



Narcissa Whitman and the Westward Movement

Characters

Narcissa Whitman
Catherine Pambrun
Helen Mar Meek

Marcus Whitman
Pierre Pambrun
Chief Tiloukaikt

Setting

This reader's theater takes place in November of 1847 at the mission outpost of Waiilatpu, which means "the place of the rye grass." Missionaries Narcissa and Dr. Marcus Whitman have built numerous buildings there for missionary and medical outreach to the local Cayuse and Nez Perce Indians. The outpost has become a stop for the many white settlers who use the Oregon Trail to travel west.



Act I

Narcissa:

Hello, Mrs. Pambrun! Please come sit down in my parlor. We can have your English lesson there.

Catherine:

Your big house with white paint is very strange to us. You have a fence outside and yellow wood floors. This is not like the log cabins and tepees people live in here.

Narcissa:

Do you remember how long it took for us to build this house? Now we have a parlor and glass windows and wooden doors. It is just like the houses back east in New York. All of this came by wagon train on the Oregon Trail.

Catherine:

You have a great many books. Now I can learn English. My husband says that more white people are coming here. He says it will be good for me to know their talk and ways. I already speak French and some American Indian languages. It is good to learn English now, too.

Narcissa:

Your English is getting much better. You are a wonderful student. Your husband, Pierre, must be very proud of you.



Catherine: Pierre says that if I stop smoking a pipe, then he will get me a present.

Narcissa: Your husband is right for wanting you to stop smoking. Where I come from, a woman would never smoke a pipe. It is not a proper thing to do. There are many things women do here that are not good. Women do work that is very hard. They do too much heavy lifting. It could hurt them.

Catherine: One of the Cayuse chiefs tried to follow what you said. He had the men do some of the women's work. But, this made him look weak in front of all the people. That is not a good thing for a great warrior to do. Everyone knows that only women do the heavy work. It has always been this way.

Narcissa: We wanted him to change his dreadful ways. Where I come from, men do the hard labor, and that is the way it should be everywhere.

Catherine: People here have different ideas about what is bad. For example, it was not good for you to return the gift that Chief Tiloukait gave your little baby when she was born. It was an honor for him to give coyote paws to little Cayuse Te-mi, or as you say, Cayuse Girl.



Narcissa: Mrs. Pambrun, I know that the chief was excited at Alice's birth, but I could not let those coyote paws be so near my newborn baby! You know what I have told you about keeping things clean in order to keep away sickness. What if the coyote paws were dirty or had made the baby sick?

Catherine: I understand, but it made the chief look bad. You should have been glad for his gift to your little girl. You know that we have all tried to learn the white ways. We do some things in new ways now. I have begun to do the wash in a bucket instead of in the river as I used to do.

Narcissa: That is very good, Mrs. Pambrun. And, I am so delighted that you no longer use the cradleboards for your babies. Their heads grow flat from being tied to that board, and they cannot move about at all. You are now giving them blessed freedom!

Catherine: That is why all the people came so often to see your new baby when she was first born. Cayuse Girl had such light skin and light brown hair. And her head stayed round! People were all very sad when Cayuse Girl fell into the river and drowned. We all miss hearing her sing her songs during worship time.