion […] Proulx embeds these ‘fancies’ in the shadowing of ‘real
life,’ however, pointing to the strangeness of ‘reality’” (94). Scanlon identifies magical
realism with the Gothic’s purpose stylistically: to distort the reader’s view to the point of
recognizing the extreme nature of the current reality—in the case of Ottaline and
“Bunchgrass,” the extremely isolating effects of the plains. Lucie Armitt connects
magical realism more specifically to the Gothic, claiming, “what we find in magic
realism (particularly at the dark end of its spectrum where it meets the Gothic) is a
double-edged frisson which oscillates around the disturbing aspects of the everyday”
(306). In other words, portions of Proulx’s narrative that include elements like talking
tractors serve as disturbing elements that intensify the text in order to reveal the cruel
absurdities of repressed histories—the cruelty of those who live there, or, as I’ve stated,
the region’s potential to induce severe loneliness. Armitt’s discussion of the term “cryptonymy” sheds further light on the way Proulx uses magical realism to Gothic ends: “Cryptonymy […] relates to the psychoanalytical concept of transgenerational haunting […] In these cases the precise nature of the trauma only reveals itself in coded form and by a type of ventriloquising process, whereby what we hear from the apparent victim are the phantoms of a trauma belonging to past generations, but filtered through the voices and personae of those present” (312). In the case of the tractor in “Bunchgrass,” the voice it uses to share stories of its own mistreatment and loneliness, through its intense strangeness, filters the voices of multiple people who have suffered on the plains—Ottaline, of course, but also, one could interpret (based on Armitt’s claim), any who have suffered loneliness and mistreatment on the plains.

The tractor speaks in a voice “hoarse and plangent, just above an injured whisper, a movie gangster’s voice” (133). Most of what the tractor has to say deals with its resentment over bad treatment and poor maintenance but also its affection for Ottaline. The tractor remembers the day Alladin purchased him and put Ottaline in the seat: “[…] your little hand was sticky with frostin and you wiggled around in the seat and I thought—I thought it was goin a be like that ever day and it never happened again, you never touched me again” (136-37). The tractor expresses the kind of loneliness Ottaline has experienced, and its attachment to her is intense. A young ranch hand years ago had been killed on the tractor in a ditch rollover. Ottaline remembers the hand, Maurice, being friendly to her, and the tractor says that he killed the hand “Over you […] I saved you from him. He was going a get you” (135). The tractor expresses jealousy toward
anyone who threatens to steal away the attention of Ottaline. Once it has her attention, the tractor delivers a list of complaints about its parts that are broken and the maintenance it never received. The most egregious thing done to it, according to the tractor, was the time Aladdin fixed its brakes by pouring beer in its master cylinder, “pumped that beer down the brake lines. Yeah, he got enough pressure. But it ruined me. That’s why I’m here” (137).

At this point Ottaline proposes to her dad that she fix the tractor up. They get the tractor “dismantled down to frame, motor, and transmission” (141), when Ottaline’s father takes sick. This necessitates that Ottaline meet with the cattle dealer the next day. Instead of the usual cattle dealer, his son shows up, and he and Ottaline begin to date, eventually marrying. Ottaline does not rebuild the tractor, and the story does not mention any other interactions; however, just listening to the tractor seems to have changed Ottaline’s outlook by making her feel wanted. The tractor does enter the story again at the conclusion, though. Alladin purchases a small plane. He is proud to fly the plane in front of his family and land it in the yard. He insists that they are all present when he arrives. The plane “touched the ground, sending up a puff of dust, bounced back into the air, and made two more prodigious hops before the left wheel caught on the iron frame of the abandoned tractor and the plane fell on its face, crumpled into a mash of cloth, metal and rancher” (148). Ottaline’s husband pulls his father-in-law out of the plane and discovers he is dead with a broken neck. Thus, the old tractor gets its revenge. It has haunted the ranch with its resentment over rough treatment from Alladin and the way it has been isolated after breaking down. Ottaline’s discovery of the tractor allows these grudges to
make their way to the surface and to alter the current course of history on the ranch. Though the tractor is vindicated through another murder, and Ottaline is freed from her loneliness by her marriage, the lasting image of the story is really Ottaline’s relationship with the John Deere. Ottaline’s mother tells her, “There’s no lonesome, you work hard enough” (136), but “Bunchgrass” and Ottaline’s exchanges with the tractor bring out the profound loneliness of the plains region, the element so often repressed or attributed to the weak in earlier, pioneer narratives. And though the tractor takes on a male persona, in its overworked, under appreciated and lonely state, it seems more comparable with pioneer women characters like Mrs. Shimerda from *My Antonia* and Cora from *Plains Song*. To apply Armitt’s claim, the tractor is the victim, but it can be interpreted as speaking through oppressed pioneer women; they are the “phantoms of a trauma belonging to past generations.” Many plains characters, especially women like Ottaline, Mrs. Shimerda, and Cora, have felt trapped by the lack of stimulation and endless work of their plains lifestyle. The tractor in the story, broken down by work and misuse, offers up a voice for the oppressed. Further, the forsaken tractor can be viewed as the inverse of Cather’s stalwart plow on the horizon in the way that it counters romantic depictions of physical work on the plains.

Unlike Ottaline, Car of “Pair a Spurs” (*Close Range*) has a strong love for his ranch. He “had lived on the Coffeepot all his life and suffered homesickness when he went to the feed store in Signal” (153). Car is said to possess a “morbid passion” for his ranch even though the tough beef market makes it extremely hard to make a living. At the
beginning of the story, Car is reviewing the last two weeks weather with his neighbor, Sutton Muddyman:

Ten days before June a blizzard caromed over the plains, drifting house-high on lee slopes, dragging a train of arctic air that froze the wet snow […] For a week the cold held under the glass sky […] it broke in minutes under a chinook’s hot breath. Meltwater streamed over the frozen ground. Scrope’s yard flooded, a mile of highway disappeared under a foot of water […] but before it ebbed another storm staggered in from the west and shucked out six inches of pea hail, a roaring burst that metamorphosed into a downpour, switched back to hail and finally made a foot of coarse-grained snow. Two days later the first tornado of the season unscrewed a few grain elevators from the ground. (152)

The weather in itself is almost supernatural: apocalyptic with blizzard, frigid cold, flood, hail and tornado following each other. The landscape seems purposefully vengeful and uses whatever resources it has to beat down its inhabitants. “I never seen so goddamn much weather packed into two weeks” (152), says Car. Recently Car and other ranchers have resorted to erecting “eat beef” signs on the road to try to help their plight. So it is clear that Car’s passion for his ranch can be interpreted as “morbid” when the living conditions themselves are so difficult. The ranch itself has been in Car’s family for several generations: “A photograph of the ranch taken in 1911 hung above the table, gaunt Scrope ancestors grinning in front of their dugout […] It had been there so long Scrope couldn’t see it, yet was aware of it in the same way he was aware of oxygen and daylight—he’d notice if it was gone” (154). Car is haunted by the image of these
ancestors, and he is driven to maintain their lifestyle in his own. The ranching life is the only life Car knows, and his family has been “grinning” in these conditions since the early 20th century. What Car represses is the possibility that his ancestors struggled as much as he does and experienced the same kind of loneliness.

“Pair a Spurs” revolves around a mystical pair of spurs. The catalyst for every turn in the story, they are coveted by many, bring about the death of two characters, and have an intense effect on Car himself. Whenever Car is around the person wearing the spurs, they give him a splitting headache and an uncontrollable desire to have sex with that person. The spurs themselves have a backstory that plays into the supernatural. They are smithed by Harold Batts, a “metallurgical engineer” for Pacific Wings who was suddenly laid off in a company down sizing. After he “became interested in prophecies, signs that the end was near and other eschatological fancies” (159), he tells his wife that “until the final trump they were going to live a simple life in a simple place” (159). Batts apprenticed to a spur maker in Oregon for a year and “spent his weekends in retreat with a coming-end sect know as Final Daze” (159). Characterized with this Ted Kaczynski like background, Batts settles in a town close to Car’s ranch and opens his shop.

Batts is a sort of mad scientist spur maker, experimenting with “unorthodox admixtures of nickel, chromium, copper, tungsten; played with molybdenum, vanadium, cobalt” (159). Proulx enters the realm of the supernatural with her characterization of Batts, his work, and his beliefs about the end of the world. The title spurs are the most beautiful he has made: “[…] half-drop shanks in steel blued to the iridescent flush of ripe plums. The line was severe and elegant. The silver buttons, the silver overlaid blunt-star
rowels and shank tips held the same pale gleam as twilight water. Silver comets whose tails flowed into the shanks ornamented the heel bands” (160). Batts says to the cat in his shop, “There’s some power in these […] Somebody’s going to Connect” (160). Proulx capitalizes “Connect” in conjunction with Batts’ own mystical beliefs, and it is clear from the way the spurs are described that they will do the supernatural, Gothic work of uncovering some repressed truth. It is Sutton that first buys the spurs for his wife, Inez. As Sutton looks them over, Batts identifies the design as the Hale Bopp comet and says of it, “Beautiful. Terrible. The position of the earth in space is going to shift. There are forces coming that will make iron swim, cause a five-hundred-foot tsunami. We live in the final times—it’s right in your face, the millennium, global warming, wars, horrible pestilences, storms and floods. The comet was the sign” (163). The spurs connection to the Hale-Bopp and Batts’ own prediction of doom charges the spurs with a catastrophic power from the time of their purchase.

When Inez first wears the spurs into Car’s kitchen, “a mixed buzz like radio static got in his head” (165). Not long after, Car complains, “I got a bear of a headache” (166). Proulx also describes that “The titanium plates holding his bones together were hot” (168). Car had been in a terrible auto accident with his ex-wife, and his bones were mended with metal plates. A possible explanation for Car’s head pain is that the metal in his body is being attracted by the metals in the spurs. However plausible this explanation might be, there is no explanation for Car’s next comment to Inez: “You set a match to me […] Let’s go do it” (168). Car follows this with more vulgar suggestions that horrify Inez. A significant background detail about Car is that his wife left him after she slept
with one of his childhood friends. Car takes the loss hard, shooting up his wife and his friend’s vehicles. It is clear that Car is lonely. Before his advances, Inez had compared him, in her mind, to other older, bachelor ranchers she has known—men she compares to “a dirty old boar in a boar’s nest” (167). The spurs seem to bring out a feeling in Car that he has repressed, his desire for physical intimacy but perhaps also companionship. Car continues to hound Inez, “plotting her day and appearing whenever Sutton was somewhere else” (169), until she tells her husband to talk to him. Before Sutton can do this, though, Inez has to ride out (wearing the spurs) to a group of dude ranchers who say they are lost and have seen wolves. (Inez and Sutton have turned their failed cattle ranch into a dude ranch for city out-of-towners.) Inez assures the group that the “wolves” are coyotes, and she rides out to guide them back to their ranch. Inez finds the group, sets them back on their way, and then investigates the area: “She rode up the wash. To her right in a clump of rabbitbrush a large female wolf appeared, watching her with yellow cross-eyes” (172). Without thinking, Inez ropes the wolf and ties her rope to her saddle horn. But at that moment the wolf leaps, and Inez’s horse rears and bucks violently: “Inez went through the windshield, landed on her chin and skidded, neck broken, mouth open, lower teeth plowing into red dirt. The dallied rope pulled free and the wolf bolted away through the sagebrush […]” (172-173). Like the weather at the beginning of the story, nature (in the form of the wolf) rises up to strike violently. Batts had earlier described unnatural events that would occur during the “end times,” and it is at least very rare, according to Inez, for a wolf to appear in the area. The description of “a large female wolf,” specifically, seems a possible allusion to Dante’s she wolf outside the entrance to
hell in *The Inferno*. In Dante’s poem, the she wolf represents deception. One might say that the landscape itself can be deceptive in the way the natural circumstances can change so quickly on the plains and turn on those who live there. It is not clear why Inez, as one of the more upright characters in the story, would meet a fate so grim: She is literally made to eat the Wyoming soil. But perhaps that is fitting as well in the theme of unpredictability on the plains.

After Inez’s death, Sutton auctions off the ranch and all its contents. It is Mrs. Freeze, Car’s hired hand, that ends up with the spurs next. She buys a box of rope for two dollars at the auction, and the spurs are buried at the bottom. Now, whenever Mrs. Freeze comes around Car wearing the spurs, the same phenomenon occurs. Mrs. Freeze is “a crusty old whipcord who looked like a man, dressed like a man, talked like a man and swore like a man,” so this has a more humorous effect in the story. When Car is around Mrs. Freeze, “He ached all over, felt the metal plates straining against his skin, the screws pulling out of the bones” (181). Mrs. Freeze leaves Car’s ranch because of his advances and gets a job on Sutton’s old ranch, which has been purchased by a Hollywood actor and is run by Texas hands. Mrs. Freeze has to give the now famous spurs to the ranch foreman in exchange for the job, so she escapes the kind of fate met by Inez. The ranch foreman is not as fortunate. After a large snow pack melts, the dam on the creek on Car’s ranch breaks, turning the creek into a “foaming torrent.” The foreman tries to cross the creek on horseback anyway and drowns. After the creek goes down some of the hands recover the body and try to find the spurs, which they would like to give to the foreman’s children; however, “They didn’t find them, for the weighted boots had lodged under a
sunken steel beam of the old railroad trestle, the spurs seeking sister metal” (185). At the end of the story, one of the hands tells Mrs. Freeze that Car now spends every day by the side of the creek, with a bottle of aspirin: “He just sets there and stares at the water” (186). It seems that Car can’t escape the desire to “Connect.” Though he missed his wife after she was gone, it seems that most of Car’s emotions are directed toward the connection he has with his ranch—the pressure to live up to the ghosts of his ancestors. After Mrs. Freeze leaves, Car thinks, “Everybody left him […] He couldn’t bear the loneliness but the place had its claim on him and there was no leaving unless through his brother’s door” (182). Car’s brother died in an accident as a teenager, so Car is saying that there is no way off the ranch except death even though he experiences so much painful isolation there. One theme of the story seems to be the landscape’s unwavering ability to strike down those who live there, and the fantastic natural elements and the Grotesque deaths they cause make this natural fact clear on Proulx’s plains. To love a land like this seems fraught with peril, and Car’s story brings out this second theme. Car’s emotions have been stunted by so many tough years on his ranch, on the unforgiving land. This is how a love of the land has rewarded him. He doesn’t know how to express emotions in a way that will allow him to connect with other people. It is only the supernatural spurs that force Car to pursue human connections, though those connections are bizarre and devoid of hope. The supernatural elements of “Pair a Spurs” bring to light the realities of blunted emotions, isolation and loneliness on the violent landscape of the plains. The way that “metal seeks sister metal” in the story is the
repressed reality that returns—the reality that the vast, lonely plains can deny its occupants the human interaction they need.

In the short, quirky story “I’ve Always Loved This Place” (Fine Just the Way It Is), Proulx depicts the devil as he makes plans to remodel hell after he has returned from a design show in Milan. As the devil rides around hell on a golf cart with his assistant, Duane Fork, he makes suggestions for improving each area. When they come to the area where the cowboys are being punished, the devil suggests the cowboys be herded into pens, castrated, vaccinated, and thrown into pastures full of “cheatgrass, goat-heads, cockleburs and ticks” (41). Duane Fork asks the devil, “Ranchers, too?” The devil answers, “Nah. Nothing here would bother them” (41). The devil later recants and decides to give the ranchers herds of “irritable minotaurs” and “headstrong centaurs” for mounts, but it is the previous remark that makes an interesting comment on plains life. Though humorous, the devil’s remark reflects that, in Proulx’s Wyoming, ranchers lead tough lives of consistent challenges. Rugged individualism is often accompanied by deep loneliness. Some on the plains, like Ottaline, don’t love the land at all, and those who do, like Car, can easily end up spurned lovers. Their stories are the alternative to Alexandra and Antonia, and they bring to light the repressed history of those who did not win on the plains.

“Brass-nutted boys” and Human Cruelty on the Plains

Alexandra says at the end of O Pioneers!!, “We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while” (198). At the end of her story, Antonia says, “We’d never have got
through if I hadn’t been so strong” (220). Cather’s two most important protagonists contributed to the strengthening of the democratic utopia myth on the plains. Like Proulx, Alexandra speaks to the idea that the land really is the most eternal thing in the region, but Alexandra believes that those who stick with the land, “love it and understand it,” can own it for a while. Antonia is the embodiment of the hard work rewarded lesson. Through these two novels, Cather does not actually put forth the idea that anyone who wants to work hard can make it on the plains. Families like the Shimerdas struggle even though they toil endlessly to make their homestead work for them. Neither does Cather paint the plains people as impeccably moral. There are swindlers like Ivy Peters and Wick Cutter, and even Jim Burden expresses close mindedness when he says to Antonia, while they are children and she complains of her father’s dissatisfaction with Nebraska, “People who don’t like this country ought to stay at home […] We don’t make them come here” (59). But, as stated in the introduction, it is the power of Cather’s transcendent protagonists that makes the lasting impression on Great Plains literature. Alexandra and Antonia had the “right stuff” to make it on the plains, and they lend real credence to the idea of the democratic utopia and the values that accompany it. Scott Russell Sanders discusses in his book, Writing from the Center, the phenomena of a certain value system being attributed to the plains (and “Midwest” as Sanders approaches it): “the Midwest would eventually become in our mythology something of an agrarian theme park, a repository for values that Americans wish to preserve but not live by […]” (39). Again, though Cather’s actual description of her Nebraska and its denizens, overall, contains value systems both negative and positive, it is the heroines and their values that
are remembered. Without characters like Alexandra and Antonia in her fictional world, Proulx is free to address the darker side of morality on the plains. Proulx explores, with much greater depth, the dark eruptions that Cather acknowledges on the plains when she depicts the closed-mindedness shown toward characters like sensitive Mr. Shimerda and the eccentric naturalist Ivar. Those who are different in Proulx’s Wyoming meet much more resistance than Cather’s outsiders, and Proulx makes a concerted effort to depict Wyoming not as a region where anyone can make it with hard work—the previous section on the failure of farming and ranching on the plains making this clear—but as a region where people show a tremendous capacity for cruelty and closed-mindedness.

In the beginning of this chapter, a quotation from the story “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water” expressed Proulx’s belief in the power of the Wyoming landscape over humans, describing the landscape as “dangerous and indifferent ground.” Proulx continues at the beginning of that story, “Other cultures have camped here a while and disappeared. Only earth and sky matter. Only the endlessly repeated flood of morning light. You begin to see that God does not owe us much beyond that” (99). The question enters then, who are the people that can make it in a land this indifferent to human life? The answer in the story is the family of Ice Dunmire. Dunmire comes to Wyoming from Texas in 1908, works various jobs until he has enough money to bring over his wife and children. His wife eventually leaves him, but not before they have nine sons together. As far as education for the sons, “What they learned was livestock and ranch work. When they were still young buttons they could sleep out alone on the plain […]” (101). Proulx continues, “They grew into bone-seasoned, tireless workers
accustomed to discomfort, took their pleasure in drink, cigarettes, getting work done. They were brass-nutted boys, sinewy and tall, nothing they liked better than to kick the frost out of a horse in the early morning” (101). By the depression era, the Dunmires dominate the region: “[…] they ran that country because there were eight of them and Ice and they were of one mind. But there builds up in men who work livestock in big territory a kind of contempt for those who do not. The Dunmires measured beauty and religion by what they rode through every day, and this encouraged their disdain for art and intellect” (103). In the story Proulx focuses on the idea of the mistrust of intellect because it does not have any bottom line involved with crops, cattle, or anything tangible to those who physically work the land.

This mistrust is embodied not only by the Dunmires but also by the region itself, it seems, judging from the fate of Ras Tinsley, son of Horm Tinsley. Horm brings his family up from St. Louis but possesses none of the skills of the Dunmires and “His failure as a stockman was recognized […]” (104). Horm enjoys the scenery on his ranch more than the work. His wife is of an even more sensitive nature to the point of extreme instability. The reader learns early in the story that on a wagon trip into Laramie, Mrs. Tinsley, driven mad by the howling of her infant daughter, hurled the child into a creek, where she drowned: “The child’s white dress filled with air and it floated a few yards in the swift current, then disappeared beneath a bower of willows at the bend” (104). After this “fit of destruction,” Mrs. Tinsley becomes intensely protective of her other two children, but her son, Ras, has a troubling disposition for life on the plains. Ras “displayed a kind of awkward zaniness. He was smart with numbers, read books. He
asked complicated questions no one could answer [...] he threw the weight of his mind in random directions as if the practical problems of life were not to be resolved but teased as a kitten is by a broom straw” (105). Sensitive and inquisitive, “There was no holding Ras. At sixteen this rank gangler left home, headed for San Francisco, Seattle, Toronto, Boston, Cincinnati” (105).

The Tinsleys don’t hear from Ras for five years until they learn that he has been in a horrendous car accident. Ras’s life seems ill fated from the beginning in the way his wandering, cerebral nature is contrasted with the tough, ranch-skill based personas of the Dunmires. When Ras gets off the train back home, he has returned a Grotesque and freakish character:

They knew it was Ras but how could they know him? He was a monster. The left side of his face and head had been damaged and torn, had healed in a mass of crimson scars. There was a whistling hole in his throat and a scarred left eye socket. His jaw was deformed. Multiple breaks of one leg had healed badly and he lurched and dragged. Both hands seemed maimed, frozen joints and lopped fingers. He could not speak beyond a raw choke only the devil could understand.

(108)
Proulx takes pains to fully establish Ras as a monstrous presence. Before he was characterized most by an active and creative (though “zany”) mind, but now he is a visual offense to even his own parents.

Ras has nothing to do at home and still has a desire to get out and explore, so his father gets him a horse, and Ras spends days on end riding out on the plains. Mr. Tinsley
learns from the sheriff that Ras, “a half-wild man with no talk” (110), has exposed himself to a rancher’s wife and some young girls. Around the same time, Jaxon Dunmire stops by the Tinsley place selling windmills. Jaxon sees Ras gallop in on his horse, learns he is Mr. Tinsley’s son, and then says that he thought it might have been the “crazy half-wit” terrorizing women. Jaxon adds that there are some people “who’d as soon cut him and make sure he don’t breed no more half-wits, calm him down some” (114). Mr. Tinsley orders Jaxon off his property.

Mr. Tinsley had taken Ras’s saddle away, but Ras took the horse out bareback on this last trip. When Mr. Tinsley talks to Ras about stopping his behavior and warns him that the Dunmires will hurt him, “Ras shot him a sly look with his good eye and began to laugh, a ghastly croaking Horm had not heard before. He though it was a laugh but did not catch the cause of it” (115). Ras takes sick with a fever right after this last trip. When Mr. Tinsley’s goes into Ras’s room a few days later to bathe him, he discovers the source of the persistent fever. Mr. Tinsley comes back downstairs, weeping: “My god, no wonder he laughed in my face. They already done it. They done it to him and used a dirty knife. He’s black with gangrene. It’s all down his groin, his leg’s swole up to the foot” (117).

The Dunmires are the kind of people who have thrived on the plains, and they are the ones who deal with Ras, the freak, and his transgressions. Proulx distorts Ras (depicts him as grotesque) to the point that it is impossible to ignore him and the root of his character: the uniqueness of his personality compared to most on the plains and also his desire to see and discover more than his home place can give him. The Dunmires’
solution, castration, to Ras’s problems is as blunt and cruel as it can be. (And is reminiscent of the way the mentally handicapped character of Benjy is dealt with in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury.*) The survival of the fittest phenomena brought out by the Dunmires is a repressed piece of history Proulx digs up, as well as the extreme cruelty the Dunmires wield with the power they have been given. The Dunmires are predators—a pack of wolves on the plains, and it is their kind that prospers. Whatever hopes Ras and his parents had for a life on the plains, they eventually had to suppress this reality. Proulx adds a note at the end of the story to underscore the importance of this history lesson:

That was all sixty years ago and more. Those hard days are finished. The Dunmires are gone from the country, their big ranch broken in those dry years. The Tinsleys are buried somewhere or other [...] We are in a new millennium and such desperate things no longer happen.

If you believe that you’ll believe anything. (117)

In one of the most Gothic historical moments in her Wyoming stories, Proulx goes beyond saying the past was different than perceived; she pushes the story further to claim that the “real” past is also the “real” present and completes a full return of the repressed as it pertains to plains citizens and their capacity for cruelty.

“Family Man” (*Fine Just the Way It Is*) is another of Proulx’s stories that works against the notion that the plains region is a designated location for morality. In the story, Ray Forkenbrock, a retired rancher, is a resident at a retirement home and has recently decided to tell “the ugly family secret” (9). Ray has decided, “He would not leave his
descendants to grapple with shameful uncertainties. He was going to clear the air” (9).

Ray has asked his granddaughter, Beth, to come to the home to record his thoughts and reflections. Beth will then type out her grandfather’s thoughts and bring the pages to him. The story is more classically Gothic in the way that it hinges on an ancestral curse, in Ray’s case the sins of the father. The return of a repressed past is also taken on in a very deliberate way with Ray’s structured approach to dredging up painful memories. Ray begins his recollections: “I’m eighty-four years old and most of them involved in the early days has gone on before, so it don’t make much difference what I tell” (13). After this qualifier, he continues, “I was fourteen year old in nineteen and thirty-three and there wasn’t a nickel in the world” (13). Many of the recollections from the curmudgeon Ray are of the “in my day” variety that express his regret at how easy and soft the current world has become after the hard life he has lived. Ray also shows a conspicuous effort to express how much he loved and respected his father. Before this topic builds, though, Ray’s focus is broken by the arrival at the home of Mrs. Terry Taylor, with whom Ray had his first sexual experience. The negative experience had occurred simultaneously with another one of his friends so Ray is bothered by Mrs. Taylor’s presence. However, in typical Proulx fashion, the distraction is taken care of in a timely manner. On a group trip to the Grand Canyon, Mrs. Taylor plunges to her death after she clowns around in front of the ledge and loses her balance: “She shot down the slope as one on a waterslide, leaving ten deep grooves to mark her trail” (20). It is as if the power of the narrative itself, the urge to uncover the past mystery, cannot be slowed down.
Ray says to Beth in one of their sessions, “You got to understand that I loved my dad. We all did [...] He was a wonderful man with kids, always a big smile and a hug, remembered all your interests” (16). However, Ray admits at the end of the story that after his father had been killed in an auto accident, he learned that his father had four separate families in four different towns. Each of the families has a son named Ray, so for young Ray, there are suddenly three other selves out in the world. Ray tells Beth, “What he done, see, was give all the kids the same names so he wouldn’t get mixed up” (31). Ray recalls a bizarre moment at the funeral when he went up to a boy with his own name to ask if he was related to his father: “He gives me a look and says [...] that is his father we are burying. I was so mixed up at this point I just said ‘You’re crazy!’” (27). This other boy can be read as a doppelganger for Ray, and in another classic Gothic moment, Ray must contend with this doppelganger as he realizes the dirty family secret. No one in Ray’s family, though, including his mother, ever says anything about these other families. After he unburdens himself to Beth, Ray says, “He got away with it. Until now” (31). Beth expresses excitement about “all the cousins,” and Ray can see she didn’t understand the story: “He had thought she was smart. She wasn’t” (31). Proulx uses classic Gothic tropes in this sense to assert that fathers are just as fallible on the plains as they are anywhere, and the family unit is no more sacred.

The dark and humorous short tale “The Blood Bay” (Close Range) is a good story to round out a look at Proulx’s view on plains morality. The story involves three cowboys who are riding during the harsh winter of 1886-87. The reader is told that, earlier, a young Montana cowboy had wasted his money on handmade boots instead of proper
clothing and had frozen to death by the banks of the Powder River. The three cowboys ride past the corpse, and one of them, Dirt Sheets, notices the handsome boots, far superior to his own. Sheets can’t get the boots off the body, so he “pulled out a Bowie knife and sawed through the Montanan’s shins just above the boot tops, put the booted feet in his saddlebags, admired the tooled leather and topstitched hearts and clubs” (94).

The three cowboys come to “old man” Grice’s shack to stay for the night. Grice welcomes them in but warns them not to bother his ill-tempered blood bay horse that stays in the shack with them. The group eats, drinks, plays cards and enjoys one another’s company that night. In the morning, Sheets realizes it is his mother’s birthday and rushes out to send her a telegraph. He takes the boots off the unfrozen feet before he leaves, throwing the feet back by the stove. When old man Grice wakes up, he is horrified: “He’s ate Sheets. Ah, I knew he was a hard horse, but to eat a man whole. You savage bugger” (95). Grice continues his rant as he drives the horse out of doors: “You’ll never eat human meat again. You’ll sleep out with the blizzards and wolves, you hell-bound fiend” (96). We are told, though, “Secretly he was pleased to own a horse with the sand to eat a raw cowboy” (96). To keep them quiet, Grice offers the two cowboys forty gold dollars and the money he won off them at cards the night before. Grice says, “Sheets was no prize […] There’s enough trouble in the world without no more” (96). The two cowboys agree. They see Sheets at a bunkhouse that night, congratulate him on his mother’s birthday but say nothing about the money: “The arithmetic stood comfortable” (96). In the introduction to this project, I shared Dan O’Brien’s claim that, “The truth is that there has never been much fairness out here […] pioneers proved to be just as human as the
next man, maybe more so” (95-96). “The Blood Bay” is a darkly comic, tall tale, but it makes the same point about human nature that many of Proulx’s stories do: On the plains people did and do what they need to in order to get by in the tough environment. It is not a place where everyone who works hard is rewarded, and morality is no more convenient in Wyoming than it is any other place.

Before concluding a look at Proulx’s Gothic treatment of the plains, there are a few other topics taken on that are worthy of attention—topics that fall outside of the pioneer myth and reaction organization I have followed thus far. Plains expatriates are prominent in Cather’s work with the major characters of Carl Linstrum and Jim Burden. Wright Morris spent the bulk of his plains work exploring the nostalgic perspective of the plains expatriate. As I have stated, though, Proulx concerns herself almost exclusively with residents of the plains. However, one of her thirty-one Wyoming stories does concern a nostalgic ex-resident. Through the story “The Half-Skinned Steer” (Close Range), Proulx makes her take on the nostalgic look back to the plains unmistakably clear. Mero, who is retired and living in Massachusetts, receives word that his brother, Rollo, has died back on the family ranch in Wyoming. This sets the stage for Mero’s long road trip back to Wyoming for the funeral. As a young man, Mero and his brother had waited for their father to move off the ranch. An unskilled rancher, their father eventually became a mail carrier, but he never moved off the place, never gave the two the chance to “pull the place taut” (22). Even though he eventually became a successful businessman, Mero has had regrets his entire life about leaving the ranch, has been haunted by the lost opportunity of becoming a successful rancher. But when he gets the call about his
brother’s passing, Mero believes his chance might not be over: “Maybe, he thought, things hadn’t finished turning out” (23).

As eighty-three-year-old Mero makes his way across the country in his Cadillac (does not like to fly), he reflects back on his years spent on the ranch, and many of these memories are tied to a story told to him by his father’s girlfriend. The girlfriend’s tale, from which the story takes its title, concerns a half-butchered steer, and the anecdote comes to carry significant figurative weight for Mero’s own narrative. The girlfriend’s story concerns a rancher, Tin Head, she knew when she was a child. The rancher got his name because of a galvanized metal plate in his head as the result of a fall down some cement steps. The rumor was that the plate “ate at his brain” (26). Tin Head’s ranch was a bizarre mess: “Chickens changed color overnight, calves was born with three legs, his kids was piebald and his wife always crying for blue dishes” (26). One day Tin Head goes out to butcher a steer that the family will eat all winter. He knocks it out, ties up the back legs, hoists it and drains the blood. He then takes the steer down and skins it, “starts with the head, cuts back of the poll down past the eye to the nose, peels the hide back” (32). The girlfriend notes that Tin Head “don’t cut the head off” but starts “siding” instead, working the tough, old skin off the steer. Siding is “hard work,” and Tin Head stops his job and goes in to eat lunch. After his lunch and a nap, Tin Head comes back outside to finish skinning the steer, but he discovers the steer is gone. All that remain are the tub of drained blood and the steer’s tongue he cut out. Tin Head thinks perhaps one of his neighbors has stolen the steer, and he looks in all directions before noticing something moving in the West:
[...] he sees something moving stiff and slow, stumbling along. It looks raw and it’s got something bunchy and wet hanging down over its hindquarters. Yah, it was the steer, never making no sound. And just then it stops and looks back. And all the distance Tin Head can see the raw meat of the head and shoulder muscles and the empty mouth without no tongue open wide and its red eyes glaring at him, pure teetotal hate like arrows coming at him, and he knows he is done for [...] (37).

Tin Head doesn’t say why, but he feels, after seeing the demonic, half-dead steer looking at him, that he and his whole family are “done for,” that “the house where they lived has to blow away or burn up and every fly or mouse in it” (37). The girlfriend says, “And it all went against him, too” (37). The extended flashback sequence ends with Mero’s brother asking, “That’s all there is to it?” (37).

The power of the evil gaze eventually makes tragic sense to Mero after he arrives in Wyoming. As he drives, Mero’s feelings of regret from leaving the ranch and also his hope for redeeming himself on the plains continue to grow. As he crosses the state line, Mero “felt himself slip back, the calm of eighty-three years sheeted off him like water, replaced by a young man’s scalding anger at a fool world and the fools in it. What a damn hard time it had been to hit the road” (31). Instead of taking satisfaction in a long and lucrative career and a comfortable retirement, Mero is consumed by what might have been back in Wyoming. Like Morris’s Gordon Boyd, Mero is almost paranoid with wonder at whether more legitimate, fulfilling lives are led on the plains. He wonders why he ever left: “How do you know when there’s enough of anything? What trips the lever
that snaps up the STOP sign? What electrical currents fizz and crackle in the brain to shape the decision to quit a place?” (33). The story speeds to a conclusion when Mero, refusing to stop, pushes all the way back home, arriving late at night during a snowstorm. He believes he remembers the turn to the ranch off the main road, but he takes a wrong turn and becomes stuck. Things go from bad to worse as he locks his keys in the car while trying to place rocks under the spinning back wheel. He smashes the window with a rock and eliminates the warm environment of the car. Mero says aloud to himself as he struggles, “This is how they separate the men from the boys” (38). But he can’t get the car back up to the main road, and the engine eventually dies. Mero begins a hike to a neighboring ranch, the location of which he thinks he remembers. In the middle of the night, Mero “walked against the wind, his shoes filled with snow, feeling as easy to tear as a man cut from paper” (39). As he begins the hike that seems highly unlikely to end in anything but his death, Mero notices an animal walking along the fence line with him, and he stops: “It stopped as well, huffing vapor, regarding him, a strip of snow on its back like a linen runner. It tossed its head and in the howling, winter light he saw he’d been wrong again, that the half-skinned steer’s red eye had been watching for him all this time” (40).

The supernatural, half-skinned steer from the anecdote is an animal that will not die when it is supposed to. Instead of existing as a carcass, the steer inexplicably rises and haunts Tin Head and, later, Mero. The steer is the distortion in style that allows Proulx to shock Mero (and readers) into rethinking a perspective on the plains, but it also embodies the perspective in itself. Mero has a mythic belief that the plains and the ranch he left
hold some form of glory for him. It is a pioneering instinct for Mero to want to come back and whip the old ranch into shape. That is the myth that Mero cannot let go.

However, the real history that Mero suppresses is that the Wyoming plains are tough country, and it is an extreme challenge (as nearly all of Proulx’s stories show) for anyone to make a living there. Mero’s brother himself has had to turn the ranch into “Down Under Wyoming,” a collection of exotic animals for tourists—basically a zoo. A runaway emu kills Rollo. Still, Mero wants to come back as the triumphant rancher. (This urge becomes even more strange and comic when it is shared that Mero is a vegetarian.) At the very beginning of the story, the family ranch is described: “[…] it was impossible to run cows in such tough country where they fell off cliffs, disappeared into sinkholes, gave up large numbers of calves to marauding lions, where hay couldn't grow but leafy spurge and Canada thistle throve, and the wind packed enough sand to scour windshields opaque” (21). This is the history that Mero represses, and the history that returns at the end. Mero wants to come back and tame this tough country, but he can’t even drive back to the old ranch without becoming lost, stuck, and frozen to death. The steer is half-skinned in the same way that Mero’s understanding of the Wyoming landscape is only half-realized. He knows it is tough, but nostalgia keeps him from realizing it is too tough for an eighty-three-year-old man. Wyoming did not hold anything for Mero as a young man, and it does not hold anything for him now. “Half-skinned” in his outlook at the beginning of the story, Mero is made fully aware, butchered, when he makes his final return to the plains. It takes Proulx one story to make clear that, on the plains, the nostalgia game is a fool’s game.
Proulx is similar to Cather and Morris in the fact that she doesn’t devote much attention to Native Americans on the plains. The one exception is “The Indian Wars Refought” (Bad Dirt), and the story does represent another example of plains Gothic. Stylistically, the story’s setting involves the classic Gothic trope of the haunted house in the form of the Brawls Commercial building, built in Casper in 1900 by lawyer Gay B. Brawls. In the present day, Linny Parrott, an Oglala Sioux woman, is given the job of cleaning up the now unoccupied building and sorting through all the files of the defunct Brawls law firm. It is interesting that Linny should receive this task in light of some of the dealings of the Brawls firm. Gay Brawls, a legitimate lawyer, died at the age of fifty-three after dropping some business folders on the stairs of the building, slipping, and cracking his head, but his son, Archibald, was involved in many shady dealings. Archibald defended a prominent rancher who benefited from the Teapot Dome scandal, and after concerned himself mainly with the “representation of timber and oil interests, rail-roads, irrigation rights settlement, and the wonderfully cloudy law of mineral leases” (20). Archibald dies in 1962 of lung cancer, and the practice is left to his son, Sage. It is Sage’s wife, Georgina, who marries Charlie Parrott, Linny’s father, after Sage is killed in a polo accident. Thus, Linny is the one to clean up the Brawls building, which has been built upon wealth from the exploitation of the land that once belonged to her ancestors.

The most interesting discovery that Linny makes in the building is a set of film canisters accompanied by some letters from “Buffalo” Bill Cody, a client of Gay Brawls. Linny eventually discovers that the film is titled The Indian Wars Refought and is

14 Louise Erdrich and Jim Harrison, authors who write in the plains Gothic mode and do focus on plains Native Americans, will be discussed in the conclusion.
primarily focused on recreating the Battle of Wounded Knee. The film takes on a mythical status. First screened in 1913, a review Linny finds states that after the mesmerized audience finished the viewing, they come “to the realization of having witnessed the most wonderful spectacle ever produced since moving pictures were invented…Nothing like this has ever been done before. Nothing to equal it will perhaps, ever be done again” (35). The film’s status as accurate or inaccurate, positive or negative, is unclear. The film has been “lost” since 1917, and Linny shares a theory from another letter she read: “There’s some think the government got rid of it because it was too realistic, showed the US Army in a bad light shootin women and babies with that big Hotchkiss machine gun cannon” (41). However, another review, this one written by Chauncey Yellow Robe, does not paint the film in a positive light. He speaks mainly to Cody and General Nelson Miles, the two main collaborators on the film: “It was not a glorious battle, and I should think these two men would be glad they were not there; but no, they want to be heroes for moving pictures. You will be able to see their bravery and their hairbreadth escapes soon in your theatres” (42). Linny struggles with the fate of the film, which actually belongs to Georgina, though Linny does not tell her of its existence. Linny does feel that “nothing in the film could possibly equal the tragic power of the single still photograph (from the actual battle) of Big Foot wrapped in rags lying dead on his back in the snow” (38).

Linny’s conflict with the nature and fate of the film encourages her to go to the library and read up on Native American history; she also asks her father about their ancestry. Charlie is excited to talk to his daughter but admits, “Linny, I’m sorry, baby
girl—I been de-Indianized. I been out workin in the wide world since I was fourteen. The rez didn’t have anything for me” (39). Charlie does offer, though, to take Georgina to the reservation, Pine Ridge in South Dakota, where he was born. “You can see for yourself” (43), he tells her. Before Linny leaves on this trip to explore a part of her history she has not acknowledged before, she has to decide what to do with the film. Because she briefly attended film school, Linny knows that she cannot open the long sealed film cans. She had told her father earlier, “You open those cans and the film will disintegrate right before your eyes” (41). Before she and her father leave the house, she runs upstairs and opens the films: “Inside the first one the coils of old nitrate film were clotted and welded together in a solid mass. The next deteriorated before her eyes to nitrate dandruff. She knocked one film out onto the bed. It had a nasty smell, and as it uncoiled and broke apart she could see that the center of each frame had been burned through by the acidic gases that had attacked the emulsion” (45). Linny chooses to destroy the version of history she finds. Two of the films appear ruined already, but one fantastically “deteriorates before her eyes” as if that version of history is being erased. The story illustrates a clear Gothic cycle. Linny’s excavation into the Brawls building, a haunted house built on exploitation, allows her to dig up a repressed past, ponder it, ultimately destroy it, and move onto a healthier present that is tempered by the experience of the painful history revealed.

“Fine Just the Way It Is”: Endurance and the Great Plains Landscape

At the heart of all of Proulx’s stories lies the landscape itself. It “looms large,” as Weltzien claimed earlier. The pioneer myth hinges on a glorious conflict between humans and nature. Cather chose characters like Alexandra and Antonia as famous
winners in this conflict. Proulx, however, whom one can view as the anti-Cather, chooses
the landscape and offers an alternative history to the pioneer myth. For a third time, I
return to the passage at the beginning of “People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water.”
Another portion reads, “You stand there, braced. […] The air hisses and it is no local
breeze but the great harsh sweep of wind from the turning of the earth. The wild
country—indigo jags of mountain, grassy plain everlasting, tumbled stones like fallen
cities, the flaring roll of sky—provokes a spiritual shudder. It is like a deep note that
cannot be heard but is felt, it is like a claw in the gut” (99). The history repressed on
Proulx’s plains is the strength and endurance of the land. It is a constant element in her
Wyoming fiction that does not change from story to story, no matter the decade or
century. She writes later that although “the signs of misadventure are everywhere” (99),
and her stories certainly document this, no human action “delays the flood of morning
light” (99). The point that Proulx makes about the unforgiving nature of the landscape is
not complicated, but it is challenging to prove due to the decades of pioneer-praising
literature that have come before.

In Proulx’s tall tale “The Sagebrush Kid” (*Fine Just the Way It Is*), a giant
sagebrush makes the point that despite the many changes and developments on the plains,
the landscape will remain the only constant variable. Proulx writes at the beginning of the
supernatural tale, “Those who think the Bermuda Triangle disappearances of planes,
boats, long-distance swimmers and floating beach balls a unique phenomena do not know
of the inexplicable vanishings along the Red Desert section of Ben Holladay’s stage
coach route in the days when Wyoming was just a territory” (81). The sagebrush in
question grew outside of the Sandy Skull stagecoach station. The wife of the
stationmaster milk fed the plant and was pleased at how quickly it grew. She dubs it the
“Sagebrush Kid.” However, strange disappearances begin to occur involving anyone or
anything that goes near the sagebrush. First a pair of oxen, then the telegraph operator, a
pair of soldiers, a group of Sioux, and five outlaws. At this point the stationmaster and his
wife pick up and move to Montana. As the stagecoach route is closed with the coming of
the Union Pacific, the sagebrush continues to grow, and as the old road is replaced by an
interstate, the plant still grows. During the mineral boom, a man camp is built out by the
sagebrush, and drillers begin to disappear. Finally, when a food deliveryman disappears,
and his truck remains running beside the sagebrush, the state troopers are called in. As
they investigate, though, they lose one of their partners. The remaining two spot their
fellow trooper’s nametag deep inside the branches of the sagebrush and lean in to take a
look—the last the reader hears of them. The last visitor to the plant is a botanist who
wants to measure the sagebrush, believing it to be the largest specimen ever. He estimates
the plant at thirteen feet, a record, and when he moves in close to measure, places “one
hand on a muscular and strangely warm branch” (91). Proulx writes at the story’s
conclusion, “The Sagebrush Kid stands out there still. There are no gas pads, no
compression stations near it. No road leads to it. Birds do not sit on its branches. The
man-camp, like the old stage station, has disappeared. At sunset the great sagebrush holds
its arms up against the red sky. Anyone looking in the right direction can see it” (91). The
tall tale carries the obvious moral that the landscape is not to be trifled with; it will outlast
or consume any human that inhabits the plains. And though the legend of the Sagebrush
Kid may be more blunt about the point, the same theme, in more complex forms, has been carried through all of Proulx’s stories. Human efforts to tame and settle are mere blips on the timeline of the land itself. Weltzien writes, “Proulx continually suggests the presentness of the geological past as though its upheavals and paroxysms—the latent force of the ‘badlands red country’—inevitably pummels or crushes human endeavor. The tough terrain continually unfolds itself” (107). The terrain is the reality of the history of the region, and it has not changed, as “The Sagebrush Kid” and the rest of Proulx’s stories illustrate, but the people who enter the plains continue to try to change its story.

In “Tits Up in a Ditch” (Fine Just the Way It Is), the political character Wyatt Match is said to have dedicated himself to preserving “the romantic heritage of the nineteenth century ranch, Wyoming’s golden time” (183). As Match works to push himself into the legislature, he is told by a well-respected, older rancher that “Wyoming was fine just the way it was” (184). Even though stories like “Them Old Cowboy Songs” point out that the nineteenth-century was not the “golden time” for the majority of plains people, Match is still enamored by this romantic conception. Match is wealthy, so it is easier for him to pursue this ideal, but for characters like Gilbert Wolfscale of “What Furniture” (discussed in the introduction) and Mero of “The Half Skinned Steer,” to name a few, pursuing this romantic notion on a ranch can come at the highest cost. Margaret E. Johnson comments on this pursuit: “In their attempts to replicate the lives of their ancestors, many of her rancher characters find that the core identity they hold in common with those who lived before them comes crashing down as the land does not provide, does not support. The worlds held in their past imaginations are at odds with the reality of
life [...] In fact, reality is hard, if impossible, to pin down” (28). The “lives of their ancestors” are grounded in only myth for many of Proulx’s characters, and the rugged land, as described in the passage at the beginning of this section, is one of the worst regional choices for the support of a myth. Alex Hunt speaks further to Proulx’s resistance to the romantic on the plains: “In moving away from stereotypical or romantic ideas about particular regions, in order to see beyond the mythos […] Proulx takes a particularly irreverent stance toward her regional characters even as—and because—she takes regional places seriously” (4). Hunt is correct in pointing out that Proulx’s characterization of her plains figures can be irreverent, darkly comic, and absurd, but as Hunt says, that is in a vigilant effort to resist stereotype and myth. Proulx must work toward extremes, and, as stated, this stylistic approach moves her into the realm of the Gothic with the distortion it offers.

With Proulx’s resistance to giving her characters any power over the land, and with her continual characterization of the landscape’s endurance, one might posit that part of Proulx’s message in her plains Gothic is environmental, but it is important to note that this is not the case. There is the story “The Hellhole” (Bad Dirt), in which poachers of Wyoming game are sucked down a “fiery red tube” (9) that a game warden has discovered, but there is also the story “The Governors of Wyoming” (Close Range), in which two environmental activists who cut fences, open gates, and poison cattle are depicted as fools—one of whom is shot at the end of the story. The oil and gas industry is present in many stories. In “Tits Up in a Ditch,” Proulx writes, “Since that pioneer time the country had become trammelled and gnawed, stippled with cattle, coal mines, oil wells
and gas rigs, striated with pipelines” (180). Proulx describes the manner in which the landscape has been abused, but the topic drops in the next sentence—no judgment follows. The industry is a part of the history of the region, but not the part with which Proulx is concerned. Elizabeth Abele offers a cogent summary of Proulx’s resistance to an environmental perspective as well as a romantic perspective on the plains:

> It may be tempting to categorize Proulx’s western writing as an environmental defense of the landscape and an attack on centuries of misappropriation of the land—treaties on how to finally “be one” with the land […] Rather than offering idealized heroes or solutions, Annie Proulx presents a lyrical documentation of the resilience of this overly mythologized land, despite man’s continual attempts at its conquest. (115)

Certainly none of Proulx’s characters become one with the land, even if they love it dearly. And, as stated before, the purpose of her stories is not a call to action to preserve the plains landscape. Her fiction simply points to the fact that the rugged landscape of the plains has remained rugged from the time homesteaders entered it to the present. In short, it does not need any help. Abele does well to describe Proulx’s exact attitude toward the landscape, which is also the primary history repressed on the plains: “[…] it is a land that demands our respect, while rejecting our reverence or our arrogance that we can know what is best. If it is possible to become one with the land, Proulx demonstrates that it is a man that must submit to the land—for this indifferent ground will resist and outlast all would be conquerors” (123). The phrase “rejecting our reverence or our arrogance” is an apt description of Proulx’s portrayal of human interaction with the plains landscape.
There are characters like Wolfscale and Archie and Rose who show an appreciation for the land. There are also characters like Ras from “People in Hell” and Dakotah from “Tits Up” that show no interest in the land and seek an escape. In Proulx’s Wyoming it does not matter; the land rejects “reverence of arrogance.” All of these characters come to a bad end, and, for those living on Proulx’s rural plains, there really are very few happy endings.

As it is important to resist environmentalist readings of Proulx’s stories, it is also important not to infer too much praise on Proulx’s part from her descriptions of the powerful, at times awesome, plains landscape. Unlike Cather, Proulx certainly does not depict the Great Plains as a playground for heroes. But Proulx does not even inject much that is positive into the landscape itself. She simply works to describe the place exactly as it is, working hard to resist the weighty myths that have defined the region. Since I have used Joyce McDonald’s more complex interpretation of the pastoral (really an anti-pastoral) to evaluate both Cather and Morris’s works, it makes sense that I should stand Proulx’s stories against her three-part progression as well. To list McDonald’s steps once again: “[…] the need to reclaim the pastoral ideal, followed by disillusionment and alienation, leading to a deep desire to reconcile human experience within a historical context” (3). Proulx plainly skips the first step entirely. She spends time depicting characters that are disillusioned and alienated on the plains, and then, unlike Cather and Morris, she fully reaches the third step of “reconciling human experience within a historical context.” The third step, as I have said, reaches a Gothic treatment of history. Proulx’s characters demonstrate that any glory on the plains does not come from the clash
with the landscape, for they have only been bruised by the encounter. Proulx works to
displace myth and to depict the Great Plains as a place that was always difficult to inhabit
and still is.

Proulx chose as an epigraph for *Bad Dirt* a quotation from Charlie Starkweather,
the serial killer alluded to in Morris’s *Ceremony in Lone Tree*. Starkweather said in his
1958 confession, “They say this is a wonderful world to live in, but I don’t believe I ever
did really live in a wonderful world.” The quotation sets an appropriate tone not only for
the collection but for all of Proulx’s Wyoming fiction. Readers and even critics have
complained about Proulx’s relentlessly dark take on the Wyoming plains through these
three collections. The reality created in these stories is often not what people want to hear
about a region, especially if they live there. But, as Proulx stated in the quotation that
opens this chapter, she is most interested in cultures in the “death throes,” and, while
being closely tied to her aforementioned research methods, Proulx crafted a plains world
that is relentlessly difficult to live in. Rood connects Proulx to the “new regionalists” of
the late twentieth century, and she describes some readers’ encounters with these writers:
“Readers who approach the works of these new regionalists out of a turn-of-the-century
nostalgia for getting back to their country roots quickly have their notions of pastoral
serenity replaced by pictures of rural poverty and varying degrees of violence” (15). On
the human side of things for Proulx, poverty and violence are the constants—the natural
effects of living in an environment so harsh. The reader reaction that Rood describes is
typical for the regional Gothic. In the works of Proulx, O’Connor and Faulkner,
distortions in styles do not veil the uncomfortable truths they bring to light. The effect is
also reminiscent of the scene in *O Pioneers!!*, discussed in the Cather chapter, in which Carl and Alexandra stop during a walk to look over the Norwegian graveyard. Alexandra recalls the time when the graveyard was wild prairie, which seems so long ago to her, but Carl says, “And now the old story has begun to write itself over there […] Isn’t it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before […]” (75). Alexandra responds to this with, “Oh, yes! The young people, they live so hard. And yet sometimes I envy them” (75).

Alexandra, the speculator, has not experienced many hard times, and has turned to nostalgia the ones she has. It is Carl who tries to make the point that hard times have always existed on the plains, all the way to the grave, but Alexandra, like the readers of the new regionalists Rood describes, does not want to hear it. To Carl, the “old story” on the plains is the story of human suffering, and with her depiction of the plains, Proulx picks up on the “old story” that Alexandra doesn’t want to fully acknowledge. Proulx depicts this repressed history as it “repeats itself fiercely” through the multiple decades in which her stories are set, offering an alternative history to the mythic conceptions of the region. Proulx gives a Wyoming look behind the curtains of the farmhouse in Wood’s *American Gothic*, describing fully the challenge of living on “dangerous and indifferent ground.”
Conclusion: A Cyclical History Revealed—Contemporary Gothic on the Plains

In the introduction to this project, I noted that the Great Plains region had no well-defined history because the past had always been the future. That is, the history of the plains was its unlimited potential, and the literature of the region had adhered to that outlook. With her three collections of Wyoming stories, Proulx adds a strong dissenting voice to the plains authors that have praised and carried forth the pioneer myth. The progression of a fully Gothic literature on the plains has been slow but steady. Cather did a great deal, perhaps the most of any writer, to strengthen the pioneer myth with her two heroines, Alexandra and Antonia, but Cather is also the Gothic genesis, in the way that she acknowledged growing materialism on the plains, introduced the plains expatriate, and created dark, violent eruptions that she could not contain in her Nebraskan world. Morris took up the expatriate archetype and fought a valiant but ultimately unsuccessful battle with nostalgia. Though Morris might have gone to the depths of his characters’ consciousness instead of the depths of history, he did look at the downside of the “plains trinity” of values. In taking the reader “to the boundary” of the Gothic, he offered up the anti-Antonia pioneer woman in Cora, and he gave a glimpse, through his photography, of the kind of dissonance in style it takes to create a Gothic view of the plains. After Morris proved the centrality of nostalgia as a stumbling block to coming to grips with a painful past, Proulx quickly broke the nostalgic link to the region and used the short story form for a historical fluidity that allowed her to take both present and past views of the region. She takes as central, as Cather did, the conflict between humans and the landscape, but Proulx sides with the land to reveal the reality of living in an unforgiving place, the
failure of the yeoman farmer, and the loneliness and cruelty prevalent on the plains. In bringing back this uncomfortable past, Proulx utilized a gamut of Gothic techniques, from classic tropes to the Southern Grotesque to her addition of magical realism.

Through her Wyoming stories, Proulx wages a successful Gothic battle with a formidable, pioneer myth opponent. Displacing these powerful myths is not easy, and the challenge the Great Plains Gothic takes on is extremely relevant. When gauging the influence of these myths on the present, one does not need to look far. During the 2013 Super Bowl, Dodge ran a commercial for their line of pickup trucks that featured as audio a speech given by conservative radio host Paul Harvey at the 1978 Future Farmers of America national convention. Still shots of various farmers and farming activities, set on a flat and stark landscape, appear with Harvey’s text. The speech begins, “And on the 8th day, God looked down on his planned paradise and said, ‘I need a caretaker.’ So God made a farmer.”15 Harvey runs down a list of tasks that take toughness, dedication, and also sensitivity—tasks like milking cows before dawn, staying “past midnight” in town for a school board meeting, and staying up all night with a newborn colt only to “watch it die.” The sentimentality reaches a crescendo when Harvey says that a farmer is someone “who will stop his mower for an hour to splint the broken leg of a meadow lark.” The Dodge commercial is evidence that mythic Great Plains values still hold real cultural (and monetary) value in America. The commercial ends with the phrase, “To the farmer in all of us,” and the ad makes use of general, agrarian values but, as mentioned, the images link with a plains landscape, at the heart of which lies an agricultural economy. Thus, I

15 quoted from the February 2013 The Atlantic article
believe the comparison is apt. These images and Harvey’s text certainly do not make mention of any of the plains realities Proulx brought up: the widespread failure of farming and ranching, extreme loneliness, the great cruelty of which conservative plains citizens are capable, the fact that all the land in the images was taken by force from Native Americans during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These realities will not sell trucks, and it is the mythic, attractive qualities of life on the plains that can be translated into a set of values, a set of values that Americans hope exist at least somewhere in the country. To demystify these values is a difficult and risky task for the plains regional writer.

In his book, *Not Just Any Land*, John Price shares the poignant story of Hamlin Garland (1860-1940), whose turbulent life as a plains writer reflected the difficulties of writing with brutal honesty about the region. Though Garland was a practitioner of realism and dealt primarily with the current conditions oppressing the plains region without connecting them to a past haunting the region, his experiences show how difficult it is to challenge the mythology that the country has established for one of its regions. Garland, who had lived in South Dakota while taking sojourns to the East to make money teaching, was encouraged by other authors to write about his home on the prairie. Garland did not have warm feelings for the plains: “He observed instead a growing regional tragedy, a population that seemed perpetually ravaged by harsh natural and economic forces” (18). Garland’s contribution to the true regional literature that he espoused came in the form of the story collection *Main Traveled Roads* (1891), a work Garland considered “the first western book to seriously address the region’s problems:
low crop prices, absentee landlords, miserable living conditions (especially for women), and the flight of bright young people from the region” (18)—a set of problems not so different from those Proulx would write about a hundred years later. *Main Traveled Roads* received “scathing reviews by some western critics who challenged the accuracy of his brutal descriptions” (19). Garland’s own family was equally un receptive to the book. His father’s reaction was silence; his mother replied that “he should not reveal too many unpleasant truths in his writing” (19). Garland had even campaigned for the Farmer’s Alliance and economic reform for the plains and was rebuffed on these efforts as well. A bitter Garland concluded, “he had done the right thing as an artist, had been true to himself and to his locality, and still nothing had changed” (19).

After moving to Los Angeles, Garland began to write again of the plains but turned his focus more inward, creating his own plains story that “had as its hero the western writer who overcomes the difficulties of rural life to eventually conquer the eastern literary establishment” (20). This “Middle Border” series earned Garland a Pulitzer Prize in 1921 but reflected a change in the writer that had argued passionately for a true regional literature. Garland now confessed that he had “no confidence in a democratic art” and declared himself an “intellectual aristocrat” (20). Garland tried to express a contrary reality of the plains in his own work and fully acknowledged his personal history as a part of the region. Price recognizes the extreme difficulty in Garland’s task: “What he put down on the page—the regional identity he proclaimed, the causes he served, the wild land he fought and ultimately eulogized—drew him into public contradiction, judgment and sorrow” (22).
Again, the challenge of a critical look at the plains region is apparent. When not only the people that live in the region but the country as a whole wants to perceive the plains in a positive way, myth breaking in a regional plains literature is daunting. With Faulkner, in the case of a Southern Gothic, no one inside or outside the region could deny the problematic history of the South, but the plains’ painful history is more securely buried and does not have a cataclysmic event on par with the Civil War to force it to the surface. In the small but specific case of the authors studied in this project, it seems almost impossible for the plains insider to create a fully Gothic literature. Cather refused to turn a cold eye to Nebraska, and Morris fought a vigilant but eventually unsuccessful battle with his nostalgia for the region. As mentioned, Proulx was not born in the region and began her contemplation of the plains well into adulthood. Cormac McCarthy and Jim Harrison, two authors to be discussed here, never lived in the region—McCarthy was born in Rhode Island and spends the bulk of his time in Tennessee; Harrison was born in Michigan and lives extensively in mountainous western Montana. The third author to be explored, Louise Erdrich, who grew up in eastern North Dakota, is an exception; however, as a Native American writer, Erdrich’s perspective on the region is naturally much different from Cather or Morris’s.

Thus, there seems to be a general trend of plains Gothic practitioners residing outside the region. I believe this phenomenon to be very telling of the hold the mythic history has on the plains region and its literature. Nevertheless, I would be remiss not to include a counterpoint I found. Mari Sandoz was born in Nebraska (to Swiss immigrants) and lived in the state for forty-four years before moving to Denver and then New York.
Her novel, *Slogum House* (1937), is the anomaly to the progression of the literary Gothic
I have traced on the Great Plains. Published a full sixty years before Proulx’s first
Wyoming story collection, *Slogum House* is a fully formed plains Gothic novel. The
narrative is set in Nebraska, and Slogum house itself, built of stolen lumber, is described
as “huddled on the prairie like a gray wart in the pit of a worn and callused palm, drawing
all the rutted trails of the Oxbow Flat toward it” (9). Gulla Slogum is the leader of the
family and uses her sons and daughters as tools to buy up and steal all the land and stock
she can. She employs her two daughters as prostitutes in the house. Running from the
closet of Gulla’s bedroom is a three-foot secret passage that allows her to observe every
room in the house. The passageway allows Gulla to obtain information when her
daughters entertain important guests like the county Sheriff and other political officials.
Her sons steal cattle and assault and intimidate whoever gets in the family’s way. Gulla
makes many of her decisions by reading cards to predict the future. On her wall hangs a
large map, the Slogum holdings marked in red. The story runs from the early 20th century
to the hard times of the 30s, and by the end of the novel, nearly the entire map is covered
in red. It is said that in one six month period, “Gulla Slogum had bought up fifteen
thousand acres of land in Dumur and Slogum counties, not an acre within half the
mortgage amount” (299). At the end of the novel, Gulla is incapacitated by strokes, and
her eldest son suffers a grisly death—strangled to death by the house’s windmill after his
neckercchief catches in its gears. Though the Slogum family’s power, at the end of the
novel, seems to be out of the hands of its most devious members, the work overall is
devoted to bringing back the repressed truth of unfettered capitalist aggression and greed
on the plains. Sandoz, like Garland, received harsh criticism for the novel. The mayor of Omaha banned the book, and in many Nebraska libraries the book was kept “on the special reserve shelf along with books about sex and other forbidden topics” (Winter-Stauffer 120). After Sandoz published *Capital City*, a novel (not Gothic in style) that took a harsh look at the economy and politics in Lincoln, the harassment Sandoz faced became “sometimes frightening”: “She was hissed at on the street and even, she claimed, spit upon on occasion. Newspapers reported that she was receiving obscene letters and threatening messages over the phone. Once she returned to her apartment to find her files rifled” (Winter-Stauffer 132). It was at this point that Sandoz, despite her close ties to her Nebraska home, relented and moved to Denver. Bringing out the dark side of the Great Plains has never been easy, and though Sandoz did not write multiple Gothic works herself or inspire other plains writers to work in that genre, *Slogum House* deserves recognition as a legitimately Gothic plains work, and Sandoz’s experiences after writing it are evidence of the regional conflict inherent to the task.

*McCarthy, Harrison, Erdrich: Contemporary Threads of the Gothic*

Cormac McCarthy gives a Gothic look at the southern plains of Texas in his novel, *No Country for Old Men* (2005). Unlike the novels of his border trilogy, which stretch the setting into Mexico, this is McCarthy’s only work set solely in the plains. West Texas provides the location for a classic battle between good and evil that reveals a repression of one character’s self and also a denial of the history of violence and evil on the plains. The character of Anton Chigurh—an unstoppable, though “principled” killer—provides a horrifying and fascinating distortion that forces Sheriff Ed Tom Bell to
contemplate his own past along with that of the region. And unlike Boyd’s contemplations in Morris’s *Ceremony in Lone Tree*, Bell’s personal reflections are always tied to region by the career he has chosen.

Bell is preoccupied at the beginning of the novel with the belief that the world is in a steep moral decline and that there are new evils cropping up that did not exist before. Bell has a clear sense of duty and states at one point, “The people of Terrell County hired me to look after em. That’s my job. I get paid to be the first one hurt. Killed, for that matter” (133). However, Bell doesn’t believe that most think this way presently: “People anymore you talk about right and wrong they’re liable to smile at you. But I never had a lot of doubts about things like that” (158). To provide proof of the current moral decline, Bell discusses a news article he read which detailed the finding of a school survey from forty years ago that asked teachers about the worst offenses they confronted. The biggest problems shared were things like “talking in class and running in the hallways. Chewin gum. Copyin homework” (196). The form was then sent out to current teachers and came back with replies such as “Rape, arson, murder. Drugs. Suicide” (196). Bell concludes, “[…] when I say anything about how the world is going to hell in a handbasket people just sort of smile and tell me I’m gettin old […] But my feelin about that is that anybody that cant tell the difference between rapin and murderin people and chewin gum has got a whole lot bigger of a problem than what I’ve got” (196). It is these changing times that create doubt for Bell as to whether he can still carry out his duties as a law officer. Bell notes, “Some of the old time sheriffs wouldnt even carry a firearm” (63). Bell “liked to hear about the old timers. Never missed a chance to do so” (64). The Gothic machinery of
the novel will eventually force Bell to confront the mythic conceptions of his version of Texas history.

As mentioned, Chigurh is the force that provides proof for Bell of the changing times he laments while forcing the Sheriff to decide whether or not he can confront this new kind of evil. Chigurh, whom Bell calls a “true and living prophet of destruction” (4), enters the novel to basically clean up the mess of a large drug deal gone bad in Terrell County. Throughout the novel, there are no specific descriptions of Chigurh, and he is purposefully drawn as a faceless source of evil. A witness questioned at the end of the novel states, “He was medium height. Medium build. Looked like he was in shape. In his mid thirties maybe. Dark hair. Dark brown, I think. I dont know, Sheriff. He looked like anybody” (292). Chigurh kills nearly everyone in his path, and his weapon of choice, an air powered, captive bolt gun used on cattle, is an accurate reflection of how he regards human lives. He can withstand tremendous pain when injured and is skilled at repairing himself. Chigurh is as faceless as he is relentless and efficient—the kind of undefined evil that has been haunting the Sheriff for some time. As they investigate the ongoing crime, Bell comments to his deputy, “I used to say they were the same ones we’ve always had to deal with […] But I dont know as that’s true no more […] I aint sure we’ve seen these people before […] If you killed em all they’d have to build a annex on to hell” (79). Bell never directly confronts Chigurh in the novel, and he is repeatedly referred to as a “ghost.” Bell describes him this way to his uncle but also says “he’s out there. I wish he wasnt. But he is” (299), to which his uncle replies, “I guess if he was a ghost you wouldnt have to worry about him” (299).
The aspect of Chigurh that defines him as more than mere terminator is his running philosophical commentary throughout the novel. Another hit man in the novel says of Chigurh, “He’s a peculiar man. You might even say that he has principles” (153). At points Chigurh has a sort of interview with his victims before he kills them. He says to one victim, “Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased […] A person’s path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly” (259). Chigurh’s main belief seems to be that choices define a path in one’s existence, and that once the path is set, it is difficult to alter. When the victim asks for mercy, Chigurh turns the philosophy on himself: “You’re asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I have only one way to live. It doesn’t allow for special cases” (259). Thus, Chigurh is disciplined about maintaining consistent choices as he follows his own path. Llewyn Moss, a character who stumbles upon the drug deal, steals the money, and then chooses to openly confront Chigurh, seems to express the same kind of philosophy Chigurh does. As he prepares for what will be his final confrontation with Chigurh, he says to another character, “It’s not about knowin where you are. It’s about thinkin you got there without takin anything with you. Your notions about startin over. Or anybody’s. You dont start over. That’s what it’s about. Every step you take is forever. You cant make it go away. None of it” (227). Both Moss and Chigurh speak to the inevitability of the past carrying through and determining the present. They speak to the futility of trying to repress the
past. Their beliefs are important because they foreshadow the realization Bell will eventually have about his own past and the past of his region.

After Moss is killed and Chigurh disappears (after hobbling away from a car accident with a compound fracture in his arm), Bell goes out to his uncle’s place to “unload his wagon.” He starts by telling a war story, a story that has haunted him since it happened. In WWII Bell was given a bronze star for returning fire after a house he and his platoon had been hiding in was shelled to rubble. Once it got dark, Bell ran away from the house though his fellow soldiers were still there; whether or not they were alive, Bell had no idea. His uncle says that Bell had no choice, that he couldn’t have helped them, but Bell replies, “I had a choice. I could have stayed” (277). The permanence of choices that Chigurh and Moss discuss seems to prove itself with Bell. He states, “I thought after so many years it would go away. I don’t know why I thought that. Then I thought maybe I could make up for it and I reckon that’s what I have tried to do” (278). But Bell does not think he has been successful. He says, “I’m not the man of an older time they say I am. I wish I was. I’m a man of this time” (279). Bell retires at the end of the novel and openly admits that he does not want to confront Chigurh: “Now I aim to quit and a good part of it is just knowin that I wont be called on to hunt this man […] So you could say to me that I aint changed a bit and I dont know that I would have an argument about that” (282). In an earlier reflection, Bell said that to confront someone like Chigurh, “I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that” (4). When Bell interviewed Moss’s wife and told her the people after him would kill him, saying, “They won’t quit,” Moss’s wife replied, “He wont neither. He never has” (127).
Bell is not like Moss, and he has suppressed notions about his own bravery throughout the novel. Chigurh forces him to confront these notions. When Bell asks his uncle if his father (since passed) would have stayed with his soldiers, Bell answers his own question: “He’d of set there till hell froze over and then stayed a while on the ice” (279). Ellis responds with a question: “Do you think that makes him a better man than you?” (279) to which Bell replies, “Yessir. I do” (279).

Bell holds onto his mythic conceptions of past Sheriffs in the county, and he also suppresses notions about the nature of the plains. He thinks that the changing nature of the region has affected his ability to keep order in it, but his uncle, Ellis, confronts these beliefs as well. Bell goes out to his uncle’s place to discuss quitting as Sheriff. Ellis served as a deputy in the county and was shot and paralyzed in the line of duty. As they talk about their family, Ellis tells Bell about another uncle (a Sheriff as well) who was “shot down on his own porch” (269) in 1879, a hundred years earlier than the setting of the novel. Ellis continues and shares an extended outlook on the region:

This country was hard on people. But they never seemed to hold it to account. In a way that seems peculiar. That they didnt. You think about all that has happened to just this one family […] You got to ask what was the good in all that. So I go back to that. How come people dont feel like this country has got a lot to answer for? […] This country will kill you in a heartbeat and still people love it. (271)

Ellis claims what Bell has been denying throughout the novel: the consistently violent history of the country. Chigurh is not the new evil in west Texas; he is just the latest incarnation. What Ellis does not understand is why people don’t condemn the region for
its brutal nature. In his view they suppress this reality and continue to pretend to love the place they live. This is the same kind of truth Proulx brings out in her stories—the brutal nature of the plains environment. And neither Proulx nor McCarthy uses any pioneer myth to add romance to the tough conditions.

As mentioned earlier, Bell is disappointed by not being able to live up to his conception of his father, but in the final scenes of the novel Bell seems to contemplate further what Ellis has told him about the country. As Bell walks around the initial crime scene for a last time, he admits that “maybe it is somethin about the country. Sort of the way Ellis said. I thought about my family and about him out there in his wheelchair in the old house and it just seemed to me that this country has got a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too” (284). In the final lines of the novel Bell shares a dream he has had in which his father is riding ahead of him carrying fire in a horn: “I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up” (309). The abrupt ending to the telling of the dream seems to suggest a sharp answer to Bell’s belief that his father is going to light the way for him in “all that dark.” After Bell has been shocked by Chigurh and helped by his uncle to contemplate the reality of the plains and its legacy of violence, he is also able to recognize his own mythic conceptions about past Sheriffs and his own father for what they are—dreams.

Jim Harrison’s *Dalva* (1988) and its sequel/prequel *The Road Home* (1998) chronicle the lives of the Northridge family on the Nebraska prairie. The time frame of the epic narrative stretches from 1865 to the present and proceeds with numerous
flashbacks. At the Gothic center of the two novels lies a crypt in the basement of the original Northridge homestead house. Dalva Northridge (whose primary narrative is set in the present) enters this crypt for the first time at the end of the first novel. The door for the crypt is located at the end of a root cellar, and the room itself, a sub basement, lies below the level of the cellar. Dalva narrates: “The light of the two lanterns revealed the door on the west end, also a fine mess of blacksnares, the largest of which lifted its head into the air and moved toward the source of light as if it was a guardian” (297). After wading through the snakes, Dalva finds that the room contains the skeletons of three U.S. army soldiers, five Sioux warriors in “full regalia,” and loads of artifacts from “tribes of the Great Basin” (298). In The Road Home Dalva and her son will deal with the contents of the crypt—a responsibility willed to her by her grandfather. The creation of the crypt and its legacy becomes clear by the end of the two narratives, and it is the main cog in the Gothic workings of the novel—a machinery that operates primarily through secrets. In addition to the crypt, a vault hides the journals of John Wesley Northridge I, journals that detail the genocide of the Native American tribes on the central plains. There are also sins of the father in the novel: On a hunting trip, John Wesley Northridge II (along with his two sons) sleep with an Indian woman, and the son (whose identity is kept a secret) born of these couplings returns to create a “biblical event” within the household. Northridge I lived primarily during the latter half of the nineteenth century, Northridge II, during the first half of the twentieth. The stories of these two men, told through flashback, make up a good deal of the narrative. Throughout the sprawling, eight hundred pages of the two books, all of the secrets associated with the Gothic elements of the novel bring back a
repressed history primarily focused on Native American abuse and also greed for natural resources on the plains.

Northridge places the bodies found in the vault there, and his story unfolds (in Dalva) through the aforementioned journals. A scholar friend of Dalva’s, Michael, is the character who most desires obtaining the journals. This plotline plays out in the present. A history professor at Stanford, Michael’s tenure and a large grant have come to depend on what he believes is contained in the journals—Northridge I’s “astounding ideas on what was termed the ‘Indian problem’ in the nineteenth century” (36). Michael defines the topic of his book as “the advent of farming in the Great Plains and the final solution of the Indian question” (113), so the Northridge journals are a scholarly goldmine for Michael. The Northridge family’s release of part of one of the journals to the Nebraska Historical Society in 1965 caused some “publicity and problems,” but Dalva has decided to let Michael read her great grandfather’s journals (there are also documents related to Northridge II and his sons). The vault is located at a bank in town; the room where the journals are kept is an “extension of the main vault” (123). Michael observes, “there were five modest wood sea chests with bright brass fittings” (124). Dalva has organized all the documents, “revealing a researcher’s dream of tidiness, with her typed list of contents resting on neat stacks of bound ledgers, and packets of letters” (124). Michael’s excitement grows as he realizes that a repressed history of the plains has been written and then organized and served up for the taking. Michael at one point in the novel says of Nebraska, “some of the soil in the area was still likely moist with Native blood, and that other than southern New Mexico with its remnant Apache and Comanche conflicts at the
end of the century, this was the last area in America where the full collision of cultures had taken place” (254). Though it is for his own benefit, Michael does want to bring back, through the specific details of the journals, the brutal, repressed past of the tribes on the central plains. He is not disappointed by Northridge’s accounts.

Northridge served as an “agricultural missionary” to the Oglala Sioux in an effort to help them transition to reservation life on the plains. He quickly becomes disenfranchised with his work: “His mission became pathetically ordinary to him—how to convince people that turnips, cabbage, salt pork, and bad beef were a substitute for buffalo” (306). Northridge becomes a staunch supporter of the displaced tribe and “came to be considered a menace by government Indian agents and the army” (306). Northridge does all he can to help his Native American friends but becomes frustrated: “I have written my many articles, traveled to Washington & have bribed Congressmen & Senators only to be betrayed. In the fire I see I must murder Senator Dawes. I howl into the fire until I begin to weep” (305). The most damaging legislation in Northridge’s opinion is the Dawes Act of 1887, which allowed the president to survey Native American lands and divide them into individual allotments to help Indians assimilate more quickly. A damaging inclusion to the Dawes Act was the government’s ability to purchase “excess” Native American land and then distribute it to non-Indian settlers. Northridge himself lives for a period among the Native Americans and practices customs with them as sacred as the Ghost Dance. Dalva recalls of Northridge, “[...] he literally became an Indian, or a version thereof, started a small headquarters in the Badlands, away from ranchers, as a small fiefdom supporting as many as fifty charges, including a
miniature army of a dozen headed by He Dog and Sam Creekmouth” (312). At this point the government leaves Northridge alone for the most part because he is “widely considered in the West to be a total lunatic” (312). Late in his life, a former friend from college who is now an army officer visits Northridge. The officer verbally abuses Northridge and his family and at one point throws a doll, sacred to Northridge, into the fire. Northridge then shoots the officer and his two companions. These men are the uniformed bodies in the crypt. The Native American bodies are friends of Northridge’s who did not want to become the victims of grave robbers. In the last decade of the 19th century, Northridge is said to have formed a version of “his own Underground Railroad” and harbored Sioux and Cheyenne leaders who were fugitives from the government. Northridge’s story provides the repressed history about the treatment of Native Americans on the plains. Michael, as a historian, already has strong beliefs about this point in plains history. In an ill-received lecture he gives to the Rotary group in town, Michael states,

The Civil War was so vicious because the frontier was dead and all the yokels, hopped up on murderous adrenaline, were stewing for a fight […] The settlers came out and swindled and swiped the land treatyed to Indians, protected by a government drunk on power, money, and booze. When the settlers needed more fuel for their greed they used Christianity, and the idea that the Indians weren’t using the land. If your neighbor leaves his land fallow, grab it. (202) Michael’s version of the creation of the Great Plains region contrasts sharply with the mythic conceptions of those who live in Nebraska. It is the previously repressed journals
of Northridge that give Michael the specific evidence to make the claims about the alternate history he will communicate through his own scholarly project.

While Northridge I revealed immorality on the plains with his reportage on the treatment of Native Americans, his son, John Wesley Northridge II (whose story is told in The Road Home), is a source of immorality himself. Dalva’s mother, Naomi, says that her father-in-law: “[…] was known as one of the biggest bullies in Nebraska […] had swindled ranches away from people in the Depression, then sold them after World War II […] was a monster using money as a club” (263). As opposed to his father’s work trying to save Native American lands, Northridge II focused on building the family ranch, expanding it from 640 to 3500 acres (aggressive growth on par with Alexandra’s in O Pioneers!!); however, the transgression that comes back to haunt Northridge II (and his sons) the most is their aforementioned sharing of the same sexual partner on a hunting trip. Both sons, John Wesley III and Paul, and also their father, have consensual sex with the same woman, Rachel Stone Horse, over the course of the drunken hunting trip. There is a son born from this short affair, Duane Stone Horse, who comes back to the Northridge ranch to work as a hired hand. Duane and Dalva (John Wesley III’s daughter) forge a romance, from which Dalva’s son, Nelse, is born. Neither novel ever makes certain who Duane’s father is out of the three men so it is unclear whether Duane is Dalva’s half-brother, cousin, or uncle. Rachel insists it is John Wesley III, but Northridge II believes that is just because she liked him best. Naomi (John Wesley III’s wife) says, “It wasn’t my husband’s infidelity that hurt me most but the final result of it, a horribly
biblical event where the illegitimate son, now nearly an adult, comes out of the hills and unwittingly mates his half sister” (309).

The “biblical event” and the ensuing incestuous complications and mixed bloodlines are reminiscent of the plot from Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! Both Duane and Nelse suffer the loss of the father. Naomi says of Duane, “[…] the fact is that in a real sense Duane had no father and by the time he showed up he didn’t want one” (337). Though Duane does not wish to find the other half of his family tree, Nelse (given up for adoption) does seek out his mother, and Dalva’s defining journey in the first novel is the search for her son. Since Northridge I had children with an Indian woman, Northridge II is half Native American, his sons one-quarter, and Dalva an eighth, while Nelse is at least a third. Also similar to Absalom, Absalom!, Harrison’s two novels seem to show that though one race can despise and suppress another, their blood cannot remain separate.

It is through the reuniting of Dalva and her son that the novel displays a healthier version of the present as it is affected by the Gothic return of the repressed. After the repressed atrocities in the form of Northridge I’s journals have come out of the vault, and after Dalva and her son have dealt with the sins of the father, the two return at the end of the second novel to the crypt in the basement. It is Nelse’s job to distribute the artifacts to various museums, and he and Dalva bury the bodies together. The black snakes still hold their post, and upon returning to the crypt Dalva “stepped on a large one, heard its verbless hiss and felt its body whip against my boot” (387). The soldiers are to be buried “beside the horse-manure pile behind the barn” (387). As Dalva dumps the skeletons into the grave, she “heard a muffled clack and rattle, the final sound these men would make,
dead now for about ninety-five years” (389). The two ride out to a pond to bury the warriors. Nelse digs a large grave and then “spread out the five facing east” (394). After learning about and facing the facts of the history of oppressors and the oppressed on the plains, Dalva and Nelse put these ghosts to rest with the honor (or lack there of) that they see fit. The occupations of the mother and son also speak to their movement toward a healthier present on the plains. Nelse farms the family’s land with conservationist techniques, and Dalva takes a job counseling families who have lost their farms to bankruptcy. After “One fourth-generation farmer hanged himself in the barn he no longer owned right after the auction that dispersed his cattle and equipment” (307), Dalva “spent several days with the wife and children and a number of relatives” (307). Dalva and Nelse are fully aware of the wounded history of the plains. In one of the journals they read, Northridge II writes, “When I tried to help both the T’ohono Odom and the Hopi with mineral leases I noted that they had a cultural hesitancy to take advantage of anything whereas it is the bedrock of our culture. Up in my own country it was apparently our nature to kill several million buffalo just as it was our nature to destroy the Native cultures” (354). Dalva and Nelse, as descendants of Northridge II and his own capitalistic aggression on the plains, are, at the end of the novel, working to heal the land and the people wounded by its legacy.

Louise Erdrich has written over a dozen novels set on and around fictional reservations in North Dakota, and the world of her collective work has been repeatedly referred to as her “Yoknapatawpha County.” The size of her cast of characters, their intertwined histories, and the way in which they are haunted by atrocities committed in
the region certainly parallel Faulkner. All of Erdrich’s works contain clear supernatural elements, often as they relate to Native American spirituality and methods of storytelling, and these elements function as the Gothic machinery that brings out the repressed history of the region. Two of Erdrich’s most recent novels, *The Plague of Doves* (2008) and *The Round House* (2012) both focus on repressed injustice as a history that must be unearthed. The novels contain ghosts, Gothic architecture, visions, and other fantastic occurrences. Both novels feature multiple characters that act as Gothic detectives, seeking to unravel the mystery behind the specific injustice against Native Americans living in North Dakota. The primary event in *The Plague of Doves* is the lynching of four Indians who are wrongly accused of killing a white farm family. The novel also deeply engages the way in which Native Americans and whites have become inextricably intertwined by both birth and history (as Harrison’s novels do). Similarly, *The Round House* takes as violent, central action a rape and also uses this crime as a path to exploring the long history of unjust laws in the U.S. that have oppressed Native Americans.

At the beginning of *A Plague of Doves*, Evelina, one of the primary narrators, gathers salamanders with her brother. The creatures come to symbolize in a Gothic manner the way in which painful, buried histories come back in the novel (*The Round House* starts with a similar motif). Evelina states, “During heavy rains, they swarmed with slow gravity out of wet cracks in the ground. There was something grand and awful about their mute numbers” (29). Evelina’s grandfather, Mooshum (a primary character in *The Round House* as well), says, “the nuns had believed they were emissaries from the
unholy dead, sent up by the devil, and hell was full of them” (29). Throughout the novel, evil secrets keep working their way to the surface just as the salamanders do. Even though the town makes “no mention” of it, the primary history that will not remain repressed is the lynching, fifty years earlier, of four Native Americans: Mooshum and three of his friends. The group walked by a farmhouse and heard cows painfully bellowing from the need to be milked. Finding the farm seemingly abandoned, the friends walk into the house and find the slain members of the family with a baby still alive in its crib. Though they want to help, the boys are scared they will be blamed for the murder so they milk the cows, leave, and then drop an anonymous letter to the authorities. Later, Mooshum, while drunk, accidentally tells a white man about the murder scene they encountered. Subsequently, a lynch mob is formed and hangs three of the party; Mooshum is spared for giving the others up. As the crime and the history of the aptly named North Dakota town, Pluto, are explored, a fact that holds true is, as Judge Anton Bazil Coutts puts it, “Nothing that happens, nothing, is not connected here by blood” (115). There are several affairs that occur between both the relatives of the lynched and the vigilantes. The history of the town and the plains shapes both whites and Indians, the novel claims. And though the role of whites in the oppression of Native Americans is never unclear, the novel does seem to claim that both races are affected by the violent legacy and have a responsibility to face it.

A supernatural motif, the recurrent history of a violin and its consequences, provides a main cog in the novel’s Gothic style and ultimately leads to the unraveling of the farm family’s murder. The violin’s story begins with Henri and Lafayette Peace.
Their father leaves them the cherished violin in his will, and he states that if the two cannot decide who should have it, they are to race canoes for it. Each brother sabotages the other’s canoe the night before the race, but Lafayette ends up capsizing and drowning when a storm comes up. A grieved Henri then straps the violin into a canoe and sends it “out into the waters” (214) to find his brother’s spirit. It is Mooshum who comes to find the violin. His own father leaves his mother and takes a violin with him after Mooshum had begun to develop a passion for playing it. That night, Mooshum has a dream in which a voice tells him, “Go to the lake and sit by the southern rock. Wait there. I will come” (205). Mooshum sits on the rock for three days and three nights until the canoe Henri launched washes up on the shore with the violin in it. However, the race between Henri and his brother occurred in 1888, and Mooshum finds the violin almost twenty years later. Mooshum values highly the violin and becomes the town’s best musician. A teenager, Corwin Peace, steals the violin from Mooshum and is punished by being forced to learn how to play the violin. Corwin comes to embrace music and the violin and eventually plays at Mooshum’s funeral. After he does so, Corwin, distraught, smashes the violin on a communion rail, and Judge Coutts finds a letter from Henri Peace (an ancestor of Corwin’s) that explains the genesis of the violin. Further, Corwin had played the violin earlier at the mental institution in town, and one of the patients, Warren Wolde, dropped dead upon hearing the music. When the surviving infant (Doctor Cordelia Lochren) of the farm family murder was found, a record player had been playing a violin solo again and again. (The murderer had put the music on to try to soothe the child.) This arouses Doctor Lochren’s suspicion, and she eventually comes to prove that Wolde was the murderer of
her family. Corwin’s music shocked Wolde (to death) with the repressed memories of the murder. The explanation of the complicated motif is lengthy, but it is perhaps the best stylistic example from the novel that shows the kind of cognitive dissonance the supernatural can create to expand the reader’s notion of reality. The fantastic journey of the violin emphasizes the incredible power of history to relentless return and visit later generations.

The 1896 plague of doves on the plains also returns throughout the novel. During the plague, settlers set bonfires to drive the doves into nets, walked the fields and tried to pray the birds away, clubbed them to death, even roasted them and baked them into pies. Nothing, though, could stop the onslaught, and “each morning when people woke it was to the scraping and beating of wings, the murmurous susurration, the awful cooing babble, and the sight, to those who still possessed intact windows, of the curious and gentle faces of those creatures” (6). The large oak tree used as the hanging tree is described as being full of doves. One of the Native Americans hanged is a young boy, nicknamed Holy Track, and his gaze upward as he expires is vividly described: “Behind his shut eyes, he was seized by black fear, until he heard his mother say, Open your eyes, and he stared into the dusty blue. Then it was better. The little wisps of clouds, way up high, had resolved into wings and they swept across the sky now, faster and faster” (79). Holy Track’s gaze is passed onto other characters. Mooshum says several times during the novel, “I saw the same thing as Holy Track, the doves are still up there” (83). Even Evelina, while spending time in a mental hospital, says, “Sometimes doves seem to hover in this room. At night, when I can’t sleep, I hear the flutter of their wings” (244). The
characters are haunted by skies crowded by doves. On an image level, the doves represent the oppression of Indians on the plains by the white race. However, Evelina notes of the original plague, “both Indians and whites set bonfires” (5) and that even though “the Norwegians disregarded everybody but themselves […] the doves ate their crops the same” (5). There is a fundamental irony, of course, in the plaguing of the plains by the symbolically peaceful creatures, and their presence in the novel seems to represent more so the unstoppable weight of plains history itself—the burden placed on later generations of both Native Americans and whites by a region founded through incredible theft and violence.

Dr. Lochren is the novel’s final narrator. She has been elected president of Pluto’s historical society, and says, “I became the repository of many untold stories such as people will finally tell when they know there is no use in keeping secrets, or when they see that all that’s left of a place will one day reside in documents, and they want those to reflect the truth” (296). Dr. Lochren’s statement reflects that fact that the novel has unveiled the truth behind the 1911 lynching, and her statement also speaks to the purpose of an accurate plains literature. But Dr. Lochren’s job is not a dynamic one, since “The dead of Pluto now outnumber the living” (295). Lochren states, “There is no bar, no theater, no hardware store, no car repair, just a gas pump […] Our town is dying” (295-96). Like many Great Plains towns in rural areas, Pluto has fallen into a state of decay. Lochren recalls that when the town was named, “it was accepted before anyone realized they’d named a town for the god of the underworld” (297). The town was also founded before the discovery of the planet, and Lochren comments, “It is not without irony, now,
that Pluto is the coldest, loneliest, and perhaps least hospitable body in our solar system” (297). The conclusion of *The Plague of Doves* does not have the same positive tone as Harrison’s two novels concerning a healthier present on the plains after a repressed history has been dealt with. Lochren, who actually treated the murderer of her family, says that she wants to “declare a town holiday to commemorate the year I saved the life of my family’s murderer […] The wind will blow. The devils rise. All who celebrate shall be ghosts. And there will be eternal dancing, dust on dust, everywhere you look” (311). Lochren admits she is being a bit “apocalyptic,” but the secrets revealed through the novel have been painful ones. The blood ties between whites and Native Americans are filled with ambivalence and conflict. Still, characters like Evelina and Lochren dig into this painful past despite the history that emerges. And as Lochren goes for a walk in town with her friend Neve Harp, she says that they will “keep walking the perimeter of Pluto until our footsteps wear our orbit into the earth” (311).

The narrator of *The Round House* is Joe Coutts, son of Judge Coutts and Geraldine—both characters in *The Plague of Doves*. At the beginning of the novel, Joe is working at digging out seedling trees that have started to grow into the foundation of the family’s home. Joe says, “They had grown into the unseen wall and it was difficult to pry them loose. My father wiped his palm across his forehead and damned their toughness […] Whenever I succeeded in working loose a tiny tree, I placed it like a trophy beside me” (1). This process can stand as a metaphor for the difficult digging Joe does to uncover clues as he tries to find the man who raped his mother, and the metaphor can also be extended to the laws that have embedded themselves into the lives of Native
Americans over time. It is the rape of Geraldine that puts all the elements in motion in the novel, and the crime brings to light the unjust nature of many laws relating to reservations that have had no presence in the American conscious. There are jurisdiction issues that challenge even Geraldine’s judge husband from proceeding with a prosecution in the case, and through the novel, Judge Coutts teaches Joe about a host of other laws that have weakened the foundation of the Native American community since the first thefts of their land.

It is Geraldine’s position as tribal records manager that puts her in peril and leads to the rape. A young woman, Mayla Wolfskin, had come into Geraldine’s office to enroll her child in the tribe—a child that resulted from an affair with the governor of South Dakota. Mayla had been working as an intern in the governor’s office. A former lover of Mayla’s, Linden Lark, kidnaps both Geraldine and Mayla in an apparent attempt to obtain the file that registers Mayla’s child and then blackmail the governor with it. He does not gain the file, but Lark rapes Geraldine and murders Mayla. Geraldine is able to escape Lark and flee to the family’s home despite enduring severe physical injury. While Lark holds Geraldine and Mayla captive at the tribal round house, he comments that “he has been studying law” and makes apparent he is aware that the round house is built at a point where tribal land, state land, and fee land intersect. There are different sets of laws for each territory, and since Geraldine was blindfolded during the rape, she is not able to say where the crime occurred. Thus it is impossible to prosecute Lark. Once home, Geraldine falls into a numb, reclusive state, and she cannot help Judge Coutts or Joe as they try to bring justice.
As young Joe strives to find and punish the man who hurt his mother, he moves through a series of Gothic and supernatural occurrences. Joe begins his search for the perpetrator at the round house. He is moved by the structure’s presence immediately upon approaching it: “There was a moment of intense quiet. Then a low moan of air passed through the cracks in the silvery logs of the round house. I started with emotion. The grieving cry seemed emitted by the structure itself. The sound filled me and flooded me” (59). Joe shares the fact that before 1978 Native Americans were not permitted to practice their religion, and they would come to the round house (under the guise of bible study) to conduct ceremonies. Even though Joe has not ascertained from the police or his father where the exact attack took place, once he encounters the round house, he feels he knows: “At that moment, a certainty entered. I knew. He attacked her here. The old ceremonial place told me—cried out in my mother’s anguished voice” (60). The backstory provided about the round house deepens its relevance as Gothic architecture. Joe overhears Mooshum tells a story (in his sleep) about a buffalo hunt involving Nanapush, a tribal elder (and a character from other Edrich novels). Starving in winter, Nanapush shoots a buffalo and then hides inside its body to protect himself from the cold. After he and many others are saved by the buffalo’s meat, the spirit of the buffalo speaks to Nanapush, and he has a vision of a structure he must build—the round house. The spirit tells Nanapush that the buffalo brought his people together, forced them to follow a set of rules and work together: “Now we are gone, but as you have once sheltered in my body, so now you understand. The round house will be my body, the poles my ribs, the fire my heart. It will be the body of your mother and it must be respected the same way” (214-
The round house is meant to be a source of shelter and support for Nanapush’s tribe as the buffalo were, but the structure is clearly haunted by the legacy of the wiping out of the buffalo and the oppression his people have faced. The fact that Geraldine and Mayla are held captive in the round house is symbolic of the lack of shelter and protection available for them and their people.

Not long after the visit to the round house, Joe sees a ghost from his bedroom window. The ghost stands at the edge of his yard, hidden in the woods. Joe says, “Although I was not alarmed, I had the clear notion that what I was seeing was unreal. Yet it was neither human nor entirely inhuman. The being saw me and my heart jumped. I could see the face close up. There was a glow behind its head. The lips moved but I couldn’t make out the words except it seemed to be repeating the same words” (80).

When Joe tells his father about the ghost, Judge Coutts calmly describes to Joe the ghosts he had seen working in a cemetery, telling Joe how to recognize them. When Joe tells Mooshum the story, Mooshum believes it was not a ghost but someone “throwing their spirit at you. Somebody that you’ll see […] When somebody throws their spirit at you they don’t even know it, but they mean to help” (133). Earlier, Joe had told his father, “The last thing I want to know is something that a ghost wants to tell me” (82). Thus, Joe represses the knowledge the spirit wants to impart, and he will not understand the message being delivered until the end of the novel. During the same visit with Mooshum, Joe is advised to consult his doodemag—herons and cranes in Joe’s case—to “find his luck.” While on a dock at the lake, Joe observes a heron and then immediately after sees a doll in the water. The doll is full of money (belonging to Mayla), and the clue
eventually pulls Joe through the mystery. As Joe works on his mother’s case, strives to uncover the buried truth, it is the supernatural that expands his sense of reality and leads him.

At the end of the novel, after Lark has been dealt with, Joe continues to search for the location of Mayla’s body. Earlier in the novel, the character of Bugger, a mentally unstable but clairvoyant character, had drunkenly tried to tell Joe about a dream but was ignored. Joe now returns to Bugger and jogs his mind about the dream: “He began to sob in dry wrenches. He kept crying about her. He mumbled about construction and I knew. She was in the construction site, the earth mounded over her” (310). Joe realizes that if he would have listened to Bugger earlier, they could have prosecuted Lark for Mayla’s murder. Instead, Joe and a close friend, acting on their own, shoot Lark dead. In another Gothic thread, Lark is a twin, the brother of Linda Wishkob. Linda is cast out of her family for being deformed at birth, and she comes to the aid of Joe and his family while they pursue Lark. Judge Coutts, a man of the law, is ambivalent about the anonymous vigilante shooting, but he eventually surmises that he could argue a “traditional precedent,” saying, “It could be argued that Lark met the definition of a wiindigoo, and that with no other recourse, his killing fulfilled the requirements of a very old law” (306). Earlier in the novel, Mooshum had explained, “A wiindigoo could cast its spirit inside of a person. That person would become an animal, and see fellow humans as prey meat” (180). Traditional law requires that the wiindigoo be ritually killed: “There was a certain way the killing of a wiindigoo must be done” (180). It is unlikely that Mooshum would
have seen shooting Lark with a deer rifle on a golf course as the “certain way,” but Judge Coutts is aware, at the very least, that traditional law has not been kind to Indians.

The return of the repressed in *The Round House* is expressed most clearly by an elaborate metaphor constructed by Judge Coutts. The metaphor expresses what the Gothic machinery of the novel has sought to uncover, what Joe and his family have worked against. Coutts takes a frozen casserole from the back of the family’s refrigerator, one that had been brought over during Geraldine’s recovery. The casserole is spoiled and moldy, and Coutts knocks it out of the pan onto the table. He then piles knives, silverware and other utensils on top of the casserole, organizing them into “a weird sculpture” (227). The rotten casserole is the collection of laws passed that have been oppressive to Native Americans. Coutts points to various parts of the casserole and names particularly damaging laws. He refers to *Johnson v. McIntosh* that allowed Indians to be stripped of land that was viewed as “discovered” by Europeans. Coutts says that what is worst about the law is that the language Chief Justice John Marshall used “survives in the law, that we were savages living off the forest, and to leave our land to us was to leave it useless wilderness, that our character and religion is of so inferior a stamp that the superior genius of Europe must certainly claim ascendancy” (229). Of particular relevance is *Oliphant v. Suquamish*, which “Took from us the right to prosecute non-Indians who commit crimes on our land” (229). Joe becomes exasperated and asks his father why he continues to be a judge when the foundation of the law is so rotten and decayed. Coutts then rearranges the utensils “so they made an edifice that stood by itself” (229), and says,
These are the decisions that I and many other tribal judges try to make. Solid decisions with no scattershot opinions attached. Everything we do, no matter how trivial, must be crafted keenly. We are trying to build a solid base here for our sovereignty […] Our records will be scrutinized by Congress one day and decisions on whether to enlarge our jurisdiction will be made. Some day. *We want the right to prosecute criminals of all races on our lands within our original boundaries* […] What I am doing now is for the future, though it may seem small, or trivial, or boring, to you.

The effort Judge Coutts makes to establish justice for Native Americans through the crafting of new laws is the healthier present (and future) in the face of the injustice that has been revealed through the course of the novel. The horror of the past is brought back by the rape of Geraldine, and the importance of Judge Coutts’ task is magnified through the Gothic tropes Erdrich utilizes. Coutts knows that the legal foundation on the reservation is rotten, but Joe did not, and the fact has surely been repressed in the American consciousness as well. Like *A Plague of Doves*, *The Round House* ends darkly. Joe finally learns the identity of the spirit he saw: a police officer telling him repeatedly to “let go” of Cappy who has just been killed after the group of friends, at the end of the novel, drink heavily on a road trip. But the Gothic does its work in the novel, bringing to light the unjust laws that still haunt the reservation.

*Return(s) of the Repressed: Boom and Bust Times on the Plains*

In 2008, when I began this project, there was a flurry of articles that came out in the contemporary media about the “dying plains”—the way in which economic struggles
and other factors were forcing people from the region and causing small towns to
dwindle. One particularly striking article was Charles Bowden’s “The Emptied Prairie,”
which was accompanied by a photo gallery: images of stark interiors, an abandoned
school house, empty roads that stretched to the vanishing point, a crumbling barn with
cattle bones in the foreground (images that would turn out to be very similar to Morris’s).
This succession of articles, with the stark photos that sometimes accompanied them, and
also the Gothic diction of some of their texts, was part of what moved me to consider the
possibility of a Great Plains Gothic emerging in the region’s literature.16 Bowden wrote
in his article, as he described a particular image, “Ghost towns stud North Dakota, and
this empty house is just one bone in a giant skeleton of abandoned human desire.”
Another journalist wrote, when describing another small, dying town, “Like giant
tombstones marking the ghosts of commerce, most of the shops along Main Street now
stand shuttered, as stark and still as the flat, unbroken plains of western Nebraska”
(Johnson). Michael Lind begins to outline some of the economic specifics as he describes
the “death spiral” being experienced in the region: “As ambitious young people move
out, entire regions enter an economic death spiral, characterized by an aging population, a
shrinking tax base, and contracting public and private investment.” Gothic language like
“ghost towns,” “tombstone” like structures, and the “death spiral” characterize the
content of the bevy of articles that came out roughly five years ago, describing the

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16 Many of these articles were brought to my attention by a panel discussion I attended at
the aforementioned University of Nebraska-Omaha 2008 symposium. The panel was
titled “Topocide: Killing Places on the Plains” and discussed the prevalence of death
imagery in contemporary media coverage of the plains. Susan Maher chaired the panel
with David Peterson and Christina Dando participating.
deepening economic woes on the plains. As Lind outlines, the loss of young people from
the region hurts the tax base and the chance for investment in the region, and this is
compounded by the shifting nature of farming on the plains, described by Timothy Egan
as “[…] the collapse of the family farm and the subsequent rise of agribusiness. A
hundred years ago, more than 30 percent of American workers earned their income from
a farm. Now it is little more than 1 percent. The big farms are getting richer, fattened by
federal subsidies, and the small farms are disappearing.” Egan provides the evidence to
prove that the iconic, historic method of making a living on the plains, the yeoman
farmer, is all but dead. The harsh realities these articles deliver and the Gothic imagery
and language they utilize were a definite part of what led me to search for (and find in
Proulx) the existence of these realities in the literature of the region. Egan writes of the
effect of the dwindling plains on the outlook of its people: “And now a broad swath of
the nation’s midsection seems to have lost something else as well: its optimism. Polls
show a quiet crisis in confidence, the one thing that had seemed part of rural American
DNA. More than ever, people feel powerless to control their lives and pessimistic about
the future.” The media also gives evidence that perhaps a large number of people on the
plains are finally coming to grips with the fallibility of the past as future, unlimited
potential view of history. The repressed facts of the consistent struggle to make a living
on the plains seemed, around 2008, to be making a concerted return in the national media.

However, a mere five years later, the national media’s headlines no longer line up
with the harsh realities brought out so clearly in Proulx’s stories. Instead, the media is
focused on the current oil boom in the northern plains, primarily located within the
Bakken formation in western North Dakota. Typical headlines read “Bakken Business” (Harper’s), “North Dakota Went Boom” (New York Times Magazine), and “The New Oil Landscape” (National Geographic). Just five years after death and decay flooded the headlines and reflected so strongly a Gothic interpretation of the region, these new stories speak of the explosive growth of western (formerly ghost) towns in North Dakota and the massive revenue pouring into the state. Admittedly, the high profile, quick change in economic conditions in North Dakota were, initially, somewhat disconcerting to someone identifying Gothic trends in contemporary Great Plains literature; however, there are clear positives as well as negatives to the oil boom in North Dakota, and the clearest thing about this new development, this new economic story, is that it is not new at all. A look at the current oil boom on the plains actually goes a long way in making sense of the Gothic nature of history on the plains, the kind that encourages a Gothic, literary treatment of the area. The boom and bust cycle, highlighted by the current oil activity, helps to distinguish a Great Plains Gothic as a distinct regional Gothic.

It is not difficult to point out the positives of the current oil boom. As the nation attempts to move toward energy independence, North Dakota is spearheading the effort. The state has moved past Alaska and California to become the second largest oil producer behind Texas. Chip Brown notes in New York Times Magazine that, while the bulk of the country remains mired in the struggling economy, North Dakota sports a 3.8 billion dollar budget surplus and the nation’s lowest unemployment rate at 3.2 percent. Brown also states that Williston, the town at the center of the boom, has tripled in population in the past ten years. Perhaps most convincing is the way in which the democratic utopia,
the myth Cather treated as truth on the plains, actually seems to be a legitimate, current phenomenon in North Dakota. Richard Manning, in the Harper’s article, describes the workers coming to North Dakota as “men who were raised to expect that if they worked they would get paid, who for a long time and in a lot of places in this country found that to be untrue but are now finding it true […]” (32). Notions of the safety valve myth come to mind as well, as the region appears to be a source of income for anyone who is drowning in the current economy but willing to work hard. Edwin Dobb writes in the National Geographic article, “For refugees from the recession, the Bakken is a chance—often the last chance—to escape ruin.” Clay Jenkinson, a humanities professor in the state, feels that the oil boom is a blessing that should be pursued full steam ahead. He says (quoted by Brown), “It’s our gold rush, our Silicon Valley. It reverses decades of anxiety about out-migration and rural decline and death. Suddenly the state that never had anything is in the middle of an oil boom that is larger than anybody could have predicted. We aren’t going to do anything to jeopardize it. People aren’t interested in stepping back.” In North Dakota, just as Alexandra and Antonia were on the Nebraska plains, many are pointed straight ahead toward a boom and a future that seems unlimited.

And though the dangers of the oil activity in North Dakota seem at least as clear as the positives, not many in the state are willing to hear them. Harold Hamm, owner of Continental Resources (dubbed “the man who bought North Dakota” by a recent Businessweek article), is quoted by Brown as asking rhetorically, “Why do [critics] always start talking about the challenges? What challenges? Spending all the money?” But the downside to the boom is hard to ignore and is also well documented by the
current media. The risk to the natural environment seems most pertinent. The development of hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”) and horizontal drilling is what has allowed the Bakken to be so highly developed as an oil producing formation. Fracking involves the high pressure driving of large amounts of water, sand, and chemicals down into the well and layers of rock, which creates fissures through which trapped oil and natural gas can escape. As Dobb writes, the environmental questions involved in the practice are numerous: “Where will all the clean water come from? How will the dirty water that’s pumped out be prevented from contaminating groundwater, as has happened in other parts of the country?” Even though some fracking chemicals are known to be toxic or carcinogenic, oil companies have a strong foothold with the law because, as Dobb notes, a so-called “Halliburton loophole” exempts oil companies from the Safe Drinking Water Act. Also, operators are not required to disclose all the ingredients of fracking compounds because “trade secrets” might be revealed in the process. Brown notes that in the Eastern states sitting above the natural gas in the Marcellus Shale, fracking meets with much more resistance, but that in North Dakota in 2011, more than 1,000 accidental releases of oil, drilling wastewater and other fluids were reported but passed “without much fuss.” Another negative to the current North Dakota boom is the fact that, because of its lack of pipeline and infrastructure, the state is not able to harvest about a third (according to Manning) of the natural gas produced as companies drill for oil. Manning notes a new image on the plains, that of the natural gas flares “producing a landscape of flames in robust competition with the stars” (33). Depending on how widespread fracking becomes in the plains (the Bakken stretches into Montana and also
several Canadian provinces), one wonders if there is potential for a dust bowl type of
disaster, with the drill replacing the plow.

Beyond the threat to the environment, there is also the concern over increased
crime alongside the influx of outsiders into the region. A recent article from The Atlantic
reports on the difficulty of prosecuting oil workers who live on the Fort Berthold
reservation in North Dakota—the very phenomena Erdrich takes as theme for The Round
House. In writing about this same “jurisdictional tangle,” Sierra Crane-Murdoch reports
that state officers are called in to prosecute white offenders on the reservation, “But
several officers insinuated that crimes committed on Fort Berthold are often a low
priority for deputies and sheriffs, who are already overworked by the boom outside of
reservation borders.”

Despite the negativity that has been recognized about the current oil activity in
North Dakota, contrary voices struggle to be heard in the booming state. Brown sums up
the feelings of proponents of the aggressive development: “This is the boom that is going
to change everything without the remorse and misgivings that have marked that aftermath
of so many past orgies of resource extraction […] This is the Big One that North has been
waiting for more than a century.” Brown notes that there have been oil booms in North
Dakota before, most recently in the eighties, but never a boom “that so radically changed
the subtext of the Dakota frontier from the Bitter Past That Was to the Better Future That
May Yet Be.” And with this turn of phrase, used to describe the shifting (again) of
optimism on the plains, Brown captures the particular nature of the Gothic return of the
repressed on the Great Plains—the repetition of the repression itself. Harsh realities can
set in on the plains when economic conditions remain consistently bad, but just as the five year period between 2008 and 2013 showed, people are willing to forget the tough times in the face of the current windfall—in the case of whatever resource gains value. For the beliefs above to become true, for the current oil boom in North Dakota to prove itself as the “Big One,” nearly a hundred and fifty years of history on the plains would need to reverse itself. From the Homestead Act in 1862 and the original boom on the plains—the rush to get cheap farm and ranch land away from Native Americans, to the wheat bonanzas around the World Wars, to the coal and oil energy booms of the second half of the twentieth century, there has never been a boom so strong that any part of the region did not return to its desolate nature. To be presented with the current oil rush in North Dakota offers the opportunity to not only see a current, frenzied period of development but to also look back at the boom and bust history of the region. As far as natural resources, no region has been more of an American slot machine than the Great Plains. It is the region that mostly clearly registers capitalistic aggression and the drive for profit in the country as a whole. These characters have been present throughout the literature studied in this project, from Cather’s Ivy Peters (and even Alexandra) to Proulx’s Dunmire family to Harrison’s Northridge II. The garden myth (expanded to include fossil fuels) is repressed and returns on the plains but does so again and again. Unlike the South, the Lost Cause on the Great Plains is Lost and Found. It seems that when in at least one part of the region, like North Dakota, there begins to be a grasping of harsh realities that resists myth, the increased value of a particular natural resource brings back the mythic belief in a rich future.
Brown describes the conditions of the state five years ago, the conditions when I began this project: “For many years North Dakota has been a frontier—not the classic 19th century kind based on American avarice and the lure of opportunity in unsettled lands, but the kind that comes afterward, when a place has been stripped bare or just forgotten because it was a hard garden that no one wanted too much to begin with […]” History dictates that the “hard garden” and the “stripped” land will return—the kind of “dangerous ground” Proulx creates as setting in her Wyoming stories. On the plains, history dictates that there will be another return of the repressed such as those featured in the works of Proulx, McCarthy, Harrison, and Erdrich. On the plains the Gothic history is cyclical. The cemetery scene from *O Pioneers!* comes to mind yet again. When Carl says that “now the old story has begun to write itself over […] Isn’t it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before […]” (75), he speaks, at the time, to a pattern of history on the plains for the next hundred years. The particularly brutal aspect of plains history is that the painful past can be repressed and then return only to be buried again. This phenomenon makes a Great Plains Gothic literature unique in comparison to New England or Southern Gothic, and it marks the emergence of a thread of Gothic authors on the plains as all the more critical.
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