VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS of the role of the prairie in O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* emphasize the strength and complexity of the novel. The prairie is "primitive nature, the earth-spirit," "one of the chief actors," "an atmosphere as well as a force," and "the limitless possibilities of the new country."¹ Land is important in the decision of the Norwegian immigrant to come to America; and land is important, not only in determining the social stance of *Giants*, in the revealing of psychological insights in the novel, but also in interpreting each major character as he or she attempts to come to terms with the prairie — as if he or she were a new Adam or a new Eve in a New World. Rølvaag believed that he "was drawing a picture of the making of America,"² and that "making of America" begins with the first settlers of Spring Creek. Consequently, Beret's conflict with the prairie is at once one of the most evocative relationships in the novel and a key to Rølvaag's central themes.

Beret could be called weak, disenchanted, and disillusioned; but in her distorted, twisted perception of self

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¹ Beret, the wife of Per Hansa, was in some respects the major character in Rølvaag's trilogy in which *Giants in the Earth* is the first volume.
and events, she gains a strength and an importance equal to those of her husband, Per Hansa. The prairie, with which Beret is in conflict, is not only a carefully conceived and artistic device used by Rølvaag to delineate character and to provide a crucible for the pioneers of Spring Creek, but also an ever-present, ever-changing, and native force in the lives of the pioneers. Ironically, it is not always the strong who survive the struggle against the force of the prairie and thus inherit the earth, but the meek or those who seem to be so. It is Beret who survives and will have dominion over the prairie, not Per Hansa.

When the pioneer settlement is looked at as it attempts to conquer the prairie, one discerns that each settler must come to terms with the prairie and himself as it competes for his body and soul. Rølvaag held that "man, especially the Nordic, cannot tear himself loose from the soil he has been rooted in for centuries and move to a new land where even the very air chills by its strangeness, without paying a great price. There is an intimate kinship between the soul and the soil. It's a long process to build a Fatherland. When even the New-Englanders, with whom pioneering had become a habit, at times found the virgin prairies of the West hard to endure, what must they not have been to many of the foreigners?"³

The "virgin prairies" become a force the pioneers face in the making of a new fatherland, a new world, in Dakota Territory. Concerning the creation of Giants, Rølvaag wrote: "In its unfolding, the story would have to picture the beginning and the growth of a whole community; it had to be the genesis of a new world."⁴ Hence, the settlement of Spring Creek must be viewed with Rølvaag's concept of the land in mind, for he holds the land in a close and sacred relationship with the Nordic soul.
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Beret speaks of the Nordic soul (Hans Olsa's), heaven, and the prairie and comes to terms with each: "Oh, how can he hope to get in? Not many from the Dakota prairie will ever stand in glory there — that I am sure of! . . . For here Earth takes us. What she cannot get easily she wrests by subtle force, and we do not even know it. . . . I see what happens in my own home."5

Beret’s reference to the “Dakota prairie” and to Hans Olsa’s not getting into heaven states that there is something about the nature of the prairie that makes it difficult for one to get into heaven. Beret believes that the “Earth takes us.” Naturally, it does, for man returns to dust, that from whence he sprang. And she believes the earth to be feminine — not a Mother Earth — but, as will be seen, a sexually competitive force. Again and again it seduces Per away from her, from his family, from his concern for the souls of others. But most important, she believes that what the earth cannot obtain easily or violently it gets by “subtle force,” and the pioneers “do not even know it.” To Beret the prairie forces its way in Dakota Territory, and struggles against those who contend with it, in ways that do not always cross the threshold of awareness. Yet because her perceptions are acute, she feels, she alone knows of the subtle power of the prairie and sees it seduce man away from his heritage, from his fellowman, and from his God.

Beret sees her transportation to Dakota Territory as a punishment for her sin of conceiving a child out of wedlock. The prairie is the instrument to effect punishment, and Beret is tested by her Creator in the crucible of the prairie. She seeks a hiding place from her God; but she is unable to hide. Even the immigrant chest is unable to conceal her satisfactorily. Beret seeks something to hide behind because she brings with her memories, some bad (her conceiving a child out of wedlock, her leaving her parents), some good (the sea and the mountains, the
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walled churchyard, the security of generations before her). The difference, however, between Beret and the others is that Per has his work, his journeying, his cleverness, and his fairy tale to hide behind; Hans Olsa has his giant strength and wealth; Sørine has her strength as “both minister and father confessor”; Tønseten has his wit and glib tongue; Kjersti has her charity, wisdom, and ingenuity; Henry and Sam Solum have their knowledge of English and participation in the settlement’s school. Beret seems to have nothing to hide behind except memories and fears. Of course she has Per, and she does go to his chest, but he is consumed with ideas of dominating the prairie and adding to his concept of self. And all the time the prairie seduces him away from Beret.

While Per is enthralled by the prairie, Beret is frightened by its vistas of space and its force. Her heart and soul are not to be found in it, as are Per’s, but in Norway, the past, and past generations. Yet in her encounter with the prairie and the process of immigration, Beret reveals her strength, her place in the “making of America,” and her relationship to and kinship with those who inhabit and traverse the great plains. And she attempts to come to terms with the prairie in her own unique way.

Beret takes her place in Giants and on the prairie quietly and after a detailed description of Per. Simply put, she is introduced as a woman in a wagon: “Across the front end of the box of the first wagon lay a rough piece of plank. On the right side of this plank sat a woman with a white kerchief over her head, driving the oxen.” These lines give an early insight into the character of Beret. She wears a white kerchief not only for practical protection against the sun and wind but also in accord with her own concept of self and determination to persevere in choosing familiar customs and dress. As
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will be seen, in order to come to some terms with the prairie and its force and the process of immigration, Beret must remain true to herself.

Beret rides in the wagon; she does not walk ahead like Per, who seeks paths and landmarks in the new world; nevertheless she helps Per drive the oxen and takes an active part in the “making of America.” She does not ride into the Dakota prairie as a mere passenger, a completely unwilling woman, a victim of fate, or a mad prisoner tied like Kari to an old chest (literally, that is). She actively participates in and partakes of the pioneering experience. Thus Beret makes Giants something more than a struggle against the prairie by men, something more than a retelling of a fairy tale with a Norwegian fisherman as a heroic and now American Askeladd; instead, she makes Giants a story of a reluctant heroine caught up by the force of the prairie and the great process of immigration.

Beret’s pregnancy, her fears, and the prairie — all cause her to see the experience of immigration as one of pain. Arrival at Spring Creek does little to diminish her concept; in fact, it is substantiated by the force of the prairie, in subtle ways and by what she sees. During the traveling days, Beret feels that at Spring Creek “something was about to go wrong,” and once there she fights hard to keep back tears when all is joy around her. The cause of her reluctance is the prairie. Because of its physical appearance, its lack of trees, or large rocks, or mountains, “there isn’t even a thing that one can hide behind!” Security, peace of mind, and trueness to self had always come from Beret’s being able to place something between her and whatever might threaten her, and now, if nothing exists, Beret will create something.

Affirmation of her perception of impending and threatening forces comes in Hans Olsa’s tent from what she sees and what she makes of it: “She turned away
from the door and began to loosen her dress; then her eyes fell on the centre pole with its crosspiece, hung with clothes, and she stood a moment irresolute, gazing at it in startled fright. . . . . It looked like the giants she had read about as a child; for a long while she was unable to banish the picture from her mind."

The giants, with their outstretched arms, meeting Beret at the end of her Odyssey and at the same time at the beginning of her life on the prairie are frightening to her, for it is an abrupt manifestation of her vision of the external world as that vision is perceived internally, or as she perceives herself in relation to the macrocosm. The spread of Beret's world is that which surrounds her and is inside her. The giants in the tent are foreshadowed by Per's stopping the caravan earlier while it was en route to Spring Creek: "He faced the oxen, held his arms straight out like the horizontal beam of a cross, shouted a long-drawn 'Whoa!' — and then the creaking stopped for that day."

To Beret, Per and the giants mean a stopping, one temporary, one permanent, a final place in space and time, and a threat to her selfhood and existence. The great difficulty is that Beret refuses, or is unable or unwilling, to recognize that the end of the journey that started in Norway has come with crushing finality in Spring Creek. The physical strain and discomforts of the voyage on the green sea and also on the green sea of the prairie are ended to a small degree in the process of transplantation; however, the mental journey (the most difficult of all journeys) and the confrontation with the prairie now begin in earnest.

The force of the prairie manifests itself in Beret's unwillingness to think of the settlement as a permanent place in America. When Per goes to Sioux Falls and Sørine urges Beret and the children to stay with her, she declines and replies that she must exercise control im-
Immediately if a home for the summer is to be maintained. The key word is "summer," and even Sørine catches the slip. For Beret home-founding in America is a short-term endeavor, not something lasting and permanent, something not at all like the strength and timelessness of buildings established in Norwegian home-founding. In Norway, "the churchyard was enclosed by a massive stone wall, broad and heavy; one couldn't imagine anything more reliable than that wall." At Spring Creek, walls like those of the pioneers' huts are made of prairie sod, not Norwegian stone, and there are as yet no walled enclosures like those in Norway, where "no fear had ever dwelt."

The absence of such comforting forms on the prairie causes Beret to become wary, apprehensive: "Something vague and intangible hovering in the air would not allow her to be wholly at ease; she had to stop often and look about, or stand erect and listen." And even though she is inside the hut, the feeling of the prairie's force lingers "in the recesses of her mind." Yet, oddly, when Beret and her family go outside, especially to climb what is later to be called Indian Hill, she is forced to see the beauty of the prairie and its likeness to and difference from the sea. But she concludes that the "formless prairie had no heart that beat, no waves that sang, no soul that could be touched . . . or cared."

Indian Hill as an upthrust of the prairie becomes part of Beret's life in *Giants* in that it helps her to understand her role in the process of immigration. In a passage reminiscent of Per Smevik's going to the top of the highest hill near the Wisconsin farm upon which he had worked (in order to search in vain for the sea), Rølvaag places Beret at the top of a hill, where thoughts come flowing into her mind like an ocean. It provides a place for Beret where she contemplates not only the present and the future but also the past. The prairie helps Beret
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to assess the journey she has undergone, to determine its significance: “Suddenly, for the first time, she realized the full extent of her loneliness, the dreadful nature of the fate that had overtaken her.” Throwing herself back into the grass, almost becoming part of the hill itself, she recalls familiar places in Norway and unfamiliar ones in America.

Beret retraces her voyage over sea and land and gives a quick résumé of the odyssey of the Hansa family, an account which is found nowhere else. She recounts the power and the force of the entire immigration process: “It had been as if a resistless flood had torn them [the Hansa family] loose from their foundations.” Through Beret’s thoughts one gets a woman’s point of view of the transplantation to America. Besides revealing her misgivings as she traveled from Norway to Dakota Territory, Rølvaag presents her as a symbol of all those who have preceded her: “It seemed to her that she had lived many lives already, in each one of which she had done nothing but wander and wander, always straying farther away from the home that was dear to her.”

The same ironically could be thought of Per, who in his many adventures had led many lives, who in his many journeys had wandered, and who in his straying farther and farther from his home had left that which was dear to him. Beret, “lying here on a little green hillock, surrounded by the open, endless prairie, far off in a spot from which no road led back,” comes to focus the significance of her adventure in terms of the enormity of the undertaking of immigration and her oneness with other human beings. This she had not really done before.

On that same hill is an Indian grave; Beret is not afraid, however, for it documents her belief that the prairie is a lonely place, and she can understand and sympathize with other human beings who must live on it or who have become one with it. Their right to the land
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is uncontested by Beret. Per tells her that the occupant of the grave may bring good luck, and Beret hopes so; but she says that "it seems so strange that some one lies buried in unconsecrated ground right at our very door." Beret views a burial as a sacred act in keeping with the traditions and laws of Norway.

If one recollects Rølvaag’s concept of sacred soil, one will see a link with the words "unconsecrated ground." Beret believes that proper rituals in respect to both human beings and the land must be performed and honored so that the sacredness of each may be preserved. When Per returns from his trip to the land office in Sioux Falls, he gives the deed to the land to Beret for safekeeping. To do so is an act of love and trust, a custom, or a gift from Askeladd to his princess, or a case of practical expediency. Literally and symbolically, possession and care of the land is entrusted to Beret, who, paradoxically, is not one in whom there is an empathy for the land. But Beret cannot dismiss the deed given to her in trust, she cannot ignore the grave of another human being, and she cannot overlook the old Indian trail that intrudes upon the settlement and scars the prairie. The prairie is marked by man, and the trail brings Beret into contact with the "Red Son of the Great Prairie."

There are prairie dwellers on Indian Hill, there are the remains of an Indian in the grave, and there are Indians who come to Spring Creek by the trail and camp on the hill. Important events take place in the life of Beret because the prairie trail traverses the settlement. The meeting with the Indians depicts another aspect of Per’s character, but it is also an encounter with other human beings, a chance for Beret to respond. She holds that no human being can penetrate the magic circle that surrounds her, the circle of the horizon encompassing the prairie. Both man and the prairie will test that belief.

The Indians climb the slope and then stop, "forming a

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crescent around the brow of the hill, facing the house of Per Hansa.” Although the form of the Indian camp is a crescent, there is a circle within it: “Per glanced around the circle,” stepped in, and became at one with the Indians. Beret, even though she is reluctant to do so, also steps within the circle, in fact twice. By having her step within the crescent and into the circle, Rølvaag shows the skill and intricacy of his imagery of the circle. Before Beret can see the suffering, endurance, and humanity of the Indians, she must go into their circle and break out of her own circle of narrowness and confinement and become as expansive as the prairie itself.

E. Wayne Bad Wound observes that “the opening of the crescent is probably facing east and the doorways of each tipi the same because it is from that direction which the sun rises,” and since the men sit on the ground, “the Indians are identifying with nature and are one with nature; they are related to nature. The men sit at Mother Nature’s breast from whom they were suckled and nurtured.” Both the Indians and Beret look to the east. The Indians do so because, Bad Wound says, “the Indian people feel the power of Wakan Takan, the Great Spirit in the sun. Greeting the sun as it rises in the morning is a sign of high respect for Wakan Takan.” Beret looks east because it is the direction of Norway. As the Indians look toward the rising sun with reverence and honor and receive spiritual strength, so too would Beret, but she lacks the harmony that the Indians have with the prairie and their freedom of movement upon it.

Called to Indian Hill by Per, Beret participates in an act of healing by giving her apron for a bandage and one of her garters to tie it with. It is a humanitarian and symbolic act. There on the hill she sees other human beings who, she thought, were different from her; and she gives her property to the Indian, not in the sense that he would give her something in return, as Per does, but
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in the sense that the influence of prairie and her own nature force her to do.

Beret attempts to come to terms with the land and those who live on it, but near the end of the chapter in which the incident on Indian Hill takes place and after the disappearance of the cows, she draws the conclusion that their loss is “an act of Providence.” Reasoning from that assumption, she forces the event and uses it to fit her idea of what living upon the prairie signifies and what it does to God-fearing men and women: “It ought to show them how things stood out here — that man could not exist in this savage, desolate wilderness.” Yet in the affair of Indian Hill, Beret witnesses the survival of the Indian. It is possible to endure, but, it seems to her, only with the help of others. The grave of the Indian and its message to the living is that other human beings have lived and died upon the prairie. Beret, however, disregards the evidence of man’s enduring presence upon the land. As a stranger in an alien land, she feels that odds are against her, and, as is her custom, she accepts the evidence that confirms her distorted appraisal of the events and the role the prairie plays in her life. It is to Beret “only a part of the hideous evil out here!”

One of the evils that Beret fears is that the prairie will force her children to become “like the red children of the wilderness.” But she has just seen in a face-to-face encounter with the Indian, a child of the prairie, that he is not an inhuman being like those depicted in the tale circulated about the Norway Lake massacre. And Per goes again and again among the Indians and their colony at Flandreau. He fights the Irish, not the Indians. Later Rølvaag will tell of the “Red Son of the Great Prairie” and the bloody strife between white and red man, but it is not recorded that such strife happened at Spring Creek. At the moment it is the lack of an old civilization, one stemming from a Norwegian heritage, and the ways
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of civilized men that Beret finds missing in Dakota Territory. That which does not conform to her ways of doing things is held suspect. She fears for future generations.

Beret takes the removal of the land stakes as a case in point. To her, the removal of the stakes from the prairie is the worst of all sins. Rølvaag explains why by a comment on "Norwegian peasant psychology." Beret concludes that the prairie is responsible for what men do: "The explanation was plain; this desolation out here called forth all that was evil in human nature. Land fully as good as theirs extended round about them for thousands of miles; but then these people had come, and had immediately wanted to seize what had already been taken, thinking that it would be an easy matter, since they were the stronger; then her own husband had used deceit and force to drive them away; and now all was well!" Beret's concern is the effect the prairie brings forth and what it forces men to do. It is a harmful and evil thing, and she fears what the immense amount of land will do to mankind and those who will become men and women in Spring Creek and Dakota Territory.

Rølvaag writes that Beret fears for her own children, and her "soul shuddered" when she listened "to her boys gloating over the incidents of the recent encounter." If the child is the father of the man, Beret's fears were well grounded, for the men in their fighting mirror the violence of the prairie. If Rølvaag gives a picture of the making of America, then through Beret and the affair of the land stakes, one sees the force of the prairie working in the difficult and soul-wrenching process of the transplanting and Americanization of the immigrant.

One needs to remember the error of Per and Beret, Per's disputation with Torkel Tallaksen, the friction between the Sognings and the Helgelændings or the Trønders. The disagreements, hatreds, and sins between
Norwegians and Norwegians or Irish and Norwegians are founded not only on rights to old-world fishing grounds or to land, but are also founded on national pride, personal jealousy, greed, egotism, racial prejudice—all very human characteristics. Here the battleground is not the sea but the prairie. As a result of the fight over the land stakes, the prairie forces Beret and the others in Spring Creek to participate in the painful process of Americanization. To others the dispute may be the result of a combination of motives, but to Beret it is the prairie that is the source of the dispute, and it exerts its force upon men and Beret. Thereby it confirms what she already believes to be true of the nature of men and her relationship to them, upon the sacred soil on which she must live. With such affirmation, there comes for Beret a traumatic confirmation of the loss of values, moral and ethical, treasured and held dear in former times and places.

When Per removes the stakes and when Tønseten gives Beret badger meat to eat, she knows for sure that “they would all become wild beasts if they remained here much longer. Everything human in them would gradually be blotted out.” In Beret’s mind, to remain on the prairie is to be reduced to the level of animals; to leave is to be elevated to the level of human beings. And, as if in defense of her thesis, she rejects the “troll food” which the prairie provides for her survival. But, unknowingly, she acts like an animal when she beats her sons.

In order to support the correctness of her thesis further, Beret rationalizes that “if the Lord God had intended these infinities to be peopled,” would He “have left them desolate down through all the ages . . . until now, when the end was nearing?” Beret tries to “reason out the best way of getting back to civilization”; however, the “infinities” are not desolate. Human beings are constantly intruding, crossing the magic circle, following
and making trails and inroads upon the prairie. Nor is it desolate of animals, birds or fish, badgers and antelope, ducks. Beret wants to use her reason to escape but uses emotion and her egocentricity instead. But she cannot, she feels, for she has not been prepared for life on the prairie.

Yet Beret is able to meet various challenges. When the cows disappear, she says that she will go after them; and when the Indian needs help, she goes, albeit somewhat reluctantly. She goes because cows are essential to the survival of the settlement. She goes to the Indian because he is a human being and because Per calls her. Bringing with her memories and customs of the past, which conflict with the moments of the present, and unwilling to succumb to what she interprets as a perversion of values in a new land, Beret distorts or misinterprets events and the motives of people. Her behavior is defensive in part, but it is active too.

Much is made of Per’s epic sowing of the prairie, the harvest gained, and his great cost in mental suffering, but little is said of Beret’s role in dominating the land and bringing forth its largesse to the pioneers. Part of the process of taking dominion over the land involves the natural and necessary helping of one’s mate, as Beret does: “During the last two days she had hurried through her housework, and then, taking And-Ongen by the hand, had come out in the field with them; she had let the child roam around and play in the grass while she herself had joined in their labour; she had pitched in beside them and taken her full term like any man.” In spite of Beret’s own misgivings, she partakes in subduing the land in order to help her husband and to augment the larder of the family. She works the land. She helps to build her house. She knows what must be done, and does it. She confronts the prairie, and changes it.

Another part of Beret’s relationship with the prairie is
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the pressing need to raise food; there, too, Beret contributes. While Per lies abed, he contemplates the merits of Beret: "He thought of other things that she had done. When they had harrowed and hoed sufficient seed ground. Beret had looked over her bundles and produced all kinds of seeds — he couldn’t imagine how or where she had got them — turnips, and carrots, and onions, and tomatoes, and melons, even!"

Where Beret got the seeds no one knows. She may have brought them with her from Norway, or from a mother colony in America, or from immigrants breaking through her magic circle, or from others at Spring Creek. But seeds she has and seeds she plants. Beret is not prepared for the difficult emotional and physical process involved in the making of America, but she is prepared for the physical necessity of raising food in order to survive. Her bringing seeds is, as Per says, a "splendid forethought" and shows that Beret does not completely lack an understanding of what it means to come to a new land. The prairie will be dominated and domesticated by women as well as by men.

Beret assists her family and others to survive and to defeat the prairie when she helps Per with the seed potatoes. When her seeds and the potatoes grow and come to size, they become "the first produce to be sold out of the settlement on Spring Creek." Those potatoes and vegetables become valuable in future events in the lives of the pioneers. With the Germans, the potatoes produce "two dollars and seventy-five cents"; with the Irish, Per says to Tønseten, "We might even talk them into buying some potatoes — eh?" And, after the altercation over the land stakes, the Irish come to Per to buy "more potatoes"; the potatoes and vegetables are also used in Per’s dealing with the unnamed man and woman — the Hallings — enabling them to keep from starving; and in Per’s trip to Worthington and the meeting with
the delightful Danish widow, potatoes and vegetables figure in the meal he receives and in his trading for sacks of lime and lumber and nails. Potatoes and vegetables are important in the life of the pioneer as well as of the city dweller, and Beret’s presence and work are behind many of the results, which are often moments of happiness.

Beret does not always share Per’s joy, as when he looks at a plowed field, but she does not at first deliberately lessen the joys of others by complaining. Her backache stems from hard work and is a stern reality that she endures in confronting the prairie. But she does not stop; she works all the harder: “They all worked at the house building that night as long as they could see.” If one remembers Beret’s determination to get the cows back, her taking Per’s gift of a rooster and two hens, her “roasting a substitute for coffee which she made from potatoes,” and her trying to tie bundles during the first harvest in Spring Creek, he will see that Beret’s role in the making of America is not as passive as one might at first think. Her importance in Spring Creek, therefore, needs to be reassessed to a degree more acceptable to her nature, notably as it concerns her relationship to the prairie, her egotism, and her sympathy toward other human beings who are deeply involved in the process of dominating it.

As has been said, Beret believes that the desolation and physical attributes of the prairie force the pioneer to do evil things, and thus any attempt to subdue it will fail. At the end of the chapter “What the Waving Grass Revealed,” for instance, Beret voices her fear that man had better consider his actions — Per had removed the land stakes, and the others had approved of his actions — lest they “all turn into beasts and savages.” Having given warning, Beret rushes from her hut and, not knowing where to turn or what to do, she stumbles over the plow.
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in the yard and finally comes to rest upon it. While she
sits there upon a tool of man's creation and one that will
aid man in his conquest of the prairie, the storm of pas­
sion within her is removed, and "deep melancholy came
instead." The plow and the prairie — both inescapable
parts of Beret's life. She experiences difficulty in coming
to terms with both.

Beret's difficulty in uniting what changes the prairie
with the changing prairie itself is not because she is
unreasonably obstinate but because she refuses to com­
promise her vision of the ideal person and her feelings of
what is right and true to her. An example of her remain­
ing true to self is revealed in the episode of Jakob and
Kari. The story is a synecdoche in that it illustrates the
whole cost of immigration in a single dramatic instance.

In "The Power of Evil in High Places," Rølvaag de­
scribes some pioneers who visit Spring Creek: young
and old alike are excited, happy, inquisitive land­
seekers. After their brief stay, they vanish into the
"green stillness of the west." Then comes the story of
Jakob and Kari.

The setting that Rølvaag provides describes a make­
believe world and carries implications for the Hansa
family: "Toward evening of the third day, the fog lifted
and clear sky again appeared; the setting sun burst
through the cloud banks rolling up above the western
horizon, and transformed them into marvellous fairy cas­
tles." The description is romantic and interlaced with
hints of good and wonderful happenings that might oc­
cur, but the pictures come from the west, not the east.
Out of a corner of the east, the northeast, creeps reality in
the form of a lone schooner. Of the wagons that come to
the settlement, of those that leave it, now comes one
wagon as "poverty-stricken," as "unspeakably forlorn"
as the wagon that brought Per and his family to Spring
Creek. It is the schooner of Jakob, Kari, and their family,
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a family lost in the infinity of the prairie, a family lost in sorrow and madness. It comes unnoticed: “A lonely wagon had crept into sight; it had almost reached the creek before anyone had noticed it.” It creeps into Spring Creek and into the lives of men and brings with it a lesson about the prairie, men, and life.

This wagon arrives unexpectedly and at a strange time in the lives of the settlers, but, as it is Beret’s wont to scan the horizon, she sees it first. Her remarks about it, however, are delivered in such a matter of fact manner that one is left with the feeling that here is just another pioneer family moving to the western horizon. Per runs to the schooner, but he stops because Jakob looks “as if he stood on the very brink of the grave,” an intimation that something is wrong, out of joint, horrible. Jakob’s daughter validates that intimation when she tells her father that her mother cannot get down from the wagon because she is tied. Per jumps to the tongue of the wagon and gets a shock: “The sight that met his eyes sent chills running down his spine. Inside sat a woman on a pile of clothes, with her back against a large immigrant chest; around her wrists and leading to the handles of the chest a strong rope was tied; her face was drawn and unnatural. . . . To him it looked as if the woman was crucified.” The motifs of Beret’s giants with their outstretched arms in the tent of Hans Olsa and Per’s outstretched arms on the prairie now merge into Kari with her arms outstretched.

This story hints of what might have happened had Per not found the track, Hans Olsa’s leg of mutton, and the trail to the settlement. Jakob explains that originally there were five wagons, that he, like Per, had had to be left behind. Per’s schooner had stuck in a mud hole, had broken, and, therefore, he had been forced to go back to Jackson, Minnesota, for repairs. Jakob’s son Paul had become ill, and therefore the father had had to go back to
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Jackson for help. Per had been helped; Jakob had not been. Consequently, Jakob says (and introduces the leitmotif of the story): "No, life isn’t easy." Per’s wagon had traveled the prairie four weeks because of the delay; Jakob’s wagon had gone over much the same ground for nearly six weeks.

Through Jakob, Rølvaag repeats the leitmotif and underscores the lesson of the story: “Ya, it was a hard life” and “Good God, what a nightmare life was!” Lacking a compass, Jakob had tried steering with a trailing rope, a device he had heard helped fishermen in Norway; but the prairie, although as green and as changing as the sea, is not the sea, and those skills used in Norway do not always work in America. Thus Jakob had failed, lost his directions, and come to the settlement from the northeast, off course, still searching for the other wagons. Per had steered a course by his watch, the sun, and the North Star and with luck made it; however, he, too, had been off course and had come from the west. Like Per, Jakob says that he did not know what would become of him and the family if they had not reached Per’s hut. Per has the same feeling: “It was getting to be a matter of life and death to him to find the trail. . . . Oh yes, he realized it all too well — a matter of life and death.”

With Jakob and Per, one has a comparison of the ordinary and the unlucky with the extraordinary and the lucky. In one respect, however, Jakob is like Beret. He remarks to Per that he had “travelled far enough to reach the ends of the earth!” This quotation is reminiscent of the same feeling, if not in the same words, as Beret uses about the trail to Spring Creek: “This seems to be taking us to the end of the world . . . beyond the end of the world!” But Jakob is more like Per than Beret — a less exciting Per, to be sure, but a Per nevertheless who might have been lost on the prairie and overtaken with tragedy instead of success. Jakob is the dark side of As-
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keladd, the dark side of Beret’s mind, the dark side of the land.

The story also tells one of the tragedy that comes to a family when it loses a loved one to the prairie. Jakob and Kari left their son Paul “by a big stone — no coffin or anything.” The story discloses the cost of immigration and the subduing of the land in terms of lives. It tells of the willingness of the prairie to confuse and to frustrate those who would attempt to place a marker upon it that would signify in space the fate of one who came to dominate it. The story reveals the psychological effect the prairie has on human beings who lose a loved one, especially on Kari.

But Beret also loses a loved one to the new land. The woman bound to the chest is and yet is not Beret. Kari prefigures Beret and her coming state of madness, but she remains Kari. She is a mother like Beret, but a mother who has lost a son to the prairie, not a husband. And like Beret Kari is symbolic, symbolic of pioneers who traverse the green sea of the land and the mind — and go mad. Both Kari and Beret are tied to the prairie, one by a son, one by a husband. Both are tied to a chest, one literally, one symbolically. And both become insane. Beret will recover from her madness; Kari apparently will not. In turn, both Jakob and Per are tied to their wives and the prairie and must remain with them.

The story of Jakob and Kari, besides revealing Beret’s similarities to, and differences from, Kari also foreshadows the psychological impact of the prairie on women of the nature of Kari. One of the first things she asks is, “Is this the place, Jakob?” The question is ambiguous, for it may refer to Paul’s grave or to Kari’s final destination. But the query is like Beret’s first thoughts upon coming to Spring Creek: “Was this the place? . . . Here! . . . Could it be possible?” But the story also shows the great love Beret is capable of giving
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to a fellow pioneer who has suffered at the hands of the prairie.

The story is a mirror of the tent episode and a counterbalance to the one in which Per cures the injured Indian. What Sørine had done for Beret at the tent of Hans Olsa, so Beret now does for Kari. She recognizes the plight of the woman immediately, and her heart and love go out to Kari at once. As Sørine had loosened Beret’s clothes, had given her a dress and water to wash with, so Beret does for Kari. She does even more: she loosens Kari’s clothes, takes off her shoes, washes her face, and fixes a place for her to sleep. The acts that Beret performs for Kari are as merciful, compassionate, and important as Per’s treatment of the Indian — and are done without fanfare or reward.

Beret sees a kinship with Kari, and Kari mirrors Beret. Beret has been slipping off the edge of sanity into the dark midnight of the mind in her rages of madness and in her covering of the windows. Per sees Kari as a “broken creature,” but he does not see her as Beret does, one for whom the prairie holds terrors unspeakable. He regards Jakob as an ignorant fool, but Beret sees him differently and points out the lesson of the story as she views the relationship of Jakob and Kari with prairie: “Now you can see that this kind of life is impossible! It’s beyond human endurance.” For some pioneers, life is impossible; for others it is not. Ironically, even though Beret says that life is beyond human endurance, she endures and Kari endures.

Later, when Beret’s daughter And-Ongen disappears (Kari takes her), Per and Beret experience momentarily and actually what Jakob and Kari experienced on the prairie and will endure the rest of their lives: sheer terror and madness. Just as Beret goes to the top of Indian Hill to experience insight into the meaning of her adventure and to recapture the familiar, so Kari goes to the
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India~'l Hill with And-Ongen in the futile hope of finding help. She seeks to locate on the prairie the joyful possession of the familiar, a child, And-Ongen, who becomes a surrogate Paul. Not until Per and Beret find Kari holding their daughter is their terror relieved, their temporary madness dispelled. Now they understand and endure the trauma undergone by Jakob and Kari. Therefore, in the spirit of true understanding, willingness, and genuine compassion, Per and Hans Olsa confront the prairie and begin a four-day search for Paul. The search to the east yields nothing, for the prairie does not always give up its dead, nor reveal their hiding place as it does with the grave of the Indian.

The search ended, Jakob and Kari ask directions to the James River. The reference to the stream anticipates Per's final place on the prairie, with his body found on a hillside, marked not by a stone but by a man-made haystack (part of the prairie itself, nevertheless), "across the stretch from Colton to the James River."

Rølvaag describes the departure of Jakob and Kari in a setting that is in direct contrast with the opening one of the story, in which there was suggested that something good and wonderful might happen. Kari and Jakob steer toward the west, and, as they leave, "banks of heavy cloud were rolled up on the western horizon — huge, fantastic forms that seemed to await them in Heaven's derision — though they might have been only the last stragglers of the spell of bad weather just past."

Beret watches Kari and Jakob from the highest point, Indian Hill, always a coign of vantage for her. Per does not fully realize or acknowledge the lesson of the story of Jakob and Kari. Beret, however, thinks she does: "That's the way I've become. . . . What misery, what an unspeakable tragedy, life is for some!" She feels guilty about sending lost people, people transfigured with sorrow and despair, searching for the lost, into the reaches of the prairie. But Jakob and Kari must go. They cannot
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remain as a constant physical reminder to the living, for Jakob and Kari are cursed by the prairie to wander it forever. They remain, however, in the prairie of the mind.

As Beret watches the family move into the “huge, fantastic forms” and “into the great, mysterious silence always hovering above the plain,” it looks to her “as if the prairie were swallowing up the people, the wagon, the cows, and all.” As the family goes farther, Beret is not sure that she sees the caravan at all. She is not sure that what she does see is the family of Jakob and Kari or “only a dead tuft of grass far away which the wind stirred.” The prairie confuses her perception of the family in space and mind, and finally it becomes one with the prairie, as its son had done.

The story closes with a description of the clouds: “Toward evening the air grew heavy and sultry; the cloud banks, still rolling up in the western sky, had taken on a most threatening aspect; it looked as if a thunderstorm might be coming on.”

Jakob and Kari move not into the world of the fairy tale, but into what looks like a prairie storm. The chapter title in which the story is found is “The Power of Evil in High Places.” Is “Heaven’s derison” part of the “Power of Evil”? Are the fates of Jakob and Kari and the pioneers of Spring Creek in the hands of an angry Lord? Or the evil forces of Satan? Is the story both an indictment of, and a lesson about, the source of pain, the fate of Man on the prairie, the unjustness of God’s dispensations? The phrases “seemed to await them” and “looked as if,” however, are ambiguous and make interpretation difficult. What conclusions are drawn are from Beret’s mind. They are what she considers to be the source of tragedy on the prairie, especially as revealed in Jakob and Kari, as she continues to interpret external events in relationship to her concept of self.

Still, the story is valuable, for Kari is integral to an
understanding of the nature of Beret, as Jakob contrasts with Per. Yet neither Beret nor Per is able to heal the mental wounds of Kari and the physical suffering of Jakob inflicted upon them by the prairie. The prairie takes its toll; it demands something from those who would live in harmony with it (the Indian), or from those who would come to conquer it (Paul, Jakob, and Kari), or from those who would seek to understand it (Beret). On the literal level, the prairie swallows all — the lost cows, the Indian in the unmarked grave, Paul, in his lost resting place, Jakob’s wagon, the pioneers in their sod huts. On the symbolic level, the prairie swallows the souls of all, including Beret, Jakob and Kari and Paul, Hans Olsa — those men, women, and children lost in the infinities of space in Dakota Territory.

Later, and again upon Indian Hill, Beret questions God and His wisdom in trying to settle and populate the prairie: “How could the good God permit creatures made in His image to fall into such tribulations?” As she meditates, there appears a cloud from the west that to her seems to be a skull. It is a bad omen, for the skull comes so soon after the departure of Jakob and Kari. However, her coupling of the sky with the earth (“the face seemed to swell out of the prairie and filled half the heavens”) provides a matrix of images which she can transform to her own liking. As Beret is caught and involved in her own personal dilemma in the midst of the prairie and as she believes that man cannot triumph over it, she makes such an idée fixe manifest in personal symbols drawn from the prairie itself — the skull cloud, the magic circle, Indian Hill.

From encounter to encounter, Beret’s struggle against the force of the prairie increases until she is driven mad. According to Per, the pivotal moment for Beret is the coming of the grasshoppers, which are spawned from the land itself to defeat both man and animal. They are

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the sum total of all the forces that the prairie can muster against Beret. Yet with the help of the unnamed minister and Per’s confession of love for Beret and his assumption of responsibility for his actions, she is made better.

Earlier in Giants, Per returns home from one of his journeys and brings trees with him in order to begin a shelterbelt. And he starts it before anyone else does. The shelterbelt protects Beret by providing her at last with a hiding place, and it protects her from the harsh elements of the prairie, the evil force that surrounds her. But it also has the negative effect of supporting the force of the prairie, for it isolates her from her fellowmen and the good forces that surround her. The planting of the trees by Per is an act of domination over the prairie: he would define, limit, and confine it with a “snow-white picket fence around a big, big garden!” Beret becomes both recipient and victim of Per’s attempt to assume dominion over the earth.

When Beret recovers from her bout of insanity, Rølvaag makes a pointed use of the trees in the shelterbelt, not only to suggest the length of her madness, but also to stress that the trees are a significant point of reference in her life: “The trees around the yard caught her eye; again she had the feeling of having just returned from a long journey. The idea! Look how big that grove is getting to be!” The trees are still there, changed yet unchanged, a constant entity in the changing, unchanging ways of the prairie. They derive their strength from the land in contrast to Beret in her unchanging ways. The relationship between Beret and the prairie does not change, for she continues to interpret events in her own perspective in order to remain true to herself and to her concept that it does not always work through massive force but in a subtle manner.

The gentler force of the prairie works upon Beret to the end. When Johannes Morstad comes to Spring Creek
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and asks her to help his wife Josie with her coming baby, Beret concludes that “this is certainly the work of the devil!” Nevertheless she goes out on the prairie as a prelude to Per’s fatal trek. She goes to a birth, he goes to a death; both reflect the rhythms of life and death found upon the prairie. As Beret is successful in her encounter, it is natural that she should later coerce Per to go. The force of the prairie leads her to think so. She believes that the weather is not dangerous, only threatening, that pioneers are able to dig out after the storm, and so she can go.

When Per thinks about going out into the storm, he reflects, “God pity him who had to travel the prairie these days!” In order to keep from going, he rationalizes that whatever Hans Olsa’s shortcomings might be, they will not keep him from getting into heaven. But Beret counters, “You know what our life has been: land and houses, and then more land, and cattle! That has been his whole concern — that’s been his very life.” Any rebuttal by Per is defeated by Beret. Now all the legends about his invincibility and his prowess are to be tested; hence pressured and provoked, Per goes to his death struggle with the prairie.

The subtle force of the prairie pressures Beret into an encounter with it, but with a surrogate, Per. Even though the major force at the moment seems to be Beret’s religious ardor and disproportionate fixation with the salvation of Hans Olsa’s soul, it is the encounter with the prairie and what it does to men that had driven Beret mad. Her encounter with it, involved with a surrogate, will kill Per, the one whom Beret loves most.

Beret now comes full circle from her first encounter with the prairie to her last, but with little if any change in her character. As she looks out the kitchen window, hoping to call a few words to Per, and then as she looks out the door of her sod hut, “the westerly gusts, driving full
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against her, snatched her words away.” To the end, the force of the prairie works against her and prevents her from communicating with her husband. It has isolated Beret from the man she loves, and now it will kill him.

Because the prairie seduces Per away from Beret, neither one really knows the other. Per believes Beret to be an “exceptional woman,” a “most sensible woman,” but he does not comprehend the complicated mental journey she takes, and many of his comments of praise are uttered when Beret is not what he perceives her to be. Even so, she is the only woman fit for Per; it is appropriate and significant that she survives him. Her terrifying journey of the mind as it confronts the physical force of the prairie may be more perilous than confronting the process of domesticating the land; it may be as heroic as Per’s encounter with the storm.

As the prairie works its force upon Beret, the very core of her being is unveiled. One sees her fears, her hatreds, her loves, her acts of kindness, and her distortions of events. She may not change, her egoism will not allow that, but she does survive and remains a significant figure while Per dies. Her encounter with the prairie in Giants makes it apparent that it is not always those who are the strongest, or those who seem to be, who survive. Often it is the weakest, or those who seem to be, who ultimately, with hidden strengths, found the kingdom—who in Rølvaag’s view, are also giants and who will have dominion over the prairie.

NOTES

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3 Ole E. Rølvaag, "Contemporary Writers and Their Works: 'Giants in the Earth'," in The Editor, 17:84 (August 6, 1927).

4 Ole E. Rølvaag, "Contemporary Writers and Their Works: 'Giants in the Earth'," in The Editor, 17:82 (August 6, 1927).

5 Ole Edvart Rølvaag, Giants in the Earth, 443 (New York, 1927).


8 Bad Wound, "Impressions of the Wandering Indians in Giants in the Earth."