

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial

VOLUME XII, NUMBER 2

and Educational Foundation

RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

TO PROVIDE FOR WILLA CATHER A LIVING MEMORIAL

Scholarship awards were given at the annual meeting of the Nebraska Teachers of English in Lincoln, Oct. 12, 1968, for the best essay on Willa Cather's work. Edward R. Johnson of East High, Lincoln, won first prize of \$150.00, for his essay "Evil, Vision, and Artistic Purity: The Existential Implications of Willa Cather." Nancy Busing of Fairbury High School won second place, \$75.00, with her essay, "Willa Cather's Special Love." Mildred R. Bennett, president of WCPM, made the presentations.

You readers have contributed the money for this scholarship gift. We have not had the essay contest for several years, however, this year with the cooperation of the Nebraska Council of Teachers of English and particularly of Esther Montgomery, Ned Hedges and Esther Hamon, we ran a successful contest.

The Nebraska Council recommends that we omit the contest in 1969 and that the Nebraska Council appoint a committee to work with us in setting up a national contest to be carried on in 1970, with directions going out in the fall of 1969. The extra year will give time for the MEMORIAL to build up funds. Also, interested persons can write us their suggestions on the 1970 contest.

The winning essay follows:

Evil, Vision, and Artistic Purity: The Existential Implications of Willa Cather

by Edward R. Johnson

"The revolt against individualism naturally calls artists severely to account, because the artist is of all men the most individual: those who were not have been long forgotten. The condition every art requires is not so much freedom from restriction, as freedom from adulteration and from the infusion of foreign matter, considerations and purposes, which have nothing to do with spontaneous invention."—Willa Cather, ON WRITING.

Existentialism, like Christianity, is a way of looking at things; consequently, it is likely to be seen in unlikely places—in Willa Cather, for example. Existentialism, like Christianity, has come to be more than merely a variety of belief: it is a style of living. With this in mind, it is not quite so surprising that Cather should have existential qualities. There are many interesting parallels of viewpoint and technique that might be drawn between the general existentialist literary approach and the specific attack of Willa Cather.

The "general existentialist position" does not exist any more than does a "general Christian approach." But there are certain values which are emphasized in existentialist literature and which give it a unique flavor. Briefly, these are: Man imposes value on things, and things have value only insofar as they relate to the individual (a sort of emotional Berkeleyism); experiences are qualitatively indistinguishable, hence life is best measured in terms of quantity of experience, in variety and extremes. The latter generates a "literature of situations" in which emphasis is placed upon event rather than upon character. First, however, it is necessary to consider the individual and his world.

Existentialism deals with the suddenly cognizant individual; Willa Cather deals with the artist; from the practical viewpoint, there is little distinction. Where Camus or Sartre write about philosophical postal clerks, Cather portrays sensitive, artistic farmers; in all instances, the appearance is gainsaid by the inner vision. For the existential "outsider," life is meaningless; for the pioneer

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TO PERPETUATE AN INTEREST THROUGHOUT THE WORLD IN THE WORK OF WILLA CATHER:

By special permission of Victor P. Hass, we reprint his article published just before our spring conference, 1968. The article appeared in Mr. Hass' "From a Bookman's Notebook" in the Sunday Omaha World-Herald Magazine of April 14, 1968:

Next Saturday, all literary roads in Nebraska will lead to Red Cloud. There, Catherians will gather for the annual spring conference of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation.

It will be, I suppose, a routine meeting, except that nothing connected with perpetuating the work and memory of that wonderful woman could really be routine.

No other feature of our state—not even our famous steaks!—counts for more than the fact that a slim girl who grew into a stoutish spinster once lived and worked in Red Cloud. In the books she wrote she fixed forever the essence of the pioneer-immigrant experience on the Great Plains.

Readers everywhere in the world are aware of Red Cloud and Webster County and Nebraska because that gentle woman flowered in our soil.

Willard Thorp, a professor of literature at Princeton, and an authority in these matters, not long ago ranked America's three prime literary villages.

At the top of his list he put Concord, Mass., because Thoreau and Emerson lived and worked there. Second he placed Hannibal, Mo., because Mark Twain lived and worked there. And third he ranked Red Cloud, because it was the cradle of "O Pioneers!," "The Song of the Lark" and "My Antonia," to name only the foundation on which Willa Cather's splendid reputation was built.

It is true, of course, that by 1913, when "O Pioneers!" appeared, Miss Cather already had moved to the East, but her own spirit and the heart and soul of her work, remained in Red Cloud.

That is the key to Red Cloud's importance in the American literary cosmos. Perhaps characteristically, Red Cloud's uniqueness is probably more appreciated by readers as far away as New Delhi than it is here in Nebraska.

I find this a pity simply because the under-appreciation of any glowing asset is a pity. Here, after all, is a living organism, this town, that shaped the work of a genius. As long as there are Americans who read, Willa Cather's novels will be read. And the farther we get from the experience she mirrored, the more precious it becomes.

But literary shrines do not just happen, they are nurtured. They need some one who can see that an inheritance is in danger and who has the intelligence and spirit to act while there yet is time.

In Red Cloud's case it was Mrs. Mildred R. Bennett. She it was who alerted her fellow townsmen to the richness of their legacy, and they responded notably. Today, in Red Cloud, you can visit the Cather home, now restored and furnished as it was in "The Song of the Lark". Too, the railroad depot mentioned in so many of Miss Cather's lines is preserved as is the Roman Catholic Church in which the endlessly memorable Annie Pavelka (my Antonia) was married. Finally, there is the bank building which now houses the Cather museum in which you can see Cather memorabilia.

What is enchanting about Red Cloud, as it is about Concord and Hannibal, is that it is a living memorial, not a restoration in the Williamsburg sense though, mind you, I do not fault Williamsburg or any other restoration. They have their place and it is important. Nothing so reminds Americans of their past as physical evidences of it.

Nor is Red Cloud's preservation of the places and things that mark Willa Cather's residence and work there, the

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TO PROVIDE A MEMORIAL (Con't from page 1)

homesteader, life is hard—these two negative conditions sometimes meet, as in MY ANTONIA: Mr. Shimerda kills himself because he is suddenly struck to the core by the incongruity of his life: the warm, pleasant home of the Burdens on the one hand, and his own miserable hole on the other; the sense of emptyhandedness, of irony, of "absurdity," overtake him, and he resigns his life. It is more than merely a case of a depressed artist. Shimerda kills himself because he cannot escape the pointlessness of his and his family's suffering; he is made dramatically aware of his own limitations. Something similar is detected in the whole business of using immigrants as characters. The immigrant is the perfect "stranger," or "outsider": he is the individual thrown into a strange, often absurd world: he becomes self-conscious of his actions, which is almost to say, existentially aware of himself, of his uniqueness. Antonia feels unique; her father can only feel strange. Perhaps the fundamental reason for this is the difference in their world-views. Mr. Shimerda sees nature (against which he competes to survive) as a restricting agent that limits and, in a sense, defines him. Antonia, on the other hand, can view the world as a sphere in which to move: she and Jim Burden belong because they see the world as theirs; this is particularly illustrated in the sunflower passage to be considered shortly.

The question of nature is an important one. To Willa Cather, nature equaled pollution; nature was evil. Why? Because nature was unordered, chaotic. To Cather, evil and disorder were equivalent. This entire idea is properly shown in the manner in which Cather treats the town on the frontier. The town, in a way, was to Cather the representative of progress, of man's order being imposed upon the wild. The town, with its houses and stores and streets is clearly order in her mind. The process of building, of transforming the open, barren prairie into civilization, was one of actualizing a plan, or a vision. All potential is measured by men's dreams. Chaos is unfulfilled vision. Thus, with both Cather and the existentialist, man imposes value on things. The life without a goal—a favorite situation of existentialist novelists such as Sartre, Camus and, in a way, Kafka—is a life devalued: in a sense chaotic: in a sense evil.

Cather's treatment of the town also reveals another existentialist bone: individual vision (integrity) versus collectivization and impersonalization. Of course, in Cather's day the problem of identity was by no means so acute as it has become; but the germ existed, even in the small towns she portrayed. Willa Cather could see the city as "society"—as an intimidator. For this reason, most likely, she paints such a heroic picture of the farm; it is there, after all, that the struggle with chaos really takes place: the town is already won and secure: the town is mostly for old people. The town is unpleasant—the town is adulterated and polluted. The real issue is out on the homestead, out in the snow. Nature and man come together, and nature receives its meaning from that encounter. But with the city the encounter with nature is long in the past: the vision has been fulfilled and diluted at the same time, and diluted life is as pointless as visionless life. The town is vision fulfilled—and vision past. And once a plan is completed, it is exhausted, spent. A new vision is needed, for the dignity was in the struggle to attainment. Dream achieved is no longer dream.

In the question of technique, too, Cather is sometimes close to existentialist literature. Something similar to the so-called "literature of situations" is to be found in Cather's use of interpolation. In Willa Cather, more than in most of the writers of her period, we discern a tendency toward the incidental, parabolic element. Cather uses the interpolated story in her work for more than merely background—her interpolations usually intrude themselves with the urgency of the myth. Her parables are plausible, logical, but, fortunately or unfortunately, hardly "subtle" in the Victorian sense of the word. Cather's interpolations all but announce themselves as independent situations. The story of Peter and Pavel and the wolves, for example,¹ is quite unique and, honestly, more arresting than its context in the novel. One is reminded by this incident of Herman Hesse's novel, STEPPENWOLF, and of the existentialist utilization of the wolf and werewolf—legend, again—themes as representative of man's ambivalent character.² Throwing the bride and groom to the wolves is an extreme and horrible act. Insofar as it is extreme and isolated it bears the marks of the existentialist parable. Similarly, the well-known incident of the plough en-

circled by the setting sun impresses the reader as more than merely a situation — it is an independent experience, not dependent upon the rest of the book. The examples in Cather's other stories and novels of this sort of thing are numerous. All of these suggest the "literature of situations" approach in which the event is stressed — in which something "just happens" and the reader is left to react to it. Another example of this sort of thing, though not so intense, is the sunflower story in MY ANTONIA:

The new country lay open before me: there were no fences in those days, and I could choose my own way over the grass uplands trusting the pony to get me home again. Sometimes I followed the sunflower-bordered roads. Fuchs told me that the sunflowers were introduced into that country by the Mormons; that at the time of the persecution, when they left Missouri and struck out into the wilderness to find a place to worship God in their own way, the members of the first exploring party, crossing the plains to Utah, scattered sunflower seed as they went. The next summer, when the long trains of wagons came through with all the women and children, they had the sunflower trail to follow. I believe that botanists do not confirm Fuch's story, but insist that the sunflower was native to these plains. Nevertheless, that legend has stuck in my mind, and sunflower-bordered roads always seem to me the roads to freedom. (3)

In this short passage all of the elements are fused, nature, man, freedom, myth. The narrator sees nature as a place where he can live, where, in fact, he can almost lose himself. At the same time, however, there is the element of man's values present: he chooses to believe the legend that attributes the sunflowers to man. And the sunflowers, one must remember, are the roadmarkers to freedom. Man creates his own values, his own limitations, and his own freedom. That is certainly existentialistic. To Willa Cather, "man" was an artist—hence, an individual with integrity to assert; by a proper approach to chaos (nature) the artist is able to assert his values, and make enough order to live with. But he must live with what he has created; that is his restriction and his freedom. This is Willa Cather's message, and this is existentialism. And it is certainly no more than a coincidence that Sartre named his master-trilogy *Les Chemins de la liberte . . . "The Roads to Freedom."*

NOTES

For further information on the existentialist approach to literature, see Hazel E. Barnes' *Humanistic Existentialism: The Literature of Possibility* (1959), or Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1935).

1. Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, book one, chapter eight.

2. Herman Hesse, *Der Steppenwolf* (1955); for a stimulating treatment of the existentialist themes in this and other Hesse's works, see Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* (1956), pp. 51-6B.

3. Cather, op. Cit. book one, chapter four.

TO IDENTIFY AND RESTORE TO THEIR ORIGINAL CONDITION, PLACES MADE FAMOUS BY THE WRITINGS OF WILLA CATHER:

We have received estimates of how much money will be needed to restore the old Burlington Depot, so dear to Willa Cather's heart, and the first Catholic Church in Red Cloud, the one where "My Antonia" was married. The work required and the money needed are outlined below:

Burlington Depot

To finish the floor of the depot with paving bricks.

To enclose the end of the depot and rearrange the walls so that a sizeable room is obtained.

To fix the roof by putting on more tin shingles and repairing those that are dented.

To redrive all nails in the outside of the building and use extra nails where necessary.

To paint inside and out the whole depot (two stories) which will necessitate the removal of much paint before new work can be done.

To reroute the staircase from the outside of the building so that it opens on the interior.

To clean the whole building and replace broken windows.

To landscape the yard and beautify premises.

To set up and fix an outdoor toilet on the premises.

To repair all doors so that they open properly and can be locked.

To close doors not used and refinish inside and out.

To remove old plumbing and repair that area.

To finish baseboard in waiting room.

TOTAL COST: \$11,750.00.

* * *

Catholic Church

To bind the two outer walls with a brace.

To tear out partitions and replaster as one large room.

To partition off a vestry, a prie-dieu room, and plaster.

To close off extra windows that have been put in and to open old windows and doors that have been bricked up.
To put in front doors. To change two doors back into windows.

To put an eight foot cupola on top of the church.
To form a cement foundation around the building.
To tear out old sidewalk and put in new.
To replace broken windows.
To put on a new roof.

TOTAL COST: \$4,500.00.

Any plans, furnishings, pictures or suggestions on these two restorations will be appreciated.

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:

A highlight of the Spring Conference was the dedication of the Willa Cather Childhood Home by Dr. Wilfred D. Logan, chief of archaeological research for the National Park Service. He pointed out how the WCPM has been a pioneer in preserving those memories and artifacts that grow daily more valuable. Community interest sparks preservation. We want to thank all of you for your part in our progress.

At the evening meeting Daniel F. Jaffe, author and assistant professor of English at the University of Missouri, at Kansas City, said that to him, an Easterner from New Jersey, Cather brought the excitement of

TO PERPETUATE AN INTEREST — (con't from page 1) extent of its contribution to the growing legend. In the person of Mrs. Bennett, it has added greatly to Cather scholarship. Mrs. Bennett's "The World of Willa Cather," published in 1951, remains the seminal work in the field, the foundation of which much Cather scholarship depends.

And, finally, to me it is purely wonderful that Mrs. Carrie Sherwood, the real-life counterpart of Frances Harling in "My Antonia" still lives in Red Cloud. More living than that, a literary memorial cannot be.

* * *

We are doing more to perpetuate an interest throughout the world. We received a card from Mrs. Masami Nishikawa telling of the semi-monthly meeting of the Tokyo branch of the WCPM. The members looked at photos sent by John March of New York and discussed the visit here a year ago, of Miss Momoko Ishii, Mrs. Masami Nishikawa and Mrs. F. Kawahara. This year we had a three day visitor from Japan, Miss Kazuko Kobayashi who attends school in Oregon and who will return to Japan in another year to teach English.

The CATHER MEMORIAL is listed on the maps of Mobil Oil, Texaco and Rand McNally. This year we took part in the President's Commission on Travel and were listed by the U. S. Department of Commerce as members of the Hospitality Card Discount Program. We offered all our services free to foreign visitors.

We had a number of 4th graders who had studied Cather in connection with their Summer Cultural Enrichment Program. Often the children led the parents in the information about Willa Cather.

Two new books have come out this year: Richard Giannone's MUSIC IN WILLA CATHER'S FICTION and Bernice Slote's new edition of APRIL TWILIGHTS with revised introduction. Both can be purchased at the MEMORIAL.

We are entering on a new phase of Cather study. Next January a group of twenty college students and their teacher, Dwight Garrington, of the Westmar College in LeMars, Iowa, plan to come to Red Cloud between semesters to study Willa Cather.

the West. She saw things as a poet and interpreted them as a poet. He complimented the WCPM on the work of preservation done thus far.

To add to our literary collection we have had many gifts from you. We can mention only a few autographed copies, but we thank all of you:

Philip L. Gerber for "Willa Cather and the Big Red Rocks," COLLEGE ENGLISH, Jan. 1958.

Wm. M. Curtin for "Willa Cather: Individualism and Style," COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY, June, 1968.

Sister Lucy Schneider, CSJ, for "O PIONEERS! in the Light of Willa Cather's Land Philosophy," COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY, June 1968; and "Artistry and Intuition: Willa Cather's Land Philosophy," MARYMOUNT COLLEGE BULLETIN, Jan., 1968.

Bruce Baker, "Nebraska Regionalism in Selected Works of Willa Cather," WESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE, Spring, 1968.

Cyril Clemens sent us the whole copy of the special Cather edition of the COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY, June 1968 and Bernice Slote gave us a copy of her paper, "Willa Cather" delivered at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, November 25, 1966.

Other gifts that should be mentioned are: a scarf of Mrs. Charles Cather given by Mrs. R. D. Saladen, Elkton, Oregon. Mrs. Rachel Gallagher of Omaha gave us \$300.00 for the figure of A LOST LADY in our new diorama from that book. Mrs. Roscoe Abbott of Lincoln gave us the antique bed which is over one hundred years old. Mrs. Ben Ford of Oklahoma City, Okla. gave the dress which Mrs. Forrester wears, which was hand made by her mother in 1882, as her wedding dress. Roger R. Leech of Chicago gave \$500.00.

Mrs. Samuel A. McClung of Pittsburgh, Pa. has given various photographs, one of which is an excellent likeness of Jan Hamburg, the prototype for Louis Marsellus in THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE and the husband of Isabelle McClung. Mrs. Esther Schultz of Red Cloud gave the night water pitcher set that belonged to Mrs. Charles Cather. Ken Baughman and Dick Willard of Council Bluffs gave a water pitcher set for use in the Cather home. Mrs. Irene Weisz of Chicago sent material about Myra Hess, a pianist whom Cather greatly admired.

We have received some excellent books this past year. Thank you go to the following:

Gertrude Coon of Hastings has given us her first editions of the Cather books which are in mint condition.

Franklin Publications, Inc. of New York gave MY ANTONIA in Urdu, Bengali and Persian and O PIONEERS! in Bengali.

From a Korean publisher came MY ANTONIA and DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP in Korean.

From the Tokyo branch of the WCPM came a Japanese MY ANTONIA, "Paul's Case" and "Neighbour Rosicky." An English MY ANTONIA prepared with notes in Japanese for study in Japan was given by the publisher, Kinseido, Ltd.

Anton V. Long, gave a book of poems by his mother, Alice Lavinia Long and a book about his father, Haniel Long. The Longs were people in Pittsburgh who influenced Willa Cather's writing.

John March of New York has sent a German A LOST LADY and ALEXANDER'S BRIDGE, the short stories of "Neighbour Rosicky," "Before Breakfast," and "Paul's Case." He also sent DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP in Polish and A COMPLETE COLLEGE READER containing the whole book of MY ANTONIA.

Philip Van Doren Stern sent an especially rare edition of DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP in the Armed Forces Edition. This small paper back book would fit into a soldier's pocket. Others in the series that we would like to have are O PIONEERS! and MY ANTONIA.

The "New Mexico Quarterly" sent us a copy of their winter 1966-67 number with an article about DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP called "A Novel of Love and Death," by Sister Peter Damian Charles, O. P.

For some time now we have been concerned about the state of the Red Cloud newspapers that have been stored in our lower vault. They needed to be micro-filmed and then tied up for permanent storage. In connection with the archives department of the Nebraska State Historical Society we have obtained microfilm of the "Red Cloud Chief."

Last August when John March was here, he went over the "Red Cloud Argus" and found the papers which the Historical Society did not have. These we took to Lincoln and they have been microfilmed with the rest of the "Argus" which the State Historical Society has. In a few weeks we will have as complete a micro-film of the "Argus" as is possible to have.

With the new microfilm, we have wrapped and stored our old newspapers, but we need a new Recordak. Our present one is old and there is a danger of scratching the microfilm. The cost of a used Recordak will be between \$300-\$500.00. We would like help on this project.

Don't forget the spring conference which will be the third Saturday in April (April 19, 1969). Plan to attend now.

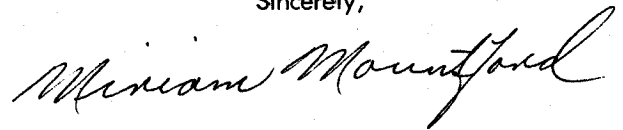
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Sincerely,



Miriam Mountford

YOU CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE AND GROWTH OF THE ORGANIZATION:

● By becoming a member of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial.

LIFE DONATION CONTRIBUTION . . . \$75.00

SUSTAINING CONTRIBUTION . \$5.00 Annually

- By contributing to a project fund.
- By contributing to the restoration fund.
- By contributing to the scholarship fund.
- By contributing your Willa Cather artifacts, letters, papers, and publications to the Museum.
- By contributing your ideas and suggestions to the Board of Governors.

AIMS OF THE WCPM

- 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 in the form of art and literary scholarships.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.



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