

# Willa Cather

## NEWSLETTER & REVIEW

Volume 57 • No. 3

Winter • Spring 2015



Mapping Literary Landscapes: Environments and Ecosystems  
*Highlights from the 2014 Spring Conference*



# Willa Cather NEWSLETTER & REVIEW



Volume 57 • No. 3 | Winter • Spring 2015



## CONTENTS

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>1 Letters from the Executive Director and the President</p> <p>2 Mapping Literary Landscapes: Environments and Ecosystems • Susan N. Maher and Tracy Tucker</p> <p>3 “We were the land before the land was ours”<br/>The Rev. Dr. Charles A. Peek</p> <p>6 Making Old Truths Effective • Daryl W. Palmer</p> <p>6 In Red Cloud, We Dance • Daniel G. Deffenbaugh</p> <p>8 “A Religion of Grass” • John T. Price</p> <p>10 The Virtues of Native Flora • Tom Lynch</p> | <p>12 Nature, Second Nature, and <i>One of Ours</i> • Mark Facknitz</p> <p>17 Living in the Holes with Badgers: Nostalgia, Children’s Literature and <i>O Pioneers!</i> • Patricia Oman</p> <p>23 Writing Her First Home Pasture: Willa Cather on Her Virginia Environment • Ann Romines</p> <p>28 “That Obliterating Strangeness”: The Prairie as Sublime Landscape in Willa Cather’s <i>My Antonia</i> • Barry Hudek</p> <p>33 Women and Nature in Willa Cather and Her Contemporaries • Maribel Morales</p> |
|--|--|

On the cover: Near Clarkson, Nebraska, 1908. All historic photographs in this issue, except where noted, are from the archives of the Willa Cather Foundation.



## Letter from the Executive Director Ashley Olson

In recent months as we launched our new website and developed our Spring Conference plans, I found myself growing more energized about the exciting things this year has in store for the Foundation. Not only are we celebrating our 60th anniversary year and beginning the final phase of construction on the National Willa Cather Center, but 2015 also brings the publication centenary of Cather’s third novel, *The Song of the Lark*.

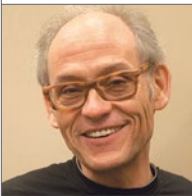
Those who have immersed themselves in Cather’s works know this beloved novel as the timeless story of a young artist in the making. Devoted mentors and educators help guide the story’s heroine, Thea Kronborg, into becoming a world-renowned opera star. Likewise, dedicated support from friends like you has shaped the Foundation into the strong and vibrant organization you know today.

As you’ve come to expect, there are many wonderful programs in store for the coming year. Most exciting, perhaps, is the 15th International Willa Cather Seminar, being held June

5–11 in Red Cloud and Lincoln and co-sponsored by our friends at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s Cather Project.

In addition to stimulating paper sessions and panel discussions, the Seminar will offer many unique opportunities for our constituency to engage in the event. Jules Breton’s painting, *The Song of the Lark*, an inspiration for Cather’s novel, will be on display at the University’s renowned Sheldon Art Museum as part of an exhibition titled “Cather and the Visual.” Historian Richard Norton Smith and author Terese Svoboda will each give a keynote address. *Larksong*, a theatrical retelling of *The Song of the Lark* and the NET Television documentary, *Yours, Willa Cather* will premiere at our Opera House, and a program entitled “The Fine Things of Youth: Words and Music from Willa Cather’s *Lucy Gayheart*” will be held on the Seminar’s final evening.

I hope to connect with you at the Seminar or at one of our many events throughout the year. Of course, you’ll be hearing from us soon with a request for your renewed membership. In this momentous year, please remember the important role your membership plays in helping us fulfill our mission. An added bonus is your renewed membership ensures you’ll continue to receive a subscription to this publication. Thank you for your friendship.



## Letter from the President Thomas Reese Gallagher

When the Willa Cather Foundation opened the doors on its restored Red Cloud Opera House in May 2003, it was not just the fulfillment of a long-held dream—not just a new home in a treasured building, a new phase in our growth. We now had a beautiful art gallery and a restored theater and a new obligation to use them well. In the years since, the Foundation has tried to keep these spaces filled with stimulating and entertaining work. From the first production in the restored Red Cloud Opera House theater—a revival of the 19th century warhorse *The Bohemian Girl*, a touring staple from the years Cather herself was in the audience and a piece that appears more than once in her own work—the Foundation has tried to maintain a steady, pleasing artistic hum about the place.

Early in this new era, we embraced a role as regional center for the arts and humanities. This was a logical but not inevitable consequence of our creating these new facilities. We were, after all, an organization dedicated to encouraging appreciation for, and deeper understanding of, Cather’s works, and to preserving

the historic settings associated with them (nothing there about children’s theater, or tribute bands, or exhibits of contemporary photography). And we knew we couldn’t slight the global aspects of our mission in favor of the local. But this is a matter of careful balance, and our finite resources must be deployed for the benefit of all our constituents. Close to home, that means acknowledging that a number of our guests and visitors might have something on their minds other than Willa Cather. (We can live with that.)

We’re delighted when we can present works that do directly draw upon Cather, such as last year’s fine stage adaptation of *My Ántonia* by Illusion Theater of Minneapolis. But we’re just as pleased to present works that engage in spirited (or perhaps heated) dialogue with Cather, like artist Catherine Meier’s exquisitely printed panoramic grassland drawings and photographer Peter Brown’s haunting photos of the contemporary American West, from *West of Last Chance*, his collaboration with the late writer Kent Haruf (see page 11).

The important thing is to create the experiences (and entertainments) that can nurture the creative imaginations of those members of our audience who have their own stories to tell. With Willa Cather as our presiding spirit, who knows but what other young creative geniuses might be inspired to find their voices at the Red Cloud Opera House?





# Mapping Literary Landscapes: Environments and Ecosystems

On the Cather Prairie near the Kansas-Nebraska border, dips, folds, and depressions in the landscape cause the modern world to disappear and allow these ancient grasslands to burst to the fore. We feel what the young Willa Cather must have experienced. An individual can be overwhelmed, as the young Jim Burden was: “Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out.” To be so humbled is a good reminder of our transience, our ultimate return to the soil. As Jim puts it, “that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.”

Returning to Red Cloud, one crosses the Republican River, the site of great adventure in Cather’s short story “The Enchanted Bluff,” and passes by the creek and cottonwoods portrayed so memorably in Cather’s beautiful short novel *A Lost Lady*. Red Cloud is not a large town, and, even in its heyday as a bustling railroad town in the late 19th century, it was always a small settlement surrounded by an immense landscape, thousands of acres both cultivated and wild, “where the weather was the great fact.” The townsfolk required no further reminder of nature’s supremacy.

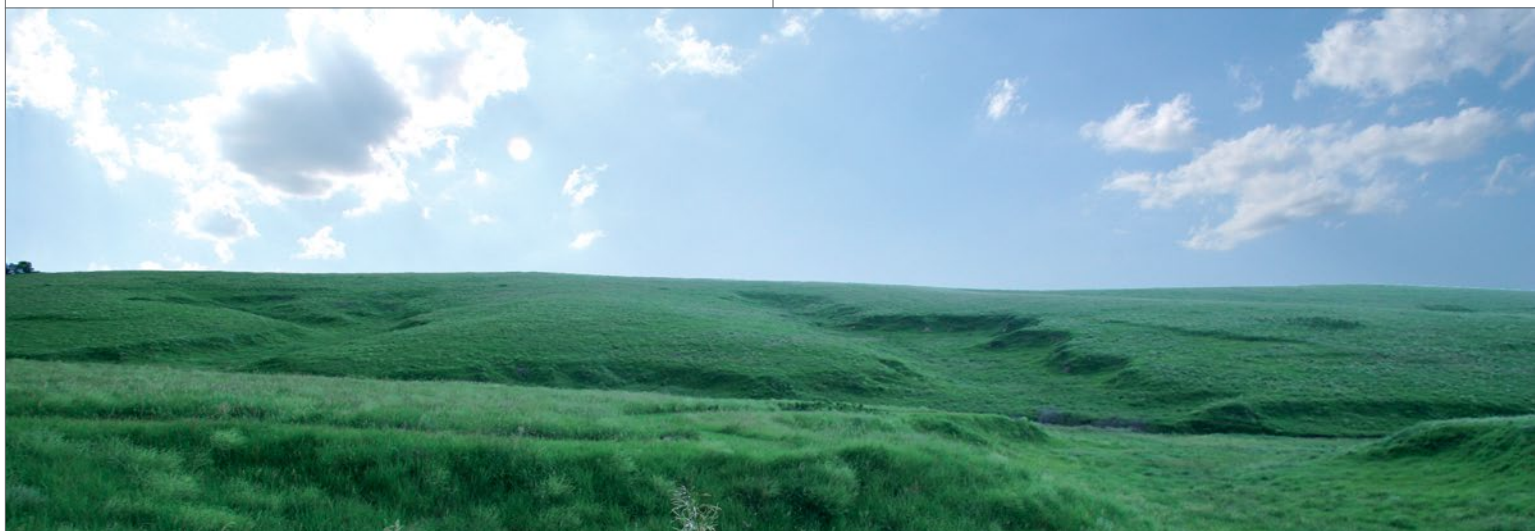
From the 5th to the 7th of June 2014, visitors and scholars from around North America and the world gathered in Red Cloud to discuss Willa Cather’s literary landscapes, to dive into the environments and ecosystems that inform and illuminate her fiction. Over three days, attendants of the 59th annual Spring Conference walked the prairie, toured the town and country environments, watched a beautiful dramatic performance of *My Ántonia*, and listened to scholarly papers that examined all aspects of Cather’s landscapes, natural and cultural ecosystems,

and literary influences. On the walls of the Red Cloud Opera House hung photographer Peter Brown’s stark and beautiful pictures of Great Plains people, artifacts, and grounds. Writers Julene Bair and Clay Jenkinson shared essays with participants and engaged all with their insights into grasslands history, culture, and environmental challenges. The 2014 Spring Conference was rich in art, dialogue, and appreciation of Cather, the Plains landscape that nurtured her, and the literary legacy into which she folded her own art and thus influenced generations of writers to follow.

This special issue provides a sampling of the Conference’s highlights. We have also included representative essays from emerging scholars and established scholars. We have attempted to distill the lucid and engaging comments from our “Passing Show” panelists. We have aimed to convey the rich flavor of the Conference both for those who attended and those of you who could not join us. Cather’s unique ability to reimagine and reframe the American landscapes where she lived and traveled is a facet of her greatness. We hope this issue captures the spirit of the weekend and the trends in Cather scholarship that place Cather in a tradition of nature writing that reflects her era and informs our own.



Susan N. Maher and Tracy Tucker



# “We were the land’s before the land was ours”

The Rev. Dr. Charles A. Peek

*This piece was delivered in slightly different form as Reverend Peek’s homily during services at Grace Church on Saturday, June 7, 2014.*

Tolstoy, by whom Cather was much influenced, asked, “How much land must a man own?” The answer may in some measure depend not so much on the person, or his or her perceived needs, or even the social ecology of the community and the role land might play in it, but on the geological and botanical and zoological character of the land, the character which so fills Cather’s writing.

There we find the Nebraska prairie, the Arizona desert mesas, the Quebec rock and forest, Virginia’s rolling hills—and in all of these richly described locations we find that the constant is the tragicomic nature of humankind, being both possessor of the land and by the land possessed. “We were the land’s before the land was ours,” wrote Robert Frost, one of the poets she most admired.

It is not hard to see Cather as our Tolstoy (with Faulkner our Dostoyevsky and Hemingway our Turgenev), but I doubt those comparisons are original to me, nor are they, I imagine, entirely fair to other writers and the other parallels we could draw.

But it is fair to say that within or outside of literary traditions, nature has of late loomed up more largely in our range of attention than it did only a few short decades ago when most people could either ignore it or take it for granted. That is, we ignored or took it for granted until it became imperiled, and its peril has gradually started calling us to attention. If the nightly talk shows have discovered the peril, we are imperiled indeed!

And the nature to which we now attend is neither the idyllic world of pastoral literature nor the world “red in tooth and claw” that followed the Darwinian awakening, but nature itself, as nearly as we can grasp it; that is, nature as we grasp it through an environmental understanding, through an ecological imagination.

I recently ran across one possible gauge of the place nature holds in our hearts today. Writing of his role as a bombardier on the first flight into Baghdad at the outset of the Iraq invasion, Jason Armagost catalogues for us the books

he has taken along in his book bag, his reading for the long, cold flight. Among his list are these titles: David Petersen’s *Heartblood*, Jim Harrison’s *Just Before Dark*, Ted Kooser’s *Winter Morning Walks*, Billy Collins’s *Nine Horses*, Wendell Berry’s *A Timbered Choir*, Rick Bass’s *Winter*, Edward Abbey’s *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness*, Dean Torges’s *Hunting the Osage Bow*, Saint-Exupéry’s *Wind, Sand and Stars*, Thomas McGuane’s *A Life in Fishing*.

That’s quite a lot of reading about nature, environment, and our relation to it and place within it.

At the same time, it seems equally fair to say that both our appreciation for and understanding of religion continues to wane. Whether seen in declines in active participation in churches or in the plentiful discussions of atheism along the theme “the no’s have it,” it appears the average young bombardier would rather be solaced by recollections of his home in nature than exhortations of his home in heaven.

I would add that, with certain qualifications, I tend to agree with Armogast’s reading list, certainly preferring it to the books I browsed on a recent visit to what calls itself a Christian bookstore.

It is similarly not easy to pigeonhole Cather. She seemed to take seriously her and her family’s confirmation into the Episcopal Church here in Grace Church where we are gathered this morning, and she found much to admire in the Church of the Ascension, New York, where she sometimes worshiped. She did not find enough there, however, to make her even sign up as a member, and one finds in her an undeniable grain of skepticism.

Addressing Ellen “Little Neddins” Gere about her stay with the Axtells when she first moved to Pittsburgh, Cather would write, “When I get through going to church and telling Indian stories I will have no more sense of truth left. . . .” That letter was written July 27, 1896, and I don’t see that sentiment or spirit abating across her lifetime. Cather seems to have sensed something like the saying currently making the rounds: spirituality is a relationship to the holy, religion is crowd control.

However, despite her skepticism regarding organized religion and the doctrinal differences in which it specializes, Cather always exhibited a profound spiritual sense of an ultimate creative force and moral authority. She might demur







*Church letting out on the Plains, ca. 1900.*

from rigid and narrow definitions of that mystery (witness “Eric Hermannson’s Soul”) but she just as eagerly embraced the sort of spirituality that fosters reason, tolerance, and compassion (three elements Guy Reynolds noted regarding her appreciation of the faith of her Archbishop).

Throughout most of my reading of Cather over the past quarter century, it has struck me that most of her work could be seen as variation on endless combinations of land, pioneer, art, and faith. In our reading, we watch the land sometimes become a character and always shape character, as Julene Bair has noted. We see the artist who pioneers and we catch the ways in which the land, as well as prayer, can be seen as sacred.

It is no surprise, then, that Cather’s works find their way not only into standard places such as classes in American literature, but also into courses in environmental literature, immigrant experience, feminist and LGBT writing, as well as into discussions of narrative, style, and genre as positions on an ideological spectrum.

This gathering does not need a lengthy discourse on Cather’s relationship to these themes. Last year we followed her portrait of the pioneer, and this year we are following her artistic appreciation of the land, of natural forces, of the delicate balance of life. We will hear of her descriptions of the land, of how she sets an artistic and possibly sexual awakening in Walnut Canyon, a canyon of which she knew every inch and every shadow of change, or how the measure of the granite for the Archbishop’s cathedral are the rock temples of the Navajo’s desert. Our Cather Prairie is but a remnant of The Prairie she made famous. Her letters show her descriptions of the colors of wines, colors coming from the fields, the wine like wildflowers, and her joy in being in Paris but her greater joy of living by the Seine.

What is not so often discussed, however, is the perspective her religious connections and understanding might have given to her views of nature and the place in it for human endeavor and icons of holiness.

Our lessons this morning allow us, at least in a small way, to suggest a perspective that I believe would easily be further established in subsequent discussions of her texts.

I chose the lessons directly from the *Book of Common Prayer* that Cather would have last known, that of 1928, and from the lessons that prayer book set aside for what it called “Rogation,” days set apart for the periodic observation of creation, stewardship of the land, the preservation of natural resources in the encounter with agricultural enterprises. In the religious calendar Cather knew, these Rogation days joined Thanksgiving as days for pointed reflection on the relationship of God and people, planting and harvest, soil and nurture.

The lesson from Luke (Luke 11:5–15 Common English Bible) establishes a biblical commonplace: God’s providence can only be characterized as a “plentitude”—there is no scarcity in Eden, no limit to creation’s abundance, no measure of the giver except as extraordinarily prodigal in the giving. Here comes to mind the line that keynote speaker Clay Jenkinson cited from Lois Phillips Hudson’s *Reapers of the Dust*: “an eternity of abundance.” And more, as the oddly out-of-place last verse suggests, when the human spirit is rightly attuned to this divine plentitude, then even those that life has muted find their voice. Not surprising teaching from the Jesus who said, “If you be silent, even the stones will sing.” There is something profound here about the well-being of the community, the inclusion of the marginalized, and a reverence for the natural world.

That very promising, very hopeful lesson does not stand alone. It is paired with Ezekiel (Ezekiel 34:25–30 New International Version), one of the four great prophetic voices of the Hebrew scripture, something of a prequel to Luke with an added variation to the theme. Ezekiel, too, envisions a peaceable kingdom of plenty, also formed by a covenant, an agreement between human and divine wills, but Ezekiel adds that the way to this abundance-producing relationship requires ridding the land of its devouring wild beasts, not such as buffalo, elk, wolves, or the so-called “savages” settlement removed, but in fact later identified by Ezekiel as famine and shame, clearly beasts for whose behavior we humans are responsible!

The Rogation message—its perspective on an environmental imagination—comes in the pairing: abundance is God’s doing, scarcity is ours. Cut down the rain forest, then don’t be surprised if you get drought. We human beings turn out to be the sometimes evil and often devouring beasts, perpetrating famine and scorn, with (as the old hymn had it) “the whole realm of nature ours,” that is, sadly, as our prey.

Who knew that such a contemporary understanding would actually be an ancient understanding, and a biblical one at that? I’m proposing that Cather did. Why else does she hold her characters responsible? Why else are her landscapes integral to her characters? How else understand her letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher (March 15, 1916), protesting about Thea Kronberg and *The Song of the Lark* that “my point was not the development of a genius—my point is always Moonstone.” Because, of course, Moonstone is not in *The Song of the Lark* so much a village as the hub of Thea’s explorations and acquaintance with her surroundings—the seasons, the land, the place. In other words, as in Julene Bair’s title, it is about “love and reckoning.”

If Cather did not get this from our scripture today, she could have gotten it almost anywhere else in the scripture as the reading of the lessons in her church would have presented it. She could begin with the circumscription of Eden by four rivers, the idyllic encompassed by the natural. She could have seen in the Eden story the preference for living closely with nature that made for suspicion of the agricultural life of the plains, with its canals in place of rivers and its granaries guarded by snakes. She could have found it in Jesus’s preference for parables drawn from the world of planting and harvesting. In the scripture as a whole, “all things come of thee O Lord.”

In the same vein, regardless of the odd interview Cather gave the *New York Times* cited by Clay Jenkinson in his keynote speech, where her own work was concerned, Cather thanks Elizabeth Shipley Sergeant (April 22, 1923) for understanding that the heart of *O Pioneers!* is “the country itself.” She writes, “It’s a fluid black soil that runs through your fingers, composed not by the decay of big vegetation but of the light ashes of grass. It’s all soft and somehow that influences the mood in which one writes of it.” Or, as she writes in *O Pioneers!*, “the great fact was the land itself.”

Cather knew her scripture much like she knew most things, not in a superficial mastery of trivial details but in a keen and intuitive grasp of what lies at the heart of it, how it resonates with life. If for her the scripture was not so much a proof text as a portal, it was portal to seeing how rich and fragile is the world around us . . . as rich and fragile as the world within us, both created by and badly in need of Grace.





# Making Old Truths Effective

*It was my pleasure to serve as moderator for the Passing Show during the 2014 Cather Spring Conference. Sponsored by Humanities Nebraska, the panel was entitled “Settlement’s Aftermath on the Plains: Challenges to Restoration and Love of Place.” The sponsorship was fitting. As John O’Malley succinctly explains in Four Cultures of the West, the first humanists sought out “the wisdom that knows how to make old truths effective in new ways for the common good.” Dan Deffenbaugh, Tom Lynch, and John Price certainly embrace this venerable ambition. In the retrospective essays that follow, they offer versions of their comments during the panel. Like the humanists of old, their writing turns on stories, and their wisdom runs deep. I invite you to follow the rhizomes, taking plenty of time for reflection and even Rogation.*

Daryl W. Palmer | Regis University



*Passing Show 2014 panelists Daryl Palmer, Dan Deffenbaugh, John Price, Tom Lynch.*

## In Red Cloud, We Dance

Daniel G. Deffenbaugh | Hastings College

I am very pleased to be able to participate in this year’s Willa Cather Conference, especially given the topic of our discussion this morning: “Settlement’s Aftermath on the Plains: Challenges to Restoration and Love of Place.” At the outset I would like to offer this caveat: my area of specialty is religion and philosophy; I am not a Cather scholar. There is, however, one point of concern here where our interests clearly overlap: love of place. This has been my abiding passion for the last thirty years, and I think Cather’s work has much to say about how we might move forward into an uncertain 21st century.

First, I would like to offer a little personal background on why this topic is so important to me. A few years ago I read what I believe to be one of the most important books written in the last decade: Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods*. I think the subtitle of this work merits our consideration: *Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. I wish I had time to go into all that is so compelling about this text, but for now I’d simply like to focus on a common experience that Louv and I share. Perhaps it is one that some of you can relate to.

Growing up in the Midwest in the late sixties I, like Louv, had the luxury of wandering through fields and wading in creeks with nary a thought of the “stranger danger” that so fills the minds and imaginations of today’s children and parents. I was good with books, but it was under wet rocks and in birds’ nests that I believe I received my real education. There was so much

about my twelve-year-old sense of self that was informed by my relationship to a five-acre world that I called my own. Even then, I somehow intuited that *who* I was—my “face,” if you will—was tied intimately to *where* I was—my “place.”

The wheels of progress, however, pay scant attention to the identities of little boys. I remember so clearly the evening my parents sat me down to tell me that they would be selling our little corner of creation and moving away from the encroaching tentacles of the city. In a few months we were out of the house and off the land, and I can still recall the pain in my stomach as I watched big yellow machines wipe away a lifetime of memories. Trees whose faces I knew so well were piled up and burned. In a matter of a day my world was reduced to a barren, empty lot.

There is one memory about that day that will remain with me forever. Out of force of habit, my younger sister had walked home to our old house after school. As I, too, came to the front porch of our former nest, I found her pounding on the front door, tears in her eyes, pleading with whoever might be there to hear: “Let me in! Let me in!” But there was no one home.

I cannot help but think that there is something instructive here, not just for someone who still lives the pain of that recollection, but for all of us. As we move forward into an uncertain future, I wonder if we too might one day find ourselves collectively on the outside looking in. This, I think, is where Willa Cather can be helpful, because it is her love of place—and





this in a landscape that is often so very hard to love—that makes her writing so compelling.

When I recently reread several of Cather's novels I found myself interpreting them through a unique lens, one that has developed for me over the years in my own work on theology and sense of place. The joy of reading great literature is that one rarely interprets it in the same way twice. Context and station in life always determine how we focus our attention. For me this time I found myself thinking about a distinction between *topography* and *choreography* and how Cather's strongest characters seem always to have a sense that their landscape is a place for dancing.

Theologian Belden Lane suggests there are essentially two ways we relate to our environment, and these determine the values with which we make our decisions there. On the one hand is topography, an attitude that sees the world in mathematical terms. Topography is concerned with dimensions and numbers, and how these might be manipulated to achieve the most efficient use of resources. If you want to get a good sense of this, take a look outside the window the next time you fly over Nebraska. For miles you will see nothing but a four-square grid that has been imposed upon the landscape, irrespective of terrain. From a topographical perspective, humans live *on* the land.

Choreography, by contrast, requires a special kind of seeing and hearing. The Greek word *chora* is often translated simply as "place," but it carries with it a wealth of underlying

meanings. This is not merely a locale that can be reduced to a point on a map. Think instead of the rich experiences you may have had growing up in a special corner of the world, a realm that you knew intimately and whose sights, sounds, smells, and dispositions were as close to you as those of your brothers and sisters. *Chora* denotes a place where we can hear pleasing strains of music that are not always evident to the casual observer. It is where we sense a distinct rhythm in movement of the trees and the changing of the seasons. *Chora* is where we dance.

I would suggest to you as we begin our conversation this morning that Willa Cather can still inspire us to live gently in this place, especially as we think about the challenges of restoring a world so quickly on the wane. We have long been informed by the topographical mind, so much so that we can rarely consider the value of any corner of this planet without attributing a number to it. But Cather's cast of characters and her evocative prose call us in so many ways to affirm that we do not simply live *on* this land, we live *in* it. And the land lives in us. Cather reminds us, even as the wheels of industry move on apace, that if we but bend our ear we can still discern here the deeper rhythms that impelled the indomitable *Ántonia* to dance, or prompted crazy Ivar to walk always with his bare feet on the ground. Should we lose these insights, I fear that one day we may find ourselves, like my young sister so many years ago, peering into a home that was once ours that will no longer let us in.

Public sale at A. P. Sidebottoms  
place in Nebraska, near  
Nov. 16<sup>th</sup> 1908.  
Cedar Bluffs, Kans.



The message on the reverse of this real photo postcard: "Snohomish, Wash. Jan. 1st, 1909. Dear Sister —This is a picture of our house taken sale day (Nov. 16th). It was taken from the south east the camera being over in Kansas. We did not know he was going to take them. Ella and I are standing in the door. May and Mabel are sitting on a box this side of the well. Willie is behind the wagon bows and Uncle Daniel sitting front of the tent and the rest were in the house I guess. From Nona. Old Jumbo is out there on the hill."



I'd like to speak on behalf of the role literature can play in transforming our relationship to place. Or at least the ways it has transformed my own relationship to place, particularly the tallgrass prairie, which remains the most endangered ecosystem in the country, perhaps the world. I was raised in Fort Dodge, Iowa, a small industrial island in the middle of what seemed to me endless fields of beans and corn—fields I considered the definition of the state in which I lived and planned to leave after college. That changed for me in 1993, when my wife and I were living in a rural Iowa town, while I finished graduate school. As I've written about elsewhere, the severe flooding of that summer caused an eruption of native grasses and wildflowers near our home that inspired in me an unexpected curiosity about prairie ecosystems. That curiosity blossomed into a passion that has inspired most of my writing ever since.

During that time, I also began to seriously study the literature of my home region, which brought me back to Willa Cather. I'd first heard of her in early adolescence, from my grandmother who, along with generations of ancestors on my father's side, had been born and raised just across the border from Red Cloud in Smith Center, Kansas. The landscape Cather describes in her Nebraska novels is the same one in which my pioneer ancestors lived and worked. The celebration of that pioneer heritage, I was told in a high school literature class, is at the center of *My Ántonia*, the first book of hers that I read. That was during the 1980s farm crisis, however, and as I discuss in *Not Just Any Land*, I mostly identified with Jim Burden's desire to escape the “curious depression” of life in his town, to leave it forever in the “incommunicable past.” For me, this was an overly familiar story of exile, not an easy celebration.

By the time I revisited Cather's work, I was well into my “prairie conversion” and had read numerous fictional and nonfiction accounts of life on the prairies and fields of the Midwest, including environmental histories. I would eventually include a number of the more autobiographical accounts in *The Tallgrass Prairie Reader*, ranging from the 1600s to the present, which presented an unexpected diversity of emotional responses to prairie ecosystems and their treatment by people. Although there were certainly expressions of fear and disdain by those encountering the tallgrass wilderness for the first time, a larger number proclaimed its physical and even spiritual beauty. Eliza Woodson Farnham, for instance, wrote in *Life in Prairie Land*, her 1846 memoir of farm life in Illinois:

Spring morning on the prairies! I wish I could find the language that would convey to the mind of the reader an adequate idea of the deep joy which the soul drinks in from every feature of this wonderful scene! If he could

stand where I have often stood, when the rosy clouds were piled against the eastern sky, and the soft tremulous light was streaming aslant the dewy grass, while not a sound of life broke on the ear, save the wild note [of the prairie chicken] just mentioned, so much in harmony with the whole of visible nature, he would feel one of the charms which bind the hearts of the sons and daughters of this land.

Given the contemporary celebration of our pioneer heritage, I was likewise surprised to find so many expressions of shock and sadness over the destruction of the prairies—an almost unfathomable loss of life—by those who actually witnessed and participated in it. Pulitzer prize-winning author Hamlin Garland, who grew up on a farm in Iowa, wrote in 1893, “The prairies are gone. I held one of the ripping, snarling, breaking plows that rolled the hazel bushes and wild sunflowers under . . . and so there comes into my reminiscences an unmistakable note of sadness.” William J. Haddock, a pioneer farmer in Iowa, confessed that the “passing of the prairie” made him sad and depressed. As he writes in his 1901 memoir: “I hold that whoever has not seen the prairies has not seen the grandeur and beauty of Iowa. The contemplation of greater wealth in buildings and farm products than the pioneers saw is a poor compensation.” One of the most powerful representations of that transformation in fiction can be found in *O Pioneers!*, where the narrator observes: “It is sixteen years since John Bergson died. . . . Could he rise from beneath [his grave], he would not know the country under which he has been asleep. The shaggy coat of the prairie, which they lifted to make him a bed, has vanished forever.” Haddock became a lawyer and remained in the state, but Garland and Cather eventually left for the coasts. There were many reasons for their exodus, including proximity to centers of literary publishing, but I often wonder what role the destruction of the wild places they knew as children may have played. From an ecological perspective, they had no home to return to.

Following my awakening in the early 1990s to the beauty and ongoing destruction of the prairies, I wrestled with conflicted feelings about home, and with my own desire, as a writer, to leave it for what I believed were more beautiful, more environmentally progressive, more culturally diverse places. If I committed to residing in this familiar, seemingly over-determined landscape, what would be the consequences for my life and my art?

During that time, I picked up *O Pioneers!* and encountered what I thought was a similar ambivalence. Sure, there was admiration for what pioneer Alexandra Bergson accomplished while transforming prairie into cropland, but the cost of that transformation was the death of something significant in her







Country schoolhouse, Arcadia, Nebraska, ca. 1907.

emotional life—a blindness that kept her from sensing the sexual tension between Marie and Emil or to feel anything more than friendship for Carl, even on the threshold of marriage. Those most closely associated with the wild prairies, such as Marie, who expresses sympathy for the wild ducks and consummates her love for Emil among the wild roses of an overgrown orchard, and Ivar, who claims his “Bible seems truer to him” while communing with nature, are facing at best social exile, and at worst impoverishment, institutionalization, or death. Even Carl, the artist, who sensed the feelings between Marie and Emil as one felt “the spring coming,” and expresses a longing for the country when it was “a wild old beast,” must leave or accept economic dependence on a rich, agricultural benefactor. As for Alexandra, the narrator claims she is an artist, as well, but the practice of that art has robbed her of an inner wildness, the messy yet sustaining, beautiful passions that feed so many other kinds of art, now relegated to the world of her dreams. When I first read *O Pioneers!*, it felt to me as if Cather, while mythologizing her home landscape, was at the same time revealing why, as an artist, she couldn’t live there. *Here’s what would have happened to me, if I had stayed. Here’s what did happen to the land.*

And yet, despite Alexandra’s limits, there is that early moment on the Divide while returning from examining the river farms, when the still wild prairie “seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious.” The narrator—or is it Alexandra’s inner voice?—reflects: “For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning.” As a general statement, this has all kinds of short-sighted racial and ecological implications, but as a personal moment of elation in the midst of a wild, home landscape—which is how I initially read it—the expression carries a positive force that continues to reverberate in my life. During all my years of living in this region, I had never experienced that kind of love for the land or yearning for any kind of future within it. Not until I awakened to what remained of the endangered prairies, and the possibility of an art wedded to restoration.

It can be argued that Alexandra’s love and yearning was, in contrast, tied to the future economic exploitation of the land. Could it also be argued, however, that those residual feelings, originally inspired by the wild country, may have led her to protect Ivar, befriend Marie, indulge Emil, and marry Carl—people who, like the prairie grasses, kept jumping the fences others had built to contain them? Fences which, in some cases, Alexandra herself had constructed? This is what I believe separates Alexandra from others in the novel who have worked to “conquer” the land, including her brothers and Frank Shabata. For them, the violent process of plowing down the prairies, of displacing and destroying its native wildlife, has (to use Alexandra’s term) “stiffened” their minds and led to a kind of inner violence that works itself outward in acts of psychological abuse, suicide and even murder. Alexandra’s love, her compassion, however limited or unconscious, for what remains of wildness in the land and in ourselves, offers a kind of hope to which I’ve clung more than a few times over the years.

I’m not alone. Since deciding to stay close to home and dedicating myself to writing about prairie, I’ve heard many different versions of “love and yearning” for the wild land expressed by, for instance, scientists working to reconstruct prairie ecosystems and by urban volunteers collecting prairie plant seeds for nearby restorations and by farmers protecting a portion of unplowed prairie, despite economic pressures. I’ve repeatedly found them on the page, as well. One of my favorite quotes from *The Tallgrass Prairie Reader* is by Louise Erdrich, in an essay entitled “Big Grass.” Here is another, more sensual version of the love and yearning expressed by Alexandra. More overtly spiritual, as well, which reminds me of what Chuck Peek said during this morning’s homily about the need for Rogation, a time set aside for “pointed reflection on the relationship of God and people, planting and harvest, soil and nurture.” As we imagine the future of settlement in this region, the fate of the tallgrass will largely be determined by whether or not we are willing to engage the difficult ecological and ethical challenges represented by Rogation. Literature, whether by Willa Cather or Louise Erdrich



or the myriad of other authors who have written out of their own relationship to the prairies, can play an important role in that. For many of us in that group, Erdrich provides the common prayer:

I would be converted to a religion of grass. *Sleep the winter away and rise headlong each spring. Sink deep roots. Conserve water. Respect and nourish your neighbors and*

*never let trees gain the upper hand.* Such are the tenets and dogmas. As for the practice—*grow lush in order to be devoured or caressed, stiffen in sweet elegance, invent startling seeds*—those also make sense. *Bow beneath the arm of fire. Connect underground. Provide. Provide. Be lovely and do no harm.*

## The Virtues of Native Flora

Tom Lynch | University of Nebraska–Lincoln

During my formal presentation during the Cather Spring Conference, I compared the work of several women authors from both the United States and Australia. Each of the authors composed works in which she described the settlement experience in either the U.S. West or the Australian Outback. The main authors I discussed were Willa Cather (naturally) and Bess Streeter Aldrich from the United States and Marie Mahood and Jill Ker Conway from Australia. Employing an ecocritical analysis, informed by settler-colonial theory, and drawing on the work of scholars such as Jay Arthur, Patrick Wolfe, Janette Hancock, and Richard Manning, I argued that in the work of these and similar authors, the original native landscape where settlement was occurring, typically an arid or semi-arid grassland biome, was invariably described as a barren, bleak environment, devoid of any meaningful vegetation. Phrases such as “nothing but prairie” or “nothing but land” were frequently used to describe and denigrate that environment. I then observed how frequently in such works women plant non-native flowers around their dwelling places in an effort to beautify and civilize them. This, I argued, was a problematic settler-colonial ritual by which the settlers established their possession of the land and their right to dispossess the native inhabitants as well as a process that contributed not just real ecological harm (from the spread of invasive species, in particular) but also created a psychological distancing between settler culture and the natural environment. Finally, I argued that such gardens, and the literary works in which they figure, are intended to signal, though sometimes prematurely, the culminating success of the settler project. As Hancock succinctly phrases it regarding the Australian context (in *A Not So Innocent Vision: Re-visiting the Literary Works of Ellen Liston, Jane Sarah Doudy and Myrtle Rose White*), the “planting of rose gardens, fruit trees and lawns reflected the fantasies of a white woman attempting to transform an alien space into a known cultural geography on one level while legitimising the appropriation of Aboriginal land on another.” She memorably refers to this process as an “Anglicised rite of habitation.” From an ecocritical perspective, the attitude that motivated this process—that there was nothing of value in the landscape prior to the arrival of European settler—has, I argued, been a contributing factor in the widespread ecological degradation



*Homesteaders, ca. 1909.*

of arid and semi-arid grasslands in both the U.S. West and Australian Outback.

In that earlier presentation I described what I saw as a problem. During today’s Passing Show, I want to highlight an alternative approach that has been followed by some settler women that points toward a potential solution. My examples are Alice Duncan-Kemp, who grew up at Mooraberrie

Station, a cattle property in Queensland’s Channel Country, and Linda Hasselstrom, a rancher and writer from South Dakota. In her 1961 memoir, *Our Channel Country*, Duncan-Kemp describes how she utilized many of the local native plants in her garden. Rather than describing her arid landscape as deficient and in need of replacement, she describes the many walks she made across a vibrant and startlingly diverse landscape in the company of the local Kurawali people, who told her about the many uses of the native flora—as food, as medicine, as ornaments, as spiritual forces. She desired to bring these plants into her life and to use them to adorn her home.

In the U.S., a similar approach to gardening and appreciation for native plants is exemplified by memoirist and poet Linda Hasselstrom. Hasselstrom has spent many years living on a cattle ranch in the short-grass prairie of western South Dakota. In her 1991 essay “Lettuce Bouquets for a Dry Country,” she reports how in response to a long dry spell she decided it was time to “stop replacing native flora with vegetation that must be fertilized and cultivated, that does not belong here.” Rather than battle aridity, in a way all too often celebrated by settler-colonial literature, she adjusts to it, and she does so not grudgingly but with an earnest commitment to creating a new, more ecologically attuned identity that she expresses in the landscaping of her home. “My house,” she proudly notes, “is surrounded by buffalo grass, big and little bluestem, threawn grass, sideoats and blue grama.”

Duncan-Kemp and Hasselstrom illustrate an awareness that the arid and semi-arid grasslands where they have settled are far from deficient landscapes in need of replacement, but rather that these lands have a sufficiency that we should appreciate and, where possible, restore. They demonstrate how women (and men too) from settler-colonial societies can enjoy flowers and gardens while simultaneously enhancing rather than undermining the





local flora. This is not only a necessary adaptation to climate (and, unfortunately, to climate change), but more importantly it can be read as a small but not inconsequential counter-colonial gesture of reconciliation with place as well as a necessary component in the evolution away from a pioneering settler-colonial identity toward a more sustainable inhabitory one. This is not a simple or short-term process, and we are only in its earliest stages. Its moral and practical complexity, however, should not prevent us from making the effort. A resistance to settler-colonial discourses of deficiency and an acknowledgement of the virtues of native flora are necessary, if by no means sufficient, places to begin.

Let me conclude with a few practical takeaways. In the classroom, when we are teaching this sort of settler-colonial literature (*O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, *With a Lantern in Her Hand*, etc.) I suggest that we should highlight and critically examine those places in the works where the native vegetation is denigrated as well as examine the cultural and political motivations and biases revealed by the plantings of lawns and flower gardens full of alien species, a practice these books so often celebrate. This process

has come to seem completely normal to us, and is usually barely noticed as we read the literature, where elements of the human-focused plot seem more compelling. But such moments, when characters engage in the planting of daffodils and lawns, are not normal or inevitable. Other options were available. We should seek to denaturalize those moments.

But the implications extend well beyond the classroom. For me, the most exciting thing happening in Catherland is the Cather Memorial Prairie. I've greatly enjoyed my walks across that thriving prairie this week. I'd love to see it used as a basis for a larger prairie restoration effort that would link with other regional efforts, encourage conservation easements on neighboring farms, and similar activities. Though I have been critical of the overall way Cather and similar writers portray this aspect of settlement, there is no doubt that their works have created a very real sense of, indeed a deep love of, the places about which they write. Such love, such local pride of place, can be harnessed to inspire local land owners to re-prairie portions of their properties and to cultivate a more bioregionally appropriate landscape aesthetic around their homes.



*Marsland, Nebraska, 1993, by Peter Brown. From West of Last Chance, Peter Brown & Kent Haruf.*





# Nature, Second Nature, and *One of Ours*

Mark Facknitz | James Madison University

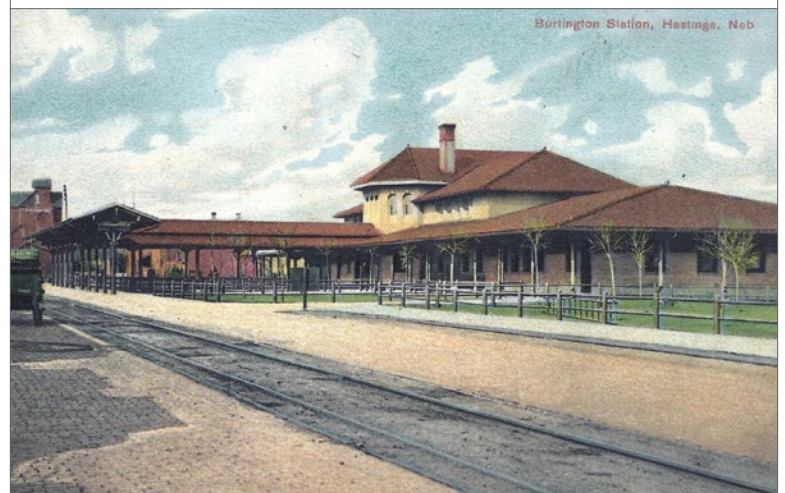
Over the years, like many readers, I have been persuaded that Willa Cather is among the most astute of authors when it comes to understanding our relation to Great Nature—that world of distant horizons, broad landscapes, sweeping rivers, and deep starry nights that beautify her novels with moments of lyric intensity. There is a concept of Nature in Cather that can at moments appear remarkably Wordsworthian, revealed when, in spite of the inhospitality of the prairie, a Natural beneficence is enhanced by wise and gentle stewardship, as in Grandmother Burden and Antonia's gardens, each in its way fecund because of the gardener's deep acceptance of the facts of soil, weather, and physical labor. There are also telling images of perfect kinship between person and nature in Cather—from Crazy Ivar's dugout (*O Pioneers!*, 1913) to Cécile's visit to the Île d'Orléans (*Shadows on the Rock*, 1931)—which might reiterate the point of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1803/1806) that "To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears" (lines 207–208).

Unlike Wordsworth, however, Willa Cather understands that primary nature is not concerned with our well-being—only occasionally and then apparently beautiful, as when the Île d'Orléans appears to Cécile as a "landscape [that] looked as *if* it had been arranged to please the eye" (emphasis added). Assuming that Nature is fundamentally beautiful can be a treacherous mistake, as it is for Emil who as he arrives in late afternoon at the orchard in which he will die, he sees "long fingers of light reached through the apple branches as through a net; the orchard was riddled and shot with gold; light was the reality, the trees were merely interferences that reflected and refracted the light" (231). True, we cannot help ourselves, for being human we will inevitably seek to experience nature as beautiful, pleasant, and when not Edenic then at least hospitable. Cather, then, more like Keats than Wordsworth, insists that nature is indifferent. Indeed, nature kills us.

Primary nature can only briefly and accidentally *seem* to be beautiful—in other words, when we falsify it—but it is always ready to render us speechless at the sublimity of its indifferent and absolute power. Cather tends to figure sublime nature as something deep, subterranean and watery, like an aquifer or an underground river, as when Frank Shabata "[i]n the warm, breathless night . . . heard a murmuring sound, perfectly inarticulate, as low as the sound of water coming from a spring, where there is no fall, and

where there are no stones to fret it" (235) and, as he holds his breath and tries to hear, the sound disappears. The susurrant returns just before Frank shoots, as "the murmur, like water welling out of the ground," and "he heard it more distinctly, and his blood was quicker than his brain" (235). Similarly, in *The Song of the Lark* (1915) the sound of water at the bottom of dark Panther Canyon menaces Thea as she descends, the "voice of the stream at the bottom of the gorge . . . hollow and threatening . . . another voice altogether [that] seemed to say that the world could get on very well without people, red or white; that under the human world there was a geological world, conducting its silent, immense operations which were indifferent to man" (345). The trope endures. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), Bishop Latour finds himself with Jacinto in a dank cave, at once glacial and vaginal, with "a fetid odour, not very strong but highly disagreeable" (134) where recently there had been a fire but now gray light and heavy cold. Jacinto regrets bringing him to this sacred place, and asks the Bishop to promise to forget it promptly when he leaves.

Yet there is a second nature as well, arising out of our confused relation between our delusion of a beneficent nature and the deep and indifferent nature that entails both life and death. Second nature is typically represented by our adaptations to place—Paul's Pittsburgh, Frank Shabata's prison, Jim Burden's railway company's observation cars, either of the Professor's houses, the Archbishop's cathedral, Cécile's kitchen or, most perversely, the space in which Jeanne le Ber immures herself. The environments become so habitual that their occupants confuse them with original nature,



*A Litho-Chrome postcard showing the Burlington Station, Hastings, Nebraska, ca. 1907.*





confusing how things happen to be with how things necessarily must be, a perilous conflation of accident with necessity. Cather understood the hazard in this, for many of her plots turn on the protagonist's mistaking of the urgencies of primary nature with the illusions and contingencies of second nature. It takes wisdom to see the difference. The Archbishop does when on the way to Ácoma he finds himself outside the gates of Eden, "as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape" (100).

*One of Ours* (1922) appears to be the hinge text in Cather's growing awareness that second nature—in its modern forms—may be increasingly imperious in shaping our lives. Claude Wheeler, tender idealist and naturally noble individual, is squelched by father and brothers, for whom farming is about power and money; then by Enid, who confuses life with digestion and defecation; and at last, of course, by a war that requires his life but trivializes his heroism. Moreover, this evisceration of a gentle nature occurs against the background of the transformation of the heartland. The First World War accelerated changes underway in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*. By 1918 the landscape had completely yielded to straight roads, a network of railroads, and new agricultural methods that caused the windbreaks to be cut down and the fields expanded as wartime grain prices encouraged mechanized monoculture. *One of Ours*, from the year the world broke in two, marks the period in history that Cather will soon abjure as subject for fiction. In that respect, I find it interesting that *One of Ours* is her book in which second nature overwhelms primary nature: capitalism, narcissism of others, and industrial war become the principal shaping forces of our lives, displacing community, selflessness, and chivalry.

In "Changing Trains" I argued that Cather was profoundly aware of the penetration of the upper Midwest by the railroad, which as William Cronin demonstrates in *Nature's Metropolis* "left almost nothing unchanged" and "to those whose lives it touched . . . seemed at once so ordinary and so extraordinary—so second nature that the landscape became unimaginable without it" (73). Indeed, many of Cather's stories and novels begin with the arrival of a train as one destiny after another arrives by rail. In "Paul's Case" the protagonist is obliterated by a locomotive; in "The Sculptor's Funeral" Harvey Merrick's remains arrive from Boston by train; exhausted Aunt Georgiana comes by rail from the bleak prairie to hear music in Boston in "A Wagner Matinée"; the High Line Flyer delivers Everett Hilgarde to Cheyenne in "A Death in the Desert"; "a squat red railway station" in Hanover is the first touch of color on the windswept flat prairie at the beginning



Bladen, Nebraska, 1909.

of *O Pioneers!*; Thea Kronberg's story could not happen at all without men who worked on the railroads that moved her about the continent to Chicago, Arizona, New York, and eventually even among the metropolises of Europe; and, of course, Ántonia and Jim arrive together on the same train at Black Hawk and while she moves to the Divide and prospers in spirit and family (after being jilted by a railroad fancy man), Jim becomes a railway lawyer and prospers financially but scarcely in spirit or family. The train is ubiquitous; the train is fundamental in shaping the nature of all of Cather's most important narratives prior to 1922.

The train is also crucial to "moving" the story in *One of Ours*—as it takes a feckless brother to Colorado, or as the sad honeymoon train in which Enid sends Claude from their stateroom to spend the night in the smoker, or as the troop train that carries Claude across the brilliant green Meadowlands to the Hoboken wharf where the ship *Anchises* waits to take him to France. By the time Claude is a young man the world has become habituated to the train; it is a given that people and their stories move by rail. Then a new mode of transport appears and Cather seems entirely alert to its implications. The automobile is still a novelty and *One of Ours* is Cather's first narrative in which it plays a significant role, and no where else does it figure so largely. In fact, the novel begins with the washing of a car—one of two that Nat Wheeler keeps—and Claude nevertheless goes into the town and to the circus riding on a wagon loaded with stinking hides. It was a beautiful day:

The sun popped up over the edge of the prairie like a broad, smiling face; the light poured across the close-cropped August pastures and the hilly, timbered winding of Lovely Creek,—a clear little stream with a sand bottom, that curled and twisted playfully about through the south section of the big Wheeler ranch. It was a fine day to go to the circus at Frankfort, a fine day to do anything; the sort of day that must, somehow, turn out well. (10)



Lovely Creek is just that, lovely, an idyllic place in a world in which commerce is still dependent on the buckboard as a more efficient way of getting hides through the loose soil of meandering roads than a automobile or small truck. The creek meanders through an irregular landscape of light, grasses, trees, and undulating horizons. Such are lines of a pleasant relation to nature. The land has yet to be fully platted for agribusiness, or its roads straightened, graded, and graveled, for motor vehicles. The market for the hides still needs the railway at Frankfort, though it is in Frankfort that Claude's brother Bayliss, scarcely thirty, is prospering in farm implement sales, machines which unlike the steam thresher in *My Ántonia* will increasingly be run by diesel and gasoline engines, while the machinery itself will be ever less likely to be community property; rather, it come to be privately held by farmers with ever larger farms like Nat Wheeler's.

With the Great War, the high price of wheat will accelerate the destruction of the windbreaks, groves, and meandering paths that Claude loved and that characterized the early landscapes of *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*. Beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century and right through today, there would be fewer types of crops in ever larger fields accessed by roads laid out for cars, trucks, tractors, and harvesters. Agriculture's industrial age is beginning as Claude goes to war. His dreams and temperament are at odds with the new "nature," which is better suited to men like his father whose capital is in large pieces of land, or his brother who sells the machinery that makes it possible to farm very large pieces of land. Yet Claude is his mother's son and in the midst of the rapid transformation of the economics and landscape of the region, Claude builds a tight house with the best of intentions, keeps the copse nearby for refuge and shade, and looks forward to a pleasant life of broad porches, flowering vines, and moonlit baths.

Cather seems to ask, do we drive or are we driven? It is telling that Enid is good at driving on dark and snowy roads—in other words, in conditions that ought to demonstrate the limitations of the automobile. In fact, she is a better driver than Claude. Moreover, Enid exploits the automobile as a crusader's convenience, putting several thousand miles on it driving about the region while campaigning for Prohibition (280). Surely she is one of Cather's least likeable characters; "everything about a man's embrace was distasteful" to Enid as if "something inflicted upon women, like the pain of childbirth,—for Eve's transgression, perhaps" (281). Nature, here sexual inclination and the acceptance of the struggles of procreation, are to Enid not facts of life but failures of human control, lapses in the domination of appetites comparable to Crazy Ivar's burrowing into the land as it was before the railroads or the automobile. Indeed, Enid, a flat character,

seems an allegorical representation of the profound mistake—modern, American, capitalist, and frozenly Protestant—that proposes that a new nature, one of human invention, is superior to an archaic nature, really the original and ineluctable nature that will sooner or later—at very latest with death—reassert itself. To keep original nature at bay, to insist that force of human will can be superior to nature, Enid creates a regime of denial—no sex, no meat, no beer, no fun—and instead takes an annual trip to Kellogg's Battle Creek to cleanse the bowels. In the same spirit, she abandons her husband to spread the Gospel in China, although without enthusiasm, for "she disliked ardour of any kind, even religious ardour" (281). Such egoism of sexual continence, the promotion of Prohibition, and a religion of rules without joy Cather believes grotesque. The battle at Battle Creek, in other words, is as dehumanizing (denaturing) as the joyless imperialist battle for souls in China, or, most obviously, the chaotic and grisly battles along the Western Front in France. More is at stake than Cather's temperamental dislike of prudes, teetotalers, killjoys, and Christian pamphleteers. Such monsters of self-control represent a dangerous repression of the natural creature, an arrogant assumption that the modern invention of a second nature trumps the quiet and listening heart, here shown by the young husband who "had been a well-behaved boy because he was an idealist" and who "had looked forward to being wonderfully happy in love, and to deserving his happiness" (282).

Before his disappointment becomes entirely real to him, however, one evening while Enid was away, Claude took a moonlit bath in a stock tank the clean water of which held the warmth of the day's sunshine. This happens one evening after a day's work and supper with his friend Leonard. After tidying the kitchen, Claude waters the gourd vine now "full of ripe squashes" and feels "grateful to the thing that did so lustily what it was put there to do" (276). He feels equal affection for his cow, who he milks, and then as he smokes a cigar "the moon swam up over the bare wheat field, big and magical, like a great flower" (276). He decides to shed his clothes and settle into a stock tank in water only slightly cooler than himself. The result is lyrical; Claude is taken out of himself:

The sky was midnight-blue, like warm, deep, blue water, and the moon seemed to lie on it like a water lily, floating forward with an invisible current. One expected to see its great petals open. (277)

Claude thinks on the past, and how "the moon, somehow, came out of the historic past" and "seemed to have looked down upon the follies and disappointments of men; into the slaves' quarter of old times, into prison windows, and into fortresses where captives languished" (277). He grasps the metaphor and



sees the people in his life more honestly than ever, for “inside of people who walked and worked in the broad sun, there were captives dwelling in darkness,—never seen from birth to death” (277). Glimpses into the stunted souls of his brother Bayliss and Enid’s mother Mrs. Royce make him shudder, but a quick movement of his hand through the water . . . caught the light and played black and gold, like something alive, over his chest” (278). Now Claude senses that “in his own mother the imprisoned spirit was almost more present to people than her corporeal self,” and that he had felt the same with Mahailey and with Gladys Farmer, the woman he ought to have married. In this warm bath, Claude experiences a revelation:

Oh, yes, how much Gladys must have to tell this perfect confidant! The people whose hearts were set high needed such intercourse—whose wish was so beautiful that there were no experiences in this world to satisfy it. And these children of the moon, with their unappeased longing and futile dreams, were a finer race than the children of the sun. This conception flooded the boy’s heart like a second moonrise, flowed through him indefinite and strong, while he lay deathly still for fear of losing it. (278).

The world will not leave the child of the moon to his bath or his deep meditations. A “black cubical object,” the automobile returning Enid from a temperance meeting, makes Claude bolt naked across the yard, dash inside, pull on a bathrobe, and hurry upstairs to the hammock on the sleeping porch where he feigns sleep. For a while “his revelation still possessed him” but “in the morning he had forgotten, or was ashamed of what had seemed so true and so entirely his own the night before” and he decides “that is was better not to think about such things, and when he could he avoided thinking” (279).

After this moment, in which the need to repress the inner self becomes clear, Claude’s life begins to unravel. He grasps that there is no chance of a loving relationship with Enid, she leaves for China in any case, and Claude travels in the exact opposite direction, toward France, “No Man’s Land,” death. There is no bathing away the horrors there, no cereal diet that would purge the system of desires, illness, or noxious gases. Instead, he is submerged in obscenity. In France, Claude futilely tries to buy medications for another soldier’s venereal disease; he later descends into the trenches. (Cather would have been aware that the French called them *boyaux de la mort*, the bowels of death.) Here, chaos and filth are second nature, and no effort to cleanse



Omaha, Nebraska, 1909.



can succeed. Claude and some of his chums go out seeking to bathe. They found “a shellhole full of opaque brown water . . . not too scummy, conveniently, and even picturesquely situated” (481). Perhaps there is a chance to touch a memory of a better place and time, to clean oneself, at least a little. After bathing, Bruger and Hammond “reclined on what might almost be termed a grassy slope, examining various portions of their body with interest” (481). Gerhardt is still in the water, and when Claude slides in he strikes something sharp (the spike of a *Pickelhaube*), ducks under water, and pulls up a “round metal object, coated with rust and slime.” Gerhardt hurries out and turns back to say “Get out, Wheeler! Look at that,” (482–483), pointing to “big sleepy bubbles, bursting up through the thick water” (483). Lieutenant Bruger comments, “you just opened up a graveyard, and now we get the exhaust” (483). To complete the inversion of Claude’s private moonlit bath in the trough, the scene ends not with shame or regret, nor even the emotion of horror. Rather, it closes inconsequentially with a light sardonic touch as Claude’s pal, Lieutenant Hammond, puts a scrawled sign on a stick:

No Public Bathing! ! Private Beach

C. Wheeler, Co. B. 2-th Inf’y (483)

*One of Ours* is one of Cather’s longest novels, both in pages and in the time required for its making. She took the task of commemorating her cousin G. P. Cather very seriously. To get things right, she visited France while the battlefields were still big muddy splotches of land littered with ruined equipment. Much of the debris was shattered chassis of trucks, ambulances, and a few tanks. Among other things, this was the first war in which internal combustion vehicles were ubiquitous. It may also have been the last war in which antique notions of valor persisted. Welling with patriotism, in a letter to G. P.’s mother from Paris on the 4th of July 1920, Cather told of the moving experience of seeing twenty thousand French war orphans, each one supported by Americans, carrying small American flags, and “many carried a second flag with the name of the state where their protector lives” (*Selected Letters* 293).

She also reported how daunting it was to get from Paris to G. P.’s grave: “it is a difficult spot to reach as the trains in that section are few and irregular,” while “Cantigny itself is not on any railroad line, and the railroads in that region are very much disorganized” (294). Moreover, there were few hotels or inns, but Cather wished to press on. Three days later she wrote to her father that through the registers of “The Society for the Care of the American Dead” she had located the grave of 2nd Lieutenant Grosvenor P. Cather at Villers Tournelle about ten miles from Cantigny, his body having been collected, tarped and carried from the battlefield to the cemetery at Villers Tournelle. She had wished to go sooner

but was delayed by heavy rains that made roads in the area impassable. She will leave Paris early in the morning with Isabelle Hambourg, she told her father, to travel by train to Montdidier, roughly seventy miles, though she will change coaches twice and experience long waits. Then, she writes, “at Montdidier I will have to hire an automobile to take me to Cantigny and from there on to the Cemetary [sic] at Villiers [sic] Tournelle” (295). The last few miles, the critical distance, covered by automobile.

Finally, the drab, modern, and pessimistic story resides in the suggestion that the world has no more room for simple heroes except to provide incidental irony. To press the analogy, irony is a vehicle with a capacity to level and devalue human stories as surely as automobiles, trucks, and tractors flattened the undulations of the Divide. So burdensome becomes the importunity of modernity—with its burdens of egoism, commerce, and violence—that survival depends not on respect for inward nature (as it does before 1922) but on capitulation to outwardly contrived forces of second nature. To this destination we were driven. Cather will explore the pain of our loss in one more novel, *The Professor’s House*, and then give up entirely on the effort to explain the twentieth century to her readers or to herself, there being nothing of an interesting *nature* left to know.

#### WORKS CITED

- Cather, Willa. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Ed. John J. Murphy, Charles W. Mignon, Frederick M. Link, and Kari A. Ronning. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999.
- . *O Pioneers!*. 1913. Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Ed. Susan J. Rosowski, Charles W. Mignon, Kathleen Danker, and David Stouck. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1992.
- . *One of Ours*. 1922. Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Ed. Richard C. Harris, Frederick M. Link, and Kari A. Ronning. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2006.
- . *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. Ed. Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout. New York: Knopf, 2013.
- . *Shadows on the Rock*. Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Ed. John J. Murphy, David Stouck, and Frederick M. Link. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2005.
- Cronin, William. *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: Norton, 1991.
- Facknitz, Mark. “Changing Trains: Metaphors of Transfer in Willa Cather.” *Cather Studies 9: Willa Cather and Modern Cultures*. Ed. Melissa J. Homestead and Guy J. Reynolds. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2011. 67–92.





# Living in the Holes with Badgers: Nostalgia, Children's Literature and *O Pioneers!*

Patricia Oman | Hastings College

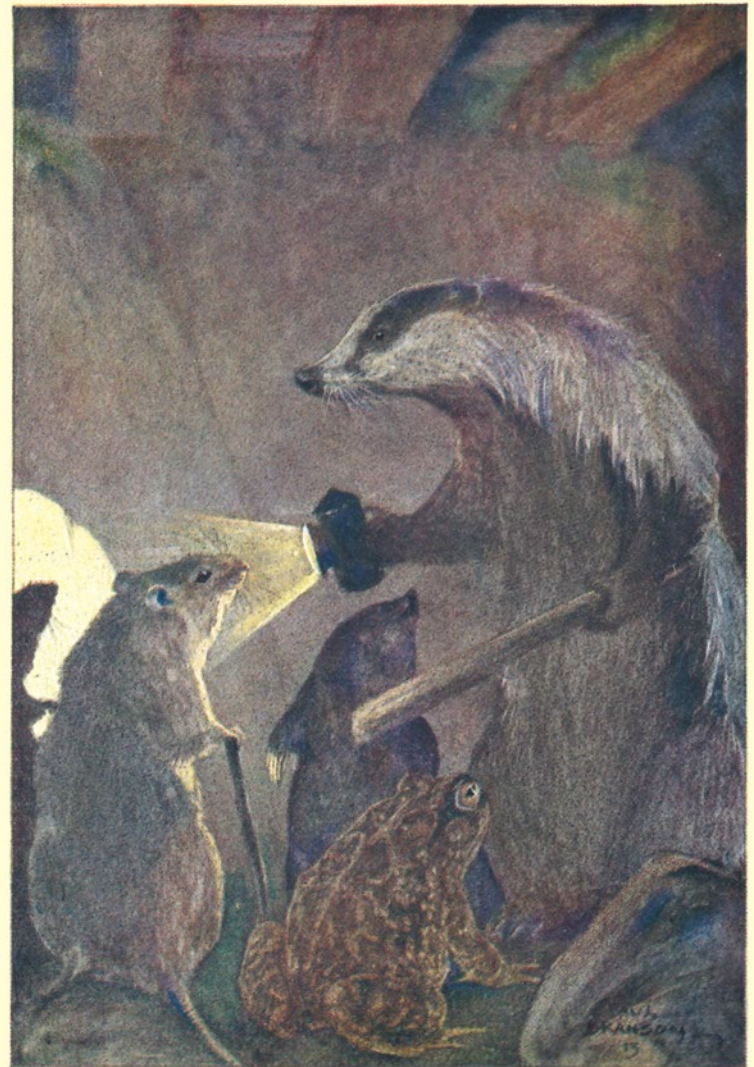
Willa Cather's 1913 novel *O Pioneers!* is a celebration of American frontier settlement, but intertextual references to two children's texts—Kenneth Grahame's 1908 book *The Wind in the Willows* and Sarah Orne Jewett's short story "A White Heron"—suggest that Cather is ambivalent about the national myth she describes in the novel. The conflicting types of nostalgia depicted in these children's texts indicate not only that Cather herself is nostalgic about the Nebraska wilderness but that she is conflicted about it.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym identifies two different types of nostalgia that I see at work in these texts—*restorative nostalgia*, which "does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition" (xviii), and *reflective nostalgia*, which "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (xviii). To this list I might add *revisionist nostalgia*, which self-consciously defines the ideal past to which it would like to return. By combining the restorative nostalgia of *The Wind in the Willows* and the revisionist nostalgia of "A White Heron," Cather is able to express a deep ambivalence toward the settlement of the Great Plains—an ambivalence about growing up on the Divide.

## Badger in Nebraska—Restorative Nostalgia

The character of Ivar is the most explicit reference in *O Pioneers!* to *The Wind in the Willows*.<sup>1</sup> His anti-social but benevolent and nurturing behavior and his lack of interest in "human habitations" likens him to Grahame's kind but hermit-like character Badger. In fact, Ivar is explicitly likened to a badger in many places in the novel. For instance, he "always said that the badgers had cleaner houses than people, and that when he took a housekeeper her name would be Mrs. Badger" (23). And when he is afraid that Lou and Oscar Bergson will send him to an insane asylum, he complains, "they have built the asylum for people who are different, and they will not even let us live in the holes with badgers" (44). Despite their common love for nature, however, Badger and Ivar both represent restorative nostalgia for the pastoral countryside.

In addition to their obvious similarities, Ivar and Badger's likeness mirrors a more fundamental connection between *The Wind in the Willows* and *O Pioneers!* on a thematic level. Sarah Gilead, for instance, sees a plot/counterplot structure in the two primary narratives of *The Wind in the Willows*: "The first, the Mole/Rat narrative . . . is a version of pastoral idyll. The second,



NOW THEN, FOLLOW ME

*Rat, Mole, Toad, and Badger in a Paul Bransom illustration from the first illustrated edition of Kenneth Grahame's The Wind in the Willows, Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1913.*

Toad's adventures . . . takes place in a more socialized narrative landscape" (148). The point of these two narratives, she argues, is to represent childhood as both nostalgic and subversive. One might argue that *O Pioneers!* has a similar two-part structure: the story of Alexandra and the story of Emil and Marie. Like the episodes involving Rat and Mole, Alexandra's story is about domestication and abiding by the rules of civilization, whereas the story of Emil and Marie's affair echoes Toad's libidinous disregard for the rules of civilization and subsequent punishment.



Central to both novels is a depiction of Bohemians as representative of the wildness of nature. The Bohemian Marie's fondness for the apple orchard, for instance, is an indication that she is too invested in the sensual pleasures of nature. And, in fact, the orchard is not only where she and Emil consummate their affair but also where they are punished for that transgression. While *The Wind in the Willows* does not reference sex explicitly, Toad's adventures often involve Bohemian objects or characters and express unrestrained primitive urges, especially when he is overcome with the desire to steal automobiles. In addition to an early comic adventure with a Bohemian caravan, Toad's last attempted car theft occurs right after an encounter with a "gipsy" who restores his confidence in his own cleverness and daring. This renewed confidence leads to being chased by policemen (again) and Toad's inevitable rescue by Rat. Although Toad is not punished legally for this last attempted theft, he does learn at this point in the novel that in his absence Toad Hall has been taken over by the weasels and stoats of the Wild Wood. In other words, Toad has lost his ancestral home because of his unrestrained passions.

Despite the novel's recognition that his actions must be punished, Toad is restored as the master of Toad Hall at the end of *The Wind in the Willows*, with Badger, Mole, and Rat fighting off the usurping weasels and stoats. Many critics point to this battle as evidence of the book's cultural amnesia about the national myths it portrays. John David Moore, for instance, invokes Raymond Williams to argue that the pastoral landscape in Grahame's book demonstrates ideological assumptions, "an order of social values that disguises the real presence of work, exploitation, and consumption" (54). He clarifies, "The threat to Grahame's pastoral order is class instability, people not knowing their places. Most evidently the threat comes from below—weasels and stoats who 'break out' and take over Toad Hall, enacting the nightmare of any Tory remembering Bloody Sunday in 1887 or the Pall Mall riots of 1886" (55–56). The siege of Toad Hall by weasels and stoats therefore represents a challenge to the book's "natural order" and suggests the book is actually a conservative fantasy of British rural life that preserves social hierarchies.

The parallel battle in *O Pioneers!* is Lou and Oscar's objection to Alexandra's marriage to Carl Linstrum because it will keep their

children from inheriting Alexandra's land. Like the stoats and weasels of the Wild Wood who work as laborers for Toad's estate, Alexandra's brothers feel entitled to the lands that Alexandra was able to buy by mortgaging the original homestead. Lou argues, "Did n't all the land come out of the homestead? It was bought with money borrowed on the homestead, and Oscar and me worked ourselves to the bone paying interest on it. . . . Everything you've made has come out of the original land that us boys worked for, has n't it?" (151). Their argument that labor entitles them to ownership even though the law technically doesn't recognize

their claim is essentially the argument of working-class laborers against a wealthy property owner. And, in fact, the novel never describes Alexandra performing any of the work on the farm; she handles the finances and manages the workers. Alexandra's dismissal of her brothers' objections thus aligns her with the wealthy land-owning class of the British rural countryside despite her own background as a poor immigrant.

Of course, the "battle" scenes of both *The Wind in the Willows* and *O Pioneers!* are allusions to Ulysses's battle against his wife's suitors in Homer's *Odyssey*. In fact, as many critics have noted, both novels are deeply indebted to the epic pastoral tradition.<sup>2</sup> In many ways, that classical tradition contributes to novels' conservative view of social hierarchy since the pastoral tradition obscures the material and historical conditions of the labor that produces it.

And, in fact, Boym interprets Odysseus's return to Ithaca as a type of restorative nostalgia (7–8). Ivar's likeness to Badger is therefore complicated by Toad's role in the battle of Toad Hall. Peter Hunt, for instance, notes that scholars disagree about Badger's social standing, whether he represents the "old aristocracy" of British society or just a kindly, salt-of-the-earth father figure (65–68). In any interpretation, however, he obviously stands for civilization and order in Grahame's fictional rendering of the British countryside. Not only does he live a genteel and prosperous life in his enormous home, but when the weasels and stoats take over Toad Hall, Badger is the character who devises the plan to take it back. Ivar's continuing (albeit unprovoked) opposition to Lou and Oscar (who want to send him to the insane asylum) is thus very similar to Badger's opposition to the weasels and stoats. Despite his affinity for nature, Ivar, like Badger, is aligned with the colonizing work of frontier settlement.



*The Pan-like "Friend and Helper" from The Wind in the Willows, 1913.*



It is no wonder, therefore, that the same critique of cultural amnesia that has been leveled against *The Wind in the Willows* has been leveled by critics against *O Pioneers!* Louise Westling, for instance, argues that *O Pioneers!* is a “benign version of the conquest of the Plains, erasing its violence” (81). Patrick K. Dooley acknowledges Alexandra’s respect for the landscape but identifies it as a form of *homocentric* land conservationism (69), in which the value of nature is determined by its usefulness to humans, not its intrinsic worth. However, the references to Badger suggest that Cather is not totally uncritical of this imperialist impulse or of a homocentric approach to land conservation. Badger’s home—the ruins of a long-gone human city—points to the fact that he is literally a badger. He explains to Mole, “There were badgers here, I’ve been told, long before that same city ever came to be. And now there are badgers here again. We are an enduring lot, and we may move out for a time, but we wait, and are patient, and back we come. And so it will ever be” (81). This insistence on Badger’s animal-ness may serve to naturalize the social hierarchies that he maintains, but it also points to the continuing resistance to human culture and its artificial hierarchies.

In fact, both Dooley and Melissa Ryan recognize Ivar as a subversive figure. Ryan argues that “a deep anxiety about the taming of the wilderness—about the very process of civilization—makes itself known in *O Pioneers!* as a crisis of space” (276). The various types of physical confinement imposed upon sympathetic characters such as Mrs. Lee, Ivar, and Frank Shabata, Ryan argues, betray the novel’s uneasiness with Alexandra’s process of domesticating (i.e., enclosing) the land (277). These spaces—shoes, asylums, and prisons—are all human inventions designed to keep other humans in line. Dooley further argues that Ivar represents a “biocentric” view of landscape conservancy (69), a view that attributes intrinsic value to nature without regard to its benefit for humans. In other words, Dooley recognizes Ivar’s animal-ness. The intertextual references to Badger in *O Pioneers!* thus support both the ideological critiques and to a lesser extent the more apologetic analyses of the pastoral’s silencing of the material conditions of rural labor.

Despite the recognition of Badger’s and Ivar’s complexity, however, other classical parallels in the novels maintain the cultural amnesia of the pastoral. Alexandra’s fantasy of a protective corn-god, for instance, is similar to Grahame’s “Friend and Helper,” a Pan-like figure who protects the animals in *The Wind in the Willows*. Although she never sees him clearly, this corn-god feels “yellow like the sunlight” and “there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him” (186), which suggests that he represents the landscape itself. His strength is indicated by the description of his “right arm, bared from the elbow,” which was “dark and gleaming, like bronze” (251). This description is similar to that of Pan in *The Wind in the Willows*, whose strength is suggested by “the rippling muscles on the arm

that lay across the broad chest, the long supple hand still holding the pan-pipes only just fallen away from the parted lips” (124). Pan is likened explicitly to an animal when Mole sees “the backward sweep of curved horns” and “the splendid curves of shaggy limbs” (124), thus linking him to the natural world, as well.

In Greek mythology, Pan, who is part animal, part man, is the god of both the pasture (i.e., the pastoral) and the wilderness and therefore in his explicit protection of the animals blesses the implied social organization of the British countryside in *The Wind in the Willows*, just as Alexandra’s corn-god blesses her settlement of the Divide in *O Pioneers!* and therefore gives his blessing to the cultural amnesia that accompanies it. J. Russell Reaver’s suggestion that Alexandra’s corn-god could have roots in both Pawnee and Navaho lore (23) is thus especially telling since one of the main critiques of *O Pioneers!* is its complete silence about the removal and massacre of Native Americans to make way for frontier settlement. The apparent necessity for blessing in both works indicates a tacit acknowledgment of that cultural amnesia and the fact of restorative nostalgia.

## Sylvia in Nebraska—Revisionist Nostalgia

If the nostalgia suggested by *The Wind in the Willows* is restorative, the nostalgia suggested by Jewett’s “A White Heron” is revisionist. The story follows a young girl named Sylvia in the Maine wilderness as she protects a rare white heron from a hunter who wants to add the bird to his taxidermy collection. The story establishes the wilderness as the nostalgic antithesis to the “crowded manufacturing town” where Sylvia “had tried to grow for eight years” (162). The relationship between Cather and Jewett is already well established, but the specific connections between *O Pioneers!* and “A White Heron” could be explicated more, because the likeness between Sylvia and Ivar adds another layer to the novel’s depiction of nature and contradicts the restorative nostalgia of *The Wind in the Willows*.

Sylvia’s and Ivar’s protection of rare birds from hunters emphasizes the importance of preserving wilderness and rejecting human interference. Their protection of the natural world emphasizes their animal-ness. Sylvia’s grandmother notes, for instance, “There ain’t a foot o’ ground [Sylvia] don’t know her way over, and the wild creaturs counts her one o’ themselves. Squer’ls she’ll tame to come an’ feed right out o’ her hands, and all sorts o’ birds” (164–165). And Ivar’s likeness to Sylvia is made explicit when he shouts at the approaching Bergsons, “No guns, no guns!” (23). He even mentions a crane who visited the week before, and although cranes are common in Nebraska during certain times of the year, this one is rare like the white heron in Jewett’s story because, as Ivar explains, “It is not her season, of course” (24).

While “A White Heron” is concerned primarily with the protection of the natural world, Sylvia’s rejection of the hunter



could be read in terms of national myth and resistance to it—the hunter with the “determined, and somewhat aggressive whistle” (163) representing the ideology of frontier settlement myth and Sylvia a rejection of that ideology. In fact, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse have described regionalism in precisely those terms. They argue that regionalism “is not a feature of geography” but “concerns the consolidation and maintenance of power through ideology” (7). They argue further that they “make a distinction between those writers who accept the assumptions of the regionalizing premise and those who take exception to those assumptions” (7). “A White Heron” demonstrates both the hunter’s assumptions that the New England wilderness exists for his personal entertainment and conquest and Sylvia’s exception to that assumption. Cather demonstrates the same tension in *O Pioneers!* through the classic national myth of frontier settlement and the challenges to that myth from Ivar. In other words, both Cather and Jewett are invested in revising that myth.

As I have argued elsewhere, regional literature and children’s literature share presumed ideological hierarchies. Just as nationalizing discourses are generally privileged over the region, adult definitions of childhood are typically privileged over children’s (Oman 177–178). Fetterley and Pryse, however, suggest that regionally aligned discourses can actually undermine or resist hegemonic discourses, which is exactly what Sylvia, Ivar, and to a lesser extent Alexandra do. The important factor here is innocence, the type of innocence typically associated with childhood and the natural world. As a child, Sylvia has an affinity with the natural world and is therefore protective of wilderness in “A White Heron.” By rejecting the trappings of civilization, Ivar fulfills a similar, albeit eventually ineffective, role in *O Pioneers!*. Alexandra, however, has a complicated relationship with wilderness for the simple fact that she grows up and accepts the responsibilities of adulthood and frontier settlement.

In *O Pioneers!* the unexpected use of present-tense narration in the first three paragraphs of the “Neighboring Fields” section marks the divide between childhood and adulthood and the divide between wilderness and pastoral. Although the novel is narrated in third-person, past tense, “Neighboring Fields” begins with three paragraphs of present-tense narration: “It is sixteen years since John Bergson died. . . . There is something frank and joyous and young in the open face of the country. . . . You feel in the atmosphere the same tonic, puissant quality that is in the tith, the same strength and resoluteness” (73). The historical present tense in this passage suggests excitement, and the generic address to “you” invites the reader to share the characters’ emotional response to their success at making the landscape productive, but this passage is striking for its unexpected, formal jolt. Significantly, Jewett uses this technique in “A White Heron,” as well. The passage in which Sylvia has climbed a tree to find the

heron’s nest begins in the past tense—“The birds sang louder and louder” (169)—but after Sylvia has spotted the nest, the passage switches briefly to present tense: “The child gives a long sigh a minute later . . . she knows his secret now, the wild, light, slender bird that floats and wavers” (170). The narrator’s direct address to Sylvia—“Now look down again, Sylvia” (169), “look, look! a white spot of him” (169)—represents the sublime moment when the young girl becomes one with nature, and the present tense represents that in-the-moment connection. The corresponding passage in *O Pioneers!* thus suggests that Alexandra has become one with nature, as well.

Although Ivar is the character in *O Pioneers!* most associated with Sylvia in “A White Heron,” Alexandra’s confidence in the land’s willingness to be settled suggests that she also enjoys a close, mystical relationship with it. Her protection of Ivar and critique of her brothers Lou and Oscar further suggest that she represents Fetterley and Pryse’s definition of regionalism as “that point where region becomes mobilized as a tool for critique of hierarchies based on gender as well as race, class, age, and economic resources” (14). The major difference between Alexandra and Sylvia, however, is that one grows up and the other does not. While Alexandra may resist the chauvinistic and aggressive wishes of her brothers, she nevertheless capitulates to those discourses when she agrees to marry Carl Linstrum at the end of the novel. The novel does not suggest that Carl will turn out to be an overbearing husband or that he will try to take control of the farm, but Alexandra does accept a somewhat subservient position as a married woman when the process of settling the Divide is finished. And, while both Sylvia and Alexandra are protective of the landscape, Sylvia rejects human intervention, preferring the wilderness to the pastoral. Childhood, therefore, is an empowered, marginalized voice for both Cather and Jewett, similar to animal-ness in *The Wind in the Willows*, but it is fleeting in *O Pioneers!*. In other words, the revisionist nostalgia of both *O Pioneers!* and “A White Heron” is limited to childhood.

## The Frontier Grows Up—Reflective Nostalgia

It is no coincidence that all of the major characters of *O Pioneers!*—Alexandra, Carl, Emil, and Marie—are children at the beginning of the novel and that they grow into adulthood as the landscape is transformed from untamed wilderness to the cultivated fields of the pastoral and beyond. The characters grow up as the landscape does. This idea of landscape growth is actually similar to nineteenth-century conceptions of cyclical empires, explained most famously in Thomas Cole’s five-part painting series, “The Course of Empire” (1833–1836), which depicts the rise and fall of a human empire through the same classical landscape. The first painting, *The Savage State*, depicts the wilderness, whereas the second, *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, depicts a peaceful civilization of settled shepherds and farmers.





*Consummation*, the third painting, demonstrates the peak of this imagined empire, and *Destruction* and *Desolation* depict the corruption and inevitable end, respectively. The argument of this painting series is that civilizations grow organically from wilderness and are destined eventually to return to it.

*O Pioneers!* charts this transformation on the Great Divide, as seen in the novel's five books: "The Wild Land," "Neighboring Fields," "Winter Memories," "The White Mulberry Tree," and "Alexandra." The first two books chart the transformation from wilderness to the pastoral. The surprisingly short central book depicts the peak of Alexandra's "empire," whereas the fourth book depicts the destruction of that empire in the deaths of Emil and Marie. By the end of the novel, Alexandra confronts the eventual end of her empire, remarking to Carl, "We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while" (272–273). The seemingly natural cycle of Alexandra's land stewardship suggests that the settling of the frontier is an inevitable event, but her reticence here ignores the fact that the closing of the frontier is a finished historical event.

Although Cole's painting series depicts the change in a civilization over time, it also suggests that this process is timeless because it applies to all civilizations. This model, however, is based on nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideological assumptions, not timeless truths. Consider William Cullen Bryant's 1832 poem, "The Prairies," which traces the rise and fall of several civilizations on the American prairies, for example. In a reverie, a traveler on horseback thinks of "those / Upon whose rest he tramples" (lines 38–39), "the dead of other days" (line 40). He describes the peaceful mound builders, who gave way to the war-like red men, who in turn are giving way to the soon-to-arrive white settlers, the "advancing multitude" of "Sabbath worshippers," who "soon shall fill these deserts" (lines 116–120). By naturalizing the decline and

replacement of civilizations, the poem, published just a few years after the passing of the Indian Removal Act, is obviously making a case for Manifest Destiny and represents the "regionalizing premise" that Fetterley and Pryse refer to—the poem assumes that the prairies exist for the purpose of national expansion. The rise and fall of civilizations described in the poem are the result of specific historical actions, not just the inevitable course of empires.

Regardless of how sympathetic Alexandra is toward marginalized characters such as Ivar and Mrs. Lee, she does exert this "regionalizing premise" in her successful settling of the Divide. In fact, she has a similar reverie about the land when she and Emil take a tour of the surrounding farms in the last chapter of "The Wild Land." The narrative seems to ignore the presence of previous cultures when it describes her "face set toward it with love and yearning," "[f]or the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages" (64). The passage then suggests that Alexandra's plan is natural and inevitable because "the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before" (64). The connection between this divine blessing and the national myth of frontier settlement is confirmed in the next and perhaps most famous sentence of the novel: "The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or woman" (64). Alexandra also therefore seems to accept implicitly the ideological assumptions of Manifest Destiny apparent in Bryant's poem and more generally in Cole's paintings.

The invocation of classical pastoral themes in both *The Wind in the Willows* and *O Pioneers!* contributes to this effect. In *O Pioneers!*, for instance, Carl argues, "there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years" (110). His argument about the timelessness of larks is strikingly similar to Badger's argument in *The Wind in the Willows* about badgers always living in the Wild Wood. Both novels therefore insist on an unchanging natural world, just as Cole's paintings argue that human civilizations will always return to nature. And, Carl's insistence that there are only "two or three human stories" ignores the historically specific context of frontier settlement that silences Native Americans, just as Badger's role in *The Wind in the Willows* is to silence the social unrest of *fin de siècle* Britain. The pastoral tradition therefore reveals uncomfortable ideological associations. Rather than ignoring these associations altogether, however, Cather's solution is to incorporate the possibility for eternal childhood/wilderness through intertextual references to children's literature.

Both of the novel's main storylines—the settling of the Divide and the affair of Emil and Marie—are driven by the characters' acceptance or rejection of adulthood. Emil and Marie,



The Savage State, the first painting in Thomas Cole's five-part series entitled The Course of Empire (1833–1836).



for instance, are punished for breaking the adult rules of human civilization, just as Carl and Alexandra eventually settle into a formal, adult relationship. These same competing approaches to adulthood can be seen in the two main storylines of *The Wind in the Willows*, with Toad being punished for stealing and Rat giving up his desire to roam to settle domestically with Mole. Sylvia is able to resist the trappings of the nationalizing frontier myth only because she remains a child in “A White Heron.” While Alexandra has some similarities with Sylvia, therefore, she is unable to maintain that communion with nature when she grows up. However sympathetic the novel may be to Alexandra, she is a flawed hero whose natural affinity with the landscape as a child ironically leads her to change it irrevocably as an adult. Of all the characters in *O Pioneers!*, Ivar is the only one that maintains a consistent relationship with both nature and innocence. His similarities with both Badger from *The Wind in the Willows* and Sylvia from “A White Heron” may introduce conflicting types of nostalgia (restorative and revisionist), but the tension from that conflict holds in check the otherwise inevitable transition of frontier from childhood to adulthood, from wilderness to pastoral, thus creating what Boym calls “reflective nostalgia.”

**Acknowledgments:** *I would like to thank Susan Maher for her helpful comments about the focus of this essay and for advice on possible research avenues. Many thanks also to Tracy Tucker, Education Director of the Willa Cather Foundation, for her research in the family library.*

#### NOTES

1. While Cather’s knowledge of *The Wind in the Willows* is not documented, she does mention appreciatively a reprinting of Grahame’s 1895 children’s book *The Golden Age* in a March 17, 1941 letter to Alexander Woollcott. That book is also part of the Cather family library, the Ex Libris sticker reading, “Elsie Margaret Cather.”

2. For a more complete explanation of Grahame’s reliance on the pastoral (especially Virgil) in *The Wind in the Willows*, see Poss. Several scholars have explored Cather’s reliance on the epic pastoral tradition. See, for example, Randall.

#### WORKS CITED

- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.
- Bryant, William Cullen. “The Prairies.” *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. B. 8th ed. Ed. Nina Baym and Robert S. Levine. New York: Norton, 2012. 126–129.

- Cather, Willa. *O Pioneers!*. 1913. Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Ed. Susan J. Rosowski, Charles W. Mignon, Kathleen Danker, and David Stouck. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1992.
- Dooley, Patrick K. “Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.” *Cather Studies 5: Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination*. Ed. Susan K. Rosowski. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003. 64–76.
- Fetterley, Judith and Marjorie Pryse. *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2003.
- Gilead, Sarah. “The Undoing of Idyll in *The Wind in the Willows*.” *Children’s Literature* 16 (1988): 145–158.
- Grahame, Kenneth. *The Wind in the Willows*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard U, 2009.
- Hunt, Peter. *The Wind in the Willows: A Fragmented Arcadia*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.
- Jewett, Sarah Orne. “A White Heron.” *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*. Pref. Willa Cather. New York: Anchor Books, 1956.
- Moore, John David. “Pottering About in the Garden: Kenneth Grahame’s Version of Pastoral in *The Wind in the Willows*.” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 23.1 (Spring 1990): 45–60.
- Oman, Patricia. “*Pollyanna*: Intersectionalities of the Child, the Region, and the Nation.” *Eleanor H. Porter’s Pollyanna: A Children’s Classic at 100*. Ed. Roxanne Harde and Lydia Kokkola. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2014. 172–188.
- Poss, Geraldine. “An Epic in Arcadia: The Pastoral World of *The Wind in the Willows*.” *Children’s Literature* 7 (1975): 80–90.
- Randall, John H., III. “Willa Cather and the Pastoral Tradition.” *Five Essays on Willa Cather: The Merrimack Symposium*. Ed. John J. Murphy. North Andover: Merrimack College, 1974. 75–96.
- Reaver, J. Russell. “Mythic Motivation in Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!*” *Western Folklore* 27.1 (1968): 19–25.
- Ryan, Melissa. “The Enclosure of America: Civilization and Confinement in Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!*” *American Literature* 75.2 (June 2003): 275–303.
- Westling, Louise. *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.



# Writing Her First Home Pasture: Willa Cather on her Virginia Environment

Ann Romines | George Washington University

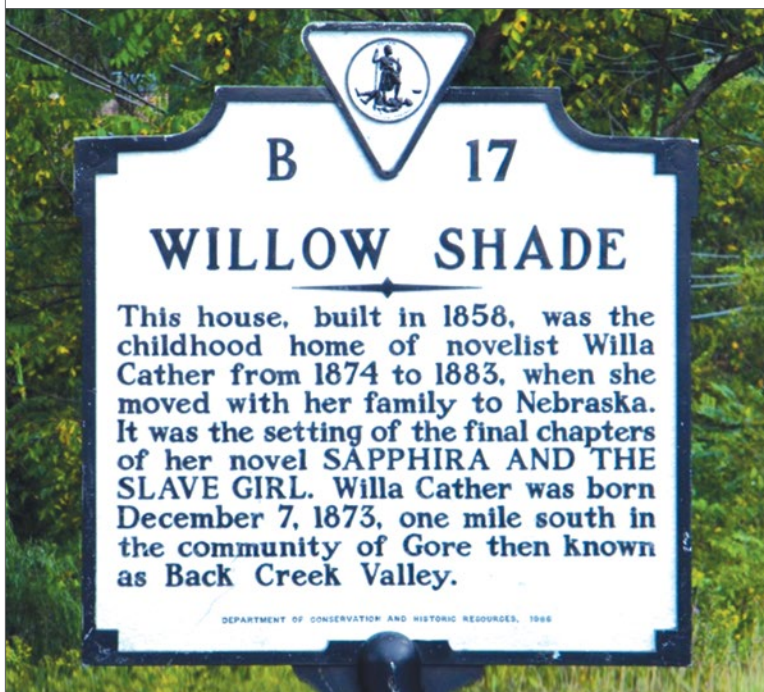
When Willa Cather sent a copy of *O Pioneers!* to her closest Red Cloud friend, Carrie Miner Sherwood, she inscribed it with these words: “This was the first time I walked off on my own feet—everything before was half real and half an imitation of writers whom I admired. In this one I hit the home pasture and found that I was Yance Sorgensen and not Henry James” (Stouck 283). A *home* pasture is a piece of land that one knows intimately, a fertile plot that is put to agricultural use, nourishing the creatures that graze there. And *home*, of course, is a place where one has deep roots and ties. In her own home pasture, Willa Cather was not the much-admired expatriate, Henry James (who certainly never set foot in a Nebraska pasture), but Yance Sorgensen, a prosperous local Norwegian farmer who would have known his own well-cultivated fields very well.

Nine years later, Cather speculated, “There is a time in a writer’s development when his ‘life line’ and the line of his personal endeavor meet. . . . after it occurs his work is never quite the same” (“Preface to *Alexander’s Bridge*” 941). Clearly *O Pioneers!*, in which she claimed and cultivated her authentic territory as a writer, was such a turning point. It was also a homecoming, she added: “it had to do with a kind of country I loved . . . [and] it was about old neighbors, once very dear, whom

I had almost forgotten in the hurry and excitement of growing up and finding out what the world was like and trying to get on in it” (“My First Novels (There Were Two)” 964).

Sarah Orne Jewett, Cather’s most influential early mentor, had warned her that such “hurry and excitement” and “trying to get on” endangered her development as a writer, and in 1908 she famously advised, “you must find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that” (247–50). By fall of 1911 Cather had acted on that advice and taken a leave from *McClure’s Magazine* that turned out to be permanent. The following months were peripatetic—Cherry Valley, Pittsburgh, Bank Street, Arizona, New Mexico, Red Cloud, Pittsburgh again—almost as if she was indeed searching for that “centre” Jewett had advocated, from which she could write with authenticity and “walk off on her own feet.”

Of all these places, the one that produced most immediate fruit was Red Cloud. While visiting her family there, Cather spent a week in “the Bohemian country . . . to see the wheat harvest” and wrote to her Boston friend Annie Fields, “The whole great wheat country fairly glows, and you can smell the wheat as if it were bread baking” (164). By fall, “The Bohemian Girl,” set in that country, was published in *McClure’s* and surprised Cather by its success. “Why, I wonder? “, she wrote to Elsie Sergeant (*Selected Letters* 143). This was her first Nebraska story in several years, and her longest ever. Was this her “home pasture”? Cather expressed some of her anxiety about this to Sergeant: “I used always to be sure that I’d never get out, that I would die in a cornfield. . . . I still get attacks of fright. I wish I didn’t. I somehow feel that [if] one were really a fit person to write about a country they wouldn’t feel that” (150). Nevertheless, she admitted to Zoë Akins that she had changed her mind about “The Bohemian Girl”: “I really think it’s pretty good myself” (169). The story “is in the right key, like that country. . . . It really . . . gets the undulation of the ground” (to Sergeant, 151). The “rightness” of the story, she concluded, had to do with the way she represented the country. By this time she was working with growing assurance on *O Pioneers!*, in which, she said, “the country itself is frankly the hero—or the heroine—” (to Zoë Akins, 169–70). When the novel was published and began to receive excellent reviews, she took this as a vindication of her choice to make “the country itself” her central character. Cather personifies it: “the brown earth” has an “open face” and “yields



The sign marking Cather’s Virginia childhood home. From MarkerHistory.com.



itself eagerly to the plow . . . with a soft, deep sigh of happiness,” as if the human endeavor of agriculture is its desired consummation (*O Pioneers!* 74). Alexandra recognizes and respects the land’s power. When Carl asks her how she transformed “rough prairie sod” into fertile fields, she replies, “The land did it. . . . It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich. . . .” (108)

In 1908, Jewett had advised Cather that she had “uncommon equipment,” including “your Nebraska life.” Now, in *O Pioneers!*, Cather was at last making full use of that “Nebraska life;” she was writing her “home pasture.” But Jewett had also reminded Cather that another part of her “uncommon” writerly equipment was her birthplace, “a child’s Virginia.” In a 1913 interview, Cather described her intense and intimate attachment to that first country: “I would not know how much a child’s life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows around it, if I had not been jerked away from all these and thrown out into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron” (Bohlke 10), where she was at first intensely homesick. “A child’s Virginia” was Willa Cather’s first home pasture, and one of her great resources—and problems—as a writer.

One of Cather’s earliest stories, “The Elopement of Allen Poole,” published at the University of Nebraska when she was nineteen, is clearly set in the Shenandoah Valley neighborhood where she had spent her first nine years. It is the melodramatic tale of an amiable young bootlegger who is shot by revenuers on the very night he plans to elope with his girlfriend, and then bleeds to death in her arms. The young author obviously knows a lot about Blue Ridge Virginia. She knows bootlegger stories and how a still was constructed, and the drink her young bootlegger produces is a “famous” “sweet and mellow” apple brandy. All this is surely a nod to the long bootlegging tradition and the thriving apple orchards in Cather’s birthplace. The best feature of this story is the specificity of its Virginia setting. Allen Poole observes

The sleepy pine woods, the slatey ground beneath them strewn with slippery needles. Around him the laurels were just blushing into bloom. Here and there rose tall chestnut trees with the red sumach growing under them. Down in the valley lay fields of wheat and corn, and among them the creek wound between its willow-grown banks. . . . The reapers were at work in the wheat fields; the mowers swinging their cradles and the binders following close behind. Along the fences . . . bare-footed children were picking berries. Allen watched them all . . . then his eyes wandered to where the Blue Ridge lay against the sky, faint and hazy as the mountains of Beulah land. (10)

The young author of this passage had not seen Virginia for ten years. Yet the description blends local botany, geography, geology and agriculture in an idyllic harmony no less beautiful

or knowledgeable than the descriptions of the flourishing fields in *O Pioneers!* In this brief story, the profusion of trees and plants—some specific to Virginia, such as the mountain laurel—is amazing. The language about the local grain crops is specific: sheaves of wheat “gave out that odor of indescribable richness and ripeness which newly cut grain always has” (10). This is very like the description of wheat that smells like “bread baking” that Cather wrote in her 1912 letter to Annie Fields, nearly twenty years later, as she began work on *O Pioneers!*. Also notable is the young author’s acknowledgement of abuse of women in the Appalachian Mountains. As Allen Poole is dying he says to his sweetheart, “maybe it’s best.” If he’d lived to marry her, he “might a’ . . . beat yo’ like the mountain folks round here does” (24).

In 1896, Cather published another story about her birthplace; “A Night at Greenway Court” is set in the eighteenth century on the nearby estate of Lord Fairfax, the early patron of her family. After that, although she wrote a few characters with specifically Virginia origins, she published no more fiction with a Virginia setting for forty-four years, until *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* appeared in 1940. *Why* this enormous gap?

Cather had been born in 1873 into Virginia’s Reconstruction years. The Shenandoah Valley, as “breadbasket of the Confederacy,” had been one of the most hotly contested regions during the war. Winchester, only eleven miles from the Cather home, was a crucial railroad hub and changed hands 70 times. According to local historian Maral Kalbian, “by the end of the war, the majority of citizens were firmly aligned with the South, primarily because of the harsh treatment they had received from Union troops. . . . Frederick County lay ravaged. . . . much of the farmland . . . bare and uncultivated.” “The area’s economy [and crops] rebounded relatively quickly.” But, by the 1890s, Virginia farmers “could no longer compete with the massive amounts of grain being produced in the Great Plains”—as depicted in *O Pioneers!* So “local farmers found a new cash crop—apples” (73–74), and Frederick County became the leading apple producer in Virginia (Kalbian 144).

By the time Willa was born, her Cather family had begun its emigration to Nebraska, seeking a healthier climate and affordable, profitable farmland that had not been exhausted by long cultivation. Uncle George and Aunt Franc were the first to move, in 1872, and Willa’s Cather grandparents followed in 1877, leaving Willa’s father in charge of the family farm at Willow Shade, where the principal product was sheep, many of which were shipped by the nearby railroads to growing city markets in Baltimore and Washington. The great farms of Frederick County, suited to profitable large-scale cultivation of tobacco, as well as grain, were in the eastern half of the county; Willow Shade was







How I Found my Rabbit Traps.

Cather on her first return visit to her native Virginia, 1896. Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries.

in the western half, with its back to the Appalachians, where hilly, rocky land didn't permit profitable large-scale farming. In 1883, the Cather barn burned. The cause may have been spontaneous combustion of hay, a not uncommon agricultural disaster, or it may have been arson. Grandfather William Cather had been a staunch Union supporter and was thus appointed as the Reconstruction-era county sheriff; he hired his sons and nephew as his deputies. He had ample opportunities to make enemies—as well as money—for himself and his family. Such hostilities may have helped to spur the Cather emigration. After the barn burning, Willa's parents decided to move their young family to Nebraska, as well, and Willow Shade was sold. At first, homesick Willa found this move painful—she made “an agreement” with herself that she “would not eat much” until she could get “back to Virginia and could get some fresh mutton” (Bohlke 12) from the family farm.

Actually, Willa Cather did not “get back to Virginia” until she moved to Pittsburgh in 1896; that fall she took a bicycle trip to her vividly remembered Virginia home. Her photo album from the trip shows her visiting local sites, such as the “Hollow Road” up Timber Ridge. Another photo shows her kneeling over something in the woods, with a wide, triumphant grin on her face. The caption reads, “How I Found My Rabbit Traps.” On this trip, Cather was clearly delighted to find the Virginia she remembered was still waiting for her, along with her rabbit traps.

She did not return until 1913, when *O Pioneers!* had just been published. Both Willa and Frederick County seemed much changed. She was traveling with her elegant friend Isabelle McClung, and first they spent a week in Winchester, at “Ye Winchester Inn,” which seems to have tried to cater to the region's growing tourist industry. Cather wrote churlishly to Elsie Sergeant that Winchester was “too, too dull. . . . All the people I really loved here are dead.” Furthermore, the food is awful: “I am sure that there is no remote province of Russia in which the food of commerce is so abominable. . . . I love the mountains still, but I have not the courage to bury myself in them for very long” (*Selected Letters* 180). That last curiously echoes her letter to Elsie earlier that year, when she wrote that her love for the Nebraska country was tempered by fear of dying “in a cornfield”—now she fears burial in her beloved native mountains. The next week, Willa and Isabelle moved to Gore, the village near Willow Shade, and Willa wrote Sergeant again, with a change of tone: “It's been a great success after all; glorious from the moment we took our plunge into the mountains. Five days of steady rain and I walked not less than six miles on any one of them. These woods are particularly fine in rain” (180–81). These are “wonderful days,” and Cather now seems untroubled by fears of burial. However, there is no mention of any people—or of anything but the woods and mountains.

Cather also wrote to her father, in Nebraska, about this visit—a very different, amused and sociable letter about *people*—friends and relatives that she knows her father will want to hear about. She describes two elderly relatives as figures in an almost mythological past. Giles and Dorothy Smith drive a carriage that “looked as if Noah had built it. . . . Giles in a fur cap and Dorothy veiled like an ancient priestess. . . . They are dear people, and I love them dearly. . . . Giles will be delighted to get the seeds and your letter” (*Selected Letters* 182). This letter is a reminder that the Cather family in Nebraska kept close ties to family and friends in Virginia, exchanging letters, newspapers, visits, and even seeds for planting. Cather's three letters from her 1913 trip to Virginia, which vary so strikingly in tone, show that she was thinking and rethinking her birthplace from day to day, and trying to decide how—and if—she might write about it.

But still, she didn't write. The Virginia memories were never lost; in a 1919 letter to her mother, she remembered “when I was a little girl and I used to ride up . . . [on Timber Ridge] on the horse behind you. . . . Oh, I don't forget those things! They are all there, deep down in my mind, and the older I grow, the more they come to light” (*Selected Letters* 284). In the twenties, close family members continued to die, including beloved family servant Marjorie Anderson and, finally, her father, then her



mother. Edith Lewis suggested that these deaths freed Cather to write about her birthplace at last: “I think it was the death of her father and mother, and the long train of associations and memories their death set in motion that led her to write *Sapphira*” (*Selected Letters* 182). Midway in the writing of that novel, in 1938, Cather, with Lewis, made her last trip to Virginia. Lewis reported that the trip was “intense and thrilling,” as Cather was reunited with the first country she had loved. “Every bud and flower seemed to speak to her with a peculiar poignancy, every slope of the land, every fence and wall, rock and stream. . . . the countryside was very much changed [and Willow Shade was in “ruinous” disrepair]. . . . All these transformations, instead of disheartening her, seemed to light a fierce inner flame that illumined all her pictures of the past” (182–83).

*O Pioneers!* had been written in a rush of excited energy, in just a few months. *Sapphira*, after that forty-four-year wait, took four more years, years marked by loss, physical decline, and anxiety over the approach of World War II. One additional reason for Cather’s relatively slow completion of this novel, I think, is that the world of *O Pioneers!* had been less conflicted and less personal for Cather than her Virginia heritage. As she said, the earlier book is about Swedish and Bohemian immigrants who were farmers in Nebraska. Her immediate family was none of those things. They lived in the town of Red Cloud and her father was a businessman. Her Nebraska “home pasture” is really her neighbors’ pasture. But in Virginia, Cather’s ancestors had been farmers and millers (the two major occupations in *Sapphira*) since the 1730s; some had owned slaves and some had opposed slavery. The central sites of the book—the Mill Farm and Willow Shade—are family properties, and almost every major character has a prototype who

is either a family member or a family slave. This book is so personal that Cather insisted on including her child-self as a character in the epilogue, one of the first parts of the book she wrote. And, unlike *O Pioneers!*, *Sapphira* uses only real place names: Back Creek, Timber Ridge, the Double S, Bethel Church: the list goes on and on. And the book is attentive to crops—such as the various grains brought to the mill for grinding—and to farming; for example, a major scene details the hand-cut haying, done by Henry and skilled slave laborers.

Most of the major characters of *Sapphira* are daughters and mothers—Sapphira and Rachel, Till and Nancy—and their stories are fraught with tensions. From childhood, Willa must have been aware that her Virginia could be an especially dangerous country for girls and women. Her Cather grandparents had six children, two sons (who both survived to prosper in Nebraska) and four daughters. Daughter Wilella died of diphtheria at the age of three; Willa was named for this aunt. The other three all died as young women, of tuberculosis. Willow Shade was a notoriously damp house, with a creek running through the basement. One attraction of Nebraska for the Cather grandparents was the dry prairie air, supposedly a cure for lung diseases. They managed to move their last surviving daughter, Jennie, out to the Nebraska prairies, but she died there, after only two weeks (Rosowski). The poem “Macon Prairie” is based on Aunt Jennie’s death. It begins:

She held me for a night against her bosom  
The aunt who died when I was yet a baby,  
The girl who scarcely lived to be a woman.  
Stricken, she left familiar earth behind her. . . . (800)

This youngwoman resembles both Alexandra and Sapphira—sick as she is, she is the “captain” and “leader” of the family expedition to Nebraska. From her featherbed in the covered wagon, she chooses the future home pasture where the family will settle and marks the spot for her own grave, directing her brother to “plant, one day, an apple orchard round me” (802), insuring that her burial spot will combine features of both her home pastures, with Virginia apple trees growing on Nebraska prairie. Clearly the early Nebraska settlers and the strong, controlling women of her own Virginia family are mixed in Cather’s mind as she writes “Macon Prairie.” Baby Willa is also a character in this poem, held against her dying aunt’s breast—as little Willa would also be a character in the epilogue of *Sapphira*.

Dealing with all these familiar family characters in her last novel, Cather had to face up to all the good and bad in her Virginia heritage. *O Pioneers!* is sometimes very romantic—especially in the romance of the land’s awakening to beautiful fertility. *Sapphira* is not a romantic book. The country itself often is very beautiful—for example, in this description:



*Willow Shade, Back Creek Valley, ca. 1870. From the George Cather Ray Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries.*



No one on Back Creek could remember a finer autumn. . . . All morning the mountains lay in a soft blue haze. . . . the colour on the hillsides had never been more brilliant. . . . the great maples in Mrs. Blake's yard were like blazing torches; scarlet leaves fluttered slowly down to the green turf. . . .

With November, the weather changed. Heavy rains. . . . Back Creek over-flowed its low banks. . . . the schoolroom . . . became very damp [and]. . . . Suddenly [the] school was closed; nearly half [its] pupils were in bed with ulcerated throats or diphtheria. (246)

This passage begins with the beautiful fall colors of Frederick County—still a tourist attraction—set against the background of the Blue Ridge. But it ends with a change in the weather and dangerous sickness. Two of the schoolchildren who caught diphtheria were based on Willa Cather's own mother and aunt; both were gravely ill, and the aunt died.

That doubleness, juxtaposing beauty and deadly danger, is always a part of this novel. In a letter to a fellow Southern writer, Viola Roseboro', Cather hoped that "something" in this book would "ring true to" Roseboro's "inward self . . . something . . . which eludes and eludes. . . . I mean the Terrible, domesticated and a part of easy everyday life. That's what I was thinking about" (WC to Roseboro). One aspect of this "Terrible" is slavery, source of much of the novel's conflict and abuse, and a defining condition of Cather's Virginia home pasture. Slavery's aftermath is still a presence in the novel's epilogue, set twenty-five years after Emancipation, and it is a powerful influence on the child Willa.

There is a "Terrible" in *O Pioneers!* too, most obviously embodied in the violent deaths of the book's two "best" young people, Marie and Emil. We don't often compare *O Pioneers!* and *Sapphira*, and I've emphasized their differences in this essay. But I'd like to conclude by pointing to their similarities. Their central characters, Alexandra and Sapphira, are both strong, willful women, good and prescient farmers who manage their property with expert skill. Both books portray places that are beautiful and obviously beloved by the author. At the end of her book, Alexandra says of her prairie land, "There is great peace here, Carl, and freedom" (289). At the end of *Sapphira*, Sapphira's last words, to her husband, are about the beloved home pasture of their farm, where both of their lives will end: "we both love the place. Neither of us would be easy anywhere else" (264). Even the slave girl Nancy, when she is being abused by Sapphira and pursued by a rapist, loves her Virginia home: "Nancy didn't believe there was a lovelier spot in the world than this. . . . the home folks and the home place and the precious feeling of belonging here" (195-96). Yet Nancy cannot stay in this precious Southern place; her life is ahead in the free north

of Canada. And in *O Pioneers!*, the artist Carl recognizes that, although Alexandra "belong[s] to the [Nebraska] land," he does not, and needs to get away from Nebraska. "I'm a fool here," he says, "but I know I can do something" (164)—somewhere else. Both books acknowledge that these home places—Virginia and Nebraska—however beautiful and sustaining, are not the right home for everyone. This is something that Cather herself must have dimly apprehended when she feared dying in a cornfield or being buried in the Blue Ridge mountains. *O Pioneers!* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are both books about a fertile and beloved "home pasture"—its beauty, its danger, and its power to ignite the imagination of both the writer and the reader.

#### WORKS CITED

- Cather, Willa. "The Elopement of Allen Poole." *24 Stories*. New York: New American Library, 1987.
- . Letter to Viola Roseboro'. 9 Nov. 1940. Alderman Library, University of Virginia.
- . "Macon Prairie." *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1992. 800–802. Print.
- . "My First Novels (There Were Two)." *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1992. 963–965.
- . *O Pioneers!* Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Ed. Susan J. Rosowski and Charles W. Mignon. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1992.
- . "Preface to Alexander's Bridge." *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*. New York: Library of America, 1992. 941–943.
- . *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Ed. Ann Romines and Charles W. Mignon. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2009.
- . *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. Ed. Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.
- . *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*. Ed. L. Brent Bohlke. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986.
- Jewett, Sarah Orne. *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett*. Ed. Annie Fields. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911.
- Kalbman, Maral S. *Frederick County, Virginia: History Through Architecture*. Winchester, VA: Winchester-Frederick County Historical Society, 1999.
- Lewis, Edith. *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*. 1953. Athens: Ohio UP, 1989.
- Rosowski, Susan J. *Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999.
- Stouck, David. "Historical Essay." *O Pioneers!* Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Ed. Susan J. Rosowski and Charles W. Mignon. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1992.



# “That Obliterating Strangeness”: The Prairie as Sublime Landscape in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*

Barry Hudek

Why has the fact of the prairie as sublime space gone virtually unexplored in Cather scholarship? Cather clearly presents the prairie as a sublime space in her writing and yet, while scholars regularly stress the importance of the prairie landscape to her literary imagination, her sense of its sublimity has gone largely unremarked. Refocusing our attention on what Cather calls the prairie’s “obliterating strangeness”—its capacity to make one feel “blotted out” by its infinite expanse—this essay explores the sublime aesthetics of Cather’s prairie, suggesting how texts like *My Ántonia* express her effort to call attention to the prairie as a national landscape worth preserving. In doing so, I argue, Cather eschews a longstanding tradition of identifying the sublime with a commending, and some argue imperialistic, verticality. Instead, Cather develops a new, horizontal aesthetic more conducive to democratic principles, an aesthetic I call “the prairie sublime.”

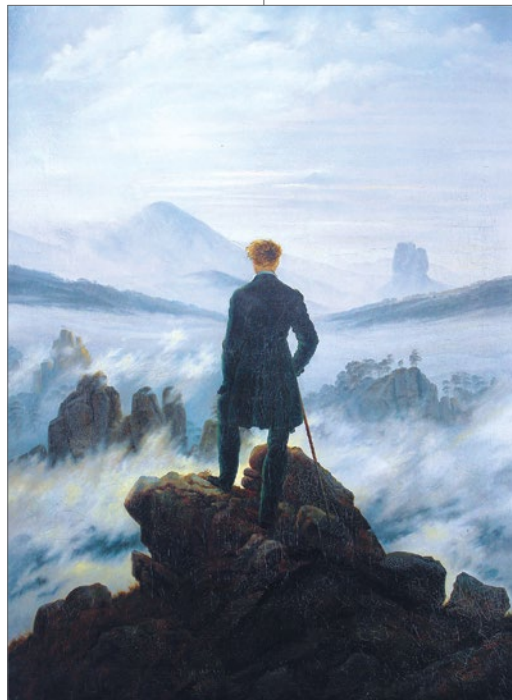
The concept of the sublime has a long history in Western philosophy and aesthetics. Longinus, believed to be its first theorist, describes the sublime as a rhetorical mode that inspires a sense of awe and elevation. By the eighteenth century, however, the sublime would become chiefly associated with physical spaces. Edmund Burke, for instance says anything that “operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*” (34). He further says that an object can produce an astonishment where the soul’s “motions are suspended” that has “a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror” is the “truest test of the sublime” (53, 67).

Furthermore, William Gilpin (1724–1804) offers that, “When the landscape approaches nearer *simplicity*, it approaches nearer the *sublime*; and when variety prevails, it tends to be more *beautiful*. A vast range of mountains, the lines of which are simple; and the surfaces broad, grand, and extensive, is rather *sublime* than

*beautiful*” (Thacker 232). For these writers, vastness, admiration, astonishment and even terror are produced in viewers of sublime places. Subtle distinctions, too, were important in determining the sublime. The vast darkness of night could be sublime as well as landscapes that feature simplicity, all of which Jim Burden experiences in his first encounter with the prairie. However, by the Romantic era, the sublime became almost exclusively associated with mountainous, vertical spaces—Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Mount Blanc,” Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, and Henry David Thoreau’s exploration of Maine’s Mount Katahdin, for instance. The Romantic’s preference for a sublime verticality influenced American artists nearer Cather’s own time, the Hudson River School.

These painters defined the sublime in grandeur, verticality, and the mountainous. For these artists, dramatic scenes, especially from the heights, exemplified America’s interest in Westward expansion. In this model, the viewer is given a privileged perspective from the heights that favors a gaze toward new land. This perspective offers a God-like view from on high that art

historian Alfred Boime says “the beholder occupies the spatial location assigned to the Godhead” (22) instead of a reverential gaze where the viewer is looking up toward “a celestial goal in the heavens” from a “wide, panoramic base” (22). In fact, in his study of popular works from the mid nineteenth century and artistic works of the Hudson River School, Boime suggests this preference for verticality and privileged perspective is associated with imperialism. For Boime, this preferred “gaze of command, or commanding view—as it was so often termed in the nineteenth century literature—that I will call the magisterial gaze,” is the “perspective of the American on the heights searching for new worlds to conquer” (20). Boime illustrates how these painters offer a “disciplined focus that submitted the vast reaches of the



Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer, or Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, Caspar David Friedrich, 1818.

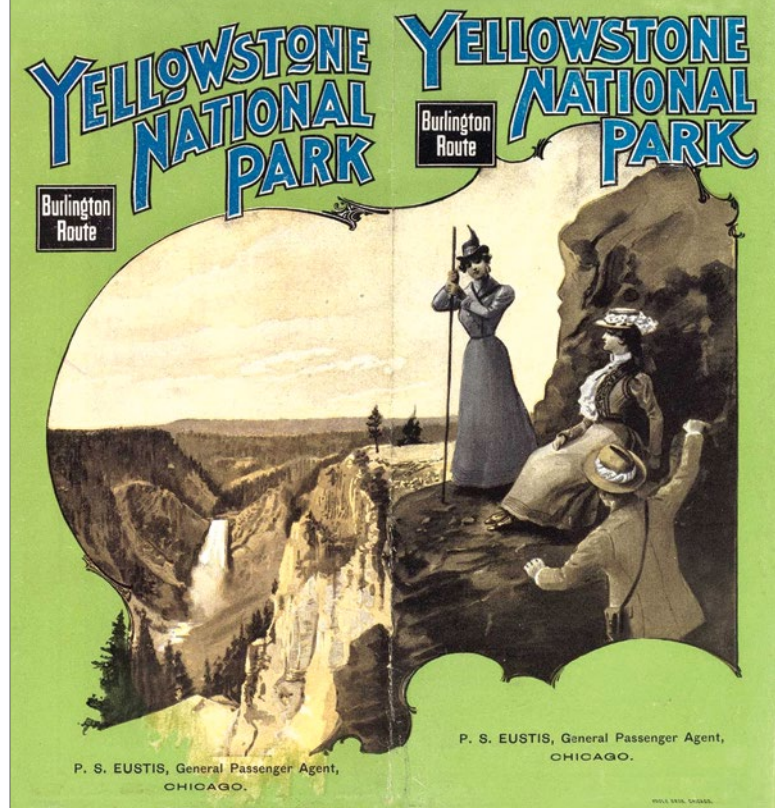


wilderness to an omniscient gaze and the larger national will to power in the form of Manifest Destiny” (x). A vertical sublime synonymous with Manifest Destiny became the nineteenth-century American norm. Simply put, the prairie was not a landscape worthy of protection as a sublime space according to the dominant notions of sublimity in Cather’s time.

Although the prairie is the furthest thing from a mountain landscape, Cather will describe its effects on Jim in terms that clearly invoke the sublime. Drawing on her own experience with the Nebraska prairie, Cather writes of Jim:

Cautiously I slipped from under the buffalo hide, got up on my knees and peered over the side of the wagon. There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land—slightly undulating, I knew, because often our wheels ground against the brake as we went down into a hollow and lurched up again on the other side. I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction. I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it. I did not believe that my dead father and mother were watching me from up there; they would still be looking for me at the sheep-fold down by the creek, or along the white road that led to the mountain pastures. I had left even their spirits behind me. The wagon jolted on, carrying me I knew not whither. I don’t think I was homesick. If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be. (7–8)

In this formative moment that Jim would later call “that obliterating strangeness,” he is struck by the utter stark blackness of the moment. The vastness creates a sense of nothingness where the “world was left behind” and how he “got over the edge of it,” “outside of man’s jurisdiction.” Jim notes the sublime vastness of the prairie space, a physical reality that creates a feeling of being “erased,” “blotted out.” Jim experiences the terror, awe, and inspiration all associated with the sublime prior to the Romantics. Indeed, despite its distinct lack of mountains, Cather’s prairie landscape exhibits the physical features that had been associated with sublime spaces in the eighteenth century, i.e. vastness and formlessness. The physical features described in this telling passage

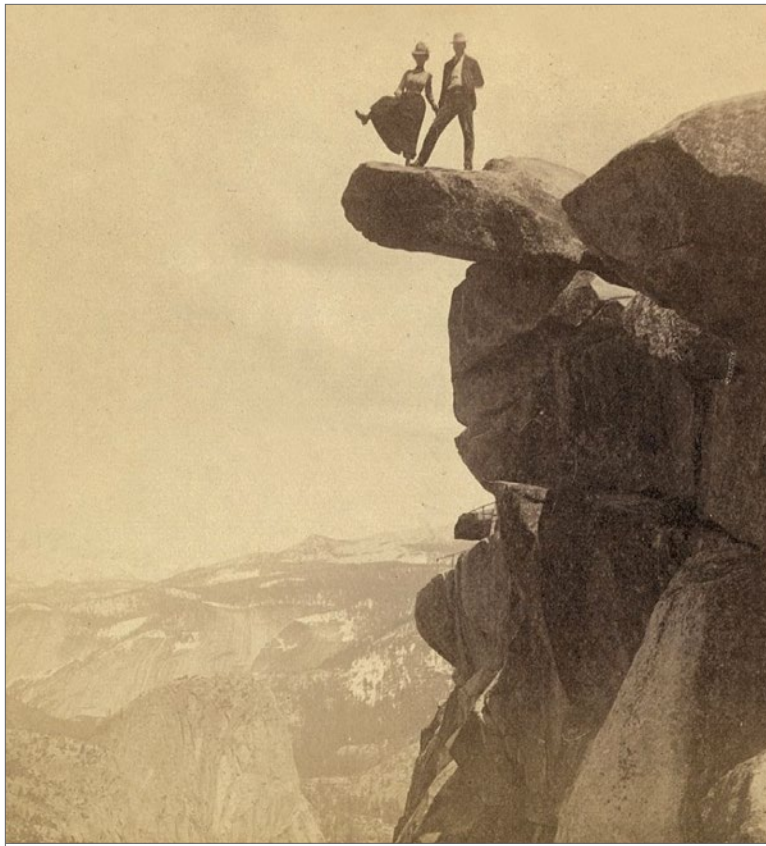


*Yellowstone National Park map cover, 1901.*

clearly match Gilpin’s insistence upon simplicity and Jim’s mental state clearly matches Burke’s criteria for experiencing the sublime. Jim notices how the landscape seems to undulate, but only because he can feel the wheels bump, not because he can see the ground change. In fact, he specifically notes the *lack* of mountains and this is what makes him feel the prairie is *more* sublime than Virginia. The landscape is nothing but a smooth “dome of heaven” and yet he revises this potentially reassuring image by telling us this dome has no parents, or God in it: this is an utterly alien landscape that was “not a country at all” but “the material out of which countries are made.” This feeling of sublime was not a one-time phenomenon either. Jim notes the next morning that, “I could hardly wait to see what lay beyond that cornfield; but there was only red grass like ours, and nothing else, though from the high wagon-seat one could look a long way off” (19). For Jim, the landscape does not change in the daytime and it was still utterly empty and its vast formlessness was not a trick of the dark.

Thus, although Cather’s prairie clearly breaks with the verticality of the Romantic sublime, she insists that this is, nonetheless, a sublime space. Nor was Cather alone in this thinking. Early explorers experienced similar notions of sublimity with this unique North American landscape. The explorer Sir William Francis describes a “view so vast that endless space seems for once to find embodiment, and at a single glance the eye is satiated with immensity” (Thacker 2). Another early traveler,





*Two daring visitors to Glacier Point in Yosemite Valley, 1902. Library of Congress photo.*

John Palliser notes that, “Everything around—the huge coarse grass—weeds that I never saw before, rank and tangled in their unchecked growth—and the eternal illimitable sweep of the undulating prairie, impressed on me a sense of vastness quite overwhelming” (36–37). Robert Thacker in analyzing these first-hand accounts misses the sublimity in Butler and Palliser’s account. He says the “prairie has offered vistas ever at odds with the western European notion of ‘landscape.’ It was, and is, unlike any other landscape conventionally thought pleasing. Rather than the variety and contrast of the picturesque, or the majesty of the sublime” (2). In Thacker’s view, the prairie is a unique feature of the North American continent and did not fit early travelers’ expectations, or their preferences—early explorers simply did not know what to make of this previously unknown landscape because they were clouded by European notions of sublimity. However, accounts from early travelers like Butler and Palliser describe more or less exactly the sublimity of the prairie, but our critics assume the sublime could only apply to mountains.

For both Butler and Palliser the uninterrupted vastness of the prairie qualified as a sublime experience. The physical space of the prairie qualifies as vast in its open, horizontal levelness and the mental experience of such travelers registers some phenomenon in the mind, such as being overwhelmed or being struck by the immensity. For Cather, too, this overwhelming vastness based on

physical reality created a formative experience that influenced her life and her fiction.

Cather thus challenges the dominant association of sublimity with verticality and supplants it with a sublime landscape that is relentlessly horizontal. In doing so, she also offers the prairie as an example of sublimity that forgoes the “magisterial gaze” and is instead marked by its lack of vista, its radical flatness affording no points of uniquely privileged vantage. The prairie is the same from wherever you stand in it, and this, I argue, accords with the equality of democratic politics. Cather’s contemporaries, the Prairie School architects, viewed the prairie in this way, too. Dixie Legler says the Prairie School “expressed America’s democratic spirit by echoing one of its most distinctive landscapes” where they “clearly evoked the freedom and sweep of the limitless midwestern landscape” (10–11). What’s more, architect Irving K. Pond says the “horizontal lines of the new expression” from the Prairie School echo “the spirit of the prairies of the great Middle West, which embodies the essence of democracy” (qtd. in Brooks 3). Cather could have been familiar with the Prairie School’s ethos and I read her presentation of the prairie as analogous to these contemporaries’ view of the prairie’s meaning. In thus framing the prairie as a new, horizontal and democratic mode of sublime, Cather suggests this landscape’s power is uniquely representative of America’s egalitarian ideals, presenting it as a space worthy of national protection in an era when the conservation movement was just getting off the ground.

The National Parks movement began with figures like John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt, among others, around the turn of the century. Muir sought to preserve areas in California, especially over the controversy of damming an area of Yosemite, Hetch Hechy. Roosevelt’s interest in preservation stemmed from interest in preserving hunting areas. These efforts, of course, resulted in the creation of Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks—both places that fit with the masculine, imperialistic preference for what Boime calls the “magisterial gaze.” Cather’s interest in the conservation movement began in 1915, according to Joseph Urgo, after a trip to Mesa Verde, Arizona (57). He also sees Cather participating in Herbert Quick’s challenge issued in 1917 at the meeting of the National Parks Council. For Quick, American authors should write about American landscapes “to fill the literature of the United States . . . with the beauties and the graces and the charms and the grandeur of national parks of this country” (Urgo 60). Cather’s presentation of the prairie fits this mission as she clearly presents a sacred, American landscape worthy of protection in *My Ántonia*. However, the prairie was not, in her day, considered a landscape worthy of preservation. In fact, of the still active National Parks commissioned from



1910–1919 all nine<sup>1</sup> share one common feature: verticality (even Acadia National Park in Maine features the tallest mountain on the Atlantic coast). Indeed, no prairie landscape would be zoned for conservation under the National Park Service until 2002 when Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve opened in Kansas.

Cather acknowledges this national disregard for the prairie's sublimity in the trajectory she plots for Jim Burden. Despite his youthful awe, Jim grows up to be an agent of the railroad and mining industry, rapidly transforming and pillaging the landscape he had once admired. Instead of seeking to preserve the landscape that, Jim, according to the narrator, still "loves with a personal passion," Jim uses the landscape for colonialism, utility, and resource extraction, not aesthetic appreciation. The youthful Jim Burden who loves the prairie is not the same as the Jim Burden who crafts his tale. Despite his experience with "the prairie sublime," Jim celebrates the transformation of untouched land into cultivated soil as a figure whom Michael Gorman calls "rooted in colonialism" (30). Jim's return to Blackhawk at the novel's end is an attempt to reconnect with something that Jim helped to eradicate. Calling the trip "disappointing" Jim is left to contemplate the transformation of the native prairie into an

agrarian, cultivated society. The novel thus becomes a morality tale about the ongoing destruction of a landscape that Cather identifies with the very essence of America's sublimity and democratic idealism.

Cather writes of the transformed prairie that "their yield would be one of the great economic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war" (124). Unfortunately, that fact would not create in the American public a sense of conservational obligation. By the time Cather wrote *My Ántonia* (1918), most of the prairie would be plowed for farmland. The great fact of the prairie sublime in Cather's fiction seems ignored and passed over as well. Clearly, Cather presents the prairie as a sublimely charged ecology on par with the greatest verticality that can be found on the mountainous regions of either coast. As such, her prairie deserved the conservationists' attention given what would be the first National Parks. Moreover, her inclusion of the prairie as a uniquely American landscape enhances her position as a national, pro-democratic, anti-imperialist writer, not merely a regional western author.



*The prairie in winter, ca. 1910.*



## NOTES

1. Glacier (1910), Rocky Mountain (1915), Heleakalā, Hawaii (1916), Hawai'i Volcanoes (1916), Lassen Volcanic, California (1916), Denali, Alaska (1917), Acadia, Maine (1919), Grand Canyon (1919), and Zion, Utah (1919). I chose the 1910–1919 time frame to illustrate how the preference for verticality dominated the selection of National Parks as Cather's interest in conservation was beginning and as she was writing her prairie novels.

## WORKS CITED

- Bainbridge, Simon ed. *Romanticism: A Sourcebook*. New York: Palgrave, 2008.
- Ball, Claudia and John Lyall. *The Accelerated Sublime: Landscape, Tourism, and Identity*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002.
- Bennett, Mildred R. "Willa Cather and the Prairie." *Nebraska History*. Vol. 56 No. 1 (1975), 231–235. <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1975WCather.pdf>.
- Boime, Albert. *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, c. 1830–1865*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991.
- Brooks, H. Allen. *The Prairie School*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006.
- . *Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie School*. New York: George Braziller Inc., 1984.
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*. London: Penguin Classics, 2004.
- Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia*. Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Ed. Charles W. Mignon, Kari Ronning, James Woodress, Kathleen Danker, and Emily Levine. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994.
- Cronon, William. Ed. *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1995.
- Cole, Thomas. "Essay on American Scenery." *American Monthly Magazine*. No. 1 (January 1836), 1–12. <http://www.csun.edu/~ta3584/Cole.htm>.
- Cosgrove, Denis E. *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1998.
- Giacomoni, Paola. "Mountain Landscape and the Aesthetics of the Sublime in Romantic Narration." *Romantic Prose Fiction*. Ed. Gerald Gillespie, et. al. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2008. 107–121.
- Gorman, Michael. "Jim Burden and the White Man's Burden: *My Ántonia* and Empire." *Cather Studies 6: History, Memory, and War*. Ed. Steven Trout. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2006. 28–57.
- Hill, David. "The Quotidian Sublime: Cognitive Perspectives on Identity-Formation in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* Vol. 61 No. 3 (Autumn 2005), 109–127.
- Legler, Dixie. *Prairie Style: Houses and Gardens by Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie School*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1999.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. ed. *Landscape and Power*. Chicago UP, 2002.
- Muir, John. *The Mountains of California*. New York: The Century Co., 1907.
- . *Our National Parks*. Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 901. <https://archive.org/details/nationalparksour00muirrich>.
- Nash, Roderick Frazier. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001.
- O'Brien, Raymond J. *American Sublime: Landscape and Scenery of the Lower Hudson Valley*. New York: Columbia UP, 1981.
- O'Brien, Sharon. *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.
- Quantic, Diane Dufva. *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995.
- Reynolds, Guy. "Modernist Space: Willa Cather's Environmental Imagination in Context." *Cather Studies 5: Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination*. Ed. Susan J. Roskowski. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003. 173–189.
- Roskowski, Susan J. *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986.
- Shaw, Philip. *The Sublime*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973.
- Thacker, Robert. *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1989.
- Urgo, Joseph. "My Ántonia and the National Parks Movement." *Cather Studies 5: Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination*. Ed. Susan J. Roskowski. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003. 44–63.
- . *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995.
- Webb, Walter Prescott. *The Great Plains*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931.
- Wilton, Andrew and Tim Barringer. *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820–1880*. Princeton: UP, 2002.





# Women and Nature in Willa Cather and Her Contemporaries

Maribel Morales | Carthage College

The forty years between 1880 and 1920 are known as the “formative years” of American environmentalism and as Joseph Uργο points out, these were also the formative years for Willa Cather (46). The era was marked by the work of writers who were aware of the importance of nature and its conservation. American writers Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Austin, Kate Chopin and Willa Cather evoked nature in different ways contributing to this environmentalism that will later be called ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism sees a connection between the patriarchal oppression of women and the exploitation and degradation of the natural world. Karen J. Warren explains that “just as there is not one feminism, there is not one ecofeminism or ecofeminist philosophy” and that “what makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nature) are feminist issues” (*Ecofeminism* 4). Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote in 1975: “Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination” (204). She agreed with the basic argument of ecological feminists in the early 1970s that the women’s movement and the ecological movement had to be united in order to modify “the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values” of modern industrial society (204). According to Karen J. Warren the slogan of ecofeminism could possibly be “Nature is a feminist issue” (“Ecofeminism and Social Justice,” 139).

French feminist writer Françoise d’Eaubonne coined the term ecofeminism in 1974 as part of her call to women to save the planet. Since then, ecofeminism has achieved international recognition as well as widespread popularity. Noting its rapid growth since the early eighties, Ynestra King, one of the founders of ecofeminism, has called it the third wave of the women’s movement. Ecofeminist scholar and activist Greta Gaard further defines ecofeminism as a contemporary political movement operating on the theory that the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race, and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment (1). King argues “the ecological crisis is related to the systems of hatred of all that is natural and female by the white, male western formulators of philosophy, technology, and death inventions” (353). She sees the central dynamic of western patriarchy as the division of society into hierarchically organized dualisms: man/woman, culture/nature, civilization/

primitivism, mind/body, reason/emotion, rationality/irrationality, and human/nonhuman. Power is centralized and focused on the masculine ruling class, with the “not-masculine” requiring protection, control, and guidance. Enforcement of these gender roles therefore enables the domination of disempowered groups: women, men of color, children, animals, and nature.

Prominent ecofeminist thinker Carol Bigwood claims that the influence of the “culture/nature” dichotomy on “the oppression of western women is well known in feminist studies” (130). Bigwood explains that women have been seen as “closer to nature” than men because of their “mothering” bodies (130). As a result, the task of ecofeminism is described as “making visible the various ways in which the dominations of women and nonhuman nature are sanctioned and perpetuated under patriarchy, and engaging in practices and developing analysis aimed at ending these dominations” (Warren, *Ecofeminism* 234). Ancient systems of thought considered nature as a living organism, an idea that also prevailed in the sixteenth century when the image of earth as a nurturing mother restricted the domination of nature by human beings. Environmental historian Carolyn Merchant explains that in sixteenth-century pastorals, nature was represented as a mother and wife, as essentially “subordinate” and “passive” (*Earthcare* 9). This identification of nature as a mother and a wife, however, was based on respect for nature because “one does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold, or mutilate her body. . . . As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it” (78). The metaphor of the earth as a nurturing mother gradually disappeared as a dominant image as the scientific revolution proceeded to “mechanize and to rationalize the worldview” (Merchant, *The Death of Nature* 2). Although the mechanistic worldview of modern science characterized nature as female, it emphasized nature’s disorder and wildness. Like something that must be tamed and domesticated, this view of nature “called forth an important modern idea, that of power over nature” (2). The new men of science in the emerging capitalist economy did not consider the exploitation of nature as something forbidden. Men were now believed to have the right to exploit natural resources promoting an ideology of untrammelled power over nature (Merchant, *Earthcare* 295). Merchant points out how modern natural sciences, based on the destruction and subordination of nature created “the death of nature.”



Stacy Alaimo argues that this ideology has not only “provoked the prodding and piercing of the natural world” but that it has also “embalmed ‘woman’ as corporeal, passive matter” (2). As a result, women are defined as being “outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality, and agency” (2).

Contrary to these exclusionary ideologies, ecofeminists often explore the symbolic patterns that link women and nature in literature, art and popular culture. Susan Griffin and other ecofeminists focus on women’s nature writing to analyze the women/nature connections. Griffin writes of the patriarchal man: “He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. . . . But for him this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature” (1). Karen J. Warren notes that Griffin’s writing is “testimony to the power of literature and language to convey basic attitudes about women and nature” (“Ecofeminism and Social Justice” 144). Warren explains that “ecofeminist literary criticism” has emerged from the analysis of the representations of women and nature in nature writing.

Clearly, ecofeminist literary criticism offers a unique lens through which we can investigate the ways nature is represented in literature, and how these representations of natural settings are aligned with criticism of gender. According to Glynis Carr, ecocriticism is “hybrid, diverse, and multivocal” (18). As Stacy Alaimo notes “many women have, in fact, invoked nature in order to critique cultural roles, norms, and assumptions and to escape from the confines of the domestic” (15). In the late eighteenth century, the capitalist revolution created the separation of spheres between production for men and reproduction for women who were left with the obligation to become wives and mothers, and to remain in the family home. Carolyn Merchant claims that the ideological split between “productive and reproductive spheres was necessary for the maintenance of the market economy” (*Earthcare* 103). The idea that women should remain in a separate sphere, centered on home and family, continued to prevail throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most women lived their lives in obedience to the emerging cult of domesticity, but other searched for an alternative to their roles as homemakers.

For these other women, nature presented an alternative to the subordination and constraints of the patriarchal society; nature became a space for female liberation. These symbolic spaces can be found in the works of Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Mary Austin and Willa Cather, four key figures in the tradition of women’s regional writing. In their stories, the female characters have special connections with nature, bonds that shape their destinies. Some authors have used regional environmental forces to end the lives of the female characters

that live under restrictive situations, limited by their gender. In other stories, women turn to nature to seek an undomesticated space where they can find inspiration and self-assertion. Fiction offers a space for women to envision themselves beyond the constraints of their gender roles. In using nature as a way to criticize the patriarchal society’s treatment of women and in some instances the destruction of nature by men, the works by these four authors fit an ecofeminist approach. Common themes unite the works of Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Mary Austin and Willa Cather; these four writers also shared a common experience as regional writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The personal and professional relationships connecting these four women reveal how their works served as inspiration and revealed the struggles they faced in the defense of women’s writing in the United States.

For Cather, the most influential writer of her literary career was perhaps Jewett. Jewett was born in South Berwick, a small town in Maine. Her works successfully capture the essence of this American region and its culture due to her style and her familiarity with the people and places she knew so well. Her characters are mainly women with strong personalities who are able to live independent lives. Her novel *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) has been considered “the best piece of regional fiction to have come out of nineteenth century America” (Spiller et al 845). Cather, in her preface for the 1925 edition of the novel, categorized it as one of three American works destined to literary immortality. (The other two novels were *The Scarlet Letter* and *Huckleberry Finn*) (Donovan 99). Jewett had a significant personal impact on the life of Cather. They had met “through Willa Cather’s first assignment on *McClure’s* as a staff member in 1906” (Sergeant 54). “Cather had long admired Jewett’s work” (Stout, *Willa Cather* 98) and Jewett recognized Cather’s talent and gave her the best advice she ever received. Jewett “urged her to resign [from the magazine] and devote her full energies to writing . . . from a female perspective” (99). Jewett became her mentor for the time remaining until Jewett’s death the next year. Paula Blanchard explains that “after Jewett’s death there was a long period when her works were little read, and if it had not been for Willa Cather’s 1925 edition of *Pointed Firs* and F. O. Matthiessen’s 1929 biography, they might almost have been forgotten” (232).

Twelve years before the publication of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett wrote the story of a young woman, Nan Prince, who rejects marriage and becomes a physician in a time when very few women were entering the professional world. Her novel *A Country Doctor* (1884) presents the obstacles and struggles of this young girl. Jewett represents nature as a place where “gender roles are not enforced and where women can ‘evolve’ into undomesticated creatures” (Alaimo 53). The major theme of this novel is women’s independence and self-determination,





and how the protagonist must follow her “nature”, her “natural calling”, and the “law of nature” even if it means going against society’s expectations of her as a woman. It is in a natural setting that she makes this decision: “while she sat there, breathing fast and glowing with bright color, the river sent a fresh breeze by way of a messenger, and the old cedar held its many branches above her and around her most comfortably, and sheltered her as it had done many times before” (111). In the novel, nature becomes a place where Nan can liberate herself from gender roles.

In a similar way, in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) nature represents a feminine space. The fictional Maine coastal town of Dunnet Landing becomes a redeeming place for the narrator, a writer. She is weary of her life in the city and travels to Maine to spend the summer looking for inspiration and rejuvenation. Elizabeth Ammons suggests that this journey takes the narrator to a predominantly feminine world that seems to be the “centre of civilization of which her affectionate dreams had told” (“Material Culture” 47). One of Jewett’s favorite themes, “city versus country,” is best represented in this novel in which according to Elizabeth Silverthorne “the narrator finds the inner peace she is seeking in the pastoral setting and in the lives of the women, who exhibit the wisdom and strength she would like to acquire” (169). The rural world becomes a source of spiritual energy in contrast to the desensitizing effect of the urban industrial world. The novel contains several hybrid spaces as Jewett cautiously documents the details of domestic space and at the same time experiments with “the potential to pose nature as an alternative (feminist) place” (Alaimo 39). As Ann Romines points out, the protagonist “does indeed redefine gender expectations” as she comes face to face with “some of the most conventional expectations for women’s lives: various versions of housekeeping” (49). These hybrid places do not conform to boundaries between nature and culture, instead “the domestic opens out into nature” (Alaimo 39).

The narrator of the story is a middle-aged, single woman, a writer whose name is not mentioned, and who stays with Almira Todd, a sixty-seven year old widow and herbalist. In Mrs. Todd’s home “domestic space outdoors and indoors intermingle, with the garden entering the house in the form of various scents and fragrances and Mrs. Todd moving between house and garden as between rooms” (“Material Culture” 85). However, Mrs. Todd does not remain enclosed in her garden. She ventures out into the wilder landscapes where she gathers herbs, and where the deepest conversations take place between her and the narrator. Both women are able to build a strong friendship through multiple conversations that create “a sense of intimacy, deep feeling and trust” between them (Donovan 102). At the beginning the narrator attempts to write in Mrs. Todd’s house, but she is too distracted by the number of people coming in to buy healing herbs from Mrs. Todd. The narrator starts to integrate herself among the people of the town as she departs from the professional



*A Nebraska homesteader, ca. 1908.*

work of writing and begins to observe and participate in the life of the town. Her stay in this rural region surrounded by nature, the sea, the flowers, the healing herbs, the fields, provides her with the tranquility she needs to recover from her life in the city, and at the same time it becomes a source of inspiration that will help her continue with her literary career. Back in the city the narrator plans to reenter the literary world in order to write the story that will become *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.

Jewett is an essential figure standing between nineteenth-century domestic feminism and Mary Austin’s “undomesticated” feminism. In the early part of the twentieth century, Austin “paints the land beyond the borders as a feminist refuge where women can dodge domestic confinement and cast off gender as if it were an ill-fitting shoe” (Alaimo 16). She was a social critic, feminist and nature writer who challenged the cult of domesticity. She did not focus on gardens that were believed to be extensions of domestic spaces; instead she traveled toward a natural territory that was not colonized by domesticity, such as the desert. Austin was born in Illinois, but after her college graduation she moved with her family to a desert area in California. Austin is known for her book *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), based on nearly twenty years of residence in the Mojave Desert of eastern California. *The Land of Little Rain* presents vibrant descriptions of the interacting physical and biological wilderness landscape of the desert. In the desert, Austin found not only a space for female liberation but also a voice and a subject matter for her stories.

Austin was one of the first authors who explored the association between women and nature from a feminist and environmentalist perspective. Representative of Austin’s regionalist revision of the land-as-woman trope is her allegorical tale “Lone Tree,”<sup>1</sup> where she tells of “the fatal consequences of environmental degradation, sanctioned by the feminization of nature” (Schaefer 127). A prospector named Hogan vents his anger at a tree in the middle of the desert: an “old-maidish” tree, “he hated the Lone Tree” (Austin 26). The male protagonist fails to notice in his machismo attitude that the tree’s roots stabilize the rock opening of the area’s only spring. He uproots the tree without considering the consequences



leaving it behind “like a woman fainting” (26). When he comes back a year later during a sandstorm, there is no water, so he dies, and Austin tells us “the bones of Hogan mixed with its stark branches” (26). The consequences of the destruction of nature by men are evident in this story, as well as the identification of nature as feminine. Austin is advocating for the conservation of nature but also critiquing male domination over women. In order to escape this female subordination in the patriarchal society, the protagonist of Austin’s story “The Walking Woman” (1907)<sup>2</sup> turns toward the desert as an undomesticated space where she can break free from society’s values and expectations.

When Austin wrote the short story “The Walking Woman” she was separated from her husband and living by herself. In “The Walking Woman,” Austin’s heroine decides to leave social limitations behind and live in the desert wandering by herself: “The Walking Woman walked off all sense of society-made values, and, knowing the best when the best came to her, was able to take it” (261). The desert becomes a metaphor for freedom for women, a place without the restrictions imposed by the patriarchal society of this time. At the end of the story, the Walking Woman continues walking in the desert: “There in the bare, hot sand the track of her two feet bore evenly and white” (262). Melody Graulich suggests that this last image of the woman implies that “The Walking Woman’s trail is one worth following” (19). Austin struggles to “portray nature as both a place of feminist possibility and an independent force that exceeds and resists mastery” (Alaimo 37).

In a similar way, Kate Chopin depicted a natural setting as an undomesticated space, free from society’s expectations, and a female protagonist deeply affected by gender limitations. As Mary Austin uses the desert as a symbolic space offering the female character the option to be independent, Chopin gives the sea the same liberating qualities for her protagonist, Edna Pontellier, in *The Awakening* (1899). This novel is an example of how nature and women are

connected and how a natural setting provides her with the freedom she desires even if it means ending her life. Chopin was born in St. Louis, Missouri but when she married Oscar Chopin in 1870 they settled in New Orleans, generally vacationing at Grand Isle, the setting for much of *The Awakening*. Chopin did not begin writing seriously until early middle age, when the death of her husband left her with their six small children to support. As a writer of regional short fiction, Chopin was particularly adept at portraying strong, complex female characters. She was aware of the social differences women suffered in her time and was able to criticize them through her work.

It is not surprising that *The Awakening* provoked enormous criticism at the time of publication. Edna Pontellier, the central character, a wife and a mother of two boys, awakens to the sexual passion and self-assertion of an independent woman. During a summer vacation at Grand Isle, she recognizes how her husband, Léonce, treats her as if she were his object of possession, and as a consequence her marriage begins to feel claustrophobic. Confronting not only the demands of marriage, but also the demands of being a mother, and of social life, Edna is overwhelmed with a growing desire to escape, but her options are limited. Inspired by the sensuous atmosphere of the Gulf coast, Edna awakens to the voice of the sea she loves so much to bathe in, and consequently surrenders to her own spiritual and sensual impulses. Edna loves the sea, as it embodies the opposite of social and familial obligation. Edna hears the voice of the sea calling her soul in a tempting way: “Seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude” (17).

Edna’s connection with nature becomes even stronger when she overcomes her fear of swimming and as she ventures out in the open sea where “she wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (33). This desire to break the gender barriers, mixed with a newly acquired confidence in herself, results in Edna’s defiance of social rules of proper behavior expected of a mother and a wife. Edna disobeys her husband and starts a mild flirtation with a bachelor named Robert Lebrun. After a period of withdrawal from her duties as a wife and mother, back home in New Orleans, she ultimately moves out of her husband’s house into a small house of her own, behaving much like a single woman. Edna engages in an extramarital affair, not with Robert, but with Alcée Arobin, a far less respectable man. However, none of these outlets proves satisfactory and Edna comes to believe that death is the only possible solution. Edna stands naked under the sky and ventures into the sea without looking back. In the sea, she frees herself of the obligations of marriage, domesticity and nineteenth-century womanhood. This is a death both liberating and affirmative.

Following publication in 1899, the novel received harsh criticism from Chopin’s contemporaries who thought *The*



Exploring the natural world, 1909.







Schoolteachers, 1907.

*Awakening* was a dangerous specimen of “sex fiction.” Many vicious reviews condemned *The Awakening* for coarseness and immorality. *The Pittsburgh Leader’s* young reviewer, Willa Cather, condemned *The Awakening’s* theme although she admired Chopin’s writing style: “I shall not attempt to say why Miss Chopin has devoted so exquisite and sensitive, well-governed a style to so trite and sordid a theme” (qtd. in Culley 170). Cather ends her criticism of the novel with the following words: “And the next time I hope that Miss Chopin will devote that flexible iridescent style of hers to a better cause” (qtd. in Culley 172).

Reading the work of Jewett inspired Chopin’s writing style. Chopin, like Cather, admired Jewett and took her as a literary model: “I know of no one better than Miss Jewett to study for technique and nicety of construction” (qtd. in Seyersted 52), and so Chopin studied her intensely. Josephine Donovan points out that Chopin’s prose style in *The Awakening* is an example of Jewett’s influence (138). Since Jewett, Austin, Chopin and Cather were trying to make names for themselves in the literary world, it is not surprising to see that they read each other’s novels and short stories and adopted aspects of each other’s styles.

The connection between Cather and Austin has been recognized for some time. Willa Cather read magazines such as *Overland Monthly* and *Atlantic Monthly* where Mary Austin published a number of stories, including “The Walking Woman” (1907). Both authors published stories in *Overland Monthly* in 1895, and considering that they competed in the same literary field, one can assume that they read each other’s works. An example of Austin’s influence in Willa Cather is the use of the metaphor “Earth-woman” in the character of Alexandra in *O Pioneers!* (1913). Janis Stout points out that “it is clear that Cather took notice of Austin’s work” (*Willa Cather* 114). Stout argues that the writers met in person around 1910 through some employees of *McClure’s* and she

adds, “Cather would almost certainly have read [Mary Austin’s] *A Woman of Genius* soon after publication. It became another catalyst for the material she would soon begin working up into her own longest novel” (127): *The Song of the Lark*, published three years later. During this time, Austin’s reputation was escalating, and she was probably better known than Cather. *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) was her initial success, and after that she published two novels with substantial success, *Isidro* (1905) and *Santa Lucia* (1908).

The friendship between Cather and Austin exhibited a mixture of admiration and rivalry, resulting in several controversial events. Austin criticized Cather’s *The Professor’s House* (1925) for her treatment of the state of New Mexico, and she had her reservations about Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). T. M. Pearce wrote in Mary Austin’s biography that “Miss Cather stayed at [Austin’s] Casa Querida when she was at work on *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. She and Mrs. Austin had been friends for a number of years” (176). Pearce explains that among the books in Casa Querida there is a copy of the novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* with a dedication Cather wrote for Austin: “For Mary Austin, in whose lovely study I wrote the last chapters of this book” (176). After Austin mentioned this in her autobiography *Earth Horizon* (1932), Cather insisted that she had not written a single word of her novel in Austin’s house, but that she only wrote some letters. There are a number of supporters of Cather’s version of the story as well as Austin’s. Nonetheless, there is ample evidence that Cather remained both “personally and professionally conversant with her up until Austin’s death in 1934” (Stout, “The Observant Eye” 142). Despite their differences, Cather and Austin experienced the natural world in a similar way. Janis Stout points out that both women shared “habits of hiking, close observation of plant life, and the use of notebooks to record their field observations” (147–148).

Nature played an important role in Cather’s life, a fact well-reflected in her novels. Her trips to different regions in the Southwest such as Mesa Verde National Park and Walnut Canyon left a deep mark on Cather. As Sharon O’Brien notes, “Cather immediately felt that she had been reborn in the Southwest” (404). In this region she found a new confidence in her writing skills and the strength to make an important decision: to leave journalism and become a novelist. Her experience in the desert, the canyons, and cliffs affected her in such a way that the Southwest became one of the passions of her life as well as an enormous source of inspiration for future novels such as *The Song of the Lark* (1915), in which Cather describes a female artist’s growth and development from childhood to maturity. This character, Thea Kronborg, leaves Moonstone, her Colorado hometown, to study music in Chicago. In Moonstone, Thea had a strong connection with nature, particularly the sand hills: “she loved them better than anything near Moonstone”



(51). She was only thirteen when one day “she looked at the sand hills until she wished she were a sand hill. And yet she knew that she was going to leave them all behind some day” (88).

In Chicago, Thea begins her awakening as a young artist with potential for greatness. Mark A. Robison suggests that as Thea looks out over the Chicago Art Institute and turns her gaze from the stone lions outside to a lumber boat on Lake Michigan, she “disregards the cosmopolitan and aestheticized view of the world that had limited women’s roles in the middle and upper classes to art objects, in favor of a view that allows those women to participate in the fabrication of regional culture instead” (148). Her full artistic awakening does not take place in an urban setting but in a desert canyon in Arizona, where she is sent to rest and regain her health.

Cather recreates her own intense experience visiting Walnut Canyon in Panther Canyon and its huge impact on Thea. Her growth as a singer in this natural setting results in part from “experiencing the rhythmic and often symphonic voices of nature’s singers—the chirping of the ‘little brown birds,’ the constant, rhythmic tapping of the woodpecker, and the repetitious sounds of the cicadas or locusts” (Moseley 226). Thea explores the area and finds a space in one of the cliff dwellings where she makes a room for herself. She feels such a connection with nature and its ancient inhabitants that the rhythmic nature-based ceremonies and her bath “came to have a ceremonial gravity” (334). Contemplating the meaning of art as she looks around the water and the broken vessels, Thea understands that just like the Native American women, who contained their art in the vessels, “[i]n singing, one made a vessel of one’s throat and nostrils and held it on one’s breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals” (335). Thea is in harmony with her surroundings in connection with nature, which helps her mature as an artist and find her musical identity. At the end of the novel the readers learn that she has become a successful soprano. As James Woodress suggests, *The Song of the Lark* is “a novel of awakening” (252), and it is precisely thanks to her awakening in this natural context that Thea achieves her professional goals. The symbolism of Thea’s trip to the Arizona desert is like other similar journeys to “secret, healing places in nature” in Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Chopin’s *The Awakening* (Ammons, *Conflicting Stories* 128).

Nature also plays an important role in the life of another female artist in Cather’s *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), a young girl

from the small town of Haverford, Nebraska. Thea Kronborg and Lucy Gayheart share a passion for music; Cather, however, “makes it clear from the beginning that Lucy does not possess the outstanding talent or irrepressible ambition to become an accomplished artist” (Weiss 159). Other critics have argued how different these female characters are; nevertheless they share a special connection with nature, a bond that will shape their lives. They both have musical talents and receive musical training in Chicago, although nature will determine different outcomes for them.

In her hometown, Lucy loves the river, a place where she experiences first love and the joy of skating in the wintertime. In Chicago she falls in love with a singer, Clement Sebastian, an



Miller, Nebraska, 1909.

older man unhappy in his marriage. Theirs is a doomed relationship and the first tragic event in a natural environment happens when he goes on tour in Italy and drowns in Lake Como. His death devastates Lucy, who returns to her hometown. Like another tragic heroine, Marie Shabata in *O Pioneers!* (1913), who loves the orchard and feels she can only be herself among the trees, Lucy chooses the apple orchard as her place of remembrance and mourning: “in the orchard she feels safe” (156). She ultimately finds the resolve to go back to Chicago

to pursue a musical career. But one day after a chilly discussion with her sister she goes to the river to ice-skate. Lucy’s return to the river induces the death of the protagonist by drowning in a skating accident. In *O Pioneers!* Marie Shabata’s death under the mulberry tree is also significant. Cather, echoing Chopin, ends the life of both female characters in the environmental setting where they always found comfort. With Lucy’s death in the river she loved, where she went to escape deception and suffering, Cather shows a pessimistic view of life, with all hopes doomed to failure. Mark Buechsel points out that Cather, as well as other Midwestern authors writing in the 1920s and 1930s, experienced “the Midwest’s shift to an industrial, mechanized, thoroughly capitalistic” world and as a result culture was dehumanized (48). Cather’s pessimism in this story reflects the economic changes taking place at the turn of the century. Nevertheless because Lucy was a performing artist, she continues to live in the hearts of those who knew her—just as her childhood footprints are preserved in concrete. The last image of the novel reflects this idea of her living memory as Harry Gordon, her one-time suitor, “paused mechanically on the sidewalk, as he had done so many thousand times, to look at the three light footprints, running away” (231). As Janis Stout



notes, “the pursuit of art, as personified by Lucy Gayheart, is redemptive for others as well as for herself” (“Willa Cather and the Performing Arts” 113).

All these treatments of nature, producing either a positive or a tragic ending, provide an important tradition of regional women’s literature. The repeated use of natural elements or natural settings as metaphors for freedom introduces an ideological critique of the “civilized city” as intimately linked to patriarchy and therefore to women’s oppression. Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Mary Austin, and Willa Cather depicted nature as inspiring liberation and offering new paths for women in a male dominated society, making them remarkably relevant to the history of turn-of-the-century American literature and the development of twentieth-century ecofeminism.

#### NOTES

1. Included in *One-Smoke Stories* (1934), a collection of new and previously published stories.

2. Included in *Stories from the Country of Lost Borders*, a collection of Austin’s short stories and sketches published in 1987. The collection focuses on the inhabitants of California’s desert region and on the way the landscape shapes their character and their destiny.

#### WORKS CITED

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2000.
- Ammons, Elizabeth. *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- . “Material Culture, Empire, and Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs*.” *New Essays on “The Country of the Pointed Firs”*. Ed. June Howard. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Austin, Mary. *One-Smoke Stories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934.
- . *Stories from the Country of Lost Borders*. Ed. Marjorie Pryse. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1987.
- Austin, Mary. *Western Trails: A Collection of Short Stories*. Ed. Melody Graulich. Reno: University of Nevada P, 1987.
- Bigwood, Carol. *Earth Muse: Feminism, Nature and Art*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993.
- Blanchard, Paula. *Sarah Orne Jewett: Her World and Her Work*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994.
- Buechsel, Mark. *Sacred Land: Sherwood Anderson, Midwestern Modernism, and the Sacramental Vision of Nature*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 2014.
- Carr, Glynis. *New Essays in Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*.

- Lewisburg Pa.: Bucknell UP, 2000.
- Cather, Willa. *Lucy Gayheart*. New York: Vintage Books, 1976.
- . *The Song of the Lark*. Willa Cather Scholarly Edition. Ed. Ann Moseley and Kari A. Ronning. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2012.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. Ed. Margaret Culley. New York: Norton, 1976.
- . *The Awakening and Selected Short Fiction*. Ed. Rachel Adams. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003.
- Donovan, Josephine. *Sarah Orne Jewett*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980.
- Gaard, Greta. *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993.
- Griffin, Susan. *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. New York: Harper and Row, 1978.
- Jewett, Sarah Orne. *A Country Doctor*. Penguin Books, 2005.
- . *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Selected Short Fiction*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005.
- King, Ynestra. “Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology and Nature/Culture Dualism.” *Feminism and Philosophy: Essential Readings in Theory, Reinterpretation and Application*. Ed. Nancy Tuana and Rosemarie Tong. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperCollins, 1980.
- . *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Moseley, Ann. “The Creative Ecology of Walnut Canyon: From the Sinagua to Thea Kronborg.” *Cather Studies 5: Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination*. Ed. Susan J. Rosowski. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003. 216–236.
- O’Brien, Sharon. *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.
- Pearce, T. M. *The Beloved House*. Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, Ltd. 1940.
- Robison, Mark A. “Transcending the Urban-Rural Divide: Willa Cather’s Thea Kronborg Goes to Chicago.” *Regionalism and the Humanities*. Ed. Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2008.
- Romines, Ann. *The Home Plot: Women, Writing & Domestic Ritual*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*. New York: Seabury, 1975.
- Schaefer, Heike. *Mary Austin’s Regionalism: Reflections on Gender, Genre, and Geography*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2004.
- Sergeant, Elizabeth Shepley. *Willa Cather: A Memoir*. U of Nebraska P, 1963.
- Seyersted, Per. *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1979.
- Silverthorne, Elizabeth. *Sarah Orne Jewett: A Writer’s Life*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1993.



Spiller, Robert E., Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry S. Canby. *Literary History of the United States*. New York: Macmillan, 1963.

Stout, Janis. "The Observant Eye, the Art of Illustration and Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*." *Cather Studies 5: Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination*. Ed. Susan J. Rosowski. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003. 128–152.

—. "Willa Cather and the Performing Arts." *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*. Ed. Marilee Lindemann. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005.

—. *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2000.

Urgo, Joseph. "My Ántonia and the National Parks Movement." *Cather Studies 5: Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination*. Ed. Susan J. Rosowski. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003. 44–63.

Warren, Karen J. and Nisvan Erkal. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997.

Warren, Karen J. "Ecofeminism and Social Justice: Introduction." *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. Ed. Michael E. Zimmerman. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005.

Weiss, Gretel D. "Lucy Gayheart and Schubert." *Willa Cather's New York: New Essays on Cather in the City*. Ed. Merrill M. Skaggs. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2000.

Woodress, James L. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P 1989.

Glotfelty) and *Artifacts and Illuminations: Critical Essays on Loren Eiseley* (with Sue Maher).

**Susan N. Maher** is Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota Duluth. She has published widely on Great Plains, environmental, and nonfiction writers. She is author of *Deep Map Country: Literary Cartography of the Great Plains* and co-edited *Artifacts and Illuminations: Critical Essays on Loren Eiseley* with Tom Lynch). She sits on the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors.

**Maribel Morales** is Assistant Professor at Carthage College, Wisconsin, where she teaches American literature and Spanish. Her scholarship focuses on gender and ethnic studies in nineteenth and early twentieth century American women writers. A native of Spain, she has presented at the Willa Cather Spring Conference and at conferences of the American Literature Association, Western Literature Association, and others.

**Patricia Oman** is Assistant Professor of English at Hastings College, where she teaches courses in American literature, film, children's literature, and writing. Her research focuses on region, especially the Midwest, in literature and popular culture. She is also the Director of Hastings College Press.

**Daryl W. Palmer** is Professor of English at Regis University in Denver. He is author of *Writing Russia in the Age of Shakespeare* and other works. His articles about Willa Cather and the Great Plains have appeared in journals such as *American Literary Realism*, *Great Plains Quarterly*, *Kansas History*, and the *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review*.

**Charles A. Peek**, Professor Emeritus at the University of Nebraska Kearney and Fulbright Scholar (China 2005, 2008), was 2011 winner of Nebraska Center for the Book's Mildred Bennett Award for fostering the literary arts. His *Where We've Managed Somehow to Be* was a 2014 Wayne State College Press chapbook, and April 2015 will see the publication of *Breezes on Their Way to Being Winds* by Finishing Line Press. He sits on the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors.

**John T. Price** is author of three nature memoirs: *Daddy Long Legs: The Natural Education of a Father* (2013), *Man Killed by Pheasant and Other Kinships* (2008), and *Not Just Any Land: A Personal and Literary Journey across the American Grasslands* (2006). He has had work published in *Orion*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Iowa Review*, and many other places. He is a professor of English at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

**Ann Romines** is professor of English at The George Washington University and a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation. She is author and editor of several books, including *Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*. She is editor of the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

**Tracy Tucker** is education director of the Willa Cather Foundation. A certified archivist, Tucker oversees the WCF collection and presents regularly on topics related to Cather, Great Plains literature and the environment. She is a graduate of Kansas State University and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln with degrees in American literature and creative writing, with a specialization in Great Plains studies.

## Contributors to this Issue

**Daniel G. Deffenbaugh** is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Hastings College. He is the author of *Learning the Language of the Fields: Tilling and Keeping as Christian Vocation* (2007) and articles in such journals as *Christian Century*, *Sojourners* and *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.

**Mark Facknitz** is Roop Distinguished Professor of English at James Madison University. The 1989 winner of the Virginia Prize for fiction, his creative work has appeared in *The Georgia Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Story Quarterly*, and other journals. Essays on Raymond Carver, Anthony Powell, Henry Green, Joseph Conrad, Michel Tournier, Willa Cather, and others have appeared in *Studies in Short Fiction*, *The Journal of Modern Literature*, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *Cather Studies* and other publications.

**Barry Hudek** is in the fourth year of the PhD program at the University of Mississippi and at work on a dissertation tentatively titled "Book of Nations: the Bible as National Criticism in Cather, Faulkner, and Hurston."

**Tom Lynch** is a professor in the English Department at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. He is co-editor of *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place* (with Karla Armbruster and Cheryl





# Willa Cather NEWSLETTER & REVIEW



Volume 57 • No. 3 | Winter • Spring 2015

## **The Willa Cather Foundation** **Established 1955 by Mildred Bennett**

Ashley Olson, Executive Director

[www.WillaCather.org](http://www.WillaCather.org)

©2015 Willa Cather Foundation

Guest Issue Editor: Susan N. Maher

Managing Editor: Thomas Reese Gallagher

Copy Editors: Virgil Albertini and Dolores Albertini

Design: Bunny Zaruba Design

### **Issue Editors**

Ann Romines, *The George Washington University*

Steven B. Shively, *Utah State University*

Robert Thacker, *St. Lawrence University*

The *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review* welcomes scholarly essays, notes, news items, and letters. Scholarly essays should generally not exceed 5,000 words, although longer essays may be considered; they should be submitted in Microsoft Word as e-mail attachments and should follow current MLA guidelines as articulated in the Seventh Edition of the *MLA Handbook*.

Direct essays and inquiries to Ann Romines at [annrom3@verizon.net](mailto:annrom3@verizon.net).

Send letters and inquiries to Thomas Reese Gallagher at [tgallagher@nyc.rr.com](mailto:tgallagher@nyc.rr.com).

The *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review* (ISSN 0197-663X) is published three times a year by:

The Willa Cather Foundation  
413 North Webster Street  
Red Cloud NE 68970

402-746-2653

866-731-7304

E-mail: [info@willacather.org](mailto:info@willacather.org)

No part of the *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review* may be reprinted without the permission of the Willa Cather Foundation.

### **Editorial Board**

Virgil Albertini, *Fairway, Kansas*

Bruce P. Baker II, *Omaha, Nebraska*

Richard C. Harris, *Webb Institute*

Charles Johanningsmeier, *University of Nebraska Omaha*

Susan Maher, *University of Minnesota Duluth*

John J. Murphy, *Santa Fe, New Mexico*

Julie Olin-Ammentorp, *Le Moyne College*

David Porter, *Skidmore College*

Ann Romines, *The George Washington University*

Steven B. Shively, *Utah State University*

John N. Swift, *Occidental College*

Robert Thacker, *St. Lawrence University*

Joseph Urgo, *Association of American Colleges and Universities*

### **Board of Governors**

#### **Officers**

Thomas Reese Gallagher, *President*

Lynette Krieger, *Vice President*

Glenda Pierce, *Secretary*

David Porter, *Treasurer*

Susan N. Maher, *Past President*

#### **Board Members**

Virgil Albertini

Marion A. Arneson

Mark W. Bostock

Max Despain

Richard C. Harris

Jill Hornady

Andrew Jewell

Charles Johanningsmeier

Ruth H. Keene

Fritz Mountford

John J. Murphy

Julie Olin-Ammentorp

Charles A. Peek

Guy Reynolds

Ann Romines

Nancy Sherwood

Steven B. Shively

### **Board Members (cont.)**

Kate Sommer

James P. Southwick

C. Kay Stahly

Robert Thacker

Lu Williams

John A (Jay) Yost

### **Advisory Members**

Bruce P. Baker II

Laurie Smith Camp

James L. Fitzgibbon

David B. Garwood

Joel Geyer

Jane Renner Hood

Ron Hull

Betty Kort

Mellanee Kvasnicka

Lucia Woods Lindley

Dale McDole

Gary L. Meyer

Nancy S. Picchi

Rhonda Seacrest

John N. Swift

Gary W. Thompson

Joseph R. Urgo



## **Fragments of Desire: Cather and the Arts**

The Cather Foundation's 60th Annual Willa Cather Spring Conference  
and the 15th International Willa Cather Seminar

Red Cloud and Lincoln, Nebraska

June 5 – 11, 2015

With keynote speakers Richard Norton Smith and Terese Svoboda

For registration and program information, visit [www.WillaCather.org](http://www.WillaCather.org)



# The Song of the Lark

BY WILLA CATHER

CELEBRATING 100 YEARS  
1915 ▶ 2015



*“... what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?”*



Limited edition commemorative poster available through WillaCather.org