

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

The Willa Cather Society

VOLUME XXXVIII, No. 1
Spring, 1994

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Winslow Homer, *The Cotton Pickers*, 1876. Private collection.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl: Willa Cather vs Margaret Mitchell

Loretta Wasserman
Annapolis

*"History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be un-lived. . . ."*

— Maya Angelou

While working on the question of Cather's anti-Semitism, I wondered also about her portrayals of other minorities, especially African Americans. There seemed little to go on — Blind d'Arnault in *My Ántonia*, a mulatto servant in "The

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WCPM NEWS

Spring Conference Comes of Age in 1994

Several significant events will enhance this year's May 6 and 7 conference.

■ The Friday afternoon PAPER SESSIONS and evening entertainment have become permanent additions after their experimental introduction last year. Contact Bruce P. Baker (Department of English, U of Nebraska at Omaha) immediately if you plan to present a paper.

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Works on Cather: Summer '92-Summer '93: A Bibliographical Essay

Virgil Albertini
Northwest Missouri State
University

This year's survey of Cather's criticism evaluates seventy-two pieces, written by both long-time and new Cather critics, and includes seven newspaper accounts, ten independent articles, three edited Cather texts, eighteen essays in four *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletters*, two collec-

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WORKS ON CATHER, (Continued)

tions, three chapters, and three books. Also included in this bibliographical essay is *The Willa Cather Yearbook 1*, thirteen essays with a 1991 copyright but released in 1993 and edited by Debbie A. Hansen, and David and Gale McCleery's *Resource Guide to Six Nebraska Authors*, one I overlooked in last year's survey. All this activity indicates that much continues to be discovered and written from a variety of perspectives on general topics, specific short stories and novels, comparative and feminist readings, and pedagogy.

I will begin with the 1991 resource work. *The Resource Guide to Six Nebraska Authors* (Lincoln: Slow Tempo Press) offers Cather material on pp. 21-36, 87-89, including biographical information by Susan J. Rosowski on pp. 21-23. The McCleerys' supply photographs, general summaries of Cather's twelve novels, short story collections, non-fiction books, and *April Twilights*, Cather's one book of verse. They also give useful information on videos, films, speakers, and places to visit in Cather country.

The Willa Cather Yearbook 1 (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press), written in honor of the late Mildred R. Bennett, pioneer Cather scholar, contains eleven new essays and two previously published studies. The collection focuses on *My Ántonia*, "Paul's Case," *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, music in the fiction, Cather as a drama critic, and order as theme in Cather's works, and includes a comparative study by Bennett herself. Ronald W. Butler explains in his "Introduction" (vii-viii) how this collection changed from its original purpose of celebrating Bennett to commemorating her and giving thanks for the direction she willingly gave to Cather enthusiasts, students, teachers, and scholars. Mildred Bennett's posthumous publication — "Wendell Berry and Willa Cather: A Comparison of Two Universal Writers" (11-21) — is a clear picture of how both Berry and Cather deal in their works in universals through similar attitudes toward characters, the land, and the people who look after it in their works. Butler follows his introduction with "Willa Cather's 'Paul's Case': A Masterpiece of Symbolism" (23-33). Here Butler discusses the intricate symbolism in the story, considering out-of-season flowers, sexual imagery, details of physical setting, and color as depicting the sensitive adolescent's life as an aesthete.

In "*My Ántonia* and 'Song of Myself': Willa Cather and the Whitman Tradition" (35-53), John P. Anders sees Whitman's long poem as a model for Cather's novel. Anders feels that Cather makes the Whitman legacy her own in *My Ántonia* and thus discovers herself as a writer by reconciling her native American material and knowledge of the West with her own artistic principles. Lawrence J. Berkove in "*A Lost Lady: The Portrait of a Survivor*" (55-68) cogently argues that Marian Forrester's choice to survive is justifiable and a situation that Cather herself probably

used in order to survive a time when her own world "broke in two." Berkove sees Niel as an unreliable, untrustworthy narrative filter who is of no help to Marian as she tries to give meaning to her life by confirming the present. "Forms of Healing in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*" (69-82) by Joan Wylie Hall discusses Jim Burden's narrative as one that emphasizes keen interest in the sickness and healing of both humans and animals. Jim, as Hall shows, alluding to his own health and physical beating by Wick Cutter, provides himself with a cure which finally distances him from death and disease. Debbie A. Hansen connects the wolf story told by Russian Pavel to Russian folk narratives in "Willa Cather's Use of Slavic Folklore in *My Ántonia*" (83-101). Cather's insertion, Hansen feels, underscores the effect the brightening night has upon Pavel and Peter and destroys their ability to survive on the Nebraska prairie. In "Homes and Churches: The Quest for Order in Willa Cather's Fiction" (103-123), Richard C. Harris finds physical, domestic, religious, and a European sense of order as central thematic elements in *My Ántonia*, *O Pioneers!*, *One of Ours*, *The Professor's House*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Shadows on the Rock*, *Lucy Gayheart*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, and "The Best Years." The longing for order so prevalent among Cather's characters seems to reflect, according to Harris, her own thoughts and feelings about home and church, havens that gave her comfort. Marvin D. Jenson's commentary, "Willa Cather as Drama Critic" (123-130), traces Cather's career as a critic for the Lincoln newspapers and the *Pittsburgh Daily Leader*. Jenson asserts that Cather was able to make intelligent allusions to theatre in her fiction because of this early experience with and appreciation of the theatre. (Of course, this assertion is not a new one.) "The Use of Names in *The Professor's House*" (131-146) by Rhoda F. Orme-Johnson perceptively examines the selection of proper names that contribute to the allusive richness of this major novel. According to Orme-Johnson, names like Godfrey, Outland, Marsellus, Blue Mesa and *Berengaria* not only strengthen obvious meanings but also elicit literary and historical relationships. In "Music and Willa Cather" (147-162) Mary-Anne Martin recalls the importance of music in Cather's life and recounts the musical references in *The Song of the Lark*, *Lucy Gayheart*, *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Martin finds over 200 musical moments in *The Song of the Lark* and 101 in *Lucy Gayheart* that, she claims, illustrate Cather's responsiveness to music enrichment. Demaree Peck's thesis in "Possession Granted by a Different Lease" (163-186) is that *O Pioneers!* belongs in the tradition of American transcendentalism. Peck, in this reprint from *Modern Fiction Studies*, sees Alexandra as a descendant of Emerson's poet landlord and, in addition, reunites both Alexandra and Cather through the Emersonian self. Patricia Lee Yongue, a familiar Cather critic, offers a

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CATHER VS MITCHELL, (Continued)

Sculptor's Funeral," Black Tom the butler in "Uncle Valentine," and then *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, certainly sympathetic to blacks, yet — as far as I could see — not incisive, its portraits weakened here and there by a haze of nostalgia and a pervasive passivity. After all, only the energy of a white woman saved Nancy.

I was jarred into rethinking *Sapphira* by a journalistic piece on *Gone with the Wind*, its point being the stress Margaret Mitchell places on the color of her storybook slaves: They must be good and black. No hint of a racial mixing appears (unless one counts the Shantytown episode, where a freed black man attacks Scarlett), this despite statistics from the 1860 census showing that twelve percent of the non-white population of the rural South was of mixed blood (Pierpont 92), and despite Mitchell's intention of treating the antebellum South realistically, of avoiding, as she said, another "moonlight and magnolia" novel. Pork is "shining black" (*GWTW* 45) and Mammy is "shining black, pure African" (*GWTW* 23). Dilsey is of mixed blood, but the non-black half is Indian. In this careful reticence Mitchell is reflecting the South's deep discomfort about any allusion to the sexual exploitation of black women by white men under slavery — and after —, a discomfort that lay behind the many post-war state laws against "miscegenation" (this a fancy, scientific-sounding term that came into use in the latter years of the 19th century, when social Darwinism lent a spurious legitimacy to these efforts to preserve racial distinctness).²

Gone with the Wind came out in 1936, its immediate astonishing popularity increased to a national obsession by anticipation of the movie, released in 1939 — just when Cather was working on *Sapphira*, published in December of 1940.³

Cather's story, unlike Mitchell's, rests on the dynamics of sexual jealousy across racial lines. It is my fancy, then, that the amazing success and general hullabaloo of *Gone with the Wind* (a million just the first six months) prompted Cather to read it, or to read long enough to be irritated into pointedly countering its bland picture of slaves and slavery in the novel she was working on. True, as my readers will be thinking, this is a scenario called up from the vasty deep. I have no evidence that Cather gave one thought to Mitchell, who, actually, is not essential to my argument. The Southern myths were fully familiar to Cather from her early reading in, for example, the novels of John Esten Cooke in the family library back in Red Cloud. Still, one cannot help wishing that the six pounds of manuscript Cather discarded as she finished *Sapphira* had survived (Woodress 481). Did she know all along that her narrative would turn on a white woman's scheme to have a young mulatto girl raped by a white man? Or did that emerge as she worked on her novel?⁴

Whatever the wellspring of her inspiration, we have evidence that in *Sapphira* Cather attempted to

portray something that troubled her deeply. Sending an early copy to her friend Viola Roseboro, she wrote that in this novel she was not so much concerned with background ("stage trappings") as with something she called "the Terrible" as it appeared in everyday life.

My thesis, then, is that this "Terrible" Cather had tried to portray is sexual exploitation and debasement under slavery — exploitation the institution not only made possible but expected, even acceptable — one of the arrangements of domestic life, as it were.⁵

Just how expected the novel makes clear over and over. In the very first scene, *Sapphira* teases Henry about Till's "yellow child," rumored to be the result of his brothers' visit: "Perhaps you have a kind of family feeling about Nancy" (9). But, she adds indulgently, "we got a smart yellow girl." Or Martin Colbert's vulgar comment, following Nancy's persistent rejection of him: "By God, if I thought that old sinner [the miller] had been there before me —" (186). Characteristically, Martin does not see the ingrained constraints of his uncle's nature and thinks of conquering Nancy as something of a sporting competition. Both *Sapphira* and Martin proceed comfortably on assumptions that, if not universal, are well understood by the general society.



Thomas Hovenden, *Sunday Morning*, 1881.
California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco.

The slaves, certainly, are fully alert to the practice: Black Lizzie assumes that Nancy's devotion to the miller is sexual: "Lawdy, Lawdy! An' you makes his bed cumf'able fur him? Ain't dat nice? . . . it ain't so fine, when somethin' begin to show on you, Miss Yaller Face" (61). Sampson, the miller's reliable mulatto

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WORKS ON CATHER, (Continued)

perceptive study defining the Cather-Lewis relationship in "Willa Cather and Edith Lewis: Two Stories, Two Friends" (187-211). (Parts of this essay originally appeared in the Fall 1991 *WCPM Newsletter Literary Issue*). Yongue understands the forty-year "marriage" and vividly scrutinizes its history. Yongue does not believe Lewis and Cather carried on a lesbian relationship but points out that Lewis served as Cather's "wifely partner," doing tasks that freed Cather for her writing. Having little control over Cather in life, Lewis did manage to govern Cather after her death, most notably in her supervision of E. K. Brown's biography of Cather and the selection of the burial site for both of them in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

Cather scholarship does not gain significantly much from the seven 1992 newspapers pieces, but they offer general information that enhances and gauges public interest in Cather. Jerry Buck in "Willa Cather Heroine Drew Lange to TV Debut" (*Pittsburgh Press*, 2 February, TV2) recapitulates much of Jessica Lange's acting career and how it eventually led to her accepting the role of Alexandra Bergson in the Hall of Fame production of *O Pioneers!* Buck says Lange was attracted to the part because of Alexandra's unselfishness, sacrifice and sense of duty, characteristics that moved Lange when she read the novel. "Reverie in Red Cloud: Willa Cather's Home on the Nebraska Prairie" by Kate Blackwell in the *Washington Post* (5 January, E1) pinpoints what people discover during their first trip to Red Cloud and the surrounding prairie. Neither has changed dramatically over the years, and a visit to Cather country illustrates much of Cather's fiction. Wayne Merger places Cather, in "An American Who Ranks with the Brits," *Anchorage Daily News* (21 June, F7), alongside the best British writers, distinguishing her as America's George Eliot. Mike Steele offers two articles in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*: in the first, "Once Scoffed at as Cornball, Author Willa Cather Revised by Feminists" (21 June, O1F), he generalizes over Cather's private life, her "veiled sexuality," and her emergence as a "feminist icon" in academe via both the women's movement and lesbian criticism. His second piece, "Illusion Tries to Do Too Much with Cather" (27 June O9E), critiques *Among Our Own*, a play written by Eric Anderson and presented at the Illusion Theater in Minneapolis. The play fuses Cather's "The Sculptor's Funeral" and *The Song of the Lark* and attempts too much in the interweaving. Cather, to be sure, used simplicity to write complexly, not complicated means to reveal simple ones. Doris Grumbach's "Within the Realm of Willa Cather — Fiction, Essays and Other Work from a Major American Writer" (*Chicago Tribune*, 22 March, sec. 14, p. 1) announces that an almost complete collection of Cather's works is now available in the Library of America volumes, making Cather one of only four women writers to be so distinguished. Grumbach discusses the contents of *Willa Cather: Stories,*

Poems, and Other Writings, edited by Sharon O'Brien, and provides a bit of biographical commentary. Carolyn J. Mooney in "Finding a 'Sense of Place' in the Great Plains" (*Chronicle of Higher Education* 38, 20 May, sec. A, p. 5) informs the academic world that University of Nebraska English professor Frances W. Kaye is writing a book that denounces Cather as "anti-women" and an anti-Nebraska elitist. Mooney calls Kaye's task a formidable one in a state that "worships" itself and Cather. (Readers can anticipate a discussion of Kaye's book — *Isolation and Masquerade: Willa Cather's Women* — in next year's essay.)

Ten journal studies were devoted to Cather's works in 1992. Marilyn Arnold's "Willa Cather and Call to Art" (*BYU Today* 46: 30-36) is a thoughtful discussion of the moral energy penetrating Cather's art. Arnold perceives Cather's writing more as a calling than a vocation and relates Cather's vision to a combination of religious and artistic sensibilities symbolized by Archbishop Jean Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Jane Cooper in "Vocation: A Life Suite Based on Four Words from Willa Cather" (*Kenyon Review* 14:67-76) simply cites lines from works by and about Cather in order to enhance the evocation of the mesas in "The Enchanted Bluff," *The Song of the Lark*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. David Laird describes Cather's techniques in "Willa Cather's Women: Gender, Place, and Narrativity in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*" (*Great Plains Quarterly* 12:242-253). In the two novels, Laird explains, Cather transcends and undercuts traditional fictive sources and tools, particularly in regard to gender, place, and narrativity. Laird shows Cather's women defying stereotypical behavior and interpretation, while her sense of place allows for an ambiguity of vision and her narrative structure obscures the line between conventional fiction and nonfiction. Last year (1991) in *Studies in the Novel* (23:443-451), Michael Leddy traced Godfrey St. Peter's multiplicity of lives to his stance at the end of *The Professor's House*, and this year Leddy follows with "The Professor's House and the Professor's Houses" (*Modern Fiction Studies* 38:444-454), viewing the complexity of the novel as great enough to belie the oversimplified metaphor of the old house being intrinsically good and St. Peter's new house being a negative symbol of materialism. Leddy argues that St. Peter at times prefers his new house and does not, as some critics feel, function in pure, artistic isolation in his old place. Leddy also reminds us that the professor, even at the height of his creative powers, is never completely free of materialism and fails to benefit from Tom Outland's experience and legacy. Ann G. MacDonald contributes to pedagogy with her "I Finally Listened to My Students: Taking Another Look at the Introduction to *My Ántonia*" (*Illinois English Bulletin* 79:68-72). MacDonald wants her secondary school English students to understand the process of revision, the differences between fiction and nonfiction, and the authorial intent of an intro-

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assistant at the mill, puts it in general terms when he tries to tell the miller of Nancy's danger: "them young fellers . . . likes to fool round a pretty girl, even if she's coloured" (190).

The first clichés to be challenged, then, are that sexual relations between white men and slave women were uncommon, or that the general society was ignorant about what was going on.



Richard Norris Brooke, *A Pastoral Visit*, 1881.
The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Another is the stereotype of the white mistress, commonly pictured as more morally sensitive and compassionate than the master — nursing the sick leading in prayers, trying to keep slave families together.⁶ At the end of the opening scene between the miller and Sapphira at breakfast, Sapphira, in the grip of a morbid jealousy, proposes to sell Nancy; then, when Henry objects, she writes to Martin, his unsavory nephew, inviting him for a visit. She is certain that he will succeed in despoiling Nancy, effectively tarnishing her in the miller's eyes.⁷ Clearly these are not the actions of an Ellen O'Hara or a Melanie, Mitchell's exemplars of virtuous Southern womanhood. Neither is her mastery of slave management, as shown by two chilling sentences describing her profitable running of the Chestnut Hill plantation, when, as a young woman, she took over during her father's illness:

When the increase of the flocks or the stables was to be sold, she attended to it
When the increase of the slave cabins was larger than needed for field and house service, she sold off some of the younger negroes. (24)

More to the point is the story of Sapphira's ruthless management of her slave Till, told to us in bits and pieces. Her siege to obtain Till's service began long in the past, when, recently moved to the raw Mill Farm, she schemed to get the meticulously trained young girl from her sister, Mrs. Bushwell, the new owner of Chestnut Hill. Knowing Mrs. Bushwell's passion for the stables, Sapphira had a young slave boy trained to shoe and doctor horses, and coaxed her sister to trade Till for him, though she knew that moving Till from Chestnut Hill and Mrs. Matchem, the English housekeeper who is Till's mentor, would be a shock and sorrow. Further, we learn that — appallingly — Sapphira later had Till married off to a "capon man," the shiftless Jeff, because, Lizzie says, "Miss Sapphy didn't want a lady's maid to be havin' chillun all over de place, — always a-carryin' or a-nussin' 'em" (43). These events are all in the past, and the narrative voice does not explore Till's reaction to this callous handling. Nor are we told the circumstances of Nancy's conception and birth. Was Till attracted to the Cuban painter? Was he to her? Was it a rebellion for having Jeff foisted on her?⁸ That Sapphira was grimly knowing about the sexual deprivation she visited on Till is clear when she acknowledges that Till was "within her rights, seeing she had to live with old Jeff" (9).

The insatiable Martin Colbert, who assaults mountain girls and slave women alike, points ironically — by reversal — toward another cliché of the moonlight and magnolia novels, one that Mitchell honors in the Shantytown episode (*GWTW* 787-89) — the insatiable black man, driven by primitive sexuality to attack and rape white women. (A corollary belief was that highly sexed slave women enticed white men; Nancy's staunch defense of her chastity belies this myth.) That Martin has no special attraction to Nancy, but pursues her out of mindless lust and cultural habit, is shown when, frustrated by Nancy's rejections, he takes the more complaisant Bluebell into the woods. Literarily, Martin is a descendant of the romantic Cavalier, of which Rhett Butler is another version, the amiable rake. With Martin, the dash and verve have decayed into bluster. When Sampson and Old Jeff rescue Nancy from one of his attempts (in deference to the white man's dominance they must disguise the res-

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duction. MacDonald accomplishes her goals by having her students read and respond to both the 1918 and 1926 introductions to *My Ántonia*. Cather's views on marriage, passion, and artistry as twentieth century alternatives to liberation of women in eighteenth and nineteenth century conventional romance is studied by Susan Neal Mayberry in "A New Heroine's Marriage: Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*" (*The Old Northwest* 16:37-59). Mayberry attempts to explain how Alexandra is representative of the new artistry of passion that transcends the self as it shapes something larger (here, the land), while Marie succumbs to conventional, self-absorbed notions of romance and dies as a failed artist. John Murphy continues his prolific critical work on Cather with two articles. His "Filters, Portraits, and History's Mixed Bag: *A Lost Lady* and *The Age of Innocence*" (*Twentieth Century Literature* 38:476-485) compares similarities in the two novels and discovers common statements about the complexities of history, society, and human relationships. Both works, Murphy shows, share themes of nostalgia and the need to adapt to change, similar points of view, and plotting that places disillusionment and mature acceptance at the dramatic core of the narrative. In "Willa Cather and the Literature of Christian Mystery" (*Religion and Literature* 24:39-56), Murphy strongly senses, as many other solid Cather critics do, that much contemporary literary theory is not akin to the writings of Cather and that the meanings of her texts need not be subverted. The critic, of course, retains the right to find meanings beyond what Cather might have intended, which, as Murphy reminds, amounts to acknowledgement of Cather's acknowledgement of a reality "not named." Cather's prophetic voice has to be extended to embrace the sense of mystery revealed in her attitudes toward belief and her "solitary characters' great moments of transcendence." Transcendence, then, is a religious experience shared in *One of Ours*, *The Professor's House*, *My Mortal Enemy*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Shadows on the Rock*, "Neighbour Rosicky," and "The Best Years." "Growing Wings to Overcome Gravity" (*Modern Age: A Quarterly Review* 34:194-202) by George A. Panichas suggests that Cather's writing offers a defense against the devaluation of words by certain novelists, professors, and critics who tend to champion impiety and infidelity. Panichas depicts Cather as a guiding voice who verifies her art in words of faithfulness in novels like *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, where she iterates permanent truths rather than offers sentimentalism and illusion. Robert Thacker provides a careful comparative study in "Alice Munro's Willa Cather" (*Canadian Literature* 134:42-57). Thacker insists that a stronger bond exists between Cather and the Canadian novelist than has been acknowledged. The major symbolic evidence of Cather in Munro's "Dulse" is a deep "gift of sympathy."

Three primary text editions were published in 1992. Josleen Wilson provides an "Introduction" (vii-xvi) to *Willa Cather: Three Complete Novels — O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, Alexander's Bridge* (New York: Gramercy Books) in which she generally recounts Cather's life and mentions nine of her novels, excluding the last three. Sharon O'Brien edited *Willa Cather: Stories, Poems, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, Literary Classics of the United States), the third and final volume in the series. O'Brien supplies notes for ninety-four of Cather's short works, including *Alexander's Bridge* and *My Mortal Enemy*, the poetry collection, three short story collections, nonfiction sketches, and selected reviews, essays, and uncollected stories; included also is a chronology of Cather's life. *O Pioneers!*, Scholarly Edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), edited by Susan J. Rosowski and Charles Mignon with Kathleen Danker, is a handsome scholarly annotated text of the novel. Rosowski and Mignon include commentary, emendations, notes on emendations, and rejected substantives. David Stouck provides explanatory notes and the historical essay on the making of *O Pioneers!*, for which Danker collects ten black and white vintage photographs.

Three chapters about Cather were published in books published in 1992. *Fiction of the Home Place* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi) by Helen Fiddymont Levy contains a chapter titled "Damning the Stream: Willa Cather" (64-96) that successfully links women's work to artistic creativity in Cather's writings. Four novels, *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Mortal Enemy*, and two short stories, "The Joy of Nelly Deane" and "The Bohemian Girl," connect Cather as a female writer to the home place and establish her within the American literary tradition of writing women. The protagonists in these works, with the exception of Myra Driscoll Henshawe, emphasize Cather's emotional and intellectual connection with the women of her childhood. "Black Matters" (18-28), a chapter in Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Boston: Harvard University Press), perceives *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as a novel that largely fails because it does not come to terms with its own chief concern — namely, the power of a white slave mistress over her women slaves. In returning to Virginia and her childhood for the material in her last novel, Cather reverts, claims Morrison, to personal and private experiences, using Nancy, Till, and Sapphira ineffectively. Her meditation on the moral equivalence of enslaved black women gave Cather an opportunity to rethink her problematical relationship with her own mother. Ronald Weber's "Home Pasture" (118-145) in *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), which centers on late nineteenth and early twentieth century American literature, clearly explains Cather's biographical orientation, her artistic evolution, and her midwestern

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cue), Martin leaves fuming, "If ever that mill-hand looks me in the face like that again, I'll break his head for him" (182).

A very minor character, the pitiable Tansy Dave, suggests another reversal of the black male driven by primitive lust. Tansy, a parody of the courtly lover, dresses in his best and rolls in sweet smelling herbs to pay court to his beloved, the maid of a visiting neighbor. When his suit is denied by the maid's owner, he pines away, as a true lover should, into despair and madness. Sampson, too, who takes such care of his wife and children, and who goes to the miller to try to protect Nancy, belies the stereotype.

In choosing a young mulatto girl as her heroine, Cather was more subtly countering the southern mythmakers. Although the theme of the "tragic mulatto," as it is termed by historians of African-American literature, had been a literary subject before (the novels and stories of Charles Chestnut, Faulkner's *Light in August*, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Edna Ferber's *Showboat*),⁹ Nancy's divided consciousness — her uncertain sense of identity and her entrapment between two worlds — is poignantly realized.

In an early scene, Till and Nancy stand in the parlor before twin portraits of the Master and Mistress. Till regards the paintings as household objects, needing dusting, handsome possessions that add to the status of the house. Nancy thinks of the painter she hopes is her father. She cannot query her mother directly but relies on what Jezebel, her great-grandmother, has told her. We are led to suppose that Nancy's aesthetic sense, her taste for bouquets of flowers and shining brass, comes from this inheritance as her careful housekeeping comes from her mother.¹⁰ ("The girl had a natural delicacy of feeling. Ugly sights and ugly words sickened her"[43].)

Nancy's inability to question her mother about her father brings up the difficult question of the parental relationship, so close yet of no support to Nancy as she tries to avoid Martin's pursuit. Increasingly critics blame Till for her blindness, finding her "a snob" or "uppity," concerned above all with her respectable status in the house.¹¹ The most stringent condemnation comes from Toni Morrison, who finds that Till's inability to offer help to her daughter in the face of possible rape renders her "unbelievable and unsympathetic," breaking "all narrative coherence" (21; 23).¹²

Certainly it is tempting to judge Till harshly. Her compliance, her identification with her mistress, appears — well, slavish. Rather, so it seems to me, Cather is portraying one of the possible dynamics of slavery as it may work on a vulnerable nature. In Till's frozen reserve we can read the psychic damage that a lifetime of servitude has wrought.

In recent decades we have been made aware of "the Stockholm Syndrome" the phenomenon that captives or hostages totally dependent on their captors not just for life necessities but for any sense of worth

adopt the ideologies of those in power over them. That is Till's position, made plausible when we recall her strange life story: as a child of nine, she saw her mother engulfed in flames and destroyed. Traumatized into speechlessness, Till is brought into the Chestnut Hill house by Mrs. Matchem, who trains her in the exacting details of proper housekeeping and its underlying principle — "that there was all the difference in the world between doing things exactly right and doing them somehow-or-other" (74). It is not too much to say that Till is baptized by fire into a new life. Matchem's cool discipline soothes the child, and the control she learns gives her a sense of worth and strength. But it also renders her the full creature of her masters. When Till urges Nancy to double her service to Sapphira — make her a nice eggnog and serve it with a smile — she is repeating a lesson held at the deepest level. As Rachel Blake thinks, trying to understand Till's blindness: "Long ago Matchem had taught her to 'value her place,' and that became her rule of life" (219).¹³

That is not the full story, of course. Till *has* perceived the threat to her daughter; she allows herself one motherly expression of relief and gratitude to Rachel when she learns of Nancy's safety: "If she's up there with the English folks, she'll have some chance" (249). When she guessed the danger and what it implied, the feelings of hurt and helplessness she endured — these the narrator respects and does not try to describe.

Critics are also registering dissatisfaction with Nancy, seeing her as too unassertive and timid in her own defense: "Rendered voiceless, a cipher, a perfect victim, Nancy runs the risk of losing the reader's interest" (Morrison 24).¹⁴ True, her virtue — steadfastness — is not a dramatic one; it can become visible only through testing. She is young, unschooled, inexperienced, raised in a backwater (Back Creek), vulnerable to pressures from two worlds. Her mixed blood puts her at odds with the other slaves: Bluebell says, ". . . she's stuck up, havin' white blood" (185). Her longing to please the miller suggests an inarticulate desire to be allowed into the world of her father. When she despairs of being able to shunt off Martin's advances longer and thinks of throwing herself into the mill pond, she pleads to Rachel, "Only I want *somebody* as'll speak up for me to the Master, an' tell him I didn't do it from wickedness. Please, mam, tell him how I was drove to it" (217).¹⁵

Nancy's dilemma is dramatized strikingly in the problematic cherry trees scene. It is a beautiful morning, and Nancy is in a "lighthearted" mood — "nothing but the foolish, dreamy nigger side of her nature climbed the tree with her" (178).¹⁶ A pretty woman in a fruit tree, nibbling the fruit — the signals could not be clearer. We are not surprised, surely, when the snake-in-the-grass enters, whistling. Nancy does not fall, but to appreciate her heroism in resisting we should weigh the forces on the side of capitula-

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WORKS ON CATHER, (Continued)

regional sensibilities. Offering first what is generally known to Cather readers, Weber then looks at Cather's response to affection for the region in *My Ántonia*, *O Pioneers!*, *One of Ours*, and "Neighbour Rosicky," four works that endure because they are aesthetically fulfilling and culturally distinct.

Volume 9 (1992) of *Legacy: A Journal of Women Writers* collects five essays on Cather: one a comparative study, two on friendships, and two on major novels. Elaine Sargent Apthorp's "Re-Visioning Creativity: Cather, Chopin, Jewett" (1-22) justifiably argues that Lucy Gayheart, like Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier, merits additional critical attention for her artistic accomplishment. Lucy, says Apthorp, is not just a failed model of Thea Kronborg, but represents Cather's vision of the artist as shaped by Sarah Orne Jewett. Lucy is one who embodies art as harmony and sensitive listening, as does Mrs. Todd, Jewett's healer in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. The result for Lucy is human connection and communion beyond Thea Kronborg's. Mark J. Madigan continues his interest in Cather and Dorothy Canfield Fisher in "Legacy Profile: Dorothy Canfield Fisher (1879-1958)" (49-58), acknowledging that Fisher is presently remembered in connection with Cather and explaining that their life-long friendship reflects the common themes central to their work — loyalty and respect for lasting values. Another friend from Cather's Nebraska days is discussed in "Legacy Profile: Louise Pound (1872-1958)" (59-65) by Elizabeth A. Turner. Turner enumerates Louise Pound's accomplishments in teaching, philology, folklore, and sports, and alludes to the two-year friendship of Pound and Cather when both were students at the University of Nebraska. [Nellie Snyder Yost's 1983 study titled "Nebraska's Scholarly Athlete: Louise Pound, 1872-1958" (*Nebraska History* 64:477-90) offers a thorough and concentrated study of Pound's outstanding career as a teacher, scholar, philologist, folklorist, and as Nebraska's most outstanding female athlete.] Ann W. Fisher-Wirth's "Reading Marian Forrester" (35-48) is a psychoanalytical study of *A Lost Lady* based on the already articulated concept (see earlier work on this novel by Nichols and Murphy) that Marian is a Freudian maternal figure for Niel Herbert, who is both fascinated by her sexuality and fearful of it. What is original is that Fisher-Wirth sees in Marian an embodiment of the envelope of the letter she sends Frank Ellinger, with its secret spaces and openness to violation. The novel thus explores female sexuality through Niel's discoveries about Marian; these discoveries, with Niel's reactions to them, form the plot of the narrative. In "Narration and the Maternal 'Real' in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*" (23-34), John N. Swift studies the language of loss and the inability of symbols to capture original reality. Such loss in this "autobiographical" novel is often embodied in the separation or alienation between mother and daughter. In fact, Cather's stylistic anomalies and

intrusions, Swift affirms, cannot fully recover the loss of meaning between the "real" and its metaphors.

Books on Cather by Deborah Carlin, David Harrell, and Patrick Shaw were published during 1992, but too late for consideration in last year's essay. Carlin's *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press) is a meaningful book that challenges the canonical assumptions about Cather's post-1925 fiction and calls particular attention to the complexities of *My Mortal Enemy*, *Shadows on the Rock*, "Old Mrs. Harris," *Lucy Gayheart*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. These five works, focusing on women and raising questions about race, class, sexuality, and power, draw their narrative structures, according to Carlin, from narratology, feminism, and deconstruction. Carlin also feels that the works oppose any reduction to easy moralistic or consolidated meaning. *My Mortal Enemy* is troubling for its textual disconnection; *Shadows on the Rock* has a plentitude of tales, histories, and meanings; "Old Mrs. Harris" is difficult to interpret and seems to resist any meaning except death; *Lucy Gayheart*, an ambivalent work on female development, is "enigmatic" and "indecipherable"; *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* describes the remembrance and reconstruction of history through its fictional dramatization and distortion of the past. Harrell, who has contributed several perceptive articles on Cather's connection with Mesa Verde and the Southwest, provides his most detailed study and interpretive narrative in *From Mesa Verde to The Professor's House* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), a carefully researched and solid work. Harrell considers neglected and previously unknown historical and biographical sources of the Mesa Verde material central to the writing and understanding of the novel, and he explores Cather's transformation of historical fact into fiction and personal myth into universal theme. For Harrell, Cather's own Mesa Verde's experiences account for the novel's form and meaning; "Tom Outland's Story" is the key to the novel, and the history of the Mesa Verde as Cather understood it is the key to "Tom Outland's Story." Shaw continues his fascination with Cather's personal conflict and her creative process in *Willa Cather and the Art of Conflict: Re-Visioning Her Creative Imagination* (Troy: Whitston Publishing Co.). He examines both textually and subtextually Cather's translation of her homoerotic tensions into art, endeavoring to show various aspects of this process in, especially, *A Lost Lady*, *One of Ours*, and *My Ántonia*. Cather attempts with Marian Forrester to shed a self image of the rebellious, sexually inhibited, irreligious nonconformist and "to come to terms with masculine-feminine qualities of artistic creation." *One of Ours* reveals Cather's skepticism of the conventional institutions of her society and her disturbance with her own sexual contradictions. Psychic distance between the writer and her text is the struggle in *My Ántonia*.

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CATHER VS MITCHELL, (Continued)

tion. First there is Martin, not an ogre, but a dapper young fellow who this morning is a seducer, not a rapist; her youthful sexual feelings are aroused, and she flirtatiously throws cherries down to him. Then, although we do not hear Nancy consciously reviewing reasons, what would be the price of giving in? Not much. Her beloved mother, after all, must have succumbed to some such blandishment, with little disgrace. And her feared and capricious mistress actually seems to be sponsoring this young man's pursuit. On the side of resistance she has only a "natural delicacy of feeling" and her desire to be worthy of the miller's regard.

The tie between Nancy and the miller is one of those delicate, difficult-to-define bonds found elsewhere in Cather's works; one thinks of Sebastian and Lucy, or Niel and Marian Forrester. Neither sees the other directly and wholly, but rather emblematically, focusing on a needed meaning. To Nancy, the miller is the right way, dimly perceived, but strongly felt. To the miller Nancy is Mercy, John Bunyan's figure of feminine or domestic grace, redeeming him from his painfully conflicting loyalties to his wife, on the one hand, and, on the other, to his growing conviction that slavery is morally wrong.¹⁷ (The allusion to Mercy can enlarge our sense of Nancy, especially her courage in setting out on a journey without fully knowing her destination. Christiana's husband had sent for his wife, but Mercy goes with her only because "my heart burned within me") [215].

Nancy's final test is that she goes at all. Not physically brave, she has no ideological longing for freedom; she is sick even before she leaves it for the only home she knows. That is why she is so numb when she actually starts her journey: "as if she were drugged; indeed she was, by the bitterest of all drugs" (239). This drug is homesickness, and it is probable that Cather here is endowing Nancy with her own misery when, at the age of nine, she was taken from Virginia and Willowshade. In her wordless going Nancy is heroic and merits the triumph of her return.

Is it possible, however, that in her last novel Cather developed a strongly didactic theme, as I have been arguing? Her distaste for polemic argument in the novel is well known. Edith Lewis, in recalling their trip to Virginia as Cather was writing *Sapphira*, speaks

of Cather's pleasure in the landscape and in remembering details from her childhood; she says nothing about a concern for slave bondage. But she goes on to make an arresting observation in answer to the critics who found the novel uncharacteristic of Cather; rather than a negative, Lewis says, this may indicate "an emergence, a substitution of other latent traits in the writer's development" (Lewis 185). As usual, Lewis writes vaguely, as though still afraid that her old friend is looking over her shoulder, ready to object that she is revealing some secret the author wanted hidden.



James Henry Beard, *Good-bye, Ole Virginia*, 1872. J. N. Bartfield Art Galleries, New York.

We should note here that Cather would have been reminded of the injustices of racial prejudice through her friendship with Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who had included a condemnation of Southern racism in an early (1921) novel, *The Brimming Cup*.¹⁸ In a recent article, Mark Madigan states that Canfield's father, when president of Ohio State University, created controversy by having Booker T. Washington to lunch (Madigan 53). Throughout her own career, Canfield lectured on discrimination and sponsored such writers as Richard Wright.

Whatever influence this friendship may have had on Cather, however, the rationale for reading *Sapphira* as a moral condemnation of slavery and racism must remain with the novel itself.

In this regard, Book III, "Old Jezebel," a section of some twenty-five pages, has a special significance. It begins with the story of Jezebel's capture by slave hunters sometime in the 1760s and ends with an old Quaker's vision of eventual slave liberation, phrased in tones of prophecy: he believed "that the Lord had

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WORKS ON CATHER, (Continued)

The *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter* continues, under the sound and stable leadership of John J. Murphy, to be a boon to Cather scholars and serious readers. For the Fall 1992 issue, Murphy selected eight essays that should enrich the reading of Cather. The lead piece, "Victorian Rules and Left Bank Rebellion: Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein" (23-27) by Patrick W. Shaw, focuses on Cather's homoeroticism, but this time Shaw compares and contrasts the differences in Stein's and Cather's respective lifestyles. Shaw scrutinizes their similar contemporary backgrounds as products of Victorian America. They differed, however, in their homoeroticism; Stein's was overt, but, as all critics of Shaw's sort agree, Cather's was covert. If Cather had emulated Stein and associated with the Paris Left Bank community, her writings might have lacked the tensions caused by her concealed lesbianism which was, as Shaw continually points out, the energy source for her fiction. Elsa Nettels's "Tradition and the Woman Artist: James's *The Tragic Muse* and Cather's *The Song of the Lark*" (27-31) is another comparative study, but not about sexual preferences. Nettels notes the similarities between Miriam Rooth, the actress in Henry James's *The Tragic Muse*, and Thea Kronborg, Cather's Wagnerian soprano in *The Song of the Lark*. Nettels acknowledges differences — Thea is artistically independent and inspired by landscape, not motivated, like Miriam, by European tradition — yet comments on the artists' shared allegiances to the artists with whom they studied. Laura Winters reasons in "My Mortal Enemy: Willa Cather's *Ballad of Exile*" (31-34) that Myra Henshawe undergoes troublesome alienation in her emotional life and that Cather's prior experience with immigrants offered her themes for novels like *My Mortal Enemy*. The narrative, Winters clearly shows, is structurally divided into episodes that detail Myra's experience of exile and resemble stanzas in popular ballads. Such ballads, Winters concludes, often portray anguished and unhappy people who learn to live and die alone, as Myra chooses to do at the end of the story. "The Internal Gaze: 'Coming, Aphrodite!' and the Panopticon" (34-37) by Holly Messitt explores the principles of the panopticon, the all-seeing gaze, in this story of the timeless power struggle between male and female. Messitt demonstrates the panopticon at work in Don Hedger guarding and controlling Eden with his panoptic look. Eden's eventual success in winning power and prestige by making people admire her beauty is then undermined by her internalizing and living under the panoptic gaze. In "Painting 'The Tricks That Shadows Play': Impressionism in *Lucy Gayheart*" (37-39), Kevin A. Synnott calls *Lucy Gayheart* impressionistic because throughout the work descriptions of Lucy are abundant with references to color, light, and especially motion. Lucy's effect on people, like Harry Gordon, is defined by the visual intensity of juxtaposed light and color-creating motion. In his illuminating

essay Synnott also shows how the visual arts contribute to the success of the novel and help clarify it as a lucid and effective technical experiment. Cather's "Two Friends" seems to have been slighted by critics, but Mark Sherf does not disappoint with his fascinating piece "The Unreliable Narrator and Political Reality in 'Two Friends'" (40-42). He relates "Two Friends" to Cather's world "broke in two" and observes the narrator functioning as the navigator of a broken road. Although the older narrator finds a way to navigate this road, her analysis is not wholly convincing because she insists on viewing her world through a child's eyes, cannot understand the rupture between R. E. Dillon and J. H. Trueman, fails to restore her broken world. Cecilia Konchar Farr's "'I Too Am Untranslatable': Failings of Filming *O Pioneers!*" (43-45) is an arguable essay that pans both the Hallmark Hall of Fame and the American Playhouse film productions of *O Pioneers!*. Farr contends that both attempt to make the land rather than Alexandra Bergson dominant. Alexandra, readers know, is indomitable in the novel, but the films, Farr argues, reduce her role and fail to depict either the depth of her friendship with Carl Linstrum or the comforting and sustaining female bond between Alexandra and Marie Shabata. As with most movies based on novels, neither film measures up to the book. "Inroads Through the Desert: Willa Cather's Reception in Saudi Arabia" (45) is Al-Ghalith Asad's reflections on his experiences teaching Cather to students at Umm Al-Qura University from 1985-89. Both male and female students, according to Asad, held Cather in higher regard than usual canonical fixtures like Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, and Dickens. *My Antonia*, *A Lost Lady*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* had special appeal because they recalled the students' own lost pasts, when their grandparents had lived close to the land and nature. Cather helped the students understand what they had lost, what their culture no longer possessed.

The Winter 1992-93 *Willa Cather Pioneer Newsletter* contains only two pieces: "Works on Cather: Summer 1991-Summer 1992: A Bibliographical Essay" (47, 53-59), the annual survey of Cather criticism by Virgil Albertini, and "Willa Cather and the Intimacy of Art, Or: In Defense of Privacy" (47-53) by Susan J. Rosowski, one of Cather's foremost interpreters. Rosowski's essay, an important and exacting one, explores the question of how best to understand the closeness many readers feel toward Cather's writings. Rosowski believes the significance of the autobiographical elements in Cather's fiction has been too long ignored by critics. What Cather really wanted in her stories was to forge "a code of friendship characterized by mutuality, respect for difference, and privacy." Cather skillfully interwove warmth of friendship and familiarity between herself and many of her characters. Mutuality, a quality Rosowski defines as "an exchange of feeling between Cather and her subjects," is prevalent in her works and, along with a

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CATHER VS MITCHELL, (Continued)

already chosen His heralds and His captains, and a morning would break when all black slaves would be free" (112). In between, we see Jezebel's funeral, her body borne by four great-grandchildren; and in the following night, two scenes picturing the master and mistress — each, significantly, alone and sleepless. Sapphira is overcome by suffocating panic, imagining that her servants, seemingly so loyal, are secretly laughing and plotting against her; the miller is again searching his Bible for a clear answer to the question of slavery. This short chapter does not advance action significantly, but it does, in brief space, present the monstrous cruelty of the slave trade, the endurance of the captives, and slavery's corrosive effect on the humanity of all. The solemn funeral procession of Old Jezebel suggests, I think, a kind of triumph, a salute to her intransigent spirit (on board the slaver she bit the thumb of one of her tormenters, and on her death bed she teases Sapphira by hankering for a cannibalistic tidbit). The bland words of Mr. Fairhead, who speaks of Jezebel rescued from a heathen land "to become a devout Christian," do not ring true.

And after freedom, what? What long road can lead from Egypt out to a better life? The name of Booker T. Washington is a reminder of proposals, seen as quaint now, that had great popularity in the first decades of the century. In a general way, Cather seems to accept — not surprisingly — Washington's program of domestic and trades-oriented education: such is the arduous path of work and self-improvement her immigrants follow. Antonia as an aged woman is grateful that she worked for the Harlings and learned their "nice ways," and Cécile Auclair must learn what Ann Romines has taught us to call "domestic ritual" from her mother if the raw Quebec civilization is to be maintained. Till, too, carries the English civility of Matchem into the damp new Mill House.

Several minor characters underscore the importance of mastering a trade or craft as a way to freedom and independence. (The slaves of *Gone with the Wind*, in contrast, are notably helpless.¹⁹) Sampson, the mill hand, found work in a Pennsylvania mill; a free mulatto trained in fine cooking taught Rachel Blake; the dignified Negro preacher who receives Nancy on her flight north speaks consolingly and professionally — "like the voice of prophecy" — to the frightened girl (239). The housekeeping skills Nancy had from her mother allowed her to earn a respectable living in the strange Canadian city, "to go out from the dark lethargy of the cared-for and irresponsible; to make her own way . . ." (228).²⁰ When, twenty-five years later, Nancy returns, her carefully enunciated English tells her mother that she has moved forward and upward: "Nancy darlin', you talks just like Mrs. Matchem, down at Chestnut Hill! I loves to hear you" (286). (It is interesting to note that Cather does not follow Washington in his diplomatic assumption of continued social separation of the races: Jezebel's great-great-grand-

children are a mixture of white, African, and Indian blood.)

One scene, an idyll suggested, doubtless, by the famous mowing scene in Cather's beloved *Anna Karenina*, points glancingly to the possibility of an ultimate racial harmony.²¹ In mid-summer, Henry shakes off the flour dust that clings to him, like the guilt that hangs over his conscience, and joins his bondsmen in scything his meadow. Like Tolstoy's Levin, who finds relief from his spiritual anxiety in work and in union with his peasants, the miller feels himself renewed by laboring in common with his slaves. Like Levin, he pays attention to the sharpness of the scythes; and like Levin, he drinks cold tea (Levin drinks kvas) and eats dinner with the men under "the mowers' tree," food brought by the women slaves, assisted, for once, by the indolent Martin (203). As though to make this meal fully communal, the miller invites poor Tansy Dave, seen slouching at the edge of the field, to join them. We might say, as Cather said (in her own voice) of Nancy's return, that in this scene there is something Scriptural.

To end with the end: Is it not passing strange that the last words of this novel — a work so often read as Cather's nostalgic tribute to her Southern roots — are given to an ex-slave, and that Till, echoing the stern Matchem, pronounces a judgment on this ancestral homeland, "where nobody was anybody much"?

NOTES

1. An early version of this paper was presented at the Fifth International Cather Seminar, Hastings, Nebraska, June 19-26, 1993.

2. In a recent discussion of race in American literature, Eric Sundquist stresses the impact of Social Darwinism on ideas about race, especially race mixing. "It is difficult now to conceive of the overwhelming acceptance throughout the scientific and sociological world . . . of theories expounding the . . . degeneration and eventual extinction of mixed-race people" (395). See his chapter "The Color Line."

3. The sheer popularity of Mitchell's book would have irked Cather, I think. In an analysis of Cather's style, Susan Rosowski emphasizes that Cather cared about her own popularity with the general reader, and worked to be both readable and elegant (see Rosowski, "Willa Cather and the Intimacy of Art").

4. The significant question is how much of the plot against Nancy is based on family story, if any. It is noteworthy that the disparity in age between Jacob and Ruhannah Seibert, Cather's maternal great-grandparents, the prototypes for Henry and Sapphira, makes them unlikely models. In 1950 Jacob was seventy and Ruhannah fifty-eight (I am indebted to Susan Parry for this information). If the sexually-motivated persecution of Nancy is entirely invented, Cather must have intended such abuse to be her subject, not mere background.

5. Marilyn Arnold argues that "the Terrible" is the empty code of manners that holds slave-owners and slaves alike in bondage. I quite agree that Sapphira, too, may be considered a "victim" of the code. I am focusing more narrowly on the workings of the slave system, which the amorphous heritage of the Old South had absorbed.

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WORKS ON CATHER, (Continued)

respect for her friends' and family's privacy, a key to understanding Cather's appeal to readers.

Two articles on *One of Ours*, one on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, and one on *Shadows on the Rock* are featured in the Spring 1993 *WCPM Newsletter*. Noted biographer James Woodress in "A Note on *One of Ours*" (1, 4) thoughtfully compares Harry Truman's and Claude Wheeler's World War I experiences in France. Woodress's source for Truman is the acclaimed biography by David McCullough, an historian with an avid interest in Cather and whose book validates for Woodress Claude's character in the experiences of Truman. Woodress points out that both Claude and Truman were happy in France and that their response to the war was similar. The war, however, was a pivotal one in a long life for Truman, although not for Claude, who did not return from it. McCullough, incidentally, quotes a passage from *One of Ours* that describes Claude's early days in France in order to illustrate Truman's self confidence and reaction to the Old World culture. In "Some of His: Cather's Use of Dr. Sweeney's Diary in *One of Ours*" (5-9), Rebecca J. Faber discusses the primary source for Book IV of *One of Ours*. Sweeney, a doctor on a troopship to France in World War I, kept the diary for his own reflections, then reluctantly allowed Cather to borrow it. What Cather did not tell Sweeney, Faber relates, is that she used situations and certain pieces of information from the diary in her novel. Faber offers a close analysis and comparison of Sweeney's diary and *One of Ours*, specifically "The Voyage of the *Anchises*." Of extreme importance, Faber feels, was Cather's dependence on Sweeney's words to describe the influenza epidemic aboard the troopship. The diary offered Cather the details she needed to describe military life and shows her skill in maintaining the high standards of her craft while building art around facts. A classroom experience in which a female student called *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* "false" because she felt that Cather was ignorant about African Americans supplied the impetus for John J. Murphy's "The Third Chapter of 'Sampson Speaks to the Master'" (1, 9-10). That charge is not an unfamiliar one since both Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou have made similar comments regarding Cather's handling of African Americans, but Murphy's response is appropriate and sound, stressing the need for the fuller treatment he expects from his students. A student's charge might be valid, Murphy asserts, but evidence must be valid and protests should not occur outside "the context of addressing the particular aspect of the art of the novel." Making a case for Cather's art, Murphy viably amplifies Cather's execution of the third chapter of Book VI of the novel detailing Cather's skill as a genre painter in writing about place. Trevor D. Packer's "Dutch Genre Painting and Sacramental Symbolism in *Shadows on the Rock*" (11-14) is an illuminating companion piece that explains Cather's fascination with

and knowledge of Dutch genre painting. To Packer, much of Cather's prose in this novel resembles the visual art of Jan Vermeer and Jan van Eyck in establishing a sense of order, tranquility, and sacredness within domestic settings. Packer shows Cather drawing parallels between the domestic duties of the Auclairs and the sacraments of the church by investing the domestic arts with religious symbolism. This symbolism and the similarities between Dutch genre painting and Cather's depictions make the Auclair home somewhat like a chapel where rituals are performed and Cécile's domestic tasks become holy work.

The Summer 1993 *WCPM Newsletter* includes two pieces generated by the Fifth International Cather Seminar, an autobiographical and pedagogical article, and an essay on a biography of Beethoven which for Cather analyzed the artistic personality and creativity. Evelyn Harris Haller, a frequent contributor to the *Newsletter*, summarizes the seminar in "A Report on 'After the World Broke in Two,' the Fifth International Cather Seminar (June 19-26, 1993), Hastings College" (17-19), a refresher piece for participants and a reminder of what the non-participating Cather scholar and enthusiast missed. During this seminar Merrill Maguire Skaggs, like Haller, spent two days viewing the prairie and observing the literary sites and artifacts. In Bladen, Skaggs discovered the house G. P. Cather built for his wife Myrtle across the street from Myrtle's parents, the Bartletts. In "Sleeping in Nebraska: Additional Seminar Reflections" (20-21), Skaggs focuses on fascinating differences between G. P.'s house and the one Claude Wheeler, G. P.'s fictional counterpart, builds for his wife Enid in *One of Ours*: G. P.'s house, unlike Claude's, does not have a sleeping porch, and it is definitely not built over a deep cellar like Claude's. Skaggs points out that George Cather's house, where G. P. grew up, does have the sleeping porch, which Cather transports to Claude's house. Dalma H. Brunauer titles her article "Teaching Willa Cather in Japan" (17, 24-27), but her discussion does not focus totally on 1990-1992, when she taught Cather to Japanese students. She talks about her discovery of Cather as a junior at the University of Budapest, where she completed her Masters in 1947, thus qualifying her, she says, as the first student at a Hungarian university to write a thesis on an American author and also the first in the world to complete a thesis on Cather. Of course, secondary sources were relatively slim in 1947; consequently, Brunauer's work is largely interpretive. Moving into pedagogy, Brunauer says she taught Cather on a limited basis after she came to the United States in 1949. Her shining moment came, however, when she was a Fulbright Professor in Japan and assigned to teach courses on Cather at both Kyushu University and Seinan Gakuin University and the following year at Kutakyushu University. Teaching Cather to foreign students presents a definite challenge, but Brunauer says she reached her students with new ideas, techniques,

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CATHER VS MITCHELL, (Continued)

6. Merrill Skaggs points out that Sapphira is in many ways a reversal of the stereotyped mistress (176 and *passim*).

7. The historian Deborah Gray White, in discussing the fates of slave women who had sexual relations with white men, reports that the white wife commonly demanded that the slave woman be sold (36-41 and *passim*).

8. Rosowski stresses Cather's marked respect for the privacy of her characters. It is especially noteworthy that Cather treats her two slave women with so much restraint — that is, she refrains from analyzing feeling and motive.

9. Twain's mordant satire *Pudd'nhead Wilson* could be considered here. Roxy is 1/16 Negro, but as Twain puts it, the 16/16 outvotes the 1/16, and Roxy does not consider herself between the two worlds.

10. Ann Romines notes that Nancy "has an affinity for domestic ritual" and "has been trained by her mother to fastidiousness," to create "an impervious environment of love and order" (182-83). Romines notes that Nancy strongly resembles Cécile Auclair.

11. See Arnold, 332; Nelson, 125; Skaggs, 175. Carlin does not single out Till, but finds that "the novel's rhetoric of race seems entirely conceived within stereotypic utterances about the essential nature of African Americans." In support of this generalization Carlin goes on to state that "numerous references to 'gay darkies' (70, 102), barefoot 'niggers' with conspicuous white teeth displaying 'eager affection' toward their 'masters' (17, 34) and the 'foolish, dreamy, nigger side' of Nancy's 'nature' can be found throughout the narrative (178)." I have included Carlin's page references, which, when checked, present some difficulties; for instance, Nancy displays "eager affection" (34) toward Rachel, not a "master," and the golden Nancy is not a good instance for a "barefoot nigger with conspicuous white teeth." In any case, Carlin's assertion that the terms appear "throughout the narrative" is notably disingenuous (152-53). Ammons, also, does not single out Till, but assumes the book's racism: "Its images of blacks participate wholeheartedly in the standard stereotypes of the early twentieth century and particularly the 1930s" (135).

12. Morrison's full argument is too complex for easy summary. Although Morrison asserts the right of a writer to any material ("... I have to place enormous trust in my ability to imagine others"), she also warns that a writer must be aware of dangers ("... what disables the foray, for purposes of fiction, into corners of the consciousness held off and away from the reach of the writer's imagination") (3-4). Where I see narrative respect and restraint, Morrison speaks of Cather's "silenced, acquiescent Africanist characters" who are "muzzled" throughout (27). Morrison's perceptions that "the plot escapes the author's control," or that "Cather was dreaming and redreaming her problematic relationship with her own mother" must be judged by each reader (20; 27).

13. Harrison views Till in a similar way: "Embracing Till, Nancy forgives her for failing to protect her from her white oppressor, and perhaps now recognizes her psychological as well as physical enslavement" (80). Harrison concludes that "*Sapphira* actually resembles the slave narrative tradition" in that "it strips the plantation romance of its pleasant veneer" (82).

14. Ammons is even more moralistic in her condemnation, not so much of Nancy, viewed as a pawn, as of "Cather's appropriation of Nancy's story The novel in fact steals the black woman's story to give it to a white woman"

(135). This deconstruction of the novel assumes Cather's racism, especially against women of color; her rebellion against "the world of domineering heterosexual white women"; and her desire to memorialize a reconciliation with her own mother (134-35).

15. Postmodern critics may argue here that in having Nancy dependent on the miller's good opinion, Cather is unconsciously perpetuating the white patriarchal elitism of her time. Certainly Cather thought explicitly in elitist terms of Culture, or Civilization, not of cultures. But she clearly denied its exclusive masculine gender. I argue in this paper that in *Sapphira* she further makes clear (perhaps discovered for the first time herself) that Culture does not have a color.

A more interesting question is the relationship between Henry's lonely individualism and the precepts of the other tutelary spirit of the novel, Mrs. Matchem, who speaks of order and place. These principles are emphasized when so unlikely a person as Martin observes that "Chestnut Hill has never been the same since Old Matchem died" (154). We could say that in this novel Cather evokes the tension between individualism and community that so bedevils current ethical thinking.

16. Perhaps every reader of this book wishes that Cather here had used other language. Romines refers to Cather's "charged and disturbing racial language" (183), and Lee says the word choice "makes embarrassing reading" (365). Several observations may be made. We can note that the slaves themselves use the word "nigger," often in scorn or condemnation, as when Till says of Jeff's bare feet, "The last thing I done was to caution that nigger about his boots" (34). But also more neutrally, as when Jezebel tells Sapphira, "the niggahs is mighty good to me" (88). Describing a summer morning, the narrator says, "Nobody was stirring in the negro cabins." But as the narrator begins to echo Nancy's consciousness of the morning, the language changes: "Look-a-ther! the smoke was coming out of Sampson's chimley a'ready All the niggers knew that Sampson . . . baked all the bread for his family" (196-97). The same rhetorical shift into Nancy's consciousness precedes the phrase we are considering: "She loved to pick cherries, and she loved being up in a tree. Someway no troubles followed a body up there; nothing but the foolish, dreamy nigger side of her nature climbed the tree with her" (178). But apart from the language, the idea is troubling, suggesting racial determinism. In an inconsistent way, Cather sometimes alludes to "blood" or, less frequently, "race," as in Matchem's teaching that "the shuffling foot was the mark of an inferior race" (41). We should note that a kind of romantic racism popular with the early modernists (O'Neill, Faulkner) pictured African Americans as warm, intuitive, and spontaneous as opposed to whites, seen as cold, rational, and controlled. Cather seems to adopt this popular view here, and also in another phrase, used once, "the emotional darkies" (70). Despite these inconsistencies, the overall effect of her characterizations is to deny essential race differences.

17. When Henry hears the gossip about Martin's pursuit of Nancy, he transforms Nancy into another of Bunyan's allegories, *The Holy War*. He sees her now as Carnal-sense — or, to speak more accurately, as the temptation that provokes his own carnal sense (the Colbert blood) lurking in the town of Mansoul to work its ruin (210-11).

18. Southern racism is a minor theme in *The Brimming Cup*, but the author's strong sense of outrage regarding racial injustice is clear, and would have attracted Cather's attention.

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WORKS ON CATHER, (Continued)

and teaching methods and found the experience a rewarding one. Continuing his quality work on Cather, Richard Harris in "Willa Cather, J. W. N. Sullivan, and the Creative Process" (17, 21-24) writes of Cather's praise for Sullivan's *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, provides background on Sullivan, a scientist, describes the biography, and explores reasons why the book interested Cather. These reasons include Sullivan's emphasis on art as expression, his recognition of experience in the process of artistic creation, and the artist's role in aesthetically transforming passion. Sullivan, too, was obviously skilled in explaining the complexities of Beethoven's music in simple and clear terms.

Cather Studies, Volume 2 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), a distinguished forum for Cather scholarship and criticism, edited by Susan Rosowski, contains nine stimulating essays written for the most part by established Cather scholars. The lead essay, Loretta Wasserman's "Cather's Semitism" (1-22), questions Cather's awareness of the anti-Semitism of her time and her willingness to confront it. Wasserman discusses Cather's many Jewish friends and her portraits of Jews in "The Marriage of Phaedra," "Behind the Singer Tower," *The Song of the Lark*, "The Diamond Mine," "Scandal," "Ardessa," *The Professor's House*, and "Old Mrs. Harris." Wasserman convincingly reflects on the development of Cather's sympathy from her depiction of the repulsive Lichenstein in "The Marriage of Phaedra" to the Rosens of "Old Mrs. Harris." Cather, as Wasserman clearly points out, was aware of Jews as a presence in American life and registered that presence in her short stories and novels. Cather combatted prejudice while reflecting the anti-Semitic biases of her dominant culture by making her fictional figures — the Nathanmeyers, Marsellus, the Rosens — vivid and memorable.

John H. Flannigan's "Issues of Gender and Lesbian Love: Goblins in the 'Garden Lodge'" (23-40) is yet another study on Cather's ambivalence toward gender. He sees the visits of Caroline Nobel to her garden lodge and her tumultuous night at the piano as the pursuit of a vision of rapture and excitement, two passions lacking in both her husband Howard and his rival, tenor Raymond d'Esquerre. Caroline, Flannigan tries to show, is "raped" by an idea about herself that has the sexual potency of a man without a male figure. Her marriage, however, is a supporting friendship closely allied to Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*.

Ann Fisher-Wirth adds to the scholarship on *My Ántonia* with "Out of the Mother: Loss in *My Ántonia*" (41-71), a prolonged discussion reflecting the pattern of narrator Jim Burden's experiences. Jim is an orphan, and his life, Fisher-Wirth asserts, is one of loss — the loss of pre-Oedipal fusion with the mother. Jim, as Cather's persona, employs his act of narrative as a "perpetual desirous return toward the lost motherbody from which his life necessarily departed."

Two studies on *The Professor's House* are juxtaposed in the collection: the first contributes an interesting "frame-up" angle on the novel; the second attempts to link the novel to the historical theories of Oswald Spengler. In "This Is a Frame-Up: Mother Eve in *The Professor's House*" (72-91), Jean Schwind sees Roddy Blake's reply to Tom Outland's personal attack that Dreyfus was a victim of a frame-up significant because she considers literary and cultural "frame-up" essential to the novel. "Tom Outland's Story," for instance, is one that frames and incriminates the innocent: the French priest Duchene misreads Eve just as Godfrey St. Peter misreads the women in his life while idealizing Outland. Cather, Schwind perceptively reveals, illustrates male misreadings that frame the women in the novel. Matthias Schubnell's "The Decline of America: Willa Cather's Spenglerian Vision in *The Professor's House*" (92-117) offers an intertextual and suppositional analysis of the novel and Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. The Spengler influence on Cather, says Schubnell, has been unacknowledged, thus evoking Schubnell's numerous citing of similarities between the two works and reading the novel as Cather's Spenglerian vision of America. The vision applies Spengler's characteristics of civilization to both St. Peter, the intellectual nomad, and Outland, the ideal man St. Peter once was and wishes to be again.

In "It Came Closer than That: Willa Cather's *Lucy Gayheart*" (118-139) Linda Chown laments the lack of critical attention given to *Lucy Gayheart*. There has been too much focus, she arguably states, on gender, class, and race. Proposing a return to what Chown calls "new aesthetics," she points out the subtle narrative techniques that decisively shape the novel, especially the use of Harry Gordon as narrative filter.

Two essays examine Cather's use of sources. In "Cather's Use of Parkman's Histories in *Shadows on the Rock*" (140-155), prolific critic Merrill Maguire Skaggs shows Cather's indebtedness in *Shadows on the Rock* to Francis Parkman's *France and England in North America* and cites the second and fourth volumes of the chronicles as the most important sources for Cather. Skaggs's analysis identifies occurrences, incidents, themes, and images from Parkman that Cather was able to use and leaves no doubt that Cather accepted Parkman's details in order to anchor her facts accurately and create an imaginative piece of fiction. James Woodress' "Willa Cather and Alphonse Daudet" (156-166) is another model source study. Woodress studies the impact of Daudet, Cather's favorite writer and the one "she quoted, from, paraphrased, and wrote about the most," on Cather's life and art and carefully explains, while pointing out differences, parallels and similarities between the two writers. Daudet's novels, Woodress emphasizes, carry the message that romantic love is dangerous, a message Cather sends in *Alexander's Bridge*, *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, *My Mortal Enemy*, and *Lucy*

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CATHER VS MITCHELL, (Continued)

19. Mitchell makes all her black characters feckless, most notably the whining Prissy. "Slavery as a social or economic system hardly exists in the novel. Slaves, in Mitchell's treatment, are chiefly social decorations for upwardly mobile white farmers. . . . Although Pork helps the family survive by foraging after Sherman passes through, he is incapable of sustained labor. . . . And while Mammy busies herself with all the affairs of the O'Hara establishment, her labors are essentially ephemeral, too. Mitchell affirms this quality in all her black characters" (Pyron 248-49).

20. This is the most eloquent passage in the novel, a novel that for Cather is unusually lacking in rich language and figurative expression. The narrator is here echoing the miller's mind as he contemplates Nancy's going. He thinks, "She would go up out of Egypt to a better land." This and other scattered Biblical allusions, as well as the scriptural tone of the passages quoted from Bunyan, lend an epic quality to the prose that, juxtaposed to the many carefully rendered dialects, makes the narration tale-like. In 1936 Cather had been reading Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers* and had admired his ability to make the most ancient of histories fresh. Cather may have thought of trying something similar, but in reverse, as it were — a going forth from bondage in an American setting.

21. James Woodress has also noted this resemblance to Tolstoy. He points out several interesting anachronisms in the scene, indicating that it is not based on memory or local story ("Cather's Recoverable Contexts," presented at the Fifth International Cather Seminar, Hastings, Nebraska, June 19-26, 1993).

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WORKS ON CATHER, (Continued)

Gayheart. Critics who dwell on Cather's sexual identity should note she might have been convinced by Daudet that romantic relationships can be disastrous and that artists should not marry.

Robert K. Miller's "Strains of Blood: Myra Driscoll and the Romance of the Celts" (169-177) is a change of pace from the usual psychological readings of *My Mortal Enemy*. Fundamental to Miller is the manner in which Myra Henshawe preserves her identity through all of those elements that strip her, including her love for Oswald, her fortune, and her health. Myra, Miller feels, can retain her individuality because she has the strength of social superiority. Miller's thesis, then, is that *My Mortal Enemy* is about race, that Myra's life has been determined by her Celtic blood. Miller then reviews the aspects of Myra's character associated with the Celts in order to convince us of Myra's belief that "blood is destiny." What it means is to be a Celt for Myra gives her the courage to achieve what Miller calls "her finest moment," death on her own terms.

The "Annual Bibliography" in the 1994 February issue of *Western American Literature* shows Willa Cather with more entries than any other Western American writer. Of course, this abundance of critical works offers no surprise to Cather scholars; Cather also attracted more than her share of critics in 1992 and 1993.

SPRING CONFERENCE . . . (Continued)

■ An ECUMENICAL SERVICE at Grace Episcopal Church with Father Steve Ryan, S.J., a Cather scholar, presiding will replace the separate denominational services.

■ An OPEN MEETING for WCPM members, the Board of Governors, and Director will follow lunch and discuss plans and invite suggestions.

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER

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May Day Cather Concert

The Hastings College Concert Choir will premiere University of Nebraska-Lincoln Professor Emeritus Robert Beadell's "Tribute" on Sunday, May 1, 3:00 p.m. at the French Memorial Chapel on the college campus, Hastings, Nebraska. The text for the musical score is Willa Cather's 1927 inscription for the cornerstone of the Brodstone Memorial Hospital in Superior, Nebraska. Money for the hospital was given by Lady Vestey (Evelyn Brodstone), a childhood friend of Cather's, in memory of her mother. Beadell's "Prairie Trilogy," a setting of three Cather poems, will be included in the program. Professor Charles Smith directs the concert choir.



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- 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.
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