

# Willa Cather

## Newsletter & Review



Fall 2006

Volume 1, No. 2

### Volunteers Make the Difference!

*Betty Kort, Executive Director*

Volunteering is a strong tradition in the Red Cloud community. The local volunteers who support the Red Cloud Opera House are among the most precious resources the Cather Foundation has. From the re-opening of the restored Opera House in the spring of 2003, which boasted over 100 volunteers, until the present, they have made themselves available seven days a week at all hours. The Opera House now has a list of sixty or more volunteers who can be called upon to do a variety of tasks—one can hardly imagine the Opera House functioning without its volunteers.

A Red Cloud Opera House committee, made up of Red Cloud citizens and Cather Foundation staff, meets monthly to plan programming and find volunteers to provide some of the refreshments. Food is an important factor in bringing in audiences. After all, the cooks in the community are second to none. Thus, it is no surprise that receptions are special at the Opera House. Volunteers sometimes bring delicious homemade sandwiches, brownies, cookies, relish plates, homemade candies, etc., for receptions and other special events.

The family of Miriam Mountford recognized the importance of the volunteer corp when they established the Miriam Mountford Memorial Volunteer Award. Each year one volunteer is recognized for outstanding service to the Opera House. The volunteer receives a personally engraved plaque and has his or her name placed on a wall plaque in the entrance to the Opera House. Recipients receive the award at the annual

Spring Conference banquet and are recognized for their services at that time. The quotation placed on the wall plaque impressively acknowledges the importance of volunteers.

#### Miriam Mountford First Volunteer Award

Aside from the founders of the WCPM, Miriam Mountford was the organization's first volunteer. With Mildred Bennett she devised the first guided tours of Red Cloud and Catherland; was the first editor of the Cather newsletter; and as first President of the board of Governors after Mrs. Bennett, demonstrated that this home-grown endeavor could have a continuing worldwide influence beyond the direct influence of the founders. The Board of Governors established this award in her memory to recognize individuals whose volunteer service is deemed to be outstanding, and as a perpetual tribute to all those whose selfless service is the heart of the Cather Foundation in Red Cloud.

Each year in September the Cather Foundation and the Red Cloud Opera House Board of Directors host a volunteer picnic to thank the volunteers. This year the volunteers enjoyed an indoor picnic and the movie *Calendar Girls*, shown on the big screen in the Red Cloud Opera House Auditorium. *Calendar Girls*, a movie about volunteering and the extent to which volunteers will go

to "make a difference." The volunteers have decided that they most likely will not volunteer to model for a calendar of the kind presented in the movie, but there is no doubt that they go the distance to make the Opera House a special place to visit.

"Volunteers are vital to the success of the Red Cloud Opera House. They work very hard to make sure every event runs smoothly. Our audience members and guests know that they are welcome in this facility and our performers are always grateful for

the effort our volunteers make in creating a special evening for their art. I am appreciative and inspired by their dedication and professionalism," said Stephany Thompson, Program Coordinator.



A number of volunteers gather on the Red Cloud Opera House stage. Photo by Betty Kort.

#### In This Issue...

Essays by Susan Meyer, Mary Ryder, Isabella Caruso, and Lisbeth Fuisz. Merrill Skaggs on new Cather letters, Robert Thacker on Cather's passport, news of Cather's birthplace, and more!



## Cather Foundation Calendar

### The 11th International Willa Cather Seminar

*Willa Cather: A Writer's Worlds*

*Paris & Provence, France*  
24 June — 1 July 2007

*Sponsored by:*  
*The Willa Cather Foundation*

The 2007 meeting will be the first International Willa Cather Seminar held in France. Its title, "A Writer's Worlds," celebrates aspects of modernism, interest in history and religion, gender roles, social criticism, politics, aesthetics, and other considerations in Cather's French as well as other fiction.

Keynote speakers will be Marc Chénétier and A. S. Byatt.

**Willa Cather Newsletter & Review**  
The Willa Cather Society  
Fall 2006

Volume L, No. 2  
ISSN 0197-663X  
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### Red Cloud Opera House Winter 2006 - 2007

*"Some Memories are Realities"*

**Discovery Mime Theatre Family Christmas** — An inspiring and heartfelt story for the holidays. A great afternoon for the family. November 18 at 2:30 pm.

**The Melodears "We Need a Little Christmas"** — This popular central Nebraska barbershop chorus will spread Christmas cheer and warmth. Also, a celebration of Willa Cather's Birthday. December 3 at 2:30 pm.

**Big Band Reprise New Year's Eve Dance** — Back by popular demand. Enjoy big band sounds, hors d'oeuvres, and complimentary champagne at midnight! December 31 at 9 pm.

**Recovered Views: African American Portraits, 1912 - 1925** — This exhibit features forty stunning images; they document life in a vibrant African American community. December 15 - January 19.

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Programs made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Nebraska Humanities Council, and the Nebraska Arts Council.

*Willa Cather Spring Conference*  
*April 27-28, 2007*  
*Red Cloud, Nebraska*

### Willa Cather and Material Culture

The 2007 Willa Cather Spring Conference theme, "Willa Cather and Material Culture," is inspired by the book (with the same name) edited by Janis Stout. The Conference will feature artifacts from the Cather Foundation Archive. Stout will present the keynote address.

## A Note from the Issue Editor

In this issue of the *Newsletter and Review*, we focus on relationships and collaborations among women in Willa Cather's fiction and career. Essays by Isabella Caruso, Susan Meyer, and Mary R. Ryder all take *The Song of the Lark*—a partially autobiographical novel that abounds in women's relations and rivalries—as a central text. Caruso also approaches Cather in terms of another career that parallels hers, at least chronologically—that of the French writer and performer, Colette. Lisbeth Fuisz looks at the young Cather as a writer of short fiction for *McClure's*, juxtaposing her work with that of another—and then far more celebrated—woman writer who was publishing fiction in *McClure's* at that time, Myra Kelly. Merrill Skaggs provides a brief, provocative introduction to a rich new collection at Drew University Library, letters that document a twenty-year friendship between women: Willa Cather and Louise Burroughs. And, writing from Virginia, two present-day Cather women introduce us to the place where Willa Cather began her lifetime of relationships with women: her grandmother Boak's house in Back Creek Valley, where she was born.

Finally, Robert Thacker rounds off the scholarly contributions with an *Object Lesson*, his speculative reading of Willa Cather's 1923 passport, a recent gift to the Cather Foundation. With this passport, Cather traveled to France—as many of us will soon do, for the 2007 International Seminar in Paris and Provence. We hope that you are planning to join us there! And meanwhile, we hope you enjoy this issue—and a happy holiday season. Ann Romines

# Coughing Girls in *The Song of the Lark*: Willa Cather, Breathing, and the Health of the Artist

Susan Meyer, Wellesley College

On Thea Kronborg's trip home on the train from Chicago, where she has spent the winter studying music, she encounters an ill nineteen-year-old girl with a persistent cough. The girl and her mother are traveling to Colorado for the sake of her lungs. When Thea pauses to rest her heavy bag on the seat in front of the sick girl, the girl urges Thea to sit there, explaining, "I'd so much rather not have a gentleman in front of me" (183). That night, kept awake by the girl's coughing, and unable even to open her window in the ill-smelling, stuffy train car, because the sick girl "can't stand a draft" (182), Thea wonders why the girl is so afraid of men. She asks herself, "Why did she shrink into herself and avert her face whenever a man passed her chair?" The passage continues, "Thea thought she knew; of course, she knew" (185). But do we know?

I find this brief episode puzzling and provocative. This unnamed girl on the train is one of several adolescent girls in the novel who is dying slowly of tuberculosis.<sup>1</sup> Thea encounters a number of them in Moonstone at prayer-meeting—including

"dreary" Maggie Evans, who dies just before Thea gets home and who is remembered at the novel's end because Thea sang at her funeral (406). Why has Cather put these dying, consumptive adolescent girls into the novel? Why does Cather term unfortunate Maggie Evans "dreary"? What does dying

of tuberculosis have to do with a morbid fear of men? And what does the relationship between Thea and these ill girls mean to Cather? The teen years and young adulthood are periods when people are especially vulnerable to tuberculosis, but there are no dying, consumptive boys in the novel: it is as if the entry into womanhood itself is causing these girls to sicken and die. These ill girls function in the novel, I believe, both as foils to Thea and as evidence of dangers that threaten Thea as she struggles to develop as a woman and an artist. A cluster of associated motifs in the novel evokes these dangers. Consumption, bad ventilation, impaired breathing, and corsets are associated with a morbid preoccupation with sexuality, with rigid social rules about female behavior, and with narrow, commonplace lives. Cather shows that both Thea's survival and her art are threatened by a narrowing society and by the constrained breathing that physically manifests its narrowness. Yet Cather gives Thea an extraordinary bodily strength—a word much used for Thea in the novel is "vitality"—

that enables her to resist these dangers and to come into full possession of her art. This novel about the development of a great artist is, somewhat disturbingly, partly a celebration of the strong as opposed to the weak, of superior, healthy bodies with the capacity to produce great art.

*The Song of the Lark* (1915) is very preoccupied with the issue of ventilation in relation to lung disease. In the early twentieth-century, physicians launched a widespread crusade urging the public to combat the airborne diseases that were devastating the American population, namely, tuberculosis, pneumonia, and influenza, and during Cather's years at *McClure's* the magazine covered this public health movement.<sup>2</sup> Physicians urged people to live in the open air as much as possible and to keep windows open year round in order to reduce the rate of infection and to strengthen the lungs of both the healthy and the ill (see fig. 1).

When the novel opens, in midwinter, Dr. Archie, who is at the Kronborg house to help Mrs. Kronborg through childbirth,

notices that Thea is seriously ill with pneumonia. One of the first things he does is to open the bedroom window slightly. Windows and fresh and stifling air are used repeatedly in the novel to indicate environments that are either healthy or unhealthy in relation both to Thea's body and to her potential as an artist. For instance, against her

mother's advice, Thea always keeps the bedroom window open in winter in her icy attic room, because Dr. Archie tells her that "a girl who sang must always have plenty of fresh air . . . and that the cold would harden her throat" (52). Thea's physical vigor allows her to sustain and overcome the cold; curled with a heated brick at her feet between the red blankets of her bed, Thea is soon warmed: "she glowed like a little stove with the warmth of her own blood" (52). Stifling enclosure, both in the small, stuffy houses of Moonstone and in the airless streetcars and the unwholesome, moldy, women's boarding houses Thea encounters in Chicago, functions in the novel to suggest enclosure within stifling, commonplace lives. As the novel begins, Thea nearly dies of pneumonia, a lung disease exacerbated by close air (according to the medical opinion of the day), and throughout the novel she struggles against the dangers that the stifling forces of her world pose to her life and her artistic spirit, and in particular to her throat and lungs, the vehicle for her art.

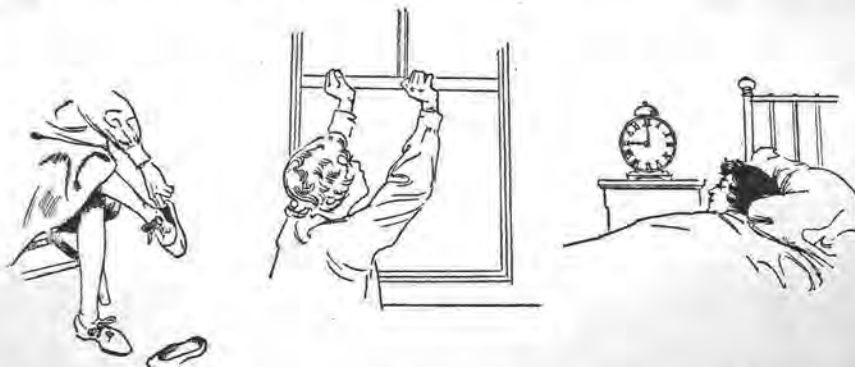


FIG. 10. Dry feet, fresh air, and plenty of sleep help to keep up the power of the body to kill germs.

Fig. 1. From John W. Ritchie, *Primer of Sanitation* (1916). Illustration by Karl Hassmann.

Women in *The Song of the Lark* are enclosed not only in airless spaces but in too-tight clothing and in a petty social world. Mrs. Livery Johnson, the president of the concert committee, a prominent Baptist, and one of Thea's "natural enemies" (54), epitomizes this narrow enclosure. Johnson dislikes Thea: she disapproves "of a child whose chosen associates were Mexicans and sinners, and who was, as she pointedly put it, 'bold with men'" (54). When Johnson in effect lies to Thea, pointedly informing her that her rival, Lily Fisher, has chosen to recite at the concert "to give other children a chance to sing," her hostility toward Thea is evident. Johnson so enjoys "an opportunity to rebuke Thea, that, tightly corseted as she was, she could scarcely control her breathing, and her lace and her gold watch chain rose and fell 'with short uneasy motion'" (54). Johnson's heaving, corseted bosom at once indicates her narrow, confined nature and reveals that she finds rebuking Thea titillating. Thea's sister Anna similarly misconstrues Thea's relationships with her friends, believing them improper. Anna disdains Mexicans, she preoccupies herself with Dr. Archie's extramarital sexual behavior (behavior Cather alludes to sympathetically), and she tells her mother that Dr. Archie's conduct with Thea (when he holds her hand or places his hand on her head) is "too free" (117). Anna's views are like those of the straight-laced, tightly corseted Johnson. The coughing girl on the train also seems to be corseted, as she loosens her clothes and wears a kimono over them at night. And the ill girl, with her morbid fear of men, also seems to share Anna's and Johnson's unwholesome, exaggerated consciousness of male sexuality. The novel suggests, via the ill girl's tuberculosis and her inability to sustain contact with fresh air, that she is wasting away from the narrowly constrained, airless social world that women of the time inhabit.

The repeated references to corsets in *The Song of the Lark* are part of the novel's meditations on breathing and on consumption. Physicians at the turn of the century believed that corsets, particularly tightly-laced corsets, were implicated in pulmonary tuberculosis. One physician, William Neftel, wrote an account in 1887 of a girl from a healthy family who, while living in a fashionable boarding school, chose to wear "day and night, a tightly-laced corset, in order to have a small waist and was admired for her beautiful figure" (213). Although she relinquished this habit after marriage, she gradually manifested symptoms of consumption and died young. This case inspired Neftel to experiment with compressing the chests of rabbits and to conclude that "a steady, methodical compression of the chest and of the upper portion of the abdomen, continued for a certain length of time, can produce tuberculosis in a perfectly healthy person without hereditary predisposition to the affection" (213).<sup>3</sup> S. Adolphus Knopf's *Tuberculosis: A Preventable and Curable Disease* (1910) includes diagrams illustrating his contention that "when a girl develops into a young woman, one should bear in mind that the tightly laced corset is one of the most injurious garments that can be worn" (358; see fig. 2).

Thea experiences her own chest and throat as constrained by her clothing when she is suffering from the narrow social views of Moonstone. After Anna criticizes Thea for singing with the Mexicans rather than in the church, Thea talks to Dr. Archie, "pull[ing] her dress lower at the neck as if she were suffocating" (205). Two men in Thea's life, Ray Kennedy and Fred Ottenburg, urge her not to wear corsets. Ray tells her that "a girl with a voice like yours ought to have plenty of lung-action" (103), and Fred

tells her that wearing stays (i.e. corsets) will make her side muscles flabby and that "a flexible body" is crucial in opera (267).<sup>4</sup> Thea evidently wears corsets at some points in her life. She laughs at Ray, as if he has repeatedly given her this advice, and when Fred asks her at Panther Canyon if she wears stays, she answers, "Not here" (267). Some pages earlier, when Thea sings for Mrs. Nathanmeyer wearing one of her daughters' evening gowns, Cather explicitly mentions Thea's corset, and it is evidently somewhat constraining to her singing, although it does not seem to be very tightly laced. The emphasis of the passage is on the vocal and bodily freedom Thea is able to reach, her ability to lift herself above constraints, yet the constraints are there. As, at Fred's suggestion, Thea is about to try singing more boisterously and freely, Cather writes, "She . . . drew herself up out of her corsets, threw her shoulders high and let them drop again. She had never sung in a low dress before, and she found it comfortable" (235). In the scene of Thea's operatic triumph, as she sings Sieglinde, however, Cather writes that Thea's "voice was as flexible as her body" (395), and the recurrence of the word "flexible" suggests that, since Thea's time in Panther Canyon, she has taken Fred's advice about bodily flexibility and abandoned the use of stays.

Ray and Fred's views on corsets, unsurprisingly, are in accord with the views of physicians who wrote on the science of singing at the turn of the century. Richard Biddle, in *The Tonsils and the Voice in Science, Surgery, Speech, and Song* (1913) observes that "good voices have been spoiled before now by tight lacing" (324) and Joseph Joal, in *On Respiration in Singing* (1895), points out that lung capacity is reduced by 200 to 1100 cubic centimeters by corsets. He would like to "formally interdict" corsets, he writes, but he fears that such advice would be ignored and he instead advises "ladies who sing to use a corset as supple and ample as the exigencies of fashion permit" (163).<sup>5</sup> Like Fred and Ray, Spanish Johnny also contributes to the health of Thea's lungs. Prudish Anna disapproves of Thea singing out of doors with Spanish Johnny and the Mexicans, but in doing so Thea is acting in accord with medical advice for healthy lung development. "Singing or recitation outdoors," writes Knopf, "have a most beneficial action on the vocal organs, on the lungs, and on the heart, and will help much in the development of the chest" (261).

Thea is threatened in the novel by social conventions, petty jealousies, and false artistic standards, and by the airlessness that represents them. Yet the novel follows Thea's development as she nonetheless grows "fuller and stronger and rounder" and develops into an artist (185). Thea suffers from tonsillitis in Chicago, an illness that suggests her contamination by the poisonous world of Madison Bowers. But her recuperation in the sun and air of Panther Canyon contributes to her healthy development of both spirit and body. The novel emphasizes Thea's bodily strength: her father says she shares her mother's fine "constitution" (14); her mother remembers Thea as the "best-formed" of all her babies (190); and Harsanyi, asked by the conductor of the Chicago Symphony if Thea is "strong physically," answers, his eye flashing, "like a horse, like a tree! Every time I give her a lesson, I lose a pound. She goes after what she wants" (174).

The expansion of Thea's chest and lung capacity as she develops as an artist receives particular narrative attention. Looking at Thea when, discontentedly tugging at her dress as

if it is suffocating her, she comes to visit him in his office. Dr. Archie notices that the bar of light from his desk lamp, which once “used to fall full upon her broad face and yellow pigtailed” now falls “below her bare throat, directly across her bosom. The shrunken white organdie rose and fell as if she were struggling to be free and break out of it altogether” (205). This passage comes shortly after the very odd one in which Mrs. Kronborg brings Thea a breakfast in bed on her first morning home after her winter in Chicago. Mrs. Kronborg stops “to put her hand on Thea’s chest. ‘You’re filling out nice,’ she said, feeling about” (191). Although this passage feels uncomfortably sexual, what I believe Cather intends Mrs. Kronborg to be assessing here is the state of Thea’s chest musculature and of her lungs and respiratory system. “Her chest was fuller than when she went away,” Mrs. Kronborg thinks, and as she leaves the room she suggests that Thea leave her nightgown unbuttoned at her throat: “This is a good time to harden your chest” (191), she tells her daughter.

Yet both the above passages also have an undeniable sexual suggestiveness. Dr. Archie looks at Thea’s bosom in the lamplight, and Mrs. Kronborg notices that “Thea’s breasts [are] rounder and firmer, and though she was so white where she was uncovered, they looked rosy through the thin muslin” (190).

The novel has an odd relationship to Thea’s sexuality: on the one hand Cather indicates that Anna, Mrs. Livery Johnson, and others are wrong to interpret the relationships between various men and Thea as tintured with sexuality, but at the same time she suggests that Thea’s blossoming development as an artist is, without her conscious involvement, irresistibly attractive, even alluring, to others around her. That allure is particularly associated with her lungs and her breathing. Jonathan Goldberg observes that “Wagnerian music drama embodies . . . the erotic desirability of breath itself” (Goldberg 78). Sherrill Harbison similarly observes of *The Song of the Lark* that “descriptions of the act of physical singing—translating music through the physical body—are among this novel’s most erotic passages” and terms this “highest Wagnerism” on Cather’s part (153).<sup>6</sup> Already at this point in the novel, I believe, Cather is representing the lungs, the breathing, and the musical responsiveness of her developing Wagnerian soprano as alluring to others, but the eroticism others perceive in Thea is often unconscious and non-volitional. After Thea first hears Dvorak’s *New World Symphony* in Chicago, she emerges from the concert hall dazed and ecstatic from the music, and two different men approach her on the street, believing her to be a prostitute. To Thea it feels like an unprovoked assault: she experiences these advances as evidence of the ugliness of the world intent on taking the ecstasy of the music from her. But the men looking at Thea seem irresistibly to imagine a different sort of ecstasy, and to believe that she is offering it. Cather’s

description of Thea at the end of this episode oddly licenses their reaction. Cather links Thea’s passionate response to the music, her breathing, and her developing sexuality: “she pressed her hands upon her heaving bosom, that was a little girl’s no longer” (172). The medical student who tends to Thea without charge when she is ill with bronchitis similarly seems to find her lungs, her breathing, and the musculature of her chest, even from the back, sexually arousing: “She had no soreness in her chest, and had told him so clearly. All this thumping of her back, and listening to her breathing, was done to satisfy personal curiosity. She had watched him with a contemptuous smile” (239). The glorious, expanding, rounding body, the healthy developing lungs that incarnate Thea’s artistic development make her, even against her will and desire, an object of admiring, eroticizing attention.

The ill girls and women in the novel with vulnerable

lungs and throats—the coughing girl on the train, the consumptive Moonstone girls, and even Madame Necker, an opera singer whom Thea admires, who is losing her voice inexplicably at the novel’s end—function in the novel like canaries in a coal mine to reveal the dangers that Thea’s stifling world poses to her.

## PREVENTION OF TUBERCULOSIS

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FIG. 107. Situation of Vital Organs in a Normal Chest.



Fig. 108. Situation of Vital Organs in Constricted Chest.



FIG. 109. Skeleton of Chest, Permanently Constricted by too Tight Lacing.

Fig. 2. From S. Adolphus Knopf, *Tuberculosis: A Preventable and Curable Disease* (1910).

But Cather’s sympathies in this novel are not with the weak and the ill. Interestingly, Sharon O’Brien observes that in Cather’s own life, she “was frequently disgusted with herself” when she was ill (151). When Cather had the flu, Elizabeth Sergeant notes, she suffered from self-disparagement: “through physical illness, she had, in a way that was baffling to me, lost her own self-respect” (90, qtd. in O’Brien 151). A similar disdain for illness and admiration for the physically healthy comes through in *The Song of the Lark* (and elsewhere in Cather’s fiction). Thinking about the sick girl during the night on the train, Thea puts her hand on her own breast and feels “how warm it was; and within it there was a full, powerful pulsation.” She thinks fiercely that “she was going to have a few things before she died.” She smiles “—though she was ashamed of it—with the natural contempt of strength for weakness, with the sense of physical security which makes the savage merciless” (185). On the morning after Thea’s uncomfortable night on the train with the coughing girl, she sends the girl a cup of coffee and a pink rose from the dining car, but then she herself goes out to the platform to admire the landscape and “to get some fresh air into her lungs” (186). Thea breathes deeply in “that blue air” (186) and the novel moves on, leaving the dying girl behind.

Cather’s sympathies in this novel are with the strong, with the gloriously, almost fiercely healthy bodies that make possible the creation of great art. Cather attended to her own bodily health, she told an interviewer, to keep her body a

vigorous instrument for writing. She took walks in Central Park, she told Latrobe Carroll in 1921, adding: "I try to keep myself fit, fresh: one has to be in as good form to write as to sing" (Carroll 24). In *The Song of the Lark*, the weak, confined, coughing, consumptive bodies of the women around Thea serve to emphasize, by contrast, Thea's own pulsating health. Their "drear[iness]" (406) emphasizes what Aunt Tillie terms Thea's "wonderfulness" (60). When Thea sings Sieglinde in her triumphal scene, Cather writes with admiration of her vital, vigorous body:

Her body was the instrument of her idea. Not for nothing had she kept it so severely, kept it filled with such energy and fire. All that deep-rooted vitality flowered in her voice, her face, in her very finger-tips. She felt like a tree bursting into bloom. And her voice was as flexible as her body; equal to any demand, capable of every *nuance*. (395)

What Cather celebrates in *The Song of the Lark* is partly a body that has been well cared for (Thea does not compress her lungs, she sleeps with her window open, she "keeps her body severely") and also a body with an inherent vitality, with an inherent capacity for greatness. As Thea sings Sieglinde, in the novel's triumphal scene, Cather writes, she rises into "the pride in hero-strength and hero-blood" (393). The coughing girl on the train, the dying, consumptive girls of Moonstone, and even Madame Necker, with their faulty, failing bodies, obviously do not share this "hero-strength."<sup>7</sup> Cather in this novel celebrates that "hero-strength" of the healthy, well-formed body, the rare body with, as Harsanyi says, "enough"—enough physical power to allow, even under the adverse conditions that wreak havoc on the weaker bodies of others around her, for the flowering of great art (394).

#### Notes

I am grateful to Ann Moseley for alerting me to Fremstad's comment that she never wore corsets, found in an interview included in the Fremstad *Scrapbooks*. Moseley alludes to these *Scrapbooks* extensively in the Explanatory Notes for her forthcoming Scholarly Edition of *The Song of the Lark*.

<sup>1</sup> The extended Cather family seemed particularly prone to tuberculosis and relocated from Virginia to Nebraska in hopes that the hot, dry air of Nebraska would prove more healthful. For an account of this family history and letters alluding to tuberculosis and to air quality, see Rosowski 37-56.

<sup>2</sup> Hendrick. See also Chapin, Ritchie, Wood and Hendricksen.

<sup>3</sup> S. Adolphus Knopf, in *Tuberculosis as a Disease of the Masses and How to Combat It* (1907), and Maurice Fishberg, in *Pulmonary Tuberculosis* (1919), similarly observe that corsets are a contributing factor to consumption and recommend that "the tightly laced corset should be banished forever from the dress of women" (Knopf 31). Knopf urges women to replace the corset with "a comfortable waist which permits free and deep respiratory movements" (31) and Fishberg urges other physicians to explain "the way a corset, even of those called 'hygienic,' interferes with the respiratory movements of the thorax" (558).

<sup>4</sup> Olive Fremstad, on whom Cather in part modeled Thea, agreed with Fred and Ray about corsets, bodily flexibility, and lung-action. In an interview in 1905, Fremstad responded to "an admiring remark about the beautiful suppleness of her body" by observing, "I never wear corsets." "Oh, Kundry, it is glorious to be young, isn't it," enthuses the interviewer. "Think of all the tight old ladies who must look seductive at any cost of lung power" (Jolliffe, n. pag.).

<sup>5</sup> See also Holmes 168.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the "physiological method" of vocal training, a method that emphasizes knowledge of and comfort with the body, and the way Thea's singing is linked with her eroticism, see Cumberland.

<sup>7</sup> In a longer version of this essay, I explore the relationship between this "hero-blood" and Thea's Scandinavian origins. See also my "Cranio-metry, Race, and the Artist in Willa Cather."

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# That D—d Mob of Women Performers: Women Artists as Rivals in Cather's Fiction

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It is no secret that Willa Cather detested mediocrity in the arts and that she was particularly harsh in her judgment of women artists and writers whose unbridled emotionalism or hackneyed style relegated women's achievements to second-class performances. One might be tempted to say that Cather's vitriolic attacks on selected women artists, many of whom were quite popular, stemmed from a jealousy not unlike that of Hawthorne toward the mob of scribbling women whose works outsold his own. But Cather's sharp criticism of these "rivals" was rooted in a profound sense of art as a projection of the self that could and should not be betrayed. Throughout her fiction, Cather endowed her true women artists with a "creative hate" (*The Song of the Lark* 459) of mediocrity of artistic performance, a hate that makes them stronger than their sister-rivals but separates them from a supportive network of sisterly affection.

From her earliest stories, portraits of performers and would-be artists abound. In stories like "Flavia and Her Artists" (1905) and "The Count of Crow's Nest" (1896) one meets aspiring performers who lack talent, overestimate their abilities, and dream of fame while belittling others whose skills, in fact, outshine their own. A montage of "want-ta-be's," they gravitate toward one another and are critical of the truly gifted artist. "Flavia and Her Artists" presents a collection of artists, some of whom could be first-rate but are miserable failures as human beings. Their hostess Flavia Hamilton cannot distinguish true from false artistry, is deluded into admiring what she cannot understand, and chalks up to cleverness the pettiness and vulgarities of those whom she embraces as *artistes*. In an earlier story, "The Count of Crow's Nest," Cather previewed the psychological and emotional entanglements that would haunt her aspiring women artists and introduced a singer who wants to sing opera but is barred from doing so by her father. He, unlike Flavia, recognizes true ability. Complaining that *cher papa* insists that she sing only oratorio and concert pieces, Helena de Koch sings "with that peculiar confidence which always seems to attend uncertain execution" and has, as Cather notes, "absolutely no musical sense" (9). She lacks what Cather called "personality," that "unanalyzable something because of which the performer *in toto* exceeds the sum of her skills" (Stout 85).

For Cather, the true artist's unique personality could not be acquired "through any external mediums, labor, discipline, or technique" (Peck 112). The protection of this self became "the secret of stage success" and a kind of "selfishness" (Cather,

*World and the Parish* 227). Eden Bower in "Coming, Aphrodite!" (1919) capitalizes on this selfishness in "the consciousness of [the] power" (375) that will allow her to compete successfully, to become "admired and adored" (381). Like Cressida Garnet in Cather's 1916 story "The Diamond Mine," Eden develops a "professional personality" ("Diamond Mine" 405) that makes her appear "hard and settled, like a plaster cast" ("Coming, Aphrodite!" 396). What these women artists have left to give of themselves is no longer personal; they must give all to art.

Cather was undoubtedly aware of the struggle by women musicians to gain recognition as true artists at the turn of the century. Judith Tick in her extensive study "Women as Professional Musicians in the United States, 1870-1900" notes that at this time "[m]usic became a feminist issue" (106). Writers like John Ruskin, whom Cather generally admired, had long insisted that woman's role in music was to serve as muse, but that she lacked the "musical intellect" that would allow her to create (qtd. in Tick 96). This attitude was reinforced by critics like George Upton who in his 1880 work *Women in Music* claimed that women could recreate and execute but not create: "[Creating music] also depended upon the ability to think logically and to abstract—exclusively male powers" (qtd. in Tick 106).

The result of such thinking was the establishment of a "typical feminine musical education" (Tick 109) that reached even into small, western towns like Cather's Red Cloud. Alice Stone Blackwell in an 1891 edition of *The Woman's Journal* noted that "[i]t is exceedingly rare that a girl's father cares to have her taught the underlying laws of harmony or the principles of musical composition" (qtd. in Tick 109). The girl who would be a true artist had, therefore, to develop early a competitive nature that would permit her to fight prevailing

social limitations, or she would need an unusual parent or patron who recognized her voice as a talent to be cultivated. Cather allows both to her protagonists. Thea Kronborg's mother stands firmly opposed to her husband's plan that Thea study only enough to accompany at church, sing at funerals, and teach piano to local children. Insisting that Thea study with Professor Wunsch, Mrs. Kronborg rejects the "typical feminine musical education." By 1935, Cather had extended her parental patronage to Mr. Gayheart, himself an amateur clarinetist, who sacrifices greatly to send Lucy to study with Professor Auerbach in Chicago, despite the protests of his elder daughter and of the community.



Willa Cather as performer in a Greek tragedy, as a student at the University of Nebraska. Photo courtesy of the Cather Foundation.

Cather had written in 1895 that “to feel greatly is genius and to make others feel is art” (“Christina Rossetti” 348), and she knew that to devote oneself to the religion of art meant challenging cultural norms and attaining proper training. This struggle would be great, and the ambitious woman artist might need creative hate to achieve her goal. If others of lesser commitment or talent stood in the path of the aspiring woman artist, they must be dealt with and not allowed to demean the art itself or to impede one’s progress. This ruthlessness Thea Kronborg must learn as she gives birth to herself as true artist. As her voice teacher in Chicago tells her, if one is to become an artist, “one had to be born again” and “owed nothing to anybody” (*SOL* 378).

By the time of the composition of *The Song of the Lark*, Cather was well acquainted with the world of opera, the struggle to maintain one’s position in that world, and the rivalries that both hindered and advanced one’s growth as an artist. In using Thea as a prototype for the true woman artist, Cather instilled in her protagonist a competitive spirit and resentment of rivals of lesser talent, both personality traits consonant with the realities of aspiring singers of Cather’s own

day. In the October 1, 1895, issue of *The Musical Times and Singing-Class Circular* a column titled “Jealousy and Genius” justified the evident rivalry and jealousy among singers as “ingrained in the artistic temperament” (653).

The writer asserts that the prima donna is not immune to this temperament and that generally vocalists are less appreciative of talent in a rival than are instrumentalists (654). Cather was conscious of these troubling dynamics among singers, for she had not only heard the greatest opera voices but had by 1915 also interviewed several divas, including Lillian Nordica, the model for Cressida Garnet of “The Diamond Mine.” Cressida, like Thea, places her family among her “natural enemies” (*SOL* 240), and she succeeds by sheer force of will (“Diamond Mine” 400).

“Everything but her driving power Cressida had to get from the outside,” Cather writes, and through sheer power of her professionalism Cressida strives to hold her position against a “Slavic rival” (422).

That women struggling to establish themselves as legitimate artists would come together as a community of supportive sisters was, though, only myth. The prima donna who boards at Crow’s Nest in Cather’s early story, for example, sneers “at the chilly style of the great Australian soprano who was singing for a thousand dollars a night down at the auditorium” (1). The reference no doubt is to the well-known and sometimes colorful rivalry between Lillian Nordica and the Australian soprano Nellie Melba. The stormy, on-again, off-again friendship between the two sopranos had blared in newspaper headlines while Cather was a young journalist. Believing herself a victim of subterfuge at the hands of her co-star, tenor Jean de Reske, and losing the role of Brünnhilde to Madame Melba, Nordica declared herself “Driven Out by Foreigners” (Glackens 189). Headlines announced

the unthinkable—“Opera Without Nordica” (Glackens 185). By 1902 the rivalry had cooled, at least publicly, and Nordica and Melba were said to have buried the hatchet (212). Cather had long realized that rivalry was coincident with pursuing and achieving diva status, and she traces carefully in her novel Thea’s reaction to those individuals who would block her progress.

While *The Song of the Lark* has long been studied as both a female bildungsroman and a Künstlerroman, little attention has been paid to the significant impact of rivalry on Thea in her journey to becoming a true artist. Early in the novel, Thea must contend with a rival—Lily Fisher, “the angel-child of the Baptists” (62). Three times, Cather refers to Lily as Thea’s rival while Lily’s promoter Mrs. Livery Johnson is dubbed a natural enemy (59-62). Upon Herr Wunsch’s insistence, Thea dutifully performs a piece that has little appeal to the untrained ears of her audience, but she resents that not she but a girl of lesser talent gains the applause. In a crucial step to a self-assertion as an artist, though, she finally resolves that she would rather “be hated than be stupid” (64). Here is her first acknowledgment that the only true rival is the art itself and that to achieve artistic success one must stand alone.

While we may never know if Cather read Lillian Nordica’s posthumously published tract “Hints for Singers” (Nordica died in 1914), Nordica stated clearly what a singer like Thea would have to do: “One Must Be Ambitious to do one’s best, to be IT; not ambitious for what They say, or ambitious for the accumulation of a fortune, but to secure perfection in art” (qtd. in Glackens 352).

Cather understood that perfection in art requires a fiercely competitive nature and the drive to overcome the most difficult things. Both of these Thea has. She cannot afford interference from the less committed or less talented. As a result, she counts among her “natural enemies” (103) even her siblings whose jealousy is “an inevitable response of the dull to the gifted” (Peck 122). The indefinable “something” in Thea is an “innate superiority” which she recognizes and

embraces (Cather, “Joseph and His Brothers” 867). Thea finally reveals to her mentor Harsanyi that the “something” that had always been within her she has felt obligated to protect “even from herself” (*SOL* 216). Demaree Peck calls this trait Thea’s “primitive romantic ego” that accounts for her categorizing the people she meets into two groups: “Those whom [she] rejects as rivals and those whom she claims as her disciples” (121).

Understanding that to become a true artist she must succeed or fail in a lone endeavor, Thea charges at difficulties. Harsanyi, her music teacher in Chicago, observes that “[s]he ran to meet [difficulties] as if they were foes she had long been seeking, seized them as if they were destined for her and she for them” (175). Yet another kind of natural enemy, the difficulties of the art form itself become her rivals. After hearing Dvorak’s “New World Symphony” in Chicago, Thea emerges from the



Nellie Melba as Ophelia, 1897. Photo courtesy of the Philip H. Ward Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.



concert hall convinced that the world has become her enemy, its people, buildings, and wagons trying to take from her the ecstatic feeling that obsessed her soul: "All these things . . . had to be met, they were lined up against her, they were there to take something from her. Very well; they should never have it" (201). Peck notes that shortly after these events, Thea returns by train to Moonstone and that her "fiercely competitive" nature becomes blatant defiance (110). Observing a sickly girl in her car, Thea smiles "with the natural contempt of strength for weakness" (*SOL* 217); girls of this kind pose no threat to her and cannot hope to rival her in determination or self-assurance.

Thea's subsequent experiences in Chicago as she accompanies Madison Bowers's students reinforce her belief in her own power. She resents that Bowers throws out "life-preservers" for "stupid people" who have little talent but big checkbooks (251). She hunts out new living quarters because she can't get along with girls of her own age: "I didn't come here to play kindergarten games," she quips (252). When Bowers warns her that she will need to temper her intolerance if she has any real talent and hopes to benefit from it, she replies to Bowers as if he, too, is an enemy who is selling out art for profit: "Well, that's the money I'll have to go without . . ." she retorts (252). Thea develops "a deep contempt" for rivals like Mrs. Priest, a popular but imperfect singer, who, Thea thinks, should be exposed, "reproved and even punished for her shortcomings" (254). Thea's attitude, while in defense of true art, moves her further and further from a sisterhood of women. She nearly succumbs emotionally to her frustration as she sees mediocre singers meet with public approval. The soprano Jessie Darcey for whom she must play accompaniment becomes the locus of Thea's discouragement: "People want Jessie Darcey and the kind of thing she does; so what's the use?" she asks of Mrs. Harsanyi (257).

Cather specifically notes, though, that Thea's bitterness was "not the torment of personal jealousy. She had never thought of herself as even a possible rival of Miss Darcey" (261). Thea knows she is a "poor student of music," while Jessie Darcey is "a popular and petted professional" whom audiences love precisely because "she could not sing" (261). When she realizes that Jessie is only "a commonplace young woman" (261), Thea's resentment wanes. She concludes that "Jessie Darcey was only Lily Fisher under another name" (261). Still, Thea finds "something shameless and indecent" in Jessie's "not singing true" (262): "I hate her for the sake of what I used to think a singer might be," she remarks (264). For Thea, those of Jessie's ilk are obstacles to be thrust aside, for they are despoilers of art, the only rival that Thea will allow.

As Thea seizes opportunities to advance her standing in the music world, she becomes "very much interested in herself" (278), and she must discover the link between her creative self and the world beyond her. This discovery comes in Panther Canyon where Thea, isolated from her contemporary community of women, reaffiliates with her creative foremothers. She distinguishes again between enemies and disciples, classifying among the former the Indian women who only carried the water and among the latter the women who crafted the water vessels. One group was the stupid faces of her childhood and Bowers' studio; the other, the talented divas of their own stage. She feels no rivalry with the water carriers, but the fashioners of the jars challenge her "to do one's best, and help to fulfill some desire

of the dust that slept there" (306). True women artists are never rivals for Thea; they are links in a chain of being and becoming a vessel for one's art. "Higher obligations" now call her (308), and she makes a commitment to meet head-on the most difficult of rivals—that is, perfection in art.

With this sense of determination, Thea is ready to become a diva. The night before departing for Germany she dreams again of "a struggle with Mrs. Livery Johnson's daughter" (381), but she arises impassioned to seize the opportunity before her and enters "the pettiness of prima-donna-dom" ("Jealousy and Genius" 654). Cather titles this portion of her novel simply "Kronborg," objectifying Thea as a successful artist who is recognized by last name only. Thea's accompanist Landry attributes her success to a "big" and "rich" personality (448), that nebulous attribute Cather ascribed to all artists. "Against it," Landry argues, "intelligence and musicianship and habits of industry don't count at all" (448). He admits, though, that Thea's fierce competitiveness made other girls "mortally afraid of her" when she was a student in Berlin. They called her "die Wölfin" (449). She tells Dr. Archie that she now leads a life "full of jealousies and disappointments"; she has come to hate people "who do contemptible work and who get on just as well as you do" (458). But, she continues, "If you love the good thing vitally, enough to give up for it all that one must give up for it, then you must hate the cheap thing just as hard" (458-459). Such hate might result in "bitter contempts" (458) and a hardening of the self that "makes you risk everything and lose everything," but it "drives you through fire" (459). In her "Hints to Singers" Lillian Nordica acknowledged that this is the sacrifice singers must make for "the *one* great thing" (qtd. in Glackens 351), that is, for art itself.

The Kronborg section shows Thea as not yet a diva but on the cusp of becoming one. In dismissing the non-threatening rivals of her youth and early musical training, Thea does not, however, dismiss all rivalries. Thea envies but admires some of her competitors. Madame Necker she says is "a great artist," even when she is not in voice (433). When Thea's chance comes to sing *Sieglinde*, Fred is hopeful that Madame Necker, who is singing Brünnhilde, may help her, "if it's not one of [Necker's] sore nights" (439). In fact, Madame Necker does say "something nice" to Thea after this performance but later becomes "chilly and disapproving, distinctly hostile" (470). Thea feels acutely the rejection by Madame Necker, for she "had always felt that she and Necker stood for the same sort of endeavor" (470). She is bitterly disappointed to discover that to Madame Necker "[e]very fresh voice was an enemy" (470). Now on the receiving end of a professional rivalry, Thea must become even more self-absorbed to survive.

Some attribute her subsequent success to "dramatic temperament," others to "explosive force" or "projecting power" (477). Ethan Mordden cites from a now obscure early 1900s work, *The Prima Donna's Handbook* by Lotte Heinotz, the five rules of temperament for prima donnas: using caprice, thriving on danger, exercising control, practicing ruthlessness, and allowing no competition (69-70). "Charity [was] pious and loyalty admirable," but the only way to avoid rivalry was "to be the only one around who sings your particular roles" (Mordden 69, 76). Harsanyi knows this, and after hearing Thea's crowning performance he confidently states, "She will sing all the great rôles . . ." (*SOL* 477).

Cather concludes her novel by asserting that only a great artist knows how difficult it is to be truthful (477), to one's self, one's passion, and one's art. The Thea who leaves the hall after a triumphant performance has vanquished her enemies, defeated her rivals, and become a great artist; yet she stands apart from the appreciative crowd. One might speculate that her struggles are far from over, for, like Madame Necker, her voice will one day fail, and a "fresh young voice" will rival hers (470). In her 1932 Preface to the revised edition of *The Song of the Lark*, Cather wrote that Thea is "a talented young girl, 'fighting her way'" to the top (v). She is also an accomplished prima donna who will have to fight to stay there.

Not only for Thea but also for other characters like Lucy Gayheart (who admittedly lacks the same degree of talent as Thea), a supportive network of women dissolves before what others perceive as the artist's pride and haughtiness. But Cather does not align herself with such small-mindedness. For Cather and her female artists, the only rival was the art itself, and it demanded that one compete with all her energies to achieve perfection. Anything less was unacceptable. For Thea and others, incompetent rivals for popular acclaim were to be dismissed, sometimes harshly, but always without regret. There was, after all, only "one great thing," and to achieve it required a passion that would admit no rival.

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## A Message from the President

Dear Constituents,

Addressing you as "constituents" may seem a little strange. Or worse, in this election year, it may seem that I've fallen prey to hearing too many speeches by political candidates. Even one of the typical stump speeches may seem like too many!

But I address you this issue as "constituents" for a far different reason.

Of course, every organization owes a lot to a few. I shudder to think of where we would be without the many talents and exhausting hours of hard work of our Executive Director. I recognize the leadership of Jane Hood and others who helped raise the matching funds for the Endowment. There would be no coming seminar without Bob Thacker and John Murphy, just as there would not have been countless spring conferences without Steve Shively. We could never have taken on the Cather Prairie without a Jim Fitzgibbon on hand to manage it. Kudos to you all!

However, to look just at a few is to miss most of the story. A foundation such as ours is truly a whole each of whose parts is vital and integral. We who meet as a Board of Governors, or those who consult as a Board of Advisors, can only map and track, propose and execute those goals and activities that you, the constituents, will support. Without the great number of you who belong to the Foundation and support its activities, the Foundation could do very little.

We are now, however, doing a lot. How much we have been able to accomplish and how much we will yet accomplish rests entirely in your hands and hearts.

As one example of this, you saw in the previous issue a printing of all the donors to the endowment. This list is not just names, and the amounts given are not just dollars, even as important as our names and dollars are. The list is a chart of your devotion to Cather, a barometer of the winds that waft us toward our aims, a graph registering the health of our pursuit of the mission entrusted to us: the promotion of Willa Cather and her works.

At the same time as we have meet the NEH challenge, we have also been laying plans for the renovation of the Moon Block and setting our sights on France in 2007 for the International Seminar. Right at this moment, recipients of the Norma Ross Walter Scholarship are continuing their educations. You, the constituent parts, made this possible.

In the near tomorrows we have to begin work on the Moon Block, assure the success of the Seminar, increase the funding available for scholarships and scholarly work, and somehow still keep our cash-flow in order. Only you, the constituent parts, can take us to the next step. Only you, each of you and all of you together, can give the Cather Foundation the future that our past efforts have now made possible for us.

From all of us to all of you: many, many thanks.

Sincerely,  
Charles A. Peck

# Vissi D'Arte: The Female Artist in Cather and Colette

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What can Willa Cather and Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette (known as Colette), such apparently disparate writers and personalities, have in common other than the coincidence of their common birth year (1873)? Ellen Moers posed broad commonalities in her study *Literary Women* and later offered more specific ones in an article celebrating the centennial of their birth year where she cites “their one similarity: an obsession with the figure of the mother” and their depiction of “queenlike figures of advanced years,” “earth mothers and pioneer mothers,” and “aging whores and opera singers with young lovers” who exude a “sexual charm” (52).

However, as I view the subject, the similarity that Cather and Colette have most in common is a fascination with the figure of the female artist incarnated as a performing artist, and my study confines itself to this topic, thus omitting Moers’ allusion to the maternal figure which I believe requires its own study. While both authors have a body of fiction depicting female performing artists at various stages in their careers, this study focuses on the artist heroines of their early novels who overcome a series of challenges with regard to the expression of their art and the confirmation of their respective artistic identities: in Cather’s case, Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and in Colette’s case, Renée Néré in *The Vagabond* (1911). Both portrayals are autobiographical and reflect the authors’ personal conflicts in establishing an artistic identity and subsequently a career in the arts. They also reflect the authors’ concepts of creativity as they pertain to the development and flowering of the female artist as well as their thoughts on writing as an art.

Why did Cather and Colette choose to depict performing artists as their heroines relatively early in their literary careers? It is evident that both had an admiration for stage performers and were around them from a young age. “Colette came of age among performers, amateur and professional” (Thurman 90) from the start of her married life in Paris with her first husband Henry Gauthier-Villars, known as Willy. Willy was among other things a writer, journalist, critic, and frequenter of many Parisian circles. Later, Colette found that only on stage “could she express her inner struggles” (Francis and Gontier 258) and explore conflicts such as the nature of love and sexuality and the role of art in her life. As for Cather, her interest in performing began in childhood and continued in her years at the University of Nebraska where she began to write theatre criticism. During her numerous years of theatre reviewing, Cather saw performers both great and ordinary. She was enthralled by the power and art of legendary actresses such as Bernhardt, Marlowe, Terry, Modjeska, and Duse and opera singers such as Homer, Farrar, and Fremstad, and as a result “the theatre became a holy place” for her (Lee 52).

In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather traces Thea’s path from childhood in the prairies, a “provincial world of utter

ignorance,” to adulthood and the pinnacle of opera stardom at the Metropolitan, a full-blown “design” that Cather would regret years later, preferring to have recounted “the latter part of the story by suggestion merely” (vi-vii), as she states in her 1932 preface echoing her advice to younger writers in “The Novel Dêmeublé” (1922) “to present their scene by suggestion rather than by enumeration. The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification” (40). Colette would agree with Cather’s creed of telling a story by suggestion. In fact, Colette believed that “literature is the art of suggestion” (Francis and Gontier 239), and she emphasized the importance of a writer’s learning what to omit (Mitchell 107).

Cather also became critical of *The Song of the Lark* partly because she believed she had worked “too directly from immediate emotions and impressions” (Lewis 93). However, Colette had no such qualms with regard to autobiography. In fact, it was her stock-in-trade. Virtually everything in Colette’s life became “material” for her books “transmuted into art” (Massie 60-61), to the extent that Renée may be viewed as none other than Colette herself (Crosland 136-137). Colette actually wrote *The Vagabond* while touring as a music hall performer.

There are several critical theories concerning autobiography in Cather’s fiction. Hermione Lee declares that Cather’s “life is in every page of her writing” (22). More specifically, Sharon O’Brien argues that for Cather and Thea, “the creative process meant entering into a relationship with another person who was both different from and similar to the self” (xii). Janis Stout proposes that in Thea, Cather depicts the artistic development of Wagnerian soprano Olive Fremstad, “whose life in some ways paralleled Cather’s own,” and by creating a heroine who represented both Fremstad and herself, Cather became the person “who had so long intrigued her, a performing

artist” (129). While Thea may represent Cather masquerading as Fremstad, in Colette’s case there is no masquerade and no stand-in. She is unapologetically herself in the person of Renée Néré, a writer turned performer who is the self-conscious narrator of *The Vagabond*.

At 33, Renée is a recent divorcée, having liberated herself with great effort from the shackles of marriage to an adulterous husband who, like Willy, had also cheated her of certain author’s rights. Renée takes great pride in her career as a music hall performer, dancing and “acting in pantomimes” because this career tests her physical strength and provides financial independence. Although performing has turned Renée into a social outcast and she is viewed as “a woman of letters who has turned out badly” (24), she ignores her low social standing, feeling that “the only real things are dancing, light, freedom and music,” “making rhythm of one’s thought and translating it



Colette around the time of the publication of *The Vagabond*. Photo courtesy of [www.colette.org](http://www.colette.org).

into beautiful gestures” (41). Renée has not forgotten the novels she has written and recalls the sensations she associates with the writing process in vivid detail:

To write . . . is to feel the divine fever mounting to one’s cheeks and forehead. . . . idle hours curled up in the hollow of the divan, and then the orgy of inspiration from which one emerges stupefied and aching all over. . . . To write is to put one’s innermost self passionately upon the tempting paper, at such frantic speed that sometimes one’s hand struggles and rebels, overdriven by the impatient god who guides it—and to find, next day, in place of the golden bough that bloomed miraculously in that dazzling hour, a withered bramble and a stunted flower. (12)

In speaking of the divine fever, the impatient god and the golden bough, Renée is speaking very much in the vein of those artists who view their responses to the muse as a sacred calling, but, in her case, the calling is a pagan one. The god Renée worships is Dionysian, and the rite of passage into art’s holy kingdom verges on the Bacchic. For Renée, as for her creator Colette, life and art are perceived in a totally sensual way, and no division or duality is perceivable between mind and body. The artist is both a receptacle of divine inspiration and the aggressor seeking satisfaction from an equally divine urging, highly suggestive of an androgynous guiding principle at work, and indeed, “the concept of androgyny” has been termed “central” to Colette’s art (Massie 66). In Colette’s *The Pure and the Impure*, she refers to certain individuals, including herself, as possessing a certain duality of mind, as being in other words, mental hermaphrodites (60).

As Renée describes the art of writing, it is essentially an erotic act, and she even sums it up at another point by referring to “the voluptuous pleasure” she savored in writing her second novel (24). In contrast to Renée’s volubility regarding the creative process is Thea’s near silence. Even as the divine “Kronborg,” she can only say to Doctor Archie “what one really strives for in art . . . is so far away, so beautiful . . . that there’s nothing one can say about it” (551). A few insights regarding the nature of Thea’s artistry in her prime are presented by the narratorial voice, by suitor Fred Ottenburg, and by music teacher Andor Harsanyi. Fred recalls composer Mahler’s remarks after having conducted one of Thea’s performances in Germany: “Miss Kronborg . . . seems to sing for the idea” (483), suggesting that Thea’s approach is a cerebral one; but when Fred queries Harsanyi about Thea’s power and beauty in performing the role of *Sieglinde*, Harsanyi responds: “It is every artist’s secret—passion” (570).

To Harsanyi’s comments, Cather’s narrative voice interposes that growth for artists is “a refining of the sense of truthfulness,” and in that performance Thea was merely free enough to come into “full possession” of all she had stored up within, able to bring forth “the fullness of the faith she had

kept before she knew its name or its meaning” (571). Within this sacred or Neoplatonic context, the artist appears as a receptacle, she who contains and expresses the Apollonian ideal of perfect balance, form, truth, and beauty.<sup>1</sup> As a conduit, the artist is entrusted with a sacred and inviolable mission and attains a priestly status. That is not to say that Thea’s art lacks dimensions of physicality. In point of fact, in performing grand opera, they would be a requisite. Cather connects Thea’s artistry to great reserves of disciplined energy, will, and concentration. Hints of sensuality may appear along with elements of autoeroticism, but most frequently, they appear in relation to images in nature, the fount of Thea’s creativity. This is evident when Cather comments further on Thea’s attributes during the same performance, declaring that Thea’s “body was absolutely the instrument of her idea. Not for nothing, had she kept it so severely, kept it filled with such energy and fire. All that deep-rooted vitality flowered in her voice. . . . She felt like a tree bursting into bloom” (571).

For Cather, art is perceived as a union of mind and body with the cerebral and the divine in the ascendancy. It is as if Thea’s energy and fire had been purified and freed from any libidinal overtones, the one exception being her experiences in Panther Canyon where music comes to her in a “sensuous form”

and “her power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation” (373). In her prime, she recalls the lesson learned from the Ancient People: “[Y]ou can’t know it with your mind,” only in your body, “an animal sort of feeling” (554). Even in Panther Canyon, however, sensation is eventually submerged in “the idea,” as when Thea reminisces about the moonflowers over Mrs. Tellamantez’s doorway and feels as if she “had opened up in white flowers every night,” but Cather adds that such “recollections were a part of her mind and personality” (374).

It is in Panther Canyon that Thea resolves her crisis—that is, the affirmation of her identity as an artist and the recognition that she must pursue her art without delay and without impediments. This is accomplished through her affinity with the canyon’s “elaborated female landscape” (Moers 258) and her connection with the ancient women potters and the forms they captured in their humble art

where they learned not only to express their desire, but to do so “as beautifully as they could” (379). Thea absorbs their entire essence, essentially giving birth to herself as an artist. At the same time she identifies with the Indian youth who ensnares the eagle in his net and struggles to capture it, symbolic of her effort to fulfill her desire, that “glorious striving of human art” (399), and suggesting that, as in the case of Renée, the process is of an androgynous nature. From that point on, Thea dedicates herself solely to the full development and expression of her art. Years later, Doctor Archie suggests to the great Kronborg that she might need a personal life aside from her art, but she declares that her work has become her personal life (546).

Renée’s crisis arises when a rich suitor named Max



Willa Cather dressed to attend the opera in Chicago, 1895. Photo courtesy of the Cather Foundation.

insinuates himself into her life, completely unnerving her and disturbing her sense of solitude, freedom, independence, and artistic fulfillment. With its gypsy life and vagabondage, as Renée refers to it, performing has given Renée the opportunity to create a new myth of herself, to be reborn, as her name implies, with “the glorious impulse of a serpent sloughing off its dead skin” (159). While Fred is quick to recognize that Thea is not “a nesting bird,” Max audaciously proposes marriage. The proposal only heightens Renée’s penchant for introspection and self-analysis, and it brings to the fore her fears of aging, loneliness, and the loss of free will, her memories of submission and servitude in marriage, and, above all, the reawakening of her great enemy—desire. Unlike Cather’s concept of desire as depicted in Thea’s quest—that is, desire as a sacred artistic longing seeking expression—desire has one main connotation for Colette and Renée: sexual longing. By reawakening her desire, Max personifies an unwelcome presence in the new “pure” existence she has carved out for herself during her “long, moral convalescence” (55). Ultimately, Renée turns down Max’s proposal and accepts a tour abroad, thus affirming her identity as an artist and renouncing a personal life that might affect her career and diminish her hard-won freedom and independence.

While divergences exist in Cather’s and Colette’s concepts of creativity and their characterizations of the female performing artist, there are numerous convergences. For one, both Thea and Renée forsake a personal life in order to dedicate themselves solely to their art. Cather makes it evident from the earliest pages in *The Song of the Lark* that her heroine’s artistry is innate. As Thea’s first music teacher Wunsch declares, it “must be in the baby” (99), yet Thea also creates herself as an artist as does Renée; and, in both cases, the artistry is born out of an androgynous self. Both identify with and draw sustenance from nature in their paths to artistic identity and fulfillment. Cather traces Thea’s inborn connection to nature beginning in her native Moonstone landscape and culminating in Panther Canyon, a relationship that forms a major source of her psychic strength and artistic drive. Although Thea must leave all of her Moonstone heritage behind her, she continues to draw strength from it in the form of memories and dreams of childhood even when she becomes the great Kronborg. Renée’s associations with nature surface in memories of her lost innocence in childhood and young adulthood, memories frequently arising from scenes in nature, particularly in gardens, and often invoked during her train journeys, but not confined to them.

Without a doubt, the figure of the female performing artist is one that grips the imagination, and she is a powerful symbol of great mythic proportions. She calls to mind a generative power in line with those earth mothers on the scale of Cather’s Antonia and Colette’s very own mother Sido. Returning to Moers’ citing of the two obsessions shared by Cather and Colette—the maternal and the female artist as performer—I view the two as a Janus-faced image of the female creative principle. Yet, Cather’s and Colette’s female performing artists, Thea and Renée, have also chosen to incorporate male attributes in their self-creation and thus their artistry is born of an androgynous nature, suggesting that both novelists saw beyond the comfortable categories of male and female. Their portrayals of the female performing artist incorporate dualities and sometimes seeming contradictions. Thus, another similarity they share—not discussed by Moers—is the artistic genius that enabled them to create the

female performer not only as an artist but also as a complex human being.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> For Bernice Slotte’s general reference to Apollonian and Dionysian forces in Willa Cather’s art, see *The Kingdom of Art* (81). For an earlier discussion of the topic, see Moseley.

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## Foundation Seeks Executive Director

*The Cather Foundation* (Red Cloud, NE) is seeking an Executive Director whose principal duties are managing our operations and finances; fund raising and grant writing; oversight of publications, educational programming, and historic sites; staff management; and public relations. Consult the position announcement on the Foundation’s Web site at <http://www.willacather.org>. For further information, contact Dr. Charles A. Peek, [peek@unk.edu](mailto:peek@unk.edu).

# Willa Cather and Louise Burroughs: Introducing A Must-Read Correspondence

Merrill M. Skaggs, Drew University

When a new collection of 75 unseen letters from Willa Cather to Louise Burroughs was announced at the 2005 Cather Colloquium at Drew University, I was invited to introduce it in the *Newsletter and Review*. I survey here only some main points of this unheard-of trove. I believe that every point I make below will make somebody a fine article, and if nobody else writes it, then I will! You first, of course.

## *Who is Louise and what is she:*

Louise Guerber, born in Pennsylvania in 1900, was an independent and audacious lass in her mid-twenties when she drove across the country to take a job as a research librarian at the Denver Public Library. When a little lady came in for arcane books and revealed that she was Willa Cather, young Louise responded, "Conrad and Cather." The facilities of the Denver Public Library were quickly put at Cather's disposal with the eager cooperation of the whole staff, thanks to Louise's enthusiasm. Louise also "toured" Cather around nearby Colorado sites in her car. Crowded mountain roads made Cather nervous. (Think of "The Old Beauty.") Nevertheless, the warmest friendship began, carefully cultivated by both parties. Later Louise returned East to a job as preservationist in the Metropolitan Museum, modeled for the Head Curator and painter, and then, Reader, she married him! Burroughs died in 1934 of tuberculosis. Through all these life changes, Louise Burroughs and Cather maintained an affectionate contact, largely through letters, all carefully preserved by the research librarian/preservationist. Louise Guerber Burroughs died in a retirement center in Princeton in 1985.

*What the collection is:* The Burroughs collection consists of all the letters from Cather to Louise Guerber Burroughs, written from their meeting in 1925 to Cather's letter of "surrender" in 1945 to her inevitable diminishment. Young Louise also kept a diary explaining in lively detail their meeting in Denver and their re-establishing a closer friendship once Louise moved to New York to work in the Metropolitan Museum. Many thank you notes for gifts of candy, flowers, gin, cigarettes, books, plus more specific items such as sports shirts for walking in Grand Manan, also follow. Beyond the journalistic record and the letters, Louise also saved all the newspaper and magazine clippings mentioning Cather that crossed her vision. Finally, she saved a few letters she received from Edith Lewis, after Cather's death, as well as a letter from Annie Pavelka that Cather had forwarded to her.

## *What the collection tells us:*

\*How Cather used the eagerly-offered help of the Denver Public Library to find details she wished to incorporate as background facts in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

\*How Cather sustained a friendship across a generation gap, for twenty years.

\*How Cather managed in her correspondence to convey attention and admiring affection while revealing astonishingly little of what she was mulling for her work.

\*Cather's strategies for not going where she did

not want to go—specifically to commencement ceremonies in which she would get superfluous honorary degrees—while she started occasional false rumors about her health or whereabouts at particular moments.

\*Cather's awareness of what critics and scholars were saying about her in print, and her contempt for their inaccuracies. She certainly cared about her "public."

\*The envelopes in which the letters were sent are also saved with care. What return address Cather used may reveal how determined or anxious she is to know her letter is safe. Return addresses alone—few with a prominent WILLA CATHER—are worth study in this collection.

\*Amusing backstories. Such as:

When Cather checked in to New York Presbyterian Hospital under Edith Lewis's name, to preserve her privacy, she was still annoyed that her mail got lost.

\*A very intriguing, if sporadic, list of books Cather read, refused to read, liked, and hated. She reports re-reading Flaubert's *Salammbô* for the ninth time—as she judges by the list of dates on her fly-leaf.

\*When Cather admits she dreads revising *The Song of the Lark* for the Autograph Edition of 1937, and says she hasn't re-read the book in 16 years, she invites Louise to cut the Epilogue, since Louise loves that book. Louise actually submits such a finished task! No evidence exists in this collection, however, to indicate how Cather treated or accepted Louise's suggestions. What we can conclude is that Cather disliked the task facing her of cutting the end of *The Song of the Lark*. What she finally did about it is an open question.

*Issue Editor's Note:* A more complete description of the contents of the Burroughs Collection, by Lucy K. Marks of the Drew University Library Special Collections, is available at <http://depts.drew.edu/lib/visions/visions18.php#burroughs>. As Marks says, the collection is a "fascinating and moving record of a professional and personal friendship deeply treasured by both women," and Cather scholars will find it an invaluable resource.

For Louise Burroughs  
from Willa Cather  
January 1st  
1940 / This bunch of ginger  
is no doubt the best there  
is in the whole world. But as  
you wanted it, here  
it is, with good wishes  
for the New Year, W.S.L.

Willa Cather's inscription in *April Twilights* to Louise Burroughs. From "The Willa Cather Collection," Drew University Library Special Collections, Madison, New Jersey.

# Willa Cather and Myra Kelly in *McClure's Magazine*

Lisbeth Strimple Fuisz, George Washington University

The advertisement section of the November 1906 issue of *McClure's* features a series of eleven full-page ads promoting the authors of works in upcoming installments of the magazine. Each page juxtaposes two authors, with copy and illustrations. S.S. McClure, the founder and editor-in-chief of the magazine, pioneered this type of self-promotional advertising and launched many writers' careers. One ad promises more stories by Myra Kelly and Willa Cather (fig. 1). Kelly receives top billing. At the time, she was the more popular writer, having had eleven "East Side stories" published in *McClure's* from Dec. 1902-Aug. 1906. McClure's book company McClure, Phillips had published a collection of these stories in 1904 entitled *Little Citizens: The Humors of School Life*, which garnered Kelly wide acclaim. Although Cather had published *April Twilights* (1903) and *The Troll Garden* (1905) by then, the latter under the imprint of McClure, Phillips & Company, only two of the stories from that volume, "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "Paul's Case," had appeared in *McClure's*, in Jan. 1905 and May 1905, respectively. The advertisement implies a relationship between the authors.

I argue that these writers—and especially the texts named in the ad, Kelly's "East Side stories" and Cather's "The Namesake"—identify education as an important means of nation building, as a way to create a common identity, culture, and history. By publishing their work in a nationally circulated magazine, Cather and Kelly collaborated in the larger process whereby the media and other institutions defined which topics and identities were central and which were marginal for their readers. Although Kelly only wrote short stories, Cather also contributed to this process as an editor of *McClure's* from 1906 until 1911, when she took a leave of absence from her position as Managing Editor. Cather's editorial duties included selecting material for the magazine and ghostwriting the majority of Georgine Milmine's popular series on Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, that ran during 1907-8.<sup>1</sup> Before becoming involved with the Eddy manuscript, Cather may have even selected the two Kelly stories that appeared in *McClure's* in 1906. *McClure's* and other general interest magazines enabled individuals to imagine that they belonged to a group of culturally similar people experiencing a common history: a nation. To read Kelly's and Cather's work in the context of *McClure's* expands current understandings of the cultural work popular magazines did in the early twentieth century.

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that print culture makes the conception of a nation possible.

He takes as one example thousands of people reading a daily newspaper, each reader imagining all the readers bound together in this common enterprise as a community, even though s/he will never meet most of these fellow readers (35). Working from Anderson's premise, Lisa Duggan demonstrates that newspapers arrange content in hierarchical categories to designate what should matter to their readers, while marginalizing or excluding certain topics and peoples (32-4). Popular magazines, the first

print material to achieve national circulation in the United States in the late nineteenth century, thus helped readers imagine the contours and boundaries of the nation (Schneirov).

More established magazines such as *Harper's* and *Atlantic Monthly* had restricted readerships, the middle and upper classes of the eastern United States. In contrast, the general interest magazines founded in the 1890s, like *McClure's*, gained larger, more diverse readerships by the early twentieth century. In 1906, *McClure's* had a circulation of 414,000, and by 1907, a circulation of 472,000; it numbered among the seven highest circulating magazines from 1900-1913 (Schneirov appendix one). Priced as low as ten cents a copy, these magazines were more affordable than their predecessors. Their editors sought to make them appealing to a regionally diverse group and imagined their audience, which included professionals as well

as the white-collar working class, to be "nationally oriented citizens" (Schneirov 124). For example, in articles exposing local corruption in politics and business, *McClure's* writers identified national patterns, implying that local matters held national interest.<sup>2</sup> These magazines also gave national significance to certain people and events. Thus, they helped their readers to conceptualize the abstract notion of a nation, a homogenous group of individuals sharing a culture and a past.

How does *McClure's* construct the nation? How does it work disciplinarily to determine which topics are central for a national readership? How does it define national identity? To begin to answer these questions, I read Kelly's and Cather's fiction within the context in which readers first encountered them. I examine two issues of *McClure's*: December 1906, featuring Kelly's "Little Bo-Peep," and March 1907, featuring Cather's "The Namesake."

The December 1906 issue designates the child and the U.S. immigrant as interrelated topics for a national audience and defines American identity in relationship to these topics. Visually, the magazine highlights children, from Blendon Campbell's



McCLURE'S FOR 1907

MYRA KELLY'S popularity with McClure readers is of a kind that makes it enough to say that we shall have half a dozen stories from her during the coming year. They will be mainly East Side stories, stories like the ones you have found best, the only difference being that they grow better as the young author's skill grows wider.

"THE NAMESAKE," by Willa Sibert Cather, will be added to our list of stories by this writer. That list has made a mark in proportion to its strength rather than its length. But "The Namesake" is bigger than any of its forerunners. It deals with the influence of a dead boy on the career of a great artist.

Advertisement in *McClure's Magazine*, November 1906.

cover illustration of baby Jesus, to a prominently placed Sapolio advertisement featuring infants, to artwork by Sigismond De Ivanowski showing suffering Russian children and by Albert Sterner showing youthful Russian immigrants arriving in New York City. Short stories and non-fictional articles reinforce the importance of children, including the third installment of Lincoln Steffens' "Ben B. Lindsey: The Just Judge," in which Judge Lindsey indicts society for making children behave criminally. This issue of *McClure's* proposes that Americans should value children and keep them safe.

This issue also suggests that the U.S. can assimilate European immigrants. It constructs the United States as a society open to and benefited by immigration. Carl Schurz's "Reminiscences of a Long Life," which commends German-Americans' patriotism, signifies the assimilation of an earlier generation of European immigrants, and W.B. MacHarg's story "The Debts of Antoine," the promise of more recent immigrants. In the latter, the French immigrant Antoine personifies the virtues of civic responsibility when he nurses a sick neighbor, thereby containing the spread of the disease.

These topics and images of the American nation coalesce in Kelly's "Little Bo-Peep," the magazine's opening story. Like Kelly's previous eleven stories in *McClure's*, this one concerns the teacher Constance Bailey and her First-Reader Class at a public school on New York City's Lower East Side. The majority of her students are Jews who have emigrated from czarist Russia. Kelly's stories posit public education as the primary means of Americanizing these children. With humor and sympathy, her stories seek to allay nativist fears about the destabilizing effects of immigration on the moral and physical health of the American nation. Immigrant Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe during this time were often represented as physically unclean or diseased, and their bodily ills were read as signs of their moral and intellectual failings.<sup>3</sup> Many of the stories represent Miss Bailey promoting her students' health and hygiene, the first step in fitting them for American citizenship. Thus, Kelly's stories envision education as a nation-building tool and Jews as citizens in the making.

In "Little Bo-Peep," Kelly's concern with validating public education melds with her intention to engender in her readers sympathy for young Jewish immigrants. Kelly writes in the muckraking spirit of *McClure's*, which used fiction and investigative journalism to bring matters to the public's attention and to advocate for reforms.<sup>4</sup> "Little Bo-Peep" addresses the reasons Russian Jews immigrated to the U.S., a topic not broached in her previous stories. The title character is a cousin of Eva Gonorowsky, one of the fixtures of Kelly's East side stories. The class calls Eva's cousin "Little Bo-Peep" because, before her arrival, Eva showed them a picture of her cousin dressed in fancy clothes with sheep at her feet. Accompanying the text, a picturesque drawing by Frederic Dorr Steele reinforces Eva's description of her cousin (fig. 2). Eva explains to Miss Bailey that her cousin is coming from Russia because "it ain't healthy for her there no more" (115). The reader, aware of the revolutionary uprisings and vicious pogroms of recent years alluded to throughout the magazine, understands how "unhealthy" Russia is for Jews.<sup>5</sup> The child who arrives is horribly ill, having been flogged in Russia with the "knout" and forced to say "'I am Christian! I kiss the Cross!'" by her persecutors (119). When Eva's mother tells Miss Bailey what has happened, she reveals the child's wounds on

both the front and back of her body. Eva is upset by her cousin's condition, repeatedly telling Miss Bailey that the newcomer cannot be her cousin: "it ain't no child" (118). Eventually, under the gentle guidance of Miss Bailey who visits her at home, Little Bo-Peep is well enough to attend school. In class, she continues to improve.

One day, frightened by the medical examinations and vaccinations the children had to undergo at school, the child flees, gets lost, and eventually hides in a stable containing sheep. The fear and exertion cause her wounds to reopen and she dies amongst her "friends," the sheep (123). Kelly does not blame Miss Bailey; the "disaster," explains the narrator, probably would have been prevented had Miss Bailey been allowed to accompany her students to the examinations (120). The story demonstrates Miss Bailey's commitment to helping her students. When the child goes missing, Miss Bailey, her students, and their parents search frantically, a community galvanized to help its weakest member. In concert with other images in the magazine that emphasize the despotism of the Russian government and the victimization of its people, the story considers czarist Russia culpable for the child's death. It uses the image of a dead child to catalyze its readers' sympathies, proposing that Americans should concern themselves with the sufferings of Russian Jews and welcome them to the United States. Although Miss Bailey cannot save Eva's cousin, her compassion and diligence equip her to help other "greenies"—the story's term for newcomer (121). A subscriber to *McClure's* would have read of Miss Bailey's many successes with her students in previous stories and would have understood that the loss of Eva's cousin is a tragic exception to Kelly's vision of public schooling's vital role in the assimilation of immigrants.

However, the nature of the magazine, which brings readers, publishers, editors, and writers into "continual confrontation and implicit dialogue" (Duggan 34), allows the reader to interpret Kelly's story in ways that diverge from authorial and editorial intentions. A reader might find it ironic that the school, in an attempt to improve the students' health through medical intervention, plays a role in Little Bo-Peep's death. At the time, many immigrant parents did not believe that public schools should concern themselves with the health and hygiene of their students (Kraut 232). In June 1906, Jewish immigrant parents rioted in New York City to protest their children's participation in adenoid operations organized by the public schools; in a *New York Times* article detailing the riots, one interviewee mentions that similar riots had occurred four years previously when the schools sent children to have their eyes examined at a local hospital ("East Side Parents"). Despite Kelly's apparent intentions, the story expresses reservations about using education for nation building purposes.

"The Namesake" identifies education as a means of nation building by connecting it to a foundational moment in national history and identity, the Civil War. The March 1907 issue featuring Cather's story portrays the Civil War and its legacy as relevant to a national audience. "The Namesake" links the development of the national identity of its two main characters, Lyon Hartwell and his uncle, to the Civil War and to traditional educational practices. Three other pieces, an installment of Carl Schurz's "Reminiscences," Grace King's short story "The Clodhopper," and Thomas Nelson Page's



editorial "The Great American Question: The Special Plea of a Southerner," also consider the impact of the Civil War on the nation.

Both King and Page exhibit nostalgia for the pre-Civil War era. Immediately preceding Cather's, King's story narrates the attempt of Maria, a former slave who is called "the Clodhopper" for her expertise with the plow, to leave the plantation for the North. The story concludes with Maria begging "Marse George" for her old job back. She has returned to where she belongs, ever the faithful servant to her master. Like King, Page envisions the proper race relations in the "amity between the remnant of the old slaveholders and the old slaves" (571). Page abhors racial "assimilation" and believes miscegenation threatens the very identity of the United States: "Are we ready to make of the American people a Negroid nation?" (568). King's and Page's representations of racial relations imply that the Civil War has compromised American identity and the authors look to the pre-Civil War era for national models.

"The Namesake" also ignores realities of race relations in postbellum America and outwardly exhibits nostalgia, proposing that the classical studies of the past can still produce dutiful (white) male citizens. Lyon Hartwell explains that discovering a copy of the *Aeneid* that once belonged to his uncle (who is also his namesake) catalyzed his identification with his American heritage. Hartwell envisioned his uncle inspired by the epic's nationalism to participate, as a Union soldier, in the American Civil War. Hartwell's own reading inspires in him not only a connection to his homeland but also an ability to translate his sense of American-ness into art. The narrator notes early in the story that Hartwell produces quintessentially American sculptures, sculptures that memorialize the Civil War and other nation-building activities. Ostensibly, then, "The Namesake" valorizes duty to family and country by linking both Hartwell's and his uncle's sense of American identity with the act of reading the *Aeneid*, a nationalistic text.

By using the *Aeneid*, a cornerstone of the classical curriculum in the U.S., as the catalyst for her characters' national identification, Cather suggests the continuing importance of Greek and Latin texts to American students. Cather's image of a schoolboy studying the *Aeneid* at home with a tutor represents the pre-Civil War model of classical education. After the Civil War, innovations to this curriculum were made at the college level, broadening the scope of course offerings and allowing students to take electives. Land-grant universities, established by the Morrill Act of 1862, added vocational subjects like agriculture to the curriculum. These changes helped displace Latin and Greek from the consensus about what constituted a proper education. The masculine humanist ideal associated with the study of Greek and Latin and personified in the liberally educated gentleman no longer had the cultural authority of the scientist or the professional expert (Baynton). By locating her story in the post-Civil War era, Cather seems to suggest that the classical education and Latin text enabling her characters' metamorphoses are not irrelevant to the continuing development of the United States, as reforms to traditional educational practices implied.

Cather's story appears to propose that classical studies can still produce patriotic citizens and a unified national culture, one based on the values of ancient Roman and Greek culture such as duty to family and country.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this seeming nostalgia for the nineteenth-century classical curriculum, "The Namesake" questions the act of looking back. By layering two unreliable, first-person narrators (the unnamed fellow expatriate artist in the framing narrative and Hartwell in the inset narrative) the story foregrounds the act of interpretation and alerts the reader to other ways of understanding

Lyon Hartwell's experiences. The story creates tension by juxtaposing Hartwell's art with the narrative he tells of his visit to the United States. The particulars of his narrative suggest a darker version of national duty, of the costs incurred on the nation's behalf. The idealized sculpture Hartwell produces of his soldier uncle, entitled "The Color Sergeant," does not allude to what the story of his own heritage reveals: his uncle's violent death by dismemberment during the war. This sculpture and the romantic, patriotic tone with which Hartwell tells his version of his uncle's story suggests that Hartwell makes sense of the brutal death of a sixteen-year-old boy by making it into a narrative of national sacrifice. Hartwell's uncle cannot comment upon whatever meanings his nephew attaches to his

experience. The reader has only Hartwell's interpretation of his uncle's wartime experience, an interpretation mediated through artifacts like the copy of the *Aeneid*, the veteran's newspaper account of the battle in which Hartwell's uncle dies, and Civil War histories he reads.

The final image of Hartwell's uncle gestures to the price of duty that is usually elided from his sculptures by combining the image of the patriotic youth with that of his death. Hartwell imagines his uncle inspired by the *Aeneid* but unaware of the end that awaits him: "Oh, I could see him, there in the shine of the morning, his book idly on his knee, his flashing eyes looking straight before him, and at his side that grave figure [one of the Destinies] [. . .] seeing what he never saw, that great moment at the end, when he swayed above his comrades on the earthen wall" (498). Hartwell interprets the death as meaningful, but the boy's lack of knowledge about his fate suggests reservations about a national event predicated in part on the naiveté of young men inculcated with patriotic beliefs through canonical texts like the *Aeneid*. The narrative structure problematizes Hartwell's idealization and aestheticization of his uncle's death as well as the form his own nationalism takes.<sup>7</sup> It encourages readers to consider the ambiguities and contradictions of citizenship and nationhood embedded in Hartwell's tale.

Within the context of *McClure's*, Kelly's and Cather's work organizes national meanings for their readers, designating education as a relevant topic. The cumulative thrust of Kelly's East side stories is to validate public education's role in nation building and to advocate for young Jewish immigrants. Contradictions within "Little Bo-Peep," however, might lead the reader to question the schools' civilizing mission. Cather's story ostensibly links education to the production of a dutiful male citizenry, but the complex narrative structure ultimately



LITTLE BO-PEEP  
"her picture what comes out of Russia."

Illustration for Myra Kelly's "Little Bo-Peep," *McClure's Magazine*, December 1906.

questions the methods through which national identification is engendered in the Hartwells. It examines the mythologizing impulse behind patriotic images of national sacrifice. While Kelly's stories place education on the national agenda, "The Namesake" moves beyond that to interrogate the process of national meaning making. Placing Cather's magazine short fiction back in dialogue with now-forgotten writers such as Myra Kelly can yield further understanding of the cultural work popular magazines did in the early twentieth century.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For biographical information on Cather's career at *McClure's*, see Woodress and Sergeant. For the importance of her journalism to her career as a novelist, see Thacker and Urgo. For discussion of Cather's work on Milmine's biography of Eddy, see Bohlke and Stouck.

<sup>2</sup> For specific information about S.S. McClure's role as editor at *McClure's*, see Thacker, Lyon, and Schneirov. McClure's *Autobiography*, ghostwritten by Cather, is also informative.

<sup>3</sup> In *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the "Immigrant Menace,"* Alan Kraut examines representations of Eastern European and Russian Jews in American culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He coins the phrase "medicalized nativism" to denote anxieties about the hazards immigrants posed to public health. Nativists used these health concerns to justify anti-Semitic behavior and other forms of prejudice. For a discussion of Kelly's negotiation of the discourse of medicalized nativism, see Fuisz. For a more general treatment of the links between physical appearance and Jewish stereotypes in the last two centuries, see Gilman. Also see Marcus on ambivalent representations of Jews in *McClure's* and in Cather's fiction.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about *McClure's* muckraking, see Lyon and Schneirov.

<sup>5</sup> Revolutions swept the Russian empire from 1905-7 while pogroms against Jews intensified in the early twentieth century ("Russian Territorial"). In this issue of *McClure's*, Schurz and Wilkinson reference Russia's unrest as does artwork by De Ivanowski and Sterner.

<sup>6</sup> For more detailed overviews of the curricular changes in American schooling, see Schmidt and Rudolph. For additional arguments about Cather's relationship to debates over the place of Greek and Roman classics in American culture, see Michaels and Swift.

<sup>7</sup> Hartwell experiences a metaphoric dismemberment at the pivotal moment of connection to the United States. Moreover, despite his claims to American identity, Hartwell is an expatriate living in Paris.

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## Marge Van Meter: A Tribute

Betty Kort

Marcella "Marge" Van Meter died on September 26, 2006, at the age of 86. She was a member of the Cather Foundation Board of Governors for forty-one years and served on several other boards along the way. In 2003, she was named the Midland Woman of the Year at Midland Lutheran College.

Though a soft-spoken, petite woman, she lived out her life with energy and conviction. A veteran of World War II, she later married, had three children, and worked for the Federal government for over forty years.

Until her health began to fail, she seldom missed a Cather Foundation Board meeting and served the Foundation in a myriad of ways with a special interest in education. She understood what it means to be part of the Cather Community. At her death, she requested that the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Board of Governors serve as honorary pallbearers. I think I speak for the entire Board of Governors in saying that Marge will be missed and that the Foundation is a far better organization because of Marge's service.

# Saving Willa Cather's Birthplace

Cynthia Cather Burton, *Winchester Star*, with Ann Romines

Photographs by Linda Cather



Willa Cather's birthplace in Gore, Virginia.

The paint is peeling, the roof is rusted, the inside is filled with junk, and the historical marker is obscured by trees. Such is the state of Willa Cather's birthplace in Gore, Virginia.

"I apologize for the condition I've let this poor place get into," owner Charles Brill lamented on a recent summer afternoon as he stood in front of the two-story house where the Pulitzer Prize-winning author was born on December 7, 1873. The house was then the home of Cather's maternal grandmother, Rachel Seibert Boak.

Brill inherited the literary landmark from his parents, who bought the weatherboarded log structure in 1950. The home has been vacant for more than a decade. The last person to live there was his elderly aunt, a retired teacher who gave visitors copies of Cather's final novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. The novel, Cather's only one set in Virginia, takes place in Cather's birthplace, the village of Back Creek Valley (as Gore was formerly called). "My aunt was always asking me to pick up more copies of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* when I went to town," Brill recalled.

In recent years, Cather's birthplace has fallen into further disrepair. Two years ago, local Cather family members, concerned about the birthplace's deterioration, tried to buy it, but an agreement could not be reached. Brill said he would like to give the house to someone who would restore it, but he can't afford to do that. Instead, he must sell it, and he is ready to entertain offers. "I need the money," he said frankly. "The highest offer I can get."

Despite his inattention to the property, Brill admits the place is worth saving. "It's my understanding that she [Cather] was a writer of some consequence, so her birthplace is special," he said with a pause, "or at least it should be."

The Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission Survey described the Boak house in 1976 as a "good Virginia vernacular log structure with a compatible frame addition, all covered in weatherboarding. Fine rural quality." It was constructed between



Charles Brill, current owner, with historic marker outside Cather birthplace.

1780 and 1800 as a three-bay log house with brick chimney. Two additional bays, with a columned porch, were added 1870-90. The house has several out-buildings, including a two-story washhouse/summer kitchen, and is "surrounded by mature trees and bushes."

Willa Cather's Grandmother Boak came to Back Creek Valley to live in this house after the death of her husband in Washington D.C. in 1854. She brought several children with her, including Mary Virginia, Willa Cather's mother. When her father, Jacob Seibert, died in 1858, he bequeathed the house to her.

Rachel Boak lived in the house until sometime in 1874, several months after her granddaughter Willa's birth. At that time Willa's parents, Charles and Mary Virginia Cather, moved into his parents' home, Willow Shade, a substantial brick house about a mile east. Rachel Boak lived with them at Willow Shade until the family immigrated to Nebraska in 1883. She moved west with the Cathers and lived in Nebraska until her death in 1893.

In 1886 Rachel Boak sold her house in Back Creek Valley to Sidney Cather Gore, Willa Cather's great-aunt and the local postmistress. In 1890 the name of the village was changed to Gore, in her honor. These three owners of the house where Willa Cather was born appear as major characters in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Henry Colbert is based on Jacob Seibert; Rachel Blake is based on Rachel Boak, and Mrs. Bywaters is based on Sidney Gore.

The historic significance of Willa Cather's birthplace has been recognized for several decades. In 1976, it was placed on the Virginia Landmarks Register. Two years later, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Neither designation, however, protects the house from being torn down—and that is a very real possibility, considering that the nearly six acres on which the house sits is more valuable than the house itself.

"What we need is a white knight," said one family member.

# How to Help Save the Cather Birthplace

The Cather family organization in Virginia has more than three hundred members, many of whom gather annually for a Cather family reunion. The 49<sup>th</sup> such reunion was held on August 20, 2006. Recently, members discussed their hope and plans to purchase or assist with the purchase of the Willa Cather birthplace in Gore. After purchasing the house, the group would first make the necessary repairs to insure that it remains structurally sound and habitable. Then they would consider how best to use and maintain the house in ways that would honor its historical significance. One possibility would be to use it as a guest residence for family members and scholars who wish to explore the rich resources of Cather's birthplace and its history, as documented in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and other Cather fiction. John Jacobs, director

of the Willa Cather Institute at nearby Shenandoah University, warns that building has accelerated in the Gore area recently. In this fast-growing economy, a building such as the Boak house may be regarded as an eyesore to be torn down, making way for "development." Jacobs reiterates the importance of this house, the "one and only" Willa Cather birthplace. "Once it's gone," he says, "all the regrets in the world won't bring it back."

A Committee for the Purchase and Preservation of Willa Cather's Birthplace is now being formed. If you would like to contribute and to learn more about this important project, please be in touch with Linda Cather, president of the Virginia Cather family organization (lcather@gmail.com), John Jacobs (Jjacobs@su.edu) or Ann Romines (annrom@gwu.edu).

## Object Lesson: Cather's 1923 Passport Robert Thacker, St. Lawrence University

Among various objects donated to the Foundation recently is one of Willa Cather's passports, a gift of Dr. and Mrs. James Southwick. Now cancelled, of course, this passport was issued in Washington on March 31, 1923; and it also bears a visa issued on April 4 at the French Consulate in New York City allowing Cather to remain in the country for a year. Made out to, and signed across the photograph, "Willa Sibert Cather," this passport identifies its bearer as an author; it offers a physical description—the chin is "round," the forehead "low," the face "oval," the eyes "grey," the nose "straight." It also sets her birthdate on December 7, 1876. The photograph is the same one Cather used on her 1920 passport (Woodress facing 339). This was the one Cather traveled on to France between early April and November 1923. As such, it is an object lesson in material culture, a physical artifact from Cather's life and, perforce, from her career. Signifying those seven months abroad, it reminds us of who, and what, she was then.

This was the passport she carried on her third trip to France: she had it when she made a rough crossing alone in April; she had it when she visited Isabelle and Jan Hambourg for an extended visit outside Paris; she had it when she went south for treatment of neuritis at Aix-la-Bains; she had it when she sat—at least twenty times—for the controversial portrait painted by Léon Baskt; she had it when she returned home in November on the *Berengaria* to begin *The*

*Professor's House*, the "nasty, grim little tale" of "letting go with the heart"—as she wrote to Robert Frost—that features most of Professor St. Peter's family returning home on the same ship as the novel closes (Woodress 367). Given this, and put

another way, this passport was the one Cather carried on her first trip to France after "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts" (*Not Under Forty* v).

The object lesson that this passport embodies, then, speaks first of all to its owner's restless spirit, one that led her to be always going somewhere, peripatetic, throughout her life—one thinks of Cather traveling east from Red Cloud to Pittsburgh in 1896 to take up a job on *The Home Monthly*; or in May 1903, living still in Pittsburgh, beckoned to New York City by S. S. McClure, laying the groundwork for both *The Troll Garden* and, later, a job at McClure's; or her April 1912 trip to the Southwest, heading for the first time to a place that would prove critical to her art and also remind her of the south of France which she had visited in 1902. That trip west would also take her away, finally, from the office routine of McClure's which had held her since 1906—James Woodress saw this trip as sufficiently significant to Cather's career that he used it as prologue to his biography.

As Joseph R. Urgo most convincingly argues in *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration*, Cather is "the one major American writer whose body of work is substantial enough to redirect American literary history in the twenty-first century by



Willa Cather's 1923 passport. Photo by Betty Kort, courtesy of the Cather Foundation.

showing how thoroughly transit has marked Americans" (5).

In November 1923, Cather returned home with this passport to set her infirmed hand to a succession of books quite unlike *A Lost Lady*, her latest novel that had been serialized in the *Century Magazine* while she was gone and was just then in the stores. The woman who set then to write *The Professor's House* doubtless offered a visage closer to Baskt's version of her than the mature, yet youthful, woman who gazes out of the passport photograph, a person with a serene, determined, and piercing gaze. E. K. Brown called the Baskt portrait "stiff, dark, dead, lifeless" (237), but James Woodress seems closer to mark when he writes that it "bares the soul of Professor St. Peter, whose similar problems"—like Cather, he suffers from "physical, emotional, and spiritual crises"—his author "had already begun to describe" (339) by the time she returned home to New York on the *Berengaria*.

This is not the place to detail the circumstances of the commissioning, sitting for, and painting, nor the various reactions occasioned by Baskt's portrait of Cather. Financed through subscriptions by an Omaha group proud of her accomplishments, it also marks, like this passport, a key moment in a career. Cather had first gone to France in 1902, a young woman of very serious literary ambitions bent to absorb as much of France—and of Europe generally—as she could. She succeeded in her ambitions before she went back in 1920. Returning then, she sought detail for *One of Ours*—"to immerse herself in its life and its history," Brown wrote (226)—but she also stayed for two months in the Latin Quarter of Paris with Lewis so that they could "live in the Middle Ages" and travel south to Arles and Avignon with the Hambourgs (Lewis 119). But *One of Ours* also marked the moment when Cather's view of life itself changed. Writing toward the end of that novel and, Brown noticed, "speaking briefly in her own person, Willa Cather says," "One by one the heroes of that war, the men of dazzling soldiership, leave prematurely the world they have come back to. Airmen whose deed were tales of wonder, officers whose names made the blood of youth beat faster, survivors of incredible dangers—one by one they quietly die of their own hand" (370). Here was the beginning of the "estrangement from modern American life" she felt, Brown maintains, an estrangement that Cather would later characterize as the world breaking in two in her prefatory note to *Not Under Forty*.

One of the most-quoted passages from *The Professor's House* is the one in which Professor St. Peter meditates over what might have fallen to Tom Outland had he not been killed in the war. By dying, St. Peter thinks, Outland avoided "the trap of worldly success" (261). Noting this, Brown asserted a fact that bears remembering as we contemplate the passport Cather carried to France in 1923. Arriving home on the eve of her fiftieth birthday (whatever the passport says), suffering from a series of dispiriting maladies of varying sorts, having won a very big prize indeed for the book that she had the hardest time writing and the book which marked a very changed outlook, Willa Cather became a very different writer than she had been during the 1910s. Then she was still striving to make her mark. After *One of*

*Ours*, its Pulitzer Prize, and a new energetic publisher, she was not any more. As Brown writes,

"No writer of her time was more successful than Willa Cather in keeping freedom and anonymity. She never became an official personage, and the crucial decisions were taken in the years of her first popular success, from 1923 to 1927. She declined to join societies, no matter who asked her, no matter what their aim; she declined to recommend books, and wrote a review so rarely that she could decently avoid pressures to be nice and helpful. Instead of working for charities she gave as if from a bottomless purse to old friends fallen on hard times, or institutions in Webster County. If a letter appeared useless, she did not write it; and instead of a false excuse she preferred a frank explanation, which usually saved her from repetition of a request she could not grant or an invitation she could not accept." Following this, Brown writes that "into Professor St. Peter Willa Cather poured her grief at the decline of so many of the values she cherished," and that "the novel is a revelation of an attitude in Willa Cather more desolate by far than any fear of the price that worldly success tries to impose, or a disapproval of new forces in American



Willa Cather's passport photograph, taken circa 1920. Photo courtesy of Cather Foundation.

life" (238, 239).

Thus in a real way, this passport takes us back to just what Willa Cather was about in late 1923. The restless traveler who looked to France—the place where many of us will be following her next June—for cultural continuity and the most civilized values to be found. They are part of Godfrey St. Peter's makeup and would prove essential to both *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*. Poised as she was in 1923 on the verge of her most mature and complex writing, Cather was about to reach the goal she had set for herself while she was still living in Nebraska. Like Eden Bower in "Coming, Aphrodite!" who knew early "that she was to be Eden Bower" (38), Willa Sibert Cather, the bearer of this passport, was about to become Willa Cather, author indeed, in the midst her own major phase.

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& EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION  
(The Willa Cather Society)  
Founded 1955 by Mildred Bennett**

Mrs. Bennett and seven other founding members of the Board of Governors defined the Foundation's mission, which has evolved into these

**AIMS OF THE WCPM**

To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with The Nebraska State Historical Society.

To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.

To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.

To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

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Betty Kort

## The Executive Director's Report



This is my third attempt to write this column for the fall issue of the *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review*. Yes, I am at a loss for words, or maybe it is that I have found too many things to say. Nonetheless, this is my third attempt to inform our readership that I am resigning as Executive Director of the Cather Foundation. Since the Board of Governors has posted a request for applications in this issue of the *Newsletter*, I suppose it is time for me to make some sort of statement. How do you say "goodbye"? That is the question.

I guess the answer is that you don't! So . . . let me put it this way: I may be resigning this position, but I plan to stay firmly planted in the Cather Community. I will rejoin the Cather Foundation Board of Governors, and you will see me at the Spring Conference, at the International Seminar next summer, and at the next major Cather event wherever it is. I cannot think of a better place to stay planted.

I once again want to devote this column to saying "thank you." Thank you to all of you out there who have been so supportive over the past few years. You have made my job a pleasure. Sometimes the road has been difficult, but the Cather Community always comes through. We have a restored Opera House. We have completed the NEH \$1,100,000 endowment. We have the largest number of historically designated buildings devoted to one author in the United States. We have a beautiful 608 acre prairie. We will have the upstairs of the Harling House restored by the end of the year. We have a Moon Block project well off the ground. We have a devoted staff and Board of Governors. All of this did not come out of thin air. It has come about because the Cather Community has made this possible. And when I say "we," I mean all of us working together. Yes, thank you. I think I have been one of the luckiest people in the world to have had this opportunity to work for all of you for this length of time.

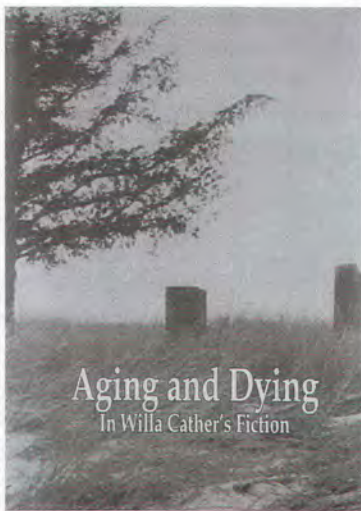
When I retired from my teaching position in the spring of 2003, I was asked to serve the Cather Foundation as Executive Director for one year. It will have turned into four years by the time I leave the position. I am going to try to "retire" again. We will see how that goes. I have enjoyed communicating for these four years with all of you. I always sense a myriad of friends out there. Hopefully, that will be true into the future. So, for whatever it is worth, I have appreciated all of your support and friendship. Let's keep working together to make the Cather Foundation even better. This is certainly not a time to say "goodbye."

Yours faithfully,  
Betty

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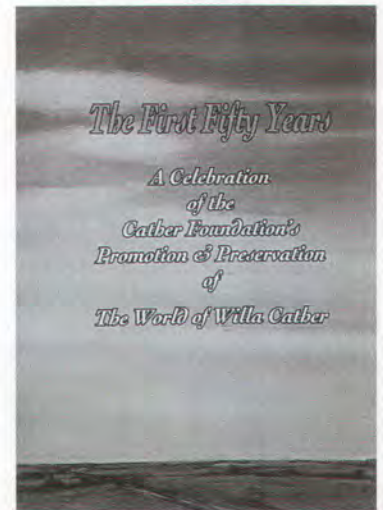
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## Welty in Red Cloud, 1973



Visiting Red Cloud in fall 1973. From left: critics Ellen Moers and John Hintz, Eudora Welty, and Cather's publisher Alfred Knopf, in Grandma Boak's room at Cather's childhood home. Photo by Lucia Woods, copyright 1973.

Eudora Welty, another of the greatest twentieth century American writers of fiction, visited Nebraska for the first and only time in 1973, when she presented her memorable essay, "The House of Willa Cather," at the First International Seminar, celebrating the centenary of Cather's birth. This is her response to Red Cloud in October:

*Nebraska was at its best, I imagine, because it was all golden everywhere, still fall—completely flat, but high—and the plains really did have that feeling of reaching, which WC described—and you see with full clarity 360 degrees of horizon, and not a single human being on it—utterly open and empty and somehow evocative—of what, you don't quite know or care to say—you think of prehistoric times and of Indians and of the pioneers, who couldn't ever have seen a soul except their own little party. This was on the all-day trip to Red Cloud.*

—Eudora Welty to Frank Lyell, qtd. in Suzanne Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography*. New York: Harcourt, 2005. 393.

## Happy Holidays from the Cather Foundation!



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