

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Editor, Mildred R. Bennett

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WILLA CATHER'S CHILDREN OF GRACE

One forgets, during these days of sexual biographies of her, the religious dimensions of Willa Cather's fiction; just as one forgets the largely untapped treasury of short stories she left us — at least ten of which should be included in any list of major American short fiction. This paper might serve as a reminder of both these areas, for its focus is three highly individual stories from different stages of Cather's career, having a common religious theme — that of God's grace operating through children and bringing people together in family. From her twenties to her death, Cather was preoccupied with this theme, which puts her firmly in the tradition of Hawthorne and James in American literature and beyond them in the tradition of inspirational writing that includes Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel [God with us]."

The first story, "Jack-a-Boy" (*Saturday Evening Post*, 30 March 1901), tells in fin de siècle style, like a Beardsley drawing, of an extraordinary child who comes to live in a boarding house and trans-

forms the futile lives of the boarders. Based on Willa's baby brother Jack (John E. Cather, born 1892)², the title character, befitting a child of grace, is precocious and androgynous in nature (311), which explains his appeal to both sexes and his instinctive musical talent and response to literary classics.

His initial reception at the boarding house is decidedly hostile, however. These boarders — the spinster music teacher narrator, an old professor preoccupied with dead languages, a decayed beauty of shady reputation, and a spinster landlady who terrorizes her lodgers — are "not . . . those who made the most brilliant success in life" and do not want to be disturbed by a romping child (311). "When Jack-a-Boy came," explains the narrator, "we all eyed him sourly enough, and if looks could kill, the florist would have been sending white roses up to Number 324" (311). But it is not as expected; the boy's dove-gray eyes and clear treble voice quickly ingratiate him to the boarders. The eyes make the narrator "remember things you had not thought of in years" (311), the very power that restores this tired group to the human family. The Professor emerges from the dusty paraphernalia (including a mummy) of his studies, is reborn as a result of the child's visits to the cluttered room, falls in love with him, and buys jonquils and violets for his May basket because "[t]he yellow ones are gay, like him, and — and I think the violets are rather like his eyes" (317). The narrator reflects that probably the old man "had never said that of a woman's eyes . . ." (317). She also responds to the boy as to a lover, plays for him in the twilight

and is moved by the sad melodies he picks out on her piano, "so graceful and individual that they made those hours sweet to remember" (314-315).

She claims after the child's death that it was "his dear little body . . . the little human boy that I loved" (320), but the Professor sees further, that "this was not a human child, but one of the immortal children of Greek fable made flesh for a little while" (318). "No," he tells her, it was not the body she loved, "no, it was the soul" (320). But the Professor cannot see beyond the pagan fables of his scholarship — that the classical divinities occasionally reveal themselves in children — nor beyond Pater's idea that "it is the revelation of beauty which is to be our redemption, after all" (322). The narrator remains as limited by her romantic nature theory — "that Jack-a-Boy heard the pipes of Pan as the old wood gods trooped by . . . and that he could not stay" (320) — until the Woman Nobody Called On offers silent testimony to Jack-a-Boy as a child of grace.

The narrator had wondered, considering art forms, "what form of expression the beautiful little soul of his would choose" (315). But the example of the opulent, faded beauty — distrusted and never called on but by Jack-a-Boy, whom she comforts because he feels her love for him exuding from her embracing arms (319) — substitutes a different kind of expression. Less inhibited than the others in showing her affections — from the bon bons she rations him to bringing flowers to his grave (where the Professor and the narrator discover her on May Day) —, it is the faded beauty who occasions the narra-

tor's acceptance of the offered grace — the narrator's resolve to call on this ostracized woman — which reveals Jack-a-Boy's full significance as well as the form of expression his beautiful soul will take:

. . . I was thinking how the revelation of the greatest Revealer drew men together. How the fishermen left their nets, without questioning, to follow Him; and how Nicodemus, who thought himself learned, came to Him secretly by night, and Mary, of Magdala, at the public feast, wiped his feet with her hair. [322]

A decade later "The Joy of Nelly Deane" (*Century*, October, 1911)³ depicted a more complex revelation of God's grace through a child (a high school chum) to a hesitant narrator. The story opens before a performance of Bradbury's Queen Esther cantata with Nelly Deane in the title role and being fussed over by three dotting Baptist matriarchs. Like Esther, Nelly's beauty and charm are a source of light.⁴ Just as the biblical heroine saved her people from destruction, Nelly enables the folk, especially the women, for miles around Riverbend, Nebraska, to survive life's difficulties. Nelly's foil, narrator Peggy, notes that the matriarchs loved Nell differently than they did their own daughters and watched over her as over a blossoming century plant: "I think they loved her for her unquenchable joy" (56).

Where Jack-a-Boy is precocious, Nelly is spoiled. She is a mixture of the praiseworthy and naughty, her foolhardiness and waywardness contributing as much to her joy as her beauty and charm do. She has her own way with her permissive parents, who spoil her with whipped cream tarts and extravagant clothing they cannot really afford; but she has difficulty with the discipline demanded at the local high school. Narrator Peggy notes that while the dear old matriarchs loved Nelly for what

she was, they were bent on "looking for influences to change her" (57). Their very names suggest their contradictory responses to the girl: Dow means fading, Spinny indicates enclosure with thorns, and Freeze implies hardness as well as lack of warmth. Nell represents what each has lost, forbidden in her own children, yet must respond to because it brightens life. There is a feminist angle to this, in that joy-killing husbands have in each case stifled what Nell has come to represent. The little white bower of Nell's girlhood, "flooded all day long with sunlight from east and south windows that had climbing roses all about them in summer" (60), recalls Phoebe's room in *The House of the Seven Gables*. But the story goes beyond the narrow, sexist view. Two hymns Nell sings, "The Ninety and Nine" and "There is a Green Hill," reflect a more universal ambivalence: Nell is both lost sheep and bringer of the glad tidings of Christ's redemption.

Like the spinster piano teacher in "Jack-a-Boy," who failed until the end to understand the child's meaning, Peggy, also unmarried and rootless, must see her friend as more than the epitome of girlhood snuffed out by a niggardly male. Matriarch Spinny's son Scott, a bad-mannered hardware merchant, does challenge Nell's waywardness, attempts to protect qualities in her he is unable to appreciate, and successfully traps her in marriage; he does indeed represent the male threat to girlhood, but what it threatened is Peggy herself, the girlhood she prefers to keep inviolate. When Nell tells her of her initial engagement to Guy Franklin, Peggy senses "imminent change and danger" (61); she actually fears the loss of what Nell has become for her — the security of her own maidenhood — and she places a protecting arm over her friend.

The demise of Nell's girlhood is her immersion as a Baptist, a preliminary to her marriage to Scott. Peggy recognizes that the matri-

archs have had their way, that the solitary sheep has joined the fold. She equates this baptism, as well as Nell's proposed marriage, with death as she watches Nell lowered beneath the dark water. The maiden bower will now be invaded, but first Peggy must hurry away to Denver, "afraid of what [Nell] might tell me and what I might say" (63). Nell detects her friend's feelings, tells her that "there were some things I would never learn, for all my schooling."

The revelation comes ten years later, when Peggy returns to Riverbend to hear from Mrs. Dow the story of Nell's death after childbirth. At Peggy's suggestion that Nell's death might be due to Scott's neglect rather than God's will, Mrs. Dow protests: "We must just feel that our Lord wanted her *then*, and took her to Himself" (66). The old ladies can accept Nell's passing as inevitable with time, but this is difficult for Peggy. Only when she discovers Nell's spunky eight-year-old daughter out sledding does she recognize the renewal, the perpetuity, of her friend's joy. When she sees the infant boy Nell left behind, the child of her suffering, and the gray heads of the matriarchs bowed over him, she transcends her feminist view, and the joy of Nelly Deane translates into the grace of the Holy Child and the glad tidings of Christ's redemption. As Peggy holds him, haloed by golden fuzz, she senses "the flush of new beginning, of the new morning and the new rose. He seemed to have come so lately from his mother's heart! It was as if I held her youth and all her young joy" (68).

Innocence and grace, suffering and death, and redemption and renewal are central to the last story Cather completed before her death in 1947. "The Best Years," a nostalgic, idealized version of Cather's own childhood family, published posthumously in *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948)⁵, includes a description of the long attic room in the Red Cloud house, portraits of

her parents, Charles and Virginia Cather, in Mr. and Mrs. Fergusson, and of her brother Roscoe, between whom and Willa "there never had been the slightest cloud . . .,"⁶ in the Fergusson son Hector. The story captures this family during a special weekend, one of the last times they are all together as a family, a few months before the death of daughter Lesley, who inspires through pure goodness and giving rather than through unrestrained joy or sweet precocity.

Lesley's inspirational and sacrificial nature is evident in her school teaching as well as in her absorption in her brothers, in their blood as in their affections — Hector, for example, has "the fair pink-cheeked complexion which Lesley should have had and didn't" (126). Her scholars are faultless, and when the Illinois boy wets his pants during Superintendent Knightly's visit to Wild Rose schoolhouse, there is "[n]ot a wink, or grin, or even a look" (83). "How do you do it?" asks Miss Knightly, but Lesley does not know, for their goodness is a mysterious consequence of her own. At home, Lesley is "telepathically one" (94) with her brothers; Mrs. Fergusson delights in her only daughter, and her husband is roused from his usual pre-occupations to attend to his daughter and learn the names of her pupils. For Lesley, being among them is like an uprooted plant put "gently back into its own earth with its own group" (96-97).

In the last half of the story a Christmas Eve vignette clarifies this story as yet another Cather parable of grace. Hector makes his way through town in a clumsy new overcoat Lesley has bought him; he recognizes her kindness, the extent to which she puts herself out for others, and he promises himself to show his appreciation someday when he is successful. Then he imagines the first Christmas, wonders if the angels keep the anniversary, and remembers a picture in Lesley's bedroom of angels flying toward the three

crosses of Calvary. The joyful family feast is thus transformed into its harsh outcome, that of Christ shedding blood, just as the Fergusson's perfect happiness is shattered by Lesley's death.

The reader is distanced from the catastrophe; we learn from a friendly railroad conductor the circumstances of Lesley's death as he describes them to Miss Knightly: how the girl saved her scholars by refusing to let them out in a blizzard, how she caught a chill, became delirious and died. Drained through giving, to her scholars and her brothers, "[s]he didn't seem to have strength to rally" (124). Thus ends that pause in time, that happy equilibrium of family living Mrs. Fergusson later calls the best years.

But the Fergusson blood thrives; Lesley's brothers are successful in various pursuits of science, farming and business, and they return periodically to visit her grave, as pilgrims to the shrine of a saint. In death as in life her spirit keeps them a family.

Like Jack-a-Boy and Nelly Deane, Lesley Fergusson inspires community; the words of the spinster narrator of "Jack-a-Boy" express what all three characters of grace magnify, "the revelation of the greatest Revealer [which] drew men together."

— John J. Murphy

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Notes

¹In *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912*, ed. Virginia Faulkner with an intro. by Mildred R. Bennett (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), pp. 311-322.

²Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Bison Book, 1961), pp. 38, 199.

³In *Collected Short Fiction*, pp. 55-68.

⁴Esther 2:7 identifies the Jewish heroine as beautiful and charming; Apocrypha 2:15-16 notes that she charmed all who saw her and equates her with water and light.

⁵(New York: Vintage Books, 1976), pp. 75-138.

⁶James Woodress, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (New York: Western Publishing Company Pegasus series, 1970), pp. 264-265.

JOHN J. MURPHY VOLUME AT CATHER BOOK SHOP

Critical Essays on Willa Cather, edited by John J. Murphy, is among the latest group of volumes in G. K. Hall's Critical Essays on American Literature series. The 310-page volume includes a lengthy introduction by Murphy and Kevin A. Synnott, which reviews contemporary responses to Cather's many works as well as more recent trends in academic Cather criticism. Among the original essays are David Stouck's "Willa Cather and the Impressionist Novel," which traces the influences of French fiction on Cather; James Woodress's survey of female friendship in Cather's life, "Cather and Her Friends"; Murphy's "A Comprehensive View of Cather's *O Pioneers!*"; and Paul Comeau's "The Professor's House and Anatole France."

The volume also brings together significant essays by Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Bernice Slotte, H. L. Mencken, Leon Edel and over 20 other critics. *Booklist* described the collection as "a monument to the academic revival of interest in Cather. . . . a state-of-the-art compendium." The volume is priced at \$35.00 and can be ordered through the Cather Foundation Book Shop. Please add \$1.50 for postage and handling. Teachers of Cather's works are urged to order the volume for their university or school libraries.

WCPM ANNOUNCES 1985 TRIP TO EUROPE

The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial is pleased to announce it is sponsoring a 1985 summer tour to England and France. In 1902 Willa Cather made her first trip to Europe. The sights and events of this trip were printed as a series of travel articles for a local Lincoln, Nebraska, paper. Together with her friend, Isabelle McClung, she traveled through southern England and across France. It was a memorable summer, its impressions later to become part of her work.

The 1985 WCPM escorted tour will visit the places Willa Cather saw and experienced. Included will be travel to the English countryside and a stay in London. Crossing the English Channel, we will travel to Paris then on to the south of France, including Avignon, Provence, Arles and the French Riviera. More information and the completed itinerary will appear later. Watch for it, and plan now to join us for this unforgettable travel experience!

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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.
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