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THE DOMINANT THEMES OF ROLIAND'S

NOWELL: AN ANNUAL APPROACH
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APPROVAL BY THESIS DIRECTOR

This thesis has been approved on the date shown below:

[Signature]
A. F. Gegenheimer
Professor of English

[Date]
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INTRODUCTION

I

FACTORS OF ROLVAAG'S AUTHORSHIP

If a man is to realize in full measure the potentialities of his being, he must first of all learn to know the people of his own kin. He must discover the peculiar situation and the special talents of his own race. He must also know its weaknesses. It is fundamentally true that we are projections of those who went before us.1

On the seventeenth of May in 1907, Ole Edvart Rolvaag spoke these words in an address. His birthplace and ancestors gave little hint that an outstanding novelist would arise from them. Lincoln Colcord, in his introduction to Giants in the Earth, describes them as follows:

Ole Edvart Rolvaag was born April 22, 1876, in a small settlement on the island of Donna, in the district of Helgeland, just south of where the Arctic Circle cuts the coast of Norway. The place is far up in the Nordland. Strictly speaking, the settlement has no name; the cove where it lies is called Rolvaag on the map, but it is an island. Rolvaag, it will be seen, took his place name after coming to America; he has explained this practice in a footnote in the present work. His father's Christian name was Peder, and in Norway he would have been Pedersen; his own sons, in turn, would have been Olsen. The name is pronounced with unlaunted o rolled a little, as in world; the last syllable, aag, is like the first syllable in auger.

All the people in this settlement were fishermen. In summer they fished in small open boats, coming home every night; in winter they went in larger boats, carrying crews of from four to six men, to the historic fishing grounds off the Lofoten Islands, where the Maelstrom runs and the coast stretches away to North Cape and beyond. It was a life full of hardship and danger, with sorrow and poverty standing close at hand. The midnight sun shines on them for a season; during the winter they had the long darkness.

The island of Danna is a barren rock covered with gorse and heather—hardly a tree in sight. It looks like a bit of the coast of Labrador. An opening between low ledges of granite marks the cove named Rolvaag; at the head of the cove the houses of the settlement stand out stark and unprotected against the sky line. Behind them loom the iron mountains of the coast. A gloomy, desolate scene—a perilous stronghold on the fringes of the Arctic night. There Rolvaag's forebears had lived, going out to the fisheries, since time immemorial.

Rolvaag's childhood gave little indication of the literary career he was later to follow. He experienced great difficulty in simply learning the alphabet, and his family regarded him as the dullest of the seven children. Rolvaag himself said:

My brother Johan, the oldest, was a natural born reader, who had learned the alphabet in one lesson—at least so I was told. He was endowed with a deep, mellow voice; often Father would excuse him from work in order to have him read aloud to the rest of the family. This brother I looked at with wonder and awe. After him came my sister Martha. She had learned the alphabet upside down by hanging across the table at the time my brother learned it. Not only did she pick up reading naturally and without effort, but once she had been a thing in print she remembered it. Father was a Voracious reader and read well aloud; Mother also was fond of reading, though she never found much time for it. Then I came along! No, I didn't come at all. I was the black sheep. I am not overstating the case, I'm simply telling how it was. Had it not been for Mother and my sister, I'd most likely have been given up as hopeless. When Father tried to teach me, he soon lost patience and boxed

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my ears, which made me cry; the crying only blurred my sight, making reading impossible. It went better with my brother as a teacher, for him I could sauce; then there’d be a fight and the torture would end.

Soon the name tyrk (meaning literally a Turk) was applied to me. I was the incarnation of an illiterate Turk. In time I’d have to be sent to Turkey, which prospect didn’t bother me so much—just let me break away once! Far worse it was that in all probability I would never learn enough to be confirmed. I was to be one of those unfortunate dunces who had to read for confirmation year after year and thus be marked for life; there were some such in the parish and they never amounted to anything.

Despite such gloomy predictions Rolvaag was sent to school. Under the guidance of a sympathetic schoolmaster he made more progress than his family had foreseen. This period was without doubt important in shaping his destiny.

The period of common school lasted seven years. Though instruction was basically religious, pupils with initiative might gather a variety of information from books in the parish library. Norway was at this time in the midst of a remarkable era of enlightenment; book collections and book clubs were found everywhere. The fishing stations, too, had them. In addition, therefore, to religious books Ole Edvart read avidly of fiction, poetry, and drama, during these early years. The usual stock upon which he might draw would include the masters of Danish and German romanticism, some English and French authors in translation, and some Norwegian authors, especially Bjornson.

At the age of fifteen Rolvaag was finished with school and ready to start on his life’s work. Even though he had dreams of becoming something better, circumstances decreed that he should be a

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1Jørgensen and Solum, pp. 19-20.

2Ibid., p. 22.
fisherman, as his father and brothers were:

He went on his first trip to the Lofoten fishing grounds at the age of fifteen. In all, he fished five years, until he had just passed twenty. Every year he was growing more discontented. In the winter of 1893 a terrible storm devastated the fishing fleet, taking tragic toll among his friends and fellow fishermen. The boat he sailed in escaped only by a miracle. This experience killed his first romantic love of the fishing life; he sat down then and wrote to an uncle in South Dakota, asking him for a ticket to the United States. Not that he felt any particular call to go to America; he only thought of getting away. He longed for the unknown and untried—for something secret and inexpressible. Vaguely, stubbornly, he wanted the chance to fulfill himself before he died. But the uncle, doubtless influenced by Rolvaag's family reputation, refused to help him; and the fishing life went on.

Later this uncle relented and sent Rolvaag his ticket. On August 23, 1896, he arrived at Elk Point, South Dakota.

Rolvaag worked for two years on his uncle's farm at Elk Point. There he felt the same restlessness and dissatisfaction with his lot that had bothered him in Norway. His early groping for a goal in life continued:

I should like to know what is to become of me in this world. Am I to continue the life I am now leading, or shall I make something of myself? The likelihood that I shall ever amount to anything is indeed small. Perhaps I shall fight this battle for a while and then go down in despair. Yet, only weak spirits go down. The strong break through. I must belong among the weak, but I should like to see these so-called great spirits go through what I have gone through these last years. Perhaps they too would have to bend under the iron hand of duty. I do not say they would break, only bend. I too am not broken, but I am bent. Mighty strange it will be if I am not some day permitted to do "something."

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5Giants in the Earth, p. xxvii.

6Jørgenson and Solum, p. 30.
I feel within me the surge of powers; whether they are to bring results, I do not know.7

At the end of his second year of farm work Rolvaag made his decision. He decided "to enter Augustana Academy at Canton, South Dakota, at the beginning of the winter term in November."8 It was a hard struggle for Rolvaag to make satisfactory progress in school. He was older than the average student, and spoke English with much difficulty. He worked on the farm in the summer to finance his next year of schooling, and even at that he had to borrow money in order to remain in school. From Augustana Academy he went to St. Olaf College at Northfield, Minnesota. In 1905 Rolvaag delivered the commencement oration at St. Olaf College as a member of the graduating class. The title of his oration was "Individuality," and it shows clearly what these years of schooling had done for him. Theodore Jorgenson, in his biography of Rolvaag, summarizes the speech as follows:

How is individuality to be attained? He thinks that in the first place, the individual must have a strict religious-ethical bringing up. "The relation of the individual to God is, when all is said, the central question of life. Through this center runs the main nerve of existence..."

Secondly, the individual must learn from childhood to be self-reliant. A man must learn to stand on his own feet and keep his own counsel...

Thirdly, young people must learn to love the great ideals. "What a sad, disconsolate, and hopeless sight youth without ideals and enthusiasm is..."

Fourthly, silence and contemplation are necessary to the development of individuality. This is especially true in youth and during the transition to manhood. We must look

7Jorgenson and Solms, p. 42.
8Ibid., p. 44.
into our own souls and try to be clear about our own selves...\(^9\)

The faculty at St. Olaf recognized Rolvaag's ability and made it possible for him to study at the University of Norway for a year. After that he was to return to St. Olaf as a member of the faculty in the Department of Norwegian. While in Norway, Rolvaag visited his home in Nordland. In one of the speeches he gave while he was there, he again emphasizes the importance of high ideals and goals in a person's life:

...There is a thrilling forward movement in history brought about by the natural potentialities of men and women when they are stirred by aspirations and disciplined by life-dominating purposes. "Each individual is a useless being to state, church, home, and fatherland if he has no purpose and no life ideal."\(^10\)

The opportunity to teach at St. Olaf gave Rolvaag a purpose in life, the purpose which he had been searching for since childhood. He felt that he had been directed by God in his search, and now that the choice had been made, he began to influence others in making their choices. In a speech at St. Olaf in 1907 he said:

Singleness of will must of necessity mean singleness of purpose. And the purpose, in order to be one, must be in the nature of an ideal. To will with all my desire and energy that which the Creator has intended that I should do, that is my task in the world, and this task also constitutes my life calling. As soon as we establish this point of view, philosophy gives way to thoughts of contributing to the enrichment of life. As soon as we establish this point of view, a reversion of current sets in. In place of the river which dissipates itself on the arid reaches of a desert comes the stream which collects the

\(^9\)Jorgenson and Solom, pp. 80-81.

\(^{10}\)Ibid., p. 99.
free gifts from every tributary until it glides in majesty and fullness into the eternal sea.\textsuperscript{11}

After publication of his book \textit{Letters from America}, Rolvaag's brother Johan saw Ole Edvard's purpose in life somewhat altered:

In the letter I received from you recently you assert once more that you consider your work as a teacher among your people in America to be the task God has marked out for you. Permit me to assume the role of a prophet in that regard. It is my conviction that from now on your work will take a slightly different direction. Your teaching will be done in the manner of the creative literary artist. May God add His blessing to your work so that you may be a Bjornson or a Holberg to the people of the Northwest! A prophet must come into their midst, a man with holy fire in his soul, a spirit capable of lifting the people out of their earthbound existence.\textsuperscript{12}

As a teacher Rolvaag had specific objectives. In 1918, when he was about to undergo an operation for appendicitis, he wrote a letter to one of his friends summarizing these objectives:

I was called by the church to be a teacher of Norse at St. Olaf College. In all my labor I have had two objectives before me: To teach the students as much Norse as possible, in order that they may be enthusiastically devoted to that which is truly great and noble in the people from which they have sprung. In addition I have tried to cultivate in them a sense of kinship. Faithfulness toward the race, love of parents, reverence for our grandfathers—in short, faithfulness and love toward my people, my kin; that has been the burden of my teaching. Not that I have desired to spread Norse propaganda in America. Rather I conceive that I have carried on the most intense American propaganda among the people of my race. For if there is anything that stands out with crystal clearness in my mind and of which I am unshakably convinced, it is that if we are to fill our place properly and be of significant value to this our country, we must preserve our love of kin and our faithfulness to our own stock. In proportion as our people lose these qualities, their role of usefulness will be diminished.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11}Jorgenson and Solm, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., p. 165.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 229.
Rolvaag's brother Johan's words were more prophetic than Rolvaag realized at that time. As his ability and calling as a creative literary artist increased, Rolvaag was more and more torn from his singleness of purpose as a teacher. In 1919 in a letter to his wife he said:

"I get so desperately weary of teaching that I soon won't be able to keep on any longer." 14

In commenting on this statement, Rolvaag's biographers point out that Rolvaag's teaching actually interfered with his writing:

These unhappy words may be taken as the expression of a passing mood, a sense of futility well known among teachers. But it is likely that he also felt his life useless because he had been sidetracked from his main interests. Between 1914 and 1920 lie six years in which no major literary work was completed. He never hesitated to maintain that nature had appointed him to be a creative writer rather than a professor, and that he was in the classroom by the force of circumstances. He yearned for the opportunity to devote himself completely to his art. 15

In times of stress Rolvaag often turned to nature for relaxation and consolation. At one time while he was staying in Norway he experienced some difficulty with his health. This difficulty, coupled with spending twelve to thirteen hours a-day in lecture and study, proved to be too much for him. In a letter written to his fiance he described how the forest affected him:

How I do enjoy the scenery around Christiania! It is beautiful. There is true grandeur over it. The dark, deep pine forest has had me spell-bound many a time since I came

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14Jorgenson and Solun, p. 236.
15Ibid., p. 236.
here. Did you ever experience the spell of the forest? Did you ever listen to its mystic, sad sighing? One Sunday I was up in the pine forest district called "Nordmarken." There is nothing to break the stillness except the sighing; and the sighing does not break the stillness at all; on the contrary, it intensifies it. The stillness seems saturated with something, for it rests so heavily upon you. It forces you to listen to it. Have you first begun, you are captured. You strain all your powers in listening. And the more you listen, the surer you get that the stillness is hiding something from you. You hear nothing save the sighing. As you listen, the sighing, too, seems to increase its power. That sighing, old as the pine forest, seems to conceal within it all the sorrow and sadness of the ages.16

As one might imagine, the objectives that Rolvaag had as a teacher were quite similar to those that he had as a literary artist. The objectives that Rolvaag strove for in his fiction were summarized by his biographers as follows:

In On Forgotten Paths he had staked out a field whose thorough cultivation might be regarded as his specific life task. To show how his kinsmen settled on the prairie; to indicate the cultural needs peculiar to the American situation; to make clear that culture and religion properly go hand in hand in the maintenance of society; to impress upon coming generations that the early struggle cost much in terms of life and lost values—all this he included in his program.17

16Jorgenson and Solom., p. 90.

17Ibid., p. 236.
II

ROLVAAG'S STYLE AND PURPOSE OF LITERATURE

In 1910 Rolvaag was opposed to the literary realisms of his day. He said of the realists:

It is impossible for me to understand how the radical realists can avoid the gloomiest melancholy. We human beings are so constituted that we need to be led up on the heights now and then in order that we may see the sunshine and breathe the pure air; otherwise we lose courage.¹

In spite of this, in 1920 Rolvaag published Pure Gold, a novel done in a decidedly realistic style. How he reconciled realism and idealism is pointed out by his biographers:

The publication of Two Fools² had shown Rolvaag to belong quite definitely with the realists. A decade earlier he had spoken with profound respect of the grasp which they had of detail and had admired the penetrating psychological analysis they often achieved. But he had held back in fear of what he called a lack of idealism. By the early twenties that fear had been dispelled. He now felt that a realistic attitude does not necessarily mean a lack of idealism, even if the purposiveness of a work of art is not directly apparent. "Nearly all great art arises from longings and tribulations, from aspiration toward greater happiness and greater perfection. All great literary art is therefore in its innermost tendency idealistic. Its striving is toward something higher and richer. Granted that it may picture life and present-day conditions among men in dark colors,

¹Jørgenson and Solum, p. 191.

²The novel Pure Gold was originally written in Norwegian, as were all of Rolvaag's novels. In translation it was first called Two Fools; later the name was changed to Pure Gold.
it nevertheless envisions something more perfect back of the actuality seen. And this more perfect life which is coming into being, the artist puts his confidence in and trusts its ultimate realization." Thus it may be that the book which on the surface seems most gloomy in realism presupposes the greatest optimism because it takes for granted the fundamental perfectibility of men.3

Rolvaag contrasted romantic literature with realism by saying that "romantic literature as being first of all concerned with the aesthetic side of life, with beauty."4 Realism, on the other hand, has a different objective:

Realism is defined as a type of art that emphasizes truth. Its message is, therefore, ethical rather than aesthetic in its ultimate objectives. "We be to the poet, if he lies about life. A work of literary art is but a piece of nature seen through a temperament." That is Zola's definition, and nature means in this sense life. The untrue is to the realists always immoral no matter how beautiful it may be. The true is the ethically genuine, no matter how disturbing the facts may be."5

In an article on Giants in the Earth Rolvaag stated the differences between his realism and that of the other realists of his day:

I am rather fond of truth in fiction. No, I don't mean a photographic reproduction of things. Nor sordidness. Not drabness either. Rather that intangible element in a piece, which forces the reader to live real life as he reads.6

In the same article Rolvaag points out how historically correct he tried to make his own novels. Of Giants in the Earth he said:

3Jorgenson and Solmso, p. 267.
4Ibid. p. 314.
5Ibid. p. 314.
6Ole Edvart Rolvaag, "Giants in the Earth," The Editor, August 6, 1927, 85.
The very atmosphere must be true. Consciously, I have not juggled with facts. Only in one instance did I take liberties: In the summer of 1873, the locusts came perhaps two weeks earlier than I have them do in the novel. 7

This attention to detail, along with an ethical purpose, are characteristic of Rolvaag's style. For Rolvaag literature and life were practically synonymous; to him they were inseparable. He said, "Literature is life—life condensed, life intensified, life distorted, but nevertheless—life." 8

It was through this philosophy that, he managed that which few other immigrant authors achieved and no one in the same degree as he, namely the creation of a personal style. 9

The function of literature according to Rolvaag is to show life. All literature of any true worth is a mirror of life. The literary artist mirrors life, and by doing so, he also explains it. We see the picture the author has drawn for us; we begin to follow it in its lines; little by little we understand the whole composition; we recognize the life portrayed as being our own. 10

He goes on to say that, "whatever the motif of the work may be, it is concerned mainly with the delineation of human nature." 11 It is in this statement that we see clearly the difference between Rolvaag and the

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7 Einer I. Haugen, "Ole Edvard Rolvaag," Norwegian-American Studies and Records, VII (1933), 70.

8 Einer I. Haugen, Ole Edvard Rolvaag, Norwegian-American Studies and Records, VII (1933), 70.


10 Jorgenson and Solhem, p. 310.

11 Ibid., p. 311.
other writers on Scandinavian immigrants in this country. In comparing Rolvaag with these other writers, George Leroy White, Jr., said:

Herein lies the major weakness of the group's value as a contribution to American literature. They have used the novel for propaganda purposes, that is, to show how much the Scandinavians have added to America. To present the contributions of various historical figures and the historical importance of the key settlements has been their aim. They have selected particular colonies of Scandinavians, traced the movement of individuals from the mother country to the colony, discussed the building of the settlement, and the promotion of educational, religious, and social programs as separate units in themselves. Back of the historical or fictitious character in the novel, they have tried to sketch American history and culture. As a result the novels are full of an incoherent mass of unrelated facts. Because of the difficulties involved in fitting their characters into this mass of accumulated facts and making the characters themselves important, they have chosen to discuss both historical content and plot-story content as separate units. Their aims have been historical rather than literary. It is only in a figure like Rolvaag that the two are untied, and his method clearly shows that the only way to create a novel of literary value about a Scandinavian settlement is to make each historical fact subordinate but contributory to a like change in the characters themselves.12

White goes on to say of Rolvaag's contribution to American Literature:

... Undoubtedly these three volumes13 are the most artistic document on the Norwegian settler (1873-1894-20th century) in American Literature. As record of the hopes and strivings of a people, they are packed with scholarship, selectiveness, and interpretation of fact. As a history of the problems the Norwegian-Americans faced as a group and as individuals, they are revealing and invaluable for future use. But it is as literature, as novels, that these documents will live. It is for their contribution to the American novel that they are significant.14

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13White here refers to Rolvaag's trilogy, Giants in the Earth, Peder Victorious, and Their Fathers' God.

14White, p. 103.
According to Rolvaag literature must do two of three things:

It must either awaken the sense of beauty or kindle the fire of an ethical conscience to make the reader enthusiastic or indignant. The third point appears not to be an either-or. "All great literature inspires the reader." The conclusion must be that a book appeals aesthetically or ethically, but, in any case, it must inspire. 15

Rolvaag realized the influence that literature had on society. He said on this subject:

There exists the most intimate relation between literature and sociology. Literature is at one and the same time both effect and cause. It reflects truly the thought of the time, and it mirrors the social conditions. On the other hand it exerts a great influence both in the realm of thought and in the actualities of social life. 16

That Rolvaag should concentrate on the ethical purpose of literature rather than the aesthetic is easily understood, considering his ethnic background:

The genius of Norwegian literature is morality and truth. It expresses herein the high ethical sense of the nation, which is pagan-racial, but which is also Christian-Lutheran. 17

As Rolvaag himself stated, "It is fundamentally true that we are projections of those who went before us." 18

15Jørgensen and Solm, p. 313.
16Ibid., p. 188.
18Jørgensen and Solm, p. 144.
THE DOMINANT THEMES OF ROLVAAG'S NOVELS

I

NATURE

A. The Prairie Personified

Dr. George Leroy White, Jr. says that Rolvaag made nature a "tremendous personal force." In speaking of Rolvaag's treatment of nature, his biographers mention:

- the element in these plains, which Rolvaag in time came to stress above all others: the giant passion of the virgin lands, the lust for blood, the troll egotism of these limitless acres.

Later they go on to say:

- There are two demons in the novel: the evil monster of the plain and the more insidious demon of man-instilled fear. Both demand blood. In the Norwegian fairy tale, the troll drinks the blood of Christian men; nothing less will satisfy it.

In his introduction to Giants in the Earth, Vernon Louis Parrington refers to "the impersonal forces of nature that are too powerful for the human will to cope with."

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1White, p. 98.
2Jørgenson and Solum, p. 178.
3Tibid., p. 350.
4Giants in the Earth, p. xvii.
Throughout all three of the novels of Rolvaag that I will consider here—Giants in the Earth, Peder Victorious, and Their Fathers: God—there is a personification of the forces of nature, and especially the forces of the prairie. On the first page of the text in Giants in the Earth there is the first indication that the prairie is to be a vocal and important part of the novel:

"Tish-ah! said the grass. . . . "Tish-ah, tish-ah!". . . Never had it said anything else—never would it say anything else. It bent resiliently under the trampling feet; it did not break, but it complained aloud every time—for nothing like this had ever happened to it before. . . . "Tish-ah, tish-ah!" it cried, and rose up in surprise to look at this rough, hard thing that had crushed it to the ground so rudely, and then moved on. 5

The resiliency of the grass symbolized in a small way what Grant G. Knight calls the "hopeless warfare" 6 which the pioneers wage against their physical environment.

Rolvaag shows us quite carefully that the pioneers realized their position in a lonely and hostile environment. Store Hans, the young son of the pioneer hero Per Hansa, is portrayed throughout the trilogy as a singularly unimaginative person, yet when he strolls away from the covered wagon he is seized with terror:

He had gone quite far before he paused to look back. When he did so the sight sent a shiver over him; the wagons had shrunk to two small specks, away off on the floor of a huge, dusky room. . . . I'd better hurry at once, he thought; mother will surely have the porridge ready by this time!

5Giants in the Earth, p. 3.

His legs had already adopted the idea of their own accord. But thoughts of his mother and the porridge didn’t quite bring him all the feeling of safety he needed; he hunted through his mind for a few strains of a hymn, and sang them over and over in a high-pitched, breaking voice, until he had no more breath left to sing with. . . . He didn’t feel entirely safe until the wagons had begun to assume their natural size once more.7

Beret, Per Hansa’s wife, compared the prairie to the sea near Norway. Strangely enough it was the sea which seemed friendlier:

In a certain sense, she had to admit to herself, it was lovely up here. The broad expanse stretching away endlessly in every direction, seemed almost like the ocean—especially now, when darkness was falling. It reminded her strongly of the sea, and yet it was very different . . . . This formless prairie had no heart that beat, no waves that sang, no soul that could be touched . . . or cared . . . 8

It was the terrible silence of the prairie that Beret objected to. The reader feels a sense of forboding in a place where no life could be heard:

The infinitude surrounding her on every hand might not have been so oppressive, might even have brought her a measure of peace, if it had not been for the deep silence, which lay heavier here than in a church. Indeed, what was there to break it? She had passed beyond the outposts of civilization; the nearest dwelling places of men were far away. Here no warbling of birds rose on the air, no buzzing of insects sounded; even the wind had died away; the waving blades of grass that trembled to the faintest breath now stood erect and quiet, as if listening, in the great hush of the evening. 9

And the sense of forboding is deliberately heightened by Rolvaag when he refers to the Trønders and Helgelanders settling their differences

7Giants in the Earth, p. 12
8Ibid., p. 37.
9Ibid., p. 38.
and being "glad enough to join forces in their common fight against the unknown wilderness. . . ."10 while all the time . . . "The Great Plain watched them breathlessly. . . ."11

These pioneers, so new to the land which was so different from anything they had ever seen before, were at a loss to name the source of their fears:

It was a singular thing, not a soul in this little colony ever felt wholly at ease, though no one referred to the fact or cared to frame the thought in words. All of a sudden, apparently without any cause, a vague, nameless dread would seize hold of them; or again, it might fill them with restless apprehension, making them quiet and cautious in everything they did. They seemed to sense an unseen force around them.12

The pioneers may not have been able to name the source of their fears, but one thing they knew for sure, and that was that it did them little good to oppose the prairie when it decided to show its strength:

... Yes, God defend them! Man's strength availed but little out here. They had already experienced it more than once. Terrible storms would come up—so suddenly, with such appalling violence! . . . Mother Shrine had reason to be frightened of these storms. Less than a week ago their tent had been carried away in one of them; Shrine, trapped inside and half choked, had been swept along with the canvas. Hans Olsa had laid the tent rope across his shoulder, planted his feet solidly in the ground, and summoned all his giant strength; but he had been whirled away like a tuft of wool. It had turned out all right, however; no one was seriously hurt. . . . this time.13

In this atmosphere of fear, even every-day setbacks took on an

10Giants in the Earth, p. 61.
11Ibid., p. 61.
12Ibid., p. 63.
13Ibid., p. 63.
added meaning. When the settlers' cows strayed away it meant to the men that they would have to go searching for the missing animals. But to the women vague ideas of the fate of the cows led to fears of the worst kind, fears of the unknown, fears of the living prairies:

All night long Beret had been lying there with her eyes wide open, staring up at a picture that would not go away: a picture of a nameless, blue-green solitude, flat, endless, still, with nothing to hide behind... Some cows were grazing on it... Yes, animals of flesh and blood were there... and in the next moment they were not there... The picture had been full of unearthly, awful suggestions. She had lain awake in terror, lost in her own imaginings, wrestling with fearsome thoughts that only increased the dread in her soul... And now he was leaving her—now he would probably stay away for a long time and she would have no knowledge of where he was faring... It must have been the Indians who had taken the cows. Could it have been anything else—could it have been?... This fear of the prairie, the land that could swallow up living things, recurs again and again in Giants in the Earth. To the women, especially, the unknown aspects of the endless grassland brought a fear of the unknown:

... In the window looking toward the east a woman's face, tear-stained and swollen with weeping, watched his figure grow less and less in the dim grey light of the breaking day, until at last it had disappeared altogether... To her it seemed as though he were sinking deeper and deeper into an unknown, lifeless sea; the sombre greyness rose and covered him.

The longer some of the pioneers stayed on the prairie, the more the influence of the land worked on their imaginations. Beret, the wife of Per Hansa, imagined that the prairie had supernatural powers which

15 Ibid., p. 105.
shut the pioneers in what amounted to a prison.

Beret had now formed the habit of constantly watching the prairie; out in the open, she would fix her eyes on one point of the sky line—and then, before she knew it, her gaze would have swung around the whole compass; but it was ever, ever the same. . . . Life it held not; a magic ring lay on the horizon, extending upward into the sky; within this circle no living form could enter; it was like a chain inclosing the king's garden, that prevented it from bearing fruit. . . . How could human beings continue to live here while that magic ring encompassed them?16

The supernatural powers that the prairie came to assume in the minds of the settlers quite naturally was equated with the trolls of their native Norway. A troll, which was a supernatural giant in their traditional belief, became the prairie here in America, and when one of the settlers sends badger meat around to the other settlers, the meat's unwholesome taste and smell leads Beret to assume that it is troll food. In their willingness to eat this troll food Beret sees the effect that the prairie has had on her people; they are becoming animals because of its influence:

She had been lying awake a long time; sleep would not come. Her thoughts drifted. . . .

. . . So it had come to this; they were no longer ashamed to eat troll food; they even sent it from house to house, as lordly fare!17

All night long as she tossed in bed, bitter revolt raged within her. They should not stay here through the winter! . . . As soon as Per Hansa came home they must start on the journey back east; he, too, ought to be able to see by this time that they would all become wild beasts if they remained here much longer. Everything human in them would gradually be blotted out.17

16Giants in the Earth, p. 127.
17Ibid., p. 188.
During the first winter that the settlers spent on the prairie they were exposed to a new danger. They had expected the cold and the snow; these two things they received in abundance:

Winter was ever tightening its grip.

The drifting snow flew wildly under a low sky, and stirred up the whole universe into a whirling mass; it swept the plain like the giant broom of a witch, churning up a flurry so thick that people could scarcely open their eyes.  

There was yet another danger to be found in the winter on the prairie, in addition to the dangers of snow and cold. Einar I. Haugen calls it "that same double aspect he (Rølvaag) felt in the sea."

The danger, strangely enough, was the beauty of the prairie in its winter dress, a beauty so overpowering that it unnerved men:

"...Evenings...magic...still evenings...surpassing in beauty the most fantastic dreams of childhood..." Out to the westward--so surprisingly near--a blazing countenance sank to rest on a white couch...set it afire...kindled a radiance...a golden flame that flowed in many streams from horizon to horizon; the light played on the hundreds and thousands and millions of diamonds, and turned them into glittering points of yellow and red, green and blue fire.

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

And yet, if the beauty of the winter was overpowering, the blizzards were even more so. It was in the snow and the storms that

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18Giants in the Earth, p. 212.

19Haugen, Norwegian-American Studies and Records, p. 66.

20Giants in the Earth, pp. 212-213.
the monster of the prairie revealed itself as a terrible enemy of man. The power of these storms seemed almost more than was necessary to destroy the settlers.

A grey waste . . . an empty silence . . . a boundless cold. Snow fell; snow flew; a universe of nothing but dead whiteness. Blizzards from out of the northwest raged, swooping down and stirred up a greyish-white fury, impenetrable to human eyes. As soon as these monsters tired, storms from the northeast were sure to come, bringing more snow . . . "The Lord have mercy! This is awful!" said the folk, for lack of anything else to say.

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

The reason that the monster of the prairie failed to destroy the settlers that winter was not that it lacked the power, and it was not that the settlers fought back, saying themselves. It was instead because of an incident the prairie had not counted on, and which it could not have coped with, had it known; it was the birth of the first child in the settlement, Peder Victorious:

Ah, that newcomer! . . . Had the Prairie been possessed of the commonest hobgoblin sense, she would have guarded herself first, of all against him. But this wisdom she had not. Glorifying in her great might, depending on the witchcraft that had never failed her, she lay there unconcerned. And powerful though she was, the newcomer minded her no more than she did him. Weak and insignificant, he yet bore within him the talisman to set her direst magic at naught. For he beguiled the heavy-hearted folk into laughing, and what can avail against folk who laugh—who dare to laugh in the face of a winter like this one? . . . That winter it was he who saved people from insanity and the grave.22
Even with Peder's arrival, the prairie did not give up its battle against the settlers. On a trip to the Sioux River to get wood for their stoves, the men were set upon by the troll again—another blizzard.

Both Per Hansa and Hans Olsa—old Lofot-men that they were—had seen plenty of storms that made up fast, but nothing like this had ever before come within the range of their experience. Like lightning a giant troll had risen up in the west, ripped open his great sack of woolly fleece, and emptied the whole contents of it above their heads.

A squall of snow so thick that they could not see an arm's length ahead of them, a sucking noise, a few angry blasts, howling in fury, then dropping away to uncertain draughts of air that wandered idly here and there, swirling the light snowfall around the sleighs. High overhead, a sharp hissing sound mingled with growls like thunder—and then the blizzard broke in all its terror.

In its personal battle with the settlers, the prairie in Rolvaag's novels seems to recognize a worthy adversary as opposed to a settler who was not prepared to war with it. On one occasion a family of pioneers wandered into the Spring Creek settlement with the wife out of her mind and the children and father lost and hungry. They had been left behind by their companions when one of their children became sick. It was because of the subsequent death and burial of her child in the middle of the prairie that the woman went mad. They were ill-equipped and without clear knowledge of where their companions were when they left Spring Creek the next morning. When Per Hansa asked the man if he knew where he was heading, he replied:

—Certainly he did! How could he ask such a foolish question? The river lay off there; all he needed to do was

23Gian in the Earth, p. 269.
to steer straight west. After finding the river, of course he'd have to ask. But that part of it would be quite easy.

Rolvaag seems to hint that the prairie looked down on these people as weaklings, not fit for the battle ahead:

The wagon started creaking; the man, short and stooping, led the way; the family piled into the wagon; the two cows jogged behind. .. They laid their course due west. .. Banks of heavy clouds were rolled up on the western horizon; fantastic forms that seemed to await them in Heaven's decision—though they might have been only the last stragglers of the spell of bad weather just past.

But to one of the settlers, Beret, it was clear that the prairie meant to crush this family. To Beret the monster of the prairie was so real that she could see it:

... Those poor folk were straying somewhere out there, under the towering clouds. Poor souls! ... Beret was gazing at the western sky as the twilight fast gathered around her; her eyes were riveted on a certain cloud that had taken on the shape of a face, awful of mien and gigantic in proportions; the face seemed to swell out of the prairie and filled half the heavens.

She gazed a long time; now she could see the monster clearer. The face was unmistakable! There were the outlines of the nose and mouth. The eyes—deep, dark caves in the cloud—were closed. The mouth, if it were to open would be a yawning abyss. The chin rested on the prairie. ... Black and lean the whole face, but of such gigantic, menacing proportions! Wasn't there something like a leer upon it? ... And the terrible creature was spreading everywhere; she trembled so desperately that she had to take hold of the grass.

During the late summer of the first year on the prairie the settlers experienced another type of attack from their enemy, the prairie. At a time when they were almost ready to harvest their first bountiful crops which the prairie had given them, a plague descended on

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them and took back the grain it had given them:

And now from out the sky gushed down with cruel force a living, pulsating stream, striking the backs of the helpless folk like pebbles thrown by an unseen hand; but that which fell out of the heavens was not pebbles, nor raindrops, nor hail, for then it would have lain inanimate where it fell; this substance had no sooner fallen than it popped up again, crackling, and snapping—rose up and disappeared in the twinkling of an eye; it chirped and buzzed through the air; it flared and flittered around them like light gone mad; it snapped and hopped along the ground; the whole place was a waltering turmoil of raging little demons; if one looked for a moment into the wind, one saw nothing but glittering, lightninglike flashes—flashes that came and went, in the heart of a cloud made up of innumerable dark-brown clicking bodies! All the while the roaring sound continued. 27

Here, as in the other battles where man faced the prairie, the strength of man availed not at all against the powers that opposed him. Per Hansa, the pioneer who fought the prairie in Giants in the Earth until his death, opposed the grasshoppers;

As he saw the fine, ripe grain being ruthlessly destroyed before his eyes, he felt but one impulse—to stop the inroads of these demons in any possible way. He began to jump up and down and wave his hat, stamping and yelling like one possessed. But the hosts of horrid creatures frolicking about him never so much as noticed his presence; the brown bodies whizzed by on every hand, alighting wherever they pleased, chirping wherever they went; as many as half a dozen of them would perch on a single head of grain, while the stem would be covered with them all the way to the ground; even his own body seemed to be a desirable halting place; they lit on his arms, his back, his neck— they even dared to light on his bared head and on the very hat he waved. 28

After Per Hansa had given up the battle, that night the powerful personal force of the prairie spoke:

Outside, the fiendish shapes flickered and danced in

27 Giants in the Earth, p. 342.
28 Ibid., p. 344.
the dying glow of the day. The breeze had died down; the air seemed unaccountably lighter.

That night the Great Prairie stretched herself voluptuously, giant-like and full of cunning, she laughed softly into the reddish moon. "Now we will see what human might may avail against us! ... Now we'll see!" 29

The grasshoppers ravished the crops of the settlers for six years, from 1873 to 1879. 30 And as the settlers observed the fields they had so carefully nurtured being eaten by the plague from the prairie, they noticed one astounding thing:

But the plague of locusts proved as certain as the seasons. All that grew above the ground, with the exception of the wild grass, it would pounce upon and destroy; the grass it left untouched because it had grown here ere time was and without the aid of man's hand. ... 31

The settlers realized then, that the plague was directed against the things that they themselves had grown.

Just as terrible was the way in which the grasshoppers chose which fields to attack. It was almost as if the prairie was showing its strength in its capriciousness:

Impossible to outguess them! No creatures ever acted so whimsically or showed such a lack of rational, orderly method. One field they might entirely lay waste, while they ate only a few rods into the next; a third, lying close beside the others, they might not choose to touch at all. In one field they would cut the stalks, leaving the ground strewn with a green carpet of heads; in the next they might content themselves with shearing the beard—then the grain looked like shorn sheep with the ears gone. Nor were they at all fastidious: potatoes and vegetables

29 Giants in the Earth, p. 349.
30 Ibid., p. 349.
31 Ibid., p. 350.
of all kinds, barley and oats, wheat and rye—it made no difference; or a swarm of insects might light on a wagon box, and when it lifted again the box would have been scarred by countless sharp teeth; at one place a fork with handle would be rasped and chewed, a mass of loose slivers; somewhere else a garment might be laid out on the ground to dry—a swarm would light on it, and in a moment only shreds would be left; if the annihilating devils were in the proper mood, they would take anything and leave nothing. 32

Even as the years passed, and the settlers became more firmly entrenched on the prairie, the monster did not give up showing how strong he really was. In Giants in the Earth the storms took the buildings of the pioneers as a personal affront to the dignity of the prairie:

The new houses seemed so out of place, standing up on the open, bare prairie. Did they really belong there? They looked too defiant! . . . And that was exactly what the savage storm thought when he came along, winter or summer, found these unheard-of objects in his way, puffed and wheezed, took firm hold, and roared in anger. Well, perhaps he did more than that; it happened now and then that a house would be toppled over, or shattered and torn to pieces. . . . 33

The pioneers had the true son of the prairie, the Indian, to contend with also. He acted in league with the forces of nature in attempting to drive the intruders away:

There was the Red Son of the Great Prairie, who hated the Palefaces with a hot hatred; stealthily he swooped down upon them, tore up and laid waste the little settlements, Great was the terror he spread; bloody the saga concerning him. 34

In the concluding chapter of Giants in the Earth, entitled

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32 Giants in the Earth, p. 352.
33 Ibid., p. 399.
34 Ibid., p. 424.
"The Great Plain Drinks the Blood," Rolvaag shows in summary some of the forces that the prairie sent against the settlers. There was the winter of 1880-1881 when "it snowed twice forty days" and "the Demon came again."

... Day and night the snow fell. From the 15th of October, when it began, until after the middle of April, it seldom ceased. ...

The suffering was great that winter. Hunger came; supplies of all kinds gave out; for no one had thought, when the first snowfall began, that winter had come. Who had ever heard of its setting in in the middle of the summer? ... And for a while not much snow did come; the fall was light in November, though the days were grey and chill; in December there was more; January began to pile and drift it up; and in February the very demon himself arrived.37

There is little of nature as an opposing personal force in the other two novels of Rolvaag's trilogy, Peder Victorious and Their Fathers' God. This is due in part to the fact that Rolvaag was treating different themes in these two novels, and partly that after the days of the pioneers nature was changed as a force into something more befitting the civilized life that the second generation was leading. Rolvaag admitted this in a letter to Lincoln Colcord written while he was in the process of writing Peder Victorious:

"You think this novel is going to be better than Giants. Well, it won't—at least not with the average reader. It won't have the sweep, the vastness, and the lift. I can't because the theme is so entirely different."38

35 Giants in the Earth, p. 427.
36 Ibid., p. 427.
37 Ibid., p. 427.
38 Jorgenson and Selum, p. 380
Thus, in Their Fathers' God, when the settlers were suffering because of a drought, which caused much hardship:

Though June was only half spent, the fields lay parched and sallow. And the earth's crust shrunk; long cracks appeared, running in all directions, like the wrinkles in an old man's face. . . . The cattle stood gasping in the heat. When a cow dragged herself from one place to another her shanks dangled spiritless. . . . The small birds, the few that still remained, lifted their heads to sing with parched throats. . . . their songs shrivelled into nothing. . . . Now at nightfall the prairie was like an eeried wasteland. Under the green eye of the moon the flat reaches turned into a goblin haunt. 39

Some people remained who blamed it on the "troll-stuff of the supernatural" 40 as the settlers did in Giants in the Earth, but the majority of the second generation consulted either science or religion for the answers as to why they were suffering so. There was no place in the second generation novels for a man like Chris Larsen, a character from one of Rolvaag's early novels entitled "On Forgotten Paths," who felt "that the prairie is his personal enemy" 41 and longed to "tear it up and chop it into small bits." 42

40 Their Fathers' God, p. 1.
41 Hagen, Norwegian-American Studies and Records, p. 66.
42 Ibid., p. 66.
B. The Taming of Nature

In Giants in the Earth nature was wild, domineering, and forceful. Near the end of that novel is the first indication that it is not to continue in the same way after the prairie had been conquered:

Wednesday afternoon of the same week a faint mist floated before the sun. A light warm rain fell at intervals from drifting shreds of clouds. Between showers the sun peeped through the clouds to see what was going on down on the prairie; and he set the rainbow here and there as a sign that he was well pleased. There was a big blue heaven behind it all, the air very still . . . beautiful weather.¹

This benign attitude of nature toward the settlers comes as a shock after the blizzards, grasshoppers, and storms in Giants in the Earth. But this is in preparation for the second book of the trilogy, Peder Victorious. George Leroy White, Jr. says: "In Peder Victorious there is a note of hesitancy in the descriptions of nature. The seasons are not so independent, they are becoming somewhat obedient to the will of man."² This is well borne out, for early in Peder Victorious the sun is shown as being actually concerned with man's welfare. Nature is still personified, and yet it contrasts vividly with the violent nature in Giants in the Earth:

The drowsy November sun was nearing the prairie. Now lingering for a moment, it waited for the creatures in that curious mound down on the plain to come crawling out of their hiding place, so that it could light the last one on its way before it went to bed—there wasn't much else to look after at this season of the year. Its face became big and puffy

¹Giants in the Earth, p. 411.
²White, p. 105.
and red from waiting so long.\(^3\)

And later in the novel, when Peder is hurrying home from school one summer evening, again the attitude of nature contrasts with nature when it beckoned Peder's father, Per Hansa, to his death in a blizzard in *Giants in the Earth*:

> In the cornfields along the road the leaves nodded in agreement to what the line said. The sun was already down, but a deep glow lingered in the western sky. It smiled at him, inviting him to come on! ...\(^4\)

> In *Peder Victorious* the taming of nature does not progress to its fullest extent. That is left to Their Fathers' God. An interesting comparison can be made between the difficulties experienced by Peder's father Per Hansa in farming and the difficulties that Peder faced. The seasons seemed to work against Per Hansa.

Winter came too early, and stayed too long, spring was late so the crops were late and the grasshoppers got them. Nature to Per Hansa was a real and personal enemy, but with Peder it was different:

> Spring was late in coming that year. But when at length it did break through it set to work with a will to compensate for its tardiness. Warm breezes out of the south began tonguing the prairie; the sun quivered the whole day long, from the moment it gilded the sky at dawn until it dozed off in lazy, lukewarm evening. All the flat lowlands became a sea of water, lying there for a day to be hidden by an impenetrable fog at dusk; as the next sun sank, the sea was gone and the fields were dry. One day the sun set to work in real earnest. The smell of wet earth and of growing vegetation became so strong that all life breathed in sheer giddiness.\(^5\)


\(^4\) Ibid., p. 173.

\(^5\) Ibid., pp. 181-182.
Finally near the end of Peder Victorious is a description of the mood of the prairie which contrasts vividly with the mood of the same land in Giants in the Earth. Where there was fear and foreboding in Giants in the Earth, there is serenity in the second novel.

The sun had just closed his eye. A dreamy silence followed. The landscape rose and listened. A meadow lark, becoming curious, struck a note through which it discovered its sweetheart, perching on a fence post a little way beyond. The two of them made ready to rejoice for a while but before they were aware of it the drowsy twilight had cast its spell over them, and so they forgot their song.

The dusk deepened imperceptible. Through it, from one skyline to another, quivered soft tones. Inaudible they were, yet exerting a peculiar power. A dream only, all of it, full of strange pictures... All the noises of the day the gloaming had lulled asleep. The prairie seemed to be adrift. Had at last no weight at all. Only floated in a vast sea of impenetrable violet and purple. Became unreal... of no substance, but felt vaster now than in the flood of sunlight which deluged the sky at high noon. Here and there drowsy lights awoke. No life in them yet. Only embers half asleep.

This may seem as peaceful and obedient as nature could become, but there is in Their Fathers God, the third novel of the trilogy, a step further in the direction of obedience, where nature actually obeys man's command.

In Their Fathers God, the final taming of nature is accomplished when the settlers decide to hire a rainmaker to end the drought. It is not certain that the rainmaker accomplishes what he sets out to do, but the important thing is the attitude of the settlers toward nature at this point. When Peder asks his neighbor if

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6Peder Victorious, p. 208.
it is true that the County Board is going to hire a rainmaker, his neighbor replies, "If we need rain we go and make it," and he speaks of how easy it is "to milk a few buckets of rain out of the atmosphere." Nature, the settler's powerful opponent in Giants in the Earth here seems to have become a servant of man, especially when the rainmaker voices his own scientific positivism:

"Everyone knew that the rain was drifting about in the upper regions of the atmosphere. Why should man not draw some of it down whenever he stood in need of moisture? Was there any mystery about getting water from above? He liked to think of the process as milking the atmosphere. Surely they had read about the man who drew lightning down from the sky? The rain was up there, too. The trick was simply to knock the bung out of the barrel."

In Peder's opinion the rainmaker failed in his attempt to rule nature, but it mattered little to the people of the area, for the drought was soon broken and "there came rain in abundance." In this third novel of the trilogy it is apparent that nature had changed. No longer was it the powerful force that opposed the pioneers at every turn. Even the winter had grown mild:

Not even the oldest settlers could recall a winter so mild as this one turned out to be. No snow worth mentioning fell until spring had come in the air, and then it

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7_Their Fathers_ God p. 6.
8_Tbid._ p. 6.
9_Tbid._ p. 38.
10_Tbid._ p. 90.
never lasted long; the sun, mounting higher in the sky with every new day, made short work of the snow. All winter long the cattle could rove outside, nipping sustenance wherever they might find it. 11

One of Rolvaag's avowed purposes was to show the glory of the pioneers—to show what heroes they were. Through this battle with a nature that was a personal enemy he has brought to us a vivid picture of the obstacles that were overcome by our forefathers. He has shown us that in spite of all that the prairie did, in the end it was the spirit of the pioneers which conquered the forces of the prairie;

The sod huts crumbled and merged again with the earth out of which they had come. Sod is but sod, after all, and was never meant to shelter human beings so long as they can stand on their legs. Large dwellings and huge barns sprang up all over. Summers the Great Plain tried tornadoes; in spring and autumn, prairie fires, until heaven and earth roared in one blaze; during the winters she would let loose all the deviltry she could think of, by way of raging blizzards, spewing out a horror of snow and cold. But all in vain; the houses reared themselves faster than she could destroy them. Even the elements were to learn that the power of man had to be respected, especially when energized by a great joy. 12

11. Their Fathers, p. 90.
II

THE COSTS OF PIONEERING

There are two ways of looking at the pioneer immigrant. One way is to emphasize the romance and adventure connected with his life here in America:

What an interesting individual this immigrant has become! On, on, came these men of the north, spreading themselves over the vastness of America like dandelion seeds before a cooling breeze. The East coast soon discovered this blonde among its thousands; the Middle West felt the thrill of his great expectancy and dreams; the South West occasionally counted him among its wanderers; the shore-line of the Far West called to him as sea to ship. He became identified with the frontier. He moved as the frontier moved. He heard the cry of the virgin soil and he answered the land's need. He floated down the Mississippi, laughing with the river-ripples, mingling with the boatmen, free as the "suckers" themselves. He struck his axe into the tall pine and arched his back again and again until Michigan was wild no more. He tended Paul Bunyan's "Blue Ox" and became closely identified with that colossal lumber-man. He jabbered incomprehensibly to his Bohemian or French neighbor while a Nebraska sun sapped his vitality. He found a country full of a thousand lakes and soil as rich as Midas' coffers; he liked it and he made it Minnesota. Days spent in mastering the unsympathetic soil made him a legendary figure. He became gay when he considered the "work of his fingers": this land which, by a miracle, had become his—he who never dreamed of working more than a few acres.1

The other way is to emphasize the cost of pioneering. It is not surprising to find that Rolvaag chose the latter, in view of his own

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1White, pp. 14-15.
experiences. Even though he came to this country after the main wave of immigration had passed, and after the prairie was well settled, Rolvaag experienced many of the difficulties that the original immigrants had experienced:

I had been dumped off the train at Elk Point, South Dakota, toward evening of a hot July day, a lonely, penniless, newcomer boy. An uncle of mine, living about eight miles away, was to have met me at the station, but failed to show up.2

From this experience alone it is easy to see why Rolvaag could identify himself with the immigrants. In his journal he expands on this situation, the plight of a lonely Norwegian boy who knew no English, in a place where he had no friends:

As soon as I was off the train, I began to look around for Uncle, or for someone who looked like the picture I had formed of him in my mind. Every now and then I took a step forward when I thought I had seen a face which might be his. There must have been between two and three hundred people at the station. It was easy to make a mistake. After awhile the crowd began to disperse, but no uncle appeared. Every time I mustered enough courage to address humbly a person whom I thought might be the one I expected, I received in return no more than a look of surprise and a shake of the head. Stones for bread may not be so good, but, believe me, smiles on the faces of strangers when you are looking for an uncle, are not much better, especially when you are in a strange country, tired to death, with only a Norwegian five-øre piece in your pocket and the time is toward dusk in the evening. One after another disappeared; at last I remained all alone. The situation was becoming critical. An office clerk came out, spoke to me by hand and mouth, but I could not make out a word of what he said. English must be frightfully difficult, apparently.3

2Rolvaag, *The Editor*, p. 81.

3Jorgenson and Solum, p. 32.
It was because of this experience, and many other difficult ones that followed, that Rolvaag decided he "wanted to do something for the Norwegian American." As his biographers point out, Rolvaag was admirably suited for the job:

He was an immigrant and a representative of immigrants. He knew that the immigrant pioneer of necessity lived in two worlds, that he was the heir of the old and the pioneer of the new. Perhaps the chief difference between Rolvaag and the ordinary immigrant American was that whereas most of his fellow travelers saw only what lay ahead and were in no small measure incurable optimists he sensed what they were losing in making the transfer. He sensed the organic structure of home, fatherland, native culture, religion, ideals, yes, even of human aspiration. He sensed the depth of the roots in his own being, while most of his fellow men thought they could be satisfied with material improvements.

Even with these advantages, Rolvaag made several false starts.

His early books, *Diary of an Immigrant* and *Nils and Astri* were never accepted for publication. The reason that these books were not of sufficient literary importance is plain to see: Rolvaag had not identified himself with the immigrant problems which were his special domain. In speaking of *Nils and Astri*, Rolvaag's biographers point out:

... When he wrote the former, his mind had not yet been integrated and disciplined by an ideal. He had not really committed himself to any cause; his life mission had not been identified with the problem of the two homes, the problem of the immigrant soul. His deep convictions upon these points were the result of both inner and outer conflicts, of a struggle in his own mind and a constant battle for his cause as a teacher of Norwegian language and literature.  

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4Jorgensen and Solam, p. 90.

5Tbid., p. 140.

6Tbid., p. 145.
In considering what the immigrants had lost and what they had gained, Rolvaag found that most of the things gained were material, while those lost were intellectual and spiritual. His criticism of this was that while material gain may be a sufficient cause for any migratory movement, it is a trivial one when compared with the great national achievements of a people in immaterial values. He goes on to say:

Life is more than food, earthly fortune something above liberty. God's greatest gift to man does not lie first and foremost in great opportunities. When I consider all we lost in the exchange, all the other things which make life worth living and which fill the years with true earthly well-being, then I wonder at times if that which we gave in exchange was not more than that which we received.

Rolvaag summarized the losses that his people experienced, placing them in four categories:

The first loss I find is the ennobling and uplifting influence which a mighty and grand nature exercises over the human mind. Surely there is great natural beauty in America also. You must not misunderstand me. But the beauty of Norway is something extraordinary.

He goes on to point out the power of the Nordland summer nights with their midnight sun, the scope of Norway's mountains, fjords, rivers, and the power and the charm of the sea, all left behind by the immigrant.

The second important loss was the loss of fatherland:

7Jorgenson and Solm, p. 154.
8Ibid., p. 154.
9Ibid., p. 154.
10Ibid., p. 154.
... the parting from kin and friends and the last hand-clasp of a father and mother grey with age. And when the last glimpse of the home over there in the valley and of the church on the headland vanished, and the eye became dim with a mist, there came a strangely sore weight within your breast.

The third loss was the loss of "the intimate spiritual association with our own people."12

... We came away from our own country and became strangers to our own people. Our pulse can no longer beat in rhythm with the hearts of our own people. We have become strangers—strangers to the people we forsake and strangers to the people we came to.13

Because of this Rolvaag says:

We have thus ceased to be an integral part of a larger whole; we have become something by ourselves, something torn off, without any organic connection either here or there. Our soul can no more be fired by a real national enthusiasm...

... In short, we have become rootless.14

The fourth loss is an intangible thing. It is the fact that when the loss is taking place, the immigrants do not even realize they are losing anything until it is too late:

... The conclusion of it all is this that we lost that which cannot be stated in words; we lost the inexpressible. And the saddest of all is that we do not comprehend these things and realize their meaning to ourselves and to future generations; we do not comprehend until it is too late.15

Lest these passages bring the reader to the conclusion that Rolvaag saw nothing worthwhile in migration, it should be pointed out

11Jørgensen and Solum, p. 155.
12Ibid., p. 155.
13Ibid., p. 155.
14Ibid., pp. 155-156.
15Ibid., p. 156.
that the solution to the problem, as Rolvaag saw it, was for the immigrant to rise above the losses and re-establish himself with his native culture. Rolvaag saw eight national traits in the Scandinavians which he thought should be preserved in the new world:

1. an inborn reverence for law and order.
2. a deeply poetic appreciation of nature.
3. a great hunger for knowledge.
4. hospitality.
5. emotional reserve.
6. deep religiousness.
7. integrity.
8. creative activity in art and letters.

In the preservation of the cultural heritage from Norway Rolvaag did not intend to be anti-American. Rather, it was in this way, in his opinion, and only in this way that the contributions of the Norwegian immigrants would amount to anything worthwhile. His basic concern was not with Norway, but with America:

I am well aware of the fact that there are many people in the United States today who do not believe in racial differences. I say that the traits are there whether you believe in them or not. Environment and teaching and training for many centuries, suffering and conditions of servitude have placed them there. I am also well aware that many people today are seeking to blot out all racial traits in this country. To me such an act is tantamount to national suicide. If richness of personal color is desirable in the individual personality, why should the monotonous gray be desirable as a national idea? I too believe in Americanization; I believe in it with all the intensity of my soul. I want every soul in America to feel that this country is the best in the world for him; and if it is not that already, it is up to you and me and to all of us to make it so.

I add these words in concluding the present lecture: I am an American first, last, and all the time. But racially I am a Norwegian. Really, I do not see how these two facts can be disputed. I am an American. That means that my whole

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Jørgenson and Solm, p. 296.
duty is toward America. But on the other hand, I am intensely interested in our own race, in what it has achieved; hand and by intelligence.17

Rolvaag did not deny that there had been Norwegian immigrants who had successfully integrated these racial traits in their Americanization. In an article which is "an attempt to gauge the importance of Norwegian immigrant contributions in the various fields of American life," he included the following:

... First to be dealt with is the work of the farmers in cultivating the soil and in founding the American Northwest. From there the author proceeds to the field of industry and finance, to the American political scene, to the press, and to music, literature, science, and the fine arts, and then closes with an account of Norwegian American church life. Throughout it all Rolvaag is the valiant prophet and standard bearer, the creator with great aspirations for his country and his people. And because there is no inherent conflict in being at one and the same time a genuine American citizen and a lover of European culture, he seeks the fullness of both.18

In his first successful book, The Boat of Longing, Rolvaag set the pattern which he was to follow in all the rest of his novels. Even though The Boat of Longing is not considered here, as it is not part of Rolvaag's pioneer trilogy, it is significant, nevertheless, as a forerunner to the trilogy:

... He once spoke of it as "the American Book of Lamentations," a particularly suggestive title in view of the fact that to his dying day he insisted that he was primarily interested in the cost, culturally and psychologically, of pioneering. The lamentations are those of a man who believes the immigrant possesses a precious soul, and who finds that he is in danger of losing it and its potential achievements in the new environment. ...
By his own word, Rolvaag intended *The Boat of Longing* to show how a young soul, representative of the finest in an old racial culture, is hopelessly out of place in a materialistic society.  

It is in showing this cost of pioneering that Rolvaag is outstanding. Vernon Louis Parrington, in his introduction to *Giants in the Earth*, says:

> ... But the emotional side, the final ledger of human values, we have too little considered—the men and women broken by the frontier, the great army of derelicts who failed and were laid away, like the Norse immigrant lad, in forgotten graves. The cost of it all in human happiness— the loneliness, the disappointments, the renunciations, the severing of old ties and quitting of familiar places, the appalling lack of those intangible cushions for the nerves that could not be transported or horseback or in prairie schooners; these imponderables too often have been left out of the reckoning in our traditional romantic interpretation.

In comparing Rolvaag's treatment of these things with the other writers on the pioneers, Parrington states:

> Since the publication of *Spoon River Anthology*, concern for psychological values has pretty much taken possession of our literature. In the lovely pages of Willa Cather's *O Pioneers! and My Antonia* there is revealed a warm sympathy with the emotional life of pioneer women and a poignant understanding of their bleak lot. But the analysis, as in Hamlin Garland's word—draws back from the threshold of final tragedy, pausing before it has penetrated to the hidden core of futility. The waste of all finer values exacted by the prairies is suggested by the queer figures of lonely immigrants who fade in the uncongenial environment, but it is not thrust into the foreground to dominate the scene. The vast stretches of the prairies are there—stern, inhospitable, breeding a dumb homesickness in alien hearts—where the red grass bends before the restless winds and the forces of nature are not easily tamed; but in the end the prairie is subdued and the scars it has laid on men's

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19Jorgenson and Solum, p. 323.

20*Giants in the Earth*, p. ix.
lives are forgotten. Since Willa Cather, Wilson, and Herbert Quick, to name a few—yet in none of their work is there the profound insight and imaginative grasp of the theme that gives to Giants in the Earth so great a sense of tragic reality.21

In Rolvaag’s own words, his purpose was:

... In the simplest possible narrative, without any sentimental preaching or cheap attempt at essay writing, I was to show the never dimming glory which the pioneer of the Northwest, no matter of what race, had won for himself in the annals of human history, and at the same time underscore the cost of the achievement. Neither factor could be left out.22

21Giants in the Earth, pp. xvi–xvii.

22Rolvaag, The Editor, p. 82.
A. Loss of Homeland

The authenticity of Rolvaag's descriptions of the effect of the loss of homeland on the immigrant stems from the fact that Rolvaag went through the pangs of longing for the country of his birth. When he was working on a farm in South Dakota, near Elk Point on the banks of the Brule Creek, this homesickness was particularly acute:

... On the acres west of Brule Creek his longing for the Nordland home and for the ocean waves grew so intense that he used to sit on the eastern hills, looking across the endless prairies as if spying sail on the distant horizon. "To ride the wave on the Lofoten Sea, ah, it was Paradise to me." he exclaims in his Letters from America. He wrote to his brother John that no one who has not experienced it can imagine what agonies he then went through. ¹

From the descriptions that Rolvaag gives us of the natural surroundings of his home in Norway, we can easily see why the prairies of South Dakota suffered in comparison:

In many different ways the mountains entered into my life. One summer, between two of the Seven Sisters, I had the first and only castle I ever owned, and a real castle it was too. July brought beautiful weather that year; in the morning there would usually blow a low off-shore breeze, lolling lazily during the long spread of the day, changing course with the position of the sun, getting warm and amorous toward night—(I mean, of course, night according to the clock because during the month of July there is not even a trace of darkness up in that region. On toward night there would be light clouds drifting in from the sea, too light for the eye to detect, only fragments and shreds of a fog that had arisen out of the bosom of the deep; in the hallway between the last two of the Seven Sisters the shreds would gather and take form and build themselves up into fantastic formations; about eleven o'clock, when the sun hung low on the sea, by some mysterious process of alchemy these cloud formations would gather up

light until they were saturated by it; the deep blue of the nearby mountain walls would give a purple lining to what was being built up. In those formations in the mountain hallway was my castle, and it was exceedingly beautiful. 2

Of the sea in Nordland, Rolvaag says:

I lived in close proximity to it. For six generations back my family had owned the house which stands on the rocky ledge about forty feet above sea level. ... Before I was big enough to walk the path, I crawled down on all fours, turning around and sliding wherever sliding was possible; on calm days, when there was a boat at the landing, an irresistible force drew me thither. 3

While in college here in America Rolvaag felt the loss of his homeland keenly. He was even then beginning to probe the relationship between the country the immigrants had given up and the country they had adopted. In an address given to his fellow students he said:

... You who are gathered here today have no fatherland. America is your country but not your fatherland. When the ship which bore your parents fixed its prow westward and sailed on into the unknown, when the gray western coast of Norway, with the gold of an evening sun on snowy peaks, sank below the horizon, then sank also their fatherland. As such it no longer exists either for them or for you. 4

On a trip back to Norway, immediately after graduating from college, the loss of his homeland was brought vividly to Rolvaag's attention:

... This is a peculiar country and a peculiar people. The surroundings seem to be too strong for the people and the people are suffering because of them. And yet people grown up in such nature can never be really happy any other place in the world. If they came to other countries, the rivers, the mountains, the forests, the fjords, the ocean, the darkness of the long winter, the peculiar light of the short summer night—all these things too peculiar to Norwegian

2 Jørgensen and Solm, pp. 2-3.
3 Ibid., p. 4.
4 Ibid., p. 68.
nature will forever have a mystic power over him who dreamt his childhood’s dreams here.5

Rolvaag’s brother Johan remained in Norway as a fisherman in the ancestral home of the Rolvaags. After an extended critical analysis of his brother’s book Letters from America, Johan considers what the loss of homeland would mean to him:

... Love of the fatherland is the only power that can place upon us in the earthly existence the stamp of nobility. You intimate that I will not misjudge you after having read this book. Thank God, Ole, my brother, I have never, never in this regard misjudged you. If the reasons for your emigration and for your continued stay in America had not been entirely clear and convincing even from the start, I should have disowned you as my brother; I should have hated you with all the fierce passion of which my nature is capable. To my mind the love of the fatherland is as deep as the love of mother, wife, and children; yes, in the judgment of my innermost being, it is the deepest of all.6

In a later novel, The Boat of Longing, “Rolvaag makes of this vessel a symbol of the heartache that emigration has caused, a mysterious bond between the grief of those who have been left behind and the yearning of those who have departed.”7

In his introduction to Giants in the Earth, Lincoln Colcord says that “Beret’s homesickness is the dominant motif of the tale.”8 Her homesickness is almost always stated in terms of the prairie, not of her homeland, however. Rolvaag leaves the reader to fill in the contrast. An example of this would be when the settlers arrive

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5Jorgenson and Solum, pp. 96-97.
6Ibid., pp. 164-165.
7Haugen, Norwegian-American Studies and Records, p. 61.
8Giants in the Earth, p. xxiii.
at what is to be their new home. Beret's reaction is one of implied,
not stated comparison:

. . . . Was this the place? . . . Here! . . . Could it be
possible? . . . .

. . . . How will human beings be able to endure this place?
she thought. Why, there isn't even a thing that one can

hide behind.10

There are times when the settlers dream of home, and long
for the security of their old surroundings:

. . . . Often, now, she found herself thinking of the church-
yard at home. . . . It would have been so pleasant to lie down
there. . . . The churchyard was enclosed by a massive stone
wall, broad and heavy; one couldn't imagine anything more
reliable than that wall.11

In Peder Victorious this same kind of longing recurs. The
years have passed, and Beret is comfortably established on a pros-
perous farm, but still she longs for her homeland:

All that summer thoughts of Norway bore more strongly
in upon the mind of Beret than at any time since her coming
to America. Not that she longed greatly for her fatherland,
but Norway was beautiful and now she was her own master.
Nothing could compare with summer in Nordland, for that
was enchantment itself—she had heard many people say so.
On warm nights, when she found it difficult to sleep, she
would sometimes get up and go out to sit on the porch in
order to let the night air soothe her mind and body. Then
old scenes would come back to her, the mood of the prairie
night round about her being strangely reminiscent of them.
It might happen that she would sit here on her own porch
and watch a lazy sea billowing listlessly into a quiet cove,
washing up against kelp-covered rocks. . . . Clear, quiescent
night. Drowsy, sated light upon heathery hills, purple
inland mountains dozing in a hazy sun. She could hear the

Giants in the Earth, p. 28.

10 Ibid., p. 29.

11 Ibid., p. 229.
call of the gull in the meadows. Down on the bay floated flocks of eider ducks, dreaming, their bills tucked under their wings. A boat paddled its way toward shore. Put in at the landing. A man in heavy sea boots ascended the rocky path. That was Father. Tonight he had been out coal fishing.12

The loss of homeland theme is carried into the third novel of the trilogy, also. In Their Fathers God Peder, born in America and remembering nothing about Norway, meets Nikoline, a girl who has recently arrived from Norway. He asks her:

"Do you know what a mirage is?"

She laughed quietly:

"You ask me that? I who grew up by the sea and in golden summer nights? We call it hilder."

"Hilder? That's right, now I remember; mother has told me about it. What is hilder like?"

"When the summer night is clear and warm and still, when you hear only the deep breathing of the big sea, then the skerries, the holms, and all the islands stand on their heads in the air—they just float there. The ships sail with their masts pointing down; up in the sky, you understand. Oh, you can't imagine how beautiful such nights are. It's fairyland and you aren't a bit afraid. All space is a magic mirror; you see only phantasms floating in a great stillness. You don't dare breathe for fear they'll pass away."

Nikoline forcefully drives home how acute the longing for a homeland can be. When Peder jokingly suggests they both leave for Norway, Nikoline reacts:

A great joy broke vivaciously on her face:

"Now it will soon be summer. Out in the west the sun will be hanging low on the sea. Come, let's go! I

12 Peder Victorious, p. 186.

13 Their Fathers God, p. 234.
want to show you what beauty really is like." The vision of distant lands of her childhood home, gripped her so strongly that she let her tongue run loose: "I'm so glad to see one of my own people I could hug you!".

She goes on to say:

"today I've been sick with a great homesickness. Now it's Easter-time at home. By this time the kildeer has returned. Soon the Lofot men will be back from the fisheries. Down by the shore they're burning tang... I can smell it now. Up in the mountain the sun dreams golden dreams, and the nights—O God!" She sighed, lost in visions...

11Their Fathers God, p. 290.
15Ibid., p. 290.
B. Loss of Language

1. Difficulties with English Speaking People

Theodore Blegen quotes Rolvaag on the question of the loss of a native language:

"The giving up of one language and the acquiring of a new requires a spiritual adjustment which forever will be beyond the power of the average man, because it requires a remaking of the soul. He cannot give up the old because that would mean death to him, and he cannot master the new—the process is simply beyond his power."

It is because of this, Blegen says, that the immigrants lived in a halfway house, in which:

The immigrant neither gave up his old language, nor though he learned some English, did he wholly master the new, but he was nevertheless not helpless or greatly frustrated. What he did was to create, by gradual and normal processes of change, adaptation, and growth, something like an intermediate language which combined both languages, broke the shock of his New World plunge, and on the whole served his needs effectively.

Einar Haugen, in his study of the Norwegian language in America, said that he considered Giants in the Earth as an effort "to depict the peculiar quality of the bilingual world in which the immigrants and many of their children have lived."

Rolvaag considered the language loss experienced by the immigrants of such importance, that he specifically set out to show this loss in the final book of the trilogy, Their Fathers' God. His

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1Theodore C. Blegen, Grass Roots History (Minneapolis, 1947), p. 113.

2Ibid., pp. 113-114.

3Haugen, The Norwegian Language in America, p. 35.
biographers state:

It is clear that in Their Fathers God Rolvaag had a specific message that he wanted to bring not only to his people but to the American nation at large. Feeling that the non-English-speaking pioneers in this country and their descendants had never been properly understood and that the older America had never been quite fair to them, he thought a word should be spoken in their behalf.¹⁴

Again there is good reason to believe that Rolvaag draws on his own experiences when he describes the effect of loss of language on the immigrant. Einar Haugen speculates:

Just such an experience must have befallen O. E. Rolvaag on his arrival in South Dakota, for he reproduces it in his first literary effort, Amerika-breve. His central figure, Per Smevik is awakened on his first morning in his uncle's South Dakota farm home by the call to breakfast.² He has no idea of what this might be, unless it were the syrup on the breakfast table, which is the only object whose name he does not know. After a number of such experiences, he wrote home that 'this practice makes it harder for me than you could imagine. When uncle asks me to do something, I stand there like a foot, a regular numbskull, and understand nothing.'³⁵

Even though mastery of a language that is not native to a person is an almost impossible task, George T. Flom in his Norwegian Immigration to the United States points out why it was not too difficult for the Norwegian immigrant to pick up a rudimentary English vocabulary and working knowledge of the language:

As to the Norwegian language I shall merely speak of its highly analytic character, in which respect it has for a long time been developing in the same direction as English, though of course, absolutely independently. Being closely cognate with English, a large part of the vocabulary of the two is of the same stock. Further, its sound system is fundamentally similar. These three considerations, especially perhaps the first, will make clear to us the reason why the Norwegian so readily learns to use the English language. . . .⁶

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¹⁴Jørgenson and Solum, p. 421.

⁵Haugen, Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 59-60.

Because of the similarities, the first step in the loss of language was the borrowing of English loan words in the Norwegian conversation. To the newcomer this combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar was incredibly confusing. In *Letters from America*, one of Rulvaag’s early books, his hero is heard to remark:

... He is bewildered by English spelling, which he quite justly finds "preposterous"; but, he confesses, "I don't dare say anything about that, for then people will think that I am stupid and understand nothing." He is almost equally bewildered by the Norwegian that he hears spoken, a jargon swarming with English for all the common objects of daily life. No wonder that he exclaims, "America is a funny land!"

In 1929, after he had written *Giants in the Earth* and *Peder Victorious*, Rulvaag still felt that there was much yet to be written about the non-English speaking immigrant:

So little of the story of the non-English speaking immigrant, it seems to me, has yet been told in fiction. The surface of this rich field has hardly been more than scratched. Changing an Irishman, a Scotch, or an Englishman into an American is one thing; transforming a German or a Scandinavian is quite another. The first leaps full-grown into American society because the speech of the new country has been his for centuries. Not so with the other.

In addressing his students, Rulvaag stated what the loss of the Norwegian language meant to the immigrants. Most of his teaching was concerned with the Norwegian language and Norwegian literature.

In one lecture he appealed to his students:

This language is rich above all other non-English tongues to us who have sprung from Norse stock—rich and of the highest cultural importance. It has been the language of our kin for a thousand years. To us the Norse

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7Haugen, *Norwegian-American Studies and Records*, 58.

8Jørgensen and Solvm, p. 168.
language is the main door through which we enter into the house of our fathers. Do you not think that is of some importance that you step inside that house and look about you with curiosity and with reverence? That house may be large and bright and imposing, or it may be small and lowly and humble; yet it is the house of your fathers. Your kin, your own flesh and blood, will be there to meet you. You will stand face to face with your own self in your deepest roots. All the great spiritual treasures your race has gained and stored for you and for coming generations are to be found there. You will stand face to face with your own self and the sires of old will take your measure to estimate the fortunes of the human race.

To Rolvaag the loss of language was a problem in his teaching. Until 1920 he had insisted on studying Norwegian literature in the original, but with fewer of his students each year having a working knowledge of Norwegian, his methods had to change:

... Rolvaag continued to insist that in a large measure the cultural values native to the pioneer fathers could be transmitted to posterity only through the language in which they had been created. In particular that was true with reference to poetry and to some of the more exquisite examples of lyric prose. Even where creditable translations were to be found in English, they must be regarded as second best, although college students might find compensation for the stylistic loss in a more adequate understanding. By 1920 Rolvaag had come to believe that the most eminent of all Norse dramatists might be studied to advantage in Archer's translation. The biographical as well as the interpretative material available in English was also abundant enough to serve the needs of a year course in Ibsen. Accordingly, at the opening of school in the fall of 1920, the department announced for the first time a course in Ibsen in English.

In *Giants in the Earth* the difficulty that the Norwegian speaking immigrants experienced in communicating with English speaking people is clearly shown:

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9Jorgenson and Solum, p. 249.

10Ibid., pp. 263-64.
This much Per Hansa was able to follow; but here he began to lose the meaning; the men spoke English too fast, and Tunseden wasn't much better; not that it made any difference; however; Per Hansa knew all that he needed to know. They had come at last! Of the conversation that followed he only understood that it was about land; and that the men were making sport with Tunseden, who had grown angry and now spoke still faster. It was unbelievable how fast Syvert could rattle off the English! The strangers' mockery was getting rather ugly now; he could tell it by the sound of their laughter. Damn it all, to think that he couldn't talk to them!

The same problem faces Beret, Per Hansa's wife. When she wants to warn some new settlers of the dangers that lie ahead of them, the dangers that she felt so acutely, she starts to approach them:

... she took a few steps forward, then halted again. What was the use of trying? She couldn't even speak the language of these people! A feeling of unfathomable loneliness settled upon her; the cruelty of her fate suddenly took on fanciful proportions. Here she was, an exile in an unknown desert; even when human beings passed, her own kind, she could not talk with them.

The old habits of language were hard to dislodge from the minds of the non-English speaking immigrants. When Per Hansa bought a pair of oxen to do his farm work, he had to change their names:

He had bought his ox team in eastern Minnesota the previous winter, from a Swede who was glad to get rid of them because he wanted to buy horses instead. The Swede had bought the oxen from an Irishman in southern Iowa, and no one knew how many other owners the team had had. The Swede had called them "Tom" and "Bucky," but Per Hansa had disliked the names. Bound on a great voyage of adventure as he was, his boats had to be properly christened. So he had gone about thinking for a while, and at length had named the oxen "Søren" and "Ferke." To Søren he had added the prefix "Old," so that the full name of the animal was Old Søren. And sometimes, when he was in his very

11Gplants in the Earth, p. 134.

12Ibid., pp. 157-158.
brightest mood, he'd prefix the same adjective before the other name, too, because that sounded more affectionate. 13

Another lingual problem that faced the settlers was the status of their own names. The customs of Norway and America were decidedly different in this respect:

The first naming problem that faced the bewildered immigrant was the necessity of choosing a definitive surname by which he could be identified for business purposes. It was not that he lacked a surname, but rather that his rural surname customs were entirely different from those of the new country. If anything, he was embarrassed by the wealth of choices that were open to him. In America he was expected to limit himself to a single surname which he would then transmit to all his descendants. This was the custom which had become general in Europe after the Renaissance, but before that time it had mostly been limited to kings and noblemen. It had filtered into Norway in the 17th Century, but remained the almost exclusive privilege of the urban population even as late as the 19th.

In the Norwegian countryside an older custom prevailed, which had once been universal in large parts of the western world. Beyond his given name, a man was identified primarily by telling whose son he was. If anything more were needed, one could state the name of the farm where he lived. These practices define the two types of surnames that were actually in use: (1) patronymics, and (2) farm names. The patronymic consisted of the father's name followed by -son (usually spelled -sen) or -datter. 14

In 19th century rural Norway it had become customary, at least in writing, to add the name of the farm as a second surname. A man thus had three names, a given name, a patronymic, and a farm name. 15

Haugen uses as an illustration of this problem, the choice made by the pioneers in Giants in the Earth:

13 Giants in the Earth, pp. 263-64.

14 Haugen, The Norwegian Language in America, p. 192.

15 Ibid., p. 193.
The importance of the choice is vividly illustrated in a scene from Rolvaag's pioneer novel, *Giants in the Earth*. The chief characters of the book were known among their Norwegian fellow settlers as Per Hansa and Hans Olsa, dialectal forms of Peder Hansen and Hans Olsen. But one day a neighbor raises the question of what names Hans Olsa and Per Hansa intended to adopt when they took out the title deeds to their land. The two are dumbfounded, and Per Hansa answers with some irritation that he couldn't understand why the name Peder Hansen would not be good enough even for the United States Constitution! The question becomes the subject of a lively discussion in the two families; Hans Olsa's wife speaks up and resolutely declares that if she had her choice she would rather be called Mrs. Vaag, from their place name in Norway, than Mrs. Olsen. But they find Per Hansa's farm name Skarvhølmen too clumsy and settle upon Holm instead. After that day, each of the two families in question had a pair of surnames. Among themselves they always used the old names, but among strangers they were Vaag and Holm—though Hans Olsa invariably wrote it with a "W" instead of a "V".

Rolvaag shows how even this expedient bit of Americanization was against the wishes of Beret, who was so firmly grounded in the language of Norway. Beret says, "Well, now they had discarded the names of their fathers, soon they would be discarding other sacred things." Even with the American-sounding name of Holm, Per Hansa still couldn't understand English. At times when he felt strongly the need to communicate, he still couldn't talk with anyone except the Norwegians:

...The neighbors, and all the east-siders—so the folk who had settled east of the creek had come to be called—and even the Irish from over to the westward, would come to look at his wheat field and say that the sight did them good. He couldn't understand what the Irish were saying.
of course, but their joy at the sight of the wheat was writ-
ent all over their faces... Damned fine people, these
Irish. Too bad he couldn't talk with them.18

In the other two novels in the trilogy, Peder Victorious and
Their Fathers' God, the difficulties with the English speaking people
diminish. The non-English speaking immigrants are on the decline by
the end of Giants in the Earth. The event that signals this is the
death of Per Hansa near the end of Giants in the Earth.

The problem of changing names occurs once in Peder Victorious,
and one cannot help feeling that Rolvaag was attempting to say, with
tongue in cheek, that sometimes the changing of a person's name can
lead to difficulties. When the Irish settlers, who dislike mixing
with the Norwegians because of their broken speech and clamishness,
set out to hire a new schoolteacher for their Murph School, they
decide on a teacher by the name of Ted Gilbert. The name seemed to
them to be a safe one, certainly not a Norwegian name at any rate.

But he was a Norwegian, as Rolvaag explains:

That he was a Norwegian, the Irish did not know at the
time they hired him. The name had fooled them, though he
had come by it rightfully enough. His father's name, at
the time of landing in America, had been Knut Gilbertsen;
but prompted by a desire to be a real American from the start
he resolutely cut away the last syllable of the surname——
easier and much more handy that way, Knut thought. The son
had been baptized Theodor, which name the boy bore until he
entered school; but the first schoolma'am under whose care
he came, meaning to do the boy a real kindness, shortened
Theodor to Ted.19

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18 Giants in the Earth, p. 334.
19 Peder Victorious, p. 315.
The Break Between the First and Second Generations

In Chapter 11 of his book entitled *The Norwegian Language in America* Einar Haugen discusses "The Triumph of English". In this chapter Haugen quotes Rolvaag as saying:

In these parts of our country the pioneer, no matter of what race, is fast disappearing. Often he is a tragic figure. History has left him behind—simply gone away from him. He may not even be able to converse intelligently with his own grandchildren.

The break between the first and second generations because of the loss of language was a brutal one. It is a theme that recurs in all three of the novels considered here. In a letter written in 1929, Rolvaag elaborates on this theme:

The break between the first and the second generations of Americans of British descent may oftentimes be quite violent, due to the difference in schooling and the outlook and the difference in traditions between the two countries. But in the case of, for example, Scandinavian Americans, the break is oftentimes brutal, though the human qualities may be just as fine. You will agree with me, I think, that it is a tragedy for mother and child not to be able to converse intimately with each other. Her songs he cannot understand. What her soul has found nourishment in, he cannot comprehend. She seems to him a peculiar anachronism, a senseless, unreasonable being. Can you not feel the heartache of that mother as she sees the child slip away from her into another world? Neither she cannot follow, for she has not the key, and the magic password she does not know. Can you understand her utter helplessness? And can't you understand too, that the child suffers a loss which he can ill afford? There are tragedies in life for which language has no adequate expression—this is one of them.

The reason that Rolvaag felt this break so keenly, and realized

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1Haugen, p. 261.
2Ibid., p. 261.
3Jergenson and Solum, p. 169.
the loss involved, was that he dealt every day, with students who were in this particular situation. As a teacher of the Norwegian language in what should have been its stronghold here in America he was in a position to see just what was taking place:

. . . . Although he felt bitterly disappointed with the meager visible results of his work, he bore his own burden of responsibility. Students came into his classrooms as the sons and daughters of non-English stocks. They, too, were blind just as their parents had been blind, but in a different way. Anticipating later developments in Rölvaag's authorship, one may say that while Beret Holm was incapable of seeing clearly the American life represented by the English-speaking groups, Peder Victorious was equally incapable of understanding the implications of his own origin, and that in spite of the fact that he spoke both English and Norwegian fluently.

Rölvaag did not mean to say that he did not recognize that English was to be the language of the Norwegians here in America. But he recognized that the loss of their native language would be a severe loss in terms of their culture:

Language is at one and the same time the best cultural means and the strongest group tie. This does not mean that English should be kept from supplanting the Norse where such a change is needed. The cultural and the religious work in the English language may very well go hand in hand with the most pronounced cultivation of Norse. There is no conflict between these two interests but a deep and beautiful harmony.

The impending break between the first and second generations is shown early in the first book of the trilogy, when in Giants in the Earth in Chapter III, Per Hansa, the pioneer father, and his son Store-Hans meet some Indians near their new home on the prairie. Even at

4Jørgensen and Solum, pp. 181-82.

5Ibid., p. 229.
this early point, the boy has mastered English better than his father:

Per Hansa stepped forward and greeted them in English—he had picked up enough words for that. The greeting was returned in the same language. . . . One of the braves put something that sounded like a question; two of the others, sitting beside him, added to it. . . . Per Hansa stood helpless for a moment; he could not understand a word.

But in this crisis Store-Hans, who had been half hiding behind his father, came to his aid; he whispered, rapidly:

"They want to know if we live here."

"How the devil could you tell that? . . . By God! I guess we do!" Per Hansa nodded emphatically toward the Indians. "Tell them there isn't any doubt of it—not the least doubt in the world—but say it nicely, now!"

Store-Hans stepped out in front, facing the seated redskins; he tried his best to make them understand, using what little English he had learned during the past winter.6

Per Hansa realized that if he was to be able to conduct business with the townspeople, and also if he was to be able to communicate with his own children, he would have to learn English too. Thus, when one of the English speaking settlers set up a school in his sod hut to teach the children of the settlement English, Per Hansa became one of the students also:

Per Hansa came one day to inquire if it mightn't be possible to move the school to his house every other week—for Beret's sake. It would be interesting for her to listen to the instruction; and, besides, both of them needed to learn English.7

But the first generation, typified by Beret, didn't keep up with the pace set by the second generation in learning English. This

6Giants in the Earth, p. 75.

7Ibid., p. 258.
is shown in the opening pages of *Peder Victorious*, the second book of the trilogy:

During his childhood Peder lived in three rooms. Moving freely among them, he scarcely realized when he left the one and went into the other. Yet only in the one did he feel really at home and dare to let himself go. Here he bustled about, doing just what he pleased; here he dreamt the future, built it; here he planned how he would do this thing and that, and how he would be the boss and set things to rights when he got to be a man. The place was like a treasure cave, stacked full of marvelous riches. What fun to play with them, to take things down and look at them, and to put them back again. And how jolly to find something new to put in—really the most fun of all. Many and remarkable indeed the adventures he had in here. In this room he lived everything in English.

The second room he shared with his mother, his two brothers, and his sister. Here he was not quite so happy.

It is not hard to see the antagonism that has built up already. Peder’s unhappiness in the second room is stated quite bluntly. The break between the first and second generations widens:

Mother—yes! She was worse than all the rest. Look at all the years she had lived in this country, and she couldn’t even talk decent English yet—English, the easiest language in all the world to learn. And she wouldn’t even try—didn’t care. "Talk Norwegian!" she would burst out all of a sudden whenever any of them talked English at home. She would even say it right in front of people who didn’t understand Norwegian, so that Peder was often ashamed when strangers came. . . . If only Mother had been different, this second room might not have been so bad. Mother was unusually smart in most things, for all she was so queer. At times she knew exactly what he was thinking about . . . had the most uncanny insight. . . . Oh, well, wait till he was confirmed and grown up and had something to say—then he’d change things about and put them where they belonged. In this room he lived everything in Norwegian.

The break becomes more acute between Peder and Beret when Peder

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8 *Peder Victorious*, pp. 1-2.

starts reading an English Bible instead of a Norwegian one. In discussing an unmarried mother from the community, in answer to Peder's question, Beret says:

"You'd better take your Catechism and read the Seventh Commandment. That'll tell you plain enough, I'm sure!"

Peder saw a new thought coming, and seized it instantly:

"Does it say the same thing in English?" He had no sooner uttered the words than he felt that this thing could not possibly be so obscure in his language. . . everything was plainer in English.

"I suppose it does," she said resignedly.

It was not only that English was the language which Peder preferred. He had grown up in an atmosphere of English except in his home, and English was easier for him to learn:

But then another thought struck Peder, one which he could not keep back; it was so easy to say it to her now that she was standing there in the dark:

"Why can't I learn my lessons in English?"

She set the pail down and came over to the cellar way: "How you talk Permand!" she said kindly. "Study your lessons in English?" she added, in order to show him how absurd the idea was.

"It's much easier!"

"For anyone as smart in Norwegian as you are?"

"But I can't understand the words!" he insisted stubbornly.

He could tell by the sound of her voice that it was no use to argue any more. . . . Then, as if in self defense, he answered:

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Peder Victorious, p. 33.
"Others do it!" 11

But to Beret this language question was something deeper than ease of
learning; to her it was a question of propriety:

"We can't pay attention to what others do!" . . . When
she spoke again, her voice was milder: "You wouldn't put
me to shame like that, would you, Pernand?" She came nearer
him.

"Shame?" he repeated, as he stepped higher up in the cellar
way.

"Aye—indeed!"

"That such a shame?"

"Certainly! The idea of a Norwegian boy wanting to
talk to God in a language his own mother can't understand.
. . . Go right along now and get at your lessons."

Peder came out into the evening, boiling with anger.
Now Mother saw no further than her nose—as usual. He . .
. a Norwegian boy. . . Huh! . . . The idea! 12

Beret was opposed by more formidable forces than she knew,
however. Peder's schoolteacher was working on his language too, in
a direction that would have amased Beret. When Peder is selected to
give a recitation at a district meeting in the schoolhouse, she
admonishes him:

. . . "You must hurry home, now, and study your selections
carefully, so that you won't disgrace me tonight, I who am
working so patiently with you! You, Peder, have a bad ac-
cent; you ought not talk anything but your country's lang-

gage for a while, though your speech will do very well out
here. 13

Rolvaag here seems to be pointing out that it is little wonder that

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11Peder Victorious, p. 34.
12Ibid, p. 34.
13Ibid, p. 91.
the break between the first and second generations was so brutal. On one hand Peder is admonished to forsake everything that is Norwegian in his speech, and is told so by a person who is supposedly an authority on this subject; on the other hand, Peder's mother wishes him to speak only the language of their ancestors.

In defense, Peder can do only one thing; he separates his Norwegian world from his English world, living in one during the day at school, and living in the other at home:

"I'll feed the pigs," he said quietly. This was his first utterance in Norwegian since he had left home early this morning; the sound of the words, the sight of his sister and his mother going about doing the work—as they had every day of his life—the sight of this room with all its secrets obliterated in an instant the whole world in which he had lived so intensely during the day. Here was another world altogether. He had had the same feeling before, but tonight it brought with it such wonder that he had to stop to collect himself. Was it here he belonged, or was it out there in the other world?

On the night of the district meeting, when Peder is to recite The Gettysburg Address, his zeal for the English language is heightened in two ways. First of all, he sees his two worlds merge as one when his mother accompanies him to the meeting:

... A peculiar tremor was making him uneasy tonight. Mother was here! Suddenly, he had to look to where she sat. ... Mother in this place! The incredible had actually happened—she had stepped out of her own world and had accompanied him into his.14

Secondly, because of the example set by Senator McGregor, Dakota

14Peder Victorius, p. 106.

15Ibid., p. 120.
Territory's representative in Congress in his speech of the evening,

Peder resolves to perfect his own English:

...And the way he could talk! Peder had actually seen
the thoughts before they were uttered. There was nothing
new in them except that they were clothed with the same eleg-
ance as McGregor himself. He had listened in rapt atten-
tion. Words and phrases which in Miss Mahon's mouth seemed
so sugary sweet and stick... had taken on a manly nobility
that was perfection itself. That's how English sounds when
spoken correctly! Involuntarily Peder's fists clenched;
he vowed then and there that he would learn to speak English
as beautifully as McGregor. Miss Mahon was right after all---he mustn't talk so much Norwegian at home, because, if he
did, English would never be more than a foreign language to
him... Well, he knew what to about that—he would talk no Norwegian except to his mother.10

What Peder did not know was that his two worlds were not merging,
but were meeting in a head-on collision. After the meeting, when Miss
Mahon and Beret met, Miss Mahon confided to Beret:

...Making herself still sweeter, she lowered her voice.
She had something very confidential to say about Peder, and
now Beret, as his mother, must try to help out of the dif-
ficulty. It was this, that Peder spoke English with a for-
eign accent. He must by all means get rid of that accent!
It would be a calamity for an American, especially for one
with such rare talents, not to be able to speak perfect
English! If he didn't get rid of his foreignism now, it
might stay with him for life... Finally, Beret had be-
come disgusted with the honeyed maternal solicitude of this
total stranger. Some of it she had understood, some of it
not. She had arisen and said, in broken English, that she
considered it more important that the boy should learn to
understand his own mother than that he should learn to talk
nice! If Store-Hans hadn't happened to come in at that
moment, announcing that they were ready to leave, she didn't
know what terrible things she would have said.17

As a result of this discussion with Peder's teacher, Beret
decided to send her son to another school in the settlement, a school

[17]Ibid., p. 138.
which was controlled by the Norwegians instead of the Irish. Peder’s confusion at being taken from his friends and being sent to a new environment is understandable, especially when he could not comprehend the reason for the transfer:

Here he was off to English school among the Norwegians because Mother was afraid. . . . well, just what did she fear might happen to him among the Irish? . . . Queer about Mother. At times she could see clearer than anyone else; there wasn’t a thing she couldn’t understand. Yet the world that was his and all the promise it held in store for him, its greatness and many wonders—she simply was not aware of its existence. 18

From incidents like this we can see the gulf widening between the first and second generations, because of basic differences in their attitudes and because of the lack of vision on both sides, resulting in no attempt at compromise.

Beret’s battle to have Peder retain Norwegian as a language used in everyday conversation was doomed to failure. Peder had adopted the language of America as his language, and consequently his knowledge of Norwegian declined. Even when he was on his way to his new school for the first time, this is clearly shown. Peder met one of his neighbors on the road, and was forced to converse with him at some length. Peder’s discomfiture at starting in a new school was heightened because: “The man talked Norwegian, too, which only made matters so much the worse for Peder, because he couldn’t answer just the way he wanted, nor find the right words.” 19

18 Peder Victorious, p. 151.
19 Ibid., p. 152.
Rolvaag also shows that Beret did not comprehend what was happening to her children, or at least did not comprehend that the switch to English was inevitable:

The school seemed to exert an influence that Beret could not understand. The children, once started, would think of nothing else. Evenings as soon as they had swallowed the last bite, they would clear the kitchen table and sit down to their books. In a moment they were off in a world where she could not follow. And they would act as if possessed; they neither heard nor saw. Never had she seen the like of it, for it was school, school, school all the time; as far as they were concerned nothing else seemed to exist.

At first, she had not realized what was taking place, feeling contented because she had the children at home, right here by the kitchen table; Ola, too, having subscribed for an English farm paper, sat here with the others. At times she would think of questions to ask just to make them come out of their world. What were they doing now? What was the lesson about? Yes, but couldn’t they say it in Norwegian? Well, was that anything for grown folks to learn? Either she would be ignored altogether, or she would get an answer so nonsensical that it vexed her. They could at least listen to what she asked, could they not? If the two younger were called upon to explain, they would stammer or stumble over the words, and immediately switch into English; then they weren’t stuck for words.20

Finally there came a time when Peder rebelled against the language of his mother:

Peder had not attended many weeks before he would talk nothing but English. He had started school knowing only a few English words, such as were used daily in the Norwegian speech at home. Returning one day he had left behind him the language he had spoken all his life. The mother talked to him in Norwegian; Peder answered her in English; his voice loud and boisterous. The boy seemed almost beside himself. The others had to join in the laugh, which only emboldened him so that he went on with still greater swagger, talking nothing but English. Finally his

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20Peder Victorious, pp. 193-94.
mother stopped talking to him altogether. That same evening, taking the Norwegian primer, she sat down to teach him from it; then all ambition and joy vanished. But he didn't escape for all that, either that night or later.21

Beret was torn between two loves. She knew that she loved her son, even if he was rebellious, but she also loved her native language, and it was incomprehensible to her that her own offspring should reject it. This conflict finally led to open warfare:

One evening while she was sitting by the kitchen table reading the Skandinaven, the two youngest, opposite her, were pouring over their books. Peder, now in the third year of school, had already reached the fourth grade. Coming upon an awfully good story, he straightway wanted to read it to Anna Marie. His sister, remembering the selection from the year before, showed no interest. But Peder, undismayed, launched into the reading at once, loudly throwing himself into it with all the enthusiasm and vim he possessed—he'd make them listen all right!

Beret looked up and waited till he had finished the story; then she asked him to come and sit down beside her—here she had found an interesting story.

At first he pretended not to have heard her. But after a little, slowly and unwillingly, he came shuffling around the table and plumped himself down next to her.

"What is it then?" he asked apathetically.

"You read this to me, my eyes bother me so."

"Huh!" he grunted and was silent.

"You can do that much for your mother, can't you?"

Peder bethought himself long, his whole figure indifferent and miserably bored. When at length he began to read, his voice sounded resentful and was husky with tears. Every other word he hacked to pieces, carelessly mispronounced. The boy acted as though he were being tortured, slowly.

Beret listed to him awhile. Unable to endure his behavior any longer she grabbed him by the arm and shook him.

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21Peder Victorius, p. 194.
"Now you read decently!"

Silence.

"Don't you hear me?"

Peder put his fists to his eyes and rubbed.

"Ain't I reading?" he whined.

His obstinacy infuriated her. Springing up, she boxed his ear, then seized him by the shoulders and shook him violently; letting go of his shoulders, she grabbed hold of one ear, and held while she beat the other unmercifully.

"Now will you read?" she panted hoarsely.²³

The affect on both generations is shown vividly throughout Peder Victorious. When Gabrielsen, their minister, gives Peder an English Bible, Beret is moved to speak these words of futility:

"Pretty soon there'll be nothing but English here— it's English at home, only English wherever one turns. The language we have spoken time out of mind, we cast away as if it were a worn out garment. . . . And now our own minister comes along saying yea and amen to the act. Oh, it's shameful—shameful, I say."²⁴

In Gabrielsen Beret met another opponent in her fight to keep her people from losing the Norwegian language. For Gabrielsen had said, "Twenty years from now not a word of Norwegian will be spoken in this country. . . ."²⁵ When Gabrielsen visited the Holm household he was naturally asked to say the table prayer, because of his position as a minister:

... As soon as all were seated he folded his hands and

²³Peder Victorious, pp. 196-97.

²⁴Ibid., p. 211.

²⁵Ibid., p. 206.
offered a lengthy blessing in English. Meanwhile the women, their heads bowed, stood over by the stove. Beret's face had turned pale. . . . The brazen effrontery of that man! This he dared to do—right in her own house!26

Beret's feeling of insult leads her to engage the minister in an argument in front of her family and guests. As they do not share her concern in this matter, her position leads to a further estrangement from both her family and friends.

In the third book of the trilogy, Their Fathers' God, the loss of language theme is not so significant. By now Beret is reconciled to the fact that her language is doomed. In one instance, though, the estrangement of the first and second generation is shown in this novel also. In this case the second generation figure is Susie, Peder's Irish wife. When Beret is caring for Petie, Peder and Susie's baby son, Beret's native language again intrudes between her and the second generation:

. . . . For long spells Beret would sit with him on her lap, letting him kick and sprawl to his heart's content. This, however, was only part of the performance: With her knees swaying to and fro in a cradle-like movement she sang to him strange, sleepy songs, in a language that Susie could not understand; the words low and soft, the melodies so sad that all the world's melancholy blinked wide-eyed out of them. . . . Was this some dark incantation to spirit her child away and give her a changeling in his place? So at least it seemed to Susie. Petie always fell under the spell. First his eyes grew stiff and glazed, the lids turning heavy as lead, gradually shutting. Thereupon Beret would dress him and return him to his mother. Each time Susie gave the baby to the older woman and each time she took him from her, she would secretly make the sign of the cross under his back. As soon as she had him safely in her arms she would carry him straight upstairs and put him in the cradle.27

26Peder Victorious, p. 242.

27Their Fathers' God, pp. 72-73.
The conflict of language is shown in Their Fathers' God in another way. When Peder neglects to have his son baptized, Beret and one of her friends take matters into their own hands. They baptize him "Peder Emmanuel," but Beret thinking that because Susie called the boy Petie, Peder would not be unsuitable to her. But Beret does not dare reveal to the parents what she has done. Susie, on a trip to town goes to her priest to have the boy baptized also. She selects Patrick as his first name, in deference to St. Patrick, and, as she feels as though the boy's Norwegian side should be represented in his name also, he is christened "Patrick St. Olaf."29

In Their Fathers' God Rolvaag also introduces a minister who is able to see the consequences that the loss of language will work on his people. In discussing this problem with Peder, he uses the Pilgrims as an example:

"..."There are many, many things that don't get into your schoolbooks. I venture to say that your teachers taught you that the Pilgrims came to America seeking religious liberty, or am I wrong?"

"What else could have brought them here?"

"I thought so! But that dogma is only part of the truth. From England the Pilgrims first went to Holland; there they enjoyed all the religious liberties they could ask. But these men were not fools; racial traditions were of vital importance to them. That's what eventually brought them to realize that if they remained in Holland their children would become Hollanders, and what was worse, they would soon lose their mother tongue. Rather than suffer such an irretrievable loss they made ready and sailed for New England."30

28 Their Fathers' God, p. 89.

29 Ibid., p. 136.

30 Ibid., p. 211.
C. Physical Hardships

In showing the cost of pioneering Rolvaag showed more than the effect of linguistic and cultural losses; he also showed what the taming of the prairie cost in physical terms. To Beret, the pioneer wife, the prairie's physical make-up was frightening:

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Per Hansa, on the other hand, thought of the prairie as a wonderful physical challenge:

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Per Hansa was just the type to accept the physical challenge of the prairie. His boundless energy was his greatest asset. His success was due to plain hard work:

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\[\text{Giants in the Earth, p. 26.}\]

\[\text{Ibid., p. 36.}\]
plow had carved and polished its upturned face. . . . Ole toiled on, settling and straightening the furrows as best he could, now and then cutting out the clods that fell unevenly. When Per Hansa had made a couple of rounds, he let the oxen stand awhile to catch their breath, and came over to Ole to instruct him. "This is the way to do it!" he said, seizing the hoe. "Watch me, now—like this!" He heaved away till the clods were flying around him. . . . When they quit work at noon a good many furrows lay stretched out on the slope, smiling up at the sun; they were also able to bring home with them a full wagonload of building material; at coffee time they brought another; at supper another. But when, arriving home at the end of the day, they found that supper was not quite ready, Per Hansa felt that he must go after still another load; they had better make use of every minute of time!

He began building the house that same evening.3

Another of the physical hardships was the living conditions that the settlers had to cope with during their first years on the prairie. At a time when all of the settlers were living in sod huts, one of the more prosperous newcomers planned to build a frame house. Of his plans Beret says:

"Your wife certainly will have many reasons to be glad. Walls that will shut out all the unspeakable things out here. . . . Floors that can be washed on the Sabbath eve. . . . I know too well that human beings should not live like beasts! After they have turned into beasts, houses don't matter."4

One of the most terrible physical hardships was the struggle against the plague of grasshoppers. These clouds of enemies that descended from the sky took the settler's food, and in some cases, took their hopes too:

And now had begun a seemingly endless struggle between man's fortitude in adversity, on the one hand, and the

3Giant in the Earth, pp. 48-49.

4Ibid., p. 312.
powers of evil in high places, on the other. There were signs of the scourge in the summer of '73, but not before the following year did it assume the proportions of a plague; after that it raged with unabated fury throughout the years '74, '75, '76, '77, and part of '78; then it disappeared as suddenly and mysteriously as it had come. The devastation it wrought was terrible; it made beggars of some, and drove others insane; still others it sent wandering back to the forest lands, though they found conditions little better there, either. . . . But the greater number simply hung on where they were. They stayed because poverty, that most supreme of masters, had deprived them of the liberty to rise up and go away.

In Chapter IV of Giants in the Earth, entitled "The Great Plain Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and Is Satisfied," Rolvaag summarizes the hardships of the pioneers:

Many and incredible are the tales the grandfathers tell from those days when the wilderness was yet untamed, and when they, unwittingly, founded the Kingdom. There was the Red Son of the Great Prairie, who hated the Palefaces with a hot hatred; stealthily he swooped down upon them, tore up and laid waste the little settlements. Great was the terror he spread; bloody the saga concerning him.

Then, too, there were the years of pestilence— toil and travail, famine and disease. God knows how human beings could endure it all. And many did not—they lay down and died. "There is nothing to do about that," they said who survived. . . .

And on the hot summer days terrible storms might come. In the twinkling of an eye they would smash to splinters the habitations which man had built for himself, so that they resembled nothing so much as a few stray hairs on a worn-out pelt. . . .

Some feared most the prairie fire. Terrible, too, it was, before people had learned how to guard against it.

The winter brought great physical hardships too. It was then

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that the need for food, fuel, shelter, and companionship was most acute:

People were hard at work throughout the whole settlement; the weather continued threatening, and there was much to be done after the storm; hogs and cattle, as well as human beings, had to be safeguarded against another onslaught of winter. On most of the farms the outhouses were still of primitive construction, built either of sod or of poles and straw. The last storm had buried some of them entirely; from others it had stripped off the straw so completely, that the tops of the poles poking through the snowdrifts resembled nothing so much as bleached bones sticking out of the ground. Of some of the farmhouses only the roofs could be seen; of the sod huts, only the chimneys; down at Tønsten’s, the smoke came right out of a hole in the snow-bank. If one wanted to go to his neighbour’s, he had to put on skis or snowshoes, and keep on top of the drifts. There were homes where no other food was left than dry corn and the little milk that the cows gave. On the outskirts of the settlement, where the latest newcomers lived, they sometimes didn’t even have that much. But the people there would borrow a sack of wheat from anybody who had one; and if they had no coffee mill in the house, they would use a mortar, or improvise one from a kettle. Folks were cheerful about helping one another in those days. What one didn’t have, he borrowed; if one got a new idea, he passed it on to his neighbours. The scarcity of fuel caused the most suffering, for hay burned like hay, even if twisted.

Rolvaag’s accounts of the hardships endured by the pioneers during the winter is not overdone. Here is another account of the blizzard of 1880 by a pioneer who lived through it:

The storm lasted three days. The first night our bed was covered with enough snow to fill a washtub. Our house was not plastered and the windows were not right, as the house was unfinished. Next morning Lou Norman went out to get a sack of hay so we could cook coffee. Later he went out to see about two little pigs that were nearly freezing to death and brought them in. In the evening the little pigs were hunting for something for bedding and got under the bed and began to pull and tear at the mattress and bed-clothes, to loosen it and make a bed for themselves.

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*Giants in the Earth*, p. 446.
I had found one of our hens with a broken leg which I set and "spliced." My little boy lay on a couch with a big Newfoundland dog over his feet. In the morning the hen with the broken leg hopped up on the couch where the boy and the dog were, and laid an egg.

We had not dug our potatoes nor threshed our grain. This winter there was one storm after another, so people could not get anywhere, nor get to threshing.

The physical hardships caused death also. Perhaps the most touching of these in Roivag's novels was Per Hansa's death in a blizzard. During the storm he had set out to bring a doctor for his friend, Hans Olsa. It meant almost certain death to travel in the winter out on the prairie, but Per Hansa left, doing what he was required to do:

... One day during the spring after Hans Olsa died, a troop of young boys were ranging the prairies, in search of some yearling cattle that had gone astray. They came upon the haystack, and stood transfixed. On the west side of the stack sat a man, with his back to the mouldering hay. This was in the middle of a warm day in May, yet the man had two pairs of skis along with him; one pair lay beside him on the ground, the other was tied to his back. He had a heavy stocking cap pulled well down over his forehead, and large mittens on his hands; in each hand he clutched a staff. To the boys, it looked as though the man were sitting there resting while he waited for better skiing.

... His face was ashen and drawn. His eyes were set toward the west.

In the second book of the trilogy, Peder Victorious, the physical cost of pioneering is still an important theme, as this book deals with the pioneers when their terrible physical battle is drawing

9Haugen, Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 9–10.

to a close. The prairie is still extracting its payment, however:

. . . This spring five Irish children had been tortured to death with scarlet fever. Mrs. Thompson, a neighbor, had died in childbirth last fall the bull had gored Ole Strandvold to death, and now the other day Peder Ness had killed himself while driving. . . .

There were still the terrible winters to cope with; here too the prairie had lost none of its vigor:

The weeks went by. The blizzards kept on raging. The struggle changed into endless toil. The fuel was gone; the supply of oil long since exhausted; the salt likewise; not a grain of flour in the house except what they could grind in the coffee-mill; coffee and sugar were luxuries scarcely remembered any more.12

Besides the hunger and cold, there was a lack of other common necessities. There were no stores nearby to replenish their diminishing wardrobes:

And it was hard on the clothes for the boys, worst of all on the footwear. Often she would sit patching until late into the night; then she would let the light burn in the window—in case he should come tonight! . . . One evening, taking a pair of heavy wool socks Per. Hansa had brought with him from Norway, she began sewing rags on them; layer upon layer, stitching them firmly together. These would make good, warm footwear, she thought.13

The animals suffered too, despite all the settlers did to keep them warm and well fed:

But most unbearable of all was the suffering of the animals, famine grinning with glistening teeth from cow and horse stall alike, and the haystacks two miles away, the snow eight feet deep on the level. Day in and day out she and the boys slaved with the fodder; they carried it home; they dragged it home on skis and sleds; and yet,
throughout the whole day, the poor beasts would not cease their pitiful crying for more.\textsuperscript{14}

In \textit{Their Fathers\textsuperscript{2}} God the physical hardships met by the settlers are shown in another way. At a time when "the fields lay parched and sallow. And the earth's crust shrank; long cracks appeared, running in all directions,"\textsuperscript{15} the drought became so intense that many of the settlers gave up their land and returned to the East:

Word came from counties farther west that conditions among the new settlers out there were even worse. Many a man, it was said, had been forced to bundle wife and children into wagons and strike back to civilization. Destitute people, out on a burnt-up prairie, cannot live on sunshine and a scorching southwind.\textsuperscript{16}

One such settler, traveling the long miles back to civilization, wrote these words on his covered wagon:

\begin{flushleft}
Fifty miles from water \\
One hundred miles from wood \\
To Hell with South Dakota, \\
We're leaving you for good!\textsuperscript{17}
\end{flushleft}

The physical hardships of the drought in \textit{Their Fathers\textsuperscript{2}} God are heightened by the fact that the settlers were fighting more than nature itself. The vicissitudes of the grain market brought bitter complaints from some of them:

\begin{quote}
\textit{... if it hangs on much longer, it will mean the worse crop failure in the history of the Northwest. Last year the panic sent the prices way down; the farmer came away}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Peder Victorious, pp. 180-81.}

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Their Fathers\textsuperscript{2} God, p. 2.}

\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Ibid., p. 2.}

\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid., p. 3.}
from the market poorer than he went to it. This year we
won't have a thing to sell, no matter what the prices
are.\textsuperscript{16}

Near the end of Their Fathers' God, the settlement doctor,
Dr. Green, summarizes the cost of pioneering. He says:

These prairies, . . . give abundant harvests. Soaked
as they are with warm blood, they ought to yield generously.
A hell of a price we've had to pay for this empire, and
still we can't call it our own.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16}Their Fathers' God, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., pp. 243-44.
Do Loss of Mental Health

Theodore Blegen, in his *Grass Roots History*, says, "Fear and sorrow, combined with the monotony of the prairie and a deep nostalgia, threw a pall of melancholy over many pioneer mothers and unbalanced some." He points out that Rolvaag used this theme to show one more cost of pioneering, and in this case, "his portrayal of the psychological turmoil in the spirit of Beret is an authentic study of one aspect of the emotional history of immigration."^2

In a letter written while he was in the process of writing *Giants in the Earth*, Rolvaag stated his purpose in using this theme:

This week I have lived in peace and quiet, working steadily. I have made every effort, but the progress had not been rapid, though it seems to me that the quality is satisfactory. I am all done with the first part and well into part two. Just at present I am portraying a wife who loses her mind in consequence of loneliness and hardships out in Dakota territory in the seventies of the last century. The subject is interesting beyond measure. If I succeed in doing it the way it ought to be, the cost of pioneering ought to be plain to all.^3

Beret’s essential make-up, "a psychological introvert by nature,"^4 is shown early in *Giants in the Earth*. She speaks "in an anxious voice,"^5 and feels strongly the vast emptiness of the prairie:

The mother had taken little Anna up in her lap and was now leaning backward as much as she could; it gave such relief to her tired muscles. The caressess of the

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1Blegen, p. 95.
2Ibid., p. 95.
3Jorgenson and Solum, p. 336.
4Ibid., p. 345.
5*Giants in the Earth*, p. 8.
child and her lively chatter made her forget for a moment care and anxiety, and that vague sense of the unknown which bore in on them so strongly from all directions.

Even on the journey to their new home on the prairie the tension of the place is too much for Beret, and she breaks down. One night Per Hansa leaves the wagon to search for clues of the whereabouts of his fellow travelers. When he returns he finds Beret searching for him:

"Good Heavens, Beret! What are you doing out here in the middle of the night?" His voice was full of alarm, yet softened by his great concern for her.

"It felt so awful to lie there alone, after you had gone. . . . I could hardly breathe . . . so I got up."

The words came with difficulty; he realized that her voice was hoarse with weeping.

Suddenly she could stand it no longer. She ran over to him, flung her arms around his neck, and leaned close against him. The dam of her pent-up tears broke in a flood of emotion; she wept long and bitterly.

When they reach their new home on the prairie Beret can scarcely believe that she is expected to live in such loneliness. As she views the prairie around her, she finds nothing that will comfort her:

. . . . As her eyes darted nervously here and there, flitting from object to object and trying to pierce the purple dimness that was steadily closing in, a sense of desolation so profound settled on her that she seemed unable to think at all. It would not do to gaze any longer at the terror out there, where everything was turning to grim and awful darkness. . . . She threw herself back in the grass and looked up into the heavens. But darkness and infinitude lay there, also—the sense of utter desolation still remained. . . . Suddenly, for the first time, she realized the full extent of her loneliness, the dreadful nature of the fate that had

6 *Giants in the Earth*, p. 9.

7 Ibid., p. 21.
overtaken her. Lying there on her back, and staring up into the quiet sky across which the shadows of night were imperceptibly creeping, she went over in her mind every step of their wanderings, every mile of the distance they had travelled since they had left home. 

At first Beret's fears do not seem unreasonable. The other women of the settlement were troubled with fear too:

Mother Sørine had reason to be frightened of these storms. Less than a week ago their tent had been carried away in one of them; Sørine, trapped inside and half choked, had been swept along with the canvas.

Kjersti, Tønseten's wife, didn't mind the storms so much; they never committed inhuman outrages... weren't out for your scalp, at any rate! But fear of the Indians was ever vividly present in her mind. Not a day passed that she didn't search the sky line many times.

The storms and the Indians did not bother Beret as much as a nameless dread of the vast unknown there on the prairie. The first time she becomes unreasonable in her fears is when Per Hansa is about to leave her to go in search of some missing livestock. At her outburst Per Hansa is at a loss:

But what had struck her? It was beyond his comprehension! She had more common sense than any other person he knew; yet here she was, talking more unreasonably than a cross child. What strange influence had come over her since they had arrived out here? He oughtn't leave her this way—but what could he do?

Because of Per Hansa's leaving her to go in search of the missing cattle, Beret's actions become more indicative of mental illness. The neighbors are the first to notice it:

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8Giants in the Earth, p. 39.
9Ibid., p. 63.
10Ibid., p. 63.
11Ibid., p. 103.
A couple of days after the men's departure, she sent the boy over to Kjersti to borrow a darning needle; she had hidden her own away so carefully that she could not find it. Such things occurred commonly now; she would put something away, she could not remember where, and would putter around looking for it without really searching; at last, she would forget altogether what she was about, and at such times she seemed like a stranger.

Beret's behavior soon began to affect the other members of the family also. Her children especially are at a loss to explain her behavior:

When she had finished the task she went out hurriedly; in a moment she came back with a willow switch in her hand. Going straight over to the table, she began to lay about her with the switch; she seemed beside herself, struck out blindly, hit whatever she happened to aim at, and kept it up without saying a word. The switch whizzed and struck; shrieks of pain arose. The boys at once stopped fighting and gazed horror-stricken at their mother; they could not remember that she had ever laid a hand on them before. And now there was such a strange, unnatural look in her eyes!

Rolvaag introduced another mentally ill woman into the story to further show the effect of the prairie on the sensitive soul. This woman's name is Kari, and she appears when a lone wagon comes traveling through the Spring Creek settlement. Per Hansa's first glimpse of the mad wife of this family unnerves him:

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. Per Hansa trembled so violently that he had to catch hold of the wagon box.

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but inwardly he was swearing a steady stream. To him it
looked as if the woman was crucified. 16

When her husband tells of the events leading up to her breakdown, it is
made clear how much torture she had gone through:

... "Physically she seems to be as well as ever—as far
as I can see. She certainly hasn't overworked since we've
been travelling. I hope there's nothing wrong with her... .
... But certain things are hard to bear—I suppose it's worse
for the mother, too—though the Lord knows it hasn't been easy
for me either! ... You see, we had to leave our youngest
boy out there on the prairie... ." 17

When Beret sees these people, and what they have paid to be pioneers,
she says, "Now you can see that this kind of a life is impossible!
It's beyond human endurance." 18

Beret's sense of impending doom becomes a contagious thing;
soon Per Hansa is affected by it too:

At first her husband made all sorts of fun of this
practice of hers; 19 he teased her about it, as if it were
a good joke, and continued to force his caresses on her,
his voice low and vibrant with pent-up emotion. But as
time went on he ceased laughing; the fear that possessed
her had begun to affect him, too... . 20

Beret's final breakdown comes when the plague of grasshoppers
strikes the settlement. It was an unnerving thing to see, even for
one in full command of his senses; for Beret it was the final outrage
that the prairie could commit. She retreated from the world of reality:

As he approached the house his misgivings grew more

16 Giants in the Earth, p. 317.
17 Ibid., p. 319.
18 Ibid., p. 323.
19 Beret's habit was to cover all the windows of their hut.
20 Giants in the Earth, p. 332.
pronounced, till suddenly they leaped into an overmastering fear which he tried to assuage by telling himself that she had kept indoors because she had not dared to leave the children, and that in doing so she had acted wisely. . . . The house lay in deep twilight as he drew near; there was no sign of life to be seen or heard, except the malignied beings that still snapped and flared through the air; the sod hut, surrounded as it was by flowing shapes, looked like a quay thrust out into a turbulent current; in the deepening twilight, the pale, shimmering sails of the flying creatures had taken on a still more unearthly sheen; they came, flickered by, and were gone in an instant, only to give place to myriads more.

. . . "Beret, where are you?" . . .

No answer came—there was no one to be seen. But wasn’t that a sound? "Beret!" he called again, sharply. He heard it now distinctly. Was it coming from one of the beds, or over there by the door? . . . It was a faint, whimpering sound. He rushed to the beds and threw off the bedclothes—no one in this one, no one in that one—it must be over by the door! . . . He staggered back—the big chest was there? . . . Per Hansa flung the cover open with frantic haste. The sight that met his eyes made his blood run cold. Down in the depths of the great chest lay Beret, huddled up and holding the baby in her arms; And-Ongen was crouching at her feet—the whimpering sound had come from her.21

In the remaining two books of the trilogy there occur only glimpses of this same theme. In Peder Victorious Beret is shown as a pathetic creature, most of the time lucid and sensible, sometimes insane. In one incident she distinctly hears God speak to her, commanding her to "utterly destroy"22 the wickedness of the settlement. She attempts to burn down the schoolhouse, but she is not successful.

In Their Fathers' God Beret is a character much as she appeared

21Giants in the Earth, p. 348.
22Peder Victorious, p. 338.
in Peder Victorious. She is treated with respect by her neighbors, but when she acts strangely, they are afraid of her. By presenting Beret in this way Rolvaag shows that the loss of mental health experienced by some of the pioneers in paying the cost of settling was not a temporary thing, to be forgotten when the prairie was settled. It was a lasting blight on the lives and families of many of the pioneers.

Beret's strange manner frightened Sørine; hurriedly she tied a kerchief about her head and went with her.

In silence, side by side, the two followed the empty prairie road; in narrow places Beret paused to let Sørine walk ahead, but followed so closely that it looked as if she were chasing the other woman. Sørine thought of turning back... What was Beret up to? ... Was she queer again?23

23Their Fathers' God, p. 87.
E. Loss of Culture

In an article written for The Editor in 1927 Rolvaag set about to explain the "genesis of Giants in the Earth." In this article he states:

"... 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."

Rolvaag was peculiarly suited to examine the loss of culture experienced by the pioneers. Soon after he emigrated from Norway he felt the lack of a native culture:

"... He was a keen critic of the rootless young people of the neighborhood. In a speech delivered in his home community in Nordland the summer of 1906 he complained that he had found life on the farm monotonous and without depth and nuances, lacking especially in the intimate folk qualities and the cultural mellowness that make living an art. The young people, he said, know nothing of group pleasures, nothing of the warm joy of human fellowship. Innocent and salutary folk dances and folk songs are unknown to them. They do not read."

Rolvaag soon stated what he thought was required of Americans to retain their native culture. In a commencement address delivered on his graduation from Augustana Academy he gained recognition in the Canton, South Dakota, newspaper:

"Sand Dannelse Paa National Grund," ("True Culture on a National Basis") an oration delivered by Ole E. Rölvaag

Rolvaag, The Editor, p. 81.

2Mid., p. 84.

3Jørgenson and Solum, pp. 39-40.
in the Norwegian language, was easily the best, although all were good. Mr. Rölvaag laid down three conditions to the acquirement of true culture, viz.: A Mother Tongue, National Characteristics, and the Faith of Forefathers. He contended that by losing the first of these, one loses his nationality and becomes a sort of international vagrant, belonging nowhere; by the loss of the last, faith or religion, the morals of the person or race degenerates.⁴

Even at this relatively early stage in his intellectual development, Rölvaag was an acute critic of the American scene. That this loss of culture was a problem worthy of much thought, in his opinion, is evidenced by the time he devoted to it:

"... There is emptiness and hollowness in a degree that must surprise every person capable of deep emotions. I have thought much on why it is that the life of the Norwegian American is so poor in true and genuine inner happiness and in the finest cordialities of life. ... The every day life is uniform and without nuance. It lacks depth and heartfelt, spontaneous joy. Although the Americans have shown a mechanical ingenuity greater than that of any other people, they have not yet discovered the art of living. Neither the Yankee nor the Norwegian American has been able to determine the proper relation between earning money and using it in the interest of human wellbeing. ... Culture demands nuance, perspective, contrast. ... Poor little old-fashioned Europe, where people are not free, and of which the Yankee has passed many a taunting remark, nevertheless has something which all the money in the world cannot buy. It has an indescribable flavor of mellowed culture; there is romantic charm in the many forms that have come down from ages past. Above all it has the many-colored richness of life itself. ..."⁵

In summarizing Rölvaag's synthesis of the old and the new, his biographers state:

"... The life in the new home must be organic in its social aspects as well as in its physical growth. It must have deep roots in the customs and the habits, the traditions and the

⁴Jørgensen and Solum, p. 53.
⁵Ibid., p. 100.
aspirations of a kindred cultural group. Rølvaag knew that life's greatest tragedies occur when the objectives are many and the will is not single. To him the old home and the new must be in intimate harmony if cultural and spiritual disaster is to be avoided. He was building the new home; but he was founding it upon the rock of experience, which centuries of agony and aspiration, on the part of his own people, had made firm.  

In a speech written in 1907, which "concerns the immigrant's relation to his racial background, his old home," Rolvaag states why he thought culture so important:

What in reality is culture? I may say briefly that the person who is rich in ideas, who has true depth of emotion, whose will is firm and has great projecting power, that person is cultured. Now, the soul grows and unfolds like a flower; even as the flower it must be nourished. And the nourishment which our spirit particularly needs is to be found in thoughts, feelings, and the exercise of will. But neither the thoughts nor the feelings come to us immediately; they do not drop as it were from the empty sky into our minds. They come to us through language. If therefore we are to make the great spiritual values our own, and by so doing become cultured, we must receive them as flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood in the language in which they were created.

Here, as in other places, Rolvaag found it impossible to separate culture and language; the loss of the latter would necessarily affect the former.

Einar Haugen suggests that Rolvaag saw in the Norwegians "an immutable national personality." In support of this deduction Haugen quotes a fable written by Rolvaag:

. . . The "Norwegian" point of view was maintained also by

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6Jørgenson and Solun, pp. 110-11.
7Ibid., p. 113.
8Ibid., p. 114.
Professor O. E. Rolvaag in a fable called "Hvitbjørn og gråbjørn, et indiansk eventyr" (White Bears and Gray Bears, an Indian Fairytale). The White or Polar Bears invade the country of the Gray Bears and settle among them; after a time the White Bears decide that they want to become gray, but in spite of everything they do, they still remain white, or at best a dirty or speckled gray. The biological simile here suggested, which Rolvaag also used elsewhere, implies the idea of an immutable national personality. 10

Haugen goes on to point out the many people who attacked this idea on the grounds that it was bad to "divide themselves to be both Norwegian and American." 11

The thing that Rolvaag's attackers failed to understand was that Rolvaag was not interested in establishing another Norway here in America; he tried to make sure that his interests were always the best interests of America also:

He did not aim to maintain a permanent Norwegian group in this country, but he was firmly convinced that only by retaining their cultural identity as long as possible could the Norwegians make a definite contribution to American civilization. 12

Rolvaag saw that by preserving the culture of his people, the traditions that kept society stable and active would be preserved also:

As a more comprehensive effort was being made to cultivate the Norwegian language and to make available the rich treasures of Norwegian literature, so the customs and the folk life, upon which the settlements in the American Northwest had largely rested, began to emerge in another light. People urged a vital and true conservation, a policy of genuine preservation, in order that it might not be necessary

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10Haugen, The Norwegian Language in America, pp. 252-53.
11Ibid., p. 253.
12Haugen, Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 56.
to wander, like the Israelites of old, forty years in the wilderness. There was great danger of the Northwest's becoming a cultural wilderness, for culture is based on loyalty and loyalty involves traditions and ways of living. If the process of disintegration continued, the power of home, school, and church to keep society virile and life disciplined might readily be lost. In the eastern and southern parts of the United States, the public schools might reasonably be expected to keep up traditions and folk memories, for in those parts the English background was also largely the cultural heritage of the people. But loyalties to church, race, and creative minds cannot be transferred in the same manner as one transfers baggage on a journey. The public schools of the Northwest might insist that the immigrant sons and daughters should speak no language other than English, but they were powerless to help their pupils in establishing a proper relation between home and children. The schools represented the state, but the state unfortunately did not represent the people save in a political way. There was grave danger that the moral structure of life might be seriously undermined and that a wave of crime and intellectual chaos would in time pass over the country.13

In addition to the loss of social stability, there would be other losses. After the loss of culture would come the loss of artistic creativity:

In a state in which the public schools dealt only with the surface of life and in which the long-time results of tradition in an integrating national culture brought from across the seas would suffer greatly from lack of artistic cultivation, it might be expected that from generation to generation the surface would seem to improve while the inner substance gradually decayed. At the end of some five or ten generations the inner realities would have disintegrated completely. Society would take the form of a gilded shell. The creative faculties would be paralyzed because there would be no germinating seed. Art and culture would be showy but without depth. Religious convictions, not properly grounded in education, would be left to feed on the pabulum of emotionalism. Moral principles would disappear with the institutions which fostered them. An era of crime might be expected to follow; democracy, reduced to mass fickleness, would undermine itself.14

13Jorgenson and Solm, p. 136.
14Ibid., p. 158.
Rolvaag's biographers see his philosophy as "an idealistic conservation," and in stating Rolvaag's views as to how this conservation was to be accomplished, they say:

...he came to see that the main task of every generation is to take the values of the past, to keep them dynamic in the creative life of the present, and to send them into the future progressively reformed and vigorously individual.

Rolvaag, always fond of Old Testament references, in a speech delivered in 1921 summarized the Norwegian American cultural problem by comparing it to the Jews of the Old Testament:

If you would know how important this heritage is, study the history of the Jews as found in the Old Testament. What became of the kingdom of the ten tribes? It was large; it was powerful; it had laws and traditions. But it scattered it all, and it was in turn scattered. The kingdom of the two tribes proved faithful to its own past. It contributed in turn beyond measure to the future of the world. Americans who have settled on the broad acres of the Northwest, your fathers built this land on the heritage of our kin. You will find that no other foundation is adequate if your future is to be worthy of their trust.

In his novels Rolvaag was chiefly concerned with the pioneers and with their children. It was their problem to do with as they saw fit. In a sense the culture of many generations to come depended on the decisions of the pioneers:

...They did not desire isolation. But they must strike a balance if they would save their souls. They must preserve their heritage at the same time that they entered into the life of the English-speaking world. If this co-ordination proved unattainable, the people of the upper Mississippi

15 Jorgenson and Solum, p. 254.
16 Ibid., p. 254.
17 The title Giants in the Earth comes from Genesis 6:4.
18 Jorgenson and Solum, p. 293.
were doomed to spend the time of several generations in a non-creative wilderness. New roots mean new traditions, new habits, new standards, new patterns of reaction. In matters purely social they may be formed in one generation. But matters cultural and religious require centuries. A complete abandonment of the past would throw the people out upon some shallow internationalism that could not be expected to engender the loves and loyalties without which the spirit remains cold.  

In the first novel of the trilogy, Giants in the Earth, Beret the wife of the pioneer Per Hansa, is introduced by Vernon Parrington as the "child of an old folk civilization who hungers for the home ways and in whose heart the terror of loneliness gathers." There can be no doubt that Beret is a character who is meant by Rolvaag to be a type of the sensitive being, a being to whom the old ways were her whole life, and a being to whom disruption of the old ways would have dire results. In describing his purpose in the character of Beret, Rolvaag says:

Transplantation of human souls, even under the most favorable conditions, is a difficult process. There are many adjustments to be made. That of acquiring a feeling of home in an alien wilderness is certainly not easy. And the more sensitive the soul, the more dangerous the experiment. In Beret, the wife of Per Hansa, I have tried to picture such a character. Some people get out of patience with her, and I in turn with them because of their lack of understanding. For generations Beret's forbears had lived on the shore of the restless North Atlantic. They had been lulled to sleep by the swash of the sea; they had awakened to the same sound. Small wonder that the song of the sea should live in her blood. And the mountains stood near by. What could be more natural than that Beret, after coming into the flat, open reaches of the Dakota Territory should miss them and experience the feeling of being lost—where she could find nothing to hide behind? The Constitution

19Jorgenson and Solm, p. 295.

20Giants in the Earth, p. ix.
of the United States is a fine document; no sane person ever denied that. And the American flag is a beautiful emblem. But these treasures, though priceless, do not cure the nostalgia of loneliness of a sensitive soul adrift in an alien wilderness. Please tell me how they could!21

George Leroy White, Jr., who says of Rolvaag's characters,
"The characters are, paradoxical as it may seem, both types and individuais,"22 analyzes Beret's character in the following way:

Beret symbolized the conservative, introspective type of mind. She is Rölyvaag's most completely portrayed character. The first volume, Giants in the Earth, shows Beret to be a woman possessed of a poetic quality all her own. She is not a chronic fault-finder. Her trouble goes much deeper than the irritations of the skin. She first of all does not love pioneering. She has torn the home-ties from her heart solely because she loved Per more than anything else. She has followed him to America, looked for the last time on a Norway dear to her, passed through many towns of the new world, seen countless dwelling places vanish behind her as she pushed her sun-burnt face westward, all because she loved this foolish man. This love, with the few times she has been able to catch a little of the magic of Per's dream, has been the only thing that has sustained her.

Here in early America where stars are prying eyes, and a small hill a silent sentinel; here where nothing breaks the expanse of blue by day and black by night; here where people ride for miles to see a strange face, Beret loses her mind—a victim of the small things of life that prey upon her: the loneliness of their place; the taking of new names; . . . .23

Farrington says that Beret's failure as a pioneer is due to
"the hidden weakness of fearful souls that cannot live when their roots have been pulled up from the congenial home soil."24 Per himself explains Beret's failure in the fact that:

. . . . She has never felt at home here in America. . . .

There are some people, I know now, who never should

21Jorgenson and Solum, p. 396.
22White, p. 100.
23Ibid., p. 101.
24Giants in the Earth, p. xvii.
emigrate, because, you see, they can't take pleasure in that which is to come—they simply can't see it!  25

There are other indications of the loss of culture in Giants in the Earth. One evening, after one of the settlers had just finished telling a folktale from Norway, another settler is moved to say:

"I should think you'd be able to find something American to talk about!  .  .  . We're through now with all that troll business over in Norway!"  .  .  . He got up and started to go.  .  .  . 26

The traditions of Norway persisted in the pioneer settlement, in spite of opposition. Unlike the later schools, which were to try to cleanse their students of everything foreign, the first school in the settlement did much to further the children's knowledge of their native land. One of the settlers was appointed schoolmaster, and as his knowledge of printed matter was limited, printed matter itself being almost non-existent, they turned to singing:

.  .  . That winter they learned to sing many songs. The children learned them, and the grown people learned them, too. There were hymns and national anthems; there were folk songs and war songs; and there were many, many love songs from their own Nordland, with not a few Swedish love ballads as well.  .  .  . 27

Beret treasured the portions of the Norwegian culture that were retained in the settlement. At a low ebb in her mental state, when their friends were trying to talk Per into having Beret sent to a mental institution, the settlement was visited by a traveling

26 Ibid., p. 207.
27 Ibid., p. 260.
Norwegian minister. The day after the church services were held in the Holm sod hut, Beret began to regain her mind. One of the contributing factors to her recovery was the fact that during the church service Beret had been comforted by the singing of some old Norwegian hymns:

... a blessed man he was indeed... And the way he had got them to sing! She had to smile as she remembered it... Just imagine! he had made them sing exactly the same hymns here in this sod house as the people sang in the churches in Norway—yet no harm had befallen the house on that account... Melodies were yet hanging throughout the room; yesterday while at work she had heard them everywhere. She had even caught one up and followed it—had sung until Per Hansa came rushing in, to ask her what was the matter; he had looked at her so queerly... He ought not to get frightened just because she sang!28

At the close of Giants in the Earth the question as to whether or not the culture of their ancestors is to be forgotten is not wholly answered. With the death of Per Hansa one era, the heroic saga of the pioneers, is ended. The question that was unanswered, as a result, left the reader wondering which direction the Norwegians would take in the future:

By the time Rolvaag had left Per in the haystack, with his face set toward the West, as a symbol of the entire westward movement in American history, the composer knew that the grand overture had been played, and that he stood before the central problem of the theme. The great question of the widening horizon, written as if in fire or in blood, rose from uncertainty as to what the future had in store. The victory he had conceived—was it to reappear in the future on another level of life? Was the pioneer of the prairie truly to initiate an era of cultural growth in the fine intensity and glow of creative activity? If so, the main though of the series would be epic—heroic beyond measure. But if the refinement of life that Beret knew

28Giants in the Earth, p. 412.
was to find no friendly soil in which to grow, the whole movement, seen in the light of one or two centuries, would be a tragedy indeed, a genuine tragedy arising from fatal circumstances within the very portion of life concerned. 29

Another question that was not answered at the end of Giants in the Earth stems from the first question. If the culture of past generations is to be forgotten, what is to take its place?

... Can a nation which consciously destroys the bridges leading out of a highly pluralistic ethnic past become spiritually creative within an observable period of time? Or must the soil be fertilized by the dead of a century or two before the continuity of past and present is re-established? Must the finest values of the personal life disappear in the quicksand of an ethnic chaos? 30

In Peder Victorious, the second book of the trilogy, there are glimpses of the Norse culture. Tambur-Old, one of the original settlers is heard humming his melancholy song, which "really consisted of two melodies—a soldier's song coupled to a Norwegian folk song," 31 and he replies to one of the girls of the settlement with a Norwegian proverb, "But it is as the hen said: One must cackle with the beak one has," 32 when he is cautioned against criticizing the people of the local congregation. The loss of culture, as one might expect, shows up most strongly in the second generation. It is best shown in the relationship of Beret and her son Peder:

... Beret had to be carried forward as the representative of a cultural past, a heritage to be preserved. If she

29 Jorgenson and Solum, p. 378.
30 Ibid., p. 378.
31 Peder Victorious, p. 36
32 Ibid., p. 39.
were to pass from the scene early in the series, the effect would be that of letting the hero die in the second or third act of the drama. But Peder had to be reared also; he had to be shown as the projection of his father, but especially as the heir of the immigrant motherhood.

Rolvaag's biographers say that in Peder Victorius, "The theme is revolt." Peder's revolt, with the choices he makes after his revolt, is complete; it is, in a sense, Rolvaag's answer to the question of what will happen to the culture of the settlers in the hands of the second generation:

... If there is a lesson in the book, it must be the one Beret teaches, the lesson that revolt must lead only to freedom of choice. Peder must choose as a complete and responsible personality, and in that choice he will establish the proper relation between the old world and the new, if his future is to be built at all upon a basis of lasting values.

Peder's leader in his revolt against the culture of his ancestors was his schoolteacher. Her purpose in life was to stir the great melting pot, removing everything foreign:

... Her country's history was the subject she cherished above all others. Nowhere had she felt the call of apostleship quite so urgently as out here in Spring Creek, where she had in her charge all these children of immigrants from foreign lands. The very thought of it excited her. It remained to be seen whether she had sufficient strength to instill in them the very spirit of America—that mighty force which had brought their parents out of bondage in the Old World, had flung wide the doors to this great land, and thereupon had invited the poor and the downtrodden to come and be happy in the beauty and promise of the New World. And hither they had come, all the unfortunate and the

33Jorgenson and Solum, pp. 378-79.

34Ibid., p. 385.

oppressed of the earth. Here they fought, without pay, wine and milk; here they had built, happily confident of the perfect existence to come! All previous history was finished, worn out like an old garment and discarded because no longer usable.

The beat of her kind schoolma'am heart quickened as she pored over her notes; the blush in her cheeks deepened. All that which was heterogeneous and foreign must here be moulded together so as to make one heart and one mind, seeing only the highest and wanting only the best. These immigrant children were the clay, she the potter, her country's history the pattern after which she must fashion them. Miss Mahon, Miss Clarabelle Mahon, to be exact, derived inspiration from that history in very much the same manner as the pious-minded draws sustenance from the sacred stories of the Bible. Whenever the textbook, in her judgment, treated any episode insufficiently, she would at once draw upon the inexhaustible storehouse of her own romantic imagination.

The two worlds of Peder were warring for his soul. There was no attempt at compromise, as Rolvaag's biographers point out. In fact, there was actually no real recognition between the two factions:

... The hidden world that was Beret's and Per Hansa's is to the son a world tangent to the new but not organically connected with it. He speaks the language of his parents; he belongs to their church; he listens from time to time to stories from the land beyond the sea. In the country school, however, another world is gradually made to appear. It has a different language, different moods, a different set of values, it takes pride in its accomplishments and its future, and has little patience with the deeper problems of the pioneers. No real bridge is built between these two worlds; no one seriously tried to build one. For if it is true that Beret did not understand the schoolteachers at Spring Creek, it is equally true that they did not understand the pioneer mother. And the latter ignorance was more fatal in its consequence than the former.

It is apparent that Rolvaag held little sympathy with the

36Peder Victorious, p. 86.
37Jorgenson and Solum, p. 383.
melting pot theory. His biographers called him "a racial and a cultural purist," and went on to say:

He believed that high values come into the human realm by way of personalization rather than through diffusion, through purity of strain rather than through any melting pot. He believed in cultivation rather than leveling.

Rolvaag saw the American nation plunging headlong into a melting pot, each group in turn, contrary to the experience of the ages running away from the living stream that flows from intellectual traditions and racial kinship. And the most fearful thought of all is that they themselves will never live to see the whole tragic import of their philosophy and behavior. Some five or ten generations hence, people may awaken to a realization that they have sinned against the law of life and against the Creative Spirit in the world.

Beret, Peder's mother, saw a danger in leaving her son in the company of children from another culture. When Peder started visiting an Irish boy, she attempted to stop him:

When the mother spoke again her voice was low and intense in its earnestness:

"You will have to find another playmate, Peder!"

"Why?"

"Because you are Norwegian and they are Irish! But likely you don't understand that yet, and I couldn't expect you to."

"They are people just the same," objected Peder sagely, in the utmost candour.

The mother smiled ever so little.

"But they are of another kind. They have another faith.

\[38\] Jørgenson and Solum, p. 413.

\[39\] Ibid., p. 413.

\[40\] Ibid., p. 424.
And that is dangerous. For it is with such things as with weeds. The authorities made a terrible mistake when they threw us in with those people. And it is no better for them than it is for us. We should never have had the school together—you can't mix wheat and potatoes in the same bin. The authorities ought to have known as much.

If these circumstances of school and schoolteacher were not enough to make Peder reject his cultural heritage, there was the added fact that he did not receive a clear picture of what this heritage stood for. In fact, his exposure to his ancestors was limited to the following incident in school:

On his desk lay a few books. Mechanically, he picked up the top one and began turning the pages. It was a geography book containing many illustrations. After a while he came upon a picture which he had to look at more closely: that of a combat between a man and an infuriated bear. The beast already had both its front paws on the man's shoulder; but the man looked undaunted; in his hand he held a sheathknife, his arm drawn back; in a moment the steel would be buried in the breast of the bear. The title of the paragraph accompanying the picture was the single word: Norway. Under the picture someone had written in pencil: "A Norskie." Slowly and deliberately Peder read the short paragraph about the land of his ancestors. Throughout the whole process of his education in the public school, this was the only information he ever got about the land from which his people had come. . . . His feeling of being ill increased. He closed the book and put it back. An idea which he found comfort in, took possession of him: When I am grown up I am going to go so far away that I'll never hear the word Norwegian again! He felt so sure of heart that he could have lain right down and bawled.

Beret realized that her children were losing the culture that she held so dear. She considered leaving America:

. . . She could sell, to be sure, and go back to Norway.
. . . Wondered if that might not be wise? For then the

41Peder Victorious, pp. 113–114.
42Ibid., p. 155.
children would regain race and fatherland and their mother tongue. As the situation was developing she knew she would lose her children:

Hidden forces were taking the children away from her—Beret saw it clearly. And strangely enough, they were enticing the youngest first. Permand and Anna Marie would watch every opportunity to talk English to each other, surreptitiously; the two older boys, she felt sure, did the same the moment she was out of their sight. Nor would they talk anything but English when youngsters of their own age came to the farm. And never did she hear them so much as mention what pertained to them as Norwegians. Here was a people going away from itself, and not realizing it!

Beret knew that the trend which she was observing could lead to only one thing—rootlessness. To her it was as if her people were vanishing:

As time passed the dread of impending evil grew. Turn where she might she saw no escape. And though realizing more and more clearly the inevitableness of what she was facing, she could not make herself believe it—no, not altogether. Merciful God, was it possible that a people could disappear utterly and yet continue to exist? Was this retributive justice for having torn themselves loose from kindred and fatherland?

The feeling that her people were becoming rootless is not confined to Beret alone. In Letters From America the young immigrant there states these same feelings:

We are strangers among strangers; we have lost our own nation and are strangers to our own people. Our pulse can no longer beat in time with the heart of our own people. We have become strangers to the people we left and we

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43Peder Victorious, p. 186.
44Ibid., p. 195.
are strangers to the people among which we dwell.\textsuperscript{146}

In The Boat of Longing the same concern for a native culture that is being lost is expressed in the character of Nils Vaag, who finds that "This America, which looks so beautiful and rich on the surface, is dark and poor within."\textsuperscript{147} In Rolvaag's novel Pure Gold, the characters of Lars and Lisbet are shown drifting as a result of this same rootlessness:

... But all in all she was still more lacking in cultural roots and spiritual aspiration than Lars was. She was caught by the frothy stream of an unsalutary Americanization. She had her name changed from Lisbet to Lizzie, and she prevailed upon Lars to follow suit by calling himself Louis. The few remnants of their cultural heritage, the reading material the parents had kept, were soon eliminated from their household, and their participation in the life of the church came to be a matter of form if not of endurance.\textsuperscript{148}

These three books, Letters From America, The Boat of Longing, and Pure Gold, are not part of the trilogy being examined here. They are referred to show the persistence of this theme, loss of culture, in all of Rolvaag's writings.

In Peder Victorious, the second book of the trilogy, the old culture is shown on the decline. A new minister, Pastor Gabrielsen, encourages the abandoning of the old customs:

... Without consulting either the deacons or the trustees he abolished the churching of mothers. A medieval custom he explained.\textsuperscript{149}

\textsuperscript{146}Haugen, Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 63.

\textsuperscript{147}White, p. 171.

\textsuperscript{148}Jørgenson and Solm, pp. 256-57.

\textsuperscript{149}Peder Victorious, p. 219.
Gabrielsen led the fight against the Norwegian language in
the settlement, also:

../English was their language as assuredly as America
was their home. In twenty years from now not one word of
Norwegian would be heard in America, no doubt about that!
In the minds of some this prophecy took root.50

Yet, among Beret and the old settlers, the customs of the
Norwegian culture were still followed:

"My good woman," cried Tuseten emphatically, slapping
his knee, "don't talk about right! Everything is right
just so it's done with decency; and don't we all know that
to make a barn leak-proof the ridgepole's got to have a
little soaking during the shingling."51

Solvaag's note]- The custom to which Tuseten refers was
an old one in the part of Norway from which he came. The
thatching of a house was a festive occasion and celebrated
accordingly. The drinks served were known as taekkingskande—
literally: the thatching bottle.

In spite of the remnants of the culture that survived, Beret's
main concern in Peder Victorious is over the great loss that her people
have sustained and how they will be changed. Pondering Gabrielsen's
words, she wonders what is to come:

Afterwards she had gone about silent, and in a bitter
mood, reflecting upon what was taking place among them.

... Was the minister right? Would his predictions come
true? Was it possible for Norwegian hearts to beat in so
alien a medium? Must it not eventually mean death to them?52

The conflict in Peder's mind over which world he is to live
in turns out to be solved not by his mind but his heart. He falls in
love with and marries an Irish-Catholic girl, divorcing himself from

50Peder Victorious, p. 220.
51Ibid., p. 230.
52Ibid., p. 221.
his people and his culture. Peder is shown as a rootless individual. He fails to realize the difficulties that lie in choosing such a mate:

... What reason did people have for carrying on like this? The thought was as puzzling now as ever: I've done nothing worse than marry a neighbour girl I've known all my life... not a soul can say a bad word about her. Yet everybody is acting as if I had committed the worst crime thinkable.53

In Their Fathers' God, the third novel in the trilogy, the first generation settlers carry on the customs of their Norwegian culture. At Christmas they prepare the traditional dishes of a Norwegian Christmas:

... Shortly before Christmas they had butchered a yearling steer that Tøseten had been fattening since early fall; from it she had prepared the savoury meat balls and delectable røste. Since the middle of Advent she had been concocting mysteries of delicate cakes. With the coffee she served fattigmand and berlinerkrans.54

Peder speaks for the second generation when he asks about his ancestors from Norway, "And what on earth did they accomplish?"55 He is answered by Pastor Kaldahl, showing what Peder and his generation have lost:

"You have been entrusted with a rich inheritance, an inheritance built up through the ages. How much of what portion are you trying to get? Isn't it your irrevocable duty to see how much of it you can preserve and hand down to those coming after you? A people that has lost its traditions is doomed." The pronouncement bore the ring of prophecy.56

53 Their Fathers' God, p. 18.
56 Ibid., p. 207.
Kaldahl goes on to compare the Norwegians and their culture to the Jews. Here the true tragedy of what Peder and his generation are doing is brought out:

... If we're to accomplish anything worth while, anything at all, we must do it as Norwegians. Otherwise we may meet the same fate as corn in too strong a sun. Look at the Jews, for example: Take away the contributions they have made to the world's civilization and you'd have a tremendous gap that time would never be able to fill. Did they make their contribution by selling their birthright and turning into Germans, Russians, and Poles? Or did they achieve greatly because they stubbornly refused to be dejewed? See what they have done in America! Are they as citizens inferior to us? Do they love this country less? Are they trying to establish a nation of their own? Empty nonsense! But they haven't ceased being Jews simply because they live here in America, and become its citizens. Do you think their children will become less worthy Americans because they are being fostered in Jewish traits and traditions? Quite the contrary! If they, as individuals or as a group, owe any debt to America, the payment can only be made by their remaining Jews, and the same holds true for all nationalities that have come here.57

Pastor Kaldahl was the kind of minister that Rolvaag held as an example. Instead of hurrying the amalgamation of all the races represented in America, Kaldahl cautioned against it. He points out what the melting pot will accomplish, the melting pot of which Peder is now a member:

... "One thing I can see clearly: If this process of levelling down, of making everybody alike by blotting out all racial traits, is allowed to continue, America is doomed to become the most impoverished land spiritually on the face of the earth—out of our highly praised melting-pot will come a dull"—he paused to hunt for words—"a dull, smug complacency, barren of all creative thought and effort. Soon we will have reached the perfect democracy of barrenness. Gone will be the distinguishing traits given us by God; dead will be the hidden life of the heart which is

57Their Fathers' God, pp. 209-10.
nourished by tradition, the idioms of language, and our attitude to life. It is out of these elements that our character grows. I ask again, what will we have left? We Norwegians have now become so intelligent," he continued, scornfully, "that we let our children decide whether we should preserve our ancient tongue!" 58

One of the major causes for the loss of culture in the settlement was the schools and schoolteachers. In the words of Gjermund, one of the settlers who looked to the future:

"... Take our schools, for example. What do they amount to? What can you expect of a lot of giddy twenty-year-old girls? Out in the settlements there's not a library to be found. No signs or thought of providing talented youth with the education they should have. Can't you see we have become a living example of spiritual poverty and hot air? 59

In the cost of pioneering Rolvaag counted the loss of culture as one of the highest prices that the settlers paid. It is a persistent theme throughout each of the three novels considered here. Einar Haugen summarizes Rolvaag's position as follows:

"... In brief, his advocacy was of a cultural pluralism for Americans, based on a devotion to the heritage of the fathers; a knowledge of Norwegian was an 'ethical duty' resting on every descendant of Norwegians. This 'duty' did not hamper but advanced the best interests of America. The creative emphasis is clear in the words he used in a classroom lecture: 'I am well aware that many people today are seeking to blot out all racial traits in this country. To me such an act is tantamount to national suicide. If richness of personal color is desirable in the individual personality, why should the monotonous gray be desirable as a national idea?' 60

59Ibid., p. 296.
60Haugen, The Norwegian Language in America, p. 259.
III

RELIGION

This third group of major themes from Rolvaag's trilogy deals with religion. Religion was an important and vital part of Rolvaag's life, and it is natural that his novels should be concerned with it also:

... His deeply religious nature urged him to persist in the footsteps of his fathers. He would not deviate from their religious practices. The home was to be a sanctuary; earthly love was to be lifted and given direction in a contemplation of the divine. On May 20, 1908, he writes: "Well, I have a good many plans too—plans concerning our every day life after we have settled down here... For every meal I shall ask the blessing aloud. Every morning at breakfast I shall read a portion of Scripture. Every Sunday we go to church provided we are able to walk. ..."

Rolvaag was insistent that religion should play an important part in art. In considering the Norwegian novelist Jonas Lie, Rolvaag rejects Lie's idea of the proper relation of art and religion:

... Jonas Lie has never brought the religious life directly into his books. I am sorry to state this, but it is true. In our day the religious life plays such a role that no literature claiming to depict reality can with impunity leave it out. A reader with true religious sensibilities cannot help regretting that no positive portrayal of religious life is to be found in Lie's works. ...

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1Jørgenson and Solberg, p. 110.

2Ibid., p. 131.
A. Beret's Calvinism

Vernon Parrington, in his introduction to Giants in the Earth, describes Beret as "A primitive Norse Calvinist. . . ."1 Rolvaag's biographers, in an analysis of her character say:

. . . Beret was definitely a psychological introvert by nature; yet this conscience was not altogether native to her. She had been taught certain authoritarian religious dogmas and had made her God an incarnation of law. The living God of Per Hansa she hardly knew except when the great moments of love came to her, and when she cared, in unconscious devotion, for her children. Her God was not the God of life, but the God of law. A morbid, doleful theology had been taught her from childhood. It had warped her mind almost beyond recognition, for she must have been very gentle and radiant and true during her childhood years. Rolvaag remarked of his own father that his religion had warped him. The legalism and the occultism of it had taken the living God from its heart and given the human soul over to the dominion of fear. The same is eminently true of Beret. She had been brought up in a system of doctrine and belief that had warped her mind, and made her sensitive nature still more ineffective than nature had designed her to be.2

Rolvaag, himself, said of Beret that "The narrowness of Beret's religion was comparable to the doctrinaire attitudes of the Hebrews."3

Beret's Calvinism is a persistent theme throughout the whole trilogy, but it is nowhere as apparent as in Giants in the Earth, in the stake episode. Per Hansa, walking one day around the settlement, happened to stumble on some stakes driven into the ground which had the names of strangers inscribed on them. The stakes could have been

1Giants in the Earth, p. xviii.
2Jørgenson and Solum, p. 345.
3Ibid., p. 361.
put there for only one purpose—these strangers meant to take away
the land Per's friends had worked so hard to prepare:

... Yes, he was right—it was a corner stake; there stood
the description, indicating both section and quarter.
But the name below ... the name ... good God! what was
this? He dropped to his knees and peered at it until the
letters danced before his eyes; he wondered if he were
dreaming. The name on the stake wasn't S. H. Tøseten at
all, as it should have been; it was just O' Hara ... nothing else but O' Hara.

Per Hansa removed the stranger's stakes from his friend's land and
hid them in a building on his farm. Beret discovered the stakes in
their hiding place and deduced what her husband had done. To Beret
such an act was so shocking she could hardly contemplate the conse­
quences:

... It was so hideous, so utterly appalling, the thought
which she harboured; God forgive him, he was meddling with
other folks' landmarks! ... How often she had heard it
said, both here and in the old country: a blacker sin than
this a man could hardly commit against his fellows!

She stood motionless in the corner beyond the stove,
watching her husband burn the proofs of his guilt; the
terror that possessed her now was immeasurably greater than
that which she had felt in the morning, when she had called
his name and got no answer ....

... That night Per Hansa slept the sleep of the right­
eous, in spite of what he had done; now it was Beret who
had a monster to wrestle with ... 5

Beret's sense of guilt over Per's removal of the stakes grew
into an obsession:

Beret's thoughts continued to spin; the web had grown
so dreadful to look at that she longed to cast it aside,
but lacked the power ... He has done it, he had done

4Giants in the Earth, p. 115.

5Ibid., p. 124.
The thoughts spun on. . . Here we are sitting on another man's land, and Per Hansa intends to stay! . . . He has destroyed another man's landmarks. . . . Oh, my God! . . .

When the settlers who had left the stakes finally return, Per Hansa and his neighbors go out to meet them to determine whether or not they had a legitimate claim to their land. Per told his neighbors nothing of the stakes; Beret saw in his actions and his secrecy an admission of guilt, guilt which she saw already taking root in their children as a consequence of their father's actions:

Beret listened in a rigid, frozen silence; she let the boys say anything they wanted to, as if she lacked the strength to make them stop. . . . One thought seemed to possess her whole being: he had destroyed the stakes on other people's land— and now he was going to drive them away! . . . Good God! could this be possible? . . .

But at last the boys went so far that she had to interfere; they had begun to laugh together in a coarse, bold way, and use evil words. . . . How truly it is said, she thought, that the seed which is sown in secret bears fruit openly! . . .

The men of the settlement decide the stake controversy once and for all when they find that the intruders have no papers and no legal right to the land. When one of the intruders "swung his sledge hammer," Per Hansa shouted, "Look out, now!" . . . "Here the trouble starts!" . . .

And so it did, only much faster than he or any of the others had anticipated. When Hans Olsa saw the Irishman loom up before him in that threatening attitude, he stared

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7Ibid., p. 150.
8Ibid., p. 147.
9Ibid., p. 147.
at him blankly, and stood for a moment as if rooted to the ground. Then, all of a sudden, the upper part of his body seemed to stretch; he stepped aside to evade the onslaught. His left fist shot out and struck the man below the ear. There was a crashing sound; with a loud groan the man sank in a heap and lay perfectly still.

The crowd had drawn back in front of one of the empty wagons; they stood as if dazed. Hans Olsa stared at them wildly, took a step forward, and stumbled over the heap on the ground. Regaining his balance, he stopped, bent over, and plunged both hands into the inert heap of flesh; the next instant he lifted it high in the air and flung it bodily over the heads of the crowd, where it crashed into the wagon standing behind. The wagon shook violently at the impact.

Per Hansa, seeing that the intruders had no right to the land which they claimed, then admitted to his friends that he had destroyed the stakes. Even though he admits his actions, which in his friends' eyes make him a hero, Beret still thinks that what he has done is evil:

... He had destroyed the stakes; and worse than that, he had kept it secret from everyone... even from her!

... Shame had probably made him do that... To be sure, she knew now that the stakes had been put down unlawfully. But suppose it had been otherwise—would he have done any different? ... Was this the person in whom she had believed no evil could dwell? ... Had it always been times with him?!

In Per's mind the incident was done; he was ready to forget it. He is surprised when Beret confronts him with her feelings of guilt:

"Oh Beret, come on, now! ... Just kick the dog that bites you—that's always the easiest way out, and the simplest, too!"

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10Giant in the Earth, pp. 147-148.

11Ibid., p. 153.

12Ibid., p. 155.
But to Beret with her Calvinistic principles, the answer is not as simple as that:

"I understand that perfectly well—though it makes poor Christianity... But you were anything but confident, I noticed, that night when you stood over by the block, chopping up the stakes." She turned away from him and seemed to speak to them all... Remember what the Book says: 'Cursed be he that removeth his neighbour's landmarks! And all the people shall say, Amen.'... words like these we used to heed... In my opinion we'd better take care lest we all turn into beasts and savages out here!" 13

In Giants in the Earth especially is Beret's unnatural feeling of guilt emphasized. Her fear of God and his punishment becomes an obsession with her:

This was her retribution! 14

Now had fallen the punishment which the Lord God had metered out to her; at last His visitation had found her out and she must drink the cup of his wrath. Far away she had fled, from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof... so it had seemed to her... but the arm of His might had reached farther still. No, she could not escape—this was her retribution! 14

She feels that the punishment that came from such a stern and harsh God was predestined:

Beyond a doubt, it was Destiny that had brought her thither... Destiny, the inexorable law of life, which the Lord God from eternity had laid down for every human being, according to the path He knew would be taken... Now punishment stood here awaiting her—the punishment for having broken God's commandment of filial obedience... Throughout the fall she had been reckoning up her score, and it came out exactly thus: Destiny had so arranged everything that the punishment should strike her all the more inevitably. Destiny had cast her into the arms of Per Hansa—and she did not regret it! Destiny had held up America as an enticing will-o'-the-wisp—and they had followed! 15

13 Giants in the Earth, p. 155.
14 Ibid., p. 223.
15 Ibid., p. 227.
Beret is not the only settler to feel the harsh hand of God in the misfortunes that befall them. When the plague of grasshoppers strikes them, Tønseten voiced much the same feelings:

To Tønseten the words of Per Hansa in an hour like this, sounded like the sheerest blasphemy; they would surely call down upon them a still darker wrath! He turned to reprove his neighbour: "Now the Lord is taking back what he has given," he said, impressively. "I might have guessed that I would never be permitted to harvest such wheat. That was asking too much!" 16

To Beret's confused mind, even though she saw the plague as an act of God, she saw as God's agent in this punishment the devil himself:

He gazed at her helplessly, imploringly; she returned the gaze in a fixed stare, and whispered hoarsely:

"Hasn't the devil got you yet? He has been all around here today... Put the chest back in front of the door right away! He doesn't dare to take the chest, you see... . . . We must hide in it—all of us!" 17

Another act of her husband that Beret objected to was the naming of their son Peder Victorious. Per Hansa added the name Victorious as he thought it typified their victory over the prairie. But in Beret's opinion there had been no victory over the prairie; to her the name was not only inappropriate, it was blasphemous:

But as the pastor asked the child's name and she gave it, and he repeated it clearly and distinctly, so as to be heard throughout the room—"Peder Victorious, dost thou renounce—" something extraordinary happened. From out of that pale face over in the corner came a sound of anguish. Beret rose up and pushed her way violently through the crowd, which moved aside in alarm to let her pass, then closed immediately in behind her; Per Hansa tried to follow,

16*Giants in the Earth*, p. 343.
17*ibid.*, p. 348.
but found it hard to make a passage through the throng, which now was crowding forward in order to get a better view; and all at once her voice, shrill and vibrant, pierced the room: "This evil deed shall not be done!" . . . She was already halfway there. Some blocked her passage; others tried to silence her. . . . "Oh, let me go!" she cried. "This sin shall not happen! How can a man be victorious out here, where the evil one gets us all? . . . Are you all stark mad?" 18

Beret's sense of sin is brought into the open again, when the minister informs her: "Two weeks from next Sunday I shall return; and then I plan to conduct communion services here in your house." 19 Beret's reaction shows her deep sense of guilt:

"Here in our sod house?"

"Yes, right here in your house, where you live every day. . . . Don't you think it would be a blessing for you to come to the Lord with your sins and taste the sweetness of his mercy?" he said in a quiet voice.

"Here . . . ?" she asked, greatly agitated. On no— that would never do—oh no! . . . It's too filthy and dirty here. . . . There's too much . . . it's unclean!" . . . She stopped abruptly, blushed scarlet, and looked down into her lap again. 20

The effect that religion has on Beret's troubled soul is again emphasized when she takes communion and receives the church's assurance that her sins have been forgiven. This assurance, coming from a true minister of the church, works an astonishing change on Beret—she begins to get well:

She felt perfectly happy, however, but felt so tired and drowsy; it had been this way every day now since that

18Giant in the Earth, p. 378.
19Ibid., p. 396.
20Ibid., p. 396.
remarkable man had placed his hand on her and in his prophetic voice had assured her that from this time forth she was released from the bonds of Satan. . . . That any man could have such power! . . . Yet, she knew positively now that he hadn't been deceiving her, because burden after burden had been lifted from her soul—she felt so light that she could almost float in the air. . . . 21

Rolvaag's biographers point out that Beret's Calvinistic upbringing is mainly responsible for her attitude toward life. Because of this fear, she finds other ways to allay her sense of guilt:

The disordered condition of Beret's mind is temporarily relieved through the salutary influence of the pastor. In her seriously split personality a measure of stability is gained from the thought that God approved of her son Peder Victorious. But she is not released from the effects of her misguided upbringing. She becomes even more rigid in her dogmatic views. Her consciousness of guilt stands firmly on its extremely legalistic basis. In fact, the change within her is in the nature of a rebound; Peder, whom she had regarded as the captive of the devil, is now to become a minister of the church. Naturally, a good deal of her antagonism toward the immigrant community is dispelled when it becomes apparent that Spring Creek will have its church and its social institutions in keeping with her own traditions. But the fearful attitude toward life—the groundwork of authoritarian discipline laid in her childhood—is as firm as ever, and it permeates in a smaller measure all these pioneers. 22

Near the end of Giants in the Earth, when Hans Olsa is dying, Beret becomes convinced that he is damned unless he confesses to a minister. The thought had not crossed Hans Olsa's mind until Beret began to convince him of it:

" . . . What you need most of all is Communion, Hans Olsa!"

"Communion . . . ? Well . . . yes . . . I suppose so . . . that is true."

21 *Giants in the Earth*, p. 412.

22 *Jorgenson and Solum*, p. 350.
"It is terrible to fall into the hands of the living God," said Beret, quietly, and looked into his face with sorrowful despair. "There is nothing but evil in us—yes, nothing! But when He comes to us in Holy Communion, laying His merciful hands benignantly upon us and assures us from out the Gates of Eternity that all our sins are forgiven—oh, there is no moment so great as this for the sin-burdened soul! Then we may rest in peace." 23

The result of Beret's coaxing is that Hans Olsa asks his life-long friend, Per Hansa, to get a minister for him. The task is impossible; the settlement is buried in a raging blizzard and the nearest minister is many miles away. But when Beret hears of Hans Olsa's request, she recognizes only one course of action:

... Beret had stopped working when she heard him; her face lighted up as she answered, with an unmistakable ring of exultation in her voice: "But I can understand it! ... Now may God be near and hear his prayer! Some one must go for the minister at once."

Per Hansa did not move; he was staring off into space. Beret crossed the floor, her hands full of dishes, and stopped directly in front of him. "You must persuade some one to go with you. This is terrible weather! ... Could you try going on horseback?" 24

This decision of Beret's, prompted by her religious zeal and sense of guilt, sends Per Hansa to his death. He realized that he had little chance of surviving such a journey. But there was no stopping Beret; someone had to go to get the minister. Rolvaag's biographers say of Per Hansa that: "He went down as a sacrifice to the relentless God which lived in Beret's imagination." 25

Beret's Calvinism works the final estrangement between her and Per Hansa. As he prepared for the journey, he thought:

23Giants in the Earth, p. 444.
24Ibid., p. 453.
25Jorgenson and Solum, p. 378.
The world seemed upside down today. That grown people couldn't see an inch beyond their noses! Here lay Hans Olse, driving himself out of his mind because he couldn't have a minister—when there was no better a man than himself in all Christendom! And here was Beret insisting that he leap right into the arms of death—she who had a heart so tender that she couldn't harm a mouse! People could certainly twist things around in a queer way.

The theme of Beret's Calvinism appears less frequently in the remaining two books of the trilogy. In Peder Victorious Beret is still aware of God's harsh judgment. Before Peder's confirmation, she cautions him:

---Was he ready to make that sacred covenant with God?
---Aw, 'is much as the rest of 'em, he st'posed. Her disquieting sadness was hard to resist, despite his efforts.
---She was concerned about him now; the others must answer for themselves. Sunday he would partake of the Lord's Supper . . . eat the true Body of Christ and drink of His Holy Blood. He remembered, did he not, God's condemnation upon those who ate and drank unworthily?

In Their Fathers' God Beret is again concerned with the harsh judgment of God, but it is a distinctly subdued theme in this third book of the trilogy. In this case, she is concerned with Peder's lack of concern over the baptism of his child. To her neighbor Srine, she confides:

... Mark my words, if we're to wait for the parents to do it, it's more likely than not that the child will never see the Kingdom of God.

---Giants in the Earth, p. 455.
---Peder Victorious, p. 257.
---Their Fathers' God, p. 88.
After the baptism has taken place, Beret is relieved. She has fulfilled the commands of the God of fear whom she worships. For a moment then she is happy:

"Praise be to God, now it is done. May it be pleasing in His sight!"29

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29Their Fathers' God, p. 88.
B. The Prairie Ministers

Rolvaag was often critical of the pastors in the settlements. This was because he expected them to do so much, and there can be no doubt about it, their task was a great one:

"... It was only natural that wherever men settled, churches should arise to bind countrymen together and to light men on their way to the great beyond. These churches rested upon a sociological basis which during the years of the first generations was even more ample and firm than the basis of the public school and the court house."

The church had a dual purpose, according to Rolvaag. Its natural obligation was to promote the religion of the settlers, but Rolvaag thought that it was just as obligated to promote the culture of the country from which the settlers had come. The church was, in his opinion, in a unique position to do so:

"... Though the American system demanded of the immigrant that he renounce all political allegiance to the fatherland, it permitted an admirable degree of religious and cultural liberty. Rolvaag was mainly concerned with the fact that the Lutheran church in America gave Scandinavians an institutional means of preserving the ethnic values of their group. The ministry of this church had ample opportunity to reach the hidden America. They were the only cultured class that stood in an intermediary position between the outward American state and the inner life of tradition and memory, alone capable of fructifying the life of the creative mind. Their position was strategic. In a letter to Rolvaag written many years afterwards, the late Dr. Laurence M. Larsen passed this judgment on them: "When we see what the clergy has done, we are inclined to praise their labor, but when we turn to what they have neglected, they merit condemnation." Rolvaag insisted that they were in duty bound to urge the cause of libraries and the diffusion of good literature, and to promote the cultivation of the native languages through settlement schools, academies, and colleges. If these opportunities were neglected, the instructional basis carried over from the fatherland..."
would gradually erode; within the span of a few generations the state educational system would have to be relied upon entirely, and even the strictly religious work of the church would be undermined. In his notes Rolvaag had on various occasions jotted down: "If the native cultural basis of the people is undermined, the Lutheran church as a religious institution will also fall or disintegrate." 2

The role of the church in the preservation of the old culture was a controversial one in those days. Men other than Rolvaag were debating what the prairie ministers should do:

In 1913 an interesting discussion of the problem was initiated by Kristian Prestgard, the editor of the literary periodical Symla. He asked two pastors with opposing points of view to present their opinions in his periodical. The "Norwegian" point of view was represented by the Reverend Dr. Dvamme, who attacked rather bitterly the sense of shame which many Norwegian immigrants and their descendants felt over their language and culture. He gave examples, including expressions of scorn for "everything that is Norwegian," the attempt to disguise Norwegian names and adopt English ones, the feeling of prestige attaching to "American" ways of behavior both in secular and religious affairs, the criticism of Norwegian cultural trends in the homeland, reluctance to speak Norwegian in the presence of Americans. In his opinion the immigrants and their descendants were still "more than three fourths Norwegian and only a tiny fraction American." 3

The "American" point of view was represented by the Reverend I. B. Torrison who argued that the characteristic quality of immigrants who had made America their permanent home was precisely that their national consciousness had changed. . . . Any work on behalf of Norwegian culture in this country had to take this factor of national feeling into account: the goal must not be to make Norwegians of the young people, but to stimulate their pride of ancestry and their assimilation of those elements in Norwegian culture which were of universal value. 4

Rolvaag would probably not have agreed with either of these two men. He did not want the Norwegian settlers here in America to remain Norwegians, nor did he want them to reject their cultural

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2Jørgensen and Solum, p. 170.

3Haugen, The Norwegian Language in America, p. 251.

4Ibid., p. 252.
heritage from Norway. It was up to the ministers to see that this heritage was not lost. In speaking of the cultural program in the settlements, his biographers point out that, "He looked upon the churches as the agencies appointed by destiny to carry this program into reality." At the same time, he viewed many of the controversies of the church as irrelevant and unimportant:

... The external forms of religious observance, church and dogma, meant little to him. They were indifferent elements, sometimes helpful and encouraging, sometimes very annoying.

The first minister that is presented in the trilogy is in Giants in the Earth. His name is not given, and he is referred to as "the minister." It is clear that here Rolvaag meant to portray a minister who serves in the way that he should. He is sensible and does not insist on the strict letter of the law of the church. He forgives Tønseten, who had been elected justice of the peace, for marrying a young couple who were in a hurry to be married. Tønseten is sorely troubled because of what he had done:

"But wasn't it a sacrilegious thing to do?"

"Yes, under normal conditions—undoubtedly. But at the time, as you say, conditions were far from normal out here, and you had been duly elected to perform certain official duties..."'

The most important thing that "the minister" does is to emphasize to the pioneers that their cultural heritage is to be guarded.

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5 Jørgenson and Solom, p. 245.

6 Haugen, Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 72.

7 Giants in the Earth, p. 360.
This, to Rolvaag, was one of the true duties of a minister:

The words came with thrilling meaning; they took on a richer glow, a brighter texture, as the minister fired to his subject. . . . There was one point, he cried, where they and the ancient Children of Israel paralleled each other in a striking manner. For the kingdom which they were founding here would be a work of praise, a blessing to coming generations, only in so far as they remained steadfast to the truths implanted in them as children by their fathers. There was no other foundation to build upon; indeed, what other refuge did men have? . . . And now he stood here in their presence on this great day, a frail messenger of the Lord, to bring them this solemn question: Would they do as the ten lost tribes of Israel did, and disappear out of the world, or would they do as the two tribes had done, and never perish among men? . . .

This minister is unquestionably a spokesman for the author. In summarizing his message, Rolvaag’s biographers say:

... In the first sermon in Per Hansa’s hut, the minister expounded cultural and ethical teachings that had been close to Rolvaag’s heart for decades: the thought of being builders of a kingdom, of being the successors of earlier builders of their own kin, of the nobility that comes from the continuity of history and the sequence of race, and of the responsibility that falls upon those who build. The clergyman in Per’s hut probably represents Rolvaag’s ideal rather than an actual person.

Even the clothing of the minister took on a significance for the settlers in Giants in the Earth. They were so starved for a glimpse of their old culture that the sight of this minister before them meant a great deal:

The minister stood in the corner next to the window, arrayed in full canonicals. The gown was threadbare and badly wrinkled, as a result of its many journeys inside the old valise; the ruff might have been whiter, perhaps; but such trifles were not noticed now, for there stood a real Norwegian minister in ruff and robe.

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9Jørgensen and Solum, p. 350.
10Giants in the Earth, p. 370.
This minister knew the needs of his people. He spoke to them about things they understood and things they needed:

The minister paused, wiping the perspiration from his face. Every time he drew one of these word pictures for them, the idea came to him more and more forcibly: "These people, sitting here in front of me, are Sognings and Vossings; the man of the house and his wife are fisher-folk from Nordland. . . . How can they understand the things that happened to an alien people, living ages ago, in a distant land? The Israelites were an Oriental race; they didn't know anything about Dakota Territory; they had no experience of the hardships out here!"11

The respect that these people felt for the ministry is shown best when Hans Olse is dying. The greatest honor that he could hope for is that his son would become a minister:

. . . . and then there was Little-Hans—it was hard to go away and not see what this seedling of manhood would grow up into. If he showed any aptitude for his books, they would have to send him to St. Olaf College. . . . Or if the Lord had destined him for the ministry—But that was probably expecting too much. . . .12

The second minister that Rolvaag portrays is in the early pages of Peder Victorious. Here the minister is called Pastor Isaksen. He is a different type altogether. Instead of being sympathetic and understanding as "the minister" was, he is severe. When one of the young unmarried girls of the parish gives birth to a child, he is a leader in the public censure of her:

. . . . What they were now recommending was in accordance with God's Word and the precedent established by the church fathers in such cases. The fallen one was the child of the

11Giant in the Earth, pp. 404-05.
12Tbid., p. 448.
congregation; as Christians they could not let the matter pass. The girl, Oline Tuftan, was present here today; she was willing to confess her sin, and to ask the congregation to forgive her the awful offense which her ungodly conduct had brought upon them.\footnote{Peder Victorious, p. 23.}

As a result of the terrible ordeal she is put through, the girl commits suicide, leaving a stark picture of the uncharitable way she was treated.

Under Pastor Isaksen the church at Spring Creek is split in two factions, the pietists and the regular members of the congregation. The pietists leave the church and form another congregation. Isaksen's true nature is revealed during this crisis; he thinks more of his own welfare and reputation than he does of his split congregation. When the break occurs he can think only of how it will affect him:

\footnote{Ibid., p. 59.}

\ldots He foresaw nothing but shame and disgrace; soon the scandal would be talked about throughout the whole Synod; perhaps even written about in the papers! His fellow clergymen would look down on him with scorn and contempt— he who had won the praise of all the professors at the seminary because he had taken the work of preparing his sermons so seriously! The praise was deserved too, that he felt sure of; he knew that he could build up a sermon so as to bring out a beautiful harmony between the different parts. \ldots

Despite Isaksen's careful sermon preparation he had neglected one of the duties of the church that Rolvaag thought was most important; he had not kept his congregation together by enforcing their common cultural ties. He had failed in his duties.

The minister that had preceded Isaksen is introduced in a
flashback when Beret reminisces about the time of Per's death. Isaksen had thought of his predecessor as an "uneducated old fogey, who had done naught else but gad about and drink coffee with the women," but the truth of the matter was that Isaksen's predecessor had been a better minister than Isaksen. He had been concerned about his parishioners, had visited them and helped them, which Isaksen failed to do. When Isaksen's demise took place, no one mourned his leaving, but when his predecessor died, Beret "mourned his death as though he had been her own father." 

Isaksen's successor was Reverend Gabrielsen, a capable man, but not the kind of minister that Rolvaag would have agreed with. Gabrielsen did away with the use of the Norwegian language in the church at Spring Creek, even though, according to Rolvaag, the language "constitutes our cultural roots." Gabrielsen could see no future for the Norwegian language in America:

These meetings Reverend Gabrielsen conducted in English, which innovation caused several of the elders to shake their heads. They all understood Norwegian, so why change the language? To that objection the minister smiled good-naturedly, like one seeing a complicated matter in all its ramifications, and knowing that he must be patient with good people who in understanding are as yet only children. . . . Not for the elders did he hold these meetings! The young people needed English, they would have to defend their faith in the language of the country. English was their language as assuredly as America was their home. In twenty years from now not one word of Norwegian would be heard in America, no doubt about that. 

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15 Peder Victorious, p. 59.
16 Ibid., p. 191.
17 Jørgenson and Solum, p. 115.
18 Peder Victorious, p. 220.
When Beret argued with him, Gabrielsen laughed at her fears:

"If your predictions come true, twenty years from now our people will not be found in America."

"Oh I see! he laughed heartily, "you're thinking of us as Norwegians. But, strictly speaking, are there any Norwegians now? Take yourself, for instance: You came into a wilderness and have ever since been building America—are you an American? And your children—\""

"Oh I don't know. . . . I am first of all a human being. The moment I cease being that, I can't be of much use to any country.\"19

Beret, so often the spokesman for Rolvaag in the trilogy, considered Gabrielsen as a minister, and found him lacking:

. . . All seemed gay and not a bit concerned over the prospect that in twenty years the Norwegians would have disappeared in America! And their own minister turned the hearts of the children away from their parents. . . . The shepherd being like that, what could one expect from the flock. . . .20

In spite of the fact that Rolvaag disagreed with Gabrielsen's views on language and culture, he treated Gabrielsen with fairness in his role as a minister. Gabrielsen is shown as a hard worker in the matters of the church, visiting all of his parishioners:

It was a matter of conviction with Reverend Gabrielsen that if a minister of the Gospel is to win people, he must go out into the highways and the byways, meet them on their own level, and let them feel how sincerely he wished them well. The preaching was only secondary. And no one could deny that the man had been endowed with a most extraordinary gift for talking to people.21

Gabrielsen's views on the Norwegian language are shown to have some merit, also. The problem over which language to use, Norwegian or

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19Peder Victorious, p. 255.
20Ibid., p. 228.
21Ibid., pp. 270-71.
English, caused much friction among the ministers of that day. To preach in English caused the first generation to grumble, to preach in Norwegian meant to run the risk of losing the second generation:

... Just so they didn’t continue the Norwegian until they alienated their own children from the church—the language of the older people was no longer that of the young!22

Beret made it plain to Gabrielsen where she stood on the issue of the languages, and at the same time pointed out to him how wrong she thought he was:

"Both early and late you’ve dinned it into our ears, that in twenty years we’ll all be alike."

"I’m afraid your zeal for a cause makes you judge unjustly—that all speak the same language can hardly necessitate all behaving in the same way!"

Beret’s eyes took a firmer hold of his:

"I wonder which of us has given most thought to the problem, you who are hastening the amalgamation, or I who all these years have tried to hold back—it’s easy to coast down a hill, one needs only to hang on! The Norwegians are as yet only children in America. Turn children loose to roam where they please, and it’s hard to tell what they’ll be up to."

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In Their Fathers’ God Rolvaag introduces a different kind of clergyman, a Catholic priest. He is portrayed sympathetically:

The priest stood up and grasped Peder’s hand firmly. For a moment the two measured each other, Peder mute and cold, a quiver of scorn about his lips, the priest with a benign air of kindness, the reward of countless victories over himself.24

The book tells us little else about this priest. As Rolvaag’s biographers state, Peder Victorious “is not a contribution to the literature

22Feder Victorious, p. 271.
23Tbid., pp. 331-32.
24Their Fathers’ God, p. 78.
of ecclesiastical controversy."²⁵

The last minister found in the trilogy is Reverend Kaldahl. Nikoline, the girl from Norway who is visiting the settlement, summarizes Kaldahl's position on the old culture in one short sentence, in a discussion with Peder:

"... It was odd to Peder that she who always questioned everything American, now grew warm in her praise of how able and democratic a man Reverend Kaldahl was. "He's supposed to be so Norwegianified," Peder had teased. Nikoline only looked at him, unable to understand what he meant. "Don't you think it's a good thing for men like you to hear about the God of their fathers?"²⁶

In discussing Reverend Kaldahl, Rolvaag's biographers say:

"The Reverend Mr. Kaldahl is in some measure to be regarded as the voice of the author himself. Peder is to learn some basic facts about his own people and about the value of traditions."²⁷

When the Holms have a Christmas party, Beret makes sure to invite the minister, even though Peder did not like the idea. In attempting to preserve the old culture, Kaldahl had alienated the second generation:

"... Peder had frowned at his mother's inviting the minister, for a learned man, Kaldahl's English was downright terrible, and in addition, he insisted on talking Norwegian."²⁸

Upon arriving, Kaldahl lost no time in assuming his role as a preserver of the old culture:

When he entered, the talk in the room died down. He felt the men were waiting for him to strike the note of the conversation, and so he began telling about Christmas in Norway, slowly, trying to determine how his remarks were being received. He dwelt particularly on the Christmas customs of the country districts. By and by this led him into a discussion of how "the race" (he used the phrase often) had lived.

²⁵Jørgenson and Solum, p. 419.
²⁶Their Fathers' God, p. 161.
²⁷Jørgenson and Solum, p. 421.
²⁸Their Fathers' God, p. 205.
Kaldahl's message to the settlers was that they should retain their heritage and treasure it. It could not be better stated than in Beret's last words, "Children that turned their backs on their fathers' God were an abomination in the eyes of the Lord."
C. The Growth of Materialism

Early in his life Rolvaag was faced with the decision as to what part material success was to play in his life. After he had received his ticket to come to America, he received another tempting offer:

... Kristian Andersen, the skipper whom Rølvaag admired as a hero and a sea king, naturally was there. They met. Andersen led his young protege over to a new boat hauled out on the beach. It evoked mutual admiration. Standing aft, beneath the stern, they spoke of builders skill and of the boat, the older man said, "If you will send the ticket back to your uncle, I will buy this boat for you. You shall command her; and when she has paid for herself, she shall be yours." The offer nearly swept him off his feet. All afternoon he weighed his future in the balance while sitting on a hill above the town. The call of his mind prevailed. He could not remain a fisherman to the end of his days. "I am sorry," he told Andersen, "I cannot accept your offer. I am going to America."

This is the decision that Rolvaag made when he was twenty years old. It was a decision that he was not to regret. It is true that America offered material success, also. Yet it was not this that he was interested in:

That winter he earned twelve dollars a month cash. He was to have twenty dollars a month for the summer of 1898. "That will amount to something in the neighborhood of 730 crowns. But the true happiness of life is not made of this stuff. Not at all!"

During his college days the problem of materialism was present in his thinking also. In a letter written while he was attending St.

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1Jørgenson and Solum, p. 25.

2Ibid., p. 40.
Olaf College, he said:

"I have come to the same conclusions as Nordgaard and Reverend Solum that the trend of our age is materialistic. We young people might just well accustom ourselves to thinking about this problem and try, according to our best abilities, to fathom it. Sooner or later we shall have to face the issue. Materialism is opposed to everything higher and deeper, opposed, in short, to everything that makes life worth living."

One of Rolvaag's early novels deals almost exclusively with the theme of materialism and its effect on two people. In Pure Gold, Lisbet and Lars, a young Norwegian couple are shown, "caught in the whirl of purely material interests and their souls wither and die."

George White says of Pure Gold:

"The settlement is not the important theme of the book. The seeking after gold is the modus operandi of the story. Suffice it to say that there is much settlement material: a warning to the Norwegians who desire to gain the whole world. The aim of the immigrant is to give to America all that within his nature will enrich her future. To gain wealth is not his duty."

The material gains in the New World were not significant in Rolvaag's opinion, especially if these gains went hand in hand with losses in the intellectual and spiritual aspects of life:

Manifestly it was hard for him to find anything that might seem at all an adequate return for giving up the fatherland. In the nature of the case the losses were intellectual and spiritual; the gains were material. And while material gain might be a sufficient cause for any migratory movement, it is a trivial one when compared with the great national achievements of a people in immaterial values.

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3 Jørgenson and Solum, pp. 71-72.

4 Ibid., p. 257.

5 White, pp. 92-93.

6 Jørgenson and Solum, p. 154.
Another novel that preceded the trilogy is entitled *On Forgotten Paths*. In this book Rolvaag emphasized a theme that reappears in the trilogy—that the rewards from the prairie are dangerous in their effect on the pioneer:

The battle with the prairie is a central theme. To be sure, it is not a physical combat. Rolvaag was never deeply concerned with the purely economic phase of the pioneer problem. The book is planned throughout as an ethical thesis. The prairie engrosses its favorites with the purely material gains to be won. What in nature itself is growth becomes in nature's master a lust for power, a consuming desire for possessions. What in nature is opportunity to unfold in richness of life becomes in nature's master the frenzy of battle. And in this battle for power the soul is hardened until it is proper to ask, "What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul?"?

The main character in *On Forgotten Paths* is a pioneer adventurer, Chris Larsen. He is the best example in Rolvaag's novels of a man who is entirely taken up by the material riches of the prairie:

... Here is the crude passion of the prairie, the will to power and dominion rising out of a fat and fertile soil. In a man like Chris Larsen, the enormous temporal opportunities seized the imagination with intoxicating power. He rose to the stature of a pagan viking, fierce in his courage, hard as steel in all his business dealings, nevertheless capable of undiluted joy out there on the prairie.³

In controlling the effect of these "intoxicating economic opportunities" Rolvaag counted on the cultural and religious ties of the settlers' ancestors. His fear was that these ties would not be strong enough to carry over to the succeeding generations:

... The first round of this feverish grappling might be expected to call forth all the latent powers of the land-hungry Europeans. Even if pioneer life exhibited

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7Jörgenson and Solum, pp. 199-200.

³Tbid., p. 211.

⁹Tbid., p. 213.
materialistic tendencies, it would be kept within restraint morally and religiously by the institutional discipline acquired in the old world. In the second and third generations, however, the economic struggle would give way to a general affluence hitherto unknown in the world. As the pressure of life against economic limitations diminished, it was logical to suppose that the rigid discipline of labor and of fortune-building would in large measure disappear. In the meantime the general citizenry would not have had time to mold the balanced inner life necessary to greater leisure. Without it the nation would be certain to degenerate. 10

The effect that the riches of the prairie had on the pioneers is shown in Giants in the Earth. Per Hansa, who had little chance to own land in his native Norway, is enraptured by his possessions in America:

That summer Per Hansa was transported, was carried farther and ever farther away on the wings of a wondrous fairy tale—a romance in which he was both prince and king, the sole possessor of countless treasures. In this, as in all other fairy tales, the story grew ever more fascinating and dear to the heart, the farther it advanced. Per Hansa drank it in; he was like the child who constantly cries: "More—more!" 11

At a time when Beret, the sensitive wife of Per Hansa, needed comfort and companionship, she was neglected by both Per Hansa and the boys because they were so engrossed in catching wild ducks. Their labors had already yielded more meat than they could possibly use, and yet they would not stop:

Each time Beret pleaded sadly, both by word and glance, for them to stay at home... They would wear themselves out this way. What could they possibly do with all these fowl? Just wait and see; they might not need so much food—something might happen... The boys only laughed at

10 Jørgensen and Solum, p. 215.
11 Giants in the Earth, p. 110.
these objections; their mother sounded just like Sofie, probably all women were alike—they had no sense. Just imagine such a ridiculous idea—catch no more birds! . . . The father joined in with them and poked mild fun at the mother. 12

Rolvaag shows here that, "They were for the most part absorbed in the business of making a living and were short-sightedely negligent of the finer values of life." 13

Another incident that shows how Per Hansa has become engrossed in the pride of the material is when he discovers a way to whitewash the walls of his sod hut in order to make it more presentable. He conceals this refinement until the settlers visit his home one day. Then he reveals it with pride:

Hans Olsæ suckled his pipe and said but little. This seemed very queer to him; he turned it over and over in his mind, but couldn't solve the problem. Was this like Per Hansa, who had always confided everything to him? . . . But here he was going about doing everything alone! When he had learned how a black earthen wall could be made shining white at so small a cost, why hadn't he told the others? There was so little cheer out here; they all sorely needed to share whatever they found. . . . 14

Per Hansa becomes so absorbed in the material promise of the prairie, that he soon comes to worship it. He handles his seed wheat with reverence:

. . . He thrust his hand into the sack and took out a handful of grain; it weighed like lead. As his grasp tightened the kernels seemed to soften under the warmth of his hand; they squirmed and twisted, slipping against one another; they seemed to be charged with a delicate life that was seeking release. But when he opened his hand and stirred

\[\text{12} \text{Giants in the Earth, p. 200.}\]
\[\text{13} \text{Haugen, Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 56.}\]
\[\text{14} \text{Giants in the Earth, p. 202.}\]
a finger among the grain, the kernels lay there as lifelessly as before—inert, yellowish pale, yet burning faintly with inner, golden light... Reverently he lifted handful after handful from the table, and emptied it into the sack.15

The minister in Giants in the Earth shows that he recognizes more important things than material progress. After he had finished preaching the first sermon at Spring Creek, he showed this by making the settlers think first about spiritual things:

Then the minister took the boy in his arms and went out into the yard; he approached each group standing there, talked to them quietly, and advised them to go home and keep to themselves as much as they could... "For the word of God," he said, "is like seed put into the ground; it must be undisturbed, if it is to germinate and bear fruit; but if it is too deeply covered, it will fail."...

"We were just talking about organizing a congregation, you see." The speaker looked in astonishment at the minister. Could it be wrong to discuss that idea.

... The minister raised his voice... "Now I will ask each one of you kindly to go to his home, remain quiet the rest of the day, and think about what you have heard."

... The minister turned away and went to another group; the man had to quit talking and make the best of it. But he thought to himself; this must be a funny sort of minister who hasn't time to discuss such an important matter as organizing a congregation!16

Later Rolvaag shows ministers who were more concerned with the material progress of the church than with the spiritual progress. But here he has shown a minister with the true purpose of the church in his heart, the building within the hearts of the people, not the buildings without.

15Giants in the Earth, p. 296.
16Ibid., pp. 380-81.
Beret, always an acute critic of her people, says of the pioneers and their chances of entering heaven: "Not many from the Dakota prairie will ever stand in glory there—that I am sure of! "

"... For here Earth takes us." Near the end of *Giants in the Earth*, when Hans Olsa is dying, Beret expresses deep concern for his soul. Per Hansa tries to dismiss her fears with a confident, "He'll land in the right place, don't worry," but Beret does not share his confidence:

The words sounded so blasphemous to Beret that she could not repress a shudder of horror. Greatly wrought up, she set the dishes down on the table and said fiercely: "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. Now he is beginning to think about not having laid up treasures in heaven..."

Thus Beret summarizes the life of the first generation.

*Peder*... "Victorious," p. 115.

*Peder*... "Victorious," p. 115.

*Peder*... "Victorious," p. 115.

Yet Beret insisted on keeping her. To Beret Rosie was a symbol of the
the fine things of the past, which to Peder was incomprehensible:

Peder had never been able to understand his mother's concern about a dead cow, and had said as much on several occasions; he saw no use in caring for that which no longer belonged to this life; no amount of tending would do any good anyway.21

In Peder Victorious, Peder was not the only person who was interested only in the material. A fever had caught the people of the prairie:

... A feverish time, full of great plans and the talk of strong men. Folk would listen eagerly until they raved in drunken joy. The enchanted land which they beheld bound them in a spell like the haze of some fair evening in high-summer.22

The terrible thing about Peder's outlook on life was that he measured it only in terms of material success. He married an Irish-Catholic girl, rejecting his own race, creed, and culture. But he did not even miss these things; when his neighbors refused to call on him and Susie, Peder knew of only one way to convince them that things were all right on the Holm farm:

... "Just show Sofie that the chickens lay eggs and the cows give milk on our farm exactly as they do on hers."23 Even though material progress went on on his farm, Peder didn't realize what was lacking.

When Peder argues with one of his friends, in response to his friend's statement, "We are all bound for heaven,"24 Peder replies:

... "I wonder, Andrew, if we sometimes aren't looking at things upside down? ... If our whole outlook on life

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21Peder Victorious, p. 112.
22Ibid., p. 117.
23Their Fathers' God, pp. 24-25.
24Ibid., p. 32.
hasn't been all jumbled up because we've been afraid. . .
. . . We've come into the world—that's an indisputable fact.
Here we are. Isn't it here, then, that we have our
greatest responsibilities? 25

The spiritual world has become unimportant to Peder. The material
is all that matters. The spiritual world has become the ministers' "Little world of illusions..." 26 and the teachings of the church
"a lot of dead dogmas." 27

The church, according to Tambur-Ola, Peder's fellow critic,
has become an institution devoted to materialism also:

"Oh no, my boy, that's not what He had in mind when
He went about on earth trying to teach people goodness, not
at all." All at once he stepped up close to Peder, jabbed
the rake into the ground and propped himself against it.
"And yet He shouted it right in people's ears, using the
plainest words there ever was. Not once did He as much as
hint at churches and ladies' aids. Not once! ... Now
tell me—don't you think we've cooked a fine soup out of
His teachings? We build God up into big churches, and
organize Him into congregations and ladies' aids, and the
people in these congregations keep on scrapping internally
with each other and each congregation with all the other
congregations." 28

In Their Fathers' God the progress of the material still
goes on at the expense of the spiritual. When Susie, Peder's wife,
wishes to go to church on Ash Wednesday, Peder can think of only
one thing:

"Hanged if he could spare the time for a trip to town
tomorrow! The neighbours were all but finished with the
planting, and here he'd be idling away precious time. The

25 Ibid., p. 32.
26 Ibid., p. 94.
27 Ibid., p. 94.
28 Ibid., p. 98.
problem called forth other thoughts. Casually he asked:

"Will you have to make more trips this week?" 29

Thus the conflict goes on, to the end of the trilogy.

29 Their Fathers' God, p. 287.
IV

THE SECOND GENERATION

The second generation in the settlement begins with Peder. George Leroy White, Jr. says that Peder is a symbol of the new complexity of life in the settlement:

... As he grows, so grows the settlement. Life becomes more complex... He symbolizes this change."1

Rolvaag, in writing about the second generation, attempted to pass on to future generations the story of the settlement. In his classroom he met many students whose forefathers had conquered the wilderness and yet who knew nothing of their accomplishments:

... First of all the children must be served. We must tell them about ourselves, about our life and aspirations, about the kinship and environment here in the American Northwest of which they too are a part. The volume must speak a language which has power to reveal their own selves to them; ..."2

In his class on Norwegian immigration, Rolvaag gave this statement of his aim:

"I am giving this course in the boyish hope that I may lead a few of our young people to think more highly of their own fathers and mothers, to appreciate the work they have done in this country, and to sense more fully the kinship of their own race. I would like to increase your love of home, your own home..."

"I am giving this course in the hope that those who take it may become better Americans."3

1White, p. 102.
2Jorgenson and Solum, p. 247.
3Ibid., p. 296.
In a letter describing his purpose in writing *Peder Victorious*, Rolvaag pointed out how he hoped to change the attitude of the second generation towards their forefathers:

> . . . I want to do the psychology of youth in such a way, that young intelligent youth who may happen to read it shall look upon themselves as children of light rather than as damned children of darkness.4

Rolvaag's estimation of the second generation was not flattering. "Lukewarmness and artificiality, sleekness and dandyism, shallow and wordy idealism—these are the moral defects the author finds in the second generation. . . ."5 Their shortcomings appear early in Rolvaag's literary career, as a theme in his early novel *On Forgotten Paths*:

> . . . the grandiose self-indulgence of the second generation is seen to be the projection of the physical victory of the pioneer; an external veneer gained in consequence of earthly abundance suddenly acquired. Here is the beginning of a civilization magnificently equipped with all the trappings of life, but lacking the basic qualities of culture—a civilization taking its pride in the swaying glory of a sunflower, but lacking those deep roots which will in time rear the sturdy oak or the superbly pure northern birch.6

In *Giants in the Earth* the second generation as a major theme does not recur. It is in *Peder Victorious* that this theme emerges. *Peder*, the son of the pioneer adventurer *Per Hansa*, is a person much like his father. He impulsively wants to do, not to think:

> And Ole—everlastingly dawdling! Why in the world didn't he get busy and buy a threshing rig, if he really

4Jørgenson and Solum, pp. 380-81.

5Ibid., p. 205.

6Ibid., p. 211.
wanted one? The very thought brought a gleam to Peder's eye. He wished he would get one, for then he, Peder, could hire out as bundle cutter, stay outdoors all fall and learn many useful things. 7

Per Hansa, though dead, lived on in Peder's memory as the ideal person, a man who "could do anything he set his mind to." 8

In Peder Victorious the second generation is shown in its fight to get rid of its Norwegian heritage. "The theme of Peder Victorious is Peder's struggle to become an American." 9 As Rolvaag himself put it:

"The theme of Peder is revolt. Beret had to come into the picture to the extreme she did in order to bring out the theme clearer. He, like all the others of his class, had to revolt in order to gain foothold in American life. I doubt that even your clear seeing eye can discern what that means for the child of a non-English speaking immigrant. That process is tragedy of the purest kind. Wonder if it ever will be understood? . . . " 10

By showing what Peder and his generation come to because of their revolt, Rolvaag sets out to help people understand. Rolvaag was afraid that much would be lost because of this revolt:

He felt that much is being thought and done in dark ignorance of the laws of life. Much is being destroyed that it has taken ages to build. Without cultural traditions no people can accomplish any important creative task. 11

Rolvaag felt that the second generation lost its heritage and

7 Peder Victorious, p. 2.

8 ibid., p. 7.


10 Jørgenson and Solum, p. 382.

11 ibid., p. 387.
did the disastrous things that it did, not purely from design. So often they did not realize what they were losing:

"The son of the pioneer, unmindful of the fact that in the memory of the doting figure tottering about the place, are stored incomparable riches of historical lore, sends his children to school in order that they may learn the songs and the sagas of other lands. We are a wasteful people," Illvaag feels inclined to add: God help the children of the pioneers, for very often they know not what they do.12

Peder often was ashamed of his mother. Her broken speech and her insistence on remaining Norwegian in culture and religion led him to reject her. When Beret advises Peder that he should not associate with the Irish because, "... They are strangers to us," 13 Peder rejects her advice. He is used to judging each person according to his individual worth, and his Irish friend Charley is, to him, "a fine fellow," 14 because "You never saw him do anything wrong..." 15

Peder's optimistic faith in the future is another symptom of the second generation. He rejects a speaker at a local gathering in the same way that he rejects the culture of his people, because he couldn't look to the past:

For a time Peder listened enthusiastically, but finally wearied of the speaker because he got no further. Was this all he had to offer people on such an occasion. Didn't the man see the future and all the promises that lay therein? The past must be of small consequence in comparison with that which was to come? 16

12Jorgenson and Solum, p. 398.
13Peder Victorious, p. 232.
14Ibid., p. 232.
15Ibid., p. 232.
16Ibid., p. 303.
In Their Fathers' God the effect of the Americanization process on the second generation becomes apparent. Peder, even though he doesn't know the facts of his own church history, is able to repeat trite generalizations about authoritarian rule. When his friend Charley discusses religion with him, Charley says:

"He said that it wasn't so bad, after all, that Susie had married a Norwegian. "The people of Norway," he said, 'hadn't separated from the True Church because they wanted to. Some foreign king came along and made them change their religion. Isn't that right?"

Peder checked the pace of his horse.

"I don't know much about that," he said, "And I care less." His voice was cold and bitter. "You and I are Americans, Charley. Popes and kings don't mean a darn to us. Tell that to Father Williams."17

Peder becomes an iconoclast. Rolvaag, in one episode, contrasts Peder's careless and thoughtless attitude toward religion with Susie's faith. At a time of drought, Susie says she had, "said my prayers to the Blessed Virgin... for rain,"18 in a serious attempt to get help. Peder can only poke fun at her faith:

... In his hand he held a necklace of small white beads. At the center of the string was a gilt heart; from this was hung the gilded crucifix on a short string of five beads. Peder held the rosary in his hand and laughed. "Yes, sir, I'll stake my money on this hocus-pocus of yours. If the county would only spend those seven hundred dollars on you and that Virgin of yours, I'll bet we'd get all the rain we want."19

Beret, still an acute critic of life, sees in Peder's rootlessness and shallowness the results of a person lacking in culture and

17Ibid., p. 11.
18Ibid., p. 23.
19Ibid., p. 23.
religion. To Beret the old ways are still the best. She insists
that Susie and Peder's son be baptized:

"You must have the child baptized right away. I'm your
mother and have a right to talk to you when I see you do
wrong."

"You make me tired!"

She came a step nearer:

"Does it make you tired, Peder, that I want you to do
that which is right in the sight of God?"

"It certainly does!"

Beret paused:

"You may be smart, Permand, but you don't see very far.
Things might happen here that you would sorrow about all
the rest of your life!" 20

Nikoline, a girl visiting from Norway, furnishes a definite
contrast to Peder's iconoclasm. She cherishes her religion and cul-
ture, and when she and Peder argue, Peder comes out second best. He
finds he knows very little about the country which he calls his own:

There they had sat talking of things far and near.
By and by they found themselves entangled in a heated arg-
ument over social conditions in America, she maintaining
that the people here were in a bad way because they did
not know how to enjoy life; if they tried, they went to
extremes of vulgarity; or else they turned to religious
debauchery like the Lestadianers back home in Norway, and
the one was as bad as the other? In attacking America she
had touched Peder's most vulnerable spot; he had to gainsay
her, defending his position with gusto. But she refused
to be downed. She had read a lot; there wasn't a book of
any consequence that she didn't know. She knew many of
Mark Twain's stories by heart; when she began relating
one of them and realized that Peder did not know who he was,
she clapped her hands in surprise: "Good heavens! You are
an American and haven't even heard of Mark Twain! What in
the world do you learn in your schools over here?" Peder
had tried to conceal his embarrassment by laughing it off, and had succeeded only moderately. . . . He was sure she was exaggerating; if the fellow Mark Twain was half as much as she said, he'd certainly have heard of him!21

Nikoline expresses her opinion of the Norwegian-American second generation, when she asks Peder:

. . . "Have you ever read about the lotus-eaters?"

"Can't remember I have. What about them?"

"Well, you see," she said innocently, "they ate and ate and just slept and ate."

"Yes?"

"Until they forgot they were human beings. After that they lived in bliss and contentment all their days. But it was a sad sort of happiness, because they could never become human again!"22

Peder completely misses the point. He is unaware that there is more to life than this:

Peder laughed gleefully—now he had her cornered:

"That's heaven, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said slowly, with an odd emphasis, "for those that want that kind of a heaven."23

Peder's lack of concern towards things pertaining to religion show another weakness of the second generation. Beret is not the only one to remind Peder of his duty concerning the baptism of his son. His neighbor Sørine chides him about this too:

"You ought to have your boy baptized." And, as if fearing that he would misunderstand her, she added hastily:

21Their Fathers' God, pp. 156-57.

22Ibid., p. 158.

23Ibid., p. 158.
"You know how it is with us older folks when we get along in years, the things we learnt in our childhood mean more and more to us."\textsuperscript{24}

Pastor Kaldahl explained to Peder what the duty of his generation was. His speech is all the more striking when one realizes how Peder was failing:

"You have been entrusted with a rich inheritance, an inheritance built up through the ages. How much of it, what portion, are you trying to get? Isn't it your irrevocable duty to see how much of it you can preserve and hand down to those coming after you? A people that has lost its traditions is doomed!"\textsuperscript{25}

Peder is in a sense the type of the second generation, a generation that has failed to preserve the heritage of the past, in Rolvaag's opinion. Peder's defense of his life sounds the death knell of the culture of his fathers as far as his life is concerned:

Peder broke the silence:

"We're Americans here!"\textsuperscript{26}

Rolvaag wished that the second generation would become good Americans, but not the kind that Peder had become. Peder's contribution to America could only be shallow and artificial.

\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Their Fathers' God}, p. 159.

\textsuperscript{25}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 207.

\textsuperscript{26}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 209.
In the theme of intermarriage Rolvaag deals with another problem that faced the second generation more often than the pioneers. By marrying someone from a race other than the Norwegian race, many thought that permanent damage would be done:

There was also grave suspicion of the wisdom, if not the morality, of marriage outside the Norwegian fold. There were instances of intermarriage between Norwegians and Americans or people of other stock in the earlier frontier period, and with the passing years the practice became common, but the feeling of doubt about such a departure from a straight Norwegian alliance lingered long. It was particularly acute if a Protestant-Catholic union was involved. The theme ultimately appeared in fiction, for Rolvaag describes the marriage of the Norwegian Lutheran Peder Victorious to the Irish Catholic Susie, and he brings the traditional folkways into a clear focus by probing the troubled attitude of Peder's mother, Beret.¹

One of the first instances of Rolvaag's use of this theme was in 1913. He was decidedly against intermarriage even then:

Among the literary contributions Rolvaag made during the years immediately before the war is a short fairy tale he had printed in the Norwegian American literary journal Symra in 1913. Few things will show more strikingly the Weltanschauung he had formed and the cultural objectives toward which he was striving. The story is called "White Bear and Grey Bear." It turns upon the question of mingling of races and the effect of such mingling. It is easy to discern from the allegory that Rolvaag had slight faith in intermarriage with its consequent inbreeding of races.²

¹Blegen, p. 91.
²Jorgenson and Solum, p. 246.
Interruption as a theme relates to the culture of the Norwegian-Americans directly. Rolvaag objected to the intermarriages because of what they did to the cultural program the Norwegian-Americans should have been following:

The real question then, is what is the effect of mixed marriages on the cultural progress of America? The answer may probably be reached with the aid of biological analogy. It is generally regarded as unfortunate that races too far apart interbreed. In fact, nature places before such a practice an insuperable barrier: At a certain point the offspring becomes sterile. So also in the cultural world. People of similar intellectual interests who enter upon the task of homemaking with a definite inner urge to share the hitherto unexplored world in the soul of their mates may succeed to a high degree even when they begin rather far apart. The requisites are a clear understanding of the problem involved, a strong will to appreciate different points of view, and a devotion capable of placing first things first. Nevertheless, divergences of a racial and cultural nature present a very real problem.

The problem of intermarriage was not primarily a religious one as far as Rolvaag was concerned. His interest was in the cultural implications of such unions, rather than the religious:

.. the conflict between Lutheran and Catholic in his last book, Their Fathers' God, though it is religious in form, is not religious in fact, as is plain from the fact that Peder, the supposed Lutheran, is essentially agnostic. The conflict is racial, between Norwegian and Irishman, between two ways of life.

Rolvaag also makes it clear that the Catholic church discouraged mixed marriages. Father Williams, in Their Fathers' God, says:

"I can well see that you are in a difficult position. Yet as your father confessor I am compelled to tell you that your suffering is the consequence of your own sins.

3Jorgenson and Solum, p. 415.

4Haugen, Norwegian-American Studies and Records, 72.
If you had come to me for advice, you would never have married outside the True Church. These mixed marriages are the greatest bane, the greatest danger, confronting the Church.5

Rolvaag's biographers point out what he was seeking to do by using this theme:

... A superficial reader might protest that the book does not probe Catholicism and Lutheranism very deeply, but Rolvaag would answer that the difference between these two religious systems is not an issue at all. What he was seeking was the crux of the American cultural problem, and he found it in the question as to whether America is to proceed on the principle of cultivating what is native in her racial stock, or of allowing all things to dissolve in the strange hope that nature or liberty or some such power will, contrary to all prior experience of mankind, bring her forward into the life of worthy achievement.6

The intermarriage, being a second generation problem, does not appear in Giants in the Earth. However, early in Peder Victorious Rolvaag offers a contrast between the two races, the Irish and the Norwegian. In this episode Peder and his Irish friend Charley both set out to draw a picture in school depicting George Washington. Peder's drawing emphasizes the majesty and seriousness of purpose that he saw in Washington:

... The latter was just now completing a large encampment: in the background tents, before which blazed great fires; on the hillsides artillery; in the foreground regiments in battle formation (in the picture these became indistinct and resembled tall grass waving in the wind), and officers on horses, whom the artist had taken much pains to make stately looking. The picture was one of many details. When it was finished the boy studied it critically, and began to touch it up here and there. Underneath he printed in gold letters: 'WASHINGTON AT VALLEY FORGE.'7

5Their Fathers: God, p. 131.
6Jorgenson and Solum, p. 415.
7Peder Victorious, p. 64.
Charley, on the other hand, chose to draw another episode in Washington's life, showing in his selection and in his portrayal a humor that was not evident in Peder's drawing:

The other boy first sketched the facade of a colonial mansion; in front of it he drew a garden, in the middle of which he planted a large tree loaded with a small, round fruit; close to the tree he drew a bareheaded boy who, hatchet in hand, was chopping away at the trunk. Judging by the expression on his face, the boy in the picture must be in a raging temper, for every detail seemed to conspire in making him look as angry as possible—his hair straight on end, his features awry. But the real ingenuity of the figure lay principally in the posture of the boy. As he stood there swinging his hatchet, he was the very embodiment of fury, chips flying about him in all directions. Every time the artist put in a new chip, he lunged a little to the side. . . . At last he, too, had finished, and sat a long time scrutinizing his work, so completely absorbed in it that he was oblivious of everything about him. Suddenly his face lighted with inspiration, and he hastened to write above the last chip: "Damn it!" making the letters as bold as possible. Once more he studied his creation, and finding nothing more to be done to it, printed underneath: WASHINGTON AND HIS HATCHET. After a final look he thrust it over in front of his companion, his eyes sparkling with life and deviltry.

Rolvaag portrays two marriages between races in his trilogy. The first is just mentioned, but it shows how seriously the settlers treated the question of intermarriage:

A terrible rumpus in the settlement now! Hadn't Beret heard about it? Really? Could it be possible? Why, people weren't talking about anything else! Ole Tallaksen had gone off and got married to Rose Mary. Awful commotion on account of it. Reverend Isaksen had refused to marry them unless Rose Mary turned Lutheran and joined the church. Tallaksen himself was on a terrible rampage; fierce the way he was cussing and carrying on; he declared that before he'd let any of his marry a Catholic he'd see them buried alive.

In Peder Victorious Rolvaag shows such a marriage, between

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8Peder Victorious, p. 84.
9Ibid., p. 192.
an Irish-Catholic girl and a Norwegian-Lutheran boy. Peder is the boy and Susie is the girl. Peder is pictured in a trance-like state, where "Nothing else in the whole world mattered to him but Susie." That this is the wrong way to choose a mate in Rolvaag's opinion, he makes abundantly clear:

"... finally the mating instinct chooses Susie. The love is pure and strong enough, but it has not consulted the higher centers of the brain. It has left out of consideration all religious and cultural ties. From a strictly biological point of view, Peder and Susie make no mistake. But they disregard all that which makes man cultured above the animal. If they had considered the minds, the value complexes, the peculiar long-time social effects, they would have understood that their personalities were tragically incompatible."

Peder's inability to comprehend what he is doing is apparent. Susie seemed to know more about the problems that they would have to face than Peder did:

"I am a Catholic."
"So you are--and I a Lutheran!"
"Don't I know it!"

Peder gave a hearty laugh:
"But in the sight of God we're just two human beings!"

In Their Fathers' God Peder begins to forget his religious and cultural heritage. He overhears Thømseten singing a song, and asks:

"What was that ditty you were singing? It's a new one to me."
"Ditty, your grandmother! That's no ditty, child!"

10 Peder Victorious, p. 324.
11 Jørgensen and Solmun, p. 386.
12 Peder Victorious, p. 325.
said Tønseten firmly and jabbed his can into the ground.
for added emphasis. "That's an old evening hymn. You seem
to have forgotten all about church and Christianity since
you turned heathen and got to be the pope's right-hand
man."13

Again and again Rolvaag shows how little Peder comprehended
what he had done. To him, he had "done nothing worse than marry
a neighbour girl I've known all my life..."14 At times Peder
even seems to advocate intermarriage:

"... 'I married an Irish girl; she belongs to the
Catholic Church; and here you people are talking about me
as if I were the worst criminal on earth! Instead of get­
ting rid of our prejudices we are burying ourselves deeper
in them. Or else we build them up into high walls and
paint warning signs: Woe to the man who peeps over!'...The
Norwegians must keep on being Norwegians, and the
Catholics must keep on being Catholics! So has it been
since Adam wore diapers, and so it must remain throughout
all the ages, world without end!... That shows how ign­
orant we are..."15

In Peder's mind the stamp of national character had almost
been erased. When Peder's father-in-law first saw Peder and Susie's
son, he said:

"Norwegian me eye... ha-ha-ha! Can you beat that?
Holy God! man, don't you see that his face is a regular
map of Ireland?"

"You're wrong there!" Peder's voice was deep and full
with pride: "That fellow is neither Irish nor anything
else; he's an American..."16

The differences in their religious and cultural backgrounds
lead Peder and Susie to disagreement also. From seemingly little

13 Their Fathers' God, p. 5.
14 Ibid., p. 18.
15 Ibid., p. 55.
16 Ibid., pp. 76-77.
disagreements, they grow farther and farther apart. Over reading the Bible, they disagreed:

"You should quit that kind of reading," she said, indifferently.

"Why?"

"That is for the priests who know how to interpret it."

"There's the Catholic in you cropping out!"

"Oh is it?" Her voice was cold; . . . 17

Even to a person as insensitive as Peder, it soon becomes apparent that he and Susie have little in common:

Peder intended only a hasty glance, but his eyes became riveted to her. . . . Was this Susie? His own wife? By the bed sat a woman whom he recognized but did not know. As for her actions, she might as well have been a stranger: Her father's hand lay in her lap and she was stroking it; in her other arm she held the sleeping boy. . . . What did he have to do with these people? . . . They were only strangers to him. . . of their heart-life he was not a part. . . could never be. 18

Susie's religious symbols serve as another point of difference between Peder and Susie. Peder at first tries to be tolerant of them, but he does not comprehend their meaning to Susie:

He studied the font of holy water until he felt cold shivers running up and down his spine; the muscles of his face twitched violently. Shivering, he crossed the floor and stopped; he wanted to dash to the door and shout to Susie, but checked himself. Instead, he only stood there, dumbfounded, staring at the crucifix. From here the nose appeared grotesquely large. "Now you had better be careful, Perman," a voice in him clearly said in Norwegian.

17Their Fathers' God, p. 100.

18Ibid., p. 106.
"If she can find any joy in such idolatrie, then certainly you're man enough to put up with it."19

The strains resulting from the differences between Peder and Susie finally result in a terrible conflict. In one stormy quarrel, Peder's Norwegian heritage unconsciously asserts itself:

As she touched the bed her feet beat fast against the mattress, her fingers clawing the pillow; out of her rose a long whine--half weeping and half a trapped beast's hiss. Then followed a fit of hysterical crying, worse than all the rest to listen to.

Peder stood bent over the bed. With a hard hand he grasped her shoulder and jerked her towards him.

"Look out, now!" he said, hoarsely, and could not let go his grip. "Don't carry this show too far!" he added in broad Nordlandsj, not realizing that he was talking Norwegian. He still half held her by the shoulder. Now he shook her.

An unbelievable thing happened. Susie's body went slack, like a taut rope that snaps; the deep flush flowed quickly from her face and a ghastly pallor remained; a couple of quick gasps for air, and she lay unconscious.20

Peder realizes, at a time too late to avert the consequences, that he has done wrong in marrying Susie. He begins to think of his obligation to his children. It only makes the situation worse when he realizes that he should have thought of these things before they were married:

"Is she going to have the right, then, to stuff the minds of my children with all these old wives' tales? Nursery stories of inherited sin, hell, devils, and purgatory? . . . Let her befog their minds by teaching them the necessity of confessing to stupid priests, and to believe in an old witch up in the sky who decided whether they were to be born girls or boys? . . . Where does my

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19 Their Fathers' God, p. 199.

20 Ibid., p. 218.
His face grew harder and colder the longer he pursued these thoughts. What did that document Father Nolan had made him sign really say? Something about "the children are members of the One True Church"? At that time such things had seemed so far away and unreal. Different now, . . .

The difference in their temperaments is pointed out in their attitudes toward recreation. When they have a chance to attend a dance, Peder, tired from a long day at work in the field, does not want to go. Susie complains of how little fun she is allowed to have:

"All that time you've been imprisoned," he said, bitternly.

"God only knows how hungry I've been for a little fun!"

"With me you never find any? No, I suppose not." A great helplessness had come over him; he was going to put on his coat and couldn't get started; he stuck his arm into the sleeve and pulled it out again.

"Not any real fun. You Norwegians don't know what that means."22

Peder finally reaches a point where he is able to advise his Norwegian friend Nikoline against marrying out of her own race. He sees the problem objectively now:

"He's a good fellow, all right. And as kind as they make 'em. He'd take care of you, I'm sure. Still, you and he could never be happy together," he had lowered his voice, . . .

Peder finally agrees not to interfere with Susie's religion.

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21Their Fathers' God, pp. 222-23.
22Ibid., p. 228.
23Ibid., p. 235.
saying, "It's wrong for one person to want to destroy another's feeling of security." He does not keep his word, however. The customs of Susie's church are too much for Peder to comprehend. When Susie returns from the church one day with a black soot mark on her forehead as a mark of penance, his good intentions go flying:

"Aren't you going to wipe off that dirt? We might meet somebody."

"That's my mark of penance. I should have remembered you Norwegians are too good for that sort of thing." There was peevishness in her voice now. She made no move to adjust her hat or to wipe off the black mark on her forehead.

"Do you folks have to smear yourselves up with dirt in order to be decent?" he said, sucking the breath through his teeth. "To me that sounds doggone ridiculous if you want to know it."

Peder, near the end of Their Father's God, discovers a bright future for himself in the new political field as their territory rapidly approached statehood. He campaigned for office and found the public eagerly listening to his speeches. But at home with Susie he found no encouragement. In this way his career in politics is hindered, and he says:

"If I had some one along, one that found pleasure in the going. . . . one that could watch out for dangerous places . . . . and also see the beauty in the landscape . . . ."

He compares his marriage to a team of horses:

"Did you ever drive a team with one of the horses hanging back all the time? There was nothing the matter

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24Their Father's God, p. 276.
25Ibid., p. 292.
26Ibid., p. 313.
with him, only that he was afraid of his own shadow; no matter what you did, whether you whipped or coaxed, there was no life in him, the other horse had to drag him along.27

In showing what Peder's future could be, Rolvaag shows how damaging this intermarriage was:

From the premises of the book the conclusion is clear that nature had designed Peder Victorious to be, in the first instance, a progressive intelligence, then also a man capable of transmitting the finest cultural values in his racial heritage, and finally a leader of men, aglow with the thought of responsibility, daring, and achievement. He had it in him to be a genuine American aristocrat, a salt in an otherwise decaying mass. He was capable of more than a biological marriage; he was capable of social and intellectual creativity. And in proportion as Peder began to sense the high calling of his own nature, in that proportion the unnatural allegiance with a woman of different antecedents and temperament grew intolerable.28

Peder and Susie in the marriage relationship are comparable to Per Hansa and Beret in Giants in the Earth in the sense that both couples were incompatible:

If Peder's situation is more tragic that Susie's, it is only because being a five-talent personality, he had greater potentiality. Per Hansa remarked to the pioneer pastor, "No two people ever loved each other more than Beret and I, but the ocean is not on that account easier to lift." In his case, too, there was incompatibility; but Per did not by far outreacht his wife intellectually, as Peder did. Although the younger Holm no doubt felt a pronounced displeasure when he beheld the rites of the Catholic church, his antagonism was not directed against any institution as such. Ignorance, superstition, and unmanly fear were his enemies. In the final analysis, it was the incapacity of Susie to follow him on his daring way that ultimately rent the curtain of their temple. She was a servant and had need of a servant morality; he was the master and had need of the freedom of the creator.29

27Their Fathers' God, p. 313.
28Jørgenson and Solun, pp. 416-17.
In another way Rolvaag emphasizes the effects of intermarriage, this time by showing the girl that Peder should have married:

... Her name is Nikoline Johansen. From the time of her first appearance in the narrative, she leaves the impression of being just the mate nature had designed for Per Hansa's son. She is womanly, exuberant, warm-blooded, surging onward in the high ecstasy of truly human living; yet she is chaste. She has the power to understand and inspire; she would send Peder to the governor's chair. Rolvaag shows no way out for the victims of intermarriage. He leaves Peder and Susie in despair. The final scene in Their Fathers: God is terrible in its destruction. Peder destroys the religious relics that Susie kept in their bedroom, and in doing so, he destroys the last semblance of order that their marriage had:

In the excitement earlier in the night Susie had laid her rosary on the commode and had forgotten it there. Picking it up Peder studied it long. "Here's the root of all the evil." Suddenly he was picking the rosary to pieces. A terrible calm was upon him. Holding the rosary in one hand, he picked methodically with the other, bead after bead. And when there were no more left he emptied his hand on the floor and applied his heel. The beads were more brittle than the crucifix and the vessel of holy water and gave a sharper sound.

Creak! it said from under his heel. Creak-eak!

"Now we're through with the idols in this house, Susie!" he said very quietly. "There'll be no more of it." He took a step towards the bed as if now her turn had come. "God pity you!" His face was ashen, his words so low-spoken that they were hardly audible. Abruptly, as though overcome by a sudden pain, he turned and staggered out of the room.

Dumb-faced, Susie sat staring at the door; her eyes were unnaturally big; but there was a silly grin on her face as if she had seen into horror itself, was seeing it

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30Jørgenson and Solum, p. 422.
yet and could not believe it; from her throat rose gurglings, as if she were trying to laugh, had to laugh, and could not get the laughter out. Her head began to droop and she sank over in a swoon.31

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31 Their Fathers' God, p. 337.
The five major or dominant themes of Rolvaag's trilogy, *Giants in the Earth*, *Peder Victorious*, and *Their Fathers*' *God*, all deal with the immigrant society. He follows two generations, the immigrant parents and their children, through their lives from the time they reach the prairie.

Rolvaag emphasizes the dangers and problems of pioneering. He shows the prairie as a personal enemy of the pioneers. He shows the costs of pioneering, emphasizing the effect on the pioneers of the loss of homeland, language, comfort, mental health, and culture. Much space is devoted to religion in all three of these novels. Rolvaag was both a critic and a builder as far as religion was concerned. He shows the devastating effect that an overemphasis on the material things of life can bring. Rolvaag is highly critical of the second generation. Because of the losses they have sustained, he sees them as a shallow and rootless generation. He points out the dangers of intermarriage, showing how, in his opinion, intermarriage dilutes the things that should remain strong and pure in a race.

All these themes show Rolvaag's deep concern with the immigrant here in America. He believed that America would benefit from having the immigrant retain his native culture. He believed that succeeding
generations had forgotten or had never learned what a terrible price their forefathers paid in settling this land. He believed that some of the things that had been lost might be recaptured if enough concern were generated among the descendants of the immigrants.

Rolvaag's career was as a teacher of literature and language. His students were the descendants of the pioneers, and he knew these students intimately. It was to these students, chiefly, that he addressed these novels. The themes of these novels all instruct, showing the problems of the immigrant pioneer. The themes of these novels all reflect Rolvaag's concern as an educator and an immigrant. The themes of these novels all show, I believe, that Rolvaag was uniquely endowed to tell the story of the Norwegian immigrant in America.
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