

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Newsletter—Literary Issue

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Edited by Bernice Slote

Twice a year literary issues of the Newsletter will present new Willa Cather material: reprints of some of Cather's early, hard-to-find, and still uncollected journalistic writings; early reviews, interviews, and notes about Cather's work; bibliographical information; and—from Cather readers—original brief notes, observations, explications, or short critical articles. (Submit manuscripts to CATHER NEWSLETTER, 201 Andrews Hall, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska 68588).

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By Sister Lucy Schneider and JoAnna Lathrop
- ☆ From a 1922 Review of **One of Ours**

On ONE OF OURS

To read **One of Ours** without recognizing its irony is to limit and distort Willa Cather's mature consideration of the nature of American life and American values.

Cather gives us a protagonist, Claude Wheeler, who as a Nebraska farm boy with "good physique . . . smooth muscular arms and legs and strong shoulders" appears an outstanding young man, a real hero. Yet Claude is flawed—or believes he is. His pale eyebrows and lashes make his eyes seem too light, giving him "a look of shyness and weakness," he is without "physical repose" and so seems awkward and uncomfortable, and—as he reflects to himself—"he knew and everybody else knew, seemingly, that there was something wrong with him" and "everything he touched went wrong under his hand—always had."

From the beginning of the book, then, Claude's appearance and his reality stand in ironic contrast. He appears to lead the usual life of one of our young men: he goes off to college, returns to the family farm business, marries, builds a house of his own, and, when the United States enters World War I, he joins the Army. Yet each step of his career has really been a failure to Claude and so to us. He goes to the wrong school, is forced to leave it for a return to farming, marries the wrong girl who cares little for the house he builds, and, finally, he joins the Army in a glow of idealism, believing that the Americans "would make war without rage, with uncompromising generosity and chivalry." Only in this last event is he saved from discovering the reality. He is killed while inspiring his men to defend an obscure bit of trench in France. His

An Unpublished Poem

by Willa Cather

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The Hills of Sleep

When the din of battle day
On the dark horizon dies,
Come the enfolding arms of peace
And the Heaven of your eyes.
Like a wounded knight I come,
Fear beset and battle-pressed,
Seeking sanctuary in
The tender mercy of thy breast.
All my wounds are healed in thee,
Who all rewards and honors keep,
When you gather me again
To thy white, drifted hills of sleep.

As one sickening for the Spring
Puts his head upon the ground,
Hears beneath the frozen earth,
Murmuring the fountain's sound,
Hears the waters sing and sob
With their passion to be free,
Feels the earth to pulse and throb
With breath of violets to be,
So within your breast I hear
All my summer singing deep,
In the fountains of your life,
Beneath those drifted hills of sleep.

Dear, remember when you pray,
All your faith is dark to me,
And the light athwart your skies,
Seemeth only mystery.
But when life and I are done,
Be your face the last I see,
Taking Heaven in my eyes
Out into the night with me.
Ere they take and lock me down
Into that slumber ages deep,
O kiss my lips, and lay my head
Between those drifted hills of sleep!
W. Sibert Cather
Pittsburg "Leader"
Pittsburgh
Penn.

death may suggest a kind of personal triumph. But does it?

Cather writes of Claude, "he died believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be. And those were beautiful beliefs to die with." Yet even if we can ignore the voice



The George Cather house, Webster County, Nebraska—probable model for the Wheeler house in “One of Ours.”

A HOUSE IN NEBRASKA . . .

*“When he came up the hill
like this, toward the
tall house with its
lighted windows, something
always clutched at his heart.”*

that implies Claude’s country is not so good as he thought it was, the irony is still pervasive. “Beautiful beliefs to die with”? The necessity is beliefs to **live** with.

We do see clearly that Claude Wheeler is one of ours. He seeks the ideal, endorses illusion, and can be saved from reality only by dying young. His mother and the reader know Claude is one “who had hoped extravagantly . . . (believed) passionately,” but has avoided the awakening only by accident.

Cather’s American has hope and passion, but without strength and endurance to survive the disillusionment that the world brings to corrode those emotions. Claude Wheeler may not be what we would like to be, but he may be what we are. Cather’s ironic choice for him and for us is to die with illusions or to live with disillusionment. Either choice is a defeat to what we popularly see as the American ideal. Cather has presented us with this dilemma. War and dying are not practical solutions to the search for values. The problem unsolved at the end of this book is how to live without values, without beliefs; this is a consideration Cather makes in her later novels.

JoAnna Lathrop
Director, WCPM

Something That Endures

Among a welter of critical estimates of Willa Cather’s ONE OF OURS, that of George Kates, made in 1956 in **Five Stories**, still states an important challenge: “I do not believe that this sensitive juxtaposition of the American West with France, so fleeting and fragile, so quietly evocative of the highest loyalties of each, has yet been noticed for what it is.”

Twenty years after Kates’s statement, the 1976 WCPM Spring Conference promises to give the 1922 Pulitzer Prize winning novel that “notice.” It will, no doubt, see to it that the “highest loyalties” of Nebraska receive their just due as have the “highest loyalties” of France, traditionally.

In one sense, the “world” may have “broken in two” for Willa Cather in 1922, but ONE OF OURS unites it on a basic, enduring level. The novelist accomplishes this feat, achieves the “sensitive juxtaposition” of which Kates writes, in many ways, not least of which is what I term her “land-philosophy.” This brief note will focus on that approach.

Willa Cather sets the first half of the novel on the Nebraska land, the second half on the way to France and in France. Both in Nebraska and in France, the relevance of the land pervades character definition and portrayal, as well as theme. Like Willa Cather’s early stories, ONE OF OURS lays the blame on society for the dark picture drawn of the land. In fact, one might label ONE OF OURS Miss Cather’s “social novel”—a type of novel she theoretically shunned. But her commitment to the land as a value in itself and as a touchstone of value underlies all she does in the novel by way of social comment. With no Alexandra loving and subduing the earth and no Antonia finding life and fulfillment with her country family, Willa Cather nonetheless firmly establishes her “land-philosophy” in ONE OF OURS, and tellingly employs “land details” to bolster her characterization of Claude Wheeler and to support the novel’s total meaning.

Several cardinal points in Willa Cather’s “land-philosophy” appear in ONE OF OURS. For example, the land is a good in itself, from which come things of intrinsic value, such as grain and livestock. No mere piece of property, the land should enslave neither its owners nor their workers. People should, in fine, “possess” it rather than own it. Likewise, the land supplies man’s spirit with the beauty, vitality, and freedom which it craves. Not only can a man feel honest and uninhibited in spirit, he can also exercise his individual creativity, and cooperate in community effort on the land. Like the land at harvest time, he can be himself to the full, actively accepting life’s cyclic processes. When society palls, he can bury his discontent by hard field work. Willa Cather further presents the land as an enduring reality that gives a man the sense of belonging to the human family; it is

A GARDEN IN FRANCE . . .

*"Deeper and deeper into
flowery France!"*



Barbizon, France

© Lucia Woods 1976

an enduring reality that provides a solid background against which the richness and variety of life form a meaningful, harmonious whole. In addition, Cather suggests through the moods of the land a transcendent purpose that is at once hidden and yet revealed.

With a restrained touch only does Willa Cather sound some notes in her "land-philosophy" scale that she will play full stop in *THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE* and *DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP*. These notes include such progressive steps as the significant relationship of the land to quantity and quality, to thing and person, to safety and uncertainty, to self interest and selfless love.

But whatever the force with which Miss Cather expresses key principles of her "land-philosophy," she does so through a wide range of "land details" extending from wild flowers, meadow larks, and horses; through timber claims, orchards, and wheat fields; snowstorms, wind, and sky; to the stars, moon, and sun—separately or in combination.

Focusing her reader's attention mainly on Claude Wheeler and his spiritual quest, Willa Cather nevertheless depicts her full cast of characters in terms of her "land philosophy." Among those with the greatest degree of rapport with the values of the land we can name Mahailey, Mr. Royce, and Gladys Farmer. Among those most completely cut off from its values one can cite Bayliss Wheeler, Brother Weldon, and Enid Royce. In Claude Wheeler's parents, as individuals and as a couple, Cather presents a complex amalgam of strength and weakness, of coarseness and refinement, of vision and blindness. But it is on the character and the values of Claude Wheeler that Willa Cather concentrates throughout the novel—from the opening page where Claude runs out of doors and meets the sun, until the closing page where Mrs. Wheeler and Mahailey think and speak of that recently deceased young man. And it is the land that admirably serves as a yardstick for measuring the scope of Claude's expanding values and the values of the other characters on whom Cather directs the light of her artistic vision.

Not long before he dies, Claude anticipates continuing his life on a farm—in France. He reasons, "Life was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together" (p. 406). Just how short his life was to be, Claude could not foresee; yet by the time he died in battle, he had already achieved—in his own eyes—not only self-mastery and self-confidence but the mastery of men as well. And Willa Cather helps her reader evaluate Claude's achievement in terms of her "land-philosophy." For example, Gladys Farmer expressed the hope that Claude could "be more successful than Bayliss and still be Claude" (p. 155). In Claude's lately formulated ideals, he was successful; further, he incorporated the "honesty" of the land, as he saw it, into his determination to live with freedom and purpose. A "vegetarian" Enid might "brush" against life rather than "touch" it, but not a "vital" Claude.

Life, he discovered, meant "Ruin and new birth; the shudder of ugly things in the past, the trembling image of beautiful ones on the horizon; finding and losing" (p. 391). He has tried to take this "finding and losing" into account, to see that both "planting" and "harvesting" form indispensable parts of life's cycle. And he has done this against a background of stability and continuity such as the land and its trees imply. Further, he has opened his eyes to both spontaneous and cultivated beauty in human living, just as he saw such beauty in the flowers and in the fields.

But beyond these things, and by means of these things, he has perceived a mysterious "something," just as he sensed a "mystery" in the milling done by Mr. Royce when Claude was a boy. In the milling process the grain is crushed. Yet in its apparent loss of identity, it somehow gives promise of entering upon a new and wider life than it lived in its natural cycle of germination, growth, and harvest. So too Claude loses his life for the sake of the "mystery" that constitutes his "ideals." Not only does he die, "believing his own

country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be" (p. 458), he likewise reaches out to fulfill that "wish which was so beautiful that there were no experiences in this world to satisfy it" (p. 207).

Sister Lucy Schneider
Marymount College of Kansas

From An Early Review of ONE OF OURS

Claude Wheeler alone is not the hero of "One of Ours." That hero is the American youth with fettered wings in the suffocating far inland towns, where no refreshing breath of adventure comes, where play is sinful and leisure is dedicated to a mournful preparation for death, where the pulse of life suffers a slow attrition from the incubus of a bleak tradition of duty, work, silent suffering, piety and death. The problem that Claude faced is the problem all aspiring youth face in the cramped, mean, unpleasant environment of the stagnant inland towns of America, towns where the pioneer spirit has died from the

spread of modern industrialism and no spirit whatever has taken its place. That problem is concerned with the effective release of the creative energies of youth in satisfying experience, joy in work and happiness in play. As conditions obtain now, there is the alternative of severing all in precarious flight, submitting humbly with bowed and bloody head—or, by a frightful miracle, war.

But, let me insist, this is not a war novel. War occupies less than a third of the book. It is the **deus ex machina** which solves in ironic fashion the perplexities of Claude. It is war which offers him adventure, release for his pent-up energies. The body of the story is concerned with the frustrations of those energies, not through the specific fault of any one, but through the fault of things as they are. . . . But that is Miss Cather's story, and she has told it with an epical dignity, simplicity and impressiveness.

Burton Rascoe
New York Tribune
September 10, 1922

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- To secure the bonding, insurance and housing of a permanent art, literary and historical collection relating to the life, time and work of Willa Cather.
- To identify and restore to their original condition, places made famous by the writings of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

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