

Analyzing O! Pioneers

Willa Cather's 1910 novel, O! Pioneers, follows a Swedish family of farmers in Nebraska. In this passage, John Bergson is dying and worries about what will become of his wife and young children. Alexandra is the oldest Bergson child.

Alexandra, her father often said to himself, was like her grandfather; which was his way of saying that she was intelligent. John Bergson's father had been a shipbuilder, a man of considerable force and of some fortune. Late in life he married a second time, a Stockholm woman of questionable character, much younger than he, who goaded him into every sort of extravagance. On the shipbuilder's part, this marriage was an infatuation, the despairing folly of a powerful man who cannot bear to grow old. In a few years his unprincipled wife warped the probity of a lifetime. He speculated, lost his own fortune and funds entrusted to him by poor seafaring men, and died disgraced, leaving his children nothing. But when all was said, he had come up from the sea himself, had built up a proud little business with no capital but his own skill and foresight, and had proved himself a man. 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. As he lay there day after day he had to accept the situation as it was, and to be thankful that there was one among his children to whom he could entrust the future of his family and the possibilities of his hard-won land.

Discuss the Meaning

Alexandra shares personal qualities with her grandfather. What are these qualities and how will they help the Bergson family survive after her father dies? Cite text examples to support your ideas.

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Alexandra shares personal qualities with her grandfather. What are these qualities and how will they help the Bergson family survive after her father dies? Cite text examples to support your ideas.

Actual answers will vary. Correct answers may include:

Like her grandfather, Alexandra is intelligent, possesses a strong will and has "the simple direct way of thinking things out."

Alexandra's grandfather built a "proud little business with no capital."

She will have to rely on the traits she shares with her grandfather, her intelligence and her "strength of will," to keep the farm after her father dies.