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Edited by Bernice Slotte

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 68508).

... In This Issue ...

☆Notes on **Obscure Destinies** by Claire Mattern, Patricia Yongue, Mona Pers, Jacquelynn S. Lewis, JoAnna Lathrop

☆From English reviews

**Obscure Destinies**, Willa Cather's collection of three stories about the people of Western farms and small towns, was published by Alfred A. Knopf in the summer of 1932. Early reviews were in the **New York Times** and the **New York Herald-Tribune** on July 31. The first story, "Neighbour Rosicky," had been completed as early as 1928 and had appeared in the **Woman's Home Companion** for April and May 1930. The other two stories were written in 1931. "Two Friends" was also published in the **Woman's Home Companion** in July 1932, and "Old Mrs. Harris" in the **Ladies' Home Journal**, September-November 1932. It was there called "Three Women." Most reviewers thought the stories were poignant, true to life, and beautifully written, though without the intensity of earlier Nebraska novels like **My Antonia** and **A Lost Lady**. Others stressed the subtlety of the style and the importance given to the lives of ordinary people. For new readers, the stories of **Obscure Destinies** continue to be revealing. The following are five notes written especially for this issue.

## THE THEMES THAT BIND

The collection of stories by Willa Cather called **Obscure Destinies** is comprised of three tales which are related to each other in significant ways, just as they are also related to the life of the author and the greater body of her work.

In each story, like the author and her family, principal characters have migrated from East to West. The prairie landscape and the way its occupants relate to it are integral parts of the stories. In each story, Chicago serves as a cultural touchstone; and in each one, the narrator notes that principal characters not only are quite literate but express an enthusiasm for Grand Opera and are conversant in this area, regarding

it as a necessary part of life. In each story, a young woman or girl is supported either psychologically or financially by a benevolent older male who is not related to her in a romantic way. In each story, death of the central figures for whom the stories are named is inevitable, but not violent.

The dominant theme of "Neighbour Rosicky," "Old Mrs. Harris," and "Two Friends" is the mystique of figures which are pillars of strength and succor for persons in their sphere of influence. The author provides a close study of the dependence of the weak and trusting upon the strong, and, when the strong figure is inexorably and permanently removed from the scene by death, leaves the reader to speculate upon what will become of the dependent figures as they are left to rely more upon themselves or someone else, with only memories to sustain them.

The narrator is a reporting observer in "Neighbour Rosicky" and "Old Mrs. Harris," but the sensitive treatment, particularly of the central figures, shows a more than casual interest. The narrator "feels" the warmth, strength, and unselfishness of Anton Rosicky and Mrs. Harris, and, along with the reader, watches with horror as their physical ills overtake them. Finally, in "Two Friends," the narrator emerges as "I," the persona who is entranced with and psychologically dependent upon the life comprised by the two friends together. The death of the two individuals, Dillon and Trueman, is, indeed, anticlimactic compared to the shattering trauma of the death of the friendship, upon which not only the narrator but Dillon and Trueman also had become dependent. The separate entity that was the friendship died of "natural causes," just as Anton Rosicky and Old Mrs. Harris did—a quiet disagreement and non-violent estrangement, from which many friendships perish, as common an ailment as heart attack or stroke.

The narrator becomes reconciled to the death of Neighbour Rosicky, and, in Whitmanesque fashion, can see the grass in the graveyard as representing completion, beauty, and the cyclical elements in life and death. The narrator draws consolation after the death of Old Mrs. Harris in speculation that those who drained the vitality from Mrs. Harris and heedlessly exploited her would be treated the same way some day, in some Karma-like fashion, and grow to appreciate what they had done. The death of the triumvirate bond between Dillon, Trueman, and the narrator in "Two Friends" remains a scar, however, and leaves the narrator unconsoled in the "old uneasiness; the feeling of something . . . delightful that was senselessly wasted." Perhaps whatever we have treasured most must always seem to us "senselessly wasted" after it is gone.

Claire Mattern  
University of Nebraska



"Dillon's bank and general store stood at the corner of Main Street and a cross-street. . . ." This is the Red Cloud scene described in "Two Friends."

## "TWO FRIENDS"

"Two Friends," commonly dismissed as of slight importance in Willa Cather's works, has a strange appeal for me. I attribute it to the special atmosphere created by the girl narrator's attitude to the two friends, who hold a strong attraction for her. Those two men are her heroes, and she is content to worship them from a distance. She hardly knows them, but draws pleasure from just watching them. As a non-participant onlooker, she observes them act their parts, like performers in a play.

Actually, there is much in the description of the situation that recalls a theater setting; the girl forms an audience of one, the two friends are the actors. The reader is invited, as it were, to share the cardboard box with the young narrator, and sit there with her, for hours at a stretch, watching the gestures and listening to the conversation of the two men, who are placed, as on a lighted stage, in chairs in front of her. While it is dark in the shade of the wall, where the girl is sitting, the moon illuminates the two men as well as the vacant lot behind them, which is described as a surrealistic stage background: "These abandoned buildings, an eyesore by day, melted together into a curious pile in the moonlight, became an immaterial structure of velvet-white and glossy blackness, with here and there a faint smear of blue door, or a tilted patch of sage-green that had once been a shutter." Ugly by daylight, this place becomes mysteriously transfigured by the moonbeams, just as rickety stage property is beautified by artfully applied spotlights.

When the cold weather comes, the two friends move inside the store, and the girl follows in their wake. Seated on a counter, she continues to watch them closely. The fact that she cannot hear a word of what they are saying does not diminish her interest. The scene of the two men "playing checkers in the office behind the wire screening; both seated on high accountants' stools, with the checker-board on the cashier's desk before them" is rendered like a pantomime. The girl's minute account of the gestures and mannerisms characteristic of the two men, and the importance she attaches to their every movement, underlines the pantomimic quality of her experience.

Until the crisis in their relationship, the two friends have little reality for the reader, because the narrator does not conceive of them as real people at all. For her, they embody the beautiful idea of a perfect friendship. When her idealized picture of them is shattered, and their human frailties are disclosed, she is dismayed. Her disillusionment is that of a child, who has discovered, for the first time, the ordinary human being behind the mask of his favorite stage hero.

Mona Pers, University of Uppsala, Sweden

## "NEIGHBOUR ROSICKY"

"Neighbour Rosicky," the first of the **Obscure Destinies** stories, is at the positive end of a narrative road that in terms of feeling is one of descent. Willa Cather's biographers recommend that "Neighbour Rosicky" be read as a brilliant postscript to *My Ántonia* (1918), for elegiac affirmation of Ántonia's creative, spirit-giving life is continued in the account of Anton Rosicky's productive life. The story also suggests Willa Cather's effort to communicate as much as possible of an essentially "incommunicable past," as that past became more distant in the face of a particularly difficult present for author and country alike. Between the time of Ántonia and that of Anton Rosicky, a deterioration of the national spirit had set in, due mainly to political-economic stress, and there was much need, amid the gloom of Willa Cather's own life at the time, to capture a moment of happiness.

"Neighbour Rosicky" is, in this respect, a fitting epilogue to *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), the only one of Willa Cather's novels to illustrate a life lived and ended in accordance with aesthetic design. Latour's death, in his rectory that is framed by his blooming orchards, so different from the bare little cruciform tree he encountered on his first trip into New Mexico, is the "splendid finish" to a splendid life. So, too, Rosicky's death, but in a much more humble way. To Dr. Ed Burleigh, the physician who tries to take care of Rosicky's defective heart, Rosicky's life "seemed complete and beautiful." The gentle, unpretentious Czech does more, even in death, to cure the spiritual afflictions of his family and good friend, than science can do for his faulty heart. Both Latour and Rosicky, like Ántonia, are artists of the personal order. Both prelates, one of the church and the other of the family, set their arid lands in order. Both build gleaming monuments of love and faith that will exist long after their deaths. Willa Cather needed to re-affirm this kind of greatness before she set out to illustrate the waywardness of life in general.

As such, "Neighbour Rosicky" stands apart from the other **Obscure Destinies** stories, which do not dwell at all on the idea of "splendid finish." Rosicky completes a life of creativity that means something to those around him, but old Mrs. Harris, as valiant and as loving and as selfless as Rosicky, slips out of the lives of her family, leaving no one but the distant narrator to see the beauty of her life and the harshness of her road, the loneliness of her road. In an almost existential way, Willa Cather emphasizes, "**Le but n'est rien; le chemin, c'est tout.**" And, in "Two Friends," she writes even more dismally of the degeneration of something initially splendid, of something "delightful that was senselessly wasted, of a truth that was accidentally distorted—one of the truths we want to keep." There is scar tissue left in the narra-

tor's heart because of this waste; there is sadness in her heart because of heartlessness in the world of old Mrs. Harris; but there is gratefulness in her heart because of the greatness of Neighbour Rosicky's story, a greatness that was a part of the past.

Patricia Yongue, University of Houston

## ON THE TITLE

Few artists have served so prolonged and careful an apprenticeship as Willa Cather did and, correspondingly, few have displayed the craftsmanship of her mature works. **Obscure Destinies** effectively displays Cather's mastery. In this work not only is each of the trio of short stories artful in itself, but the whole collection is unified in conception and titling.

Cather read Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" insightfully. Gray, in this poem, warns that neither Ambition nor Grandeur dare mock the "useful toil, . . . homely joys, and destiny obscure" of those members of the community now buried in the churchyard. The poet concludes with a promise that artists who memorialize the seemingly unimportant dead will be themselves remembered and so suggests that art immortalizes both its subject and its creator.

Willa Cather presents us with the "obscure" lives of Anton Rosicky, Mrs. Harris, R. E. Dillon, and J. H. Trueman. The first three die in the course of their stories and Trueman disappears with finality from the narrator's life. Just as the buried dead are for Gray the "forefathers" of the town, so each of these characters is identified by Cather in a familial or social role. Rosicky is "Neighbour Rosicky"; to suggest the community's affection and familiarity, Mrs. Harris is "Old Mrs. Harris" and, to her family, "Grandma"; Dillon and Trueman are "Two Friends," related to each other and to the townspeople. We cannot be permitted indifference to these lives; their destiny is ours; the human family is ultimately one. Cather names each person to particularize individual importance, yet renames him to stress his immersion into the commonality of the world. To suggest each story's universality, Cather ends each with a direct statement of the importance of what has occurred. Dr. Burleigh reflects, "Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful." An unidentified voice summarizes that "thus Mrs. Harris slipped out of the Templetons' story," but promises that the daughter and granddaughter will in time come closer to Mrs. Harris through emotion and understanding. The retrospective observer of "Two Friends" reviews the broken friendship and concludes that it produced "the feeling of something broken that could so easily have been mended; of something delightful that was senselessly wasted, of a truth that was accidentally distorted—one of the truths we want to keep."

Cather has let her narrators lead us to see beyond the limitation of each individual life into mutual similarity and human continuity. Cather has remembered these people in her lines and through her art has emphasized the "destiny," the important function of individual life. She has converted the adjective "obscure" into an ironic comment on life: these lives only seem ordinary, yet they endure in Cather's art and so insure their fame and hers.

JoAnna Lathrop, University of Nebraska

## THE EXPRESSION OF LONELINESS

I continue to be intrigued by a special Willa Cather brand of aloneness exhibited repeatedly in her fictional characters. One by one they face up to each unique existence in like lonely stature, described with like simplicity.

The pioneer place and time of Cather's stories was, at its best, a lonely experience. Truthful treatment of the progress West and the people who were a part of that phenomenon must naturally depict a raw determination and courage, at the core of which was loneliness. But there is more than simple description of a singular determination; there is a technique peculiar to Willa Cather and more complex than lonely prairies, cold cities, courageous settlers, and the right words to embody them all. This device is a coupling of opposition—or comparison—semantic adversaries united, as it were, within a sentence, a paragraph, or a perception. By creating a picture contrary to what the reader might conceive, Willa Cather thus achieves a significant effect which builds as her stories progress.

"Neighbour Rosicky" in **Obscure Destinies** will serve as my single, brief example. In Doctor's Burleigh's office we are introduced, after little conversation, to Mr. Rosicky as one who "did not look like a sick man." He is, then, further described as "gay rather than grave." After leaving the Burleigh office Rosicky proceeds to the store where he is attended by a lively, young, pretty, town girl who further sets apart the worn, old, dying country man who shortly passes a "snug and homelike" graveyard on the road to home and a kitchen described by Rosicky himself as "no place fur a man." The "united differences" continue, some subtle and others sharp, but all piling in the mind of the reader the foreign essence of existence which serves to inflict an overwhelming aloneness on, first, "Neighbour Rosicky," then "Old Mrs. Harris," and, finally, "Two Friends."

There is a peculiar and significant genius in Willa Cather's expression of loneliness which lies beyond a choice of simple words. Perhaps this subtlety of underlying and interwoven opposition is important to that remarkable result.

Jacquelyn S. Lewis, University of Nebraska

## ENGLISH REVIEWS

In England, reviews of **Obscure Destinies** first appeared in late 1932. The following excerpts give a hint of their tone.

From a review by Frank Kendon in **John O' London's Weekly**, December 3, 1932:

. . . She ventures upon no tricks, but gets her effects by shrewd native knowledge of character based upon instinctive and loving observation of persons, and by sound solid prose—prose that does not try to be anything more than the clear medium in which the story appears. I am inclined to compare her with Hardy, chiefly because her eye is always on the people and not on the book. . . . Novelists of the conservative class, like Hardy, . . . are greater, it seems to me, in the very fact that they make Literature take a quiet corner. They spare no labour to efface the marks of their labour, their conscience makes them write well,

their good taste and modesty make them write quietly so that their readers may have nothing between them and the character. . . .

The obscure destinies which Miss Cather celebrates in these three stories are an old farmer, an old grandmother, and two sound business men of the old school. All three tales are set in the Western States of America, and taken altogether give a picture of that quiet, vigorous, well-founded farming life, like and yet unlike the land life of England. Unselfishness, sturdy independence, humaneness, love of house and land and family, content rather than happiness, are the virtues—the Wordsworthian virtues I almost wrote—which Miss Cather finds in these people; and she

gives us opportunity to look for such qualities and to find them for ourselves by describing with exactness, without minuteness, these simple domestic lives. She is not afraid of simplicity, she makes the flavour of provincialness pleasant, she makes obscure men masters of their destinies; but with all her kindness she is never false to reality, never noisier or sadder or sweeter than life.

From the **Manchester Guardian**, December 16, 1932, signed "T.M.":

. . . The delicacy and tenderness of the story entitled "Neighbour Rosicky" are perfect. . . . The picture is like music in its complete harmony. And when the old man dies the end is like music fading. From a review by Helen Moran in the **London Mercury**, January 1933:

. . . Miss Cather creates people, not types. These are homely, quiet people, who seem so real that when old Rosicky dies one feels a pang of regret because now it is too late ever to know him, forgetting for the moment that he is a character in a book.

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