

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

The Willa Cather Society

VOLUME XXXVIII, No. 3
Fall, 1994

1994 Spring Conference Papers

326 N. Webster Street
Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970
Telephone (402) 746-2653

The Magical Art of Willa Cather's "Old Mrs. Harris"

*"Who else can make the Statue of Liberty vanish,
levitate across the Grand Canyon or fly!"*

BLANCHE H. GELFANT
Dartmouth College

Critics have been reading Willa Cather in such a variety of ways that her fiction seems a melee of dissonant elements controlled only by the high order of her art. Some critics have emphasized the autobiographical elements of this art, and some the feminist impulses within the autobiographical — to mention only two elements within a long and proliferating list. Looking at this list, one would think that Cather's fiction contains almost all the dominant modes of Western literature: mythic, romantic, realistic, modernistic, humanistic, pastoral, historical (and the historically incorrect); also Catholic, Gallic, medieval, classical; and homoerotic.² I would add an element critics seldom, if ever, discuss or seek to discover; and even if they detected its presence in a Cather's text, they would ignore it because Cather directs attention elsewhere. This canny misdirection suggests to me a strategy for reading Cather work, in particular, her much admired story, "Old Mrs. Harris." At first glance the strategy may seem unlikely because it asks us to think of Cather as an illusionist or conjurer, someone standing on a stage and performing a set of magical acts. Each act depends upon a technique that produces effects we marvel at in the theater, where we are delighted at being mystified though we do not know how. Magicians, of course, do know, and occasionally they demystify their performances by using technical terms I apply in this essay to Cather's story. My purpose is

to draw an analogy between the storyteller's art and standard acts of magic. For their part, magicians claim that "magic is really a form of storytelling, with each trick a small, self-contained drama"; like any drama, they contend, "a magic trick has characters (coins, cards, silk handkerchiefs. . . .), a story . . . and a plot."³ Inversing the analogy, I would claim that Cather's storytelling art contains elements common to magic acts and that both can be demystified — as magic acts often are — by an analysis of the techniques used to produce illusions either of the marvelous or, as in Cather's story, the real. If this analogy is persuasive, or even suggestive, it may illuminate elements of obfuscation that I believe characterize Cather's art and have made its thematic meanings indeterminable.⁴

The magician's commonly used technical terms can be defined briefly. *Production* and *vanish* refer to the magician's most common and well-known techniques. *Production* makes something appear out of nowhere, like a rabbit out of a hat, while *vanish* makes something disappear. *Transposition* combines production and vanish by making something disappear in one place and reappear in another. In *restoration*, something is destroyed and put back together again, like the woman sawed in two and then restored. *Animation* brings an inert object to life; *transformation* changes an object into something else; and *penetration* allows two solid objects to occupy the same space simultaneously. *Time control* permits the magician to accelerate or slow the pace of time, and *prediction*, to foretell events of the future. The meaning of



Blanche Gelfant and a favorite author.

(Continued on Page 38)

THE MAGICAL ART (Continued)

escape is obvious, though the technique, as Houdini has shown, is mysterious and esoteric. The "central principle of magic" and, I believe, of Cather's art, is *misdirection*.⁵ Misdirection makes an audience look at what the magician wants people to see and not at what is taking place right before their eyes. Through misdirection, the magician controls an audience's perception by inducing misperception.

If stage magic is "the art of creating illusion agreeably," as we have been told,⁶ then Cather's art is surely magical, evoking illusions that dazzle and delight. They also baffle, as magic should, by the mystery of their creation and by their mysterious tenacity. Most readers find that the characters, kitchens, and encounters conjured up by the art of "Old Mrs. Harris" remain in their minds with a reality time does not dim. This persistence is hard to explain, since commonplace people and events are hardly memorable unless, as in magic, the commonplace — a rabbit, a handkerchief — is transformed into something marvelous. This happens, I believe, in "Old Mrs. Harris," "perhaps the best story Cather ever wrote,"⁷ but still a singularly unspectacular story about a grandmother, mother, and granddaughter and a few small town neighbors, some good, some mean. As Cather describes the simple negotiations taking place among these characters, she makes the reader believe that though little actually happens, little out of the ordinary and known, everything important in life is taking place. This may be the most marvelous illusion created by the story, and I want to know how Cather does it.

I begin with a cake:

Some eggs are broken into a porcelain vessel, some flour is added thereto . . . incorporated with . . . eggshells . . . The whole thing is put in a hat, . . . the hat is passed over a flame three times, and an excellent cake, baked to a turn, is taken off of this new set of cooking utensils. . . . the owner of the hat . . . finds . . . that his head gear shows no traces of the mixture that was poured into it.⁸

Obviously, the recipe for this "excellent cake," followed with great success on the magician's stage, would be shunned by the women characters who baked their fragrant cakes and kolaches in Cather's kitchens.⁹ I suggest, however, that the *production* of a cake in a hat is no more illusory — no more magical — and no less technical than the *production* of a cake in a short story, for which the ingredients are not flour, eggs, and egg shells, but words, mere words. "Beautifully browned," "symmetrically plaited," "with poppy seeds" and "sugary margins about the twists" — with these words, Cather conjures up a cake, a character, and a beginning for her story. Like any writer, or any magician, she is making something appear out of nowhere. In a seemingly simple act of magical *production*, Cather has produced Mrs. Rosen, who produces a cake which, in turn, produces a point-of-view character in whose competence and credibility the

reader instantly believes. Of course we believe in the character who has baked a beautiful old world coffee cake in her clean and orderly kitchen, a friendly woman intent upon getting to know her quiet neighbor better. Moreover, Cather seems to have baked a neighborly intention into the cake itself, thus creating the illusion (as in magical *animation*) that something inert can have purpose and agency of its own. Once out of the oven, the cake does not merely accompany Mrs. Rosen, it impels her into action by giving her a motive, other than gross curiosity, for hurrying across the alley way into Mrs. Harris's kitchen. There Cather uses the cake to provide a seemingly legitimate excuse for Mrs. Rosen's intrusion upon an old woman's privacy. "Don't let me disturb you, Grandma," Cather has Mrs. Rosen say, though she knows, and Cather shows, that Mrs. Harris is deeply disturbed by the unwelcome visit, "troubled, — and at a loss."¹⁰

Thus, Mrs. Rosen and her cake introduce into a kindly visit an ambiguity that is usually overlooked though it is, I believe, thematically crucial to the story. For ambiguity is inherent in the transformation that the visit seeks to effect — a magical *transformation* of an old woman in a dull brown calico dress into someone interesting and important, in Mrs. Rosen's words, someone "impressive." Unless this transformation takes place, the reader will see only the hard-used, hard-working woman that the world sees, a woman washing her hot face in a tin basin. Through Mrs. Rosen, Cather conjures up alongside this tired woman an other figure who is the "real grandmother," though she is also invisible and so unreal. This other woman has "something absolute" about her, "a kind of nobility" and a grave, perhaps tragic, "resignation to the chances of life." With Cather directing (or misdirecting) us to think as Mrs. Rosen does, we may believe that we are seeing the grandmother nobly resigned to chance, though she is obviously disquieted by a friendly visit and a slice of cake. Even Mrs. Rosen sees that the old woman is "uncertain," "apprehensive," "embarrassed," "not at all pleased." Who, then, is the real grandmother Cather? Is she a woman so abject that she cannot enjoy a slice of cake with her neighbor (because her daughter will be irked), or is she a person of presence and dignity? Which is the reality, and which the illusion? Cather's phrases, meant to enhance Mrs. Harris, induce uncertainty, for a *kind* of nobility equivocates, and *something* absolute evades by its vagueness. Is Mrs. Harris noble, or is she, as an early reviewer said, "a ridiculous old woman, killing herself to keep the house respectable, a stupid martyr to selfishness . . . a victim of . . . futile respectability"?¹¹ Even this skeptical reader, however, felt forced to concede to Mrs. Rosen's perception (or misperception) that Mrs. Harris was "a great soul."

Mrs. Rosen's power to shape what the reader sees testifies, I believe, to Cather's magical power as an illusionist. For it is Cather who has created the illusion that the goodnatured if nosy and opinionated Mrs.

(Continued on Page 40)



Pat Phillips
— Photo by Robert Graning

News from the WCPM Director . . .

These are exciting times for Board and Staff members of the WCPM and ultimately will be exciting times for all of you interested in Willa Cather and the direction of the WCPM. Our Board has been changing and growing since we lost the wisdom and leadership of

Mildred Bennett late in 1989. Keith Albers provided us with solid leadership while we learned to take on new roles of responsibility. David Garwood now leads us through another stage of growth.

As has been reported, the Opera House was donated to us in 1990 by Frank Morhart, grandson of the man who built the 1885 Hardware Store/Opera House. The Opera House was an important component of Red Cloud's and Willa Cather's cultural lives, and the WCPM intends to establish this site as the Willa Cather interpretive and cultural center for Cather studies. In July, the Nebraska Board met to begin development of a preliminary strategic plan to propel our development toward the year 2000.

The full Board came together in September to enlarge and refine what the earlier meeting stimulated. (For your information, our Board of Governors meets three times a year: January in Lincoln, May in Red Cloud, and September in Omaha. The thirty Board members come from ten states; sixteen members represent Nebraska, coming from Red Cloud, Lincoln, Omaha, McCook, Kearney, Hastings, and Fremont.) Part of the plan is a major renovation for the Opera House and a major capital campaign. Not only will the auditorium on the upper floor be restored and busy again, but the main floor will be redone to house the art gallery, bookstore, interpretive center, and administrative offices. The basement, which is unpaved now, will be excavated to house the Nebraska State Historical Society's Willa Cather Archives as well as Mildred Bennett's papers. This level will provide classroom space and a research/study area.



The year 1995 promises several Cather celebrations. The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation will be forty years old; the University of Nebraska-Lincoln will observe Willa Cather's 100th graduation anniversary; *Lucy Gayheart* will have been published sixty years, and *The Song of the Lark* eighty

years. The 40th Annual Spring Conference will celebrate these anniversaries. In late June and early July WCPM will sponsor the Sixth International Seminar on Cather in Quebec City, Canada.



The number of guests touring the Cather facilities has increased during the first eight months of this year. Nearly half of the more than 5,000 visitors arrived during July and August, when the new management plan with the Historical Society began. This was a convenient opportunity to test the new organization, but the most inopportune time for the Museum building's air conditioner to quit functioning! The people who travel through the Cather sites are really wonderful. It's fun to have them (you) here to matter what their level of Cather interest.

The most unusual tour this summer was a group of nearly forty French people who visited all of the town sites. We were aware that they were from France, but we were unaware that they didn't speak a lot of English, for everything we said was translated to them by three translators!

Concordia College in Seward, Nebraska, is using *O Pioneers!*, "Neighbour Rosicky," the Cather Memorial Prairie, and four of the five restored buildings here for orientation for nearly 200 freshmen from all over the United States. Ten Concordia professors toured here in June and have been working all summer to develop this multidisciplinary orientation. The students will be writing, photographing, observing, and drawing.



Did you see the Willa Cather portion of *A Century of Women*, which aired this summer on Turner (TBS)? Willa Cather was also profiled on ABC's "Good Morning America." If you know of upcoming media coverage on Cather or her work, please call or write us. If you see newspaper, magazine, or journal articles, send them to us. We try to maintain files and scrapbooks but surely we miss some things. We appreciate the fact that so many of you try to keep us informed.



The WCPM owns a completely renovated country schoolhouse located one mile west of Red Cloud. It was given to us several years ago by one of our founding members, Harry Obitz, in memory of his wife, Helen. We call it the Little Red Schoolhouse. This summer it and the playground equipment received a new coat of paint in preparation for a fall opening to fourth graders. Vicki Bush, formerly an elementary

(Continued on Page 41)

THE MAGICAL ART (Continued)

Rosen sees beyond appearances and that what she sees, or thinks she sees, is what the reader should accept as real. As a magician's assistant, called to the stage to (mis)direct the audience's attention, Mrs. Rosen is almost comical. She is certainly unusual, since a magician's assistant is typically young, beautiful and scantily



dressed. Mrs. Rosen is mature, plump, and well-corseted, as Cather often notes. Moreover, unlike most stage assistants, she is intrusive, a bold character who effaces the real magician so that we hardly notice Cather as she quietly creates her marvelous illusions. One of these marvels, I believe, is Mrs. Rosen herself, a secondary character who is, for a time, ubiquitous. She is there at the beginning

of the story and then everywhere, in the Templeton kitchen, in a snowstorm with Victoria, in her own parlor with Vickie, at the Methodist lawn party, at the children's circus. She is peripheral to every scene, which concentrates, as she does, upon some other character to whom she directs attention — peripheral, but also prominent. Directing us to wonder about the "real" Mrs. Harris, she misdirects attention from the "real" Mrs. Rosen, by which I do not mean her prototype in real life, Mrs. Charles Wiener, the generous neighbor who befriended Cather in *Red Cloud*.¹² Critics who focus upon the salience of autobiographical elements in "Old Mrs. Harris" may explain why late in her life Cather turned to her early years in *Red Cloud* when she was a daughter growing up with a strong-minded mother, a self-effacing grandmother, and a kindly Jewish neighbor. But biographical facts do not explain why a story called "Old Mrs. Harris" begins with Mrs. Rosen, gives her prominence and sage pronouncements, and then makes her disappear.¹³ With a wink and a nod, she is gone — *vanished* from the story.

All this seems natural as we read, but it is all highly sophisticated artifice — and even the artifice is not what it seems. Mrs. Rosen seems to be a conventional point-of-view character, a literary figure who serves the writer by providing a reliable or unreliable way of seeing a story's characters and events. As revealed through the metaphor of magic, however, Mrs. Rosen is highly unconventional, neither reliable nor unreliable, or perhaps both simultaneously as she meddles in the story's plot and defines the story's characters. Characters assume importance not

because of who they are or what they do, but because of what Mrs. Rosen *likes*. Given the limited choices of a small town and the proximity of the Templetons, Mrs. Rosen's choices may seem somewhat arbitrary. She sees — and through her, Cather directs the reader to see — that Vickie is self-absorbed and petulant. Nevertheless, Mrs. Rosen *liked* Vickie's "sturdy build" and "steady vitality," the "glow" of her "rosy skin and dark blue eyes," the "springy quality to her curly reddish-brown hair" (pp. 107-8). She liked her untutored appreciation of lovely things and her avid desire for literature and learning. She *liked* also Victoria Templeton's gaiety while struggling through a snowstorm and her girlish delight at sinking into a drift (p. 114). She even *liked* the Templeton's house, though the kitchen was "cluttered" and the yard "unkempt," and Mrs. Rosen *liked* "order and comeliness" (p. 80). Her own house seemed to her neighbors an "art gallery" and "museum," its walls hung with "engravings in pale gold frames" and "water-color sketches" (p. 103). Still she rather *liked* the "old oil-chromos" that hung in the Templeton parlor.

Readers know they are often looking through Mrs. Rosen's eyes, but they seldom notice the power of her eyes to transform figures of an obscure family into dramatic characters struggling with ambition and failure, desire, resignation, and pain. At the same time, Cather directs the reader to see that these characters are self-centered, painfully ensconced within narrow prejudices and beliefs, sometimes unkind, perhaps even unworthy of concentrated attention, except for the promise, the magician's promise, that their ordinariness will be transformed into something marvelous. Cather keeps this promise by transforming Mrs. Rosen into a fairy godmother who effects a magical *transformation* of ordinary characters and (with the help of a fairy godfather, kindly Mr. Rosen) a miraculous *escape* for Vickie. But Mrs. Rosen is as much illusion as reality. For if in reality she is a wise and discerning woman, she is also a nosey neighbor (who, I might add, would not be tolerated in Brooklyn). Only a confident and honest writer would tell the reader that Mrs. Rosen is prying and spying. She knows it, the grandmother knows it, and Cather allows the reader to know it, only to make the reader discount this knowledge. "Mrs. Rosen couldn't help prying just a little" (p. 84), Cather writes, denying what she has led the reader to see, that Mrs. Rosen is prying a lot. When Cather tells us that Mrs. Rosen "has come to spy out something in Victoria's absence" (p. 83), her candor is a tribute to her magical art and her confidence in its power. For magicians will sometimes give away the secret of their tricks because they know that they can still make audiences gasp at their illusions. The indeterminacy of Cather's meanings arises because her story reveals the illusions it has created and needs to conceal or obviate. Cather needs the reader to believe in the superiority of Mrs. Rosen's perceptions; nevertheless, she takes the risk

(Continued on Page 42)

NEWS FROM WCPM DIRECTOR

(Continued)

school teacher and now one of our tour guides, has developed an early 1900s day in country school for area fourth graders. They will do old-fashioned reading, writing, arithmetic, and games, and they will have an opportunity to discover a little about Willa Cather in the nearby Red Cloud Depot.



At the Depot, Linda Lambrecht Stych's acrylics of the "Magical Essence of Willa Cather's Childhood" (owned by Anne Wagner of Columbus, Nebraska) are on exhibit until mid-November. If you are close to Red Cloud, see this exhibit. Terry Sheahan of Winfield, Illinois, has been engaged to develop a permanent exhibit for the Depot, telling the story of the railroad coming to Red Cloud and of its significance in the settlement of Red Cloud and Webster County, and to the immigrants and Willa Cather.



Jane Gillette from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's *Historic Preservation* magazine did research here in September for her regular feature, "Open House," which will come out sometime in 1995. Joan Acocella from *The New Yorker* magazine was here at Spring Conference time and is working diligently on an article on Willa Cather. A lot is happening — *My Ántonia* on USA Network (December), books, articles, travel pieces — more, even, than we know about. These *are* exciting times.



With regret, over the past year we have accepted resignations from our Board from Robert Harwick, Keith Albers, Lucia Woods Lindley, and Robert Knoll. (Robert Knoll still serves on the Advisory Board.) We thank each of them for their constant and steady support and leadership through these years. We will miss their active participation but look forward to armchair advice and comments.



We are pleased to announce the following new Board members: JoAnn Middleton, Drew University; Susanne George, University of Nebraska-Kearney; Jo Bass, attorney for Kutak, Rock in Omaha; and George Day, University of Northern Iowa.

— Pat Phillips

**Tune In to Nebraska Public Radio
Wed., Dec. 7, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.
to hear Lora Black read My Ántonia**

This eight-hour broadcast will be repeated in a daily 13-program series beginning Monday, December 12, at 4:00 p.m. and ending Wednesday, December 28, at 4:00 p.m. (NPR FM frequencies include 88.7, 89.1, 89.3, 90.3, 90.9, 91.1, 91.3, 91.5, 91.7 and 91.9.)

The 1994 Passing Show

The two commentaries that follow were presented to generate our annual discussion on Cather texts at Spring Conference. Since Susan J. Rosowski could not participate on the panel as planned, due to car trouble, she has rewarded us with a complete essay on her topic, "Coming, Aphrodite!"

Defining Community in "Jack-a-Boy" and "The Best Years"

Kevin A. Synnott
The Sage Colleges

Exploring the tension caused by the demands of the kingdom of art and the demands of family is a recurring theme in Cather's fiction. Drawn by the powerful influence of beauty and truth, the artists in Cather's world necessarily separate themselves from the traditional, and perhaps mundane, aspects of life, and they imaginatively and purposefully reconstruct communities and worlds to replace those they have needed to abandon. This tension permeates Cather's work, and the process of reconciling such dual allegiance captivated her throughout her career. "Jack-a-Boy" (1901) and "The Best Years" (1945) are stories that represent the beginning and the end of Cather's literary life and, as a pair, provide surprising insight into Cather's continual search to find the artist's place in the world, a theme that teased Cather's mind across the lifetime she gave to the higher processes of art.

One does well to recall that both of these stories sprang from Cather's warm memories of childhood and especially of her brothers. "Jack-a-Boy" is a tribute to the youngest Cather, Jack, who was eight years old when Willa Cather wrote this story. She was, by this time, already working in the east, away from the little boy to whom she loved to read, and she was very likely homesick for all of the young Cathers far away in Nebraska. "She told friends," Mildred Bennett recounts, "that she would give anything just to look into his eyes for ten minutes" (38). It is likely that the sentimentality frequently noted by critics of this story owes something to Cather's longing for home and family while she was writing it.

Similarly, "The Best Years," written late in life, was Cather's tribute to her brother Roscoe, a reminder of their happy childhood in Red Cloud. In it, she traveled back to the prairie, to the streets of the country town, and finally to the snug and magical attic bedroom in the little white house at 3rd and Cedar. This story's cast of characters would recreate childhood dreams, reordering a world remembered across time and through memory. Like "Jack-a-Boy," "The Best Years" would be charged by some critics with an excess of

(Continued on Page 43)

THE MAGICAL ART (Continued)

of revealing Mrs. Rosen's indefensible curiosity and her persistence in staying where she knows she is not wanted. To distract the reader from Mrs. Rosen's snooping in the Templeton kitchen, Cather waves the coffee cake around, using it as a stage prop or magical wand to keep an uncomfortable visit going. Once in Mrs. Harris's kitchen, the cake needs to be displayed and discussed. "Dis is Mr. Rosen's favourite coffee cake, Grandma," Mrs. Rosen says, creating an impression of familiarity by her address and of easy communication by her questions. "You are such a good cook," she says, "I would like your opinion of my cake" (pp. 78-79). Meanwhile, Mrs. Rosen's "smooth, dusky-red hands" have broken the cake and portioned out pieces, Mrs. Harris has "watched Mrs. Rosen's deft hands out of grave, steady brown eyes," and Cather has kept the reader looking from one woman to the other with intense interest as though something portentous were being revealed in an ordinary, if not downright dull, coffee break.

I focus upon Mrs. Rosen because for me she is an emblematic figure who allows us to see through Cather's characters — *see through* suggesting both insight and deception. Moreover, once we have become accustomed to seeing through her eyes, we are prepared to see through Mr. Rosen's eyes as he looks admiringly at Victoria when they are together at the Methodist lawn party. Through his enchantment with what he sees, Cather weaves a magic circle about the beautiful woman in which everything is "just right," her dress, her kindness to the little Maudes, her way with her own children (p. 125). But once Victoria steps out of this magical circle and returns home, she becomes "severe and distant" with her children, and cross and reproachful with her mother. So we see through one reality to another, or one appearance to another, or through an appearance to a reality, or vice versa. Who is the real Victoria, the lovely Southern belle Mr. Rosen sees; the petulant daughter Mrs. Harris sadly sees, the pregnant woman we later see "dragging a chain of life that never let her rest"? Thus, just as Mrs. Rosen confuses the reader over what is real or illusory in Mrs. Harris, or over the real existence of this dichotomy, so Mr. Rosen contributes to confusion over the real Victoria.

At the same lawn party, still another Victoria emerges as the woman seen by Mrs. Jackson, a minor character who mimics Mrs. Rosen by constantly "keeping an eye" on her neighbors. Unlike Mrs. Rosen, however, Mrs. Jackson often does not like what she sees, and especially, she "didn't like the Templetons" (p. 125).¹⁴ If Cather uses a coffee cake to credit Mrs. Rosen with good intent, she uses another cake to discredit Mrs. Jackson. This mean-spirited neighbor insults Victoria as she hands her a slice of cake that Grandma Harris had baked for the lawn party — "a white cake, thickly iced and covered with freshly grated coconut" (p. 120). Mrs. Jackson becomes, if briefly,

another character Cather makes us see through — to her own meanness of spirit, to Victoria's vulnerability to reproach, perhaps justifiable reproach, and to Mr. Rosen's rosy view of Victoria, which the reader, as seemingly directed by Cather, takes as valid and then, again directed by Cather, may pause to reconsider or revise. Like a magician who shakes an audience's confidence in what to believe, since one cannot believe one's eyes, Cather is disorienting the reader by transforming a literary convention, the point-of-view character, into an agent of mystification and misdirection and, at the same time, into a seer into truth. First, she introduces Mrs. Rosen as her emblematic confuser and truth-sayer, and then, Mr. Rosen, Mrs. Jackson, Mandy, and even the German couple that Mr. Templeton visits. Cather has each direct our attention and misdirect it, lead us to perceptions and misperceptions, which is what the magician does with an assistant, a rabbit, or a cake.

I am suggesting that in certain ways, the intentions and effects of the magician and the writer are analogous. Both seek to elicit and direct the interest of an audience or reader, both use methods of misdirection, and both evoke pleasure that is inseparable from a sense of mystification. Both can make the trivial seem marvelous. Cather's cakes may seem delicious but not marvelous, suggesting that the analogy falters over the story's realistic details. But the difference between Cather's cakes and a cake baked in a top hat seems to me nugatory when we note that in the story cakes seem to exercise a power of agency that inert objects assume on a magician's stage. On the stage, a bird made of folded newspapers can turn into a pigeon and fly away. This is the effect of the magical act of *animation*: to make an inert object seem alive. In the story, cakes made of mere words not only take on texture and taste; they also assume the power to act and comment upon characters' actions. Cakes elicit emotions and facilitate or hinder sociability. A luscious slice of coconut cake "poisons" beautiful Victoria Templeton. A *second* slice of chocolate cake, eaten by Mrs. Rosen, creates an illusion of narrative flow within a scene that is essentially static (p. 150). The cakes simultaneously direct attention away from and to the complicated interactions of the story's characters and the conflicting sets of values these characters represent — those of the old world and the new; of petty and generous people; and of a "feudal" Southern society that dignified an old woman's services and "a snappy little Western democracy" that denigrates the woman and the daughter she has reared. Thus cakes participate in, or precipitate, the story's plot and help create its thematic complexities. To wonder whether Cather's cakes are realistically inert details or magically animate objects seems to me no more peculiar than wondering whether a bird is paper or a real pigeon. In each case, we think we know, but have been made to doubt our knowledge. And in each case, we are in a state of exulted wonder that makes being baffled or

(Continued on Page 44)

DEFINING COMMUNITY (Continued)

sentiment. The charges are fair, to some measure, but one must see in this tale a final reflection of Cather's own fragile memories and fond remembrances. Roscoe Cather's death shortly after she finished "The Best Years" was both a shock and a sad reminder to Cather of her own "best years."

For other critics, these stories share the rich textures and complexities found in virtually all that Cather wrote. Mythic and religious themes have been explored, connecting these stories to Cather's own classical education and her lifelong spiritual quest, as have themes about human love and loneliness, death and reconciliation, or the search for meaning in an apparently random world. In all of these matters, "Jack-a-Boy" and "The Best Years" are made of the same stuff as Cather's longer works and share a place in the American procession of Hawthorne and James, and perhaps even Twain, exploring the fundamental innocence of youth as a particularly American paradigm. Like many who precede her, Cather writes about American communities and circumstances inhabited by the usual suspects and by the solitary, special few who stand apart from the crowd, and who are an extraordinary presence and voice within those communities.

But these particular stories also explore another theme of continuing interest to Cather as she struggled with the impact of her work on her own life: the problem of the artist seeking a place in the middle ground, overcoming the dislocation and strain caused by dual allegiance to art and to life. In "Jack-a-Boy" and "The Best Years," Cather explores the balance between the artist and the world, the fundamental need for all to belong, to be a part of a greater order. Moreover, these stories suggest the dislocation Cather herself needed to reconcile throughout her life. "Jack-a-Boy" and "The Best Years" are stories about the life of art and the art of life.

"Jack-a-Boy" is the story of a young boy, who moves into Windsor Terrace and changes the lives of his neighbors, whom, we are made to understand, "are not those who have made the most brilliant success in life" (311). Not kindly disposed toward children, the narrator, the Professor, and the Woman Nobody Called On all harbor fears that Jack's arrival foretells an end to the usual course of events in their mundane lives — an upheaval they do not want. Instead, the wistful young boy charms each of them in turn, and the others living in the Terrace as well, with his simplicity and grace. He possesses, the narrator tells us, "the power of bringing gladness into people's lives" (315). Recognizing a special aesthetic sense in Jack, his neighbors think of him variously as the poet Keats, as "one of the immortal children of Greek fable made flesh for a while" (318), and as a "gleeful young elf" (317). Jack gives human meaning to otherwise empty lives by the artistry he brings to living. In the joyful task of making May baskets, or in the simple hours spent looking at

pictures in the Professor's books, Jack-a-Boy is an aesthetically and spiritually revivifying force. He restores human connections among the odd and amusing mix of people on Windsor Terrace, who seem to have misplaced the magic in their lives.

In the end, Jack-a-Boy falls victim to scarlet fever, and the band of friends, stronger in their human relationships to each other because of Jack, are left to deal with the grief of the "long, bad dream of the flowers and the casket and the dismal hymn so cruelly inappropriate for such a glad and beautiful little life . . ." (320). Jack's parents move away, but the narrator, the Professor and the Woman Nobody Called On find themselves drawn together as a new community, a new family, remembering Jack as the "revelation of beauty" (322) that redeemed them all. They even fulfill the familial obligations of bringing flowers to Jack's grave on May Day, a reminder of the young boy's power and impact in their lives from beyond the grave.

It is no surprise to see Jack's natural family replaced by the trio whose lives represent art (the narrator), intellect (the Professor), and sensuousness (the Woman Nobody Called On). The convergence of such influences is frequently identifiable in Cather work, and the creation of an alternative community in competition with the traditional family is a particularly useful way to dramatize the conflicting demands of the world of art and more usual human responsibilities. In showing how Jack-a-Boy is nourished and satisfied by his new friends and *not* sustained in the usual ways by the traditional family, and how the lives of those friends in turn gain dimension and richness, Cather sets forth a model to which she would frequently return. The community of art replaces the family — a necessary displacement if the artist is to flourish. A more elaborate example is found, of course, in *The Song of the Lark*, which Thea Kronborg would suffer in the overcrowded Kronborg household, sever ties with her family, and create an artistic life with Spanish Johnny, Professor Wunsch, Harsanyi and Fred Ottenburg — all of whom ultimately watch her magnificent performance at the Metropolitan Opera. "Jack-a-Boy" is a portrait of the artist as a young boy, and its lack of emphasis, perhaps even de-emphasis, on family in the traditional sense gives us cause to take note more fully of the new community that Jack has brought into being — a community with a sense of the traditions of art and culture, whose members know more about the art of life because of their brief involvement with the beautiful life that is Jack's.

By 1945, when Cather turned to writing "The Best Years," her artistic success had been won and her thoughts seem to dwell on an aspect of life that had been part of the price of her success. This story would be the portrait of a family — a portrait that can seem too studied, too contrived and conventional in its depiction of the traditional family. Lesley Fergusson, another child of grace in Cather's world, is at the

(Continued on Page 45)

THE MAGICAL ART (Continued)

bamboozled become pleasurable and, paradoxically, enlightening. For in both cases we see the limits of possibility expand beyond the ordinary to include the marvelous.

Good magicians, we have been told, can produce a sense of the marvelous with a small or trivial prop. An elephant does not have to disappear for an audience to gasp. Magicians have, indeed, made elephants disappear, but they have also made audiences gasp by vanishing a rabbit or producing a cake in a top hat. I have claimed that Cather's cakes, seemingly incidental and insignificant, have the power to produce the astounding effects of particular magical acts, such as *misdirection* and *animation*. They also figure in the overall *transformation* that Cather has worked upon insignificant characters whose destinies, without her magical intervention, would remain obscure.¹⁵ For Mr. Templeton will not be known for building a railroad or a cathedral. Mrs. Harris will not help create a country out of an empty land. Vickie will not sing in the world's great opera-halls. Nevertheless, these obscure characters seem no less important than Captain Forrester, Bishop Latour, Ántonia, Alexandra Bergson, or Thea Kronborg. Cather gives Vickie, Victoria, and Mrs. Harris importance by enveloping them in "the magic of contradictions," to borrow a phrase from *A Lost Lady*. Before our eyes, she transforms each into another person, retires an old woman and restores her as a source of energy that is life itself. "The tired, solitary old woman Grandmother had been at daybreak vanished," Cather writes, her ordinary term *vanished* resonating with magical overtones (p. 137). The little Templeton boys give the grandmother new life, and she makes a new life possible for her granddaughter Vickie. With Vickie, Cather performs the magical act of *escape*, finding ways of cutting the bonds of circumstances that would keep her in Skyline. Out of nowhere, Cather produces "a young gentleman" professor and some jolly male students who befriend and inspire the girl — surely a marvelous act of *production*. No less marvelous, I believe, is the sudden production of decisiveness and will in Grandma Harris, a woman resigned, we had been told, to the chances of life and to Mr. Templeton's fecklessness. "None of our people, or Mr. Templeton's either, ever went to college," Mrs. Harris says, rather archly I think (p. 150). Nevertheless, this staidly traditional woman helps her granddaughter make a daring and untraditional escape from the pattern laid out for women in the past. She is assisted by the Rosens, already on stage, who come forth, naturally it would seem, to assist in the escape and in what promises to be a transformation. Having played their part in Cather's performance of the magical acts of *production*, *transformation*, *vanish*, and *escape*, the Rosens can be vanished from the stage. Cather makes Mrs. Rosen disappear wonderfully, as I noted, with a nod and a wink. Soon after, as she must, Cather vanishes old Mrs. Harris — but not

entirely, not even at all. For Mrs. Harris returns as Cather performs the final acts of magic in the story — the acts of *penetration*, *transposition*, *restoration*, and *prediction*.

The classic example of magical penetration is the "Chinese Linking Rings" trick in which "apparently solid metal rings visibly pass through one another, linking and unlinking in various designs and combinations" (Blackstone, p. 129). At the end of "Old Mrs. Harris," the narrator predicts an inevitable linkage in the lives of three separate and distinctly different women as Victoria and Vickie "come closer and closer to Grandma Harris" until, finally, "their lot will be more or less like hers" (p. 190). The statement, analogous to a magical *prediction*, creates an illusion of omniscience or, at least, of wisdom. I say *illusion* because I wonder if the prediction is wise and knowing, or even tenable. From the long perspective, to use one of Cather's phrases, all life is linked by an ineluctable pattern of birth, experience, and death. The experience of her three women as women, Cather's conclusion implies, will turn out to be similar, though their historical times, cultural circumstances, and individual personalities are different. Why is this so? Is this so? The story ends with an essentialist view of women that seems to deny the essential differences that separate its mothers and daughters. Are we to believe that proud Victoria will sink into the servitude that Mrs. Harris considered proper for old women? Or that Vickie's lot will be linked to that of her mother, who is "sick of it all: sick of dragging this chain of life that never let her rest," this succession of pregnancies? (p. 178). Victoria is "chained" and Mrs. Harris is "tied" (p. 97), but Vickie wants to escape bondage and find her own road to follow. And her grandmother, resigned (nobly or not) to a road traveled in the past helps Vickie escape into an untried future. Perhaps contrary to the story's final words, neither Victoria nor Vickie will "come closer" to Mrs. Harris, and the illusion that a *penetration* will unite mother and daughter is subverted by the incantatory words that have created the illusion. "Their lot will be more or less like hers" — like a magical spell, Cather's words resound with alliteration and finality, mesmerizing the reader into belief, until the verbal smoke clears. Then one rubs one's eyes, wonders, and asks what "more or less" means. Is *more* more significant than *less*, or does the *less* — the differences among the women and their lots — undercut or cancel the similarities suggested by *more*?¹⁶

Cather's highly quotable thematic statements usually strike me as indefensible. I want to argue with her narrator's words when they seem, as at the end of "Old Mrs. Harris," the text's final words. After all, Vickie's road, which is taking her away from home, is already diverging radically from the roads traveled by her mother and grandmother. Only a magical act of *transposition* could vanish someone from one place, one road, and make her reappear at another. Though Cather could write sympathetically about her Grand-

(Continued on Page 46)

DEFINING COMMUNITY (Continued)

center of the tale. She takes a position as a country school teacher in order to make her way in the world, but she is homesick for the family from whom she is separated. Her free-thinking father, socially-conscious mother, hearty and dependable brothers are an unabashedly nostalgic vignette of the Cather household at Red Cloud, and the description of place, particularly of the attic sleeping quarters for the children, is as literal as it is evocative. The joyful homecoming for a weekend visit to the family, arranged by the kindly Miss Knightly, is counterbalanced by the tragedy that takes Lesley's life away from the bosom of her family. Trapped by a freakish blizzard, Lesley heroically saves her "young scholars," only to succumb to pneumonia herself. In this story of a life of promise too soon ended, a more traditional familial order is restored: the family grieves, especially the mother who must mourn for her daughter, and family obligations are met, as Lesley's brothers, not strangers or outsiders, bring flowers to their sister's grave. Miss Knightly is allowed to do so too, for she has been granted family status by Cather. She keeps up with the lives of the Fergussons by taking the local papers even after she has moved away, and she shares in the sorrow, pain and loss caused by Lesley's death. Her conversation with Mrs. Fergusson at the end of the story describes her special connection to the family, and it is through that conversation that Cather can underscore, one final time, the cost of progress in the modern world and the change it has meant for the family.

For many, Lesley's goodness and heroism, her easy and loving relationship with her siblings, her cheerful fulfillment of her obligations, and her untimely death can be seen as too heart-warming and heart-wrenching. We do well to remember, as Marilyn Arnold has suggested, that Miss Knightly's distance and point of view counterbalance the sentimental narrative for us, and it is such a finely wrought narrative tension that saves this story (172). Most importantly, however, the folks in "The Best Years" are an authentic American portrait, created from obviously fond memories and perhaps with a wistful longing for "what might have been" in Cather's own life.

Lesley's fulfilling engagement with her family may be one of the ways Cather had of dealing with her own ambivalence toward family life during her Red Cloud years and after, and the distance her work and life had put between her and her family. Such a conflict provides an almost thematic disequilibrium in *The Song of the Lark*, *My Ántonia*, *One of Ours*, and *Lucy Gayheart*, and in many other stories as well. In "The Best Years," Cather can imaginatively bring closure to critical matters of family — its relationships and obligations, its joys and sorrows, the good and the bad — that had eluded her in real life as she imaginatively struggled to shape a world of art.

Putting these stories side by side, one cannot ignore Cather's continuous struggle with fundamental

questions about art and artists, even across the forty-four years and the career that separate these tales. Each seems to be an imaginative strategy for examining the central unifying power of art, and for asking ever-complex questions about the artist's place in the world. "Jack-a-Boy" is a parable that illustrates the reconstructed community of art, beauty, and culture for which each artist leaves behind the usual concerns of life. "The Best Years," with its central theme and metaphor of family, may be seen as a justification for the artist's life, and an imaginative reconstruction of much that needed to be abandoned at one time or another. At either end of Cather's career, and across it, essential questions pose and repose themselves. Searching for the answers to them was work that Willa Cather shared with many others in the American tradition, adding her own strong voice to the American dialogue.

WORKS CITED

- Arnold, Marilyn. *Willa Cather's Short Fiction*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1984.
- Bennett, Mildred. *The World of Willa Cather*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961.
- Cather, Willa. "Jack-a-Boy." *Collected Short Fiction*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965. 311-322.
- . "The Best Years." *The Old Beauty & Others*. New York: Random House, 1976. 75-138.

(Continued on Page 47)



Watch for the USA Network broadcast of *My Ántonia* in March, 1995. These Red Cloudians were selected for non-speaking parts in the movie which was filmed mostly at Stuhr Museum in Grand Island, Nebraska. Pictured left to right are Seth Schulz, Stephany Thompson, Taylor Thompson, Ardis Yost, Bri Schulz, Cole Hansen and Matthew Hansen.

THE MAGICAL ART (Continued)

mother Boak, she saw to it that her road in life did not converge with that of her foremothers — that is, except in her imagination which, imbued with the magical power of creation, could restore to life her grandmother, her mother, and her adolescent self. But this act of *restoration*, a magical act, is illusory, as all magical acts are, since in real life Grandma Boak once vanished can not be made to return. Only in art or on a magician's stage could this happen. Moreover, even in art, the restoration of Grandma Harris is illusory, for historical and temperamental circumstances have severed her life so radically from the lives of her daughter and granddaughter that the three women cannot become one, though Cather's final words in the story seek to persuade us they will. And just as the magician's acts can persuade because the audience wants to believe in the marvelous, so Cather's art persuades because the reader wants to believe in familial reconciliation and in the hope that an act of escape realizes.¹⁷ The magician and the writer satisfy human desires to hope and believe by creating the illusion that the impossible is not only probable, to refer to Cather's phrase, but actual, realized by characters performing marvelous acts on the stage or in a text.

Almost thirty years ago, Bernice Slote discovered a "real" Willa Cather hidden within an accepted myth. As she read through the newspaper columns and reviews Cather had written during her presumably silent year of 1895 to 1896, Slote saw "another woman" slip out of the newspaper pages, an engaging woman "more full of surprises, than old Hermann the Magician on the Lansing Theatre stage."¹⁸ I believe that this twenty-two-year-old woman never left the magician's stage, that she is still there performing her marvelous acts of magic in "Old Mrs. Harris." These acts are, ultimately, esoteric and inexplicable. The critic can describe the magical techniques Cather uses — those of *production, transformation, vanish, misdirection, animation, escape, transposition, penetration, restoration, and prediction* — but still, the secret of the Cather's art eludes analysis, no matter how closely one draws an analogy between this art and the magician's astounding acts. Someone can explain, and indeed has explained, how the magician baked an excellent cake in a hat, but no one can adequately explain how Mrs. Rosen could take a coffee cake out of her oven, or how Mrs. Harris produced, out of nowhere, a thickly iced white cake "covered with freshly grated coconut," or why Mrs. Rosen would, of course, want another slice of chocolate cake. No one can explain the inexplicable in art and make its extraordinary achievements seem ordinary. If explanations could demystify a writer's art, then the long list with which I began would come to an end, and yet we expect and look forward to new and unexpected critiques. Moreover, contrary to common sense, explanations of how amazing acts have been performed seldom, if ever, impair their power to amaze.¹⁹

Once when the great Sherlock Holmes was asked to explain how he had achieved his amazing results, he demurred, saying that "a conjurer gets no credit when he has explained his trick." "If I explained too much of my method of working," he told Dr. Watson, "you will come to the conclusion that I am an ordinary individual after all."²⁰ I doubt that all the explanations that critics, biographers, and Cather herself have given of her life and work could lead anyone to think Willa Cather ordinary. Nor have all the explanations of her art dispelled the magic that, I believe, it casts for everyone. In this respect, Cather had found the secret of the perfect magical trick, one "in which the method is completely undetectable and invisible" (Blackstone, p. 140). Can we ever fully explain how a coffee cake set us on a road we can travel again and forever — a road that takes us across a sandy unkempt yard into a lowly kitchen and, from there, into Willa Cather's kingdom of art?

NOTES

¹ Leslie Ansley, "The Wizard of Awes," *Valley News, USA Weekend* (April 29-May 2, 1994), p. 4, an article on David Copperfield, the contemporary American magician. As a young reviewer, Cather had attributed to art a power that magicians exercise, to the extreme when, as in the epigraph, they make the impossible happen. "One of the most glorious powers of art," Cather had written, is "to make the impossible seem probable" ("Henry James: 'a really great artist,'" Cather's 1896 review of Henry James's *The Other House*, reprinted in *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*, ed. William M. Curtin [Lincoln: University of Lincoln Press, 1970], Vol. II, p. 552). I am preparing to argue that in "Old Mrs. Harris," Cather has made the impossible seem probable to her readers and that analyzing her art as a series of magical acts reveals the impossibilities and how they baffle the reader into belief.

²Space does not permit me to list the books and articles that discuss each of these elements, or any combination of elements, in Cather's art. Such a list can be drawn quickly and easily, most of the criticism being well-known.

³Harry Blackstone, Jr., with Charles and Regina Reynolds, *The Blackstone Book of Magic & Illusion* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1985), pp. 117 and 146.

⁴As I have noted above, Cather had early asserted her belief in the power of art to make the impossible seem probable. I would add that Cather also made the probable and the actual difficult to know with certainty, though the text conceals the difficulties it has created. Elsewhere, I have argued that such novels as *My Ántonia*, *Lucy Gayheart*, and *One of Ours* are much more indeterminate in their meanings than they seem and are often taken to be. Most recently, I have emphasized the prevalence of obfuscation in *My Mortal Enemy*. See "The Capitalistic Will: Women and Inheritance in *My Mortal Enemy* and *Love and Salt Water*," *Cross-Cultural Reckonings: A Triptych of Russian, American, and Canadian Texts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming in 1994), pp. 119-81.

⁵I have italicized the magician's technical terms here and, occasionally, elsewhere to distinguish them from ordinary speech. My list is selective and the definitions minimal. For a full and detailed description of magical

(Continued on Page 48)

An American Tradition in "The Enchanted Bluff" and "Before Breakfast"

John J. Murphy
Brigham Young University

The "American tradition" I am reminded of when reading "The Enchanted Bluff" (1909) involves Mark Twain, specifically the scenes in *Huck Finn* of Tom Sawyer's boys' club, where the boys plan romantic adventures. More pertinent even are the scenes of Huck and Jim on Jackson's Island and, later, on the Mississippi, when they muse about the stars. But this is really part of a larger tradition I associate with Emerson, although one can go beyond him to the many poets and philosophers he "borrowed" ideas from.

One of the first things I notice in "The Enchanted Bluff" is that the river resembles a half-dozen others in the corn country, different only in that with its island it has been possessed by these boys. Early on, the narrator makes an interesting comment about how he will miss this place when he goes up to the Divide to teach country school. This is the tamed Divide, long after the "wild land" of the first part of *O Pioneers!*, for, he says, there will be "nothing willful or unmanageable in the landscape"; yet this river proved too turbulent for milling in spring, which is why the boys had it as their own. The Divide has been physically tamed, but the physically untamed appeals to the narrator and to the other boys, although what they experience in the story is poetic taming or spiritual possession, that is, the subduing or domesticating of the wild through human reference and interaction. I think both this story and "Before Breakfast" are about poetic or imaginative possession.

In "The Enchanted Bluff," after Percy has trouble making out the Little Dipper — its very name indicative of a kind of poetic claim over something not humanly controllable — talk switches to the North Star as a guiding star for people, particularly its service to Columbus in discovering the "new world" paralleling the little island world these boys have claimed as their own. Arthur then points out the Milky Way as representing "lots of good dead Indians," another human extension. Soon the river itself is humanized, even if it can't be physically controlled: during the day its mood is said to be "sunny complaisance," but during the night, its mood is "heavier . . . mutinous, complaining," of "inconsolable, passionate regret." This kind of "humanizing" increases in references to geometric propositions and to Napoleon — Cather's range here is quite universal. The moon becomes a "cart wheel," then a "galleon in full sail," and then a "heathen god." The talk finally turns to "a big red rock" in New Mexico, a special rock — just as the river is a special river — because it's linked to a human story, to the remains of a culturally advanced tribe (like the superior people Tom Outland associates with the ruins on Blue Mesa in *The Professor's House*). This human tragedy is

what generates the contest among the boys to be first to get to the top of the rock to find — what? "Bones, maybe," says Tip, "or the ruins of their town, or pottery, or some of their idols." It's rather like the curiosity we have about space, about other planets. The big mystery is the people dimension, not the scientific dimension — or if the scientific, only to the extent that the science serves that higher (or human) people dimension we associate with imagination. The lost tribe mystery is never solved — it's important that it won't be, that it keeps a mystery, a mystery passed on to the next generation — to Tip's son.

"Before Breakfast" (1948) is a more complex story, and I can't go into all the complexities here. It has obvious resemblances to the earlier and simpler story. There's water, an island with trees, although the island itself is the great red rock, and there's a "star" — the planet Venus — to replace the North Star, Polaris. Also, Henry Grenfell's contemplations are, like the boys', night thoughts, and the story ends with dawn. Henry seeks this island repeatedly over the years to counter the impact on his life of materialism: the effects of the bond business he works at in Boston and of that other "corporation" made up of his wife and scientist son, Harrison. The sterility of both these "realities," which takes its toll on Henry's delicate stomach, is relieved on this thinly carpeted island rich in vegetation and animal life and sustained by streams that tumble into the sea in four silver waterfalls.

What the scientist Fairweather manages to do is dehumanize, or deromanticize, the island for Henry — spoil it at least in his mind by challenging its humanity, the comfort obvious in Henry's attributing friendliness and "a kind of greeting" to the snowshoe hare and claiming the fallen spruce tree as "Grandfather." For Henry, Fairweather reduces the island to figures (says it's 136 million years old), which is why at the end of a bad night of "auditing," taking stock of his life, Henry uses the planet Venus to make the professor's statistics insignificant: "You were winking up there," he says to it, "maybe a hundred and thirty-six million times before that date [the scientists] are so proud of." Henry's Venus is not a mere rock; she's been humanized like the island; she's a goddess, and the fleecy cloud through which he views her becomes "her rose-coloured veils."

The challenge in the story is, ironically, to hold out against the human tendency to dehumanize, for that destroys meaning, and when meaning goes, life goes with it. "Why patch up?" asks Henry, who had been putting eye drops in his eyes. "What was the use of anything? Why tear a man loose from his little rock and shoot him out into the eternities? All that stuff was inhuman. A man had his little hour, with heat and cold and a time-sense suited to his endurance. If you took that away from him you left him spineless, accidental, unrelated to anything." This "little [human] hour, with heat and cold and a time-sense suited to [human] endurance" is represented in the soil-surface of the

(Continued on Page 49)

THE MAGICAL ART (Continued)

acts, see Daniel Fitzkee (pseudonym for Daniel Fitzroy), *The Trick Brain* (San Rafael, CA: Saint Raphael House, 1944); and *The Blackstone Book of Magic*, pp. 117-47. *The Trick Brain* is devoted entirely to an explanation (and demystification) of the techniques used to create a magical trick, "a particular and individual feat," and its effects or "general ultimate accomplishments" (p. 22). The illusionist's magical acts, which originated with jugglers and street-smart sorcerers, serve as entertainment, whereas magic as creative power has religious as well as scientific functions. I am concerned here with the hermeneutic possibilities that the illusionist's magical techniques present to the literary critic.

⁶ John Mulholland, an American magician, quoted in *The Blackstone Book of Magic*, p. 3.

⁷ So James Woodress says in *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 441. Woodress again designates "Old Mrs. Harris" as "my choice for Cather's best story" in his essay "A Dutiful Daughter: Willa Cather and Her Parents" in *Willa Cather: Family, Community, and History (The BYU Symposium)*, ed. John J. Murphy (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young Humanities Publication Center, 1990), p. 26. Marilyn Arnold also ranks "Old Mrs. Harris" "among the very best of Cather's works" (*Willa Cather's Short Fiction* [Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1984], p. 152).

⁸ David H. Charney, *Magic: the great illusions revealed and explained* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book, a Strawberry Hill Book, 1975), pp. 218-20.

⁹ For recipes of the foods described in Cather's fiction, recipes (unlike the cake in a hat) that readers can follow, see Roger L. and Linda K. Welsch, *Cather's Kitchens: Foodways in Literature and Life* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987). The "many strange recipes" that magicians and witches have used to exercise their powers are given in Leonard R. N. Ashley, *The Wonderful World of Magic and Witchcraft* (New York: Dembner Books, 1986), pp. 133-52. For the "basic" magical cake recipe and "its use," see pp. 131-32.

¹⁰ Willa Cather, "Old Mrs. Harris" in *Obscure Destinies* (New York: Random House, Vintage, 1974, published originally in 1932), p. 77. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

¹¹ Henry Seidel Canby, "Review of *Obscure Destinies*," published originally in 1932 and reprinted in *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*, ed. John Murphy (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 280-282. Canby wrote admiringly that Cather had built up the stories of *Obscure Destinies* "without one trick" (p. 281). Obviously, I think otherwise.

¹² Is Mrs. Rosen in the story because in real life Cather knew Mrs. Wiener? But in real life, Mr. Wiener did not lend the young Cather money she needed to attend the University at Lincoln; her father managed to raise the necessary cash. Like any writer, Cather was inventing as much as she was re-creating her lived past.

¹³ Woodress cautions the reader, as he does the biographer, not to confuse Cather's life with her fiction, especially the fictions she created about herself. "The biographer of a writer like Cather, whose memories and experiences are woven into the fabric of her fiction," Woodress writes, "has to separate the reality from the invention. Cather presents a special problem because she often treats her own life as though it were a fiction" (p. 42). Still, Woodress, like other Cather critics, sees "Old Mrs. Harris" as "a very autobiographical story," though again he reminds the reader that "of

course, it is fiction and not strictly autobiography" ("A Dutiful Daughter," p. 26; see also pp. 25-27).

¹⁴ And the Templetons didn't like Mrs. Jackson's "miserable contribution of a veal-loaf," which she used as an "excuse" to gain entry into the Templeton house (p. 173). But unlike Mrs. Rosen, she was "blocked" at the kitchen door. The fragrant coffee cake worked as a magical "Open, sesame," but the veal loaf did not.

¹⁵ David Stouck notes that Cather's title, *Obscure Destinies*, alludes to Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," and that in the stories Cather was "no longer" writing "about artists or distinguished men and women, but about the ordinary people from her own past" (*Willa Cather's Imagination* [Lincoln: University of Lincoln Press, 1975], p. 208).

¹⁶ For a view that the three women will become more alike, see Marilyn Arnold, *Willa Cather's Short Fiction*, pp. 149-50. Pointing to the many reconciliations Cather effects in "Old Mrs. Harris," Arnold says "that as Victoria and Vickie grow old, they will close the gap of understanding that has separated them from each other and from Mrs. Harris" (p. 149). Only a (magical) transformation can close this gap of understanding since, according to Arnold, "the young woman will never really understand the old woman until she one day becomes that old woman" (p. 150). I am arguing that Vickie will not *become* that old woman, and that the story's conclusion creates an illusion of the women's future identification by techniques analogous to those used in magical acts of *restoration* and *penetration*. On the stage, a *vanished* woman (like Mrs. Harris) can be *restored*, and two women (Mrs. Harris and Vickie) can *penetrate* each other by seeming to occupy the same space and so to have become one. Although Karen Stevens Ramonda recognizes that each of the women in "Old Mrs. Harris," has an "involute self," she believes that Cather has "superimposed" each self upon the other and so made the generations continuous and mother and daughter "interchangeable" ("Three in One Woman in 'Old Mrs. Harris'" in *Willa Cather: Family, Community, and History*, pp. 175-81). I would argue for the difference between continuity and interchangeability, one predicated upon a passage of time, and the other upon a merging of identities that differences in the historical times of the characters would not permit.

¹⁷ In an essay that deals with "the current nostalgia among baby boomers for their fifties childhood," Donna Bassin discusses the psychological implications of memory, motherhood, transformation, mourning, and "the possibility of oneness regained" — matters placed within a contemporary setting that are interestingly pertinent to the themes of "Old Mrs. Harris." See "Maternal Subjectivity in the Culture of Nostalgia: Mourning and Memory," *Representations of Motherhood*, ed. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 162-73.

¹⁸ Bernice Slote, *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. vii. Alexander Herrmann (1843-1896) was born in France, achieved extraordinary success with his magical acts in Europe, and later migrated to the United States. He toured the country — evidently stopping in Red Cloud — receiving great acclaim wherever he went. He is said to have created the now traditional "image of the magician" as a mysterious "tall, narrow-faced man with dark beard and goatee." (T. A.

(Continued on Page 50)

AN AMERICAN TRADITION (Continued)

island. The rock itself was ancient but "that . . . had nothing to do with the green surface where men lived and trees lived and blue flags and buttercups . . . and goldenrod crowded one another in all the clearings." The human endurance for which this soil-surface is a setting is embodied, with further irony, in the professor's daughter, who makes a plunge into the cold sea to prove her endurance to herself — and who becomes, in a sense, the Venus of the humanized planet, as she emerges from her shell to ride the foam. Like the winking, blinking star, the girl answers (for Henry at least) the challenge of her scientist father and helps Henry recover the meaning of the island.

The visions of both stories are human in the sense that the source of all meaning is within humanity, within intelligence, within spirit, or soul. "Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit," writes Emerson, and then he makes the following distinction between material and poetical possession: "The charming landscape which I saw this morning is . . . made up of . . . twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this, . . . Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title." What Henry Grenfell owns is the "best part" of the island, and when that ownership threatens to be reduced to a lesser kind, it is what he recovers during his morning walk.

(Continued on Page 51)

Willa Cather's December Birthday Events Red Cloud

DECEMBER 4 (SUNDAY)

2:00-4:00 p.m. — Victorian Christmas Tea Open House at Childhood Home. 3rd and Cedar.

7:30 p.m. — Premiere performance of "A Tribute to Willa Cather" by Betty Jean Steinshouer, as herself, and Burns Davis, pianist. Grace Episcopal Church, 6th and Cedar. (Nebraska Humanities Council.)

DECEMBER 7 (WEDNESDAY)

Noon — Celebratory Mass at Grace Episcopal Church. Father Charles Peek, officiant. Lunch follows. Please call (402) 746-2653 for reservation.

9:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. — Nebraska Public Radio. The complete book of *My Ántonia* will be read by announcer Lora Black. Selections of music that Cather enjoyed, along with other music of her time, will be included in the eight-hour broadcast.

Willa Cather's University Days: A Centennial Celebration 1895/1995

APRIL 6-8, 1995

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Cather's years at the University of Nebraska, 1890-1895, were pivotal ones. While there she began her literary and journalistic careers, publishing her first stories, reviews, and essays in campus and Lincoln newspapers, and national magazines. The taste of a wider world in the University developed the passion for art which drove Cather throughout her life.

This three-day celebration of Cather's college days explores the formative influences on her through talks by distinguished scholars; papers on Lincoln and the University in the 1890s and on Cather's connections to the literary, musical, social, scientific, and political life of the times; exhibits of Cather-related materials by the University Archives, the Nebraska State Historical Society, and other institutions; readings; musical events; local tours — all designed to help the modern reader place the young Cather in the context of her times.

Sponsored by the Cather Colloquium, the Department of English, and the Center for Great Plains Studies.

For more information and/or registration write: Kari Ronning, Department of English, 315 Andrews Hall, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska 68588-0333.

1995 Spring Conference Preview

Our topic for next May's Spring Conference (May 5 and 6) will be Music and Willa Cather and highlight *The Song of the Lark*, *Lucy Gayheart*, and other works with significant musical components.

CALL FOR SPRING CONFERENCE PAPERS.

We are continuing to develop the Friday program of paper presentations. We consider all worthy efforts on Cather and her work but especially welcome those on the topic of music. We encourage students at all levels (which includes teachers, of course). Address inquiries to Bruce Baker, English Department, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska 68182.

ALA Call for Papers

Seventh Annual American Literature Association Conference, Baltimore, Maryland, May 26-28, 1995.

For information write 1995 Cather Sessions Directors: Ann Romines, Dept. of English, George Washington U., Washington, D.C. 20052 (topic open); Kevin A. Synnott, Vice President, The Sage Colleges, Troy, NY 12180 (topic: Cather and the Visual Arts). Length 7-10 pages; due date: 1 December 1994.

THE MAGICAL ART (Continued)

Waters, *The Encyclopedia of Magic and Magicians*, [New York Facts on File Publications, 1988], p. 167).

¹⁹ Even when the magician explains his tricks, the audience will be fooled. So Blackstone, Jr. asserts, pointing to examples dramatized by his father, the famous magician Harry Blackstone. Blackstone, Jr. writes: "Deep in their hearts, people want to believe in magic . . . They do not want to be told that the wonderful illusions a magician performs are in reality just tricks, even though they know intellectually that this is the case" (p. 3). I am suggesting, by analogy, that readers want to believe in the oneness of mother and daughter, in a magical act of *penetration*, even though they know a text has shown division and separation.

²⁰ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Study in Scarlet," *The Complete Sherlock Holmes: The A. Conan Doyle Memorial Edition* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1930), Vol. I, p. 39. Like the famous detective, writers have referred to themselves as conjurers, explicitly so in two recent, unconnected works. In "The Editor's Story," written by Rebecca Goldstein, the narrator asserts that the writer she is describing "was a conjurer . . . A prestidigitator in a hobble skirt": "She would take the barest hint of a suggestion, cup it in her palm and mumble some magic incantation over it, then open up her hand to show a white dove that would come flying forth, or a streak of colored scarves" (in *Strange Attractors* [New York: Viking, 1993], p. 48). Appropriately, the title of the fictional writer's work is *Chimera*. In Timothy Findley's novel *Headhunter*, a professor responds to a madwoman's belief that she has released the nefarious Kurtz from Conrad's text into the modern world by saying that "all books are a conjuring . . . They are all a conjuring of humankind and the world that we inhabit. Conrad was not the first to conjure Kurtz — and not the last" (*Headhunter* [New York: Crown, 1993], p. 261). Findley validates his character's statement by conjuring up both Kurtz and Marlow for a novel that illuminates the darkness in our modern world.

Cather's Canadian and Old World Connections The Sixth International Seminar June 24 - July 1, 1995 Quebec City, Canada

SEMINAR THEME:

Although her associations with Nebraska and the American Southwest are far better known and acknowledged, Willa Cather's imaginative connections to Canada and, especially through Quebec's Old-World culture in *Shadows on the Rock*, to Europe, are considerable. The Sixth International Cather Seminar, which will be held in Quebec City from June 24-July 1, 1995 will focus on these connections.

Broadly defined, this theme will include papers which address Cather's literal connections to Canada and Europe — her use of history in both *Alexander's Bridge* and *Shadows*, her summer visits to Grand



Old Quebec from the St. Lawrence

Manan, New Brunswick, Quebec City, and her European trips — as well as her imaginative use of such antecedents in bringing the Old World to the New throughout her fiction. While a formal call for papers will be circulated this fall, interested participants should contact the Seminar Co-directors with proposals as early as possible.

SEMINAR FORMAT:

Participants will be housed in dormitories on the suburban Quebec City campus of Laval University. The program will be made up of lectures and discussions by scholars on Cather, her use of Canadian and Old-World materials, and on Quebec itself. Much time will be spent in the Old City — the areas described in *Shadows* — as well as in its environs.

PRE-SEMINAR TRIP TO GRAND MANAN:

Also planned is an optional trip to Grand Manan island scheduled from June 20-23 and beginning and ending in Quebec City. Participant numbers will be limited and there will be an additional fee.

Send inquiries, statements of interest, and paper proposals to:

Robert Thacker
Canadian Studies Program
St. Lawrence University
Canton, NY 13617

or

Michael Peterman
Department of English
Trent University
Peterborough, Ontario
Canada K9J 7B8

SPONSORED BY
THE
WILLA CATHER PIONEER MEMORIAL AND
EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION
AND THE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

Cather's Manifesto for Art — "Coming, Aphrodite!"

Susan J. Rosowski
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

In Willa Cather's oeuvre, "Coming, Aphrodite!" is the siren story which readers approach in fascination yet fear, sensing that danger lies in venturing too near. Its plot is — well, strange, as even a brief synopsis demonstrates. A painter (Don Hedger) discovers that through a knothole in the partition separating their apartments, he can see his neighbor (the singer Eden Bower) exercising nude before her mirror, and he becomes obsessed with viewing her each afternoon. Eventually they meet, gradually they become acquainted, and (inevitably) they become lovers; she breaks open the lock on the door that separates their rooms, and they reveal their secret dreams and desires to one another. Among those revelations, Don Hedger tells Eden Bower the story that gave rise to one of his paintings. As strange as Hedger's peephole voyeurism is his tale of an Aztec Princess and her Captive, a prisoner who was gelded and his tongue cut out because while tattooing the Princess he "violated her honour." In the end Eden Bower and Don Hedger quarrel and part, and years later Eden Bower (now billed as Aphrodite) revisits the neighborhood where she had once known Don Hedger and confronts the different success each has achieved.

Cather's story was deemed dangerous for public consumption when it was published in 1920, and for its magazine publication she made changes "calculated to make it more palatable to squeamish readers and literary watchdogs bent on protecting public morality" (Arnold 247).¹ Revising the title to "Coming, Eden Bower!" and deleting words such as "nudity" and "gelded" hardly altered the story's character, however, which resides in its imagery as much as its diction. As James Woodress observes, those editors would have been startled by what readers today see — that, for example, when Hedger watches Eden Bower through his peephole, Cather's "explosive and gesture imagery suggests masturbation" (313-14): his "fingers curve as if holding a crayon," she writes, and "the charcoal seemed to explode in his hand at the point where the energy of each gesture was discharged into the whirling disc of light."

Attuned to suggestions that escaped the censoring editor in 1920, we readily acknowledge that "Coming, Aphrodite!" is "one of the most erotic love stories Cather ever allowed herself to write" (Lee 162) and that Eden Bower is "elemental woman, she is sexual" (Arnold 248). Should any reader doubt that Cather was aware of and drawing upon sexual tensions, "this story clearly shows both Cather's awareness of the play of erotic energies and her skill in conveying these tensions." Loretta Wasserman observes: "its printing history provides evidence that Cather was consciously pushing the limits of sexual explicitness for that time" (37). To my mind, the interesting question now

concerns not whether eroticism is present (it is), but to what effect Cather deployed that eroticism. And in responding to that question, I suggest that "Coming, Aphrodite!" is not merely, or even primarily, about a man and a woman in love so much as it is about two artists; moreover, I suggest that it is Willa Cather's most explicit exploration of art as a dance of seduction between performer and audience, writer and reader, and that as such it is her Manifesto of Art.

When Hedger discovers the knothole through which he watches Eden Bower performing her exercises, it is all embarrassingly awkward — he has to go into his closet and through his dirty laundry to find it, for example, and then he must crouch uncomfortably and bend over to peer through it. But when through that hole he sees the woman, it is as if seeing Aphrodite "in a pool of sunlight, . . . wholly unclad, doing exercises of some sort before a long gilt mirror." Self-consciousness drops away, and he is taken up by her beauty. "[H]e had never seen a woman's body so beautiful as this one, — positively glorious in action." The story that unfolds concerns their relationship as each practices the negotiation between public and private involved in performing for an audience.

As a painter, Don Hedger thinks nothing of watching her, the narrator assures us, for "[n]udity was not improper to any one who had worked so much from the figure." Drawing from the figure of a model posed in a studio, however, is one thing; peering through a hole in a closet wall at a woman who is unaware she is being observed is quite another: yet it is precisely this violation of privacy that Hedger becomes addicted to. Day after day, he crouches "down in his closet to watch his neighbor go through her mysterious exercises"; no longer painting at all, he sinks into "a stupor of idleness." He resists meeting Eden Bower directly, shunning revelation of her "everyday personality" by listening for her "not to encounter, but to avoid her." He prefers instead to imagine "that body as never having been clad. . . . She was the immortal conception, the perennial theme."

Cather's story thus evokes the discomfort of voyeurism inescapably presented as voyeurism, accompanied by an aching back and the rank odors of unwashed clothes. As such, it illustrates well the position in which I find myself for so many of the scenes in Cather's fiction to which I respond most intensely. In *O Pioneers!* I am there with Frank Shabata, walking toward the orchard within which his wife and her lover lie together, oblivious to the outside world; in *A Lost Lady* I find myself with Niel Herbert outside the window of Marian Forrester's bedroom, hearing from within her "soft laughter; impatient, indulgent, teasing, eager," joined by the "fat and lazy" laugh of Frank Ellinger. And in *My Mortal Enemy* I am with Nellie Birdseye, outside the door leading to the apartment of Myra and Oswald Driscoll eavesdropping upon their bitter quarrel over his fidelity. In each scene, my sense of being privy to others' secrets

(Continued on Next Page)

evokes mixed feelings of fascination and fear, pleasure and shame. That is the dilemma that Cather explores in "Coming, Aphrodite!" — the realization that in creating art, an artist violates the privacy of the persons sitting for her portraits as well as reveals herself in disclosing how she sees them; and in responding to that art, the observer/reader acknowledges her/his desire to be privy to those secrets.²

"Coming, Aphrodite!" is Cather's most direct exploration of the delicate negotiation between the love and exploitation, intimacy and voyeurism of art. It is a relationship fraught with tension and unease, and also with pleasure and passion — not merely or even mainly in terms of sexual eroticism, but in the classic sense of passion as the energy underlying creativity. For Cather's story draws us into a dance of seduction that resembles a flamenco, in which partners interact by an ever-intensifying rhythm of exchange: performer/audience; dominance/passivity; advance/retreat; male/female. Peering through the knothole at Eden Bower, Don Hedger is the artist who would possess his subject by rendering her into his experience of her; but on the other side of the wall Eden Bower is herself a performer as she poses before her mirror, painting her picture into his eye.³

Cather illustrates the principle of exchange by an excursion to Coney Island, America's prototypical performance site in its promise of illusion. There model becomes performer, artist becomes audience, and audience becomes performer — the interplay is as ongoing as the amusement park itself. The excursion begins when Hedger invites Eden Bower to accompany him to see one of his models perform in a hot air balloon. Excited by the performance, Eden Bower secretly changes places with the model and goes up in the balloon, where she exercises the seductive skill she has been practicing alone in her room: she removes her skirt, for example, and comes down on the bar — all done "first-rate."⁴ It is a performance that pays tribute to both illusion and restraint by offering the promise of disclosure while withholding its actuality. Though Eden Bower displays her legs by removing her skirt, she covers her flesh by black tights; and though by performing above the audience she appears to offer access to the private places of her body, "She keeps her feet together."

Performance is like courtship, a wooing ritual that invites receptivity by evoking desire. For it to succeed, response is necessary, as Cather describes: when returning to Don Hedger, Eden Bower "felt a strong wish to propitiate her companion, to be alone with him." Though the performance "was a lark," she realizes that it is "not very satisfying unless one came back to something after the flight," and she acknowledges that she wants "to be admired and adored." Again, the principle of exchange is at work: performer becomes audience as Eden Bower, wishing to "propitiate her companion," poses for him, and Don Hedger, responding to her desire, views her as a painter views his subject: "Though Eden said nothing, and sat with

her arms limp on the rail in front of her, looking languidly at the rising silhouette of the city and the bright path of the sun, Hedger felt a strange drawing near to her." The dance intensifies as its partners absorb themselves in one another: "If he but brushed her white skirt with his knee, there was an instant communication between them, such as there had never been before. . . . He felt as if they were enveloped in a highly charged atmosphere, an invisible network of subtle, almost painful sensibility. They had somehow taken hold of each other."

Far more than being about sexuality, this is a story of intimacy, and Cather's lovers "take hold of each other" in the form of questions and answers, of desire to know answered by secrets revealed. Hedger "was talking more to [Eden Bower] tonight than he had ever done before," and in response to her question about a new picture she had seen in his room of supplicating female figures, he tells her its secret history. As a storyteller, Don Hedger reveals himself by rendering in words the emotions he has expressed on canvas. Again, secrecy heightens the intensity of the moment, established when Hedger prefaces his story by its complicated transmission. As if opening a series of Chinese boxes, Hedger reveals that for his painting he drew upon a story he got from a Mexican priest, which the priest found in an old manuscript written by some Spanish Missionary, who got his stories from the Aztecs. "This one he called 'The Forty Lovers of the Queen,' and it was more or less about rainmaking," Hedger remarks, the "more-or-less" enticing in its possibilities.

Like the wall through which a knothole provides access or the fabric through which flesh may be glimpsed, proprieties serve as a reminder of the privacy essential to intimacy.⁵ Cather frames the inset story with precisely such a reminder. When Eden Bower asks Hedger to tell her the story behind his painting, he fumbles, then hesitates. "I don't know if it's the proper kind of story to tell a girl." Again, their seduction is mutual:

She smiled; "Oh, forget about that! I've been balloon riding today. I like to hear you talk."

Her low voice was flattering. She had seemed like clay in his hands ever since they got on the boat to come home. He leaned back in his chair . . . and, looking at her intently, began to tell his story, the theme of which he somehow felt was dangerous tonight.

The story which is "somehow . . . dangerous" is a parable of artistic desire. Hedger tells of an Aztec Princess who was dedicated to the gods, protected while young from intercourse with men, and taught rain-making secrets. During her adolescence rain was so abundant that "[t]he oldest man could not remember such fertility." When she was eighteen, however, warriors brought back among their prisoners a young chief who had created art of "his great stature," upon which he had covered his arms and breast with the

(Continued on Next Page)

tattooed figures of wild animals. When she beheld the Captive, the Princess begged for his life from her father, for "[s]he desired that he should practise his art upon her, and prick upon her skin the signs of Rain and Lightning and Thunder, and stain the wounds with herb-juices, as they were upon his own body. For many days . . . the Princess submitted herself to the bone needle, and the women with her marvelled at her fortitude."

A woman seeking to speak signifies with her body her desire, Helene Cixous writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa." And thus Cather writes of the Aztec Princess's desire to signify fertility with the inscription of her body. "But the Princess was without shame before the Captive, and it came about that he threw from him his needles and his stains, and fell upon the Princess to violate her honour," and punishment was great: the Captive was gelded, his tongue was cut out, and he was given for a slave to the Rain Princess. The point is not so much that the tale is cautionary (so are most stories about women, it seems) but that the revelation of the tale's brutality is so stark.

Desire will not be stilled even by such sanctions against it. When the Princess married and became the Queen of the Aztecs, she took with her the Captive, who served her by procuring men for her, bringing them to her by a secret passage, then conducting them away by the same secret passage, but where a rush mat now concealed a hole from which a stone had been removed, so that when the youth stepped upon it he fell into an underground river. Thus the Queen's secrets were safe until she favored one of the youths by giving orders that he should live. Jealous, the Captive summoned her husband to secretly visit the Queen; and when the King found her with the Captain of the Archers, he killed the Captain on the spot, "but the Queen he brought to public trial. The Captive, when he was put to the question, told on his fingers forty men that he had let through the underground passage into the river. The Captive and the Queen were put to death by fire, both on the same day, and afterward there was scarcity of rain."

The story is brutal (the word Cather uses) in posing issues of intimacy in art, which concern the power of the artist to strip away masks, to search out secret desires, and to force disclosure. "Eden Bower sat shivering a little as she listened. Hedger was not trying to please her, she thought, but to antagonize and frighten her by his brutal story." She sees his "lean, big-boned lower jaw" and "savage and determined expression." *"Now she was looking at the man he really was. Nobody's eyes had ever defied her like this. They were searching her and seeing everything"* (my emphasis).

The exchange of the gaze — she seeing him and he seeing her — is Cather's confrontation with Medusa that is, in Ovidian tradition, essential to the release of creativity. It is the moment of revelation in which the reader recognizes that by conflation and substitution, Cather has throughout her story presented Woman as

she has been variously represented in legend: as the power of love in Aphrodite; as that of fertility in the Aztec Princess; as the temptress Eve in Eden Bower; as the severity of absolute beauty in Artemis. In each case, Cather has confirmed the power of female desire; and in each case revealed the brutality of the legend that would punish a woman for possessing that power.

Creativity lies in returning the gaze and in seeing all there is. The consummation that follows includes sexuality, but far more importantly, it consists of revealing secrets. Meeting on the roof of their apartment, the painter and the singer "began to talk, both at once, as people do in an opera. The instant avowal brought out a flood of trivial admissions. Hedger confessed his crime, was reproached and forgiven, and now Eden knew what it was in his look that she had found so disturbing of late." As in the legend of the Aztec Princess, Cather's woman is active in her desire, and it is Eden Bower who breaks the lock on the door separating their apartments; "That's better," she exclaimed exultantly. "So the bolts are always on the lady's side? What a lot society takes for granted."

"You are the only one who knows anything about me," Eden says — "that's why I'm here." Hedger knows all there is to know: the nakedness of her body, and also the nakedness of her desire to transform herself as she exercises before a mirror, and of her defiance of boundaries in her flight on the balloon, and of her past as Edna Bowers. Disclosure and comprehension are two different things, however: without a protective barrier between them comes misunderstanding, and when Eden Bower urges Hedger to adapt his talent for a commercial market, they quarrel and part. Each imagined the other a mirror of their own desires, and each realizes that the other doesn't know them at all. Fleeing, Hedger realizes "He had never in his life been so deeply wounded . . . He had told this girl all his secrets" — indeed, had been able to reveal them only with his hand "locked" in hers, only with her "to explain all his misty ideas about an unborn art the world was waiting for, had been able to explain them better than he had ever done to himself." Realizing that she thought him a commercial failure made him appear ridiculous to himself; seeing her again would mean that "everything he had told her, that he should never have told any one, would come back to him."

Once released, however, desire will not be stilled in Don Hedger any more than it was in the Aztec Princess by threat of mutilation and death, or will be in Edna Bowers by setbacks. When Hedger returns to their apartment "to share everything with her, even the most trivial things," he finds Eden Bower gone, having left behind a note telling him that Fate had come knocking at her door (she had sailed for Europe with "friends"); she'd never forget him. After reading it, Hedger "went back into the closet and knelt down before the wall; the knot hole had been plugged up with a ball of wet paper, — the same blue note-paper on which her letter was written." As a coda, eight-

(Continued on Next Page)

een years later Eden Bower returns to New York and the neighborhood where she and Hedger had been lovers. Inquiring about him, she learns that he has had another kind of success from her commercial one, for he is known as someone who can't be placed, someone who is "original, erratic, and who is changing all the time." "He often exhibits in Paris, you must have seen —"? "No, I tell you I don't go to exhibitions."

Cather ends her story with the Medusa:

Leaning back in the cushions [of her car], Eden Bower closed her eyes, and her face, as the street lamps flashed their ugly orange light upon it, became hard and settled, like a plaster cast; so a sail, that has been filled by a strong breeze, behaves when the wind suddenly dies. Tomorrow night the wind would blow up again, and this mask would be the golden face of Aphrodite. But a 'big' career takes its toll, even with the best of luck.

Reveal, perform, exhibit, and disclose — these are the key verbs in this story about partitions, locks, barriers, and fortresses. And the secret at the story's core concerns the breaking of taboos concerning women — how a painter sees women and what a writer says about them. The stark drama of the inset story sets the tone, with its Aztec Princess violated because she was "without shame," then killed for lying with forty men; the memory of an aside echoes a similar lesson, when after seeing Eden Bower emerging from her bath, Don Hedger recalls the story of Acteon turned into a stag and killed by his own dogs for unwittingly coming upon beauty at her bath. The volume's epigraph recalls Christina Rosseti's poem warning girls against looking at Goblin men, and the volume's title, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, establishes that the overriding figure informing all the stories is Medusa, transformed for lying with Poseidon by Athena into a monster so hideous that she turned all who looked upon her to stone. In "Coming, Aphrodite!" Cather returns the gaze, to reveal that behind Aphrodite there is Eden Bower, and behind her Edna Bowers.

Returning the gaze means confronting the horror of the image and the brutality of the plot: to gaze directly upon the Aztec Princess, Artemis, Medusa, and Eve, the myths would have it, is to see something so terrible that unimaginable punishment follows. A people suffers drought, one beholder is turned into a stag and torn apart by his own dogs and another is turned into stone; all of humanity falls from grace into Original Sin. By each account, female nudity is the metaphor for exposure; shame is masqueraded as a woman's protection, fear and guilt a man's safeguard — all from exposing oneself.

Against these cautionary tales, Cather evoked Aphrodite. "In sharp contrast, Aphrodite may have been depicted nude (intermittently) from remote times" (136) writes Paul Friedrich in contrasting Aphrodite to Artemis, although his discussion applies more broadly to the gallery of cautionary female figures Cather

evokes in her story. Aphrodite "can be active and take the initiative . . . she is never raped or, in Homer, assaulted by a male — she is so powerful sexually that this would be a contradiction in terms — but she herself does sometimes 'seize up' handsome young men"; she "presents an image of relative sexual equality and an active female role that dynamically contradicts the sexual double standard of the early texts." She "defies and threatens and crosses over fundamental categories" of a male-dominated culture, Friedrich concludes; she is liminal in representing "sexual intercourse without pollution . . . Sexual relations between a goddess and a mortal . . . Nakedness of a goddess before mortals . . . Sexually active female; . . . Nature and culture combined in the 'arts of love' . . . [and] 'The blessings' and 'the curse' of Aphrodite." In all these cases, "Aphrodite is liminal or intermediary" in that "she overrides . . . categories that are opposed in the cultural system." She plays a "liminal, mediating, or transgressing role" not in transforming categories, but instead in her role of "a pragmatic acting-out, that brings together" that which is customarily "kept apart" (140-147).

Understanding Cather's evocation of Aphrodite begins with remembering that she wrote her story at a critical juncture in her creative life. She had released her voice in *O Pioneers!* (1913), claimed it in *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and proved its power to the world with *My Ántonia* (1918), which critics hailed as "an American classic." Success was hers, it would seem, and she had every reason to anticipate that more success lay ahead: she was writing the novel she was calling "Claude," to be published as *One of Ours* in 1922 and to receive the Pulitzer Prize in 1923. Yet as her biographer James Woodress notes, in December 1919 she took a break from "Claude" to write "a long story just for fun, an uncharacteristic act but one that turned out well" (309). Woodress refers here to the quality of her story, but "Coming, Aphrodite!" turned out well in more personal terms for Cather, as the vehicle by which she confronted and resolved issues central to her literary life. Increasingly dissatisfied with the way in which Houghton Mifflin was presenting her writing, Cather was evaluating the terms being defined for the success offered to her, and (as a result) preparing to move to Alfred Knopf as a publisher who would support her desire to please herself when she wrote, rather than casting her stories to please a public. An artist makes himself understood in his painting, Don Hedger reflects; so (as Cather could expect her reader to realize) she was making herself understood in her story.

"Coming, Aphrodite!" is Cather's Manifesto, her public demonstration of her principles and intentions in art. In it, Cather laid out the terms of the "various kinds of success" offered an artist; she revealed her commitment to write to please herself; she announced her ambition to be "great" rather than popular and to be "first among the moderns" rather than in

(Continued on Next Page)

sales; and she disclosed the principles by which she would attempt to fulfill that ambition. By writing of a peephole, she acknowledged issues of privacy fundamental to the intimacy of her art; by plugging that knothole "with a ball of wet paper, — the same blue note-paper on which her letter(s) were written,"⁶ she announced the principle of restraint that she would explain in "The Novel D meubl " (1920) and demonstrate in *A Lost Lady* (1923), where she took such care in creating Niel Herbert as her "peephole character." With this manifesto, Cather announced a redirection in the way in which she would reveal herself in her writing: never again would she write in so direct a manner of her development as an artist as in *The Song of the Lark*; never again would she create a first-person narrator so closely modeled upon her own experience as Jim Burden.

"Coming, Aphrodite!" announced also a redirection in Cather's treatment of her subjects. Whereas Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, and Antonia Shimerda had merged into the mythic Pioneer, Artist, and Earth Mother, following "Coming, Aphrodite!" Cather was to reverse the process, writing of women struggling to escape the type and to emerge as themselves. In *A Lost Lady*, for example, Cather gave Marian Forrester the desperate will to cry out, "I have such a power to live in me" as she refuses to immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband; and in *My Mortal Enemy* she gave Myra Driscoll Henshawe the courage to tell the truth of her own life, thereby disproving the myth of romantic love in which she was cast as heroine.

I end by again acknowledging "Coming, Aphrodite!" as a siren song, but one that offers the promise rather than the threat of revelation. To respond to Cather's story is to hear in the voice of Eden Bower a desire so large that she transforms herself into legend. "People like Eden Bower are inexplicable," Cather observed; theories are well enough, she might have added, but an Eden Bower challenges us not to explain but to understand. For me, responding to that challenge has meant wandering beyond Friedrich and Cixous to Marilyn Monroe, our version of Aphrodite as the cultural icon in whom we see reflected (if we dare to look closely) the pleasure and pain of our own desires. "Tomorrow . . . the golden face of Aphrodite" will reappear — so Cather ended her story in 1920. Six years later was the birthdate of Norma Jean Baker, inexplicably to give birth to herself as Marilyn Monroe. To read her autobiography, *My Story*, is to hear Eden Bower/Edna Bowers' voice again and to find her story repeated. The echoes are uncannily close: the fierce desire to embody a golden dream, the shrewd observation of others to learn what she needed to know, the exercises in posing before the mirrors of various sorts, the awareness she was being watched, the casual indulgence of attention from men and the enjoyment of friendship with women, the comfort with nudity and the pleasure in her body not for its sexuality but for its evocation of a desire for intimacy. As for voices combining to create the intimacy of art, Norman Mailer

and Gloria Steinem represent those, one the photographer who, like the painter Don Hedger, engages in a love affair with his subject; the other the woman who, like Cather, acknowledges issues of exploitation, pays tribute to "The Woman Who Will Not Die," and imagines the life her subject might have had outside the myth in which she was imprisoned.⁷

Thus observers become performers and readers become writers. As Norma Jean Baker created Marilyn Monroe, so Mailer created his *Marilyn*, and in response to Baker/Monroe/Mailer, Steinem wrote her *Marilyn*. The dance broadens by a serendipity that demonstrates the presence of Monroe — and Cather — in our cultural consciousness, for Monroe's masseur, Ralph Roberts, joins in when he recalls being "off in silent thoughts of Willa Cather" while giving Monroe a massage when she suddenly asked, "Have you ever read *A Lost Lady*?" (qtd by Mailer, 229).

Art is an ongoing act of negotiation and appropriation. More directly than in any other of her stories, Cather in "Coming, Aphrodite!" challenges each of us, her readers, to participate actively in that negotiation, to acknowledge that it is our desire that we see reflected from this strange story in which, at its center, the storyteller reveals the secret of her art so directly that she is "searching her [reader] and seeing everything . . . testing her, trying her out," challenging her to return the gaze.

NOTES

¹ Cather's uncharacteristic willingness to submit her story to bowdlerization (albeit for magazine publication only) may demonstrate her desire to reach a broad public with it, a desire consistent with its serving as her manifesto.

² As I argue elsewhere, the fact that we are *not* privy to the details of such scenes is essential to the intimacy of Cather's art ("Willa Cather and the Intimacy of Art, Or: In Defense of Privacy," 51-52).

³ Here I am paraphrasing Norman Mailer's description of Norma Jean Baker's skill in posing as she is becoming Marilyn Monroe: "For as the photographer is usually seen as the artist, and his model as a species of still life, she becomes the artist when she takes a pose: she paints the picture into the camera, and few photographers will fail to pay her homage" (50).

⁴ The sexual meanings throughout the story form their own interplay, beginning with the title's "Coming." To come is to advance (as a subject moves toward an observer, so Eden Bower moves toward Don Hedger); to make progress (as announced by the legend on a marquee at the story's conclusion, Eden Bower succeeds by becoming Aphrodite), to have priority or rank (as Aphrodite has the rank of a Titan), and to issue forth (as the story is Cather's issuing forth of her Manifesto); "to come" is also to experience orgasm.

⁵ I develop this idea more fully in "Willa Cather and the Intimacy of Art, Or: In Defense of Privacy."

⁶ As those with whom she corresponded and those who have read her personal correspondence housed in various archives would recognize immediately, Cather wrote on precisely such paper.

⁷ "The Woman Who Will Not Die" is in the title of Steinem's first chapter, "Who Would She Be Now?" the title of her last.

(Continued on Next Page)

Conversations echo throughout any reading of a text, and with "Coming, Aphrodite!" I was particularly aware of — and grateful for — those with Evelyn Funda about performance and storytelling, and of those with Elizabeth Turner about traditions of silence.

WORKS CITED

- Arnold, Marilyn. "Coming, Willa Cather!" *Women's Studies* 11 (1984): 246-260.
- Cather, Willa. "Coming, Aphrodite!", *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920.
- . *A Lost Lady*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923.
- Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1 (1976): 875-893.
- Friedrich, Paul. *The Meaning of Aphrodite*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978.
- Funda, Evelyn I. "Every Word Counter for Twenty": *Storytelling in the Fiction of Willa Cather*. Diss. U of Nebraska-Lincoln, forthcoming.
- Lee, Hermione. *Willa Cather: Double Lives*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990.
- Mailer, Norman. *Marilyn*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1973.
- Monroe, Marilyn. *My Story*. New York: Stein and Day, 1974.
- Rosowski, Susan J. "Willa Cather and the Intimacy of Art, Or: In Defense of Privacy." *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter* 36 (Winter 1992-93), 47-53.
- Steinem, Gloria. *Marilyn*. Photographs by George Barris. New York: Henry Holt, 1986.
- Turner, Elizabeth. *The Poetics of 'The Thing Not Named': Willa Cather's Tradition of Silence*. Diss. U of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1994.
- Wasserman, Loretta. *Willa Cather: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Boston: Twayne, 1991.
- Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987.

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER

Editor: John J. Murphy, Brigham Young University
 News Editor: Patricia K. Phillips, WCPM
 Bibliographer: Virgil Albertini, Northwest Missouri State University
 Editorial Assistant: Sally Murphy, Salt Lake City, Utah

EDITORIAL BOARD:

Bruce P. Baker, University of Nebraska at Omaha
 Susan J. Rosowski, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
 Merrill M. Skaggs, Drew University
 David Stouck, Simon Fraser University
 Loretta Wasserman, Annapolis, Maryland

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.

YOU CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE AND GROWTH OF THE WILLA CATHER PIONEER MEMORIAL

- By being a Cather Memorial Member and financial contributor:

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIPS

Benefactor	\$1000.00 and over
Patron	\$100.00
Associate	50.00
Sustaining	30.00
Family	20.00
Individual	15.00

(Foreign Subscription: add \$5.00 to membership category.)

WCPM members receive:

- Newsletter subscription
- Free guided tour to restored buildings
- By contributing your Willa Cather artifacts, letters, papers, and publications to the Museum.
- By contribution your ideas and suggestions to the Board of Governors.

ALL MEMBERSHIPS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND BEQUESTS ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE

Under Section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1965

AIMS OF THE WCPM

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

BOARD OF GOVERNORS

Virgil Albertini	Ron Hull	William Mountford
William Thomas Auld, M.D.	Robert E. Knoll	John J. Murphy
Bruce P. Baker, II	Betty Kort	Harry Obitz
Jo Bass	Mellanee Kvasnicka	Nancy S. Picchi
Alicia Bennett	Ella Cather Lewis	Susan Rosowski
† Mildred R. Bennett	Catherine Cather Lowell	David E. Scherman
Don E. Connors	John March	C. Bertrand Schultz
George Day	Dale McDole	Margaret Cather Shannon
James L. Fitzgibbon	Gary L. Meyer	Merrill M. Skaggs
Josephine Frisbie	Jo Ann Middleton	Helen Cather Southwick
David Garwood	Miriam Mountford	Gary W. Thompson
Susanne George		Marcella Van Meter

Patricia K. Phillips, Director

Printed by Vaughans Printers, Inc., Hastings, Nebraska



Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial

326 North Webster
 Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970

Nonprofit Organ.
 U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
 Red Cloud, NE
 Permit No. 10