

# WILLA CATHER

## PIONEER MEMORIAL AND EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

# NEWSLETTER AND REVIEW

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## Regarding Willa Cather's "The Profile" and Evelyn Osborne

Mark Madigan  
Nazareth College of Rochester

When Willa Cather and Dorothy Canfield Fisher met in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1891, Fisher's father was the chancellor of the state university and Cather was a student. What Fisher later described as a "close comradeship" soon developed ("Novelist" 42). After leaving Nebraska, Cather and Fisher wrote and visited each other as work and education precipitated changes of address. A disagreement



*Evelyn Osborne's graduating class as pictured in the Barnard College Mortarboard of 1900. Although the students are not identified by name, note that the woman on the far left is conspicuously posed in profile. Is this Evelyn Osborne?*

— Barnard College Archives

between Cather and Fisher occurred in 1905, however, and the friends did not resume regular correspondence until fifteen years later. In July 1987, a packet of twenty letters by Cather was found in a barn on the Fisher homestead in Arlington, Vermont. These letters, kept with three others by Fisher, one by Cather's mother, and one by Isabelle McClung, shed light on the dispute. As I have discussed elsewhere, the letters revealed that Cather's story "The Profile" was the major point of contention (Madigan 115-129). I return to that subject now with additional information about the woman who stood

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Symposium

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## Major Gift Ensures Opera House Renovation

A major gift from a donor whose grandmother knew Willa Cather has enabled the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation to meet the first-stage goal of its plan to renovate the Red Cloud Opera House.

Lucia Woods Lindley, of Evanston, Illinois, and New York City, has donated \$250,000 towards the project. The gift was announced by Betty Kort, president of the Foundation's board of governors. Ms. Woods Lindley's gift enables the Foundation to meet the requirements of two challenge grants and begin the renovation phase of the project. Additional funds will still be needed to complete the project and to provide an endowment for management and operations.

The Woods Lindley gift caps 634 individual gifts from 41 states and Japan. The Foundation also received challenge grants totaling \$350,000 from the Peter Kiewit Foundation of Omaha and the Nebraska Tourism Development Initiative.

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## REGARDING WC'S "THE PROFILE"

(Continued)

at the center of the controversy, the woman upon whom the protagonist of "The Profile" was based, Evelyn Osborne. This information not only clarifies the circumstances of the story's publication and adds to the biographical record on Cather's first trip to Europe in 1902, but also gives insight to the writer's state of mind at a key moment in her career.

For contextual purposes, I will summarize what is already known about Osborne and "The Profile." On June 14, 1902, Cather sailed for England with her friend and Pittsburgh housemate, Isabelle McClung. The two were joined by Fisher in London in mid-July and proceeded to Paris at the end of the month. It was there that Fisher, who was pursuing her doctorate in French at Columbia University and studying at the Sorbonne, introduced Cather and McClung to Osborne, a fellow graduate student. In late 1904, Fisher learned that "The Profile," a tale of a woman with a grotesque facial scar and penchant for gaudy dress, was to be the third story in *The Troll Garden* (1905), Cather's first volume of fiction scheduled for release the following spring. She immediately asked Cather for a copy of the story, which she feared was based on Osborne, who had a similar scar and taste in clothing. In letters that followed, Cather argued that Virginia Gilbert, the central character, would not be identified with Osborne and that it was her right to publish the story. Fisher opposed her, claiming that Osborne would not only recognize herself in the unflattering depiction of Gilbert, but might even commit suicide if she read it. Finally, Fisher and other friends of Osborne brought the matter before S. S. McClure, the publisher of *The Troll Garden*, and prevailed in their attempt to stop publication. A long period of hard feelings between Cather and Fisher ensued.

Although "The Profile" did not appear in Cather's short story collection, it was published in *McClure's Magazine*, of which Cather had become a staff writer and editor, in June 1907. In the opening of the story, artist Aaron Dunlap is commissioned to paint Virginia Gilbert's portrait in Paris. He completes the work, a profile, as Virginia suggests, and in the process falls in love with his subject. Yet even after marrying, they cannot bear to speak of her disfigurement. Two years later, Dunlap develops a fondness for his wife's cousin Eleanor, who is their houseguest. Virginia leaves her husband after he insults her, but not before fixing an alcohol lamp to explode in Eleanor's face, permanently scarring her as well. In the conclusion, Dunlap is divorced and marries Eleanor, while Virginia moves to St. Petersburg, Russia,

The fictional conflict is thus resolved, but several questions remain about the real-life drama behind Cather's story. For instance, what were the facts of Osborne's life beyond her status as a graduate student? How closely did Cather model Virginia Gilbert after her? How well did Cather and Osborne come to

know each other in Paris? How strong was the friendship of Fisher and Osborne? And why did McClure publish the story in 1907 after he had been persuaded not to two years earlier?

These questions are answered in letters written by Fisher to a French friend, Céline Sibut. Fisher and Sibut met shortly before the turn-of-the-century when Fisher was a student at the University of Paris. She resided in the Sibut pension at 11 rue de Cluny on the Left Bank and became friends with Céline, one of four daughters whose father died young and whose mother supported the family with income from the lodgings. Sibut, who later taught in the Paris school system for many years, became Fisher's best friend. Their international relationship is documented in hundreds of letters spanning the years 1900 to 1941; Fisher's share of the correspondence was returned to her by Sibut's sisters following Céline's death in 1944. These letters, like the aforementioned Cather letters, are housed at the University of Vermont, to which they were donated after Fisher's death in 1958.

While it has been noted that Cather and McClung stayed at the Sibut pension during their month in Paris, what has not been brought out is the Fisher connection. It was she who arranged for Cather and McClung to stay with the Sibuts, as she had done for their mutual Nebraska friend Mariel Gere three years earlier. Nor has it been acknowledged that there was among the boarders at 11 rue de Cluny in summer 1902 still another of Fisher's friends, a young woman who was also conducting research at the Sorbonne, one who had been badly burned and now bore a long scar on her face, Evelyn Osborne. In eight letters written in French between 1902-1906, Fisher provides significant details about Osborne, Cather, and the events that led to the removal of "The Profile" from *The Troll Garden*.

In the first of these letters, Fisher wrote to Sibut in May 1902 to make living arrangements for Osborne, Cather, and McClung. Osborne would be the first to come to the pension in early June and would stay the whole summer. Cather and McClung planned to arrive during the last week of July and stay three weeks (they stayed a week longer than expected). Fisher would do the same. This is the first letter mentioning Fisher's three American friends. It offers little information about Cather and McClung, save for their request for a private room with two beds, but does provide some background on Osborne. She was, Fisher wrote, a fellow student at Columbia who was working on her dissertation at the Sorbonne. Institutional records show that after transferring from Wellesley College, she received the A.B. degree from Barnard College in 1900 and the A.M. from Columbia the following year (*Barnard Quarterly*). The only child of wealthy New York parents, she had traveled widely and had a very pleasant personality, Fisher continued. Her appearance, though, was not so pleasant, as she had a large burn which covered one side of her face and disfigured her nose and one of her eyes. In "The Profile," Cather is unsparing in her description of Virginia Gilbert's scar,

"It had evidently been caused by a deep burn, as if from a splash of molten metal. It drew the left eye and the corner of the mouth; made of her smile a grinning distortion, like the shameful conception of some despairing medieval imagination. It was as if some grotesque mask, worn for disport, were just slipping sidewise from her face" (128).

Fisher's next letter concerning Cather was written on August 12th in Glasgow, where she had joined her parents who were touring Scotland, England, Norway, and Sweden. Fisher remarked to Sibut that Cather spoke English with a Scottish accent. She rolled her "rs" and did not pronounce vowels clearly, so that "well" sounded like "wull" and "very" like "vurry." She also wrote that she had a letter from Cather praising the Sibuts. This was probably Cather's letter post-marked August 8th, in which she mentioned not only the Sibuts' fine cooking, but also Evelyn Osborne. (Due to the provisions of Cather's will, this letter, like all those by the author, may not be quoted.) Earlier that day, Cather wrote, she had tried to get film developed, called at the American Express office, visited the Luxembourg Museum, and purchased extravagant undergarments, all with Osborne and McClung. The three women then took long baths and dressed themselves in white duck.

An August 28th letter from Cather to Mariel Gere provides further evidence of Cather's friendly relations with Osborne. Though not referred to by name, Osborne is identified as one of Fisher's fellow students from New York who was staying with the Sibuts. Cather wrote that she and McClung liked Osborne very much and that it was a pleasure to have an American nearby who believed in baths, controlled her emotions, and did not have a disagreeable attitude. The letter also establishes that it was Osborne who accompanied Cather and McClung on a joyful trip to the village of Barbizon, which Cather described in the *Nebraska State Journal* ("Barbizon" 929-933). While Osborne is spoken of highly, Cather had little to say to Gere about Fisher, except that she did not agree with her about Céline Sibut. She offered no details, but it appears that Cather far preferred Osborne's company to Sibut's.

From Paris, Cather and McClung traveled south to Provence and the Mediterranean coast of France before returning to England. They sailed from Liverpool on September 24th bound for New York. That same day, Cather wrote to Fisher that she felt closer to her than she had for several weeks. In Paris, Fisher seemed to be one of the French and not one who shared a common country, tastes, and standards with her. On September 26th, Fisher, then in London researching at the British Museum, informed Sibut that Cather and McClung had stopped in the city to see her before leaving for the United States. Fisher may have had Cather's letter in hand, for in her message to Sibut she addressed the very issue Cather had raised. Her American friends, Fisher wrote, seemed like strangers to her in Paris. When she was with the Sibuts, she felt

completely French. Moreover, Fisher felt that her time with Céline was too precious to spend on people she could see elsewhere. "It is you that I come to visit in Paris and not the Pittsburgh women!" she wrote.

By the time of Fisher's November 19, 1902 letter to Sibut, all of the American *pensionnaires* had returned home. Fisher was busy with her studies in New York, while McClung was in Pittsburgh with Cather, who was teaching high school English and writing the stories that would compose *The Troll Garden*. Osborne, however, was greeted with bad news at Columbia. Her dissertation director, Professor Adolphe Cohn (who was also Fisher's director), could remember very little about what she had spent the summer researching in Paris. In fact, he had forgotten her subject. Osborne, who had been behaving strangely in her last days with the Sibuts, was now in anguish.

On May 11, 1903, Fisher wrote to Sibut about Osborne's bad taste in clothing, saying her fervour for gowns and chiffons was truly pathetic and she was already preparing her wardrobe for a summer vacation at a hot springs resort. In "The Profile," Cather writes that Virginia Gilbert, too, has a "passion for dress. . . . [a] mania for lavish display" (129, 132). Moreover, at a crucial moment, it is the effect of a conspicuous new gown and chiffon collar that moves Virginia's husband to make his first cruel comment about her scar (133). In the same letter, Fisher told Sibut that Cather had visited her and was ecstatic. The best publisher in New York had accepted a book of her short stories and would publish whatever else she wrote. If she kept her health, her literary fortune was made, Fisher wrote, and now everything was as Cather had hoped for. It was the end of long waiting and periods of discouragement. The auspicious meeting Fisher referred to had occurred ten days earlier at the office of S. S. McClure, who had agreed to publish *The Troll Garden*. As biographer James Woodress has written, "Life was never the same for her after that interview" (171).

Evelyn Osborne, meanwhile, was not faring nearly so well, according to a letter from Fisher to Sibut in summer 1904. Fisher had just received her doctorate, but Osborne had abandoned her dissertation and quit graduate school because of Professor Cohn, of whom she was afraid. Fisher had battled him too, she wrote, but was victorious against the "capricious little tyrant" who did not approve of female students. By the end of the year, Fisher was engaged in a battle of another sort with her friend Cather, who was making final revisions to her collection of short stories.

*The Troll Garden* was published on April 5, 1905. With "The Profile" expurgated from the volume, Osborne, whose already fragile self-esteem had been further damaged by her failure to complete the doctorate, was spared whatever pain the story might have caused. Within three months, though, the point would be moot, for Osborne's life was ended not by her own hand as Fisher had feared, but rather by appendicitis

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*The editors of the Newsletter & Review gathered at the Fall 1999 Cather Conference at Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado. They are (left to right) Ann Romines, John Swift, and Merrill Skaggs.*

## REGARDING WC'S "THE PROFILE"

(Continued)

which turned fatal on July 2, 1905 in Greenwich, Connecticut. She was thirty years old. In an early 1906 letter, Fisher reminded Sibut of the previous summer, when they had spoken of Osborne in Paris, unknowing of her death. Fisher told Sibut that in New York she often saw Osborne's mother, Elizabeth, who was inconsolable and had aged twenty years since her daughter died. Fisher, too, was profoundly effected. She cried when she thought of Evelyn and dreamed of her almost every night, dreams in which they were playing violin together again. It was the first time she had recurring dreams and it made her think of Emanuel Swedenborg's idea that the dead never completely leave us. Yet Fisher said she did not completely regret her death, for Osborne was often unhappy and would have had a difficult life. Furthermore, Fisher wrote, she would never have forgiven herself if Cather's story had poisoned the last weeks of Osborne's tragic life. She was indeed glad she had prevented its publication.

Fisher's final letter to Sibut concerning Cather and Osborne is dated August 6th, 1906. She wrote that Cather had telephoned her in New York and said it was imperative that they meet. When Fisher arrived at the McClure's offices on East Twenty-third Street, Cather told her that she had recently learned of Osborne's death from Isabelle McClung. That was the pretext for the meeting, but Fisher believed that Cather really wanted to see if it was possible to reconcile with her. Cather was alone, imprisoned by her ego, and could not escape even though she wanted to now, Fisher wrote. Cather was by turns supplicating and threatening, she continued. Once, she even threatened to have McClung, who was in Paris, tell Sibut terrible things about Fisher. But soon after, Cather told Fisher that she could not live without her. Although she pitied Cather with all her heart, she would never again be able to trust her, Fisher told Sibut. Finally, Fisher believed that despite Cather's sudden changes

in point-of-view, despite her fierceness, she sincerely regretted her cruelty to Evelyn — or at least the consequences that followed. Apparently, Cather had given Fisher no indication as to whether she intended to publish "The Profile" now that Evelyn Osborne was dead.

In light of the documentary evidence above, Cather and Fisher's positions on "The Profile" may be well understood. Cather's relationship to Osborne was more than a fleeting acquaintance. They commiserated as Americans in a foreign land, lived in close quarters for a month, explored Paris, and toured the countryside together. Indeed, Cather liked Osborne. Even so, she used Osborne's deformity as the basis of a story and disguised the protagonist so thinly that Osborne could not have helped but recognize herself as the prototype. Once prevented from publishing "The Profile," Cather placed the tale in *McClure's* not long after learning of Osborne's death. As Fisher emphasized in her letters to Sibut, Cather was determined to succeed as a professional writer and the effort exacted a great personal toll.

Fisher's close identification with France and fluency in French piqued Cather's jealousy. In a late March 1922 letter to Fisher, Cather wrote that the friendship between the uncultured farmboy Claude Wheeler and the sophisticated violinist David Gerhardt in *One of Ours* was analogous to their own relationship in Europe in 1902. So "The Profile" was clearly not the sole point of disagreement between Cather and Fisher. It was, though, the most keen. Fisher knew not only Osborne, but also her mother. She had played music with Osborne and they shared a passion for French literature. She sympathized with her about struggles in graduate school, struggles against the same chauvinist professor. It was on the basis of this friendship that Fisher intervened to stop the publication of "The Profile" in *The Troll Garden*, an action that damaged her relationship with Cather for many years.

Ironically, French language and culture played an important role in bringing the estranged friends back together. In an April 8, 1921 letter, Cather told Fisher that the person who made such a big issue about a short story was not her true self. It was the foolish side of her and she hoped that they could put the

*The newest member of the Board of Governors is Jay Yost, a Red Cloud native. A former practicing attorney, he is a private banker with Citibank Private Bank in New York, New York.*



whole affair behind them. Soon after, Cather appealed to Fisher for editorial help with a French translation of *My Antonia* and the sections of *One of Ours* set in France. Fisher responded favorably and their warm friendship resumed unabated until Cather's death in 1947.

### NOTES

I am very grateful for the assistance of Martine Armand in translating Fisher's letters from the French. Carol Falcione of the Wollmann Library, Barnard College, provided invaluable assistance in locating a photograph of the class of 1900. To Nazareth College of Rochester, I give thanks for a grant which supported my research.

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## Cather Clearinghouse

With this issue, the *N & R* begins a new feature: Cather Clearinghouse. It notes items of interest to Catherphiles. The service is free to members; a nominal fee is charged to non-members. It is solely informational; the WCPM does not negotiate or transact dealings.

**FOR SALE:** Willa Cather Portrait, artist unknown. Came from the estate of Alfred Knopf. Frame, 24½" x 17". Portrait, 12½" x 9½". Portrait of Miss Cather was done when she was in her 60s. \$300.00 or best offer. Photo available. (402) 553-8749 or e-mail at snagyridge@aol.com.

## MAJOR GIFT (Continued)

According to board president Betty Kort, "The Lucia Woods Lindley gift will bring joy and the relief to the larger Cather community and validate the faith so many have placed in the project. With the renovation of the Opera House, we will be providing a center for the arts and education and preserving a historical site vital to Willa Cather's development as an artist."



Lucia Woods Lindley

The Woods family has a long history with Willa Cather and the WCPM. Woods Lindley was a member of the board of the WCPM for more than twenty years. *Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir*, Photographs by Lucia Woods and Others, Text by Bernice Slote, was published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1973 and reprinted in 1986. Woods has exhibited her work in the United States and abroad and has made presentations at many Cather seminars. Her father, Frank H. Woods, Jr., was instrumental in the acquisition and development of many of the Foundation's and Nebraska State Historical Society's sites connected with Cather and her writing. In 1974, the Woods Charitable Fund provided a grant of \$218,000 to enable the Nature Conservancy to purchase the 610 acre Cather Memorial Prairie and to provide an endowment for its management and maintenance. This past fall the Prairie was designated as a Friends of the Libraries USA National Literary Landmark.

## MAJOR GIFT (Continued)

Lucia Woods Lindley has requested that the auditorium of the Opera House be dedicated in memory of her grandparents, Nelle Cochrane Woods and Frank H. Woods, and her father, Frank H. Woods, Jr.

In a letter announcing her gift, Woods Lindley stated, "My decision . . . comes out of love for Willa Cather's writing, my family's history with Cather and the WCPM, in particular, my father's relationship with Mildred Bennett, my memories of Bernice Slote, Virginia Faulkner, Jo Frisbie and JoAnna Lathrop, respect for Helen and Harry Obitz, Miriam Mountford, Bill Mountford, Helen Cather Southwick and others, out of my work in the area as a photographer and a board member, my sense of the value of a center and meeting place that the WCPM could provide, many experiences in the larger Cather community, and out of conversations with Betty Kort, whose energy I so admire."

Woods Lindley added that she shares the Foundation's belief in the need for gifts of all sizes to raise the still-needed funds for the Opera House and the equally important endowment.

The challenge grants from the Kiewit Foundation and the Nebraska Tourism Development Initiative have fueled the fund drive over the last 18 months. In April of 1999, individuals across the country began responding to a mailing campaign. Three fundraising events in Nebraska and a New York City fundraiser followed. The Foundation was still short of meeting the terms of the challenge grants by approximately a quarter million dollars in mid-December when the Woods Lindley gift was presented. Her gift, according to Kort, salvages the challenge grants and will now pave the way to initiating the restoration project.

Steve Ryan, executive director of the WCPM, noted "The Opera House will provide major benefits for Red Cloud and Webster County. The first will be cultural — the programming and arts it houses will enrich the community. But there will be civic and financial benefits as well. With the renovation we will be able to sponsor programs that will bring people to Red Cloud, and stimulate its business and entertainment district."

Consultation with architects will be renewed shortly with construction to begin later this year, according to Ryan. The renovation plans were drawn by Bahr Vermeer & Haecker of Omaha.

"There are some preliminary matters to resolve," Ryan explained, "including finding a new home for the hardware store," which has been housed in the Opera House building for many years.

Kort and Ryan both emphasized that hard work remains to assemble the funds necessary for the operational endowment. "We've come a long way," Ryan said. "We've reached an important plateau. But there is another cliff to be scaled before we're finished."

## Briefly Reviewed: Acocella, Anders, and the Purposes of Criticism

Joan Acocella, *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P 2000)

John Anders, *Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literary Tradition* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P 1999)

Joan Acocella's 1995 *New Yorker* essay "Cather and the Academy" was a brisk, well-informed socio-history of Cather studies, by an admirer of her work. Now expanded and republished as *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*, it maintains its original principal intention, critiquing the trendily overt politicization of much Cather scholarship since the mid-1980s. Acocella's targets range from the sometimes stupefying language of psychoanalytic criticism, through the interpretive gymnastics necessary to make the historical Willa Cather speak for lesbian feminism, to recent condemnations of Cather and her characters as dupes or agents of patriarchal imperialism. Her villains are feminist or gender-oriented scholars (and to a lesser extent "multiculturalists") — Sharon O'Brien, Elizabeth Ammons, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and others — who she reads as distorting Cather's work in support of their own political agendas. She calls for a scholarly return to discussion of Cather's idealism and her aesthetics; she asks that the works be heard for themselves, without the unattractive, distracting apparatus of politically tendentious theory.

Exposing the excesses and opacities of academic criticism can make for fun reading, and most readers who have attended a scholarly conference or read a scholarly journal will find at least some point of agreement with Acocella. But her argument is finally unsatisfying. Her ruling-out of "political" approaches, of interpretive strategies that import ideas and ideologies alien to Cather, gives her much to say about Cather's critics (admittedly an entertaining group), but leaves her almost silenced about the author herself or her works. She quotes extensive examples of Cather's literary skill; she includes a brief lyrical chapter insisting on Cather's tragic Platonic idealism, her renunciation of life for the kingdom of art. But as a Cather critic Acocella is unwilling to go much beyond these mimin-alist gestures.

While such critical reticence in an obvious way respects an author's and work's integrity, it's not creative of the kinds of literary conversations that keep Cather and other writers vital for successive generations of readers. Yes, much clumsy prose has been written about Cather since the mid-1980s (and before), many hobby-horses exercised to exhaustion. But as Acocella rightly notes, exactly the work of those gender critics whose tendentiousness she dislikes led to an explosion of interest in Cather, and to Cather

studies' current multifarious robustness. By framing Cather's voice in a great historical/political contest of silencing authority and unspeakable wishes, writers like O'Brien radically expanded and democratized the field. The consequent bubbling-up of critical energies, exuberantly rough-edged, reflects the generosity of Cather's fictions, which, like her serenely inscrutable heroines, endlessly solicit impassioned stories from their audiences.

In her last chapter, Acocella describes attending the 1994 Cather Foundation Spring Conference, where "a graduate student read a paper on the homoerotics of *One Of Ours*" to a quietly tolerant audience — apparently an instance of the extent to which politicized gender theory had invaded even bucolic Red Cloud. The "graduate student" (actually he had received his Ph.D. in the preceding year) was John Anders, who in his dissertation and a series of papers and essays in the 1990s was developing a new context for reading Cather. The result of his investigation was the recently published *Willa Cather's Sexual Aesthetics and the Male Homosexual Literary Tradition*: a title and subject matter unlikely to win much sympathy from Acocella.

Anders's project is fundamentally a study of influence, of Cather's place in and relation to a demonstrable tradition of Western literature (although one rarely explored or even recognized by mainstream literary history), that of great, passionate love between man and man. He revisits Cather's points of contact with a 19th-century homoerotic literary tradition: her well-known admiration for Pierre Loti and A. E. Housman, her ambivalent responses to Verlaine and Whitman, her repudiation of Wilde. Behind these Anders maps masculine love's long literary history, passing through Shakespeare to Virgil, Plato, and Homer. He suggests that Cather mined this history and the possibilities of love between men across her career, but most fruitfully in imagining the creatively loving friendships of *One of Ours*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

In Anders's reading the male homosexual tradition and the love that it describes become foundational reference points in Cather's work, like music, classical poetry, or religious devotion. In fact, he suggests that homoeroticism, as a structuring of feeling, shares with these more familiar "themes" a kind of sanctity, as a gateway to experience that transcends language and the mundane. Like them, it moves emotion (in characters and readers) toward the miraculous and holy, toward the "thing not named."

In other words, Anders reads Cather as a traditional idealist — Acocella's Platonist — whose uncompromising devotion to the realms of spirit and art found support in a literary vision of redemptive love between men. By positing male homoeroticism as a cultural, historical, and literary phenomenon, he avoids the awkward unanswerable questions of personal psychology: was Cather a practicing lesbian? And what would that mean? Although he clearly understands Cather

as having a profound emotional commitment to and grasp of homosexuality, Anders has no particular concern for her life's sexual specifics.

Yet, for all its biographical diffidence and its insistence on the most conservatively humanistic concerns — values, aesthetics, transcendence — Anders's book is surely deeply political. He has an agenda: to put homosexuality as a formal mode of human relationship on the interpretive table, without disguise or apology, and to insist on its capacity for illuminating Cather's work. His argument involves interpretation at every step, and thus is open to challenge on questions of influence and intention. It will and should be challenged. Its purpose is presumably not to have the last word on Cather, but to have a word, and a significant, fruitful one — a word that will itself elicit more words, further conversation.

— John N. Swift

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## Reading Cather Read America in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

Blythe Tellefsen  
University of California at Riverside

As do many of Cather's texts, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* opens with a preface. An American bishop named Father Ferrand pleads his case for a missionary priest to be sent to New Mexico before three European Cardinals in Rome. One Cardinal, in response to Ferrand's description of life in New Mexico, remarks offhandedly, "I suppose it is no worse than a life among the Hurons. My knowledge of your country is chiefly drawn from the romances of Fenimore Cooper, which I read in English with great pleasure" (11). Moments later, when Father Ferrand gently remarks, "Down there the Indians do not dwell in wigwams, your Eminence," the Cardinal responds airily, "No matter, Father. I see your redskins through Fenimore Cooper, and I like them so" (13).

Cather's prologue introduces the key themes and arguments of her narrative, among them, questions about nationality, ethnicity, culture, and history. The introduction of Father Ferrand as "an American bishop" who is "Irish by birth, French by ancestry" (5) suggests immediately one of the significant questions explored in this narrative: "Who or what is an American?" If Ferrand is of French extraction and raised in Irish culture, then what makes him an "American" bishop? Evidently, one assumes, he is American by virtue of having chosen to live and work in America. In addition, Cather's physical description of Ferrand suggests a certain "Americanness" about him: "Bishop Ferrand . . . looked much older than any of them, old and

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## READING CATHER (Continued)

rough — except for his clear, intensely blue eyes . . . . The missionary was here for a purpose, and he pressed his point” (6). Here we have a clear-eyed, roughly-dressed, purposeful frontiersman, out of place among the cultured and somewhat effete Europeans. Cather’s description also suggests implicitly that one becomes American by embodying or adopting certain mythic American cultural traits. It reflects Dale Knobel’s argument that in nineteenth century America, “Citizenship, not membership in what might be denominated a ‘Volk,’ was the basis for inclusion in the nation . . . . Historians agree that this conception of nationality rendered citizenship, as James Kettner puts it, ‘contractual, volitional, and legal rather than natural and immutable’ ” (39-40).

Bishop Ferrand’s purpose is also reflective of certain American values (industry, hygiene, innovation), as evidenced by his description of New Mexico society as an “Augean stable” which, if not “cleansed” will “prejudice the interests of the Church” (7). His proposed bishop, Father Jean Latour, will be just the man to do this necessary job. Ferrand’s description of New Mexico and Latour’s task there echoes claims made in support of Manifest Destiny — America, as a virtuous, powerful, democratic nation, has a duty to conquer the continent and impose her superior government, culture and way of life on all of its inhabitants. America must “cleanse” the continent for its own good. The narrative opens in the year 1848, the year of American conquest of New Mexico, and thus it appears obvious that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was written to support retroactively that “duty.” Indeed, Father Latour himself writes to his sister, “I mean to help the officers at their tasks here. I can assist them more than they realize. The Church can do more than the Fort to make these poor Mexicans ‘good Americans.’ And it is for the people’s good; there is no other way in which they can better their condition” (36).

One might then assume (as readers have done) that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a manifesto for American imperialism. In reading the text, one will engage imaginatively with the great task of Americanizing a new land and people and identify with a great American pioneer hero as he sets out to accomplish this goal. Indeed, there is much evidence for such a reading, particularly in Cather’s highly controversial and flattering depiction of Fathers Jean Latour and Joseph Vaillant, and equally controversial and unflattering portrait of Padre Martinez. A thorough discussion of this controversy is outside the scope of this essay, but the evidence seems clear that Cather’s characters bear little resemblance to the real-life figures upon whom they are based. The fact that Fathers Latour and Vaillant — the newly arrived French missionaries who will serve American interests — are painted much more sympathetically, and that Father Martinez — a native New Mexican priest — is

painted much more negatively than seems justified historically, also lends credence to reading this text as a justification of American imperialism.

However (and there is always a “however” when reading Cather), one must bear in mind Deborah Carlin’s salient reminder that “reading Willa Cather is never as simple as it seems” (26). Carlin’s warning seems especially significant to cultural critics, such as myself, who are drawn to Cather precisely because history, culture, ethnicity, nationality, gender, race, and “the story of America” often form her main themes. One must be exceedingly careful, however, when venturing down the cultural criticism road with Cather. Carlin claims that “Cather, one is forced to accept, will always demand to have her texts read both ways, and at once” (24), and Guy Reynolds echoes this argument throughout his thoughtful study of Cather’s work, *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire*. In fact, the last line of his book is his assertion that *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, while beginning as an “open text,” eventually becomes “an evasive” one (173).

In considering the competing claims made about Cather, I would like to return briefly to the novel’s prologue. If one is to claim that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is, at heart, another romanticized justification of American conquest, then what is one to do with the Cardinal’s comment about preferring to “see” America’s Indians through the lens of James Fenimore Cooper’s novels? This seems to me to be quite clearly a moment of textual self-reflexivity in which Cather comments wryly on the Anglo-European tendency to prefer fictional representations of the cultural Other over facts. The Cardinal does not even bother to argue Ferrand’s point — that, in truth, southwest Indians do not live in wigwams. He simply dismisses this fact as unimportant. He prefers to think of all Indians as Cooper’s Indians and thus he will continue to do so. Period.

The Cardinal’s remarks also indicate that Cather was highly aware of the power of fiction to represent and, in essence, “become” reality for readers. Given this awareness, I think we must be careful when reading Cather as she “represents” America. On the one hand, her understanding of the relationship between history and fiction makes her misrepresentation of Padre Martinez, other Mexican priests, and certain aspects of New Mexican history very troubling. On the other hand, one must be careful not to misread Cather’s characters and narrator as the author herself. A common problem for Cather critics is the ambiguous characterization of her protagonists; from Jim Burden, to Niel Herbert, to Godfrey St. Peter and Tom Outland, to Father Jean Latour, the problem remains the same: do we readers assume they are protagonists who speak “for” Cather? Or are they complex and flawed characters who are subject to authorial criticism?

I think they are the latter, and thus the problem of “Americans” and “America” becomes much more complex. While Latour is clearly meant to be an admirable man, his is only one voice among many in



this narrative. In fact, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is unusual in its "multi-voicedness" — many stories are told by many people, often in opposition to one another. Indeed, Father Latour's stated intention to "Americanize" the Mexican Catholics who form the bulk of his congregation is met head-on by Mexicans who refuse steadfastly to comply. One young man says pointedly, "They say at Albuquerque that now we are all Americans, but that is not true, Padre. I will never be an American. They are infidels . . . . We want our own ways and our own religion" (27). In fact, Mexicans are not a one-dimensional category in this text, and that fact complicates the contest between cultures for a nation. For instance, portraits of the rich rancher, Antonio Olivares, who is "intelligent and prosperous . . . a man of wide experience, a man of the world" (175), and of his friend, Manuel Chavez, who "love[s] the natural beauties of his country with a passion, and . . . hated the Americans who were blind to them" (183) counteract other depictions of Mexicans as humble, obedient, uneducated peons. "The Mexican" as such does not exist in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and this fact, I believe, undermines any argument for the narrative as solely or even primarily a manifesto for America's manifest destiny.

In fact, what becomes clear to me in reading this text is the lack of the "traditional" depiction of the American as the all-conquering, white, Protestant, male. Even Kit Carson, certainly an American icon, is Catholic and married to a Mexican woman. Moreover, and more interestingly, Cather radically complicates the reception of Native Americans in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and their implications for her larger vision of America. Gerald Vizenor argues that American Indians suffer enormously from the ways in which the dominant culture misrepresents them. Vizenor calls such representations "manifest manners . . . . the simulations of dominance; the notions and misnomers that are read as the authentic and sustained as representations of native American Indians" (5-6). We are, like Cather's Cardinal, familiar with the "noble savage," for instance, of Cooper's novels, as well as the "bloodthirsty redskins" of John Wayne movies. Vizenor argues that such representations *are* reality for other Americans; we do not see Native Americans, we see only simulations of them as represented to us by fiction or the media.

The Cardinal's remarks in the preface indicate that Cather was certainly aware of these simulations; the question a cultural critic may ask is, "Does Cather herself engage in such representations?" The answer to this question is rather complicated. Father Latour's relationship with his Indian guide, Jacinto, is one example of the complexity with which Cather represents Native Americans. When Latour asks Jacinto the name of a mountain, he says, "The Laguna Indians call Snow-Bird mountain," and when Latour replies, "That is very nice . . . that is a pretty name," Jacinto comments, "Oh, Indians have nice names too! . . . quickly, with a curl of the lip" (90-91). Jacinto's refer-

ence to European prejudices is quickly passed over, but it prefaces one of the Bishop's many meditations on "Indian culture:"

The Bishop seldom questioned Jacinto about his thoughts or beliefs. He didn't think it polite, and he believed it to be useless. There was no way in which he could transfer his own memories of European civilization into the Indian mind, and he was quite willing to believe that behind Jacinto there was a long tradition, a story of experience, which no language could translate to him. (92)

Is this an example of manifest manners? After all, the "Indian mind" as some sort of separate entity is postulated, as is, in fact, the "European one." The Bishop perceives a great divide between Jacinto and himself, based upon their different ethnicities and cultural experiences. There is "no language" which can communicate the "Indian experience" to Latour nor the "European one" to Jacinto. Here is an unbridgeable gulf, "difference," "Otherness" — all the catch phrases for domestic Orientalism at work. On the other hand, there does not seem to be any implication of "European superiority" here. In fact, Latour recognizes "Indian culture" as having as long and presumably as illustrious a history as that of Europe. And, indeed, could not one read Latour's refusal to "convert" Jacinto, and to explain and impose his own ideas on him, as admirable? Such a refusal could be interpreted as an unusual recognition of difference not as a racially-based, but as the result of "experience" and "tradition," each one deserving of respect.

As this particular night progresses, Latour and Jacinto do, in fact, discuss their beliefs about the stars. Latour says that "The wise men tell us they are worlds, like ours," which Jacinto considers thoughtfully, and replies, "I think not . . . I think they are leaders — great spirits." Latour replies, "Perhaps they are . . . . Whatever they are, they are great" (93). Here two beliefs, two traditions, *are*, in fact, shared across the cultural divide — and neither is given precedence over the other as the truth.

After this discussion, the Bishop "went to sleep thinking with satisfaction that he was beginning to have some sort of human companionship with his Indian boy" (93). Instantly, the wary reader is alerted to the patronizing term, "boy," and the Bishop's self-satisfaction at having actually attained "human" interaction with him/it. But Latour catches himself, musing that,

One called the young Indians 'boys,' perhaps because there was something youthful and elastic in their bodies. Certainly about their behavior there was nothing boyish in the American sense, nor even in the European sense. Jacinto was never, by any chance, naïf; he was never taken by surprise. One felt that his training, whatever it had been, had prepared him to meet any situation which might confront him. (93)

Immediately, we are admonished that Indians are not boys, and we are also returned to implicit suggestions about the "European mind" — that it applies adjec-

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## READING CATHER

(Continued)

tives based on appearances which, in turn, have little to do with "essence" or "truth." Far from Latour seeing Jacinto in a condescending light, as a "boy" over whom he can exercise paternal authority, there is a clear sense throughout the text that Latour admires Jacinto's maturity.

The juxtaposition of apparent "othering" of the Native American against observations which appear to be quite open-minded, even humble, continues throughout the narrative. The story of the Spanish Friar Baltazar who built an oasis for himself at the top of a rock on the Ácoma Indians' backs is less a story about Indian vengeance than it is of the imperialist's arrogance and blindness. Indeed, Cather undercuts expectations of "terrible Indian revenge" by noting that after the Ácomas throw their priest off the rock as retribution for his murder of his Ácoma servant, "the execution was not followed by any sacrilege to the church or defiling of holy vessels" and, in fact, "when the next priest came, years afterward, he found no ill will awaiting him" (114).

On the other hand, Father Latour's experience on the rock of the Ácoma generates speculations which do seem to reflect Vizenor's "manifest manners":

He was on a naked rock in the desert, in the stone age, a prey to homesickness for his own kind, his own epoch, for European man and his glorious history of desire and dreams. Through all the centuries that his own part of the world had been changing like the sky at daybreak, this people had been fixed, increasing neither in numbers nor desires, rock-turtles on their rock. Something reptilian he felt here, something that had endured by immobility, a kind of life out of reach, like the crustaceans in their armour. (103)

Here is the Indian frozen in time, an unchanging, unchangeable species of man which is as cold and inhuman as a reptile, refusing progress, refusing glorious history, all new desires, all new dreams.

Such contradictions occur and continue throughout the text. We have, for instance, speculations about the Pecos' tribe sacrificing their children to a serpent balanced by the portrait of Latour's close friend, Eusabio, a Navajo man who is "one of the most influential men among the Navajo people . . . with a face like a Roman general's" (220). We have a trader's comment that "the things [Indians] value most are worth nothing to us. They've got their own superstitions, and their minds will go round and round in the same old ruts till Judgment Day" balanced by Latour's remark that "their veneration for old customs was a quality he liked in the Indians, and . . . it played a great part in his own religion" (135).

The final chapter of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* recounts the hunting of Apaches and Navajos by government soldiers, and the story of Kit Carson's brutal relocation of the Navajo people and their result-

ing decimation. But the final few passages include Latour's direct comment that "I have lived to see two great wrongs righted; I have seen the end of black slavery, and I have seen the Navajos restored to their own country" (292). Nor does Father Latour invest in the myth of the Native American as doomed; instead, he declares, "I do not believe, as I once did, that the Indian will perish. I believe that God will preserve him" (297).

So what is a cultural critic to do with such a contradictory text? It is very tempting to build cases "for" or "against" Cather's political and social arguments, but I conclude that such arguments, for the sake of coherence, must almost always leave a significant amount of the text unexamined. Rather than make a final assessment of Cather's views on Native Americans — and, by extension, other ethnicities — Cather scholars should explore the wonderful opportunities a Cather text offers for cultural criticism while remaining aware of the enormous pitfalls it presents to us. The recent flowering of cultural criticism on Cather is to be welcomed, but critics must be careful when constructing arguments about Cather's vision of America. Her vision is, perhaps, often flawed, but it is also very large, and we would do well to remember that fact as we venture forth into reading Cather read America.

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There is something frank and joyous and  
young in the open face of the country.  
It gives itself ungrudgingly to the moods  
of the season, holding nothing back.  
Like the plains of Lombardy, it seems to rise a  
little to meet the sun. The air and the earth  
are curiously mated and intermingled,  
as if the one were the breath of the other.  
You feel in the atmosphere the same tonic,  
puissant quality that is in the tilth, the same  
strength and resoluteness.

— "Neighboring Fields," *O Pioneers!*

# “Willa Cather on Mesa Verde”: A Report on the Fall Cather Symposium

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From October 20 to 23, 1999, “Willa Cather on Mesa Verde: A Symposium” brought scholars and readers from across the nation to the Far View Lodge in the Mesa Verde National Park to experience firsthand Cather’s Mesa Verde. The Symposium, organized by John Swift and sponsored by Occidental College and the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation, was attended by 106 participants who came to present and discuss papers on topics representing the most current work in Cather studies and to learn more about the Anasazi culture, one of the most ancient in North America.

Everyone arrived knowing at least one version of Cather’s story. In August of 1915, Willa Cather and Edith Lewis spent a week on Mesa Verde exploring the Anasazi ruins which came to figure so prominently in *The Professor’s House*. Although the story is disputed, according to an August 26, 1915, *New York Times* article, Cather and Lewis were left injured and exhausted by their experience at the hands of poor guides. We, on the other hand, endured few hardships and without exception left the mesa with a deepened understanding of Cather’s life and work.

Being on the mesa lends itself to reflection and a renewed sense of perspective. From the white morning light that streamed through the windows of the Far View Lodge at breakfast to the evening shadows which colored breathtaking vistas at the canyon rim, the experience of Mesa Verde challenged us to reconsider both past and future and our place in between. Fittingly, then, many of the papers and discussions arising from our meetings focused on our changing understanding of history and our projections for the future of Cather studies. The symposium opened with a presentation by David Harrell, “From *The Professor’s House* to the Roundhouse,” in which he recounted his own journey from his work on the mesa in *From Mesa Verde to The Professor’s House* to his return to Cather studies as a symposium speaker. Harrell’s discussion of the place of literature and the opportunities for scholars outside of the academy prompted a particularly topical discussion of the evolving place of literary studies in American culture. In many respects, Harrell’s ability to make the literature and history of this area immediate to our everyday lives and concerns set the standard for many of our further discussions throughout the conference.

Thursday began with paper sessions focusing on such issues as “Meaning and the Mesa,” “Time, History, and Community,” and “Excavations,” preparing us for what was perhaps one of the most startling and beautiful moments of the conference, an afternoon

plenary session in the Amphitheater at the canyon rim. Merrill Skaggs and Joe Urgo spoke from the platform of the Amphitheater and challenged us to reconsider our assumptions about Cather’s place in literature and history. Standing against the enormous backdrop of the canyon and the pale blue expanse of afternoon sky, Skaggs presented “Cather and the Father of History: Mark Twain,” in which she shared details from Cather’s and Twain’s work suggesting a dialogue between the two in which it was Twain who found influence and inspiration from a young Willa Cather. Joe Urgo’s discussion of “Multiculturalism as Nostalgia in Cather, Faulkner, and the United States Culture” prompted us to ask how much Americans’ current interest in cultural diversity might signal the end of a genuinely multicultural United States and sparked a lively debate about the future and focus of multiculturalism and multicultural studies. We were hesitant to leave our discussions and this unexpected venue, but refreshments and a reception at the Spruce Tree terrace lured us away.

Our day concluded back at Far View Lodge with a plenary session devoted to investigating Cather’s development over the course of her career. Sue Rosowski presented “The Greening of Language in *The Professor’s House*,” in which she considered the development of meta-narrative and metonymy in *The Professor’s House*, finding that in this novel fiction is renewed through language. John Murphy’s presentation, “Willa Cather’s Embracing and Replacing of the Cliff Dweller’s Culture,” juxtaposed *The Professor’s House* and *The Song of the Lark*. Murphy analyzed the way cliff dweller culture figures in these two novels, suggesting that in *The Professor’s House* Cather changes her perspective and concludes with the romantic view of art as being religious.

Friday’s tour of the Cliff Palace was, for many, the central event of the symposium. Throughout all of these presentations, the Cliff Palace was ever present as one of Cather’s great fascinations. By Friday afternoon, we had already heard much about the effect of the mesa and its history on Cather. We had read Cather’s depiction of the Cliff Palace’s transformative effect on Tom Outland and had seen tantalizing glimpses of the ruins from our travels atop the mesa. Many of us had heard excerpts from Laura Winters’ introspective narrative of Cather’s experience on Mesa Verde (published in the last *Newsletter and Review*). We were more than eager to experience the Cliff Palace for ourselves, and our guided tour allowed us to see and touch these ruins and also to hear about some of the most recent archeological findings from the site.

The cliff dwellings could easily be viewed at a distance from the buses and from the canyon rim. Wayside exhibits depicted the development of the ancestral Pueblo culture, and maps directed us to some of the otherwise indiscernible edifices built into the cliff side. For those getting their first view of

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## FALL SYMPOSIUM

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these remarkable structures, the words of Willa Cather seemed incredibly immediate and evocative:

set in a great cavern in the face of the cliff, I saw a little city of stone, asleep. It was as still as sculpture — and something like that. It all hung together, seemed to have a kind of composition: pale little houses of stone nestling close to one another, perched on top of each other, with flat roofs, narrow windows, straight walls. (*The Professor's House*, 179-180)

Cather's description in *The Professor's House* suggests a sense of wonder the likes of which every member of our tour seemed to express. A National Park tour guide was ready to supply an explanation to many of our questions, taking time to describe to participants the methods of construction of the pit-houses and even how we could witness the Anasazi's developing architecture through a comparison among the excavated sites.

For the brave (and most participants were very brave) the tour guide led the groups down from the mesa and into the Cliff Palace, the largest of the cliff dwellings. Cather was especially intrigued by the people who had built these cliff dwellings. Our guide provided us with a history of their fate as we looked through the windows and climbed around the structures they had left behind. The Anasazi, being highly skilled craftsmen, constructed the buildings within the cliff dwellings by carefully shaping sandstone into rectangular blocks about the size of loaves of bread. Mortar consisted of mud and water. The walls were built tall and straight with stones precisely shaped and mortared. However, the guide asked the seminar participants to note the more recent structures and the additions on the tops of towers. Here construction seems to be more haphazard. The stones are not so well shaped, the mortar is sloppy, and the lines of the structure become less regular, often sagging. All of this, in the thinking of the experts, seems to represent a pressured, declining society, and by about 1300 Mesa Verde was deserted.

Coming into the Cliff Palace proved much easier than leaving. Not only were we hesitant to end our tour, but we also found that the Cliff Palace retained its original exit: a difficult route up hand-hewn ladders and through remarkably narrow rocky passages where we observed the hand- and toe- holds once used by the Anasazi. As our group climbed up a ladder that looked much steeper from below than it had from above, we steadied ourselves at the shallow niches the Anasazi had carved into the sandstone. I realized then just how courageous and dedicated were the members of our symposium. We ended this day of exploration with a banquet accompanied by the flute music of David Nigteagle. Using an instrument native to the region, Nigteagle's haunting music reflected the mystery that had permeated our day's experience on the mesa.

The symposium officially concluded with a fourth plenary session at noon on Saturday, involving an open discussion of the breadth and the future of Cather studies with David Harrell, John Murphy, Sue Rosowski, Merrill Skaggs, and Joe Urgo, moderated by John Swift. WCPM President Betty Kort later made a special plea to the participants for support of the Cather Foundation Opera House Restoration project and also talked about the transition within the WCPM to a new Executive Director, Steve Ryan. Ryan then spent a few minutes discussing the various services the Cather Foundation provides for ongoing Cather studies.

As the plenary session ended, congratulations and high praise were prolific for John Swift, director of the symposium. Swift had approached the WCPM board over two years earlier, excited about the possibility of a symposium on Mesa Verde after he and his family had explored the site. He had described Mesa Verde, extolled the virtues of Far View Lodge, claimed the fall weather to be unbeatable, and eagerly suggested that the WCPM Board of Governors not only co-sponsor the symposium but also hold the fall board meeting there. The success of "Willa Cather on Mesa Verde: A Symposium" proved that Swift had not exaggerated.

Following the noon plenary session, the Cather Foundation Board of Governors members who had come for the conference went on to hold an official board meeting as planned. The WCPM was well represented at the Board of Governors meeting. Present were Betty Kort, president, Dave Garwood, past president, Bruce Baker, Ann Billesbach, John Murphy, Ann Romines, Sue Rosowski, Merrill Skaggs, John Swift, Jay Yost, and newly appointed WCPM Executive Director Steve Ryan.

While the WCPM board met, symposium participants were let loose upon the mesa and free to explore on our own. Armed with cameras, box lunches, and sturdy shoes, many of us braved some of the mesa's many hiking trails such as the 2.8 mile Petroglyph Point Trail. My journey on this trail led me through a three-hour climb winding up the side of Mesa Verde canyon and to a panel of Anasazi petroglyphs, ancient art carved into the stone. The trail turned out to be as ruggedly beautiful up close as it had appeared from the many vantage points along the mesa rim. Once up to the top of the rim again, a hiking trail took us back to Spruce Tree Terrace, and then we were soon back at Far View Lodge where many of us enjoyed our last dinner together.

Sunday morning found a smaller, but tenacious, group at breakfast in the Metate Room of the Far View Lodge. There, as the white light again streamed into the dining room, the group took one final look westward over the mesa. Farewells said, the last of the participants began the breathtaking, winding descent from Cather's Mesa.

David Harrell, in *From Mesa Verde to The Professor's House*, describes Cather's unique engagement with the mesa: "it was a rich week that Cather spent

on the Mesa Verde. Whether she realized it or not, she was surrounded by the raw materials of one of her future stories" (68). For those of us on the journey, the experience proved rich and provocative, perhaps providing us with future stories as well.

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## Cather's "Disruptive Excess": A Feminist Reading of "A Wagner Matinee"

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Willa Cather's "A Wagner Matinee" presents the reader with a central intelligence, Aunt Georgiana, around whom the narrative runs, but from whom we hear, directly, nearly nothing. Georgiana is spoken for by her husband, Uncle Howard, and the first person male narrator, her nephew, Clark. This arrangement, which Cather uses to advantage elsewhere, suggests the subtlety of the author's fictional technique and may presage something about her paradoxical convictions concerning the possibility or advisability of women's speaking for themselves.

This narrative stance, this distancing of the mentality at issue from the reader's direct grasp, is not that peculiar as a standard method for the preservation of suspense, or, to say the same thing, to prevent the premature ending of the narration. In Doyle, this keeps Sherlock's insights under wraps while the reader is impeded by Watson's conceptual bumbblings. In James, the *ficelle* or companion keeps us not from the presence of insight, but from the precocious discovery of its absence. In Cather, this silence of the central woman is never in itself undone. Its persistence, however, seems not to be simply a resignation to or acceptance of male censorship, but rather a victory for an expression between speeches, a victory that only seems pyrrhic to those who cannot hear between the lines.

The dilemma of patriarchal ubiquity — a double bind in which to speak against patriarchy is to deploy its discourse and thus confirm its immanence — haunts certain feminists. Judith Butler, for example, gives one succinct version of the problematic in *Gender Trouble*: "the repression of the feminine does not require that the agency of repression and the object of repression be ontologically distinct. Indeed, repression may be understood to produce the object that it comes to deny" (93). Wherever one goes, gendering must already be, since the availability of any

discursive position demonstrates infallibly that the position, however nominally liberationist, is within the structure of patriarchy. To speak is to iterate, to be silent is to acquiesce. What expression is conceivable that does not bear with it the implicit axiom of its own constitution?

Luce Irigaray implies, not a solution, but a kind of mechanism that may be at work in Cather's story. Since for Irigaray all language is phallogocentric, every discourse "of or about woman [must be] . . . a recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition" (*Not One* 78). The outside of patriarchy must be in its midst, since no "elsewhere" is available. This "interior margin" must be the very center of intelligibility, its taxonomy, its structure of sense. Irigaray suggests that this center can be assaulted, not by postulating an essential feminine *outside*, but by the implicit recognition of the inessential, unstable character of contrapuntal cognitive structures themselves. What "A Wagner Matinee" implies through narrative disruptions and uncertainties is that the system of oppositional sense, of which gender is a part, is maintained through a logical tyranny whose rudiments keep everything — and especially women — in place. This feminine "place," as the devalued term in the dyad of gender, is maintained by both the valorized and devalorized terms. Each substantiates the other. Only an immersion into their contradictory mutuality brings them out of a world of contrapuntal exclusion and manifests their mutual definition. This immersion appears formally as a melting along the midline, the permeability of the virgule that normally only mirrors the oppositional terms which constitute the binary. Such a melting or deliquescence does not constitute a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, for it precedes no "larger synthesis." Such a reconstitution of taxonomy would proclaim it as fixity of position reasserted at 'a higher level.' Instead, what occurs is liquefaction without a reinitialization into a phallic logos.

The "woman's narrative" of "A Wagner Matinee" is told through men, but men whose apparent discomfort with their own expressive medium portends their inability to capture or hold their feminine object within the bounds of male language. Clark's language when he sees his aunt disturbingly underscores his and its inadequacy: "Her own figure, at once pathetic and grotesque . . . opened before my feet a gulf of recollection" (97). Here the story's sustained brutish Freudian symbolism begins a frolic between phallic and vaginal objects. Clark's reaction to the female body as a huge gulf suggests not the absence of the phallus but the *power* of that which only appears as a lack. He feels "in short, the gangling farmer-boy" (97). Not just space but time opens; the reader is presented with an interstice in male discourse that appears not as purely missing element but as an expansion. Here we find hinted a world between, one reminiscent of youth in which matriarchal power ruled a world, where

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## CATHER'S "DISRUPTIVE EXCESS"

(Continued)

standard verbal expression found its limit in the body of the female. Into this fluid, socially dangerous space the narrative goes.

James Woodress notes in his preface to his edition of *The Troll Garden* that only in the case of "A Wagner Matinee" did the evolution of the tale in its revisions not suggest motives of aesthetic improvement. Rather, Cather seems to capitulate to social pressures to ameliorate the tale's harsh visions (Cather xxvi-viii). It is exactly those visions, however, which mark the story's aspirations to disturb the system that rejects them. The following instructive image was, for instance, edited out of later editions: "She looked not unlike one of those charred, smoked bodies that firemen lift from the debris of a burned building" (xxvii-viii). This image, of the desiccated female body, is central to the story's competing metaphors of rigidity — taxonomic, social, perceptual — and liquefaction of those categories at the border of their demarcation. Its abandonment is not an improvement but rather a surrender to those forces that it exposes.

Especially in its early versions, "A Wagner Matinee" is notable for symbolic patterns that facilitate what Irigaray calls a "disruptive excess" (*Not One* 78), a liberation within the masculine binary that consistently undoes figures of petrification grounded in opposition. The narrative consistently establishes and then conflates opposites. The recurring metaphor that facilitates this confluence is the liquefaction of rigidities. For example, as Clark introduces Aunt Georgiana to his landlady he notes that not just excess heat (as in the expunged metaphor of the seared corpse), but also excess cold plague the female body. "I saw my aunt's misshapen figure with that feeling of awe and upset with which we behold explorers who have left their ears and fingers north of Franz Josef Land, or their health somewhere on the Upper Congo" (95). These defamiliarized opposites of temperature also imply the antagonism of exposure and shade: the white expanse of snow and the heart of darkness. No golden mean is proposed for the female. She is, like the missing phallic appendages here, always already castrated, doomed by the very logic of sense at either extreme.

The sense of split identity externalized by these colonial references is carried forward as the narrator continues to explore her alienated monstrosity. Clark's xenophobia reacts to the contradictions engendered in the female body, whose foreign character is the paradoxical result of her domestic labor: "her shoulders were now almost bent together over her sunken chest . . . her skin was as yellow as a Mongolian's from the constant exposure to the pitiless wind and alkaline water" (96). Like Shelley's monster, whose yellow skin inspires Frankenstein's abhorrence of his creation and smacks of a possible racism, the aunt appears to Clark in the guise of the other. And like the overheard orangutan in Poe's "Murders of the Rue Morgue," Clark

sees the female's distance from the sense of man as a series of false and logically mutually exclusive identifications.

These images of contending opposites engendering a being outside the taxonomies of the relatively naive, if self-satisfied, perception of the story's narrator reflect Clark's vision and his memories of her chimerical character. She was, he recalls, a woman of sophistication and learning who was capable of sensitivity but bound to the endless trivial cycles of a frontier home. Like most frontier women of her era, she could only cling to her intellectual attributes as if they were an odd and demanding appendage sewn onto the body of her grinding duties. She taught Latin, Shakespeare, and music while engaged in the drudgery of raising six children, supplying the needs of a homestead, and attending to an insensitive husband. Clark recognizes in these doubled virtues not a reward but "her martyrdom" (96). She is like an incarnate oxy-moron, someone who embodied aesthetic capacity but was fated to repetitive manual labor.

Aunt Georgiana's very consciousness seems to lurk between two opposing states, sleeping and waking. She is a Janus figure of mind. Her mental liminality is much like that of Poe's Valdemar, tapped between two worlds and two men, mesmerized and/or dead: "She was," he sees, "still in a semi-somnambulant state" (96). Her trip, the space/time between West and East, appears as a dream. "She had no recollection of anything but her discomfort, and, to all intents and purposes, there were but a few hours of nightmare between the farm in Red Willow County and my study on Newbury Street" (96). Clark's reaction to this mind in the middle is to desire the continuation of her zombie existence, rather than to hope for the life of spirit: "I could only wish her tastes for music quite dead" (97). Clark, like Aylmer in the Hawthorne tale for which Georgiana may be named, "The Birthmark," is interested in the body of the woman at whatever cost to her character and aesthetic capacity. "I began to think it would have been better to get her back to Red Willow County without waking her" (97). Masculine narrative likes the paradoxical state of the undead. It prefers that those who do man's bidding have little consciousness of the services they render or the opportunities they forgo.

As his aunt begins to wake, Clark begins to concede that his vision reflects his own ossified conception as much as her atrophy. To negotiate this transition, Cather moves from images from distant, interperate lands to symbols vested with time and history. These classical allusions suit her technique of conflated opposites. The monuments to which Clark compares her are at once ancient and familiar. "How superficially I had judged her. She sat looking about her with eyes as impersonal, almost as stony, as those of the granite Rameses in a museum watches the froth and fret that ebbs and flows about his pedestal — separated from it by one lonely stretch of centuries" (97). This reference is psychological, symbolic, and

Biblical, and it suggests the blurring of these categories. The monuments suggest those of Abu Simbel, the temple built by Rameses II (1292-1225 BC), generally conceded to be the pharaoh of Exodus. His temple figures, now moved, were built with their feet toward the Nile and their backs to the desert. They mark the interface between water and sand, life and death. The Old Testament allusion hints at a typology between Nebraska's bleak landscape and the wilderness of the Biblical Jews. This symbolism suggests a parallel to Georgiana's barren physical and intellectual life, but also to the growing hope brought about by her exodus from the dull iterations of farm life.

To keep even this complex conceit from stabilizing into a category of fixed interpretation, Cather almost immediately balances the image of ancient desert heat with one of contemporary cold. Suddenly, Georgiana appears as an old miner just come "from a frozen . . . Yukon" (98). Like the Rameses, this Jack Londonesque character is remote, separated by a "gulf no haberdasher could bridge" (98). This idea of bridging (or the impossibility of bridging) water, a central one to Cather since her first novel, is here cast sartorially to prepare for the coming thaw in the frozen coding of dress. Until now in the story, clothes have emphasized Georgiana's entrapment by a fixed assignment of gender position because "she had surrendered herself unquestioningly into the hands of a country dress-maker" (95). Both the male narrator and his female focus begin to escape from rigid categories, unleashed by the matinee's middle state, its lyric freedom between their contending worlds.

Clark begins to see in her, and for himself, a metaphor no longer colorless and static but bright and expressive. The images move from stone and ice to oil paint, a medium at once fluid and stable. Here the clothes of those women who populate the matinee begin to become not the registers of social confinement but the place of public expression, an appreciation of the aesthetic. "My Aunt Georgiana regarded them as though they had been so many daubs of tube-paint on a palette" (98). A shift in subjectivity has occurred. Clark no longer looks at his aunt, objectifies her as a desiccated horror, but now looks through her eyes at a world mobilized, unstable: a world at once mimetic and real, mobile and yet comprehensible.

This deliquescence of the images of ancient stone is facilitated by a discourse that moves from the sculptural to the painterly, from stiff finality to kinetic moisture. In the galleries of the musical theatre, the waking odd couple sees the oxymoronic image of nature as art. The vibrant sea of brightly colored women appears as a "veritable hanging garden, brilliant as tulip beds . . . the color of bodices past counting, the shimmer of fabrics soft and firm, silky and sheer; red, mauve, pink, blue, purple, ecru, rose, yellow, cream, and white, all the colors an impressionist finds in a sunlit landscape" (98). The natural world is metaphorized here. No longer a threat of rigid extremes, the world, like music, becomes pliable with

sensual delight under the agency of art and through the allusion to enduring love. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon are the only one of the ancient wonders to blend the architectonic and the vegetative. They are also the only one of the seven wonders created as an expression of love's triumph over a bleak plain. Built for his wife Amytis in order to satisfy her longing for her native Median Hills, Nebuchadnezzar altered the flora and topography of his kingdom. For the tale, this emblem synthesizes the opposites that have informed the previous allusions: dead past and living present, physical and psychic life, flat iterations and elevated aspirations, the natural and the aesthetic. The symbol anticipates perfectly the story's climactic liquefaction: the sensual experience of music beyond the capacity of written expression.

As the music comes on, the descriptions become more and more sensual and evocative of a magical and sexual appreciation, the sensations that Nietzsche found in the Dionysian element of Wagner's music. We see the "varnished bellies of the 'cellos" and the "long bow strokes . . . as a conjurer's stick" (98). Here the instruments themselves move between sex, nature, and art, a mutual invigoration: "the violin bows that drove obliquely downward, like the pelting streak of rain in a summer shower" (99). The dried plains of her Nebraska as well as her dried body and the desert of the Old Testament, all seem to participate in this invigoration. The liquid image, a placebo for the more erotic flows alluded to by this climactic moment, is also manifest elsewhere: "Her eyes were closed, but the tears were glistening on her cheeks, and . . . in my eyes as well" (100). A coming together between Georgiana and Clark, between potential and actual, between female and male, between the physical and aesthetic, has punctured "a dullness of thirty years, through films made little by little" (99). These *Is* and "eyes" are undone as rigid formations and melt into the commingled opposites that Nietzsche also felt in the experience of Wagner: "The Dionysian, with its primordial joy experienced in pain itself, is the common source of music and tragic myth" (*Birth* 90).

Clark recognizes that this spiritual hydration challenges his previous notions of fixities in character and spiritual possibility. He sees in his aunt the coming together of opposites. "It never really died then — the soul . . . it withers to the outward eye only; like that strange moss which can lie on a dusty shelf half a century and yet, if placed in water, grows green again. She wept" (100). This revivification bursts the borders and limits, the barriers of space and concept that had constrained the narrative, "as a shallow vessel overflows in a rainstorm" (100). This is liberation: this symbolizes the "excess" that Irigaray sees as the freeing moment of a self that no longer capitulates to taxonomies of gender.

Again, the challenge to binary thought is made manifest with a literary, geographic, and historical allusion that serves all of Cather's interests. As

(Continued on page 16)

## CATHER'S "DISRUPTIVE EXCESS"

(Continued)

Clark sees his Aunt's ecstasy, he makes a faint allusion to a celebrated text that self-consciously and almost paradigmatically speaks to and from the border between two worlds, evoking height and depth, space and time, memory and expectation. "Georgiana sat silent upon her peak in Darien" (99). This moment, drawn from the last line of Keats's famous sonnet, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," suggests the tremendous energy at the confluence of the Romantic and Classical aesthetics. Nested within that great metaphysical meeting is also the historical and geographic Pisgah vision of Balboa. He, among European explorers, first was able to see both those huge oceans, the Atlantic and Pacific, from an elevation in Central America. Time, space, history, aesthetics, geography and culture — the oppositions that had hereto marked the narrative — are no longer mutually exclusive and antagonistic but mutually definitive and supremely intertwined, as are the fates of the old and new world.

Georgiana's previous "flat world of the ancients" sandwiched between flora — "a cornfield that stretched to daybreak" — and fauna — "to the west, a corral that reached to sunset" (99) — has been undone. However, this destabilization of repressive forms was only possible in the border between contending forms, only within the confines of this moment and this special circumstance of art. The images of ecstatic moisture devolve: "the flute players shook the water from their mouthpieces" (101). As in some post-coital depression, the patriarchal order and the rule of the quotidian begin to reassert their authority. Aunt Georgiana does not wish to leave that vibrant lyric line between worlds that allowed her to liquefy the obligations and concepts that had so previously dried up her sensibility and delimited her potentiality: "I don't want to go, Clark, I don't want to go" (101).

The story's achievement and Georgiana's had been to find a tacit but vital arena between the specifications of obligation, proscription, and ossification, to find in that line a freedom unavailable on either side. The moment of ecstasy and escape had been bracketed by the tale's binary language: it was not explicitly expressible in the language of letters, written or read. This contradictory moment is not a surrender to a simple silence but the discovery of an infinite sea, unseen between the confinements of category. For Cather, the end of speech must be the end of speech not as an unspecified space or lack, but as a celebration in no man's land, brightly vested beyond the binary's grasp, a disruptive excess.

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## Cather Seminar at National Taiwan University

On October 13, 1999, Cather Board member Dr. John J. Murphy, Brigham Young University, directed an International PEN seminar on Willa Cather for thirty graduate students and faculty at the National Taiwan University. Murphy explained how preparing the University of Nebraska Press's Scholarly Edition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* revealed significant aspects of Cather's modernism. While in Taipei, Murphy also discussed "Paul's Case" with some eighty undergraduates at Fu Jen Catholic University.



Participants in the seminar included (in the middle row, left to right) Professor Hsiao-ling of the National Taiwan University, who has recently published on Cather in *Studies in Language and Literature*; Professor Emeritus (NTU) Pang-yuan Chi, former editor of the Chinese PEN Quarterly and long-time Cather enthusiast; Emily Murphy, Sally Murphy, and Professor Han-liang Chang, chair of Foreign Languages and Literatures at NTU. John Murphy (right) and his son, Dr. Joseph Murphy, a professor at Fu Jen University, are in the back row.





*The Foundation lost a dear friend with the passing of Harry Obitz this winter. He was the last surviving charter member of the WCPM&EF. We fondly remember him and his unique contribution.*

—SR

## Red Cloud Loses a Good Friend, Harry Obitz

Harriett DeLay

Harry Obitz's death leaves a void in the community of Red Cloud. His absence is felt already in the few days since his death last Sunday, February 20.

Harry died at age 88 at Lincoln's Bryan LGH Medical Center East. Always an optimist, Harry was perhaps Red Cloud's greatest fan. He had faith in its people and maintained that big things could happen if people would persevere. He reinforced these tactics often even if it was just a "hi" wave as he passed an office window or his quick greeting, "Cheerio," through the door.

The people in Red Cloud are well aware of his generosity and keen vision for the future of the town.



**HARRY OBITZ, 1911-2000**

"Harry was a dear friend, a gentleman, and certainly Red Cloud's #1 booster," reminisced Barb Sprague. "He was a man of action. If a need developed in the community, he didn't just talk about it, he did something."

Harry's death came after he had been hospitalized several times recently. Several weeks ago, he underwent surgery at Bryan LGH for a heart problem.

Obitz not only gave of his time and his ideas, he was a major donor to many causes in the Red Cloud community.

Most noons, Harry could be seen having lunch with longtime friend, Red Cloud attorney, Jerry McDole.

"Harry never sought publicity," said McDole. "He really liked people, particularly children." The attorney cited various projects Obitz had been instrumental in helping with, one in particular, the Merle Illian Ballfield. "I've always noticed that anything Harry was involved with, he gave credit to others, making stars of the people he came into contact with." McDole also pointed out that Obitz, not being a native of Red Cloud, could have chosen anywhere in the world to live, but he chose Red Cloud because he loved it here.

Harry spent his youth in California and became a golf professional, playing tours beginning in the 1930s. He worked as a golf professional around the world. A World War II veteran, he served in the navy from 1941-1945.

Obitz's introduction to Red Cloud came through his marriage to Red Cloud native, Helen Frame, in 1947. Helen was in the Navy WAVES when she met Harry who was leading a golf clinic at the base where she was stationed in California. Although they called Red Cloud their home base, the couple traveled extensively with Harry's golf commitments. Through these, he designed many courses, including the Red Cloud Club and Lochland Country Club, Hastings, and wrote several books on the topic of golf.

Helen and Harry were both involved in this city's promotions and foundings, which included Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Foundation and Ding Dong Pre-School. Both were constantly interested in furthering the education of youth and supported countless projects in response to this.

When asked about Red Cloud and Nebraska, Obitz would respond with pointing out his love for hunting, the people here and the austere beauty of the state. He noted that no matter where he went, he was always anxious to get back to Red Cloud.

A "mover and a shaker," aptly fits Harry Obitz best, offered a cluster of citizens gathered on a Red Cloud street corner on Tuesday as they shared thoughts on their friend. "He'll be missed," the men noted as they mentioned Obitz's interest in the plans for the proposed new community center for Red Cloud.

As far as his interest toward WCPM go, feelings are reflective of Harry's benevolence and selflessness. "I found Harry had a genuine interest and enthusiasm for his adopted city," said Don Connors, long-time member of the Board of Governors, WCPM. "Cather supporters found him to be a loyal supporter of his wife's interests and he was always willing to aid in her pursuits and her historical interests." Connors went on to say that Harry never missed a Spring Conference banquet and he remained proud of the work he had been involved in.

The thoughts go on and on . . . Red Cloud has lost a very good friend. His absence leaves an onerous absence in our midst.

May we extend a hearty "Cheerio, our kind Harry, we miss you."

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— Photo by Harriett DeLay

Betty Bohrer recently began as office manager at WCPM. She stands beside a John Bergers painting, "Winter's Bitter Song," at the Cather bookstore.

## WCPM Announces New Position for Betty Bohrer

Betty Bohrer has been appointed to the position of office manager at Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. Betty has been employed with WCPM for nearly three years. Her duties besides the financial records include bookkeeping, scheduling events, and organizing tours and events with Dr. Ryan, executive director, and other officers in the organization.

Bohrer's career in the business field lends itself to her new position. She served as Webster County Clerk and deputy clerk for a combined total of fifteen years, was office manager for Peterson Oil/Lewis Grain and Farms for five years, was employed as administrative clerk for the USDA Agricultural Stabilization Conservation Service (ASCS) for nine years, and served as office manager at Herberger's in Hastings for eight years.

Mrs. Bohrer and her late husband, Bob, raised their children, Lori (Hartman), and Rob, in Red Cloud. The family was involved in community and school activities and had a constant interest in the growth of the WCPM. Lori is administrator of Human Resources at Thermo King, Hastings. She has two children. Rob, a college professor in Mechanicsville, Pennsylvania, has one child.

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from The Red Cloud Chief

Spring, 2000

Dear Readers of the *WCPM Newsletter and Review*,

Congratulations! Thanks to you and hundreds of others across the country who have made contributions to the 1885 Opera House Renovation Fund, the WCPM has met its initial goal. Construction will begin in September. The restored Opera House will be a reality in the year 2001.

In 1999 I asked for your support on behalf of the Cather Foundation, and you responded in wonderful ways. Now again I need to request your help. This year we must put our energy into raising the funds for the Culture and Education Center Endowment which will provide the stable and ongoing financial base that will allow the WCPM to maintain the building and provide for expanded humanities and educational programming so important to the mission of the WCPM.

Through your help last year, we met the provisions of the two major "challenge grants" from the Peter Kiewit Foundation and the Nebraska Department of Economic Development. We are now in the process of applying for a National Endowment for the Humanities Challenge Grant to establish a \$1.1 million endowment. We will be asking for \$275,000 in this grant, which must be matched three to one for a total of \$825,000 in matching funds. Each and every gift we receive will help the WCPM toward this objective.

So many of you have helped the Cather Foundation to achieve our important initial goal. Now exciting times lie ahead. In 2001 we will dedicate the Opera House, and we hope to celebrate the achievement of a Cultural and Educational Center Endowment as well. We want you to be part of the celebration in Red Cloud. The Board of Governors is eager to personally thank you for your support, and we hope you will continue to give generously to this worthy endeavor.

Sincerely,

Betty Kort  
President, Board of Governors

## Homily for Cather's Birthday

(Homily delivered by Rev. Dr. Charles Peek, University of Nebraska-Kearney, at liturgy on Willa Cather's birthday, 7 December 1999, in Grace Episcopal Church, Red Cloud.)

In 1670, a bit before Cather's time I allow, another famous American, William Penn, was arrested under statutes forbidding inciting a riot and seditious assembly. The actual reason for his arrest was the unpopularity of his minority religious views, and his judges threatened his jurors to deliver a verdict of guilty on pains of being locked up "without meat, drink, fire and tobacco." "We shall have the verdict, or you shall starve."

The jurors framed their verdict carefully . . . they found Penn "Guilty of speaking aloud on Grace Church Street." Not amused, the judges had them locked up in Newgate Prison. Since there is no record of their being released, if they managed to live to Old Testament ages, they may be there still. But my interest today is not in the tenacity of the jurors but in Penn and the verdict rendered of him, that he was "Guilty of speaking aloud on Grace Church Street."

Often religious and other minorities and their supporters find themselves having to speak aloud unpopular messages on and about the street where they live. This is the vocation of church and art alike. I hope today I am guilty of speaking aloud on Grace Church street, but I doubt I can speak quite so loud as Cather did. And that is what struck me as so apt for today, how Willa Cather was another who was, quite literally, "Guilty of speaking aloud on Grace Church Street."

I'm not referring specifically to her depiction of her villains, although they make a good start. One can only imagine the response of those Red Cloud citizens who served as the models for "Poison" Ivy of *A Lost Lady* or Wick Cutter of *My Ántonia*. But the accuracy of Cather's gaze, the truth of her depictions came to rest on other citizens besides the rogues and fools. How unflinching is her depiction of Victoria Templeton in "Old Mrs. Harris," of the two friends, Trueman and Dillon in the story of that title, of Jim Burden in *My Ántonia* who arrives home in May and delays visiting his disgraced friend Ántonia until he's ready to return

to school in the fall, of Marian Forrester whose luster becomes tarnished in Niel's eyes after he discovers her attraction to a succession of scoundrels. And since we know a good deal of her writing was autobiographical, characters and events arising out of her own family experience, what must her family have thought of her veiled depictions of them?

That's the way with art: it shakes our world, our way of seeing it and ourselves, to the foundations. When we read and read truly, something very akin to Peter's description in our lesson today takes place: "the heavens disappear with a great rushing sound, the elements disintegrate, and the earth with all that is in it is laid bare" (II Peter 3, NEV).

And we, so depicted, don't generally like the way we look when we appear transformed into the characters of a novel. The citizens of Oxford, Mississippi, didn't much care for Faulkner; we can imagine similar apprehensions here in Red Cloud about Cather. The novelist of the great prairie and desert west gave the citizens of the prairie and desert west much to reflect on, much to fear, much to rue. She "spoke aloud on Grace Church street" and America has a habit of not well-honoring those who speak aloud the truth about



—Photo by Steve Ryan

*The following WCPM staff members gathered at the Red Cloud luncheon on Willa Cather's birthday, 7 December 1999: (left to right) Norma June Peterson, Brenda Kohler, Dorothy Mattison, Judy Graning, Janice Nikodym, Priscilla Hollingshead, Betty Bohrer, and Katy Cardinal.*

us. Russians may have lined up by the tens of thousands for Tolstoy's funeral cortege, but in America, we like to bury our authors off somewhere safe, glad to have their books after they are no longer so directly identifiable with our place and time; the books on the shelves, and good riddance to the writers.

Red Cloud and her experience here as a young person of the new western civilization then in the  
(Continued on page 20)

## CATHER BIRTHDAY HOMILY

(Continued)

making stuck with Willa all her life, and she spent that life, whether in the classroom or at *McClure's* or in the novels and stories, turning her unflinching gaze on what life had taught her to observe wherever she went, and she continued until her death "speaking aloud on or from Grace Church street."

Guilty as charged! And because guilty, one of our great, enduring modern prophetic voices, like Penn's or like Isaiah's. And what of it? Peter directs us to the point: Since the whole universe as we thought we knew it is to break up, or in Isaiah's words, since every valley is being lifted up and every mountain and hill brought down and the rugged places made smooth and the mountain ranges turned into plains and even the flowers fade when the spirit of God blows over

them — since, in a word, we can never see ourselves or our world the same again, then, asks St. Peter, "what sort of people ought we to be"?

That's the way with those who speak aloud on Grace Church Street: they leave it all in our lap! Whether we will be the sort of people who speak aloud in our turn, will resist the tyrannies of our own days, will give something of our lives to those who do, can risk our meat and drink and fire and tobacco for something worthwhile.

Willa Cather knew how the world as we think we know it can disintegrate, can, as she put it, break in two; knew what were the enduring truths that survived, and of it all spoke aloud on, of, from, and about Grace Church Street. Guilty as charged, thank God! Happy Birthday, Willa. And now, what sort of people ought we to be?

## Sherwood Accepts Position with WCPM

Harriett DeLay

Nancy Sherwood began a position February 1 with Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial & Educational Foundation. Her title of



— Photo by Harriett DeLay

Nancy Sherwood

Development Assistant will mean she will work with WCPM Executive Director Dr. Steve Ryan in the advising and aiding in areas of fund-raising for the Opera House project.

Mrs. Sherwood's main responsibilities with WCPM will be to keep ledgers concerning funds and pledge reminders, and to send pledge notices as required. She will also send spring mailings for fund raisers with letters

from either the Executive Director or President of the Board, as well as assist in planning for the fund-raising events and track expenditures incurred for these.

Nancy will keep records of contributions, and will send messages to donors as well as keeping them abreast of activities. She will assemble news articles related to the Opera House and help prepare and coordinate news releases.

Included in the Opera House Project plans is a special wall in the auditorium lobby. It will be one of Nancy's designations to assist in the placement of contributors' acknowledgments.

Mrs. Sherwood is the first individual to be hired for the position of Development Assistant since the inception of the project.

"The development sphere of the Foundation has grown dramatically in recent years," said Dr. Ryan. "The Opera House Restoration project has involved direct mail appeals and fund-raising events across the state and across the country. The added work load taxed the existing staff severely. We are very pleased to have someone of Nancy's caliber to handle these critical duties for us."

The new WCPM assistant will be working out of her home office.

Nancy and her husband, Brad, have two teenagers: Ryan, a senior, and Kristin, a sophomore, at Red Cloud High School.

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from The Red Cloud Chief

*I felt the old pull of the earth,  
the solemn magic  
that comes out of those fields  
at nightfall.*

— "The Pioneer Woman's Story," *My Antonia*

# Doll Comes Home in Time for Christmas

Harriett DeLay



— Photo by Harriett DeLay

*Dorothy Mattison*

Through the efforts of Dorothy Mattison, an employee at WCPM, a doll which belonged to the Cather family is now back where it rightfully belongs — in the Cather Childhood Home.

Dr. Steve Ryan, Executive Director at WCPM, drove to Lincoln one Friday in December to the Nebraska State Historical Museum to bring the doll back to Red Cloud. The blond-haired cherub had been in the capital city for fifteen years, possibly for repair or use in an exhibit. The doll has a china head, cloth upper body and leather arms and lower legs. One arm is missing. It is not known whether the doll belonged to Willa or to one of her siblings.

Dorothy Mattison remembered that the doll and a carriage were on display on top of a bookcase in the upstairs portion of the home. "People could touch

the doll, and had we known, the temperature variations in the upstairs probably weren't good for the doll," Mrs. Mattison offered. She has been a volunteer and then employee of WCPM for more than forty years.

Ann Billesbach, Curator of Reference at Nebraska State Historical Society, agrees with Mrs. Mattison and said that prior to 1984, the doll and also a carriage had been on display in the attic bedroom or downstairs in the parent's bedroom. Due to the condition of the doll, it will remain on the first floor of the home and will be on display but restricted to an area where it cannot be handled. Dr. Ryan and Mrs. Mattison plan to place the doll in Grandmother Boak's bedroom.

The carriage is a donated gift to WCPM from the late Mrs. Luther Pelt, a teacher in the local high school for many years. The carriage is of a similar vintage as the doll. It also has been in Lincoln in the archival collections.

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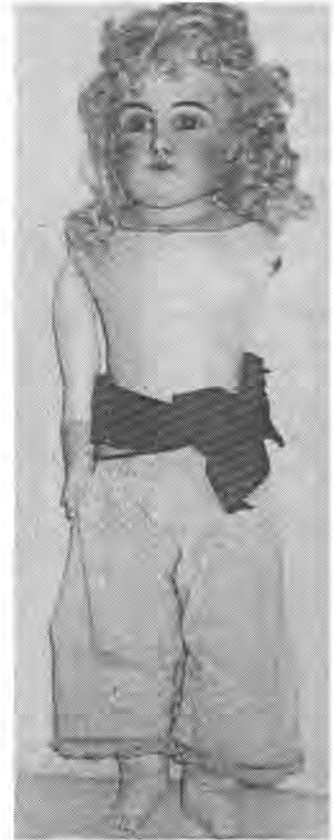


Photo courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society

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## Cather Session at Society for the Study of Southern Literature

The Society for the Study of Southern Literature held its biannual meeting in April 2000, at Central Florida State University in Orlando, Florida. This conference is an important event in Southern literary studies, and this year, for the first time, it featured a Cather session, "Willa Cather and the South." Papers included "Performing Region: Katherine Anne Porter and Willa Cather as Southerners," by Janis Stout of Texas A & M University; "At the Crossroads of Incest and Race: Willa Cather's Foray into Faulkner Country," by Mako Yoshikawa of the University of Michigan; and "Beginning to Remember: Willa Cather's Virginia Sources," by Ann Romines of George Washington University. Romines also organized and chaired the session.

The session was well received and featured lively discussion, reflecting the growing interest in Willa Cather as a Southern writer. Several persons expressed interest in participating in a Cather session at the next SSSL meeting, in Spring 2002. If you are also interested in such a session, please be in touch with Ann Romines.

## Red Cloud Wins Two Awards at NCIP Banquet

Harriett DeLay



— Photo by Harriett DeLay

*Judy Graning, Betty Bohrer and Dr. Steve Ryan of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Bookstore are shown with the "Nebraska Project of the Century" award earned by WCPM at the NCIP Awards Banquet.*

Nearly 520 Nebraska community leaders participated in Community Quest 1999, which included workshops, a luncheon and an evening awards banquet at Kearney's Holiday Inn Friday, November 19, 1999.



— Photo Courtesy of The Red Cloud Chief

Community Quest is the new name for the joint annual conference of the Nebraska Community Improvement Program (NCIP), Nebraska Lied Main Street Program, and Community Builders. In all, 92 plaques, trophies and cash awards were presented to community representatives.

This year's NCIP Awards recognized outstanding community and economic development excellence, as well as one-time Nebraska Project of the Century and Nebraska Community of the Century awards.

In 1999, NCIP joined millennium celebrations across the nation and state. The Nebraska Millennium Celebration theme is "Illuminating the Past, Igniting the Future." The Nebraska Century Awards are special one-time awards which commemorate the positive and lasting accomplishments of the 20th Century. Specifically, the awards included "Nebraska Community of the Century" and "Nebraska Projects of the Century."

Red Cloud (Population 1,204) received an award in Category II (501-1,500 Population) as the "Nebraska Community of the Century." Each community was required to provide a brief history, including how the community was founded. There was a point system on five criteria which established the judges' decisions. News articles, photos and other information supporting data were accepted. No community visits took place.

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## From the Director



Steve Ryan

☐ The new year has taken off like a rocket. It would be hard to imagine a more dazzling start. First, the generous gift of Lucia Woods Lindley enabled us to meet our funding goal to renovate the Red Cloud Opera House. Work will begin in the late summer or early fall. The project was featured in a front-page article in the *Omaha World-Herald* on February 29 and a news feature broadcast on Nebraska Public Radio May 1.

☐ Second, on January 23 received the good news of a \$29,000 Save America's Treasures Preservation Planning grant for the Cather childhood home. The funds are made possible by the support of the J. Paul Getty Trust. They will be used to undertake a comprehensive preservation needs assessment of the structure. Of particular concern is saving the wallpaper, hung by Cather herself, in her upstairs bedroom. The funds must be matched by the WCPM and Nebraska State Historical Society before the analysis can begin.

☐ Third, we were pleased to learn Red Cloud's main east-west arterial, U.S. Highway 136, was named a Nebraska Byway by the Nebraska State Department of Roads and Tourism. The road extends from Brownville on the Missouri River to northwest of Edison in Furnas County. It was selected along with eight other Cornhusker State thoroughfares for its scenic beauty and sites of historical and cultural significance. Byways are an increasingly attractive alternative to travelers weary of the heavily trafficked, homogenous Interstates. Consider taking this pleasant route on your next visit to Red Cloud.

☐ Meanwhile, members and friends from across the country mailed in clippings of news reports that Marilyn Monroe's library included *My Ántonia* and *Lucy Gayheart*. They were included in a gift to the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and part of a collection of Miss Monroe's belongings auctioned in October 1999 for more than \$13 million. Now we realize we can admire the late actress for her fine intellect and discerning literary taste, as well as her other talents.

☐ Jane Renner Hood, executive director of the Nebraska Humanities Council and member of our Board of Governors, invited Bruce Baker, also on the Board of Governors, and me to a meeting with William R. Ferris, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The spring gathering, held in Omaha, brought together a broad spectrum of Nebraskans involved in cultural concerns. Dr. Ferris discussed the

upcoming establishment of regional humanities centers. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is vying for selection as the Plains regional center.

☐ One of our favorite events of the year, the annual Pastimes and Playthings for regional school children, took place in the yard of the Childhood Home April 26 and 27. WCPM tour guide Keron Bailey organized the activity, which shows youngsters how their counterparts played and passed the time over a century ago. It was as much fun as ever. One hundred and sixty-six young folk from Kansas and Nebraska participated.

☐ Two of you passed through Red Cloud some time ago, and asked to have materials mailed on ahead of you to an address on Hiawatha Road in Wellfleet, Massachusetts. They came back, however, labeled "undeliverable." If you identify yourselves and another address, I will happily forward them to you.

☐ We look forward to seeing many of you at the premiere of Cather's *The Song of the Lark* in Red Cloud on October first. That date is the eve of the 85th anniversary of the publication of the novel. The film will be broadcast on PBS Mobil Masterpiece Theatre's American Collection later in the season. Along with our co-sponsor, Nebraska Educational Telecommunications, we warmly invite you to attend. Bring your friends; the event is open to the public and admission is free.

### PREMIERE

#### Mobil Masterpiece Theatre's American Collection

Production of

WILLA CATHER'S

### *The Song of the Lark*

Red Cloud High School  
Red Cloud, Nebraska

Sunday, October 1, 2000 — 2:00 p.m.

Open to the Public — Free Admission

#### SPECIAL GUESTS:

**Dorothea Petrie**  
**June Petrie**  
Co-Producers

and

**Steve Kulczycki**  
Executive Producer  
of American Literary Tradition, Inc.

Co-sponsored by  
The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial & Educational Foundation  
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The *Newsletter and Review* welcomes articles, notes and letters to the editor. Address submissions to Ann Romines, Merrill Skaggs, or John Swift. All submissions must follow *The MLA Style Manual*. News items should be sent to Bruce Baker. Essays and notes are currently listed in the annual MLA Bibliography.

**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.

**BOARD OF GOVERNORS**

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**YOU CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE AND GROWTH  
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- By contributing your Willa Cather artifacts, letters, papers, and publications to the Museum.
- By contributing ideas and suggestions to the Board of Governors.
- By being a Cather Memorial Member and financial contributor:

**ANNUAL MEMBERSHIPS**

Benefactor .....	\$1000.00
Patron .....	500.00
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(Foreign Subscription: add \$5.00 to membership category; if air mail, add \$10.00)

- WCPM members receive:
- Newsletter subscription
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