

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

*The Willa Cather Society*

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*A street in Clermont, France.*

J. Murphy

## ***Death Comes for the Archbishop* 1927 - 1997**

There is a telling passage beyond the middle of *Archbishop* where Father Latour, during a visit to Father Vaillant's sister's convent in Riom, is taken to a window framing a truncated view of a narrow street by one of the impressionable young nuns busy fulfilling Vaillant's requests for vestments. "Look," she directs Latour, "after Mother [Philomène] has read us one of

(Continued on page 2)

## **Virginia Seminar News**

### **SEMINAR FELLOWS ANNOUNCED**

The Seventh International Willa Cather Seminar, scheduled for June 21-28 in Winchester, Virginia, promises to be a unique and important scholarly event, exploring the topic of Willa Cather's Southern Connections. An impressive list of faculty and speakers has already been announced.\* In addition, a number of noted scholars and teachers who have published recently on Cather or whose work is closely related to the Seminar topic have agreed to join the Seminar as Fellows. They will be presenting papers and helping to facilitate the ongoing discussions that have been such a rich and productive feature of past Seminars. To date, this stellar list of Fellows, both Cather scholars and scholars of Southern writing and culture, includes Professors Virgil Albertini, Richard Harris, Sharon Hoover, Helen Fiddymont Levy, JoAnn Middleton, Ann Moseley, Elsa Nettels, Daniele Pitavy-Souques, Diane Quantic, Janis Stout, John Swift, Loretta Wasserman, Laura Winters, and Catherland photographer Beverly Cooper. For the first time, distinguished high school teachers who have made important contributions to Cather studies have been invited to serve as Fellows; Betty Kort and Melanee Kvasnicka will be participating in this Seminar as High School Teacher Fellows.

### **FOCUS ON TEACHING**

Cather texts in the contemporary classroom will be an important topic of this Seminar. One plenary evening will be devoted to classroom issues. Betty Kort of Hastings (Nebraska) High School and John Jacobs of Winchester's Shenandoah University will talk about teaching Cather in places intimately associated with her work, and historian Phyllis Palmer, who specializes in classroom issues of race, will discuss teaching *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* in a contemporary urban university. In addition, we will make an effort to tap our collective experiences with Cather in classrooms by collecting syllabi for courses in which seminar participants have read and taught Cather texts. When you register for the Seminar, you will be asked to submit at least one syllabus for this project.

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## DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP

(Continued)

[Father Vaillant's] letters . . . , I come and stand in this alcove and look up our little street with its one lamp, and just beyond the turn there, is New Mexico; all that he has written us of those red deserts and blue mountains, the great plains and the herds of bison, and the canyons more profound than our deepest mountain gorges." The sister, of course, is getting her New Mexico twice removed, like Cather's readers, and from a French perspective. The novel's Southwestern country is filtered through a cultivated European sensibility, which is why mesas resemble "vast cathedrals," Stone Lips cave is "shaped somewhat like a Gothic chapel," the prairieland sky is "empty" and "monotonous to the eyes of a Frenchman," the quarry of "golden ochre" rock glows like the "old Palace of the Popes, at Avignon," and the "golden-face" of the Midi Romanesque cathedral is appropriate against its "curtain" of "rose-coloured," "pine-splashed" New Mexican hills.

The correspondence Latour detects near the beginning of the novel between the "wooden figures of the saints" (santos) in New Mexico and the "homely stone carvings on the front of old parish churches in Auvergne," and later between the painted altar decor at Laguna and a "Persian chieftain's tent . . . in a textile exhibit at Lyons" reveal Cather's own significant artistic interest in what she referred to as "the utterly unconventional frescoes and countless fanciful figures of the saints" in Southwestern mission churches and indicate the museum or art gallery dimension of the novel's filtering perspective. The grim skeletal santos of death kept in churches for Holy Week and Penitente observances reminded Cather of Holbein's *Dance of Death* series, to which (although Death in Holbein comes to a mere bishop) she credited her title.

The combination of subject, landscape, and perspective suggested in Howlett's material provided Cather an opportunity to duplicate in prose contemporary French art that had teased her since the 1902 visit of France. "Since I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes [actually oils on canvas] of the life of Saint Genevieve in my student days," she revealed to the *Commonweal*, "I have wished that I could try something a little like that in prose; something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition." The eight panels (two triptychs and two independent panels) painted for the right and left walls of the Pantheon in Paris provided her with a model for doing "something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment," and Howlett's book provided her a subject that naturally lent itself to the style of the legend of Paris's patron saint, who, like Lamy (Latour), built a church.

Excerpt from John J. Murphy's Historical Introduction to the forthcoming U of Nebraska Press Scholarly Edition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

## A Parisian Views Cather's Southwest Illustrating Willa Cather

Françoise Palleau-Papin  
University of Tours

"The lake . . . he could recall all its aspects perfectly. They had made pictures in him when he was unwilling and unconscious, when his eyes were merely open wide" (*The Professor's House*).

As Harold von Schmidt, who illustrated *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in 1929, explains, every illustrator first studies the literary text as a critic: "I always ask myself *why* the story was written, then try to add something constructive to augment the writer's intention, to enhance it. I prefer, usually, to paint the spirit and the background of the action rather than the action itself, though, of course, this is not always possible (Interview with Harold von Schmit, *American Artist*, issue 109 [Nov. 1947]: 56). Every reader of Willa Cather's texts knows how visually her prose can take hold of one's imagination, and how, like Tom Outland at Blue Mesa, we are apt to see pictures behind the printed page: "When I look into the *Aeneid* now, I can always see two pictures: the one on the page, and another behind that: blue and purple rocks and yellow-green piñons with flat tops, little clustered houses clinging together for protection, a rude tower rising in their midst, rising strong, with calmness and courage — behind it a dark grotto, in its depths a crystal spring." My own attempt at illustrating Willa Cather, and in particular *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, in woodcuts and typography, has stemmed from a desire to share how I visualized the "thing not named," the respiration, the rhythm, the breathing softness and the decisive cut of Willa Cather's writing.

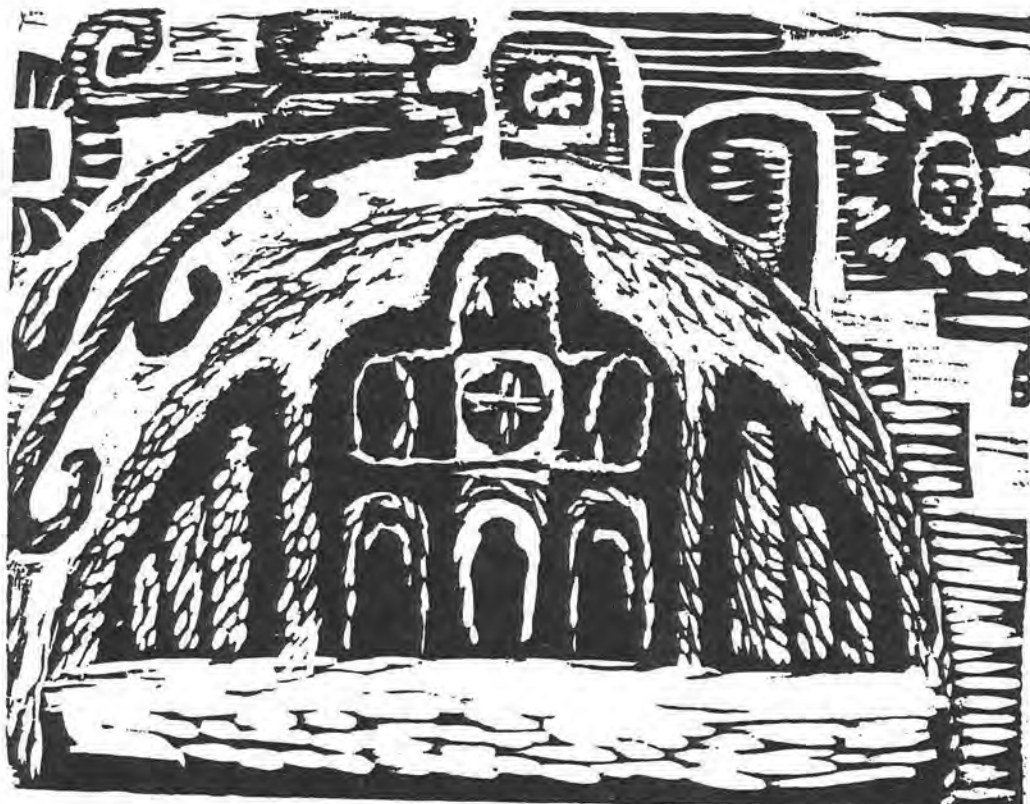
He must have travelled

through thirty miles of these conical red hills,



Fr. Papin 1995

winding his way in the narrow cracks between them,  
and he had begun to think that he would never  
see anything else.



a small white church,  
 painted above and  
 about the altar with  
 gods of wind and rain  
 and thunder, sun and  
 moon

Fr. Papin 1995



Fr. Papin 1995

It was Olivares who presented Father Latour with  
 the silver hand-basin and pitcher and toilet accessories  
 which gave him so much satisfaction  
 all the rest of his life.



Fr. Papin 1995

Nothing sensational,  
 simply honest building and good stone-cutting,  
 – good Midi Romanesque of the plainest.

## VIRGINIA SEMINAR NEWS (Continued)

Virgil Albertini, an experienced Cather bibliographer, has agreed to compile these syllabi and report to the seminar on his findings. A packet of syllabi will also be available for purchase.

### ENTERTAINMENT AND EXCURSIONS

In addition to its scholarly attractions, the Seminar week will offer a wide array of entertainment and excursions designed to introduce participants to the cultures of the Shenandoah Valley and Blue Ridge Virginia. The Jack Tale Players of Ferrum College and the Blue Ridge Institute will present an evening performance of folklore and music. A gospel choir concert from a Blue Ridge community church will evoke the traditions of African American church music that are important to *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. A group of Winchester-area quilters and quilt collectors will introduce us to the Shenandoah Valley quilting traditions that Willa Cather encountered as a little girl, when she learned patchwork in Virginia. And local members of the Cather family will join us one evening for dinner and informal storytelling.

We will be welcomed to Willow Shade, the Cather home, by owners Susan and David Parry, and we will drive to family cemeteries and local landmarks, such as the Double S and Winchester's Christ Church. We'll also visit Belle Grove plantation, a National Trust property reputedly designed by Thomas Jefferson. An entire day will be spent in nearby Washington, D.C., featuring — as well as scholarly presentations — an introduction by a local art historian to the art that Cather might have seen on her visits to Washington at the end of the nineteenth century and a free afternoon in which to explore Washington museums.

As an additional attraction, Site Director John Jacobs, who has made arrangements for Seminar meals and accommodations, promises an introduction to the excellent Shenandoah Valley cooking for which young Willa Cather was so homesick after her move to Nebraska!

### REGISTRATION INFORMATION

Make your plans now to be a part of this exciting and stimulating week. For information about registration, travel, and accommodations, contact the Site Director. For information about the program and about paper submissions, contact the Program Director.

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\*For this list, see the Seminar poster. If you have not received a poster, you may request one from either of the Seminar Directors or from the WCPM.

## Prefatory Note to "Friends of Willa Cather"

*Anyone who attended the 1989 Western Literature Association meeting will recall the poignant moment when we heard it announced that Mildred Bennett was too ill to travel to Coeur d'Alene, and that her daughter Alicia would read what her mother had written. In the essay, called "Friends of Willa Cather," Mildred describes her meetings (sometimes over years) with Louise Pound, Mariel Gere, Dorothy Canfield Fisher and Elizabeth Sergeant. "Friends of Willa Cather" is thoroughly in Mildred's style — matter of fact, but graded with telling detail and good humor.*

*A reason for printing "Friends of Willa Cather," then, must be the pleasure of being in contact again with the first of Cather biographers, and of seeing her investigating manner first hand, as it were: observant yet tactful, Mildred lets her interviewees go only as far as they wish.*

*But a second — and I suppose more significant — reason is that there are observations here that enlarge our sense of Cather's behavior and personality, especially during her university years.*

*All biographers are agreed that Cather's student days were turbulent, marked by strong friendships and academic successes, but also by sudden ruptures and hurt feelings. The most discussed of these is the break with the Pound family over the published ridicule Cather heaped on Roscoe. When Louise Pound asks Mildred to read the whole of the attack — included here — we can sense Pound's lasting resentment against Cather. (We cannot help wishing that Mildred had asked Pound the reporter's question, Why? Pound must have had an explanation of some kind.) Interesting, too, is that the loyal friend Mariel Gere tells Mildred that following the Pound incident Mariel herself was treated to a published assault, which she chose to ignore. Why did Cather do these things?*

*To my mind, a clue may lie in the very last incident Mildred questions Dorothy Fisher about — the prom date with Tom Wing — rather, the fake date, since it was entered into only as a dare. It doesn't take much sympathetic imagination to see how much hurt that discovery must have given Cather. We have only to think of her dressed for the ball in her elaborate gown, a filmy affair with giant puffed sleeves (the picture is reprinted in many places), to feel sure that she was trying, as surely she had before, to be accepted socially into university life. And it is likely that jokes and rebuffs of this kind had occurred before. After all, Cather was, as the biographies make clear, belliger-*



ent in pressing her views in any literary or academic quarrel, offending the less intransigent. It is understandable that the offended would want to get back at her when they could — that is, when she seemed to want to join in the traditional, dating, ways. And if, or when, Cather found that she had been made fun of, it would be equally understandable that she would lash out with the weapons she had at hand — words in print.

But it is not in keeping with the style of "Friends of Willa Cather" to attempt elaborate analyses. Mildred tells it only as it happened.

— Loretta Wasserman  
Annapolis



Cather in graduation gown, 1895.

— Courtesy of WCPM Collection,  
Nebraska Historical Society

## Friends of Willa Cather

Mildred R. Bennett

When I was doing research on *The World of Willa Cather*, I read in one of Carrie Miner Sherwood's clippings that Louise Pound and Willa Cather had a falling out over something Miss Cather had written about Roscoe Pound, Louise's brother. One time when I was in Lincoln, I called Louise Pound and said I had read the clipping and I wanted to talk with her about it. She said, "I have done enough for Willa Cather!" and hung up.

When my book came out in February of 1951, I received a letter from Miss Pound. She liked the book and regretted that she had failed to get to the Writers' Guild luncheon in my honor. She had forgotten, was out shoveling snow, and remembered too late. Someday, she said, she would tell me why she was so ungracious to me on my first approach to her, that she did not want to be the one to correct birth dates, and that she had been requested to save all materials for E. K. Brown. She also said that I had mistakenly listed both her and Willa as working on the *Lasso*, a university publication.

The next time I was in Lincoln, I again looked at the *Lasso* and found the two names just as I had recorded. I then wrote Miss Pound and asked her to look for herself. She replied that she had indeed found the old *Lasso* in her attic. The names were there and she commended me for accuracy. She thought that since she was Willa's first friend at the university, she had probably recommended her for the position, but she did not think Willa had been very active in gathering news for the journal. Her interests lay elsewhere.

Time passed and one day Miss Pound invited me to the Country Club and I thought surely she would tell me about the rift between the two of them. But she only bought me an ice cream treat and discussed other things. Finally in February of 1957 I had a note inviting me to lunch with her and her sister, Olivia, at the University Club. On this occasion she brought the offending article which Willa Cather had written about Roscoe. She read it with a voice trembling with emotion — probably rage.

He was one of those who came back to us on Charter Day, in his own mind, at least, one of the heroes of yore days. He was tall and slender and wore his hair parted in the middle. He stood around the halls button-holing old acquaintances and showing the University to them. He exhibited the campus, buildings and faculty with an air of proprietorship and pleased condescension. He was, by the lengthy words he used, a member of the botanical seminar. He called everything by its longest and most Latin name, and the less his victim knows about botany the more confidential he becomes and the more copiously he empties forth Latin words upon him. In his early youth he was a notorious bully, and all the very little boys of the neighborhood used to be afraid to go past his home. Now he bullies mentally just as he used to physically. He loves to make rather weak minded persons into a shapeless mass. It is the same bully instinct a little refined. He seemed very enthusiastic about University matters, but it seemed rather boyish and miniature in a man of his age. It was not a large kind of enthusiasm, that could take in principles and beliefs, it was a petty traditional sort of enthusiasm that was confined to a few people and incidents. He is liberal to all University enterprises, but it seems to be rather to perpetuate his own name and fame among the students. He has no particular business except hanging around the University in order that

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## FRIENDS OF WILLA CATHER (Continued)

people may ask who he is and be told what fine marks he used to get in his classes. He has ability enough, but he just seemed to quit growing when he graduated. He has never got past the blue-ribbon, sheepskin, "yos salutamus" stage. He is a University graduate, and that's all he ever will be in this world or that to come. (*The Hesperian*, March 10, 1894, pp. 4-5)

It was a nasty piece of innuendo making it clear that although she did not mention a name, no one would miss the intent of her lampoon. When Miss Pound had finished, she said, "After my mother read this, she said, 'Never let that girl darken my door again!' and she didn't."

She then asked me what I thought of the essay and I said I would have felt just as her mother did. We were then able to have an excellent conversation. She told me how Willa had sat in their living room and told a long story about how she had talked to Lillian Russell and what Miss Russell had said and what Willa had replied. She even described the hair-do and the clothes. Finally, Louise had said, "But Willa, you have never seen Lillian Russell." "So I haven't," she replied.

I also asked Miss Pound about the rumor of Miss Cather's being Lesbian. "But who was her partner?" she asked. I said I didn't know but thought perhaps she could help me. "No," she said, "I can't."

During my research years I met and talked at length with Mariel Gere who knew all the Lincoln friends of Miss Cather. Mariel's father founded the *Lincoln Journal* and Willa was a frequent visitor in the home. Mariel let me read all her Cather correspondence.

Mariel and I discussed the rift between Willa and Louise. When the Pound-Cather fiasco happened, Willa's Lincoln friends wanted to shun her to show their disapproval. Mariel told them that if they were true friends they would stick by Willa no matter what. Within a few weeks Willa wrote a caricature of Mariel, equally damaging and unkind. Mariel said, "I just had to swallow my own medicine and remain her friend."

In Cather's letters to Mariel after Willa was established in Pittsburgh, she thanks Mariel for sticking by her in the Pound affair. Some recent critics have taken the word "affair" to mean something vastly different.

Mariel also told me of a visit she and Willa made to Brownville to do an article on the town. They were guests of Senator Tipton, who paid for their hotel. The people hoped that an article in the *Journal* would help rejuvenate the place. Mariel acted as photographer on the trip. In one of the churches Willa threw hymnals on the floor and generally messed up the place to make a more dramatic plot and article. Mariel was much embarrassed and felt they were taking hospitality under false pretenses.

Miss Gere also told me how she had visited Willa in Red Cloud and the two of them had caught and

chloroformed a sick cat in order to dissect it. Willa showed her how to make an alcohol burner out of an ink bottle and how to dissect the animal. Mariel felt that Willa's instructions helped her a great deal when she went out to teach biology.

Other friends Willa had in Lincoln were Dorothy Canfield and possibly Edith Lewis, although it is not certain that Edith and Willa knew each other, but Dorothy and Edith played in the same prep school orchestra.

The friendship between Dorothy and Willa continued for a lifetime — with a few interludes when they could not agree. In 1948, when I was visiting the Johnsons in Rhode Island, whom we knew from World War II days, Frances Johnson suggested the two of us leave the kids with their fathers and drive up to Willa Cather's grave. I was driving a new Packard and puddles lay around the edge of the Jaffrey Cemetery. Of course, I got the car stuck. When we finally got out of the mud hole, we decided to go over to Vermont to see Dorothy Canfield Fisher. We drove to Troy, New York and ate lunch there. During lunch we thought more soberly about our intended trip and decided it would be a good idea to telephone Mrs. Fisher to see if she would talk with us.

We asked at the cafe if they had a pay phone but they said the only pay phone in town was down at the depot at the bottom of the hill. We drove down there and parked back of the building. Since we had only a few hours to do all these errands, I left the motor running and assured Frances Johnson that I would be back in a minute.

When I went to the station window to ask the clerk to make change for me so I could use the telephone, I thought he seemed reluctant to do this. But I went ahead and called the Fisher home in Arlington, Vermont. Dr. Fisher answered and said that Dorothy was not home, she was over at a graduation ceremony in Marlboro. "But," he added, "I don't think she'll talk to you unless you have Mr. Knopf's permission. She's had this letter from Edith Lewis. I think it's all nonsense and if I knew anything, I'd have you come up and I'd tell you everything, but I don't know anything."

If Mrs. Fisher would not feel free to talk with me unless I had Mr. Knopf's permission, I knew I had to call him. But I was out of change again. When I went back to the window, the clerk slammed it shut in my face. I had felt he was unfriendly, but I didn't know why. I went out and looked around. A warehouse stood within a half block. I stopped to tell Frances that I had to get more change and went on to the building. The woman there gladly gave me change. "What is the matter with the people at the depot?" I asked. "Oh, they're expecting the payroll for the mill to come on the next train."

Then I realized that the sleek Packard with my accomplice sitting in the seat, the motor running, constituted a terrible threat. As I stepped up on the station platform, the train roared in, threw off a cash

box and went on. The armed guards grabbed it up and with triumphant looks at me tore off in a truck.

I went into the depot and called Mr. Knopf who said he saw no conflict of interest in any conversation I might have with Mrs. Fisher. Thereupon we took off for Marlboro, Vermont. We arrived where a graduation was taking place on a hillside, there being no building large enough to house the audience and the VIPs from all the prestigious schools of New England. On the platform we spotted Mrs. Fisher and Robert Frost.

After Mrs. Fisher had given a short talk, she came down into the audience and sat at the other end of the plank where we were. I sent her a note to ask if I might talk with her after the graduation. She sent back the note with "yes."

When the ceremonies had finished I went down to talk with her, but as soon as I would ask a question and she would get her hearing aid adjusted (I had not realized she had a hearing problem all her life), someone would stop for her autograph. Finally she said that she could see we were getting nowhere and she knew I wanted to talk privately. Would I meet her in the library in fifteen minutes?

When we did meet, she said, "What's wrong with Edith Lewis?" I said I didn't know. Mrs. Fisher said that she felt she had been shut out of the friendship the last few years of Willa Cather's life.

She did not have time to talk long then but invited me to write and to visit her. I did write and received excellent suggestions. Eventually I went to Burlington, Vermont, to read the Fisher-Cather correspondence. Among the many letters I most appreciated those concerning *One of Ours*. Willa identified herself with Claude Wheeler and Dorothy with David Hochstein. She wanted Dorothy's criticism of the French war scenes, since Dorothy had spent much time in France and knew the language well.

In the collection was a letter to Mrs. Canfield in which Willa Cather said that she did not blame Mrs. Canfield for how she felt, that if anyone else had done to Dorothy what she had done, she would feel the same. I wanted to ask Mrs. Fisher about this letter but I could not bring myself to do it. Later, when I ate lunch with the Fishers and climbed the mountain back of the house with Dorothy to look for lady slippers and fern, I could not ask. I thought I probably already knew.

In one of the Gere letters Willa had mentioned Tom Wing in connection with a night of morphia and morpheus and her comments about him led me to ask Mrs. Fisher if she knew Tom Wing. She did; Wing had lived in Arlington, but was now dead. Her brother, James, however, had known him well. I asked if E. K. Brown had talked to him but apparently Miss Lewis had instructed him not to talk to Tom Wing.

Mrs. Fisher, however, insisted I must talk to her brother, James. When she called him on the telephone to set up an appointment, I could tell from her end of the conversation that he was reluctant to talk. She told him firmly that he was going to talk with me,

and he did. He said that Tom Wing had taken Willa to some prom dance when they were graduating, and he had done it on a dare or a bet. Willa had taken his invitation at full value, but realized eventually that the date had been a joke. In her letters to Mariel she declared she would follow her art, no matter what or who tried to prevent her.

The last letter I sent Dorothy Canfield Fisher was answered after her death by her secretary. They had read my letter to her and discussed it before her death. She had given her usual kind reply.

Although I had corresponded with Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant for several years, I did not meet her until 1955. She lived in a little cottage in Piermont on the Hudson. I took the bus from New York to get there. She was then working on her biography of Robert Frost and having difficulty as he was not always pleased with her script. Her pet cat was jumping about the living room, over the typewriter, the desk, the chairs. Miss Sergeant told me the cat's name was "Willa Cat."

In regard to most of the questions I asked about Willa Cather, she referred me to her correspondence, which she had put into the Morgan Library in New York. She also suggested I talk with Witter Bynner. As for the Morgan Library, they would not let me read the letters (Edith Lewis had this much power) and I heard that Witter Bynner hated women. By this time, my courage failed occasionally and I did not want to confront a woman hater. I asked a friend to go see him, but he did not obtain any information.

The day when I talked with Miss Sergeant, I had laryngitis. When it came time for me to walk to the corner where the bus would pick me up, Miss Sergeant protested that I should eat something or drink something. I did not accept her offer. However, as I stood on the corner, I saw her, a frail little lady, walking up the hill toward me, bearing a little glass of wine. I drank it with much gratitude and it did warm my heart on the trip back to New York.

— Red Cloud, June 1989

## Willa Cather's New York Save the Date!

Plans are underway for an International Willa Cather Colloquium to be held June 20-27, 1998 at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. The focus of the colloquium will be on Cather's years in the New York City area, and the ways in which the Big Apple influenced her work. The event will include addresses by some of the finest Cather scholars as well as tours of New York City and environs focusing on Cathersights. For further information please contact Karen Marquis or Angela Conrad at Willa Cather Colloquium, c/o Drew Graduate School, Drew University, Madison, NJ 07940, or by e-mail: [aconrad@drew.edu](mailto:aconrad@drew.edu) or [kmarquis@drew.edu](mailto:kmarquis@drew.edu).

## Miss Cather, English Teacher

Mellanee Kvasnicka  
Omaha South High School

While Cather's move to a teaching job was perhaps surprising given her professional reputation and journalistic skills, it was not unprecedented among the ranks of writers. Cather's own Thomas Carlyle, the subject of her first adult essay, himself, "just out of the university and untrained for any useful profession," turned to schoolteaching. Cather's move was precipitated by several possible motives. She had been working in journalism since her junior year in college and, while her salary was good, it simply wasn't what Cather really wanted to do, though she perhaps had not come fully to that realization. What she had come to know for certain was that she could not be a serious writer and continue the pace of her job and schedule. Her situation at the McClung house, where she paid no rent, may have also encouraged her to take a job which paid her \$650 annually, which was three hundred dollars less than she received at the *Leader* (Brown and Edel 92). Her first position was at Central High School from 1901-1902 and her second, from 1903-1906, at Allegheny High School. By the time she left Pittsburgh for New York and *McClure's Magazine*, her salary had risen to \$1300 (Brown and Edel 92).

She believed she would have far more time to write, which was perhaps a bit naive coming from one who had not taught before, and she would have the summers to herself. James Woodress believes she planned to teach until she felt able to write full-time, meanwhile using her vacations from teaching for writing (*A Literary Life* 152). At any rate, she began teaching in March of 1901, replacing a Central High School teacher who was ill. She taught composition, Latin, and algebra. (Later she would become a full-time English teacher.) As a first-year teacher with three preparations, one of which was in her worst subject area (mathematics), Cather typically immersed herself into this new assignment, losing twenty pounds by the time she returned to Red Cloud for the summer (Woodress, *A Literary Life* 150). Remembering Cather's hatred of mathematics, it seems clear just how tired she was of journalism. Edith Lewis remarks that when she

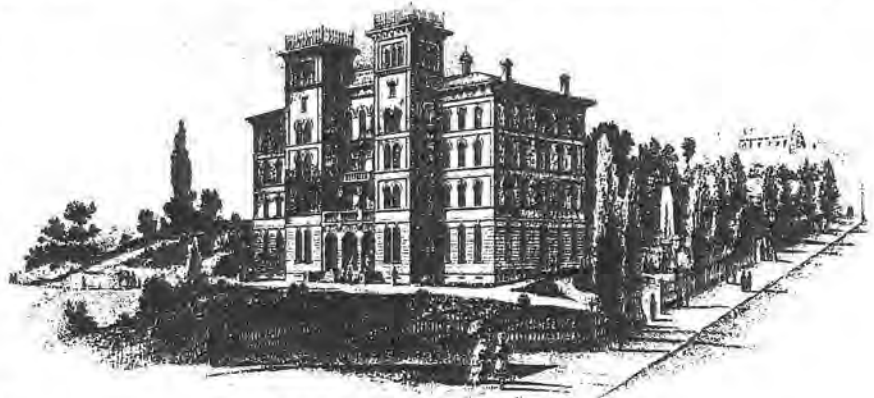
gave up journalism for teaching, it might have been thought a retreat from the direction she wished to take. But I think it showed, rather, her knowledge of herself, and her wisdom about the true road for herself as an artist. However much her teaching job drew on her time and strength, it did nothing to compromise her artistic aims. (42)

And, in fact, teaching students how to write further clarified many of Cather's ideas about writing and education and art.

It would be too easy, however, to assume that Cather took the job for practical reasons alone. Cather had always liked children, spending much time with her own brothers and sisters, and as the oldest, telling them stories. Edith Lewis comments:

She must have been an exceptional teacher of English. She had, all her life, a great love of children and young people — from the days in Red Cloud, when she was the chieftain of her younger brothers and sisters, leading them into all sorts of adventurous exploits, to the later years, when she became the companion and friend of her young nieces and nephew Charles Cather, and of the young Menuhin children, bringing to her intercourse with them great imaginative sympathy and tact and wisdom as well as the wit and fun and brilliant charm that children love . . . (50)

In the column she edited for the *National Stockman and Farmer*, Cather's affection for children, as



Pittsburgh Central High School

well as her belief in the importance of education, is clear. She wishes her young readers a happy vacation with plenty of bike-riding and good fishing. She encourages them to find out what a good place the world is. It makes her happy to think of so many boys and girls just out of school about to make this discovery. Then her lighthearted, affectionate tone turns serious (just a bit):

But even when the sun is brightest and the woods are greenest, I hope that none of you will be quite afraid of the sight of a book. Just pick one up occasionally, if for nothing else to see how good it is to be able to put it down when you want to. But seriously, the reason many boys and girls get on so slowly at school is that they determinedly go to work every summer to forget all they learned the winter before. I do not mean for a moment that you should study on vacation, but you ought to read . . . there are plenty of books as interesting as a picnic or a ball game. And when you have nothing else to do write to me and tell me whether you like my advice and how you are enjoying your vacation. (27 May 1897, 22)

It is impossible not to think of today's summer reading clubs for children in libraries across the country. Cather's concern and affection for young people would be one of her strongest traits, seen not only in her life, but also in her fiction.



Almost from her first day of school, Cather made an impression that many of her students would not forget. Perhaps one of the most complete portraits of Cather as teacher comes from a former student, Fred Otte, Jr. He begins by describing her appearance compared to the other faculty members:

Looking over the faculty in the assembly hall, they seemed mousey, rather shabbily dressed, collectively funereal. That is, all but one. In a neat brown suit, wearing a crisp white shirt waist with Peter Pan collar and cuffs, this one looked trim, smart and tidy amid her drab surroundings. Her lightly tanned complexion was fresh and clear, with the slight flush of peaches ripened in the sun and wind. Her hands were brown and strong — almost masculine. She sat at ease, looking over the pupils. ("The Willa Cather I Knew," 2, SC)

Phyllis Martin Hutchinson, who would write a memoir and bibliography honoring her former teacher, remembered Cather as "good looking, with gray-blue eyes and dark hair worn pompadour fashion. She had intermittent dimples and beautiful, even, white teeth that seemed to flash when she laughed" (263).

Otte, Hutchinson and Cather's other students would quickly discover that Cather was quite different from the other teachers they had previously encountered, but not just because of her appearance. Her entire approach to teaching was based on beliefs she had been shaping for years, heavily influenced by those who had taught her. When Cather moved to a teaching career in Pittsburgh, she took with her the principles of education she had seen in her own teachers. Her devotion to the humanities, her concern for her students, and her teaching methods all suggest a soundness in modern educational principles.

Her own interest in and emphasis upon literature and the classics support her sense that education must do more than enable us to make money. Later in her life, in the thirties, she would be dismayed about the attitude toward the arts in modern American life and the direction in which university education was moving — a fascination with all things contemporary at the cost of "the great performances of the past" (Brown and Edel 290). Brown and Edel cite the incident in which Cather was asked why she taught Latin and English to high school students. When she replied that she liked both the languages and the literature, her interviewer was astonished. "Education seemed to her to become more and more an exaltation of technology and an aid to making money," and she wondered how anyone could truly believe this was education; "what could be said for a people that did not care about Shakespeare?" (290) In contrast were her own aspirations for her students, as one of them recalled: "She tried to impress her own high ideals upon us, and taught us to avoid the tawdry at all costs" (Byrne and Snyder 50). The "tawdry" was everywhere, and it was threatening. Cather wrote in 1923:

The classics, the humanities are having their dark hour. They are in eclipse. But the 'classics' have

a way of revenging themselves. One may . . . hope that the children, or the grandchildren . . . will go back to the old sources of culture and wisdom — not as a duty, but with burning desire. ("Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" 7)

Thus Cather's own beliefs about education had been shaped by her own teachers. From her high school commencement address to her essay on Carlyle, her early experiences with the humanities led to her adult conviction that education provided a doorway to art. As an artist, she "rang the humanistic alarm, and the novels and short stories in which it rings out are, in addition to their value as art, Cather's gift to the teachers and students in the second half of the twentieth century" (Byrne and Snyder 67).

In addition to her belief in the importance of the humanities as a cornerstone of her educational philosophy, Cather also exhibited deep concern for her students. Perhaps the best evidence of this fact comes from her former students. Frances Kelly suggests that "Everyone seemed to know she was really interested in him or her" (Byrne and Snyder 55). Cather wielded enormous influence on her students, and there is no question that she liked working with students, even though predictably she found at times the daily grind of school exhausting.

Many students remembered her with respect and affection. In 1966, C. H. Klingensmith recalls Miss Cather from Allegheny High School, saying, "She seemed to take an interest in my work. We got along real well" (Letter, Marion Marsh Brown Collection). Byrne and Snyder describe Klingensmith as a "student of some ability," who cared only for "baseball and his English class" (61). Though Klingensmith dropped out of high school before earning a diploma, he reported that Cather was "generally well-liked," but that he especially admired her for her control of her classes (61). Bruno W. Merker agreed, recalling "no nonsense" during the class period and crediting Cather with his success as an English student the University of Pittsburgh (Byrne and Snyder 60). Even students who were not in her class wished they had been. Josephine Anderson regrets "that I was not in her class as I have been one of her great admirers, one who has bought, paid for and read every one of her books" (Letter, 15 May 1967, MMBC).

Cather's relationships with her students lasted for years, in much the same way she remained close to her own teachers — Miss King and the Goudys of Red Cloud, and Herbert Bates of the University of Nebraska. Fred Otte writes of his remembering her birthday every year and her comic threat if he were ever to reveal the date of her birth. He also describes his visits to her home in New York City:

Now and then when in New York, I went to #5 Bank Street to hear and tell the latest news. Here it was, in front of a cozy fireplace, with tea and scones, I saw the exciting snap shots of her Mesa Verde expedition. Willa never lost her love for the western

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(Continued)

country, nor her interest in any personalities or incidents which might have possibilities for future writing. I eagerly read every thing she wrote, and just for old time's sake, I imagine, she asked for my opinions. ("The Willa Cather I Knew," 6, SC).

Obviously close to his teacher, Otte believes he is the namesake for Fred Ottenburg in *The Song of the Lark*.

Another of Cather's Pittsburgh students, Norman Foerster, would become a writer and critic himself and remain a lifetime correspondent. In a 1910 letter, Cather writes to congratulate Foerster on an article he has written. She indicates her previous confidence in his ability to succeed. Still the mentor, she offers to give Foerster a letter of introduction to Ferris Greenslet, and even offers him the opportunity to free-lance for *McClure's*. She closes by writing affectionately of her wishes for his success (20 July 1910, SC). Later, in a letter dated that same year, she writes praising his style, pleased that he has outgrown his complex sentence structure and grateful that he has become a better editor of his own work (Letter, 24 July 1910, SC). Still later that year, she writes again to ask if he has subjects in mind for articles (1 October 1910, SC). Thus Cather continued to do for Foerster what her teachers had done for her: offer support, even assistance, criticism, even advice if needed. That Foerster's regard for Cather continues is evidenced in her 1936 letter asking him *not* (my italics) to recommend her for an honorary degree from Rockford College. That a student would, some thirty years after having been in her class, want to so honor her is indeed a tribute to his teacher. Remembering Edith Lewis's comments about Cather's correspondence with the Goudys, her former teachers, we have a sense of Cather coming full circle and writing the same kind of letters to her students that her teachers had written to her.

Fred Otte writes affectionately of Cather's enthusiasm for her students' learning and performance. At one point, she recommended that he not return to Central High School but instead attend a good school like one she had heard of in Switzerland. She arranged to tutor him in English. He describes the lessons:

As a tutor, Willa was a patient, but hard taskmaster. She insisted upon careful and thoughtful work, however imperfect it might be in quality, for she often reminded me that we learn by doing . . . Willa had been raised with the boys of her family and she understood them. She was the only person I had ever known who made me like study until it eventually became a habit. ("The Willa Cather I Knew" 3-4, SC)

We think of Gaston Cleric's remonstrances to the young Jim Burden and realize once again that with Cather fiction and reality are close neighbors.

But her years at Central and Allegheny High Schools did more than demonstrate her concern for

students and cement her philosophy about the importance of the humanities in education. Her methodology suggests sound, modern educational practice. Phyllis Hutchinson describes the typical English curriculum of the day:

... "English" in elementary school had been limited to grammar drill, parsing words and diagramming sentences. By the time a pupil reached ninth grade, he was supposed to know how to write grammatically, but the world of literature was mostly unknown. I think Miss Cather reveled in opening up the Realms of Gold to us and in stimulating our imaginations with her own enthusiasm . . . (264)

Hutchinson goes on to recall that Cather was the first teacher to "give us a list of books for summer reading" (265). Obviously Cather wanted her students to have the same exposure to the classics that she had been fortunate enough to have had. In 1939 she would explain this idea:

I think we should all, in our school days, be given a chance at Shakespeare, Milton, Fielding, Jane Austen — coming down as late as Thackeray, George Eliot, George Meredith, and Thomas Hardy . . . I mean that students can be "exposed," so to speak, to the classics. If the germ "takes," in very few, it will develop, and give them a great deal of pleasure in life. And those who do not catch the infection will certainly not be at all harmed. (Bohlke 191)

Cather wanted her students to understand how language worked. So she taught them elements of poetry. Prosody was important in Miss Cather's class. Ida Little recalled, "She was great for similes and descriptions" (Byrne and Snyder 58), and Phyllis Hutchinson agreed, remembering Cather's comparison of a "chrysanthemum on a coat lapel to a bunch of coleslaw" (58).

In addition to her emphasis on the classics and the prosody of poetry, most compelling are her theories regarding the teaching of composition. Cather believed in the effectiveness of frequent writing experiences. As Phyllis Hutchinson recalls:

She knew the only way to learn to write was to write, and she set us to writing themes, one every class day, usually in the first ten to fifteen minutes of the period. We did not know until we came to class what subjects she would assign. They were simple subjects like "My first Party," "An Italian Fruit Stand," "My Favorite Play" . . . (264)

This was a technique Cather had come to know very well at the University of Nebraska under Herbert Bates's instruction. In a letter written in 1943, Cather recalls that she was a member of Bates's daily theme class, and their themes were often used in the *Hesperian* (Letter, 10 September 1943, SC). Cather understood well the need to write frequently. In her column in Pittsburgh's *National Stockman and Farmer*, Cather had earlier addressed the need to know how to write and how to learn to do so: "it [the ability to write] can be cultivated inexpensively, without the aid of a teacher or

an expensive instrument. You can perfect yourself in this by merely reading the books of men who wrote well and by practice" (12 November 1896, 783).

Additionally, Cather advised her students to "write out of their own experiences" (Byrne and Snyder 56). Foerster recalls her response to his writing:

She liked some of my own themes. I remember one, which I believe I still have, on my memory of the dreamy summer time while I lay in bed during a blizzard that beat against the windows. On her advice I submitted it to the *High School Journal* where it appeared to my great delight, with my name in print for the first time . . . . What could I do but admire and respect her? This attitude was heightened in my second year (when I no longer had her as a teacher) by the publication of her *April Twilights*. I thought it wonderful of her to write a book . . . . (Brown 93-94)

One needs only to remember the summer picnic in *My Ántonia*, or the boys swimming in Mrs. Forrester's marsh, or Lucy's Gayheart's skating party to understand why Cather would have found such a theme so appealing. And, of course, Foerster's reaction to seeing his words in print could just as easily have been Cather's own words after her Carlyle essay appeared. Cather would remark in 1915 that "the young writer must learn to deal with subjects he really knows about. No matter how commonplace a subject may be, if it is one with which the author is thoroughly familiar it makes a much better story than the purely imaginal" (Bohlke 15). Cather's advice to her students anticipates her later description of the writing of *O Pioneers!*:

*O Pioneers!* interested me tremendously because it had to do with a kind of country I loved, because it was about old neighbors, once very dear, whom I had almost forgotten in the hurry and excitement of growing up and finding out what the world was like and trying to get on in it . . . . (Willa Cather on Writing 93-94)

What Cather was teaching her students about writing were the very principles she used herself. What her teaching experience suggests is that, much like the Lincoln and Red Cloud years, education and educating were critical steps in her long apprenticeship.

Another of Cather's techniques in teaching composition was, as one student described, "designed to teach us first to observe carefully, then to describe and narrate clearly" (Woodress, *A Literary Life* 153). Once Cather asked her class to write a description of a tree. Some of the students turned in reports they had written based on research. Cather, however, dismissed those papers and instead chose to share with the class a theme by a girl who had actually "looked at a horse chestnut tree and written about what she had seen" (Byrne and Snyder 56). This idea of observing and describing from one's own experience and vision would be refined in "The Novel Demeuble" years later:

Out of the teeming, gleaming stream of the present [the novel] must select the eternal material of art.

There are hopeful signs that some of the younger writers are trying to break away from mere verisimilitude, and, following the development of modern painting, to interpret imaginatively the material and social investiture of their characters; to present their scene rather by suggestions rather than by enumeration. The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification. (*Willa Cather on Writing* 40)

She must have remembered her students in Pittsburgh, when she writes in the same essay, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, of "that drudge, the theme-writing high school student" (41).

There is, in all of this, a sense of unbroken experience from Cather's writing to Cather's doing. Phyllis Hutchinson describes the effects of her teaching:

'Fine writing' was her *bete noir* and we must despise it as she did. She urged us to seek the right word to express a certain shade of meaning; she made literature come alive; she broadened our horizons and encouraged us to make the most of whatever ability we possessed, and above all, to be ourselves. (Hutchinson 265-66)

Cather's disdain for "fine writing" would continue all of her life. In a 1915 interview, Cather would talk about herself as a "young writer": "Every writer has to work off the 'fine writing' stage. It was a painful period in which I overcame my florid, exaggerated, foamy-at-the-mouth, adjective-spree period. I knew even then it was a crime to write like I did, but I had to get the adjectives and the youthful fervor worked off" (Bohlke 12-13). Cather learned this lesson from her own teachers and then taught this lesson to her own students. Later she would practice in her own work what she had learned and taught.

In spite of the fact that Cather was undeniably effective with many students, some students and colleagues resented her techniques and attitudes. Some students thought that she was too demanding, and James Woodress suggests that in terms of writing, "She was hard to please and graded themes very severely" (*A Literary Life* 153). Hutchinson reports "Seldom did she grade beyond 85 . . . . Mostly we got 70's and occasionally achieved an 80 on our themes which were all carefully corrected and returned to us" (264). Cather's students sometimes had mixed feelings about her, depending to a certain degree, on their class standing. However, another former student disputes this comment: "In Miss Cather's class we never thought about grades; we just enjoyed learning about literature" (Byrne and Snyder 57). Hutchinson remembers that her personality could not be ignored: "She was greatly admired by some of her students, and just as heartily disliked by others. This condition alone prevented boredom in class" (265). Perhaps a more telling criticism of Cather as a teacher has to do with her impatience with students who were not bright, and what appears to be her penchant for ridiculing them. Another of those former students suggests that Cather was a perfectionist, who had little patience with the stupid or careless student, "and

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## WILLA CATHER, ENGLISH TEACHER

(Continued)

once put a young man in his place by reading a letter he had written. The errors must have been egregious because she followed the reading by asking, "Why didn't you sign off 'Yours intoxicatedly'?" (Byrne and Snyder 62). Some of her colleagues recognized this tendency to ridicule the less-than-brilliant student as well. However, Phyllis Hutchinson remembers things quite differently: "While Miss Cather had strong likes and dislikes and was generally outspoken, she understood the sensitivity of teenagers and never held us up to ridicule as some of the other teachers did. I shall always remember and be grateful that she took a *faux pas* of mine in stride and did not give the class a chance to laugh at my expense" (264). A woman who taught at Allegheny High School seven years after Cather had left relates residual feelings of bitterness from faculty members who recalled Cather's "devotion to the brilliant students and her intolerance of those who did not learn quickly" (Byrne and Snyder 62). Cather played favorites among her students, and "was not very subtle about it" (Byrne and Snyder 64), inviting particular favorites to tea at the McClung house. Part of this criticism may have been a result of the fact that Cather did not mix socially with faculty members because, as James Woodress points out, "she went home when class was over and spent her evenings grading papers, reading with Isabelle and writing stories" (*A Literary Life* 155). Another teacher clearly remembers Cather from Allegheny High School with great admiration and respect. In a letter written to Cather dated November 28, 1926, Adda Marlie writes that:

. . . I shall never forget you and what an inspiration you were to me during my first year's teaching . . . nor my disappointment when I learned that you were not to return . . . I am still able to visualize your kind encouraging smile that never failed to greet me no matter how busy you were . . . I am only one of the many students and teachers who have been uplifted by your great tender heart . . .  
(SC)

Much of what former students and colleagues relate is, of course, colored (or discolored) by time and memory's afterglow. Doubtless some envied her abilities. But perhaps a more obvious reason for adult resentment of Cather lay in the fact that Cather was, for most of her life, a person whose focus was clearly established. She would not be diverted from her art. She understood its demands and submitted to them. Whether she was universally idolized or not, this clarity of vision, reveals several important facts: Cather was a teacher who practiced much of what she believed in, much of what she herself had been taught, and what she herself would go on to demonstrate in her "other career."

Not long before her teaching years were over, Cather wrote a letter to Mariel Gere indicating her

affection for teaching and her conviction that she continues to become a better teacher (SC). That Cather enjoyed her teaching a good deal is echoed in a letter she wrote her to her homeroom students when she left for New York. Dated 2 June, 1906, the letter wishes them good luck and comments that "One always has to choose between good things it seems. So I turn to a work I love with a very real regret that I must leave behind, for the time at least, a work I had come to love almost as well" (Byrne and Snyder 63). She concludes the letter by extending an invitation: "As long as I stay in New York, I shall always be glad to see any of my students when they come to the city" (63). In a letter dated November 22, 1906, Cather would remark that she was sorry not to see old friends on a recent visit to Pittsburgh, but she was much in need of rest after her former students had visited her in large and numerous groups (Letter to Mr. Slack, HSWP). Of course, several of her students continued to do that, off and on, until near the end of her life.

Cather expressed her own idea of what constituted excellence in teaching in 1939, some thirty-three years after she herself had exhibited these same characteristics and nearly fifty years after encountering these same traits in her own teachers:

While I do not believe that English literature can be "taught" in the sense that Latin can be taught, I know from experience that an instructor who is really steeped in his subject, who loves both literature and life, can, by merely expressing his own honest enthusiasms, or his honest objections, have a great influence on young people. If the English teacher is vain and opinionated, and wishes to astonish his classes by a lot of diagrams and formulae which are supposed to explain to them why *Julius Caesar* was written, and why *Far From the Madding Crowd* is a fine novel, he will prejudice his better students against the subject he teaches, and will immensely reinforce the self-satisfaction of the shallow and conceited ones. (Bohlke 139)

The faces of Miss King and Herbert Bates and all the others are clear here. Clearly she wanted to be the sort of teacher, not who astonished her students with diagrams and word-counts, but one who opened doors for them, as all of her teachers had done for her.

Though Cather would leave teaching to return to journalism one more time, it became more clear to her than ever before that journalism was not the kind of work she wanted to do for the rest of her life. Edith Lewis would remark that "it never gave her any pleasure to remember her newspaper work" (94), suggesting that perhaps this was the reason it "never figured in her novels" (94). As we think about the many teachers in her fiction — Aunt Georgiana, Gaston Cleric, Andor Harsanyi, Madison Bowers, Godfrey St. Peter, Lesley Ferguesson, and all the others — it is clear the same cannot be said about teachers and teaching.



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B. J. Cooper

## A Self-Reflective Sympathy: Willa Cather's "Paul's Case"

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E. K. Brown refers to "Paul's Case" as a "coda" (114) to Willa Cather's novel *The Troll Garden*. His assessment is nearest to my own. I see this richly told story, ending in the suicide of a teenager, as Cather's attempt to conclude the work with a flourish — both punctuating and complicating her message about art, the artist, and his/her relationship with society. I believe that a close investigation into "Paul's Case" reveals an intentional sympathy for Paul that enlightens readers of Cather's early fiction.

My examination of "Paul's Case" requires dealing with the question of whether or not Paul is an artist — at least in Cather's eyes. It is only in the answer to this question that we can attempt to discern the message from her story. Critics vary widely in their assessment of Paul. Bernice Slote feels that Paul has a "genuine if excessive feeling for art" (96) and Dorothy Van Ghent calls Paul Cather's "earliest model of the young, artistically or merely sensitively gifted person" (75). Loretta Wasserman, on the other hand, tells us that "Paul gives no evidence of suppressed talent or even fine-grained love of art; in fact, he appears to use art only as a vehicle for escapist dreams" (24). In a less harsh tone, Mellanee Kvasnicka comments on Paul's situation, assessing "It isn't that Paul appreciates or even understands the art and music; they seem to fill an emotional void, to take him away to forgetfulness" (104).

The text itself, the descriptions given of the character, is an obvious place to turn for light on the question of Cather's casting of Paul. The opening scenario creates a frame through which the reader views Paul throughout the story. When we first meet him, his opal pin, red carnation, and tan velvet collar speak loudly of his vision of himself — if not Cather's. Such arty touches, along with the "suave" way he enters the meeting with the faculty, displaying "something of the dandy" (Cather 306), and his graceful bow when exiting, tell us that Paul sees himself as the artist, one apart from the crowd, as special. This first scene also shows us another side of Paul, unintentional but perhaps more revealing. His "twitching" lips, "trembling" fingers, and "jerking" hand (Cather 307) are all physical manifestations of internal pain. Besides these characteristics, the structure of the scene is also meaningful. Weighing one desperate and sensitive teenager's insolence against a group of mature teachers, lacking understanding or mercy, creates an underdog advantage for Paul and suggests Cather's intent that the reader view him sympathetically from the very beginning of the story.

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## SELF-REFLECTIVE SYMPATHY

(Continued)

The question of Paul as artist can also be examined through the narrator's descriptions of his encounters with art. There is no reference to Paul creating art, except with the possible attempt to fashion his own immediate world. However, the narrator reports that the Raffelli paintings "exhilarated him" and he "lost himself" in the blue Rico (Cather 308). Then, after the symphony, Paul found it "impossible to give up this delicious excitement which was the only thing that could be called living at all" (Cather 309). The claim that these reactions amount to an immature response to art, akin to Flavia's fascination with the art world in "Flavia and her Artists" (Woodress xix), dismisses the narrator as overly sentimental and unreliable without good cause. It seems now that the earlier question of Paul as artist expands to whether Cather's sympathy lies only with the artist as creator, or whether the label of artist can be extended to include the fascinated spirit. Looking beyond the text of the story to the circumstances of its creation and Cather's involvement with the character can help clarify Cather's feelings about art and about "Paul's Case."

"Paul's Case" is the best known and most often anthologized of the seven stories in *The Troll Garden* and the one Cather obviously favored. A biographical tie with Cather lies, of course, in the fact that the tale was written between 1901 and 1903, while Cather was teaching high school. Her inspiration for Paul comes from two personal memories — one of an impudent student in her Latin class and the other from her feelings on first seeing the city of New York and the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel (Wasserman 22). A much publicized incident involving two boys who stole \$2000 and ran away to spend the entire amount on high living just before the story was written probably also influenced the turn of the plot (Meyering 186).

Cather's personal connection with the story is underlined by scholars who detect her personality in this troubled young character. Significantly, the story was originally published with the subtitle "A Study of Temperament," suggesting, along with the title word "Case," that the emphasis in the story is on the motives and rationalities behind Paul's behavior, not merely on his actions. The shared attitudes between Cather and Paul are apparent to several critics. Brown points out that the split personality of the city — dead yet, at the same time, so alive — was a constant source of amazement to the young Cather (185). With the theater as his source of light in the darkness of the city, Paul has the same sensation: "in the midst of that smoke-palled city, enamored of figures and grimy toil Paul had his secret temple, his wishing carpet, his bit of blue-and-white Mediterranean shore bathed in perpetual sunshine" (Cather 314). Sharon O'Brien sees "Paul's Case" as a flashback to Cather's early life when she chopped off her hair and assumed the masculine persona of William Cather, Jr. and suggests that

"Paul is a male version of Willa Cather" who shares his longing to escape the drab and ordinary, rejecting traditional gender roles represented by Paul's abandoning his father's values (283). Philip Gerber also suggests the link between the young Cather and the title character in the story: "Cather's major fears about her life [are] that she does not have enough talent to succeed as a writer, that the security of family and a steady income may seduce her away from her art, and that her youth will slip away from her before she accomplishes anything of value" (45). Paul echoes her theme that true success lies in the artistic life when he observes the German soloist in the symphony: "The soloist chanced to be a German woman, by no means in her first youth and the mother of many children; but she wore an elaborate gown and a tiara, and above all she had that indefinable air of achievement, that world-shine upon her, which, in Paul's eyes made her a veritable queen of romance" (Cather 309). Also the narrator's understanding of Paul's fears about his future again echoes Cather's: "There it was, what he wanted — tangibly before him, like the fairy world of a Christmas pantomime — but mocking spirits stood guard at the doors, and, as the rain beat in his face, Paul wondered whether he were destined always to shiver in the black night outside, looking up at it" (Cather 310).

Cather acknowledged the affinity between herself and her character Paul and "confessed how much of her own hunger and frustration were embodied in the unhappy boy's flight from the drab reality of his daily life and in his instinctive reaching out for beauty." She also "explain[ed] the impulse behind 'Paul's Case' and others of her early stories as the raging bad temper of a young person kept away from the things she wanted" (Robinson 125).

Once we see Paul as a partial reflection of the young artist Cather, expanding the focus to her ideas about the nature of art and the artist can add to our understanding of the story. The two epigraphs Cather chose to introduce her first collection, *The Troll Garden*, help us appreciate the unifying theme she paints with these seven stories. Even though various critics interpret the quotations from Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" and Charles Kingsley's "The Roman and the Teuton" differently, a definite concern for the nature and purpose of art is common in these interpretations. James Woodress feels that Cather "loved art like a religion and dedicated herself to it, but she also was aware that in the pursuit of any religion she might mistake false gods for the true one" (xvii). And specifically, in the story "Paul's Case," Paul is essentially "seduced by art" and "cannot distinguish between the true and the false" (xix). Marilyn Arnold agrees that "the most overt treatment of the troll garden/goblin market theme in the book" is seen in "Paul's Case." Paul is "obviously the hungry forest child who is utterly helpless before the luscious appeal of the garden, represented for him in the trappings of wealth and in his adolescent perception of the artist's world" (61).

These ideas that Paul is “seduced by” and “helpless before” art also work to support Paul as a sympathetic character. Similar sentiments are expressed by Cather biographers and Cather herself.

Brown, in his *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, speaks of Cather’s attitudes towards her art and particularly her view of the artist as an exceptional personality who deserves understanding:

[S]he always believed that the artist is not amenable to the standards by which other folk may rightly be judged. For the mastery of an art, she thought, a fearful tax is levied on the entire personality of the artist. Artistic achievement means a constant bleeding of a person’s strength. Imaginative understanding of the artistic process should bring, she thought, a deep compassion for what the personality of the artist undergoes, if not homage for his acceptance of his destiny. (187)

Cather herself also reflects on the artist’s fate: “The further the world advances the more it becomes evident that an author’s only safe course is to cling to the skirts of his art, forsaking all others, and keep unto her as long as they two shall live” (Slote 407). This reference to the wedding ceremony between the artist and his art indicates the depth to which Cather sees the necessary separation of the artist from society. If, as I believe, Paul’s response to and fascination with art are sufficient for Cather’s sympathy, then his short life becomes even more tragic. In this light, Paul’s escape from the ordinary world is his destiny; his nature makes him sensitive to the siren call of art, and he has no choice but to follow.

Opposing arguments that dismiss Paul’s love of art as a disguised fascination with wealth or simply a rebellious desire to be different are hard to ignore. However, in light of the series of stories in *The Troll Garden* and information from Cather and others who have studied her life during the time the story was written, I am inclined to accept Paul as a tragic hero who, without any real guidance or understanding, was destroyed by the trolls as he sought to enter the garden. Phyllis Robinson tells us that “in later years Willa Cather would have been the first to chide the moody, reckless Paul for seeing in the glitter and gold of the Rialto the answer to his heart’s desire” (125). But for the time in Cather’s life that Paul had the power to speak, his response was appropriate.

Later in her career, Cather’s outlook changed, as expressed beautifully through books that romanticize the landscapes and personalities of her native Nebraska. However, the view of art that rules these later works is significantly different from the one that governs “Paul’s Case.” Possibly Cather’s critique of the actress Julia Marlowe best generalizes her own critical principles as they apply to her early fiction: “After all the supreme virtue in art is soul, perhaps it is the only thing which gives art the right to be. The greatest art in acting is not to please and charm and delight, but to move and thrill; not to play a part daintily and delightfully, but with power and passion. All the prettiness for

its own sake is trivial” (Slote 53-54). “Paul’s Case” seems not to be just a “case” study of Paul but a capsule look at Cather’s insistence in her early work on achieving art that “moves” and “thrills . . . with power and passion.” Only through such insights can we begin to see her transformational move in tone from the solemn and tragic stories of *The Troll Garden* to the uplifting romance of *My Ántonia*. When the evolution of Cather’s theory of art is viewed alongside her work, her early story “Paul’s Case” becomes a poignant reminder of the price that art often extracts from its chosen lovers.

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*Cather Childhood Home.*

B. J. Cooper

**An Interview with Joseph Urgo**  
**(*Willa Cather and the***  
***Myth of American Migration.***  
**Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995)**

Karl Rosenquist  
Los Angeles

KR: *I have to tell you that I enjoyed reading your book very much; I particularly enjoyed the clarity and precision of your prose. It's seldom when one can read an academic book and term it "enjoyable," but I must say that yours was.*

JU: Thank you.

KR: *You write that Cather is the one major novelist of her era to recognize that "migration links peasant and poet, immigrant and aesthete, into one global pattern of consciousness" (17). I wonder, would such a linkage deem Cather an egalitarian writer (reducing poet and aesthete to common people) or something of a snob (raising special peasants and immigrants to artist potential)?*

JU: I'm glad you asked this question. As with so much of her writing, Cather is distinctive for her clear vision here. I see her as neither an egalitarian nor a snob, but as someone who raises important questions about those categorizations. She's no egalitarian, because even in her depictions of "good country people" she makes crucial distinctions. Just ask yourself about farmer solidarity in *My Ántonia*, for example, when Mr. Shimerda dies. And she is no snob, despite her highly developed aesthetic senses — you'll find aristocrats among the farmers and peasants among the powerful in Cather. No, what I mean by the statement you quote is that Cather was tuned in to what I call elsewhere the "simultaneous enactment" of ideas in any civilization. Education, money and social position create artificial but very real, distinctions among people's styles of articulation. As a result, the same idea or notion held by, say, a first-generation Bohemian Nebraska farm woman will manifest itself entirely differently when articulated by, say, a classically educated railroad lawyer. The vast social difference between these two figures, when treated by the methods of realism, will result in narratives of intellectual gulfs, conflicts, and mutual irrelevance. But in Cather's mind these two figures are connected. By virtue of their experiences they share a common past, a common set of (what we would call today) cultural values. Remember when Jim delivers the wonderfully eloquent line about how Ántonia is a part of his mind, how she influences his likes and dislikes, his tastes, and all that? It's a beautiful statement about the interconnectedness of lives, and his language reflects well on his teachers at Lincoln and at Cambridge. Then Ántonia responds and says something like, ain't it wonderful

how much people can mean to each other. Her response is very pedestrian, but contains exactly the same meaning as does Jim's eloquence. She possesses the very same knowledge that Jim possesses, but no one is going to quote her words in a literary journal. She is no poet and Cather doesn't suggest that this peasant is some mute undiscovered sage. It's a question of articulation, of enactment. Ántonia's mind speaks as women for ages have spoken, through the home she creates and in the way she nurtures her children, including stories about her childhood with Jim Burden. This is the form of her eloquence, and it's a language that Jim, we know, cannot begin to utter in the home he has back in New York. Now, we can talk about whose language is privileged in our culture, but that's another issue from the great fact of this Catherian human ecology. Despite the wide gulf between their articulations, Jim and Ántonia are saying the same thing: they believe in the power of this landscape and this time to produce these new people, this new nation, and they reject the idea that people as diverse as they cannot share recognition.

KR: *In your book, you insinuate that William Faulkner has been canonized in American letters due to his general insistence on a sense of home and of national origins in his work, in contrast to the migratory consciousness of Willa Cather. You cite the Snopes clan as Faulkner's one acknowledgement of the migratory consciousness. Wouldn't Thomas Sutpen embody such a consciousness at the heart of Southern plantation culture, undermining any Southern claims to stable lineage? As well, Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden, Gail Hightower, and Lena Grove present a crisscross pattern of migration in *Light in August*; in other words, isn't it possible to read Faulkner as potentially destabilizing a Southern sense of place?*

JU: You're right about Faulkner. I guess the difference I see here is one of emphasis. All the characters you cite have strong desires to establish or maintain a home — some of them, like Hightower and Burden, clearly stay home too long. And the characters who migrate, like Sutpen, do so for negative reasons, because they had to set aside a wife, or, like Snopes, move away from an arson charge. But it is unfair and stupid of me to generalize this way. The fact is that Faulkner and Cather speak to each other in very complex ways. In Cather and Faulkner we see the crossing of horizontal and vertical axes in American literature. On the one hand, we have Cather's axis of migration: ahistorical and "burdened" only in name, throwing the bride and groom to the wolves and racing ahead to another place, defining the self spatially, by where one had been, a sense of self mapped out and



charted, fired by the dream of finally settling in one place or by images of those who have achieved such stasis. On the other hand, there is the Faulknerian axis of rootedness: firmly identified by a localized and fixed sense of the past, directed and guided by the words of the dead, asserting one's desires (such as for teeth, in *As I Lay Dying*) only and always within those words, defining the self historically, by what happened here, a sense of self with precedents, fired by the dream of escaping or by the memory of those who managed to break free. It's an American dilemma, to find flat land so beautiful and inspiring that one cannot help but lay railroad tracks or an interstate highway system across it. And so it is as fascinating to see how Faulkner deals with migratory consciousness as it is to see how Cather handles rootedness.

KR: *It seems to me that Peter and Pavel endured a great deal of guilt over the wolves incident, in fact never quite overcoming it. And, certainly, Lena Grove seems eternally moving, never to set down roots. But you're right about the complex relationship between these authors! And I also agree with you when you claim, in your book, that "Willa Cather felt neither alienated nor detached by displacement but in fact marked intellectual bounty by her own spatial mobility" (5). In essence, you riot only let Cather off the hook for not following Sarah Orne Jewett's challenge to write about what she knew, but you suggest that Cather is always pushing towards new knowledge as a sign of cultural awareness. How would you defend this position against those who take Cather at her word when she claimed to write for the back-ward looking?*

JU: Well, we might also say that Cather followed Jewett's advice better than Jewett could have imagined when Cather wrote about what she knew about mobility. There is no question that there is nostalgia in Cather. There's nostalgia in Faulkner, too, for that matter. Movement entails loss. Anyone who has packed up to move knows that a lot gets thrown away in the process, and often these are the things you end up missing. This process applies to intellectual and emotional possessions as well as to material items. In Cather, people become defined as much by what they have relinquished as by what they possess. In fact, I think that one of Cather's great insights is that human beings actually possess what they relinquish. In contemporary terms, it's like when you delete something from your computer's hard drive, and so it's gone — but, as anyone who has mistakenly deleted something has found out, what is deleted is also still there, and can be recovered — it can be "undeleted." This can be cast in Freudian terms as well, in the case of the unconscious. But we always need new metaphors,

right? Well, we know that technology is no more than the reification of what the human spirit desires, that all technology mirrors the soul. Cather knew that the soul was capable of deleting and undeleting its attachments and its commitments. Now, you have to have something to delete from your hard drive in order to undelete, which is why all this may make no emotional sense to those "not under forty" Cather talked about. But look closely to the preface of *Not Under Forty*. It's not simply backwardness that is of interest, but the capacity of those who are considered forward-looking (like Thomas Mann) to contain and recognize within their forwardness this backward quality. There comes a point in every life where one should recognize that every great movement forward is also the recovery of something deleted, a reappearance of some backward phenomenon in the guise of a new idea. So, to answer your question, we should take Cather at her word when she said she was "backward," but we'd better make sure we know what her word meant.

KR: *I like the way you put that. But I have another question related to the previous one; you suggest that Cather's likely lesbianism makes the categorization of her as "nostalgic for a pioneer era, a repository of old virtues," "difficult" (11). First, I wonder why you think this is so? Second, are you intimating that perhaps Cather's sexuality is one key to explaining her attraction to displacement as a literary theme?*

JU: I think I said that three things, her unconventional lifestyle, her likely lesbianism, and the experimentation with gender identification in her fiction are what make such a categorization difficult. Cather wasn't flashy, but she was as technically innovative as any in the ranks of modernist writers this century. Cather did not advertise it, but her living arrangements and her travel schedule make her private life as distinctive, even exotic, as any of our more visible avant garde literati. And what she did with gender and sexuality in her writing still confounds us and compels us to rethink easy categories of masculine and feminine, bisexuality, homosexuality, heterosexuality, sexuality in general. So I for one can not understand the reading of her as longing for old virtues. First of all, she was too smart to ever presume such virtues ever existed. Old virtues have always been old virtues, haven't they? They exist now and have always existed in the imagined past, invoked as a justification for enforcing some prohibition on human freedom. As for Cather's own sexuality? Well, until I am comfortable with your concluding that I think the way I do because I am a heterosexual in a monogamous marriage, I would never presume to argue that what pleased Cather's body explained or provided the

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## URGO INTERVIEW

(Continued)

key to her aesthetic creations. That's a dangerous intellectual road to travel, and it is potentially belittling. But I understand the necessities of contemporary sexual politics, and think that Cather's lifestyle choices should be shouted from the rooftops if it helps someone, somewhere, to live the life she wishes to live without some blind fool talking about old virtues in her face.

KR: *Is it your idea, then, that sexuality plays no role in aesthetic creation? Or marital status, for that matter? Why, I wonder, does marriage after marriage fail in much of Cather's fiction? Or Henry James's? It's inconceivable to me that Cather could have written the Molly Bloom chapter of Ulysses, or the Vanamee sections of The Octopus, for example. I'm certainly not arguing that sexuality controls aesthetics single-handedly. But I do think it plays a role in facilitating aesthetic discourse. Further, why is investigating the potential lesbian angle of Cather's aesthetics "potentially belittling"? It would be if we were to critique Cather as Lesbian — period. But good critics don't do that. I guess what I'm trying to say is, is exploring the function of lesbianism in art necessarily or solely a political gesture?*

JU: Of course sexuality plays an important role in aesthetic creation, and the social pattern of one's sexuality is also central. What I am arguing against is sexual essentialism, if you'll forgive an awful phrase. You know the arguments that Cather said X because she couldn't say Y, and she couldn't say Y because she was a lesbian. In my opinion, this is belittling, and reminds me of nineteenth-century arguments about women writing through their glands and men through their minds. So in this case I argue for the recognition of a difference of opinion among critics. I know the arguments I am countering, and I find them valuable, especially toward an understanding of exactly how sexuality (especially sexuality without social sanction — outside of marriage, homosexuality, etc.) influences and informs creativity. But I would not privilege sexuality above other passions. And yes, this comes to you from a man in a comfortable, sanctioned, and passionate middle-class marriage. And speaking of marriage, what of the Nebraska Burdens? There's one happy marriage. But happy marriages are pretty dull. I find Sapphira and Henry Colbert's marriage to be among Cather's best portraits, especially if we consider marriage as a power struggle between two impassioned people. That scene of reconciliation, before Sapphira dies, is worth a hundred scenes of domestic bliss. I do think Cather provides positive images of marriage — but to her credit, and our benefit, she makes it damn clear

that marriage is no cure for anything and is certainly not a good idea for everyone.

KR: *I think we had already agreed that "sexual essentialism" is a bad idea. But I would caution against using this label against all critics who choose to explore the function of lesbianism in Cather's fiction. No one is "privileging" sexuality as a topic any more than, say, you privilege migration in your book. That is, we all contribute in different ways. Lesbian criticism is only a small part of the body of work written about Cather and sometimes I think such criticism seems much more prolific because such a frightened spotlight is continually shining on it. Speaking of sexuality, would you clarify a point you made about Professor St. Peter. You claim, "if we come face to face with [our] original ego in the form of a fact or an idea, we agree with it; if it comes in the form of a student, we fall in love, as St. Peter fell in love with Tom Outland" (34). To what extent might Cather be delving into Freud here? To what extent is she risking an interpretation of homoerotic desire?*

JU: You've zeroed in on a sentence that surprised me when I wrote it. I'm a professor of course, and I do know how traumatic it is to move an office. As for St. Peter's love: Intellectually, a writer can spend hours, maybe days or weeks, working out some complex problem in his writing, only to come to a conclusion, which seems so bright and new, but turns out to be a reaffirmation of one of his bedrock ideas. And so he agrees with it, writes it down, and his readers marvel at his consistency. This process is enacted with students. We forget, in this era of antiseptic human relations, that teaching is a passionate profession. (I sometimes think that Distance Learning is academic "safe learning" — no bodies come in contact — and that for this reason techno-education can only accomplish a portion of the educational experience.) Now don't go putting me down as lurid or perverse! I mean that professors routinely fall in love with students, and if they are not corrupted by our sexually-charged mass media, will know how to channel that passion into what is good for the student's intellectual development. The students we love are the students in whose minds we see ourselves incarnate — they have similar questions, desires, drives. Their gender is irrelevant. It is this phenomenon that allows teachers to feel so good despite what are often poor working conditions, and despite the many students who fail to meet their potential. Furthermore, the spark from that love can empower the student for years, providing a lifetime of inspiration based upon an experience with a teacher who truly believed in him, believed sometimes more deeply and thoroughly than the student believed in herself. The story of St. Peter is among the most remarkable tributes to that

kind of experience I know of. Homoerotic? Sure, some will reduce it to that, and again, there are important reasons to do so, given today's sexual politics. And of course, teachers and students have been sleeping together since at least the days of Socrates. Socrates was put to death for corrupting the youth of Athens. But St. Peter is given the ability to choose to live, to face the future, and, one expects, to recognize his spirit once more in the passionate eyes of youth.

KR: *How does suggesting that St. Peter was erotically attracted to Tom Outland affect today's sexual politics, I wonder? I just think Cather demonstrates powerful intuition and emotional clarity in her presentation of these characters. And "homoerotic" in this case, for me, entails no more physical sexuality than the "erotic" which I would use to characterize Clément Sebastian's attraction to Lucy Gayheart. You remarked that St. Peter is "given the ability to choose to live once more in the passionate eyes of youth." Do you believe that he chooses to do this? Something is irrevocably gone, I think: I read the loss as precisely passionate youth, Tom, the Kansas boy . . . . And when I think of Niel Herbert, Jim Burden, and the pall Myra casts upon Nellie's conception of love — I read all of these instances, St. Peter providing no exception, as examples of youthful passion gone away. Which leads me to another question: no doubt Cather believed in living, in moving on, but with what attitude? Why, in so much of her fiction, does the past cast such a dark shadow?*

JU: You're right; all the instances you mention are examples of a discovery that youthful passion has passed away. However, what also distinguishes Cather (and what makes her work so satisfying to readers at various ages) is that she takes age seriously, and writes not just poignantly but with great insight about the processes and metamorphoses associated with staying alive a long time. I mean, the first time I read *The Professor's House* I thought that St. Peter was a fuss budget, now I'm not so sure, and I am beginning to think that Outland is something of a show-off. You'll have to tell me more about the dark shadow that hangs in Cather. I don't see it.

KR: *Well, Niel Herbert's wounded vision, Nellie Birdseye's tarnished picture of love, Harry Gordon's awfully quiet future, etc . . . .*

JU: There are the Catherian passion twins, Memory and Desire, and life in Cather hangs in the balance. Too much memory is fatal (as with Mr. Shimerda), but so is too much desire (Claude Wheeler comes to mind). I see the wolves episode in *My Antonia* as central to this idea. There the past does hang like a black shadow over Peter and Pavel. But to Jim and Antonia, those wolves, who feed on the new bride and groom,

seem to represent unleashed passions of all sorts, dangerous and seductive, a good example of the pleasure and danger associated with sexuality. Jim says he never forgets the episode, and it stays with him throughout a distinctly passionless life. In any case, what is the black shadow of the past to one set is the onset of desire to another. Wolves have to eat, after all . . .

KR: *You like those wolves! Well, so do I. I wanted to ask you: in your book, you seem disposed to portray individuals (St. Peter) and cultures (the extinct cliff dwellers in *The Professor's House* and *Song of the Lark*, as well as the Navajo in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*) who insist on living in a certain place as doomed "by Catherian standards" (98). Does Cather validate such standards or merely accept them? In other words, isn't Cather's resuscitation of past voices celebrating beauty tinged with lament? Cather describes those who likely destroyed the cliff dwellers as barbaric. Is Cather indifferent to those who try to hold on to the past, or who turn there, in search of meaning?*

JU: Oh no, not indifferent. Where else can we turn? We put our faith in the future, assuming for the sake of our sanity if nothing else that "it will all work out," as we say. But we hold that faith because we know that at some point in the past someone said we'd never get this far, and here we are. It may well be that what destroys the present is barbaric by present standards, but what else could it be? I know of no one who invites the executioner to dinner. I'd like to rephrase your question to what I think you are getting at: Does Willa Cather believe in Progress? She saw and recognized and wrote about historical change, stages of empire, waves of time — but Progress? My sense is that she believed strongly in individual progress — you know, Thea, St. Peter, Alexandra — people who learned things and progressed. But on the stage of world history, she was more in tune to contemporary theories of cyclical history. I mean, those who destroyed the Roman empire were barbarians, and those who eventually destroy the present order will also be barbarians. No, Cather was not indifferent to those who study the past to find meaning. Remember, the most effective of the forward-looking are backward-looking as well. Not to do so is like driving a car without mirrors, a very disconcerting and deadly way to go.

KR: *In your book, you cite Lucy Gayheart the character as "St. Lucy, patron saint of the migratory dimension, the compensatory image" (118) in terms of what she offers to the town of Haverford, or to us, for that matter. I wonder why you are so much less generous with Myra Henshaw — who, after all, becomes an icon for Nellie Birds-*

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(Continued)

eye. Similarly, while you see Lucy as a positive example of imagemaking, you denounce Claude Wheeler as one of the "men whose lives were empty enough to find the prospect of death in battle preferable to life in their time and place in America" (166). From a town perspective, is Lucy any less "one of ours" than Claude? Does her life spell some kind of success which eludes Claude — or Myra, for that matter?

JU: Consistency is not really a human characteristic. You're right, the categorizations under which I examine these characters are fluid. In some ways Myra Henshawe is worse off than Lucy Gayheart because Cather saves Lucy full knowledge of her own failure. But I am intrigued by the parallel you suggest between Claude and Lucy. Both of these characters have ambitions that exceed their social support systems, to put it clinically. Claude goes to war, Lucy goes to Sebastian, each expecting fulfillment. In this sense yes, Lucy is "one of ours," but of course we don't build monuments to honor women who die in the name of unrequited desire. It is pretty to think so — a "tomb of the unknown lover," wouldn't that be another kind of world.

KR: *I love your idea about the "tomb of the unknown lover"! It reminded me of how I felt visiting G. P. Cather's grave. I thought about Claude and David, about how Claude — like Lucy — finds passion and vigor away from small-town life only (perhaps luckily?) to have life itself snatched away. In your book, you're harsh towards Claude while I find myself comparing him to Lucy more and more. Both are disappointed, both are naive, neither is supremely talented. But both are sensitive. In a letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Cather wrote extensively about how much Claude had come to mean for her. So I can't agree that she is archly ridiculing him. Claude, like Lucy, makes one great journey metaphorically represent the growth from childhood to passion? They die with it; it is enough. Do you think that moving is metaphorical in these instances? In any instances?*

JU: You're very convincing about Claude and I'm going to keep your impression of his journey in mind when I read that novel again. I also like the idea of metaphorical journey, and find it crucial. Cather was no tourist — by which I mean, she does not present travel as recreational or suggest that it is of value in and of itself. One has to go somewhere with purpose. Can this be accomplished sitting in one's chair? I think so. St. Peter does it, for one, as he looks out his window to the lake. Physical migration is only half the Catherian aesthetic I outline in my book; the other part is spiritual and intellectual. I like your sug-

gestion that Claude goes a lot further than France, and Lucy returns to much more than her hometown. Both are thoroughly shaken out of previous intellectual and spiritual homes, and provide models, or examples, of the distance the human mind can travel. To me, among the most fascinating of all things Cather wrote about is the idea of intellectual migration — how ideas move around the globe, how they enable physical migration and in turn are facilitated by the interactions between migrant and host, turning migrant into homesteader and homebody into migrant. The difficulties we have pigeonholing Cather testify to her great success in writing and living this aesthetic. What is she? Nebraska writer? Lesbian writer? My argument with the latter is no different from my argument with those Catherland signs in Nebraska. Cather is a towering genius with many towers, a writer of place from many places, a writer of passion with multiple passions. This is what I meant when I said the world is catching up to her. The model of living Cather presents may save us yet with the idea that ideas must always divide us. In Cather, ideas play host to the passions for the time being, before being worn thin. After that, new ideas arrive to give voice to restless desires. In this sense, differences of opinion are not divisive, but instructional, as they reveal the complexity of human life and counter the impulse to centralize one's own desires and marginalize those of others. Maybe this is what happens to St. Peter. He is decentralized and comes to see himself as existing in a familial and social web where real people, not dressmaker's forms, surround him, people with passions as real as his own. So yes, there's loss there, but there is also a new existence to face, and he certainly does not have to face it alone.

KR: *You write, "perhaps survival in the twenty-first century will depend, as it did in seventeenth-century Québec, on our making the past into a world apart, something from which no debt can emerge that will impinge on the future" (111). How would you defend such a statement in the context of multicultural studies, particularly in a discussion of Sapphira and the Slave Girl?*

JU: This is a great question. My only defense is that word "perhaps". This is the issue, isn't it? What debt is owed? I think that our protracted debate about the national debt is a deflection, like what psychologists say about married couples who argue over the household budget. The debate is really about something else. Is the real national debt the trillion dollars, or is this figure merely an expression of the interest on 40 acres and a mule times four million emancipated slaves compounded over one hundred and thirty-three years? Maybe the trillion dollar debt is our way of saying we can't make restitution. It's like a mantra, "we can't pay it back, we can't pay it



back" — repeated until the inability becomes the norm, and "can't" becomes "won't." In any case, I won't defend the statement you quote, but I will reiterate it. Sooner or later we'll reach a consensus that it's impossible to pay back a trillion dollar bet, especially when the debtor is ourselves, our banks, our infrastructure, the global economy. The cultural implications could be disastrous if a parallel is applied to disenfranchised groups of people and the conclusion is that they're not owed anything, either. On the other hand, *Shadows on the Rock*, to which the quoted statement applies, provides another set of conclusions. Are we condemned to understand the past and future by bookkeeping metaphors? It may be that the language of debt and repayment schedules is inapplicable to the challenges posed by the accumulated needs of human beings. The rise of multicultural studies moves us in this direction, toward rethinking the relations of human beings over time and territory. These scholars are providing us new ways of understanding cultural conflict so that simple notions of victors and victims are overturned. This is the way we affect the future, not by paying off debt, but by conceptualizing our relationship to the past. Well, I'm struggling with this too. If we could articulate it, we'd be there.

KR: *Your juxtaposition of Willa Cather and Salman Rushdie was ingenious. Did rereading Cather at some point make you think of Rushdie or did reading Rushdie help you to think about Cather in a new way?*

JU: Let's see. During my research for *Willa Cather and the Myth of Migration* I came across Rushdie's collection, *Imaginary Homelands*. I was reading anything I could find that dealt with home, migration, exile — and Rushdie emerged as central in terms of the currency of these concepts in the contemporary world. The language with which he describes his migratory existence is uncannily Catherian, and Cather's fiction, in many, many ways, anticipates the predicament and symbolism of Rushdie in the world today. One of my favorite movies of all time is "The Wizard of Oz," and Rushdie is one critic who takes the film as seriously as it must be taken, listing it among the most important Hollywood productions of the century. I remember being glued to the television screen year after year, as a child, growing up in Connecticut in the 1960s. My parents and grandparents, Italian immigrants, would watch also, and the screening was an annual event, like a holiday. The strongest argument we had, as children, in favor of color television was so we could see Oz as it was meant to be seen. Rushdie describes a similar attraction to the film in his book about Oz, which he would view as a child in India. What possible connection could the film provide from India to

the USA. Well, we are now coming to appreciate once again the extent to which human continuity is obscured by national boundaries. Cather knew this, of course, and long before NAFTA her idea of America extended from Canada to Mexico with links to Europe (eastern and southern as well as northern), Africa, and Asia. Cather provides a way to reconceptualize the national experience in migratory terms, thus recasting our relation to the past and (to go back to your earlier question, which still troubles me) to this debt we owe. Well, we certainly owe a debt to Willa Cather, but the payment she demands isn't meant to close the books, but to open them. Yes Rushdie helped me solidify my thinking about Cather, opening the books again, as it were, to fresh readings. The world is catching up to Willa Cather, don't you think so?

## News Items from the WCPM Director . . .



Pat Phillips

### ❖ CHAUTAUQUA, JULY 4 - JULY 8 —

It should be an interesting encounter this summer when Kate Chopin meets a young Willa Cather in Red Cloud. After all, Cather's review of Chopin's *The Awakening* wasn't very flattering, and it is to discuss *The Awakening* that Chopin is coming to town! You may want to be present when Kate

Chopin and Willa Cather have tea on the lawn of the Harling House on Saturday afternoon, July 5 at 2:00 in the afternoon. The "Great Plains Chautauqua, The Gilded Age" is



supported by the state affiliates of the National Endowment for the Humanities in Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota to generate interest in writers and their ideas during this period in American history. The company travels throughout the summer in each state and performs under a huge blue and white striped Chautauqua tent. Red Cloud will be the only performance site in Nebraska this year. One of the purposes of the Chautauqua is "to help readers see a part of the literary response to the social changes of the Gilded Age and to recognize the critical function of several writers whose works question the era's golden surface." To read the selected books "in the context of the series should reveal more of their original purposes and encourage in the reader an habitual alertness to the tensions between society's institutions and . . . literary voices." With a perfor-

(Continued on page 22)

## WCPM NEWS

(Continued)

mance each evening by one or two of the Chautauquans and casual interactions with participants at the breakfasts and workshops during the five day event, those in attendance will have a rare glimpse into the personalities and times of the selected authors. Appearing at the Chautauqua will be Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Kate Chopin, Zitkala-sa, W. E. B. DuBois, and Jack London. A special addition for the Red Cloud meeting will be young Willa Cather, portrayed by Jennifer Yatskis from Jamestown, North Dakota, a senior honor student doing her senior thesis on young Willa Cather. The books highlighted during the week will be *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Awakening*, *American Indian Stories*, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and *The Call of the Wild*. In July 1894 Willa Cather wrote nine articles for the *Lincoln Evening News* on the Chautauqua that was held that year in Crete, Nebraska. You may want to read the three of these articles that were reprinted in the 1975 WCPM Summer Newsletter, and Bernice Slote's article, "Willa Cather Reports Chautauqua, 1894" in the Spring 1969 *Prairie Schooner* (117-28). Other interesting reading includes "When I Knew Stephen Crane" by Willa Cather, reprinted in *Prairie Schooner*, Fall 1949 (231-36), and also in *The World and the Parish* (771-78), edited by William Curtin; "Stephen Crane and Willa Cather" by Bernice Slote, *The Serif*, December 1969 (3-15), and a preface by Willa Cather from *The Work of Stephen Crane*, Knopf, 1926, which is reprinted in *Willa Cather on Writing* (67-74).

◆ **OTHER EVENTS** — Also on the calendar are Pastime and Playthings May 6 and 7, the American Literature Association meeting in Baltimore, May 22-25 (two Cather sessions), the Prairie Institute June 9-13, the Seventh International Willa Cather Seminar in Shenandoah, Virginia, June 21-28 (see the web page at <<http://www.su.edu/willasem/index.htm>>), and the Western Literature Association meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico, October 15-18 (usually many Cather sessions). To end the year, Willa Cather's birthday will be celebrated on Sunday, December 7, with a Victorian Christmas Tea and special showing of the new introductory video to the Willa Cather State Historic Site.

◆ **NEW VIDEO** — The new introductory video, a special project of the Nebraska State Historical Society and Nebraska Public Television, will no doubt provide an excellent orientation for the Cather journey in Red Cloud, considering the fine quality of the productions that NPTV has done on Cather to date. Filming has been completed but editing and final preparations will take several more months. The NSHS has commissioned introductory videos for four other of their historic sites.

◆ **CONSERVATION ASSESSMENT** — Julie Reilly, Nebraska State Conservationist, is doing a conservation assessment of the Cather properties and archives. During three days in late January she and Brent Carmack thoroughly inspected all the properties. Gail Potter and Paula Doe took an inventory of all the artifacts at the Cather Childhood Home and placed a few more appropriate objects in the house.

◆ **HISTORYAMERICA** — On August 11 HISTORY AMERICA will again bring a group to Red Cloud on the "Pioneering Women" tour which concentrates on Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, and Laura Ingalls Wilder. The tour originates in Lincoln, Nebraska, on August 9 and returns to Lincoln on August 16, after traveling to Red Cloud, Sandoz country, and to South Dakota's Wilder country. Historian Jack McDermott will be the principal guide, and there will be many stops, including a visit to a real sod house. If interested in knowing more, contact HISTORYAMERICA Tours at 1-800-628-8542 or look for their web site at [historyamerica@airmail.net](mailto:historyamerica@airmail.net).

◆ **WEB PAGE/E-MAIL** — Speaking of web sites, we too have entered the modern age by establishing a web page and an e-mail address. Our web page may be viewed at [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org) and our e-mail address is: [patpwcpm@gpcom.net](mailto:patpwcpm@gpcom.net). We are grateful to the advertising agency, Portwood, Martin, Jones in Hastings, Nebraska, for designing our web page as a service to us.

◆ **PRAIRIE INSTITUTE, JUNE 9-13** — May 24 is the registration deadline for the Third Annual Prairie Institute which will be held at the Red Cloud Elementary School from June 9-13. Three hours of graduate or undergraduate credit (one hour each in geography, history, and English) are offered by the University of Nebraska-Kearney. Teachers for the Institute are Dr. Charles Peek, Dr. Mark Eifler, and James Fitzgibbon. The registration fee is \$100 and includes use of facilities, morning rolls and coffee, special speakers, and the traditional prairie dinner. A nonrefundable deposit of \$25 is due by May 24. The theme for this year's Institute is *Lost and Found: The Evolution of Prairie Pathways*. The announcement states that "the Institute will address how, when, and why various communities came to be here, from the biological communities represented in the fossil record to the human residents of the prairie . . . Always the pathways show us varied circumstances of the convergence or clash of myth and material value systems. And as always, the Institute will treat its subject interdisciplinarily, demonstrating how literature and story, paleontology, and history can be integrated in our approach to fuller understandings." In addition to the classroom instruction, lab (prairie) work and tour, each evening will offer special talks: "The Overland Trails: Neihardt" (Joe Green and Stan Smith will address

the epic chronicle of the pioneer), "Coming and Going" (Helen Stauffer will discuss the differences in finders and followers), "Plants and Perceptions" (Ron Weeden, an ethnobotanist, will talk about the use of plants), and a Chautauqua book discussion on Kate Chopin and Willa Cather (led by Betty Kori). The Cather text for this Institute will be *A Lost Lady*. Please call, write or contact us at the e-mail address if you have questions or want to register. Pre-registration through the University of Nebraska-Kearney is encouraged.

❖ **PLANTING AT CATHER HOME** — Charlene Houschour, local resident, has volunteered to take charge of planting flowers at the Cather Childhood Home. With the help of Deb Albers and Deb Klingenberg, our wonderful caretakers, the area around the house will be cleaned up and prepared for planting flowers appropriate to the late 1800s, early 1900s and *The Song of the Lark*.

❖ **MORE . . .** — Videos with Cather connections produced by Nebraska Public Television available for purchase through us include: "The Sentimentality of William Tavener," *Love and Loneliness on the Plains*, *Blossoms on the Prairie*, and *Singing Cather's Song*.

If you would to keep in touch with Red Cloud and Catherland, consider subscribing to the *Red Cloud Chief* at P. O. Box 466, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970.

## Willa Cather Dies; Noted Novelist, 70

Reprinted from *The New York Times*  
April 25, 1947

Willa Sibert Cather, noted American novelist, died at 4:30 p.m. yesterday in her home at 570 Park Avenue. After Miss Cather's death a secretary, who was with her at the time, was too upset to talk about it. It was reported that death was due to a cerebral hemorrhage. The author was 70 years old in December.

Surviving are two brothers, John E. Cather of Whittier, Calif., and James Cather of Long Beach, Calif., and two sisters, Mrs. Jessica Auld of Palo Alto, Calif., and Elsie Margaret Cather of Lincoln, Neb.

One of the most distinguished of American novelists, Willa Sibert Cather wrote a dozen or more novels that will be long remembered for their exquisite economy and charm of manner. Her talent had its nourishment and inspiration in the American scene, the Middle West in particular, and her sensitive and patient understanding of that section of the country formed the basis of her work.

Much of her writing was conceived in something of an attitude of placid reminiscence. This was notably true of such early novels as "My



Willa Cather, May 1944.

Ántonia" and "O Pioneers!," in which she told with minute detail of homestead life on the slowly conquered prairies.

Perhaps her most famous book was "A Lost Lady," published in 1923. In it Miss Cather's talents were said to have reached their full maturity. It is the story of the Middle West in the age of railway-building, of the charming wife of Captain Forrester, a retired contractor, and her hospitable and open-handed household as seen through the eyes of an adoring boy. The climax of the book, with the disintegration of the Forrester household and the slow coarsening of his wife, is considered a masterpiece of vivid, haunting prose.

### WON PULITZER PRIZE IN 1922

Another of her famous books is "Death Comes for the Archbishop," 1927, in which she tells in the form of a chronicle a simple story of two saints of the Southwest. Her novel, "One of Ours," won the Pulitzer Prize in 1922.

In 1944, Miss Cather received the gold medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the institute's highest award and designed not to honor a specific work but the sustained output of a writer or artist.

Although generally thought of as a Western writer, Miss Cather was born on a farm near Winchester, Va., on Dec. 7, 1876. Her ancestors, on both sides, had been Virginia farmers for three or four generations. They came originally from England, Ireland and Alsace.

When she was 8 years old, her father took his family to Nebraska and bought a ranch near Red Cloud. The little girl did not go to school at first but spent many hours reading the English classics with her two grandmothers. Later, when her family moved into Red Cloud proper, she attended high school and then the University of Nebraska, from which she was graduated in 1895.

She spent a few years in Pittsburgh teaching and doing newspaper work, choosing that city rather than New York because she had many friends there. Each summer she visited in Nebraska, Colorado and Wyoming. Meanwhile, she had started writing, and her first published book was a volume of verse, "April Twilights," reissued in 1923 as "April Twilights and Later Verse."

### EDITOR ON McCLURE'S MAGAZINE

Miss Cather's first volume of stories was "The Troll Garden," published in 1905 by McClure-Phillips. Two years later she became an associate editor in New York of McClure's Magazine. She then was managing editor of the publication for four years.

During this period she wrote very little but traveled a great deal in Europe and the American Southwest, Arizona and New Mexico. In 1912 she gave up editorial work to write her first novel, "Alexander's Bridge." This was followed by "O Pioneers!" "The Song of the Lark" and "My Ántonia."

In "The Professor's House," 1925, she began experiments with a new technique of story-telling, constructing her tale of an intellectual's soul development according to the familiar methods of music.

The next year she wrote "My Mortal Enemy," which was compared by many with "A Lost Lady" but, for the most part, suffered by the comparison. A reviewer in *The New York Times* said of the book that while it was inferior to the former work it did impress as a "later" book.

In 1931 Miss Cather wrote "Shadows on the Rock," which was considered the most popular novel in America during that year in the annual Baker & Taylor survey, and won for her the Prix Femina Americaine.

Miss Cather, who in 1931 was ranked by J. B. Priestly, the English author, as this country's greatest novelist, received the honorary degree of Litt. D in 1924 from the University of Michigan. Columbia University conferred the same distinction on her in 1928, Yale followed suit in 1929 and Princeton two years later.

Among her other novels were "Lucy Gayheart" and her last, "Sapphira and the Slave Girl," published in 1940. She also wrote two books of short stores, "Obscure Destinies" and "Youth and the Bright Medusa," and a collection of essays under the title, "Not Under Forty." For many years her publishers have been Alfred A. Knopf.

## WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER

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*Willa Cather Newsletter* welcomes articles, notes and letters to the editor. Address submissions to John J. Murphy, English Dept., Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah 84602. Essays and notes are currently listed in the annual MLA Bibliography.

### Inside:

- ◆ Interview with Joseph Urgo
- ◆ Woodcuts on *Archbishop*
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### AIMS OF THE WCPM

- To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with the Nebraska State Historical Society.
- To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

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