3 Martha Ostenso: Norwegian-American Immigrant Novelist

Martha Ostenso (1900–1963) was a second-generation Norwegian-American immigrant who achieved success as a novelist in the 1920s and 1930s. She became the first Norwegian-American woman to support herself and family by her writing. Her works include fifteen novels, about thirty short stories, a biography of Sister Elizabeth Kenny, some poetry and miscellaneous prose. Her major writings are realistic representations of rural Midwestern United States and Canada, where she spent most of her life. She presented her material in terms of the romantic vision of the human quest for selfhood, and at times she showed the influence of naturalism, especially in the frank treatment of character. Nearly all her works reveal Scandinavian influence in themes, characters, and settings, but this emphasis diminishes in the last novels.

Her life illustrates the immigrant “success story” — the fulfillment of the American dream of her parents. As an infant she lived on a farm along the fjord near Bergen, Norway, where her ancestors had struggled for a livelihood since Viking days. As an eighteen-year-old, she...
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chased skunks in the morning before she taught in a log schoolhouse on the Great Plains near Dog Creek, Manitoba, Canada. At the age of twenty-five, she gained fame in New York City for her prizewinning first novel, *Wild Geese*. For this achievement, she received $13,500, the largest literary prize ever offered, to that time, in such a contest in America. Her success attracted the critical attention and friendship of Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and other writers.

When Martha was two years old, her family emigrated to Canada, and during the following eleven years the Ostensos lived in seven little towns in Minnesota and South Dakota, a repeated uprooting that was representative of immigrant experience. After high-school graduation, she attended the University of Manitoba for one year. Her early work included not only teaching school but also serving as a railroad baggage clerk, a newspaper reporter, and a social worker. In 1921 her poems began to appear in periodicals such as the *Canadian Magazine of Politics, Art & Literature*, the *American-Scandinavian Review*, the *Literary Digest*, *Poetry*, and *Voices*. Forty-three poems were collected in 1924 in a small volume entitled *A Far Land*.

From poetry Martha turned to fiction, and her first short story, "The Storm," was published in the *American-Scandinavian Review* for September, 1924. This story, concerned with the conflict between Ole Seim and his son about the correct way to build boats, is the beginning of her use of Scandinavian elements in her fiction. But she turned from the description of the sea back to the land. The theme of the acquisitive farmer whose obsession for land made him willing to sacrifice anything for it — as expressed in the poem "The Farmer's Wife" — was clearly in Martha's mind when she wrote *Wild Geese*. She had observed such people in the country where she taught school, and now used them
and the country for the characters and the locale of the novel. She later described such influences: "My novel *Wild Geese* lay there [in the lake district of Manitoba], waiting to be put into words. There was the raw material out of which the little towns that I knew so well had been made. There was human nature stark, unattired in the convention of a smoother, softer life."¹

With the sudden fame she gained from the publication of *Wild Geese*, as well as from the economic support that lifted her bank account from two dollars to $13,500 overnight, Martha began a writing career that continued until 1958. Her creative powers stretched mainly over two decades, and they were at their height from 1925 to 1935. During this decade she published eight novels, five of which were also serialized in *Pictorial Review*, *Hearst’s International*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *McCall’s*. She also published one serial novel in the *Minneapolis Tribune* and eight short stories in the previously mentioned magazines, as well as in the *North American Review*, *Redbook*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Country Gentleman*. During the second decade of her career, from 1935 to 1946, she turned increasingly to writing short stories and had twenty-one of them published in the magazines just referred to, as well as in *Liberty* and *Woman’s Home Companion*. In the same period she wrote four novels.

In her last decade, when her career declined for professional and personal reasons, she published only two novels, followed by a final one in 1958. Once her books were in print, they generally appeared in many editions in the United States, Canada, England, and Australia. They were translated into forty-five foreign editions printed in at least ten countries: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Austria, The Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia. With the publication of her short stories in such periodicals as *Cosmopolitan*, Martha added considerably to her already large reading
public, for a single issue of one of these magazines might be printed in over a million copies. When she began writing fiction, production of her poetry tapered off, but she managed some miscellaneous articles and collaborated with Sister Kenny on the latter’s biography, And They Shall Walk, published in 1943. Films were made of Wild Geese (1927) and the Sister Kenny volume (1946).

Martha Ostenso’s novels easily confirm the wisdom of her advice: “Write out of the experiences of your own life or don’t write at all.” For her, the small towns and farms she knew best provided the materials for her novels. After describing an Icelandic farming community in northern Manitoba in Wild Geese, she frequently chose a similar Minnesota locale for the setting of a novel, as in The Dark Dawn (1926), The Mad Carews (1927), There’s Always Another Year (1933), The Stone Field (1937), The Sunset Tree (1949), and A Man Had Tall Sons (1958). Three novels center in unidentified Midwestern small towns — The Young May Moon (1929), The Waters Under the Earth (1930), and Milk Route (1948); two works specifically focus on life among pioneers in the Red River Valley in Minnesota — O River, Remember! (1943) and The Mandrake Root (1938).

Two novels other than Wild Geese are set in Canada — Prologue to Love (1931) in British Columbia and The White Reef (1934) on Vancouver Island. The setting of Love Passed This Way (1942) moves from New York to South Dakota. Furthermore, nearly every novel has some Norwegian immigrants and their descendants as characters, but those with three generations of Norwegian immigrants as central characters are O River, Remember! and The Mandrake Root. Not only do the novels give realistic portrayals of the hard, lonely work in farming communities, but often the main character — usually a man — treats his wife and children tyrannically
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because of his own excessive ambition, love of the land, and often narrow religious views.

That Martha managed through the writing of fiction to support herself and her extended family that numbered eleven was a remarkable accomplishment for a woman of that time. In the depression of the 1930s, her income annually averaged from thirty to forty thousand dollars. It was an exception to the general custom then for an immigrant woman to support herself solely by being an author. Cecyle Neidle says, “To become a writer . . . called not only for a long-term effort, but it was an ambition that carried a high risk of disappointment. People who led precarious lives would understandably hesitate to take risks.” Among the Norwegian-American immigrants, only one writer to Ostenso’s time had been able to make his living by writing, Lars Stenholt, whose cheap paperbacks earned him an existence described as “wretched.” Two Norwegian-American women immigrants during the 1920s — Dorothea Dahl and Belle Hagen Winslow — wrote only one and two novels respectively, and so had no possibility of using authorship as a full-time career. Even Ole Edvard Rølvaag was not able to obtain sufficient income from his novels to allow him to leave his duties in the college classroom until 1929, two years before his death.

Whether Ostenso truly belongs to the group of Norwegian-American immigrant writers depends upon the criteria by which “immigrant” status is defined. If one uses the narrow meaning of the term to refer to one of foreign birth who must “adjust to a new mode of existence and accept alterations in life style,” she would not qualify as a first-generation immigrant because she never had to adopt a new life style. Nevertheless, she is usually mentioned in books on immigrant women writers. First-generation immigrants have been classified by Einar Haugen into two groups — those who arrived in

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the New World after the age of fourteen, when their speech habits had been formed, and those who came before the age of fourteen, who “are linguistically in much the same position” as the second generation. Martha would be placed by Haugen in the latter group. Even though she was born in Norway, she came to America at such an early age that her Americanization was quite rapid, and because she came to the Midwest three decades after it had been settled, she grew up “among the descendants of pioneers, rather than the pioneers themselves.” More aptly, Martha Ostenso should be considered as belonging to the second generation, even though she and her family experienced firsthand many of the immigrant struggles.

Further evidence that as an author she belonged to this classification lies in the fact that like “most second-generation authors of Scandinavian background [she] wrote in English.” Although she spoke Norwegian first, she quickly learned English in school and, even though she remained bilingual all her life, she wrote all her works in English. This fact lessened her Norwegian audience because Norwegians who wrote in English had fewer opportunities to publish in periodicals issued by their own people. Even in the 1920s, many Midwestern Norwegians preferred to read Norwegian; this may account in part for Rølvaag’s Giants in the Earth having great popularity among them because it was written originally in the author’s native language. Ostenso’s novels were readily available to the reading public in Norway as well as in America in the 1930s and the 1940s, but not necessarily in Norwegian in the immigrant communities on this continent. Her Wild Geese, however, was serialized in Norwegian in Skandinaven, a Chicago newspaper, in 1926.

Additional support for her status as an immigrant author can be derived from both her life and her works.

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Often mentioned with Rølvaag as one of the leading Norwegian-American authors of the day, she is similar to him, yet different, particularly in the perspective from which she viewed the cultures of the Old World and the New. Since Rølvaag migrated to America as an adult, he was able to present the two cultures from a simultaneous perspective. But because Ostenso came as a child, she presents primarily an American point of view, but with some discernment of the Norwegian heritage. Both novelists, however, wrote about pioneer characters who showed courage, perseverance, and strength.

Another reason for including Ostenso among Norwegian-American immigrant writers lies in her use of Scandinavian materials, themes, and motifs. Her best and most famous novel, *Wild Geese*, illustrates this tendency very well. In an Icelandic settlement in Manitoba, a prison-like house dominates the landscape of “dark, newly plowed furrows . . . with acres of narrow woodland stretching northward like a dark mane upon the earth.” The daily activities of the men who struggle to produce a livelihood and of the women who toil in the fields and care for the animals are representative of life in immigrant communities. Also typical are the extraordinary occurrences which were common enough for pioneers — blizzards, prairie fires, and death during epidemics of disease.

Although the nationality of the central figure in *Wild Geese* is not made explicit, Caleb Gare is a domineering farmer, who is driven by his desire to acquire more land at the expense of others to the point that he tyrannizes his own family and the community. Devoting most of his time to adding to his material holdings, primarily his land, he uses his possessions as evidence of his being in control, and thus his possessions become his very life. Caleb’s first love becomes especially clear when he runs his hands over the heads of his growing flax in a “stealthy
caress — more intimate than any he had ever given to woman.” Because his possessions assume the status of a loved one, the tyrant devotes himself and everyone else to them. In so doing, he alienates himself from the human love he needs yet hopes to find in his properties, especially his land. He controls Amelia, his wife, by reminding her of her illegitimate child.

Gare squeezes a bargain from his dying neighbor about a hay crop, and he threatens to refuse him a Catholic burial in the Protestant cemetery. During a blizzard he denies shelter to a neighbor because he is afraid that the man may have a contagious disease. But, in the end, the swamp which he traded to that neighbor for valuable timber becomes the means whereby he is destroyed. The name “Gare” has the possible meaning of “eager, covetous, desirous of wealth or miserly,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. As the etymology of the word is given as an adaptation from Old Norse *gorr, gørr*, or *gaerr*, his name suggests Scandinavian influence, and the meaning certainly is appropriate to the characteristics of the main figure.

The strong Nordic woman who rebels against paternal dominance is illustrated by Judith, Caleb’s seventeen-year-old daughter. Her rebellion also exemplifies the major immigrant theme of insistence on freedom from bondage. Rather than use her strong body to slave for her father — milking, haying, plowing, and corralling the cattle — she begins to rid herself of the physical and psychological ties that bind her to him. Completely uninhibited, she strips off her clothing in the woods one day and presses her body into the good earth. She becomes aware of her own womanhood and knows that “the world has singled her out from the rest of the Gares. She was no longer one of them.” She is suddenly “bursting with hatred of Caleb,” who represents all suppression of knowledge of herself. Later in her encounter with her neighbor lover, Sven Sandbo, they become “two
stark elemental forces striving for mastery over each other." In this frank passage the influence of naturalism is clearly evident. In response to Judith's taunt that she could throw him, they wrestled. This incident is dramatically described in *Wild Geese*:

"Judith was almost as tall as Sven. Her limbs were long, sinewy, her body quick and lithe as a wild-cat's. Sven, who started the tussle laughing, could get no last­ing grip on her. She slid through his arms and wound herself about his body, bringing them both to the earth. As their movements increased in swiftness and strength, Sven forgot to laugh and became as serious as Judith. It did not occur to him that he might have to use his real energy in defending himself until he saw that the girl's face was set and hard, her eyes burning. He realized suddenly that she was trying to get a head lock on him that he himself had taught her. He caught both her hands, twisting her right arm backward. She threw herself upon him violently, almost somersaulting over his shoulder, freeing her arm with a terrific jerk. Sven turned quickly, caught her about the waist with one arm and pressed the other against her throat, so that she was bent almost double and unable to breathe. He looked at her, saw that her eyes were closed and her face almost scarlet and dripping with perspiration.

"Had enough?" he asked, slightly loosening his hold.

"Judith took advantage of the moment, and with a twist of her head was out of his grip like an eel. Her eyes were blazing, her breath coming in short gasps. She lashed out with her arm, striking him full across the face. While Sven, half stunned from the weight of the blow, was trying to understand the change in the issue, she hurled herself against him and he fell to the earth under her. Then something leaped in Sven. They were no longer unevenly matched, different in sex. They were two stark elements, striving for mastery over each other.

"Sven crushed the girl's limbs between his own,
bruised her throat, pulled her arms ruthlessly together behind her until the skin over the curve of her shoulders was white and taut, her clothing torn away. Her panting body heaved against his as they lay full length on the ground locked in furious embrace. Judith buried her nails in the flesh over his breast, beat her knees into his loins, set her teeth in the more tender skin over the veins at his wrists. She fought with insane abandon to any hurt he might inflict, or he would have mastered her at once. The faces, throats and chests of both were shining with sweat. Sven’s breath fell in hot gusts on Judith’s face. Suddenly her hand, that was fastened like steel on his throat, relaxed and fell away. Her eyelids quivered and a tear trickled down and mingled with the beads of perspiration on her temple. Sven released the arm that he had bent to breaking point. He was trembling.

“‘Judie,’ he muttered, ‘Judie—look at me.’

“Judith raised her eyelids slowly.

“‘Kiss me—now,’ she said in a breath.”

This scene parallels that in Frank Norris’s McTeague, in which the dentist struggles with his animal instincts until he finally kisses Trina “grossly.” It also parallels a scene in Moran of the Lady Letty, where Moran loses in a barrage of fists and an effective wrestling hold. This fondness for the portrayal of direct, brutal action and the depiction of men motivated by instinct, that appears in Ostenso as well as in Norris, reminds one of the Scandinavian sagas, in which humans fought brutes with their hands. The evidence of naturalism is Ostenso’s unique contribution, as it was far more common in the novels of the twenties and thirties to treat this theme of freedom from tyranny in a realistic, romantic, or melodramatic manner.

The ax-throwing episode that occurs after Caleb discovers the lovers together also suggests Scandinavian origin, for it is reminiscent of beheadings by hatchets in Norwegian folk tales and of the hammer-throwing of
Thor from mythology. Other parallels to the ax incident are found in Bjørnson’s novel Arne, where the main character approaches his father with an ax. Arne, however, is spared murder because his father conveniently suffers a fatal heart attack. Similarly, in Rølvaag’s Pure Gold, Lizzie, after greeting Lou with an ax in her hand, lies dead.

Two main themes in Wild Geese are common in Scandinavian literature: man’s closeness to the land and paternal dominance of the family. After Caleb discovers that he has lost control of his daughter and his wife and that he is about to lose his precious field of flax in a brush fire, he drives furiously to plow a fire-guard, but sinks down into the swamp. He is devoured by the very land that he has worked so hard to dominate. Rølvaag’s first novel, On Forgotten Paths (1914), also presents the story of a Norwegian immigrant who loses his soul in his acquisitive drive to possess the prairie, “big and strong and rich.” Rølvaag’s next novel, Pure Gold (1920), also develops this theme. In On Forgotten Paths the prairie is always more powerful than any human being who foolishly thinks he can control natural forces, as in Giants in the Earth and Wild Geese. In Rølvaag and Ostenso the virgin prairie is the dragon who must be destroyed or at least subdued before a person can gain the gold it guards, and one may lose one’s life in the struggle.

The theme of patriarchal dominance, common in Scandinavian as well as in Norwegian-American immigrant literature, is central to nearly all of Ostenso’s novels, whether the characters are identified as Scandinavian or not. In The Divided Heart, Dorothy Skårdal says: “The Scandinavian family in both Old- and New-World settings... was dominated by the father, whose authority over both wife and children in the home country was nearly absolute. He determined the children’s discipline, their training and education, their future
career, their marriage partner . . . [everything but the laws of the land and the rules of the church]. In a considerable number of tales this paternal dominance was shown transferred to America.” 15 When a harsh father worked his children beyond endurance for the sake of the whole family, the children often rebelled, especially if the neighbors had an easier life. 16 Even if this emphasis on parental control is Scandinavian, it is neither exclusively nor universally so. In Wild Geese, harsh tyranny is repeated in the character of Thorvald Thorvaldson, but at least two Scandinavians, Fusi Aronson and Erik Bjarnasson, are kindhearted, fair-minded family heads. Scandinavian elements such as these pervade the entire Ostenso canon.

Finally, two personal reasons — her attitude toward her heritage and her citizenship — provide evidence that Martha should be called an immigrant author. When she was interviewed by a Norwegian newspaper writer, she told him that she felt herself “more Norwegian than American.” 17 After she read the first Norwegian translation of Wild Geese, she was “convinced that the tale is more effective in Norwegian than it is in English. For reasons which are difficult to explain, I have a feeling that the rugged forms of Norwegian are much better fitted to convey the spirit of the story as I conceived it in the first place, and as I struggled to convey it in English.” 18 That her feeling for Norway and its language was genuine was also shown by her delay in taking out American citizenship. Although Martha’s parents had become American earlier, she herself did not receive citizenship until 1931. 19

For these reasons, Martha Ostenso properly belongs among Norwegian-American immigrant writers, even though she lacked the dual perspective on her heritage which Rølvaag and other authors presented. She is best classified as a second-generation immigrant author on
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the basis of the content of the works and of the language in which they were written. Her major contribution to that tradition is the realistic, even frank, interpretation of the second-generation immigrant who struggled, first for land and money, then for family and love. Martha’s life — as it developed through experiencing the hardships of immigration, gaining overnight fame like a female Horatio Alger, and then losing the “promised land” for personal as well as professional reasons — documents the saga of the Norwegian-American immigrant woman revealed in many literary works, her own as well as those of others.

NOTES

1 Charles C. Baldwin, Martha Ostenso: Daughter of the Vikings, 8 (New York, 1930).
2 “Forfatterinnen med millionoplagene,” in Skandinaven (Chicago), September 27, 1928.
3 Lillian Taafe, “Minnesota Woman Novelist Joins Issues with the Moderns,” in Minneapolis Tribune, July 2, 1927.
4 Cecyle S. Neidle, America’s Immigrant Women, 255 (Boston, 1975).
8 Neidle, America’s Immigrant Women, 1.
10 Neidle, America’s Immigrant Women, 262.
11 Dorothy Burton Skårdal, The Divided Heart: Scandinavian Immigrant Experience through Literary Sources, 37 (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1974).
12 Martha Ostenso, Wild Geese (New York, 1926).
13 Skårdal, The Divided Heart, 242.
15 Skårdal, The Divided Heart, 238–239.
16 Skårdal, The Divided Heart, 245–246.
17 Øyvind Sørensen, “Hos forfatterinden Martha Ostenso,” in Skandinaven, July 6, 1928.
19 “Martha Ostenso Grabs Truck, Drives It to Loop to Get Citizenship Papers,” in Minneapolis Star, May 14, 1931.