

# Willa Cather REVIEW

Volume 62 | No. 3 | Summer 2021



Cather and  
the Opera

Bright  
*Medusae*

Remembering  
Departed  
Friends

# Willa Cather REVIEW

Volume 62 • No. 3 | Summer 2021

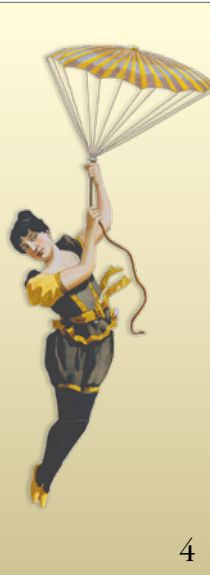


## UN/TETHERED

Cather on the Cusp of the 1920s  
June 4–6, 2020 • Red Cloud, Nebraska  
65th annual Willa Cather Spring Conference | National Willa Cather Center



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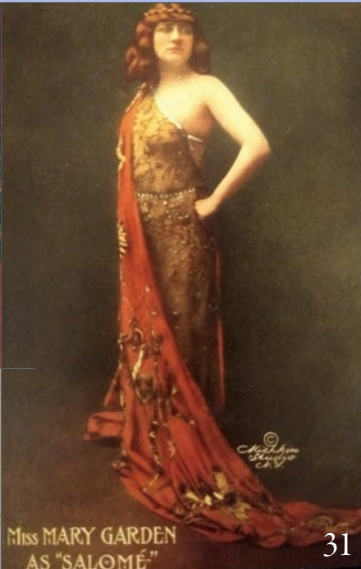
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*On the cover:* Interior detail of the old Metropolitan Opera House, New York, N.Y., demolished in 1967. Image from the Historic American Buildings Survey, ca. 1933. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Bust of Willa Cather by Paul Swan (detail) for the Nebraska Hall of Fame, photographed by Don V. Becker, ca. 1963. Used by permission of History Nebraska; no. RG2639-01-28.



## Letter from the Executive Director Ashley Olson

Adaptation is the word that comes to mind when I recall our 2020 Willa Cather Spring Conference. Flexibility and innovation are not far behind. Much of 2020 required all of these things—with a bit of resiliency too. In spite of the volatility that characterized much of the year, the Willa Cather Foundation accomplished a great deal beyond the well-attended and memorable spring conference that is recalled in the pages of this issue of the *Review*.

The absence of on-site programs for much of the year was offset with the addition of virtual arts events, exhibits, and a new monthly author series. If you haven't already, I encourage you to download our National Willa Cather Center mobile app to tour the Willa Cather Childhood Home, the Cather Prairie, and much more. At long last, you can also browse our collection online at [www.willacather.org](http://www.willacather.org). Willa Cather's financial ledger and Charles Cather's journals are just two examples of the treasures to be discovered, with many additions yet to come.

The generosity of donors to our *Campaign for the Future* enabled us to commence restoration efforts at the Burlington Depot, Pavelka Farmstead, and the Farmers and Merchants Bank. These properties, so deeply connected to Cather's life and literature, were carefully rehabilitated as a first step toward an enhanced visitor experience. In the near future, exhibits within each of the sites will examine topics such as migration, settlement, agriculture, the railroad, banking, and rural life—both historically and as they relate to our lives today.

While we adapted to the changes that came our way, we also celebrated that Cather's literature continues to inspire new art. Lee Isaac Chung's Academy Award-nominated film *Minari* is a recent example. Inspired in part by Cather's *My Ántonia*, *Minari* also depicts the difficulties of rural farm life—in Arkansas in the 1980s rather than Nebraska in the 1880s. Once again, the land becomes both a loved and an antagonistic character.

So please treat yourself to something I've shared here. Visit our historic sites in Red Cloud, check out the collection, download our app, or see the film. We'd love to hear about your experience!



## Letter from the President Glenda Pierce

Our 2020 Willa Cather Spring Conference, "Un/Tethered: Cather on the Cusp of the 1920s," which we revisit in this issue of the *Review*, was a virtual and actual success! The digital platform attracted participants from far and wide, many of whom had never been able to attend a spring conference because of travel limitations. We learned from this new experience and we will continue to offer digital participation when we are able to safely resume in-person conferences.

Much of the spring conference focused on the arts and artists, both of which are common themes in Willa Cather's works. Cather deeply appreciated music and the theater. It was in Red Cloud, as a young girl, that Cather first

developed her passion for the arts. Like many small frontier communities, the opera house in Red Cloud provided a wide variety of musical and theatrical performances for its citizens, often of very high quality. Willa was able to attend and be inspired by these performances in what must have seemed a grand setting for a prairie town.

The Red Cloud Opera House, which dates from 1885, is an integral part of the National Willa Cather Center and was fully restored and reopened in 2003. We continue to embrace Cather's enthusiasm for the arts through productions on the Opera House stage, art exhibits in the NWCC gallery, digital author talks, archival displays, and educational presentations. You, our supporters, are the reason we are able to share Cather's life, world, and love of the arts with Cather enthusiasts around the globe.

Thank you for continuing to support our work. We deeply appreciate your generosity.



# Un/Tethered: Willa Cather on the Cusp of the 1920s

## *Revisiting the 2020 Spring Conference, or How We Got There*

Diane Prenatt and Elaine Smith

As codirectors of the 65th Spring Conference, held June 4–6, 2020, we knew from the first that the event would commemorate the centenary of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, Willa Cather's second collection of short stories and her first publication with Alfred Knopf, which appeared at the cusp of the Roaring Twenties. Every story in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* concerns art and artists; the theme is inescapable. The date of publication suggested also the wild freedoms of the Jazz Age with its flivvers and flappers and cheap, if illegal, booze, which were just around the corner; darkening the fizzy mood, however, were the remembered horrors of the Great War, the 1918 influenza pandemic, and a dark, reactionary undercurrent that qualified the idea of the giddy twenties. We envisioned a conference that would put these two strands—the importance of art and the exigencies of the historical moment—into conversation with each other.

Our conversations kept returning to a striking image in “Coming, Aphrodite!,” that of Eden Bower in a hot air balloon, high above the crowds of Coney Island. Clad in revealing black tights and silver slippers, she lowers herself to the trapeze that hangs from the passenger basket. For a few moments, she is transformed into a beautiful, unattainable daredevil, completely in control of her body and its performance. Eden's soaring figure, apparently untethered, came to represent for us the liberated spirit of the artist that Cather so admired—a spirit that by 1920 had, to a great extent, liberated Cather as well. Although focused on the liberated young singer in a moment of triumph, the scene suggests other aspects of art and the artistic life in 1920: that art is spectacle or performance, that its essence is illusion, that artistic success depends on pleasing—perhaps tricking—the audience, that the audience is made up of consumers with questionable taste. Bringing to a head Don Hedger's argument with Eden Bower about the nature of artistic success and its costs, this scene questions the artist's desire for adulation and the necessity, fairly new in 1920, of advertising and self-promotion.

Cather's lifelong interest in the creation of art and the life of the artist, as well as in the importance of art to those lives which lie outside the creative process, is evident in the reviews she wrote early in her career for the Lincoln and Pittsburgh newspapers, in the stories of *The Troll Garden* (1905), and in her 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark*. In her journalism and in her fiction, Cather turns her attention time and again to the discipline and rigor

demanding of the artist, the power of art to transform both its maker and its audience, the commerce and the consumption of art, and the tension between the great world beckoning to the artist and the artist's place of origin—sometimes a source of artistic inspiration yet at other times a philistine wasteland from which the artist must escape. In the stories of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, Cather's artists break with philistinism, with restricting social construction, with the shabbiness of materialism, thus freeing themselves from the mooring conventions of small-town, middle-class life to become the transformed figures gazed upon by an admiring or perhaps uncomprehending audience.

In 1920 liberation was in the air, as our plenary speaker, historian Erica J. Ryan, author of *When the World Broke in Two: The Roaring Twenties and the Dawn of America's Culture Wars*, reminded us. The demographic shift from rural to urban created an American culture that felt “newly modern.” Increased mobility, the expansion of media, and modern advertising created a more homogeneous and accessible popular culture. The Nineteenth Amendment enfranchised women voters. Both the suffragist and the flapper evolved into highly visible social types as “Celebrating Women,” an exhibit of contemporary quilts curated by Cynthia Levis and Dianne Duncan Thomas, and Sue McClain's presentation of “The New Woman's Closet” made clear. Social boundaries between the sexes relaxed, and alcohol and the automobile contributed to more permissive sexual behavior. As Ryan noted, cultural change provoked cultural backlash and anxiety which found expression in a nostalgic longing for the imaginary certainties of the past, in a rejection of Darwinian science, and in the racist and anti-immigrant sentiments of nativist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Ryan reminds us that the roots of today's culture wars are to be found in the conflicts and disruptions of the 1920s.

As a writer, Willa Cather herself figures in this shifting cultural landscape. In his keynote address, Alex Ross, music critic for *The New Yorker* and author of *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*, spoke in the conference's keynote address of Cather's great admiration for Wagnerian opera and for the singers of her day, indeed, of her allegiance to high art. He noted that two of the great contemporary Wagnerian divas, Lillian Nordica and Olive Fremstad, provided the models for Cressida Garnet of “The Diamond Mine” and Thea Kronborg of *The Song of the Lark*, and that Wagnerian opera figures explicitly throughout *Youth and the*



*Bright Medusa*. Wagner was a celebrity artist; well-known singers like Nordica and Fremstad achieved a measure of autonomy and financial independence unusual for women. But, Ross reflected, the stories of *Youth and the Bright Medusa* reveal “a sense of loss,” a “darker vision” that replaced Cather’s early attraction to the “romantic grandeur” of the kingdom of art.

Ross’s talk and additional papers presented at the conference appear in this issue of the *Willa Cather Review*. They are enriched by some of the evocative visual images featured during the conference. The essays and images capture the conference’s rich exploration of its themes while provoking ongoing work on this exciting aspect of Cather’s life.

John Flannigan, looking at one of the prototypes for Kitty Ayrshire and Eden Bower, the Scottish diva Mary Garden, posits that Garden’s example of diligent self-promotion may have inspired Cather to pay more attention to public promotion and fame as requisite to a “big career.” Following David Porter, Mark Madigan, and others, Flannigan notes that Cather’s abandonment of Houghton Mifflin was occasioned in part by her perception that the publishing house had failed to sufficiently promote her books. Flannigan argues that, beginning in the 1920s, her stories about artists had to do less with high artistic achievement and more with the practical necessities behind artistic production.

The tension between brilliant success and abject failure is suggested by Cather’s title: youth will chase the compelling bright light of artistic achievement but may discover instead of shining success a terrible Gorgon that will turn her to stone. The tensions within an artist’s life are the subject of Elizabeth Wells’s essay “Youth and the Bright *Medusae*: Cather’s Jellyfish.” Noting that a common name among scientists for jellyfish was “medusa,” Wells draws parallels between the shimmering, stinging sea creature and the risks of artistic desire.

If Wagner and the preeminent opera singers of the day were elevated sources of inspiration for Cather, we were frequently reminded during the conference that Cather’s work itself becomes a source of education, information, and transformation. Michael Burton transformed Cather’s short story “A Gold Slipper” into an animated film and a multimedia art exhibition, new forms for a new century. Burton’s essay explains his creative process and the challenges that come with adapting the power and artistry of Cather’s words to new forms of expression.

During the coronavirus pandemic, travel to Red Cloud for the 2020 spring conference was impossible. We remained tethered to our homes. In our imaginations, however, we soared, finding in Cather’s words and the words of her readers an unlimited source for thought and inspiration.

# UN/TETHERED

Cather on the Cusp of the 1920s  
June 4–6, 2020 • Red Cloud, Nebraska

65th annual Willa Cather Spring Conference | National Willa Cather Center



Strobridge & Co. Lith. Coney Island beach and boardwalk scenes. Cin'ti; New York: Strobridge Lith. Co. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.



# Spring Conference 2020: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Tracy Sanford Tucker

Those who have had the good fortune to join us in Red Cloud for our annual Willa Cather Spring Conference weekend already know that every conference is different—different speakers, different performers, different exhibits, different themes. The worlds Cather created in her writing are so rich and varied that we never lack new approaches to her work. As we began planning for the 2020 Spring Conference, we were looking forward to examining Cather’s collection of short stories, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, from our modern perspective, one hundred years after its publication. Little did we know what challenges and adventures awaited us.

When I think about all our spring conferences since I started my work here, only two commonalities jump out: the Cather community itself, which makes every spring conference feel a little like a family reunion, and some inevitable change of plans. Every conference has dozens of planning complications, from early scheduling conflicts to last-minute travel hiccups. Last year, however, just as we were ready to announce our spring conference events and programs, a new concern arose—to say the least. Complications and conflicts and hiccups are as nothing compared to the rapidly mounting fear and anxiety and dread brought on by the worldwide spread of Covid-19. While we exerted every effort to keep our loved ones and ourselves safe, and struggled to stay abreast of constant news reports that were horrifying or confusing, or both, we still had a conference to plan. Didn’t we? Like every organization planning summer events in 2020, we watched the news, listened to epidemiology radio shows, and sought guidance from our professional networks and our local and state Departments of Health. Some valuable early advice was to conduct a “tabletop exercise”—that is, imagine and talk through the worst-case scenario of what our conference might look like if travel and gatherings were simply not possible in June.

As I write this essay, more than a year since those early conversations, I think back to early brainstorming sessions. One suggestion, postponing the conference a few weeks, in retrospect feels almost painfully hopeful. The possibility of simply cancelling for the first time since the spring conference’s inception was dismissed out of hand; finding an alternative format seemed to be the only real option, but it was

an option with a steep learning curve, for both the planners and the participants.

The things we *didn’t* know about virtual conferencing far outweighed the things we *did* know, and we had just weeks to learn them. Though we had all participated in any number of Zoom calls and webinars, single sessions like those are very different from a three-day event that requires ticketing, security, technological redundancy, videography, editing, training, and setup. With very little time to prepare, we had to rely on already developed software tools, many of which come from, and are intended for, the corporate sector. While not a perfect solution for our conference needs, we were grateful for the support that we got from the developers at Whova, the vendor we chose to provide our virtual conference platform. They answered our most granular questions and even made some custom adjustments for our audience. Without their help, we would’ve had a much less successful event.

We also owe thanks to our presenters, who were patient as we tried to plan for an ever-changing conference schedule and, in the end, finished their papers early, recorded their own talks, and still made time to be present for the live Q&A sessions, answer questions on Whova’s community message boards, and support their Cather colleagues as they navigated a new conference experience. We’re so grateful for their excellent scholarship and, moreover, to be part of this amazing group. The conference codirectors, Elaine Smith and Diane Prenatt, and our board leadership, were our biggest supporters in finding innovative ways to move forward, which made all the difference.

Without a doubt, the technological hurdles we encountered were most challenging. Adopting the best practices suggested to us by our software developers, we made use of both live and pre-recorded elements of our schedule, which in some instances meant writing, rehearsing, recording, and editing content throughout the month of May. Questions about our audience that had never been meaningful before (“How many are smart phone users?”) became really, *really* important; other questions from years past (“How many guides are available on Saturday? Are there fans in Grace Episcopal? Who might need rides down to the Burlington Depot?”) fell by the wayside. Saddest of all, perhaps, was that there wasn’t a single kolache in the building.



We tried to recreate moments of live human connection; the Passing Show panel was done completely live and unscripted yet was—as it nearly always is—one of the highlights of the conference. We knew without a doubt that this particular conference feature could never be duplicated in a recorded form, and I'm glad we made that decision, though the possibility of an internet outage (in Red Cloud or elsewhere) kept us on the edges of our seats for those two hours. By no means did we come away unscathed by technical goofs—despite all our preconference testing, the Zoom room didn't function on event day and a video file didn't work for some conference attendees. We were able to correct and move on, but not as gracefully as we might have been able to with an in-person conference.

As with every spring conference, there are things we loved and want to keep. We heard from more than a few brand-new attendees that they had never had the opportunity to attend our conference before and this new format gave them the chance to do so. As a result, 2020 was one of our best-attended spring conferences in years. Some of the conversations that began on the Whova message boards are still going on. Recorded sessions from the conference have been archived and will become a permanent record and resource for the organization.

We always know that we can improve. The technology gets better, and we already anticipate better functionality for people who want to participate in the conference from their desktop computers instead of from their phones. We've identified some efficiencies we can implement now to make things more accessible for our attendees and for ourselves. We're thinking ahead about remaining committed to digital delivery options as we transition toward hybrid events.

But more than anything, we cannot wait to have you back in Red Cloud. As I write this, some weeks ahead of Spring Conference 2021, I'm aware that you will be reading it after the conference is concluded. Whether you returned to our hybrid 2021 conference virtually or in person, we are eager to hear your reactions to the changes that have taken place during the long months we were closed, the things we've learned, the projects we've undertaken. We are incredibly blessed with forward-thinking leadership, generous supporters, and a staff that is so incredibly flexible. I couldn't be prouder of the spring conference planning team and what we've collectively accomplished. When the world closed down in 2020 and could no longer come to us, we took Willa Cather's hometown to the world, and we'll continue to do so.



# Willa Cather, Olive Fremstad, and the Singer in Fiction

Alex Ross

It seems fitting that a music critic should speak in connection with *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, since six of the eight stories are musical in theme. Five have singers as principal characters. A sixth, “A Wagner Matinée,” has an obvious operatic connection, even though the matinée in question consists of orchestral excerpts from the Wagner operas. A seventh, “Paul’s Case,” uses a concert hall as a setting. One can see *Youth and the Bright Medusa* as a kind of epilogue to *The Song of the Lark*, Cather’s story of the rise of an American Wagner soprano, based in part on the life of the singer Oliver Fremstad. In my new book, *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*, an account of Wagner’s sweeping influence on arts and literature after his death, I write at considerable length about *The Song of the Lark*. Here I will give a somewhat compressed version of the Fremstad connection, and also discuss the various singers who seem to lie behind *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, which combines stories that were relatively new at the time of publication with stories from Cather’s debut collection, *The Troll Garden*.

Cather loved music her entire life and had many crucial experiences with music during her youth in Nebraska. One early source of knowledge was Professor Schindelmeisser, an obscure Red Cloud character who gave Cather piano lessons and became the model for Professor Wunsch, Thea Kronborg’s teacher in *The Song of the Lark*. As I reveal in *Wagnerism*, Schindelmeisser was, in fact, the son of Louis Schindelmeisser, a fairly well known German composer and conductor who was an avid supporter of Wagner at a time when that composer was under heavy suspicion for his revolutionary activity. Although full-fledged opera was not possible at the Red Cloud Opera House, Cather would have been able to hear touring singers and orchestras once she got to Lincoln. In 1893, for example, she heard the celebrated soprano Lillian Nordica perform, Nordica being the model for the unfortunate Cressida Garnet in “The Diamond Mine.”

When she moved to Pittsburgh, Cather heard performances by the Walter Damrosch company, from New York, and then from

the touring company of the Metropolitan Opera. These were pivotal and revelatory experiences. The Met casts included some of the greatest Wagner singers of the day: Nordica, Jean and Édouard de Reszke, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, Lilli Lehmann, Andreas Dippel, Marie Brema, and Anton van Rooy. “Certainly all the living talent of the world could not furnish a better cast,” Cather wrote of the lineup for Wagner’s *Lohengrin*—a plausible claim (*The World and the Parish* 619). Less plausible is her announcement that she had never heard Nordica sing Elsa so well (620); almost certainly, this was her first encounter with Nordica in the role. She also appears to have made Nordica’s acquaintance, as she wrote in the same review, “Madame Nordica told me in the afternoon when she was running over the score at her hotel that she had a premonition that the night would be a triumphant one” (620).

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Nordica cemented her place as one of the great Wagner sopranos of the day. In this era, the leading female Wagner singers embodied a rare kind of power for women in the public arena, which occasionally found a political application. Nordica was a vocal suffragist, and in 1910 she said that her involvement in the suffragist struggle was rooted in her experience on the stage, the “only place where men and women stand on a perfect equality.”

She said that “our whole social system is founded on conditions that existed in the stone age, when man took what he wanted by force” (“Maude Adams Makes Pilgrimage to Ireland”). In 1913, Nordica appeared at two suffragist pageants, both times singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” while attired as Columbia. At the one, a vast outdoor parade in Washington, D.C., the Pilgrims’ Chorus from *Tannhäuser* was heard as figures representing Liberty, Justice, Hope, and the like bowed before Nordica (“Suffragette Parade Attracted Thousands”). The second rally, at the Metropolitan Opera House, included a speech by Theodore Roosevelt and an orchestra of professionals and society women playing selections from *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin* (“Suffragists’ Big Night”).



Photogravure print ca. 1890 of Lillian Nordica from an original photograph by W. & D. Downey, London.





At first glance, this steely, feminist Wagnerian might have seemed the likelier basis for the big musical novel that Cather had long planned to write. But she had mixed feelings about Nordica's singing—and her distinctly mixed feelings about feminism might also have made her wary of Nordica's political involvements, though I know of no direct comment on the subject. In 1899, Cather wrote an "Open Letter to Lillian Nordica" (*The World and the Parish* 642–46) that praised the "aggressive form of courage" of the soprano's international ascent (643) and the "powerful and splendid organ" of her voice (645), but criticized her for being too hard,

too unyielding: "Ah! if you would sometimes let your heart go out with that all-conquering voice! if you would but sometimes be a woman!" (645). Cather speaks approvingly of Nordica's renditions of the Wagnerian "warrior maidens"—she has in mind Brünnhilde, the world savior of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*: Elsa, the unfortunate heroine of *Lohengrin*; and the self-sacrificial Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*—but finds her inadequate to the mad, furious passion of Isolde, in *Tristan und Isolde* (646). It is strange to find a writer who pressed against stereotypes of gender chastising another artist for failing to conform to womanly traits, yet the contradiction is typical of Cather, who reserved for herself an independence that she often withheld from other women.

In 1914, Nordica died suddenly of complications brought on by hypothermia caught on an ocean voyage. Her demise inspired "The Diamond Mine," in which Cressida Garnet dies on the maiden voyage of the *Titanic*, "on the road between the old world and the new" (133–34). Nordica was married three times, to men who treated her in variously condescending, unfaithful, and exploitative fashion. Garnet, likewise, is portrayed as a brilliant talent surrounded by grasping, manipulative men. She wished to bequeath a considerable sum to her Greek-Jewish coach and pianist, but after her death her relatives and her most



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and Brown and the Garnets quarreled over her personal effects. They went from floor to floor of the Tenth Street house. The will provided that Cressida's jewels and furs and gowns were to go to her sisters. Georgia and Julia wrangled over them down to the last molecule. They were deeply disappointed that some of the muffs and stoles, which they remembered as very large, proved when exhumed from storage and exhibited beside furs of a modern cut, to be ridiculously small. A year ago the sisters were still reasoning with each other about pearls and opals and emeralds.

I wrote Poppas some account of these horrors, as during the court proceedings we had become rather better friends than of old. His reply arrived only a few days ago; a photograph of himself upon a camel, under which is written in German:

*Trust and truth  
only in the depths are found;  
cunning and cowardice  
thrive in the sun.*

His reply, and the memories it awakens—memories which have followed Poppas into the middle of Asia, seemingly—prompted this informal narration.

**Next month's Big Little Novel, complete in one issue, is "The Torpedo," by Wallace Irwin, a powerful story of love and adventure with the great war as background—intense, dramatic, satisfying.**

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**Oh, You Robber!**  
[Continued from page 13]

Nettie was through fighting. Her nerves gave way and the corners of her mouth began to quiver. She dabbed her handkerchief in her eyes.

"I didn't mean to," she said in a quavering voice. "Honest, Mr. Kroeger. I didn't know he'd take it so hard. I like Tim, honest I do. I guess—I guess—he's the best friend I ever had. I'm sorry; maybe I was wrong. Let me think it over. I don't want to hurt Tim's feelings. Tell him, Mr. Kroeger, tell him, I—"

She stopped suddenly, her face hardening as she looked past Benny. He turned. Tim was just stepping out of the elevator. His hat was tilted back. He swung a cane jauntily and he was whistling. With a care-free air he walked over to the cigar-counter

**VER JOHNSON**



**YOUR LANGUAGE**

"Restore the German text" appears in Cather's hand on this fragment from the last page of "The Diamond Mine" in the October 1916 McClure's. Betty Kort Collection, NWCC.

recent husband launch legal wranglings to claim all the money for themselves. They fail, and are left to haggle over jewels, furs, and gowns—the remnants of the "diamond mine" they saw in her.

The story's narrator sends news of this outcome to Poppas, the pianist. His reply, with which the story ends, consists of the Rhinemaidens' final lines from *Das Rheingold*, the first part of the *Ring of the Nibelung* cycle. In the story's first publication, in the pages of McClure's, these lines appear in English: "Trust and truth / only in the depths are found; / cunning and cowardice / thrive in the sun." The German, which Cather uses in all subsequent appearances of the story, is: "*Traulich und treu / ist's nur in der Tiefe; / falsch und feig / ist was dort oben sich freut!*" (137). A more literal translation would be "Only down deep is it trusty and true: false and base is the revelry above!" These are crucial lines in the *Ring*. The gods are entering the newly built palace of Valhalla, but the building rests on a corrupt foundation, its builders paid with the gold that Alberich took from the Rhine and that Wotan then stole from Alberich. The revelry above is the false glory of the gods, who go to their doom at the end of the cycle, clearing the way for a more just world. One can guess that Cather intends an allegory for the world of the arts, in which the rich and the successful, the darlings of fortune, inhabit an upper tier and more





“Three American Singers”: Louise Homer, Geraldine Farrar, Olive Fremstad. Homer: as Amneris in *Aida*, by Aimé Dupont, 1900, NWCC collection. Farrar: as Juliette in *Roméo et Juliette*, real photo postcard ca. 1910, NWCC collection. Fremstad: 1911 portrait, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Div. 98519797.

serious souls labor below. It might be noted that in 1916 Cather herself had not yet achieved her greatest literary fame; *The Song of the Lark* had a somewhat mixed reception. So she may see herself among the “trustful and true.” Whether the unfortunate Garnet and her model Nordica belong among those false gods is perhaps left for the reader to decide. One might conclude that whatever the honorableness of their intentions and the strength of their artistry, the singers are inevitably damaged as they are drawn into that false world.

If Nordica represents one of Cather’s earliest encounters with a major operatic voice, the stories of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, together with *The Song of the Lark*, reflect her experiences once she moved to New York. In 1906, *McClure’s Magazine*, the most culturally ambitious and politically outspoken American magazine of the day, hired Cather as an editor. Her position at *McClure’s* allowed her to attend performances regularly at the Met and afforded access to leading artists; in 1913 she published an article titled “Three American Singers,” profiling Louise Homer, Geraldine Farrar, and Olive Fremstad. Farrar was a modern, celebrity-conscious singer, noted both for the lyrical gleam of her voice and for her glamorous physical appearance, fit for the latest flapper fashions. In “Three American Singers,” Cather presents Farrar as a study in worldly success: she is an artist who makes herself a “darling of fortune” (36). Cather quotes her saying, “I do not long to, nor do I believe I can, climb frozen heights like the great Lehmann” (42). This is Farrar’s

teacher Lilli Lehmann, the great Wagner soprano who also had the flexibility to assume the bel-canto role of Norma in the Bellini opera of the same name. One can easily see Farrar-like traits in the lively, flighty character of Kitty Ayrshire in “A Gold Slipper” and “Scandal,” both written in 1916 and later published in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. John Flannigan makes a persuasive case that the flamboyant soprano Mary Garden also left her traces on these stories, and even more on the figure of Eden Bower in “Coming, Aphrodite!” (see page 31 in this issue). In 1906 Garden sang the world premiere of Camille Erlanger’s scandalous opera *Aphrodite* and took the role to Chicago in February 1920.

Louise Homer was a contralto of notable power and richness of tone who was long a mainstay of the Metropolitan Opera. Cather admires her singing but does not seem to find it artistically compelling. Homer, she writes, “set for herself no goal that it would break her heart to lose” (35). Married to the composer Sidney Homer and the mother of five children, the singer also lacked the personal eccentricities and complexities that made Nordica and Farrar interesting to the social anthropologist in Cather. Homer leaves little obvious trace on these singer stories. Fremstad is by far the most interesting of the trio. She is a “great and highly individual talent” who floats far above the workaday opera business—into that zone of “frozen heights” (42). Her singing deals not only in emotions but also in ideas. She is solitary, obsessive, elusive. Cather quotes her saying, “We are born alone, we make our way alone, we die alone” (42).

A native of Stockholm, Fremstad came to the United States with her parents when she was a child and spent part of her youth in the northern prairie town of Saint Peter, Minnesota—a shift hardly less abrupt than Cather’s to Nebraska. One passage of Cather’s *McClure’s* article reads like oblique autobiography: “Circumstances have never helped Mme. Fremstad. She grew up in a new, crude country where there was neither artistic stimulus nor discriminating taste. . . . She fought her own way toward the intellectual centers of the world. She wrung from fortune the one profit which adversity sometimes leaves with strong natures—the power to conquer” (48).

Fremstad’s father was a revival preacher, and as a budding musician she led congregations from the organ. In the early nineties, she made her way first to New York and then to Berlin, where she studied with Lilli Lehmann, who had performed in the 1876 world premiere of Wagner’s complete *Ring* at the first edition of the Bayreuth Festival. Initially cast in lower-lying contralto and mezzo parts, Fremstad made her Bayreuth debut in 1896 as the Rhinemaiden Flosshilde and as the Valkyrie Schwertleite. Returning to New York in 1903, she caused a sensation as Kundry in the Met’s *Parsifal*. She then made a tricky transition to soprano parts, becoming the Met’s reigning Brünnhilde and Isolde. She first sang the latter role under Gustav Mahler’s direction, and later with Arturo Toscanini. Those notoriously demanding conductors found a kindred spirit in Fremstad, who spent countless hours studying her parts and plotting how she would move onstage. One famous story concerns her preparations to perform the title role of Richard Strauss’s *Salome*, in New York, in 1907—a scandalous occasion that incensed the daughter of J. P. Morgan and caused the production to be shut down. The opera ends with Salome kissing the severed head of the John the Baptist. Fremstad is said to have gone to a New York morgue in order to research how heavy a severed head might be.

In discussing Fremstad’s performances, Cather divulges her own understanding of Wagner heroines. On Kundry: “She is a summary of the history of womankind. [Wagner] sees in her an instrument of temptation, of salvation, and of service; but always an instrument, a thing driven and employed. Like Euripides, he saw her as a disturber of equilibrium, whether on the side of good or evil, an emotional force that continually deflects reason, weary of her activities, yet kept within her orbit by her own nature and

the nature of men” (47). On Brünnhilde: “Mme. Fremstad’s idea is that the war-maiden in the first opera of the Ring is a girl, not a matron. . . . The Valkyr music is restless, turbulent, energetic. The Valkyrs’ ride is the music of a pack of wild young things.” Cather is alert to gender ambiguity: Brünnhilde’s body is “straight and athletic, like a boy’s” (48). These interpretations cannot be described as feminist: Cather accepts at face value Kundry’s transition to mute subservience and Brünnhilde’s evolution toward a more contained womanliness. But the girlish-boyish wildness palpably excites her most.

For ordinary mortals, Fremstad was never an easy collaborator. In the 1913–14 season, she quarreled with the Met’s general manager, Giulio Gatti-Casazza, who decided that she was worth neither the expense nor the effort. In the spring of 1914, she announced that she would leave the Met roster. Her final performance, in *Lohengrin*, was a legendary occasion, precipitating a twenty-minute ovation. No less fabled was the brief, enigmatic speech that she gave at the curtain. It ended: “My one aim has always been to give you of my best, my very best. May we meet again where there is eternal peace and harmony. Good-bye!” (“Fremstad Gets Rousing Farewell”). She was only

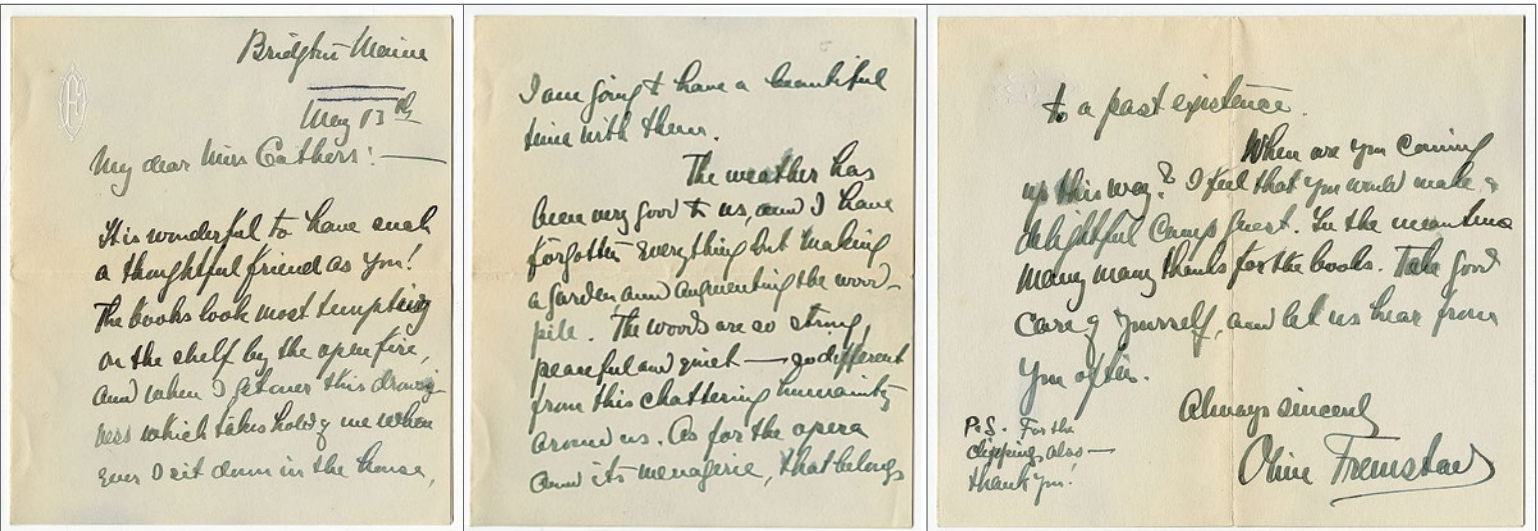


Fremstad at “Little Walhalla,” her property in Bridgton, Maine, 1915. Private collection.

forty-three, and might have gone on singing at least for another decade. But the outbreak of the First World War ruled out a shift to Europe, and a Met comeback never materialized. The abruptness of her exit and the curttness of her farewell added to her aura of mystery.

Fremstad’s personal life was even more obscure. She married twice, but both relationships were dissolved after a few years. In interviews, she declared that serious artists should remain





Fremstad's letter to Cather. Charles E. Cather Collection, University of Nebraska—Lincoln Archives and Special Collections.

unattached. Her most stable relationship was with a woman: Mary Watkins, later Mary Watkins Cushing, who became enraptured by Fremstad while still in her teens. Cushing was hired as Fremstad's secretary and soon became her live-in companion. In a memoir with the Wagnerian title *The Rainbow Bridge*, Cushing is candid about her crush on Fremstad. Describing her state of mind before the initial meeting, she says that she "felt like a medieval esquire in vigil on the eve of knighthood." She served, above all, as a "buffer"—Fremstad's word—against the outside world (4). Isolde now had a Brangäne at her side.

Cather got to know Fremstad better than most. After the *McClure's* article came out, the two women met many times during the singer's final Met season. In June 1914, Cather visited Little Walhalla, Fremstad's summer home in Maine; before the visit she wrote to her brother Roscoe in anticipation of seeing again her dream character, "the greatest artist of her time . . . and a Swede off the Divide" (*Selected Letters* 191). She wrote Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant about the "glorious time" she had with Fremstad: "She fished as if she had no other means of getting food; cleaned all the fish, swam like a walrus, rowed, tramped, cooked, watered her garden. . . . It was the grandest show of human vigor and grace I've ever watched" (*Selected Letters* 192). In a letter to Cather, Fremstad wrote of her pleasure in solitude: "The woods are so strong, peaceful and quiet—so different from this chattering humanity around us." Behind the diva façade, Cather saw a solitary girl from a rural background, not unlike herself.

The Wagner singer, emitting ear-splitting sounds while inhabiting superhuman roles, was irresistible to writers of fin-de-siècle fiction. For those of an idealistic bent, heldentenors and dramatic sopranos represented a striving at the limit of

human possibility. The heroine of George Moore's 1898 novel *Evelyn Innes* is a Wagner singer who decides to depart from worldly life and enter a convent, though she goes on singing Wagner there. Leonora Brunna, the Spanish Wagner soprano in Vicente Blasco Ibáñez's 1900 novel *Entre naranjos* (*In the Orange Grove*), casts a disconcerting spell on a handsome, callow young man: Brunna is "the arrogant Valkyrie, the strong-minded and valiant female, ready to slap the slightest impudence and handle him like a little boy" (160–61). Satirists relished the notion of modern people walking off the streets of Berlin or New York and putting on winged helmets. The Wagner tenor in Frank Wedekind's 1897 play *Der Kammersänger* is a cynical egoist, leaving human wreckage in his wake.

American authors delighted in the strangeness and loucheness of the Wagner milieu, which allowed them to enter generally forbidden territory. Gertrude Atherton's *Tower of Ivory*, published in 1910, describes the rise and fall of Margarethe Styr, who leads a life of prostitution before reinventing herself as a Wagner soprano. Styr has a doomed affair with a feckless young British diplomat, who, it is clear, has gay longings. Rather than face a life without her beloved, she arranges that her immolation at the end of *Götterdämmerung* be done with real fire, and she perishes. Although *Tower of Ivory* seems ludicrous today, Atherton was notable for creating independent-minded female characters, sometimes with lesbian overtones attached.

The music critic James Huneker, an avid chronicler of decadence, wrote several singer-stories, one of them inspired by Fremstad. He first heard the singer at Bayreuth in 1896, and wrote in his review in the *Musical Courier*, "Our Olive deserved the crown" (20). His interest was not merely musical: that summer he and Fremstad either had a brief affair or were on the verge of one. He fictionalized the incident in a story

titled “The Last of the Valkyries,” later republished as “Venus or Valkyr,” where he represents himself as a superficial Wagnerite torn between an American singer and a Romanian sophisticate. In Huneker’s 1920 novel *Painted Veils*, a soprano named Easter Brandes, bewitching to men and women alike, moves through a decadent milieu in which the names of Huysmans, Wilde, Nietzsche, and Wagner are dropped with numbing regularity. Although Brandes resembles Fremstad in a few ways—she studies with Lehmann, as does Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark*—her coldly ambitious personality, described as a composite of “harps, anvils, and granite,” is far removed from Fremstad’s (293).

Marcia Davenport’s 1936 novel *Of Lena Geyer*, a late and sophisticated entry in the genre of the singer-novel, portrays a Fremstad-like diva who approaches her art with almost comical seriousness. She, too, is a Lehmann pupil, and, like Fremstad, she puts her career ahead of any enduring physical relationship. The way she sings a certain phrase in *Tristan* reveals that “no human love could touch Lena Geyer; the woman had consecrated herself to a world of superhuman ideals” (349). She does, however, form a seemingly platonic attachment with a female devotee, Elsie deHaven, who trails Geyer from performance to performance. “The voice poured into me, and from that moment it became the one thing I cared to live for,” deHaven says of her first encounter with the singer (225). Eventually, she becomes Geyer’s live-in secretary, as Mary Cushing did for Fremstad. Speaking to the book’s narrator, deHaven feels compelled to clarify that this “strange, almost passionate friendship” was, contrary to rumor, a pure and innocent one (208). In what may be an esoteric inside joke, Geyer is seen weeping over a copy of Cather’s *My Antonia* (380).

The pitfall of the singer-novel, from which *Of Lena Geyer* is by no means exempt, is a tendency toward insiderish chattiness. Cather herself wrote to Katherine Foote, “I hate most musical novels—a compound of a story and a lot of musical criticism which never blend” (*Selected Letters* 216). She cites Moore’s

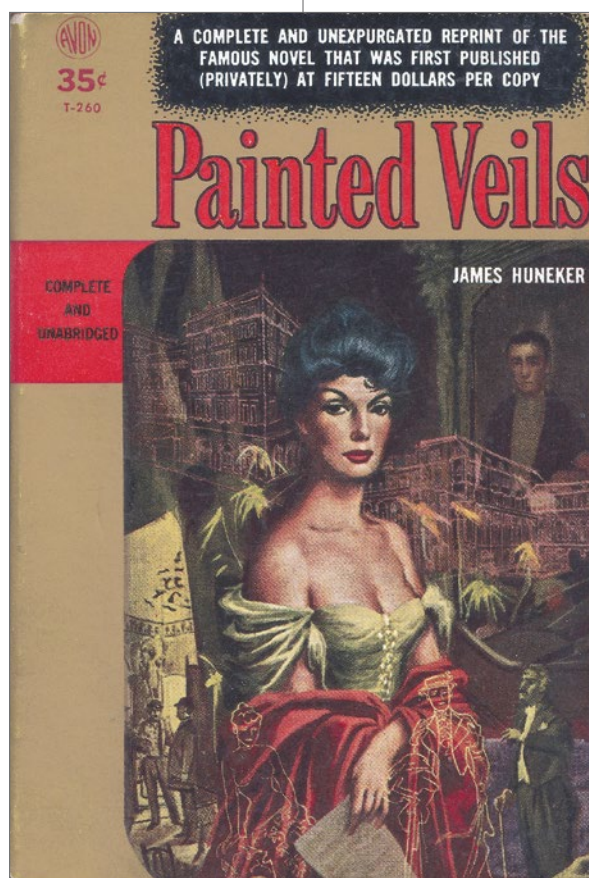
*Evelyn Innes* as one such failure. She made no direct comment on Atherton or Huneker’s work, but presumably would have disdained their indulgence in potboiler melodrama and overripe decadence, respectively. Her aim was to give a full-length portrait of a singer as artist, and in so doing she accomplished something greater. Joan Acocella describes *The Song of the Lark* as the “first completely serious female *Künstlerroman*, the first portrait-of-an-artist-as-a-young-woman in which the heroine’s artistic development is the whole story, with sex an incidental matter” (2).

As has often been observed, the remarkable thing about *The Song of the Lark* is the way Cather seamlessly weaves together Fremstad’s early life with her own story. Thea Kronborg, like Fremstad, is a preacher’s daughter of Scandinavian descent, who provides musical accompaniment for her father’s sermons. But the town of Moonstone is a replica of Red Cloud, down to the little attic room that Thea makes her own. Thea is musical and bookish,

but, like the young Cather, she also roams free in open land.

Professor Wunsch, modeled on Albert Schindelmeisser, is the first to recognize the extent of her gift—her “nature-voice . . . breathed from the creature and apart from language” (85)—but for some time that gift remains a secret between them. When Wunsch departs, Thea takes over many of his duties, and she seems destined for a career of teaching and occasional performing. Then she has a stroke of luck: a freight train conductor who had hoped to marry her dies in an accident, leaving her the beneficiary of his life insurance policy. She uses this money to study piano in Chicago, where a pianist of Hungarian ancestry, Andor Harsanyi, guides her toward singing. In one scene, Harsanyi tells his friend Theodore Thomas about the promising talent he has found. An ordinary novelist would have staged a “star is born” moment, with

Thomas crowning Thea the singer of the future. Cather lets the scene hang: the two men veer away to other topics, some of their dialogue drawn from Thomas’s memoirs. Thea is left to make her own way, step by halting step.



The decadent milieu of James Huneker’s 1920 *Painted Veils*—“the fabulous story of Easter Brandes and her seven deadly sins”—receives the pulp treatment in this 1957 paperback edition.



Cather passes over the technicalities of Thea's development—her studies with a Chicago voice teacher, further work in New York—and instead focuses on the social fabric of high culture that envelops her. She meets the wealthy Fred Ottenburg, who has inherited a love of Wagner from his mother, a bohemian personality with Continental connections. Mrs. Ottenburg is said to be “one of the group of young women who followed Wagner about in his old age, keeping at a respectful distance, but receiving now and then a gracious acknowledgment that he appreciated their homage.” When Wagner died, she “took to her bed and saw no one for a week” (311). Fred is a regular at Bayreuth, although his Wagnerian inclinations are counterbalanced by a healthy heterosexual regimen of “ballgames, prize-fights, and horse-races” (312).

After two years in Chicago, Thea has failed to make any sort of breakthrough. She is on the point of giving up when Fred invites her to Panther Canyon, Arizona, where remains of Native American cliff dwellings can be found. Thea, having heard tales of the cliff dwellers back home, jumps at the chance. She first goes there alone, with Fred joining her later. She takes shelter in one of the ancient dwellings—“a nest in a high cliff, full of sun” (328). By the end of the summer, a transformation has occurred: she has acquired personality, vision, confidence.

This material has little to do with Fremstad and everything to do with Cather, who had undergone a momentous experience on a trip to Arizona and New Mexico in 1912. The magnificence of the setting seized her at once; she praised it to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant: “The most beautiful country I have ever seen anywhere. . . . The Lord set the stage so splendidly there” (*Selected Letters* 151). The site she calls Panther Canyon in *The Song of the Lark* is actually Walnut Canyon, near Flagstaff, where the Sinagua people built cliff dwellings into the sheer rock walls of a deep and narrow gorge. Enthralled by such places, Cather felt a surge of creative renewal. She decided to quit the magazine world and give herself to fiction full-time.

For Thea, Panther Canyon is the gateway to a new understanding of her art. Music runs through her mind, but it is a wordless, formless kind of music—“much more like a sensation than like an idea” (330). She envisages the lives of the Sinagua and adapts to their rhythms. She thinks about their artistic efforts, their pottery and designs. Bathing in a pool at the bottom of the canyon, she realizes that art is an attempt to capture the flow of life: “In 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).

This emphasis on sensation is thoroughly Wagnerian. In *Opera and Drama*, his principal theoretical text, Wagner

underscores the necessity of pure feeling in the intellectually overfreighted world of art. The cult of emotion is not the same as emotionalism; rather, it envisions an art that follows the free contours of human feeling, refusing to impose the strict controls of intellect. Poetry is liberated when it enters into the oceanic zone of music, finding itself reflected in ever-heaving melodic forms. Thea's newly instinctive grasp of musical phrasing becomes the core of her future work. Almost in the same instant, her ambition revives: she forms the plan of going to Germany for further study.

When Fred arrives, they explore the canyon together, entering before sunrise to watch the light pour in: “In a moment the pine trees up on the edge of the rim were flashing with coppery fire” (346). As they eat breakfast, Fred almost jokingly brings up the idea of marriage—“a comfortable flat in Chicago, a summer camp up in the woods, musical evenings, and a family to bring up.” Thea responds, “Perfectly hideous!” (349–50). Fred is undismayed; he knows better than to try to pin her down. They ascend the canyon, and after a while Fred tires and lies down under a pine tree. Thea goes clambering upward and appears in triumph at the top, waving her arm. Fred admires her “muscular energy and audacity,” exuding “a personality that carried across big spaces and expanded among big things.” He speaks to her, even though she cannot hear him: “You are the sort that used to run wild in Germany, dressed in their hair and a piece of skin” (353).

The image of fire on the canyon's rim alludes to *Die Walküre*: Wotan placing Brünnhilde beneath a pine tree and igniting the ring of fire. Fred is an urban Siegfried, breaking Thea's proud solitude on her rock. Tellingly, he hears a woodpecker hammering while he lies by the pine, just as Siegfried listens to the Woodbird while reclining on what Gertrude Hall describes in *The Wagnerian Romances* as a “mossy couch” (132). Thea's greeting to an eagle high above also has a Wagnerian grandiloquence: “Endeavor, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art! From a cleft in the heart of the world she saluted it” (354). The emphasis on will, on youthful ambition, makes one think of Professor Wunsch, whose name means “wish.” Wunsch had told her: “There is only one big thing—desire” (84). It has died in him, but he sees its glow in her. She is a “wish maiden”—the old Icelandic name for a Valkyrie, as Cather noted in her 1899 review of *Die Walküre* (*The World and the Parish* 625). Wagner uses the words *Wunschmaid* and *Wunschmädchen* repeatedly in *Die Walküre*, making much of the idea that Brünnhilde fulfills what Wotan wishes but cannot achieve.

Thea's almost occult awareness of the canyon's silenced Native American voices affects her singing. Later, when she is

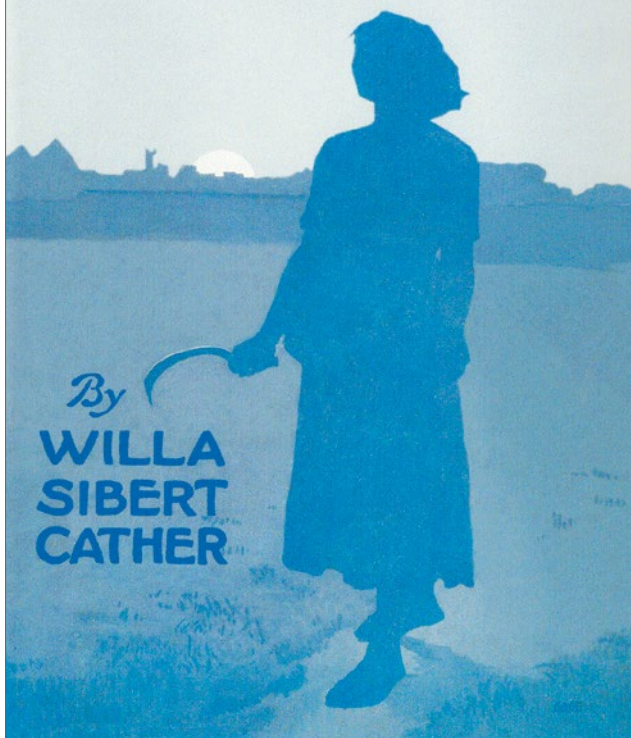


performing Wagner at the Met, Fred thinks back to their time in Arizona: “You’re as much at home on the stage as you were down in Panther Canyon—as if you’d just been let out of a cage. Didn’t you get some of your ideas down there?” Thea nods. “Oh, yes! For heroic parts, at least. Out of the rocks, out of the dead people.” She says that the cliff dwellers must have been a “reserved, somber people, with only a muscular language, all their movements for a purpose: simple, strong, as if they were dealing with fate bare-handed” (509). In a letter to Ferris Greenslet, Cather confirmed that the cliff dwellings had awakened Thea’s “historic imagination—so necessary to a great Wagnerian singer” (*Selected Letters* 205). It may seem unlikely, given Wagner’s notorious racism, for Native peoples to be aligned with the story of the *Ring* in this way.

But Wagner, while unremitting in his hostility toward Jews, was more ambivalent, and sometimes positive, in his occasional statements about non-white people. In the diaries of Cosima Wagner, he assents to his wife’s statement that “I would give the whole of discovered America in exchange for the poor natives’ not having been burned or persecuted” (393).

With Fred’s encouragement, Thea embarks for Germany. Cather drafted a section of the novel describing this period but set it aside, believing, she wrote to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, that it would “destroy the composition” (*Selected Letters* 218). (She may have been hampered by the fact that she had never been to Germany.) A few glimpses of Thea’s time abroad remain: other students are said to have been “mortally afraid” of her rough ways, calling her “*die Wölfin* [the she-wolf]” (493). The novel’s final chapter leaps ahead a decade, to the singer’s first years of stardom. Dr. Archie, the fondly supportive Moonstone town doctor, is struck by the splendor of her voice but disturbed by the sense that the plucky girl he knew exists no longer. “Thea” has become “Kronborg.” Fred assures Archie that the master singer-actor they see onstage is the natural extension of the Thea of old. He cites lines of Wagner to convey her force: “*Wie im Traum ich—*” (the complete quote is “*Wie im Traum ich ihn trug, / Wie mein Wille ihn wies*”). These are

# THE SONG OF THE LARK



Dust jacket image from the Houghton Mifflin first printing, 1915.

Wotan’s words on seeing Valhalla; Cather translates them, “As in my dream I dreamed it, / As in my will it was” (466).

Kronborg reaches the apex of her art. When a soprano singing Sieglinde is indisposed, she steps in. On the first night, she “came into full possession of things she had been refining and perfecting for so long” (525). It is not merely a musically or theatrically excellent interpretation but an embodiment of the music’s spirit: “She was conscious that every movement was the right movement, that her body was absolutely the instrument of her idea” (526). Fred Ottenburg reports to Dr. Archie that none other than Gustav Mahler, after conducting for one of Thea’s early performances, says, “She seems to sing for the idea” (435). Or, as Cather wrote in her profile of Fremstad in “Three American

Singers,” “The idea is so intensely experienced that it becomes emotion” (46). Wagner’s mandate in *Opera and Drama* has undergone a further modification, almost an inversion. The idea now takes precedence, except that it is indistinguishable from emotion. Kronborg cannot be merely an unthinking conduit of Wagner’s music: she must reverse the compositional process, working backward from the level of technique to the inner realm of psychology and myth. Cather thus establishes the fundamental might of the singer’s art.

This is also the moment at which Kronborg’s understanding of her artistic persona, of her “second self,” falls into place. She had long sensed another persona within her: “It was as if she had an appointment to meet the rest of herself sometime, somewhere. It was moving to meet her and she was moving to meet it” (240). As that self comes forward, Cather’s story draws to a close. In the wake of the *Walküre* triumph, the narrator announces: “Here we must leave Thea Kronborg. . . . The growth of an artist is an intellectual and spiritual development which can scarcely be followed in a personal narrative” (527). A brief epilogue gives glimpses of Kronborg’s subsequent career—including her triumphant Isolde—but Cather’s attention turns back to the ordinary folk in Moonstone, who marvel that such a phenomenon arose in their midst.



Critics have often noted that *The Song of the Lark* is heavily weighted toward Kronborg's childhood and youth. Some readers preferred the first part to the second. The critic H. L. Mencken—who considered Wagner's operas “the most stupendous works of art ever contrived by man” (Introduction xii)—said as much in his review of Cather's novel in *Smart Set*. Cather responded to Fisher that the air of anticlimax was deliberate. As an artist develops, she wrote, the personality is consumed by the art and “arrives at the vanishing point.” Kronborg has gone from the “personal to the impersonal” (*Selected Letters* 218). In the preface to a later edition of the novel, Cather compares Kronborg's rise to success to Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*: the person onstage is self-renewing, the person offstage is spent (*The Song of the Lark* 617).

We can now turn back to the singer stories in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* and see them as an aftermath of *The Song of the Lark*. What is notable is that the sweeping modern-Romantic vision that defined Cather's portrait of Thea Kronborg ebbs away. “A Gold Slipper,” “Scandal,” and “The Diamond Mine” are focused on the business of music, its complications and pitfalls, whether in comic or tragic mode. “Coming, Aphrodite!” ends with the telling words, “a ‘big’ career takes its toll” (74). Later comes *Lucy Gayheart*, in which a female pianist falls under the spell of an older male singer and is drawn toward a lofty concert world that ultimately has no place for her. “Uncle Valentine” (1925), based on the Wagner-besotted composer Ethelbert Nevin, likewise speaks of dashed hopes and unfulfilled ambitions. Perhaps Cather's knowledge of the later lives of performing artists, often marked by loneliness, made her take a different tack. She herself settled into a comfortable domestic existence with Edith Lewis, but she was haunted by the feeling that she had surrendered too much of herself to her art. Her remaining work would be shadowed by a deepening sense of loss; Wagner's Romantic grandeur increasingly belonged to a fading past. The world had indeed broken in two.



*This essay is a revision of my keynote address for the 2020 Willa Cather Spring Conference; that address was adapted from my book Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music, especially Chapter 8, “Brünnhilde's Rock: Willa Cather and the Singer-Novel.”*

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# The Living Picture: Creating a Multimedia Adaptation of “A Gold Slipper”

Michael Burton

“Marshall McKann followed his wife and her friend Mrs. Post down the aisle and up the steps to the stage of the Carnegie Music Hall with an ill-concealed feeling of grievance” (139). The first line of Willa Cather’s short story “A Gold Slipper” introduces a protagonist who is completely unlikeable. Why did Cather write a story about such an unlikeable character? Because he was a foil for the beautiful, mischievous, and deeply artistic Kitty Ayrshire, whom McKann, by chance, fell in love with.

The elements of *contrast* in “A Gold Slipper” are what attracted me to the story of Kitty and McKann and are why I chose to create a multimedia art exhibition and an animated short film of the same title. The warm Carnegie Music Hall interior compared to the cold, wet streets of Pittsburgh were strong environmental contrasts. McKann’s boxy features compared to Kitty’s elegant curves were intriguing visual juxtapositions. The hot, uncomfortable stage that holds McKann captive as he squirms under the watchful eyes of his peers is the same stage that liberates Kitty. She is energized by the audience’s disapprobation. In the taxi ride to Liberty Station, Kitty is coy and McKann quite assertive; these roles, however, are reversed on the train to New York.

Contrasts lend themselves well to the hybrid form of animation I work in because the element of time allows viewers to see different spaces, experience narratives, and make visual comparisons within a singular artwork. The element of time allows characters to develop and environments to change whereas traditional paintings or illustrations are typically a snapshot in time.

But this fluid notion of time posed a problem for an art exhibition. I wanted to illustrate McKann’s development the way that Cather had written it. She portrays him as a staunch

social conservative who is steadfast in his beliefs about the roles of women and the arts. His assumptions about Kitty Ayrshire are challenged when she outruns him to the train for New York and bests him in a debate. Kitty absconds while McKann falls asleep. He awakes only to question how his life might have been different. My question was how to communicate this character change in an art gallery setting.



*The Stage*, one of five tableaux vivants.

## Formats and Audience

*A Gold Slipper* was created in two different formats with two different audiences in mind. First, a multimedia art exhibition featured five digital projections in the manner of a tableau vivant (living picture). These five tableaux contained real costumes and actors with an emphasis on cinematic aesthetics and storytelling. For the exhibition I also created twenty-four artistic illustrations of historic garment accessories, each titled to communicate a tone of arrogance using adjectives or other descriptors from Cather’s original text. For example, a lady’s white gloves are *Sumptuous*, a clutch purse is *Splendid*, and a top hat is *A Person of Substance*. The accessories were drawn from objects in the Historic Costume Collections of the Department of Textiles, Merchandising, and Fashion Design, my home department at the University of



Nebraska–Lincoln. A collaborative team of actors, a costume designer, lighting and production staff helped me produce the tableaux in a digitally crafted format with filmed actors and illustrated elements. The tableaux looked like the popular art form of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries



Cast and crew in green screen studio at Nebraska Educational Television.

when actors in costume would be arranged to mimic a painted composition.<sup>1</sup> I arranged the tableaux chronologically in the art gallery, thus showing McKann evolve from a confident man attending a concert to an elderly man lamenting the past.

I considered the tableaux to be the five most important moments in *A Gold Slipper: The Stage, The Taxi, Can You Run?, The Train, and Lament*. I created them with the goal of hooking audiences in the gallery for the duration of each moment with the hope they would understand the basic premise of the story. The tableaux looped continuously, varying in duration from about fifteen seconds to two minutes so viewers could enter and exit at any time and understand the meaning. Live actors combined with animated elements created a visual experience that was reminiscent of 1917, and I wanted these experiences simultaneously to seem real and painted like a living picture. To execute these tableaux successfully I had to pay special attention to surface treatments, props, costuming, acting, and lighting. The Cather Project at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln contributed to the success of my project with financial support, thus allowing me to hire actors and a production team, construct costumes, and create custom ornamental projections of the digital

tableaux vivants. The entire production was filmed in a green screen studio at Nebraska Educational Television (NET) in December 2018.

In addition to the multimedia art exhibition, my team and I created an animated short film, also titled *A Gold Slipper*. It contained filmed and hand-drawn elements created on an iPad Pro using still imagery from a variety of sources including *McCall's Magazine* advertisements, still images of actors, and photographs of Pittsburgh in the 1910s. This format was intended for film festivals, web conferences, and on-demand platforms. The animated short film was an adaptation of Cather's original story with narration by Eric Rebello-Pradas and a score comprising four arias performed by mezzo-soprano opera singer Hayley Shoemaker.

The expectations for each audience in each venue and each format were different, and the pace at which each audience consumed the medium was different too. For example, audiences were not likely to watch an animation in an

art gallery, especially if the start and ending of the animation cannot be controlled. Thus, the animation was created for captive audiences watching via an on-demand platform. The multimedia exhibition of tableaux and illustrations premiered at Kiechel Fine Art in Lincoln, Nebraska, in January 2020 with a live performance by an opera singer. The exhibition was later installed in the National Willa Cather Center with a special screening of the animated short film during the 2020 Spring Conference. The film is also available on Amazon Prime.

## Costume Design

Cather wrote a rich description of Kitty Ayrshire's dress and shoes in the first passage of her story. In our animation viewers see Kitty from the perspective of McKann, on stage as she sings. She enters the scene camera right, and, as Cather writes, "her velvet train brushed against his trousers" as she walks toward the front of the stage (142). Here is Cather's description:

Kitty's gown that evening was really quite outrageous. . . . It was constructed of a yard or two of green velvet—a reviling, shrieking green which would have made a fright of any woman who had not inextinguishable beauty—and it was made without armholes, a device to which we were then so unaccustomed that it was nothing less than alarming. The

velvet skirt split back from a transparent gold-lace petticoat, gold stockings, gold slippers. The narrow train was, apparently, looped to both ankles, and it kept curling about her feet like a serpent's tail, turning up its gold lining as if it were squirming over on its back. (143)

I could not find a dress like this in any costume shop, so I had to find a designer with knowledge of early twentieth century dress and the ability to construct such a garment. I hired Nicole Rudolph, a graduate student in the Department of Textiles, Merchandising, and Fashion Design at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Rudolph designed, sourced, and constructed Kitty's and McKann's costumes. Her background and research in historic costume design proved to be an invaluable resource. Rudolph consulted on all aspects of costuming for period specificity. She was able to create a dress to exact historical accuracy using knowledge of period dress and Cather's writing. In addition to designing the dress and sourcing fabrics, Rudolph also found a tailcoat, vest, tiepin, cufflinks, slacks, and pair of gold slippers (flapper shoes) from a company called Historical Emporium. Once actors were hired, Rudolph conducted fittings in her home studio and constructed the costumes.

## Casting and Filming

Cather wrote such a compelling description of Kitty Ayrshire and Marshall McKann that it was particularly challenging to find the best talent to portray them. I wanted to capture the characters' attitudes in physical form and gesture because the film and tableaux were silent.

I began virtual casting with *The Stage* tableau in mind. Looking for the ideal Kitty and McKann, I advertised the project to actors residing in Nebraska and Iowa. I cast Katie Otten and Wayne Matychuk in the roles. Prospective cast members were asked to share video auditions with me. Cather's descriptions provided the criteria for casting; however, I added specific instructions. All those auditioning needed to demonstrate themselves running in a dress or tuxedo so I could anticipate a convincing performance as the actors run to the train station. Actors auditioning for the role of Kitty were asked to lip-synch to "Love to Love You Baby," by Donna Summer. I chose a disco-era dance song for auditions because

I wanted to find an actress who read the script, studied the genre, and understood Kitty as an opulent performer. Her outrageous performance at Carnegie Hall would seem mild by today's standards, but Kitty was, after all, a controversial opera singer. Katie Otten embraced the difference between a pop star of the late twentieth century and an opera singer from 1917, and she portrayed the role beautifully.

Audience members were also cast; since budget was a concern, however, I was limited to hiring only six actors who would be styled differently in a series of shots to build the 1,900-person Carnegie Music Hall audience. My production team and I decided to film these actors in a variety of poses. We filmed several takes from eye-level with each actor in a different arrangement. These shots allowed me to build the audience seated at ground level. We filmed additional takes with the camera looking up at the actors from the ground—from worm's-eye view. These shots were used to arrange the audience in the mezzanine and balcony levels. Additionally, we filmed more takes from different angles to fill in the audience in the balconies on either side of the stage.



Before and after image of cast for Carnegie Hall audience.

The same production techniques were used to film the remaining four tableaux. A wooden door and window created the taxi where McKann, by chance, encounters Kitty while she is stranded on her way to Liberty Station. I constructed large wooden Pullman train car seats for the train ride where Kitty and McKann debate their views on the role of women, the arts, and industry. I needed a way to create the ambiance of a night at the opera during the day of filming. Once the camera was rolling, we played a selection of arias to help our performers



feel more like they were at a night at Carnegie Hall. Works by Debussy, Rossini, and Mozart were on our playlist. “Clair de Lune” played during the filming of the two-minute-long *The Train* tableau. Our stage lighting assistant slowly lowered the lights until only a silhouette of McKann and Kitty was visible.

## The Animation

Adapting Cather’s work for an animation was by far the most challenging aspect of this project. The animated short film *A Gold Slipper* was meant to be a character sketch of Marshall McKann narrated through his inner thoughts using voice-over adapted from Cather’s original text. I initially attempted to include all of the written story. However, it takes approximately twenty-five minutes to narrate “A Gold Slipper,” far longer than my budget would allow, so I knew this approach wasn’t possible. I recorded myself narrating the sections of the original story that occurred during each tableau. I played my recording and watched the tableau, trying to determine which lines moved the story forward in a cinematic way and which lines to remove. I realized that I was slowly building the animation around the situations in each tableau. This analysis revealed Cather’s cutting sense of humor. Nearly all of Marshall McKann’s thoughts seem to border on the ridiculous; however, I also feel his views are probably not much different from those of some contemporary men. This circumstance served as the jumping-off point for the animated segments that situationally placed him in the awkward position of defending his opinions while illustrating the narrowness of his point of view. For example, McKann is in a position of some authority despite being seated in *The Stage* and in *The Taxi*. However, by the time Kitty beats him to the railcar in *Can You Run?* and wins a debate on *The Train*, he is left tired and outwitted. To me, Cather builds up McKann in such a way that readers enjoy seeing him reduced by Kitty.

There are no alterations to Cather’s writing retained in the finished voice-over narration by Eric Rebello-Pradas, only lines which we removed. Some lines that I chose to include further illustrate Cather’s humor. For example, McKann says that Mrs. Post “was always keeping up with the world and talking about

things in which no one else was interested, music among them” (139). I directed Rebello-Pradas to employ some indifference in his tone to emphasize McKann’s dislike of Mrs. Post. Other passages, however, illustrate McKann’s severe view of the arts and women. For these passages Rebello-Pradas spoke with a tone of arrogance.

## Animation Style

While searching for a character piece for Bessie and Mrs. Post (McKann’s wife and her friend), I stumbled upon fashion illustrations from the early twentieth century. Cather’s only physical description of the women was that Mrs. Post had “a deep voice like a jovial bassoon” (140). I wanted to find two actors who would convincingly portray these animated roles. Fashion illustrations and advertisements from the 1910s made with pen and ink outlines and subtle color washes emphasized silhouettes and draping. These illustrations provided a strong sense of style and color. I sampled both a warm and a cool color palette from original *McCall’s Magazine* advertisements and used them uniformly across all of the animated illustrations (“*McCall’s* in the 1910s”). I created the figures and clothing for Bessie and Mrs. Post by sampling parts of different illustrations and combining them to create each character. I replicated this method of illustration on an iPad Pro using an app called Procreate to create all of the animated elements.

## Exhibition Aesthetics

The illustrations in the art exhibition were sourced from twenty-four objects in the University of Nebraska Historic



Installation view of tableaux, Kiechel Fine Art, January 2020.



*Opera Comique*, 18" x 24" *pochoir* on watercolor paper.

Costume Collections. Each object was photographed and transferred to watercolor paper. I used a *pochoir* technique to illustrate the objects. *Pochoir* was an alternative form of printing to lithography popular in turn-of-the-century fashion illustration. Artisans used a variety of stencils and a wide, round brush to stamp in opaque pigment. *Pochoir* can be easily identified by matte color, a raised edge of paint along the edge of each color, and clearly demarcated color sections. I replicated this method exactly for a poster of Kitty Ayrshire at the Opera Comique in Paris, whereas I modified the technique to include graphite drawn elements in other illustrations in the exhibit.

The five tableaux were displayed at the opening of *A Gold Slipper* at Kiechel Fine Art in Lincoln, Nebraska,

using a modified digital projection system. I created ornamental brackets similar to those found in late art nouveau wrought iron design to hide the projection equipment and present each as an intimate tableau vivant. My brackets were made of stained birch plywood cut on a CNC (computer numerical control) router as a cost-saving measure. The result featured five individual tableaux, glowing on walls in a darkened space, that viewers could watch while listening to an opera singer perform.

These tableaux, combined with the rest of the multimedia exhibition and the animated short film, demonstrate that Cather's words not only remain powerful over a century after she wrote them, but they also inspire artists working in new art forms.

#### NOTE

1. Cather was aware of period tableaux and admired them. In a column published in the *Nebraska State Journal* on June 2, 1895, Cather wrote, "The Episcopal church of Beatrice [Nebraska] is getting up a series of Trilby tableaux which promise to be graceful and successful." These tableaux were inspired by George du Maurier's popular 1894 novel *Trilby*. Cather called the art form a "commendable diversion and a great improvement upon the usual church lawn socials" (*The World and the Parish* 118).

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The 1920 cover of Cather's *Youth and the Bright Medusa* features an embossed portrait of the Gorgon Medusa; however, the Alfred A. Knopf publishing house's advertisement for the book on the back of the September 29, 1920 *New Republic* speaks of a Medusa of a different sort: "In the stories of the present volume, [Cather] deals with youth's adventures with the many-coloured Medusa of art." Knopf's reference to a "many-coloured Medusa" does not correspond visually to a Gorgon image; it does, however, evoke another creature with the same name—the jellyfish. Known by the scientific name denoting their body type—*medusa*, plural *medusae*—jellyfish were a subject of interest for naturalists in the 19th and early 20th centuries, including Charles Darwin, Sanborn Tenney, Charles Frederick Holder, and Ernst Haeckel, among others, who were captivated by their phosphorescent and sprawling beauty. In the latter decades of the 19th century, scientific interest quickly translated to popular interest, as gorgeous illustrations accompanying the work of these naturalists appeared widely in print and were copied in popular literary magazines—including in an article on medusae in the Cather Family Library in the Willa Cather Foundation Collections and Archives at the National Willa Cather Center. Moreover, medusae were central to imaginative descriptions of beauty and art in literary works that Cather knew, including Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, many editions of which featured fantastical illustrations of jellyfish, and Jules Michelet's *The Sea*, where he devotes a chapter to this "Daughter of the Seas" (160). In addition to being noted for their colorful and ethereal beauty, medusae were a subject of fascination to authors for their appetites and dangerous tentacles, as well as for their fragility and vulnerability. The article on medusae from an 1882 *Demorest's Monthly Magazine* in the Cather Family Library sums up well this unique combination of colorful beauty, fragility, and danger:

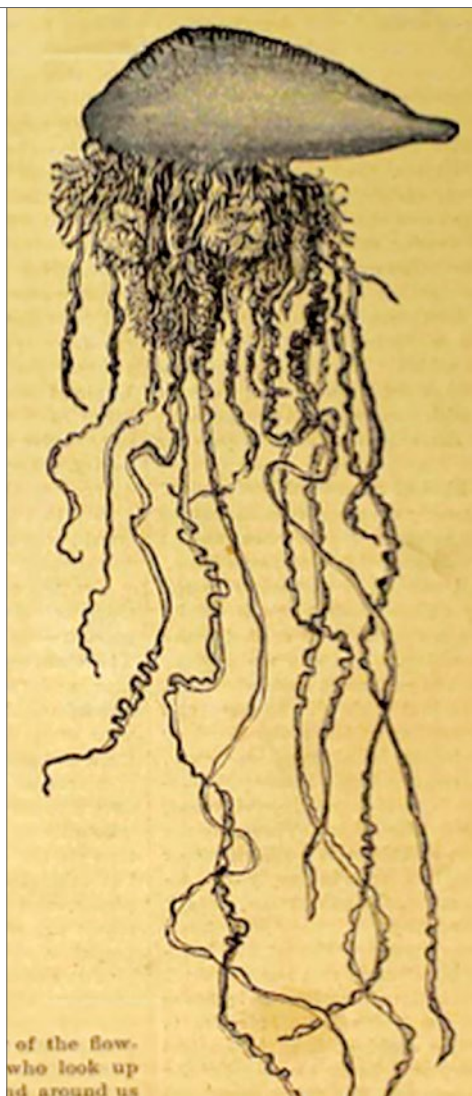


Illustration of a Portuguese Man-of-War, from "The Galley Acalephas" in *Demorest's Monthly Magazine*, Nov. 1882. Cather Family Library at the National Willa Cather Center.

the way we interpret her art. In contemporary scientific and artistic depictions of medusae, Cather would have discovered a symbol that combined both predator and prey in the same beautiful form: a creature at once a seducer who attracts and stings its victims, and a fragile mass of shimmering jelly easily consumed and washed ashore. Reading her 1920 collection with this composite image in mind allows us to recognize multiple characters who either sting others or are stung themselves by encounters with another kind of beauty. Although this narrative in some ways resembles that of the monstrous Gorgon—who, once beautiful, now paralyzes her prey with her serpent's glare—interpreting the bright Medusa as jellyfish provides a more ambivalent cover image, one that entangles the reader in Cather's complex drama of the wonder and cruelty of art.

When the sun shines upon them they show all the colors of the rainbow, making a beautiful spectacle. . . . They are very brilliant in their blue and red colors, and when in great number impart their hues to the surrounding waters. Their feelers, which are of enormous length, are violet and red in color. . . . Many of these creatures shine with a phosphorescent brilliancy, and illumine the waters through which they pass. They appear, when examined, only a mass of jelly, and few would imagine that they had life and power in them—such power as makes them the dread, not only of the smaller inhabitants of the sea, but the unfortunate bather around whom they wind their long, stinging arms. ("The Galley Acalephas" 17)

Indeed, Cather's mysterious line to Dorothy Canfield Fisher on March 21 [1921], "what a lot of life one uses up chasing 'bright Medusas'" (*Complete Letters* no. 0534), makes more immediate sense when we picture jellyfish, those "lamps of the sea,"<sup>1</sup> and "the unfortunate bather" drawn toward their glow.

In this essay, I will explore the image of jellyfish not only to suggest new scientific and literary sources for the title of Cather's collection but also to pose questions about how an alternative gloss of her title changes

the way we interpret her art. In contemporary scientific and artistic depictions of medusae, Cather would have discovered a symbol that combined both predator and prey in the same beautiful form: a creature at once a seducer who attracts and stings its victims, and a fragile mass of shimmering jelly easily consumed and washed ashore. Reading her 1920 collection with this composite image in mind allows us to recognize multiple characters who either sting others or are stung themselves by encounters with another kind of beauty. Although this narrative in some ways resembles that of the monstrous Gorgon—who, once beautiful, now paralyzes her prey with her serpent's glare—interpreting the bright Medusa as jellyfish provides a more ambivalent cover image, one that entangles the reader in Cather's complex drama of the wonder and cruelty of art.

Thinking of medusae as jellyfish also permits us to engage historical and biographical questions about Cather's early days in New York. From Greenwich Village, she could have walked to the free, recently established, and already world-renowned New York Aquarium. Cather alludes briefly to the aquarium in "Coming, Aphrodite!"; as Mark J. Madigan points out in his historical essay about *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, which includes several contemporary photos of the aquarium, Cather depicted many of the landmarks she had come to know in New York in rich detail (350; photos 8–9). Whether or not she visited the aquarium herself, Cather would have read about and participated in the emergence of this world wonder, celebrated not only by zoologists and tourists but also by the art community in New York City. Excitement over the aquarium's rare collection, which included over a hundred species of tropical fish, may have inspired Cather to include the image of Don Hedger painting a study of the aquarium's tropical fish (5). More broadly, Cather's recognition of artistic interest in the aquarium likely made her think about thematic links between marine imagery and art, perhaps leading her toward a new focus on aquaria in her 1920 short story collection.

### Stinging Beauty and Tragic Prey in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*

In his 1905 lay manual *Half Hours with the Lower Animals*, zoologist Charles Frederick Holder wrote of jellyfish: "It may appear strange that one of the most resplendent of animals should be the most dangerous, yet such is the case. The attractive tentacles which drag behind the Physalia are deadly to almost every fish" (34–35). The combination of beauty and stinging nettles resonates with the *femme fatale* qualities of Kitty Ayrshire in "A Gold Slipper" and Eden Bower in "Coming, Aphrodite!" Tentacles are perhaps even visible in the description of Kitty's gown: "The velvet skirt split back from a transparent gold-lace petticoat, gold stockings, gold slippers. The narrow train was, apparently, looped to both ankles, and it kept curling about her feet like a serpent's tail, turning up its gold lining as if it were squirming over on its back" (143). Iridescent and serpentine, Kitty's train quite literally grabs at McKann as she brushes by him. While not explicitly a comparison to jellyfish, her description resembles the image of a medusa with tentacles drawn up and ready to strike. But the prey in these two stories, Marshall McKann and Don Hedger, are particularly resistant to the charms of these women because they have sought to avoid desiring anything that requires risk. After she discovers that McKann was "dragged" to her concert, Kitty laughs at him and calls him a coward for disliking her art only because he wants a life "with the sting taken out": "I might have

known!' she chuckled, and shook her head. . . . 'Your morality seems to me the compromise of cowardice, apologetic and sneaking. When righteousness becomes alive and burning, you hate it as much as you do beauty. You want a little of each in your life, perhaps—adulterated, sterilized, with the sting taken out. It's true enough they are both fearsome things when they get loose in the world; they don't, often.'" (161) Despite McKann's desire for a life "with the sting taken out," Kitty gleefully provokes him by leaving her sting behind in the form of a gold slipper, which he keeps in memory of the "inextinguishable beauty" of Kitty's performance and presence (143).

Like McKann, Hedger also lives by meticulously avoiding—hedging out—all stinging pleasures. While his painting subjects are all immensely colorful and vibrant, he does not allow any of their color to bleed over into his life. This changes, however, when he begins to "fall under a fascination" with Eden Bower and can no longer be satisfied with a life that separates his desire from his

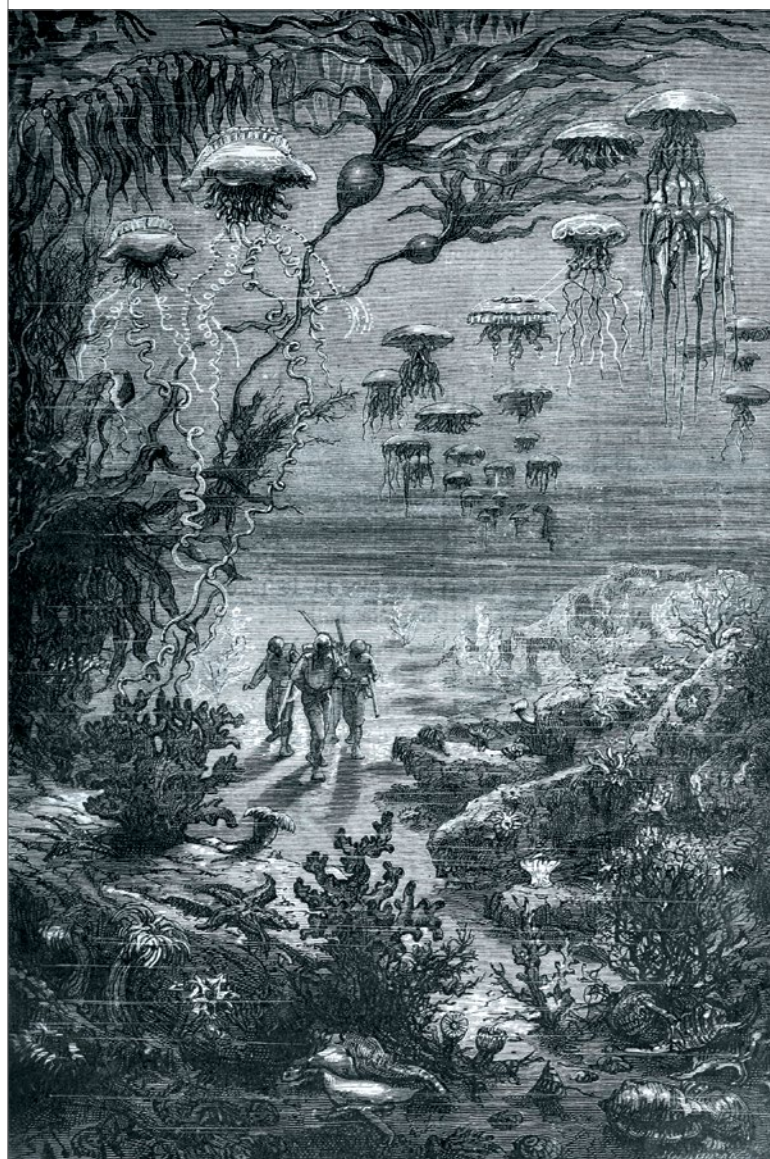
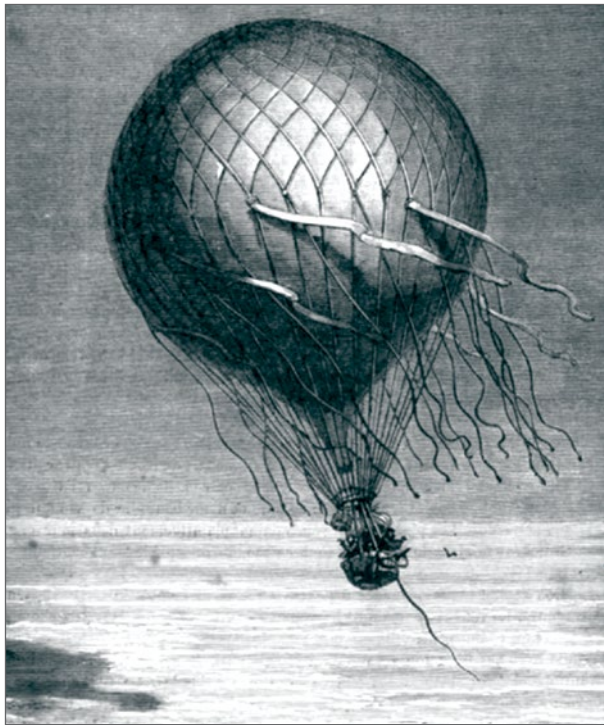


Illustration by Alphonse de Neuville for Jules Verne's *Vingt milles lieues sous les mers*.





(Left) Balloon ascent illustration from *Histoire des ballons et des ascensions célèbres*, 1876, by A. Sircos, Th. Pallier, and A. Tissandier.

(Right) Illustration of jellyfish from *Half Hours with the Lower Animals*, 1905, by Charles Frederick Holder.

her, “the shimmer of fabrics soft and firm, silky and sheer; red, mauve, pink, blue, lilac, purple, écru, rose, yellow, cream, and white, all the colours that an impressionist finds in a sunlit landscape” (241); however, when the first number begins, Georgiana clutches her nephew’s sleeve (242). By the end of the performance, Georgiana tearfully realizes that she has long been trapped by a world that is devoid

of color—her black pond and unpainted house surrounded by a naked landscape—and that she longs to be borne out upon “the shining current” of art (246).

art (37), for although Hedger enjoys watching his artistic subjects glow and ascend—his shiny dog, his paradise fish, the stars on his roof—he prefers to keep his own life dull and grounded. “Wouldn’t you like to go up with her?” Eden asks Hedger about his hot air balloon model, and he responds that he only takes sensible risks for his art (41). Cather’s description of the seaside hot air balloon rising with its ropes hanging down evokes an image of a jellyfish rising, drawing attention to the similarity in form between the balloon and her book’s title image: “As the balloon rose from its tent enclosure, they saw a girl in green tights standing in the basket, holding carelessly to one of the ropes with one hand and with the other waving to the spectators. A long rope trailed behind to keep the balloon from blowing out to sea” (42). Minutes later, in her own bold and unauthorized balloon ascent, Eden Bower attempts to entice Hedger to allow himself to be grabbed by his muse, to attach his own life to the transcendent beauty of his subjects.

Like Georgiana, Paul also longs to be released from the clutches of a sullen life into a dreamy world of color: to “float on the wave of it, to be carried out, blue league after blue league, away from everything” (217). With the money he steals, he is able to find brief admittance to that world. Cather’s description of his perceptions during that foray is distinctly aquatic: “The flowers, the white linen, the many-coloured wine glasses, the gay toilettes of the women, the low popping of corks, the undulating repetitions of the ‘Blue Danube’ from the orchestra, all flooded Paul’s dream with bewildering radiance. When the roseate tinge of his champagne was added—that cold, precious, bubbling stuff that creamed and foamed in his glass—Paul wondered that there were honest men in the world at all” (226). Paul’s dream is full of associations with a bright medusa: refracted in many colors, dotted with diaphanous, billowing fabrics drifting in the waves, brimming with bubbles. As with Georgiana, Paul finds that he cannot remain in this dream and must return to a life of poverty and hardship; his choice of death over this return emphasizes once more the potent sting of art’s beauty.

If “Coming, Aphrodite!” and “A Gold Slipper” involve the seductive sting of art’s tentacles, “Paul’s Case” and “A Wagner Matinée” portray the longing for that seduction from characters who are in the clutches of unrelenting monotony. Aunt Georgiana’s hands, once so fine for playing the piano, have become through years of hard farm labor “stretched and twisted into mere tentacles to hold and lift and knead with” (244). Before the performance in the Boston concert hall begins, Georgiana can think of nothing but the chores she has left behind on the farm, and she shows no interest in the colorful audience surrounding

The second and contrary association with jellyfish in Cather’s collection comes in her consideration of art not as stinging predator but as tragic prey. At the turn of the century, multiple authors of scientific and cultural interest portrayed the fragility of the jellyfish as its chief beauty. After the death of his wife, German

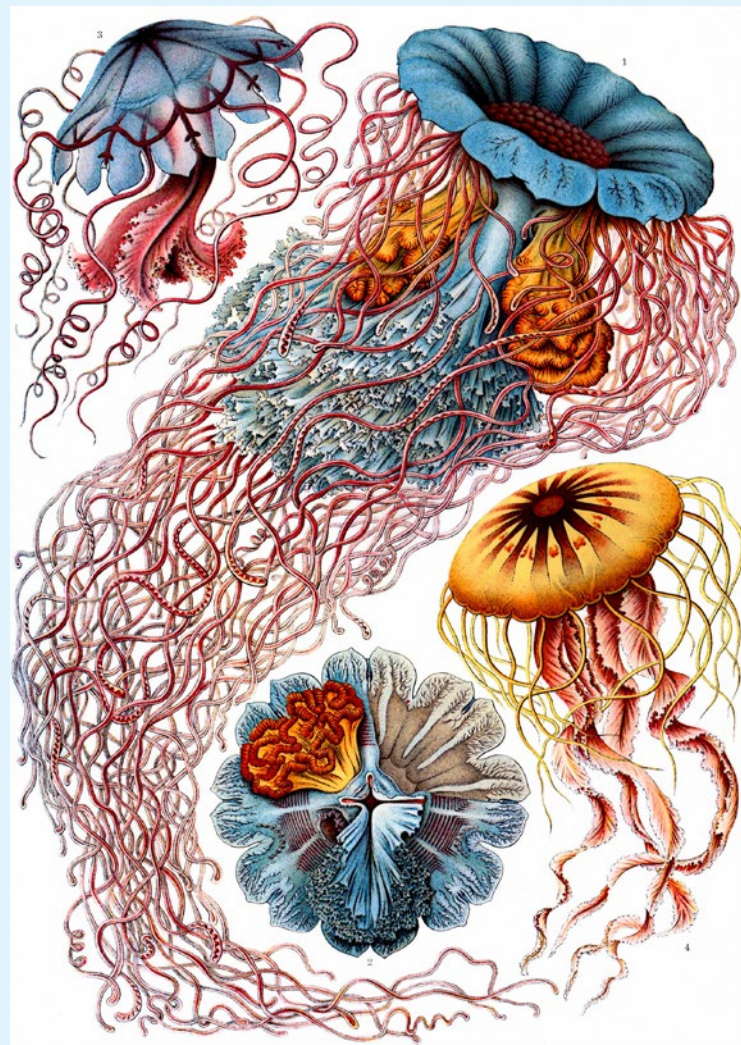
of color—her black pond and unpainted house surrounded by a naked landscape—and that she longs to be borne out upon “the shining current” of art (246).



zoologist Ernst Haeckel was captivated by jellyfish and drew multiple collections of them, even naming several species after his deceased beloved (Haeckel 50–1). His illustrations became a cultural phenomenon when they were published with his accompanying descriptions in translation in 1904 as *Art Forms in Nature*, and art historians cite in particular his embodiment of elements of feminine beauty—like hair and dress—in his ephemeral, delicate, and melancholy forms (47–55). In addition to Haeckel’s illustrations, which Cather probably would have seen, Jules Michelet wrote about jellyfish in a chapter of his 1861 collection of essays on sea creatures, *The Sea*, in which he emphasizes their beauty not as seductresses or predators but as tragic figures. In his chapter “Daughter of the Seas,” he describes walking along the Mediterranean shores of Provence and coming upon a jellyfish that has been washed upon the shore in the tide; he speaks at length about the pathos of this “wrecked beauty”:

The pools left by the sea contained some little creatures that had not been able to accompany the retreating tide . . . amongst them, unshelled, unsheltered, lay the living parasol,

that for some, anything, rather than good reason, we call the *Medusa*. Why has that name of terror been given to a creature so charming? Never before had my attention been attracted to those wrecked beauties, which we so often see high and dry upon the sea shore at low ebb tide. This especial one was small, not larger than my hand, but singularly beautiful, in its delicate colors, passing so lightly from tint to tint. . . . Much bruised in that tender body, it was also wounded and mutilated in its fine filaments, or hairs, which are its sensitive organs of respiration, absorption, and even love. . . . Nothing more ephemeral, more delicate than these daughters of the sea. . . . Poor creature, perhaps she got wrecked or stranded again, ere long, for it is impossible to navigate with weaker means or in a fashion more dangerous. The *Medusæ* fear the shore where so many hard substances hurt them, and in the open sea they are liable to be overturned at every gust of wind, in which case, their swimming-feathers being above instead of below their bodies, they are carried hither and thither, at random, upon the waves, as the prey of fish or the delight of birds who find sport and profit in seizing them. (161–64)



Jellyfish illustrations from Ernst Haeckel's *Art Forms in Nature*, 1904: Narcomedusae (left) and Discomedusae (right). Wikimedia Commons.



Michelet emphasizes the delicacy, tenderness, and lightness in color and body of this “wrecked beauty” that he regards not as a powerful predator but as a defenseless and mortal creature who is so easily wounded by the elements and by predators on the shore.

In both “The Diamond Mine” and “A Death in the Desert,” we can see portraits of these “wrecked beauties” in the characters of Cressida Garnet and Katharine Gaylord. Cressida stands on the deck like a figure out of Haeckel’s drawings, as Cather emphasizes the shimmering and billowing of her lavender scarf: “The ends of her scarf, lifted by the breeze, fluttered upward, almost transparent in the argent light. Presently she turned away,—as if she had been alone and were leaving only the night sea behind her,—and walked slowly forward; a strong, solitary figure on the white deck, the smoke-like scarf twisting and climbing and falling

back upon itself in the light over her head” (92–93). Whereas the attractions of Eden Bower and Kitty Ayrshire are snares to catch men, Cressida’s beauty leaves her vulnerable to others who want to acquire her beauty. Her tentacle-like lavender scarf is not reaching out to sting others but rather endangers her because it attracts others who hope to acquire her, as evidenced by her many leeches—her multiple husbands, family members, her accompanist, and others who hang on to her for their livelihood.

While Cressida becomes a “wrecked beauty” quite literally as a passenger of the *Titanic*, Cather emphasizes this wrecking process more gradually in the character of Katharine Gaylord in “A Death in the Desert.” When Everett Hilgarde sees Katharine many years after her love affair with his brother Adriance, an artist whose passion “consum[ed] all in his path,” he is shocked to see her wasted body, a “white, burnt-out brand” (296). Cather describes her body in terms that resemble Michelet’s wrecked jellyfish, dried out on the shore: “The long, loose folds of her white gown had been especially designed to conceal the sharp outlines of her body, but the stamp of her disease was there; simple and ugly and obtrusive, a pitiless fact that could not be disguised or evaded. The splendid shoulders were stooped, there was a swaying unevenness in her gait, her arms seemed disproportionately long, and her hands were transparently white, and cold to the touch” (285). While the serpentine dress of Kitty Ayrshire squirms and sparks with warm desire, Katharine Gaylord’s long and lifeless arms are stretched out and washed out to the point of becoming colorless and cold. Her drained body suggests that she has been a victim, like Cressida, of a predator upon her beauty.

This portrayal of Katharine resembling a jellyfish washed ashore evokes another character who has been drained by his dedication to art, Harvey Merrick in “The Sculptor’s Funeral”; as Mark J. Madigan and Timothy Bintrim both demonstrate, Merrick, who as a boy had been “cast ashore upon a desert of newness and ugliness and sordidness” (263), can be read as Cather’s allusion to Charles Stanley Reinhart’s painting *Washed Ashore* (Madigan 329–30; Bintrim 20). But Katharine is a more composite character than Cressida Garnet and Harvey Merrick: at once powerful seductress and vulnerable prey, she has given her beauty completely over to be consumed by Adriance’s predatory artistic career, but she has done so because she has been ensnared by his artistic power. In this way, “A Death in the Desert” is a fitting end to the story collection because of the connection it draws among several of the stories that precede it: like Hedger and McCann, Katharine has been stung by another’s passion; like Paul and Georgiana, Katharine finds life without her artistic muse to be empty and deserted; and like Cressida and Harvey Merrick, she gives her body over to her muse to the point of death.

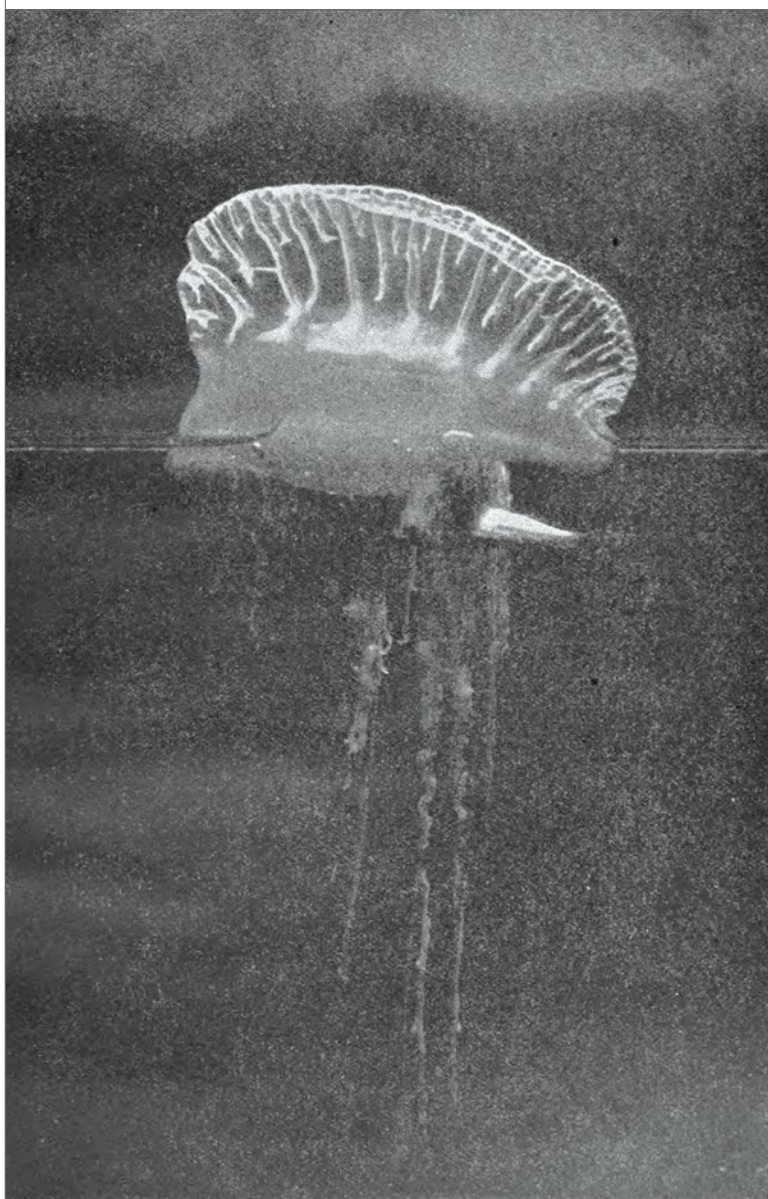


Photo by L. L. Mowbray

**PORTUGUESE MAN-OF-WAR (*Physalia arethusa*)**

Full-page illustration of the aquarium’s Portuguese man-of-war in the 1919 *Guide to the New York Aquarium* by Charles Haskins Townsend.





James C. Beard illustrations from "Treasures of the New York Aquarium." *Century Magazine*, Vol. 60, 1900.

## Troll Garden to Castle Garden: New York Aquarium as Artistic Influence

When Cather moved to New York in 1906, the New York Aquarium was located at Castle Garden (now Castle Clinton) in Battery Park.<sup>2</sup> Managed by the New York Zoological Society after 1902, the aquarium was celebrated by scientists and culture enthusiasts alike for its varied specimen collection. Much of this new interest was due to the work of professor and author Charles L. Bristol, who led an expedition to Bermuda in 1899 to secure a new collection of over one hundred specimens of tropical fish for the aquarium ("Aquarium's New Attractions"). In 1900, Bristol wrote an article for the *Century Magazine* called "Treasures of the New York Aquarium" that begins with grandiosity: "The life of the sea has never ceased to fascinate mankind. . . . So it has happened that from childhood we have been filled with a desire to know more about the unseen inhabitants of the ocean. Nowhere else in the great capitals of the world may this desire be so completely gratified as in the New York Aquarium, and nowhere else may it be gratified without charge" (553). Bristol gives an overview of the aquarium's design—a combination of circular pools and wall tanks with both fresh and salt water, as well as cold and warm water—and its exhibit specimens, which, in 1900, included a wide variety of sea creatures. Jellyfish specimens were not acquired until a few years later, though certainly several years before 1913.<sup>3</sup> Charles Haskins Townsend's 1919 *Guide to the New York Aquarium* includes a description and full-page illustration of the most

conspicuous and rare jellyfish in their collection, a Portuguese-man-of-war, which was known for its paralyzing tentacle.

Bristol ends his *Century* article expressing pride for the aquarium's diversity, hinting that it provides a cosmopolitan image: "The crowning feature of our aquarium is the great diversity of its exhibits. In no other aquarium are the fishes drawn from so large an area. The waters of half a continent and its seaboard are laid under contribution for representative specimens; and though they bring with them widely different habits and peculiarities, they find congenial quarters, and thrive in them" (560). Bristol suggests that the aquarium offers a simulacrum of the city, where inhabitants come from far and wide to make unlikely bedfellows. We may be reminded of Eden Bower who, staring at the pigeons outside her window, thinks about how much she appreciates living in the city because it has brought her such a curious companion as "the queer painter chap" Don Hedger (33).

Bristol's article is remarkable not only for its pride in the aquarium's diversity but also for its dazzling color illustrations of the aquarium fish collection by James C. Beard. Beard's drawings depict several species, with two drawings featuring parrotfish and angelfish in full, vibrant colors. In 1910 the *Century* ran another full-color illustration, this time with a gorgeous color painting by Charles R. Knight accompanying an article written by Charles Haskins Townsend, director of the aquarium, about the "chameleon" qualities of the aquarium's fish. The caption for Knight's painting makes clear that this is not an amateur drawing but a composite of a number of artistic "studies made at the New York Aquarium"



(677). Seven years after this article, art journalist Charles de Kay wrote an article for *Art World Magazine* in which he extols Townsend's article and Knight's painting. His 1917 piece titled "A Realm of Beauty for Artists to Explore" makes the argument that the ocean has always represented the great undiscovered country of art; now, thanks to the New York Aquarium, artists can explore a completely untapped source of beautiful material for their art:

It is in this splendidly equipped but already overcrowded museum, the New York Aquarium, that artists can find abundant proof of the beauty lost to us because we cannot follow life in the water and watch marine creatures at our leisure. We can study here the lithe stealthy undulations of the green moray, that wolf of the rocky ranges under sea, the curious wavy fringes of the hellbender, the color pulsations in the groupers, the golden-framed eyes of the spot snapper, the pale, exquisite hues of the blue striped grunt, the sheen of the silvery moonfish with its long thin ventral fin and fine-cut tail, the parrot fish with a reddish or brown network over pale green body and bright green eyelids and lips. . . . (265)

Knight's painting and de Kay's article resonate with the image of Don Hedger painting in his apartment, "absorbed in a study of paradise fish at the Aquarium, staring out at people through the glass and green water of their tank" (5). As a budding artist, Hedger seems to be taking the advice that de Kay gives to young artists seeking "new realms of beauty," to paraphrase his title, for Hedger has clearly spent multiple hours painting fish at the aquarium. Perhaps Cather even had in mind Knight's painting of chameleon fish when describing Hedger's aquarium study, since a print of Knight's painting from the *Century* could be purchased on a postcard from the Aquarium shop.<sup>4</sup>

## The Centrality of Marine Symbolism

*Youth and the Bright Medusa* presents readers with a series of aquatic images spanning the dual beauties of predation and fatality. To me, this collection of imagery seems neither sequential nor chronological but rather a set of variations on a theme that engrossed Cather for over fifteen years; nevertheless, a couple of points on chronology and composition stand out. First, although there are some aquatic themes in her earlier compositions from *The Troll Garden*, Cather's three newest stories, and especially



THE QUEEN-TRIGGER FISH. PAINTED FOR THE CENTURY BY CHARLES E. KNIGHT  
The picture represents four color phases of this chameleon fish, from studies made at the New York Aquarium. The brightest and the lightest phases, shown at the top, are both normally the dull coloring, in the middle at the left, is assumed when resting, and also in case of fright; the fourth phase, at the bottom, indicates distress when the flow of water is stopped and the tank is stirred artificially.

Charles Knight's painting in "Chameleons of the Sea" by Charles Townsend. *Century Magazine*, Vol. 80, 1910.

"Coming, Aphrodite!," more clearly indicate the centrality of marine symbolism in her thought. By observing how Cather's 1916 and later stories reflect the New York Aquarium's artistic interest, we can see the likelihood that Cather was thinking more concretely of aquatic themes after moving to New York. Second, while her republication of the earlier *Troll Garden* stories in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* may have been, in part, an effort to consolidate her best work with her new publisher in 1920, her inclusion of these stories with their epigraph nonetheless refits her older compositions with a new centerpiece, one that reincarnates the "Goblin Market" theme of art's poisonous desirability with the image of the dangerously beautiful Medusa. Cather's line to Canfield Fisher about chasing bright Medusas should be read alongside the Rossetti epigraph: "We must not look at Goblin men/We must not

buy their fruits." Like Rossetti's Goblin men, Cather's jellyfish are alluring and deadly; unlike them, however, they are femininely beautiful and vulnerable. In this way, they also embody the poem's protagonists, the sisters Laura and Lizzie, who taste the Goblin fruit and must fight not to be consumed by a poisonous art.

To read Cather with an eye for jellyfish allows us to see her collection in a different light. Distinctly feminine and visually dazzling in its imagery, Cather's collection participates in the emergent scientific and artistic fascination with marine life forms in her time. Moreover, by making of the Medusa a composite symbol that interlaces artist and muse, Cather engages difficult questions about art and consumption. *Youth and the Bright Medusa* involves perhaps more push-and-pull in perspective than her other short story collections, as Cather moves from predator to prey, artist to muse, and back again. Sympathizing with so many points of view, Cather does not seem to side with one but instead offers a multifaceted spectrum of voices that pose questions about the beauties of and costs to a soul entangled in art.

At the end of his chapter about jellyfish in *The Sea*, Michelet compares the jellyfish to the human soul:

The noble and beautiful Medusæ . . . seem to express gravest thoughts. Beneath them, their luminous hair, like some sombre watch-light, gives out mysterious lights of emerald and other colors, which, now flashing, anon growing pale, reveal a sentiment, and, I know not what of mystery; suggesting to

## WORKS CITED

us the spirit of the abyss, meditating its secrets; the soul that exists, or is to exist some day. Or should it not rather suggest to us some melancholy dream of an impossible destiny which is never to attain its end? Or an appeal to that rapture of love which alone consoles us here below? . . . Thus much is certain, that they yield at once their flame and their life. . . . Flame, love, and life, all are at an end—all vanish for ever. (171–72)

For Michelet, the jellyfish is a creature that, like the human soul, desires achingly to both be illuminated and to impart illumination; as such, its hermetic image inspires dreams of rapture and anguishes of mortality. Perhaps the flame at the heart of Michelet’s image gives us a final gloss of Cather’s title—her bright Medusa a flash of mysticism revealing that art’s immortal beauties are forever tethered to their wavering frailties.



*I wish to thank several people for their contributions to this essay. I am grateful to Tracy Tucker, who was standing next to me when I discovered the Demorest’s article in the National Willa Cather Center, and who encouraged me to share my research at the 2020 Cather Spring Conference, which celebrated the centennial of the original publication of Youth and the Bright Medusa. I am also grateful for the numerous suggestions I received from scholars who attended my panel: to Steve Shively, Diane Prenatt, and Elaine Smith for their suggestions that I look into the New York Aquarium’s history; to Daryl Palmer for his notes on the opposition between desert and marine landscapes; and to Timothy Bintrim for conversing with me about marine readings of “A Sculptor’s Funeral” and connections to Charles Stanley Reinhart’s Washed Ashore.*

## NOTES

1. Sanborn Tenney and Abby A. Tenney say that jellyfish are nicknamed “the Lamps of the Sea” because of their night phosphorescence (227). Both Charles Frederick Holder and Jules Michelet give accounts of being at sea and being dazzled by the “phosphoric gleam” of jellyfish.

2. Madigan provides an explanatory note on the location, size, and worldwide prestige of the Castle Garden New York Aquarium (381).

3. It is not clear exactly when the aquarium first acquired jellyfish for its collection. Although they are not included in the catalogue of exhibits in 1902, the New York Zoological Society’s March 1913 *Zoological Society Bulletin* speaks of them having “lived for some years in the balanced salt-water aquaria at the New York Aquarium” (975).

4. See the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) online digital library for an archive of the New York Aquarium’s printed postcards, including the postcard that uses Knight’s painting: [dcmny.org/islandora/object/nyaquarium:collection](http://dcmny.org/islandora/object/nyaquarium:collection).

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In commemorating the centennial of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, the 2020 Spring Conference explored Willa Cather's many depictions of high art—opera, paintings, sculpture—in those collected stories. As a whole, however, Cather's oeuvre also pays attention to such forms of folk and domestic art as food preparation, Native American pottery, gardening, and sewing, so it was fitting that the conference also featured *Celebrating Women*, an exhibit of fifteen contemporary quilts curated by Cynthia Levis and Dianne Duncan Thomas. Fourteen accomplished quilters from across Nebraska responded to a call from the League of Women Voters, Eighth District, to mark the centenary of the 1920 ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment giving American women the right to vote. Their quilts, which depict women's lives in the liberating spirit of 1920, were on display at the National Willa Cather Center in Red Cloud from May 2 to August 31, 2020,

and were the subject of an artist's talk by Dianne Duncan Thomas during the 2020 Spring Conference. The exhibit and Thomas's talk can be found online at [willacather.org/events/celebrating-women](http://willacather.org/events/celebrating-women). (While we have selected several quilts from the exhibit to accompany this article, the parenthetical image numbers you'll see here refer to each quilt's placement in the online exhibit.)

Quilting, like other domestic work, provides space for the exchange of stories. Edith Lewis, Cather's longtime partner, relates that during her Virginia childhood, "When the old women came from Timber Ridge to make quilts, Willa Cather would creep under the quilting frames and sit there listening to their talk. . . . Many of these stories Willa Cather remembered all her life" (10–11). In *Celebrating Women*, the quilts themselves tell the stories, stories of public women like Amelia Earhart who made headlines and stories of women like Gramma Shellen who were known only to their families and neighbors. Writ large and small, these stories have inspired and sustained the women who made them.



"Gramma Shellen." Cindy Erickson

During the revival of quilting in the 1970s, many quilters reproduced traditional quilts, which continue to be made today. Some contemporary quilters, however, soon began to untether the form from its domestic, utilitarian origins and to interrogate the social structures that had historically supported it.<sup>1</sup> The quilts in the *Celebrating Women* exhibit are related to that impulse: they are art quilts, classified as textile art or fiber art. By definition, a quilt is a three-layer sandwich—a layer of batting or filler between two pieces of cloth—stitched to join the three layers together. Art quilts like those in the exhibit observe this traditional form, but disrupt it to produce quilts that, as Thomas observed, "are not just for beds anymore." They might be irregularly sized, with unfinished edges, and made of materials that prevent any conventional use. (They usually cannot be laundered, for example, because of applied paint and dye and three-

dimensional embellishment.) They are often pictorial, whether representational or abstract, rather than composed of a pattern repeated in a number of blocks. One views them as one would view a painting hung in a gallery. The extraordinarily high quality of the *Celebrating Women* quilts is evident in the originality of their design, in the imaginative choices of fabrics, color palettes, and techniques, and in the fluency of the machine quilting.<sup>2</sup>

Using a form and process that has historically been associated with women's domestic work, so often undervalued and not preserved, the creators of the *Celebrating Women* art quilts thus heroize women and revalorize their work. Such quilts are by nature subversive. Peg Pennell's "Femmage" (exhibit images 21–23), for example, is an assemblage or collage of repurposed, used textiles including vintage fabrics that might have first appeared in aprons or clothing, "orphan blocks" left over from the making of traditional quilts, and scraps of embroidered cloth, one a rabbit that, as Thomas commented, was probably part of something originally made for a baby. The design of the dress in the foreground, evoking women's

fashion illustrations of the 1950s, is bordered with the hexagons of “Grandmother’s Flower Garden,” a quilt pattern originating in the eighteenth century. Dedicated to the feminist artist Miriam Shapiro, “Femme” challenges the presumption that *les hommes* are the proper objects of homage. The quilt showcases the wide variety of women’s needlework skills and preserves a group of domestic textiles that might otherwise have been lost.

Half of the *Celebrating Women* quilts are designed around representational portraits of women, achieved through a variety of techniques. Thomas’s “Amelia Earhart” (images 30, 31), for instance, incorporates newspaper photographs of Earhart and headlines about her 1937 disappearance that Thomas had printed on fabric at a T-shirt shop; the quilt’s grayscale color scheme echoes the newspapers and newsreels of Earhart’s day. Thomas’s “Frida Kahlo” (images 16, 17) uses a printed image of Kahlo’s face, fused to the background fabric and embellished with three-dimensional artificial flowers and butterflies. In “Willa Cather 1873–1947,” by Cynthia Place Levis (images 24, 25), a pieced fabric facsimile of the Nickolas Muray photograph of Cather is appliquéd to a background printed with an image of the Farmers and Merchants Bank in Red Cloud; the modeling of Cather’s face is pieced from fabric printed with text from *O Pioneers!* In “Nellie Bly” (images 8, 9), Roberta Price Willet assembles a printed image of the journalist along with printed images of artifacts and passages from Bly’s writing that speak to her bold, investigative work. “Abbott Sisters—Prairie Pioneers” (images 32–34) by Rhonda Baldwin features pieced portraits of Grace and Edith Abbott, social workers and reformers affiliated with Hull House, and embroidered text noting how they are commemorated in their hometown of Grand Island, Nebraska. These portraits ask the viewer to consider the living person behind her celebrated achievement. Cindy Erickson’s “Gramma Shellen” (images 10, 11) and Megan Patent-Nygren’s “Grandma Martha” (images 2, 3), on the other hand, offer portraits of women who are not well-known but whose lives are enlarged by the work of these quiltmakers. Gramma Shellen’s three-quarter pose, limned in black machine-stitching against a background pieced of fabrics that appear to have faded, and the chickens of “Grandma Martha,” thread-painted to indicate their feathered, scurried texture, are especially effective.

Art quilts frequently incorporate text into the pictorial frame, as many of these do. Debo Hysack uses text dramatically in “A Revolution Begins” (images 6, 7) to chronicle Amelia Bloomer’s innovations in clothing that allowed women to work and play more comfortably. Composed almost entirely of letters printed from a myriad of sources on Tyvek as well as conventional fabrics, the strong graphics are reminiscent of a ransom note—were women held hostage to the skirt and corset? Likewise, “Julie Beth Thorne

Larson” by Aimee Mahan (images 12, 13) adds ribbons of text to an appliquéd heart and hands as a loving tribute to a teacher.

Other quilts feature an image associated with the female subject, such as the sugar beet in “Rachel Lloyd 1839–1900,” by Dorothy Heidemann-Nelson (images 4, 5), a quilt that speaks to Lloyd’s achievement as the first American woman to earn a Ph.D. in chemistry and her great success in developing the sugar beet as a Nebraska crop. The sugar beet poses almost as an icon, gorgeously colored in media (pencil, latex paint, ink) more commonly seen on canvas or paper. Marge Bresel’s “Georgia on my . . .” (images 14, 15) commemorates the painter Georgia O’Keeffe with an interpretation of her 1924 painting *From the Lake, No. 1* in cotton batiks and dupioni silk, the fused strips of fabric and striated machine quilting echoing the abstracted lines of O’Keeffe’s landscape. The bold slash of Big Red Ultrasuede in Marilyn Schmadeke Rembolt’s “March On” (images 28, 29) records the historic moment (in 1972!) when women were permitted to join the University of Nebraska marching band.



“A Revolution Begins.” Debo Hysack.



Chris Taylor’s “Women in Living Color” (images 18–20) and Deborah Ebke’s “Sisters in Spirit” (images 26, 27) provide some welcome diversity in this exhibit, reminding viewers that it was largely white women who enjoyed the voting rights conferred by the Nineteenth Amendment. African Americans—men as well as women—would not see an appreciable change in their freedom to vote until the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1965. Even though Native Americans were granted full citizenship only in 1924 and Asian Americans not until 1952, they and others have continued to struggle to achieve complete enfranchisement. And as we know all too well, threats to the minority vote continue into the twenty-first century. Besides Thomas’s “Frida Kahlo,” “Women in Living Color” is the only quilt in this exhibit to portray a woman of color. It celebrates diversity with headshots of twelve women of various skin tones and hairstyles, beautifully executed in raw-edge appliqué and sinuous machine quilting. Ebke’s “Sisters in Spirit” honors the Iroquois, whose matriarchal government was a model for some suffragists, by combining symbols of the Iroquois and suffragist flags in a minimalist composition highlighted by three-dimensional folded fabric stars.

*Celebrating Women* celebrates women’s triumphs but also attests to the sober facts of women’s lives. Rachel Lloyd, an orphan, had been widowed and lost her only two children by the age of twenty-six, Heidemann-Nelson’s artist’s statement reports. Grandma

Martha, Patent-Nygren reflects, was one of many anonymous women who “broke sod, walked along with wagon trains, [and] fed the world while men were at war”; she died at fifty-six. Gramma Shellen, Erickson points out, was born before women had the right to vote—as were all of the named women in these quilts except Miriam Shapiro and Julie Beth Thorne Larson. Quilts and quilting were surely a part of these women’s lives, as they were Willa Cather’s. How amazed they would be to see this new art form!

Willa Cather told an early interviewer that she had “never found any intellectual excitement any more intense” than what she felt as a child spending time with farm women at their household tasks: “I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said” (10). The makers of the *Celebrating Women* quilts understand this kind of domestic storytelling. In telling the stories of women from Frida Kahlo, whose paintings depict fabrics embroidered with Mexican folk motifs, to Grandma Martha, who probably saved her feedsacks to make aprons and quilts—from women who changed the world to women who changed the diapers and sheets—their quilts tell us “so much more.”

#### NOTES

1. The very names of some traditional quilt patterns—“Old Maid’s Puzzle,” “Drunkard’s Path”—could seem provocative, while the bland sentiment of others invited critique. The late twentieth century saw a clutch of contemporary quilts depicting the imagined shadow life of sweet “Sunbonnet Sue,” for example. One subversive quilter drove inked tire tracks over a “Double Wedding Ring” quilt.

2. The skill of a hand-quilter is measured by the size of her stitches, the ideal being twelve tiny stitches per inch. Most contemporary quilts are machine-quilted, however, and appliqué is usually glued or otherwise fused. The quality of the quilting is assessed instead by the fluency of curvilinear “free motion” machine stitching (e.g., image 15), its consistency and density, the effectiveness with which it captures raw edges of appliqué (e.g., image 33), and its contribution to the overall design and visual impact of the quilt (e.g., image 19).

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“Women in Living Color.” Chris Taylor.



# Mary Garden and Willa Cather: A Clash of Big Careers

John H. Flannigan

At the end of Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915), soprano Thea Kronborg enjoys the brilliant career readers feel has always been her birthright. Her success, however, belies troubling realities in the lives of Thea's two prototypes, soprano Olive Fremstad (1871–1951) and Willa Cather herself. More than a year before the novel's publication, Fremstad had sung her last performance at the Metropolitan Opera and would retire completely from singing in 1920. And Cather, whose fourth novel, *My Antonia* (1918), enjoyed only lukewarm sales, must have wondered if she would always haunt the margins of literary fame. Consequently, she found herself at this time, in David Porter's words, "increasingly devoted to selling herself and her writing" (166). Frustration with her elusive success is apparent in three stories collected in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920): "A Gold Slipper" (1917), "Scandal" (1919), and "Coming, Aphrodite!" (1920).

In these stories Cather presents Kitty Ayrshire and Eden Bower, both based in part on a new prototype, soprano Mary Garden, as having "made their way in the world of art by going in precisely the opposite direction [from Thea's]—by making the adjustments and compromises that enable them to adapt to the world and to achieve the 'worldly' success they need and crave" (Porter 162–63). Cather, too, would find herself making such "adjustments and compromises" in bridging "the gulf between the kingdom of art and the philistine world in which artists live" (Porter 166).

Cather had crafted Thea's musicianship using Fremstad's experiences in "the kingdom of art," but she borrowed mainly from Garden's life in "the philistine world" for Kitty and Eden. "A Gold Slipper" focuses not on Kitty's recital but its aftermath, an encounter between the singer and a Pittsburgh businessman on the night train to New York. In "Scandal," Kitty is too ill to sing and frets at home while gossip swirls about her. And Eden sings only once in "Coming, Aphrodite!," practicing a Puccini aria and interrupting Don Hedger, his dog Caesar, and the reader's reverie at the story's most serene moment. The emphasis in these stories on their characters' offstage



Mary Garden in *Aphrodite* (Paris, 1906). In Camille Erlanger's opera, the courtesan Chrysis (Garden) commands the sculptor Démétrios to commit murder, defile Aphrodite's temple, and steal a coveted mirror, comb, and necklace. In Paul Berger's photo Garden holds the mirror and comb. Philip Hale Photograph Collection, Boston Public Library.

lives indicates Cather had disenthralled herself from earlier fantasies. Janis Stout claims Cather realized "the world of the prima donna" was really "a combination of hard work, indulgence, and glamour," and I believe she also realized an author must not only write masterpieces—that in addition to "hard work," "indulgence and glamour" were essential, too (39). At *McClure's*, she had already learned the importance of advertising and knew her name, face, and books needed pushing. In fact, her growing dissatisfaction after 1915 with her publisher, Houghton Mifflin, arose in part from its perfunctory advertising of her books (Madigan 344).

After offering *Youth and the Bright Medusa* to her new publisher, Alfred Knopf, Cather reaped artistic and financial rewards unlike any she had known. She accepted she would lose some of her freedom and privacy in becoming famous, but she never would be comfortable in the limelight and always sought shelter in "a world insulated from everyday tawdriness" (Porter 166–67). In fact, the three stories inspired by Mary Garden portray the same struggle between an artist and an adoring—often ruthless—public that plagued Cather for the rest of her life. Garden flourished in the "everyday tawdriness" Cather abhorred, yet the latter perhaps envied Garden's ability to remain a serious artist while tolerating her public's intrusive curiosity and ignoring her critics' sometimes severe judgments. Perhaps Cather saw Garden as proof that she, too, could achieve and survive the big career she both desired and feared.

Born into a prosperous middle-class family in Aberdeen, Scotland, on February 20, 1874, eleven weeks after Cather's birth, Mary Garden was raised in Chicopee, Massachusetts, and Chicago before studying voice in Paris. During a long career, based in Paris and Chicago, she sang the title roles in Bizet's *Carmen*, Puccini's *Tosca*, and Strauss's *Salome* but specialized in contemporary French operas, particularly Massenet's. Unlike Fremstad, who lived much of her retirement "without purpose," Garden never stopped working (Young 64). She was a mainstay of the Chicago Opera until 1931, served as its director for the





MISS MARY GARDEN AS "MÉLISANDE" IN DEBUSSY'S "PELLÉAS AND MÉLISANDE"  
PAINTED FROM LIFE FOR THE CENTURY BY BRIGIDIO DE VIANOWSKI

From *Century Magazine*, Vol. LXXVI, No. 1, May 1908. Author's collection.

1921–22 season, starred in silent films, appeared in vaudeville, and scouted talent for Hollywood studios. She retired from opera in 1934 at age sixty but toured Europe and the United States as a lecturer into the 1950s and was interviewed for a BBC radio program as late as August 1961.

Despite having a voice that critic Henry Pleasants called “an essentially indifferent instrument,” Garden enjoyed phenomenal success (313). Her demeanor on stage was spellbinding: “She was always able to convince the audience of the reality of her vision, and to make the audience a participant in her experience. . . . She belonged to that curious group of singers who—in the theater, at least—sound better than they sing” (Pleasants 313). She herself explained, “I used my voice the way a painter uses a brush. He throws the colors he wants onto his canvas. I threw color into my roles in the different tones that I sang” (quoted in Pleasants 312).

Her unexpected stage debut was even more dramatic than Thea’s breakout performance. When Thea replaces an indisposed Sieglinde in Act 2 of *Die Walküre* at the Metropolitan, the substitution is greeted with “vehement applause from the upper circles of the house” (*The Song of the Lark* 483). On the evening of April 10, 1900, however, nobody in the audience of Paris’s Opéra-Comique had ever heard of Garden when the management announced she would replace Marthe Riota in Acts 3 and 4 in the title role of Gustave Charpentier’s *Louise* (1900). Riota had created the role two months earlier, and Charpentier’s up-to-date story of bourgeois and bohemian Parisians was

already a hit. Garden, however, had never appeared professionally on a stage before. Only Albert Carré, the Opéra-Comique’s director, knew of Garden’s diligent study of Charpentier’s score, and he had arranged sixteen rehearsals to prepare Garden as Riota’s understudy (Turnbull 19). An unknown American neophyte with a Scottish accent playing a quintessentially Parisian working girl, Garden triumphed.

Two years later, on April 30, 1902, she created the role of Mélisande in Claude Debussy’s landmark opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) and secured a place in opera history. At the work’s first rehearsal, accompanied by Debussy at the piano, Garden had been “unnerved” by the music’s strangeness, but, after Mélisande’s death scene, she fled the room racked by “uncontrollable sobbing” (Turnbull 31). Parisian audiences initially were hostile, but the opera proved to be the hit of the season. Later, Debussy wrote in Garden’s copy of the score, “In the future, others may sing Mélisande, but you alone will remain the woman and the artist I had hardly dared hope for” (quoted in Turnbull 34).

In November 1907, Garden made her American debut at Oscar Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera House, appearing that season in the U. S. premieres of three French operas: Massenet’s *Thaïs* (1894) (November 25); *Louise* (January 3, 1908); and *Pelléas* (February 19, 1908) (Cone 130, 138, 152). Cather was in Pittsburgh that November and in Boston that February, but she was in New York in early January 1908 and could have attended the *Louise* premiere. (Edith Lewis claimed she and Cather attended Garden’s performances, but she did not specify during which season nor in which operas [90].)<sup>1</sup> Cather likely knew of Garden’s article “The Debasement of Music in America” in the

February 1908 issue of *Everybody’s Magazine* and borrowed its confident, breezy tone for Kitty Ayrshire’s repartee. In the article, Garden complains that the “American public . . . is to-day quite happy and content with the operas of its grandmothers” (232). She deplors “mere vocal acrobatics” and believes in “modern music [that] aims not wholly at the senses, but also at the mind. . . . It goes deeper than tone. . . . It represents not persons, but passions” (236).

No modern opera was more passionate than Richard Strauss’s *Salome* (1905), and Hammerstein produced it for Garden in January 1909 with tremendous success. Two years earlier, Fremstad had appeared in the opera’s

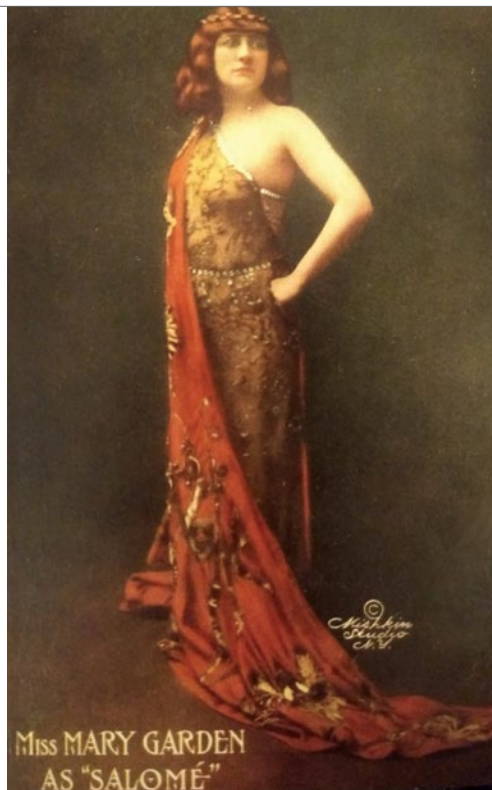


The Manhattan Opera House at West 34th Street, ca. 1907. Oscar Hammerstein challenged the Metropolitan Opera’s monopoly by opening the Manhattan (capacity 3,100), located between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, in December 1906. Placards visible in the photo announce performances for December 30, 1907 to January 4, 1908, including the Friday, January 3 premiere of *Louise* featuring Mary Garden. The Manhattan, extensively remodeled, survives today as the Manhattan Center, 311 West 34th Street. Byron Company, New York, N.Y. Museum of the City of New York. 41.420.482.

American premiere at the Metropolitan, but the board had found the work so repulsive that it withdrew the production after a single performance. Garden's success, according to John Frederick Cone, perhaps owed something to the fact that Fremstad "hardly suggested a fifteen-year-old Judaean princess . . . [whereas] Garden, pictorially and histrionically, seemed more nearly ideal" (210–211). Also, for Salome's "Dance of the Seven Veils," Fremstad had left the stage while a ballerina replaced her. Garden, however, did her own dancing (211).

Garden's self-assurance would have interested Cather, and she probably admired, even if she could not emulate, an artist who asserted, as Garden did in "The Debasement of Music in America," "Give me the approval of the masses, and I can survive without the aristocracy, or the critics" (232). Certainly, Garden's personality interested Cather more than her musicality. In fact, unlike Louise Homer and Amelita Galli-Curci, whose voices Cather admired, and Lillian Nordica, Geraldine Farrar, and Fremstad, who also inspired Cather characters, Garden as a *singer* is never mentioned in Cather's correspondence or journalism. Garden herself deprecated her voice. "I was never a singer," she said in a 1954 radio interview with John Gutman: "You go to hear [Enrico] Caruso. You go to hear [Dame Nellie] Melba. But you come to see me."

Garden supplied colorful material for Cather's stories. She never married, but, like Kitty Ayrshire, was the subject of frequent rumors of romantic entanglements (Madigan 342). Garden appeared in advertisements for La Maison Rigaud perfumes and beauty products named after her, just as Kitty in "A Gold Slipper" is the namesake of "perfumes and petticoats and cutlets" (*Youth and the Bright Medusa* 141). In 1909, Garden casually gave Rigaud permission to use her name in their publicity but made no arrangements for being paid. As a result,



Lithograph postcard of Garden in Richard Strauss's *Salome*, for the perfumer V. Rigaud. From original photograph by Mishkin Studio, New York, 1909. Author's collection.

Pittsburghers in Massenet's *Le jongleur de Notre-Dame* (1902), in which she sang the role of Jean, a fifteen-year-old boy, originally written for a tenor. She returned there in February 1912 with the Chicago Grand Opera in the local premiere of Victor Herbert's

Garden never received any royalties from sales of Rigaud's "Mary Garden" product line. She fought a legal battle that was finally resolved in her favor in 1933 when the New York Supreme Court upheld her right to revoke her gratuitous license (*Garden v. Parfumerie Rigaud*). Perhaps Garden's dispute with Rigaud also influenced Cather's portrayal of Kitty's victimization by an unscrupulous promoter in the story "Scandal."

Pittsburgh, where "A Gold Slipper" is partially set, had hosted Garden twice before her first solo recital there. She had appeared with the touring Manhattan Opera in December 1909 in Massenet's *Sapho* (1897), based on the same 1884 Alphonse Daudet novel that Eden Bower in "Coming, Aphrodite!" finds "secretly sold in paper covers throughout Illinois" (*Youth and the Bright Medusa* 35). That same season, Garden charmed English-language opera *Natoma* (1911), the title role of which she had created the year before in Philadelphia.

Garden's first solo recital in Pittsburgh took place on April 12, 1912 at the ballroom of the Schenley Hotel. The event was not attended by Cather, who was in Arizona at the time, but it nevertheless supplied details for "A Gold Slipper." *The Pittsburg Press's* critic was disappointed by Garden's "vocal defects" but struck by her appearance: "Elaborately gowned in ivory satin and lace and green velvet, with an immense rose in her bodice, Miss Garden was a beautiful picture as she stepped on the stage" ("Large Audience"). Kitty, too, startles the audience in Cather's story by wearing a "gold-lace petticoat" and a gown "constructed of a yard or two of green velvet—a reviling, shrieking green" (*Youth and the Bright Medusa* 143).



Full-page advertisement for Rigaud's Mary Garden Perfume, Face Powder, and Cold Cream, featuring Paul Berger's 1906 photo of Garden costumed as Chrysis in Erlanger's *Aphrodite*. *Ladies' Home Journal*, March 1919. Author's collection.



Garden may have inspired the eponymous slipper of Cather's story, too. Following her recital at the Schenley, she took the night train to Buffalo and Syracuse, where, the next morning, she discovered one of her diamond hoop earrings, valued at \$1,000, was missing. She appeared in recital in Syracuse wearing only one earring, "caus[ing] many in the audience to think she had started a new fad" (Turnbull 101). When Garden's train compartment was searched in New York City, the lost earring was discovered next to a steam pipe (Turnbull 101). Similarly, the morning after Kitty and Marshall McKann's conversation on the train to New York, McKann discovers Kitty has hidden one of her slippers in his berth. Unable to throw it away, he hides it in his safe deposit box, and it becomes "a thorn in the side of a just man" haunting him until his death (*Youth and the Bright Medusa* 167). Perhaps wryly expressing her opinion of Garden's singing, Cather suggests Kitty's most potent legacy is not her voice but her discarded shoes.

There are strong resemblances, too, between Garden and Eden Bower in "Coming, Aphrodite!" Both had Illinois roots and enjoyed the patronage of Chicago benefactors (*Youth and the Bright Medusa* 34, 36, 385 n34–35). Cather borrowed Eden's name from a Rossetti poem, but perhaps she also knew of Garden's connection to James Anderson Bower, a wealthy Aberdeen granite merchant, whose estate, Pitmurchie House, Garden had known as a child and, with her notoriously unreliable memory, claimed as her ancestral home. Moreover, one of Bower's sons, George, had married Garden's sister Amy in 1918 (Turnbull 1; Garden and Biancolli 271–72).

Cather devotes only one sentence in "Coming, Aphrodite!" to Eden's voice, describing it as "big, beautiful . . . rather like a professional's" (*Youth and the Bright Medusa* 13). The fact that Don Hedger, a non-musician, makes this assessment also connects Eden to Garden, who thrilled audiences but received enough bad reviews to end a less confident singer's career. For example, her New York appearance as Thais with the Chicago Opera in February 1919 drew this from the *New York Tribune*: "Miss Garden was what she always was in the past, superb as the courtesan, dull as the saint. Sainthood in opera requires beautiful singing to make it bearable, and Miss Garden's singing is never beautiful, though it is always original and sometimes interesting" (Vernon). Theater manager Arthur Hammerstein, whose impresario father had first brought Garden to New York, was harsher. Testifying in a February 1923 lawsuit concerning actors' fees, Hammerstein explained why Garden could demand \$2,500 per performance: "Mary Garden has about the worst voice of any operatic prima donna on the stage today, but she has personality" ("It's Personality"). Hammerstein erred in one important detail, however: Garden received \$3,500 per performance that season (Davis 145–46).

Such lavish fees no doubt offended purists who objected to Garden's quirky musicianship. When her friend Vincent Sheean asked her how she had managed to sing Thais's many high notes, she replied, "There is one thing you can do about high notes if they don't suit you. Just leave them out" (Sheean). Moreover, Garden frequently appeared in operas that were musically undistinguished if not tedious. "She had no musical taste whatsoever," wrote Sheean, and appeared in a series of operas that she "found rewarding to her style" but that were written by "tenth-rate" composers.

Sheean could be speaking of Eden Bower's taste as well as Garden's, for among the "tenth-rate" composers Garden favored was Camille Erlanger, whose opera *Aphrodite* (1906) is Eden's choice for her New York debut in Cather's story. A student of Delibes and Massenet, Erlanger (1863–1919) was a prolific composer whose operas enjoyed a brief vogue in the early twentieth century before fading into obscurity. Based on Pierre Louÿs's explicit 1896 novel *Aphrodite: Mœurs Antiques* ("Ancient Morals") and set in Alexandria around 57 BCE, Erlanger's *Aphrodite* was a sensation at its March 1906 Opéra-Comique premiere, and Garden, who created the role of the amoral courtesan Chrysis, sang the part fifty times that year (Van Vechten 76).

Garden recalled that *Aphrodite* "proved to be one of the most spectacular successes the Opéra-Comique had ever enjoyed" (Garden and Biancolli 98). The sensation was caused not by Erlanger's tepid music, however, but by the opera's lurid plot. According to Carl Van Vechten, the libretto "winds its pernicious way through a tale of prostitution, murder, theft, sexual inversion, drunkenness, sacrilege, and crucifixion, and concludes, quite simply, in a cemetery" (72). Before producing the opera, a worried Albert Carré had warned Garden, "It's very Lesbian" (Garden and Biancolli 97). Garden dismissed Carré's concerns, but even she admitted that "everybody wanted to see [*Aphrodite*] for reasons other than art" (Garden and Biancolli 98).

Americans, too, were curious about *Aphrodite*, and, for fourteen years, from 1906 to 1920, its American premiere was promised almost annually. Each time, however, the project was abandoned. The opera's overdue New York premiere finally took place at the Lexington Theatre on February 27, 1920 featuring Garden and the Chicago Opera.<sup>2</sup> The event is the backdrop for the epilogue of "Coming, Aphrodite!," in which Eden is about to appear at the same theater in the same opera. In fact, *Aphrodite*'s endlessly postponed premiere may have inspired Cather's title, which pokes fun at an opera always coming but never arriving, at least on schedule.

When *Aphrodite* finally came, New York's critics savaged it. Writing for the *New York Times*, Richard Aldrich believed "there were few operas produced here in recent years in which the music showed so great a poverty of invention." Henry Krehbiel, in the *New York Tribune*, complained that "*Aphrodite's* presentation was little more than a disgrace to the [Chicago Opera] company and left a stench in the nostrils of every lover of the lyric drama." Garden appeared in *Aphrodite* two more times in 1920, in Boston on March 3 and in Chicago on December 31. While Garden's performance was praised, both stagings received disappointing reviews, after which *Aphrodite* disappeared forever from American opera houses ("Aphrodite' Given Boston Premiere"; Miller). History confirms the hundred-year-old judgment of a prescient Boston critic: "it is doubtful whether we ever hear the work again" ("Aphrodite' Given Boston Premiere").

Writing many years later, the music critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Robert C. Marsh, felt that *Aphrodite's* single Chicago performance and Garden's neglect of better operas proved that Garden "really did not care very much for opera in the largest sense. She was interested in those works—whatever their musical or dramatic value—that gave her an opportunity to display her vocal and dramatic resources, and she had an audience that couldn't get enough of them or of her" (124). Yet Garden was no charlatan. She concentrated on congenial, French-language roles—she even sang *Salome* in French—yet regretted never singing Kundry in Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882), an opera she deeply loved, or Octavian in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), roles that suited her voice but that she avoided because she distrusted her German language skills (Sheean).<sup>3</sup> Perhaps Cather was thinking not only of Sarah Orne Jewett but also of Garden when she observed, "To note an artist's limitations is but to define his talent" (*Not Under Forty* 81).

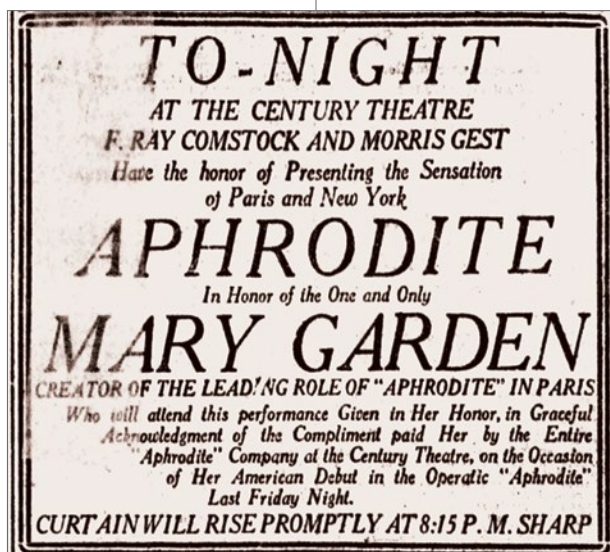
It is not known if Cather was aware of the failure of Erlanger's opera while writing "Coming, Aphrodite!" But she would have known of a theatrical rival perhaps contributing to its failure. On December 1, 1919, another work, also adapted from Louÿs's novel, began a successful run at New York's Century Theatre and played to packed houses until April 1920. F. Ray Comstock and Morris

Gest's *Aphrodite: A Romance of Ancient Egypt* featured a huge cast, including film star Dorothy Dalton, a troupe of horses and camels, spectacular costumes, music by Rimsky-Korsakoff, Glazunov, and Mussorgsky, and artists from Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes—Léon Bakst painted the sets and Michel Fokine choreographed the ballets ("Aphrodite' Proves a Wonder Pageant"). An unimpressed Dorothy Parker found the entertainment "an endless series of scenes, held together by an extraordinarily dull story" (430). Even so, Comstock and Gest's colorful pastiche score clearly outshone Erlanger's weak music, and even Garden's enormous star power in 1920 could not invigorate an opera whose mystique had faded considerably since 1906.

Thus, the irony in the title "Coming, Aphrodite!" suggests an even deeper irony: the fragility of big careers such as Garden's that can be derailed by bad timing. The success of the Century's Hollywood-inspired *Aphrodite* highlighted, too, the powerful appeal of Broadway shows and movies and the growing difficulties stars such as Garden faced in attracting audiences for operas much better than Erlanger's. Garden juggled appearances in opera, movies, and vaudeville, but Cather would find to her chagrin that, in permitting filmed adaptations of her novels, she risked losing everything she had achieved. In 1920, however, she perhaps worried that, if Garden with her outsize public image could not compete with Comstock and Gest's über-philistinism, a struggling writer in a stalled career had even less chance for success.

In time, of course, neither Cather nor Garden had cause to worry. Nor did Garden bear any ill will toward Comstock and Gest. The producers had wished Garden "a gigantic success" in an open letter in the *New York Tribune*

the day of *Aphrodite's* premiere ("An Open Letter"). And the following Monday, the *New York Herald* included a notice that that evening's performance of the Comstock-Gest extravaganza was dedicated to Garden, who would appear at the Century "in Graceful Acknowledgement of the Compliment paid Her by the Entire 'Aphrodite' Company" ("To-night at the Century Theatre"). Clearly, Comstock, Gest, and Garden were savvy theater people who knew their reciprocal advertising would benefit all of them. Garden's failure, like Erlanger's *Aphrodite*, was quickly forgotten.



Announcement by producers Comstock and Gest of Garden's appearance at the Monday, March 1, 1920 performance of their own production of *Aphrodite*. *New York Herald*, March 1, 1920.



Garden's enthusiasm for contemporary opera never waned after the *Aphrodite* fiasco, either. She championed recent works by Italo Montemezzi, Franco Alfano, Arthur Honegger, and Hamilton Forrest while continuing to sing *Jean*, *Carmen*, *Louise*, *Thaïs*, and *Mélanide*. And even after retiring, Garden remained interested in theater. She admired Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's musical *South Pacific* (1949), "that little jewel of a thing," and felt it could be a model for English-language operas (Garden and Biancolli 287). In November 1954, she attended the American debut of soprano Maria Callas in Bellini's *Norma* at Chicago's Civic Opera House and told her accompanist friend Bill Browning, "Listen carefully, son. There's not been anything like this since *I was up there*" (Turnbull 198). Plagued by illness and dementia, she lived the remainder of her life in Aberdeen and died there on January 3, 1967, shortly before turning ninety-three.

Garden's long career would not have surprised Cather, who had studied artists for many years and knew that great singers are untouched by setbacks such as *Aphrodite's* failure. Thus, there is no hint in "Coming, *Aphrodite!*" that Eden's debut will be anything but triumphant even though Cather implies such success is unimaginable for Don Hedger. When Eden asks him, "What's the use of being a great painter if nobody knows about you?," she chides him for rejecting the fame she seeks (*Youth and*



Mary Garden as *Carmen*. Photo by Matzene of Chicago. *The Theatre Magazine*, November 1911. Author's collection.

*the Bright Medusa* 61). On one hand, Hedger preserves his artistic integrity, and Eden is pleased to learn years later that he is "much talked about" among other artists (73). On the other, however, he seems destined to remain in the "tank" where Cather's story leaves him (70), shielded from contact with the world beyond his tight artistic circle. Even his name implies he will always avoid risking more than he can afford to lose.

Cather, however, had no desire to hide in a "tank," and 1920 would be her year for taking big risks. In Eden Bower, she created a character who, like herself, had come to Greenwich Village early in the twentieth century and years later still hungered for success. Now, armed with a new book, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, and a new publisher, Alfred Knopf,

Cather was about to achieve it. Garden, idolized on both sides of the Atlantic, perhaps emboldened Cather when she most needed encouragement. She may have disliked Garden's singing, but Garden would not have minded that. At age eighty-seven, she reflected, "I don't care whether a man or woman sits in the front row and doesn't like me. I don't give a damn. . . . If they don't like me, well, they don't have to come" ("Mary Garden—Prima Donna").

Cather never lost her touchiness about negative reviews and probably would have found Garden's disregard of audiences' sniping refreshing, even enviable. Garden's confidence perhaps inspired Cather as she found herself on the brink of a big career that, for better or worse, she, too, knew was her birthright. And despite Cather's misgivings about becoming famous, at the end of her life she probably would have described her career in much the same way Garden described hers in her last radio interview: "I've had a wonderful career! . . . Oh, I just loved the stage! . . . I had just my own way of doing things. I was just different from anybody else. Happily."

#### NOTES

1. Garden appeared in the final three of the Manhattan Opera's four seasons (1906–1910). After the Manhattan's dissolution in April 1910, Garden's contract and the performing rights for her repertoire passed to the new Chicago Grand Opera Company, beginning Garden's long association with Chicago (Cone 244, 277).



Mary Garden aboard the *Kaiser Wilhelm II* heading to Europe, April 29, 1913. Library of Congress, George Grantham Bain Collection, LC-DIG-ggbain-12407.

2. Located on Lexington Avenue between Fiftieth and Fifty-First Streets, Oscar Hammerstein's Lexington Avenue Opera House opened in August 1914. Cather calls it the Lexington Opera House although it was advertised in 1920 as the Lexington Theatre. Acquired by the Loew theater chain in 1923 and thereafter known as Loew's Lexington Theatre, it was demolished in 1961.

3. Garden's biographer, Michael T. R. B. Turnbull, believes Garden's German was adequate and that World War I caused the cancellation of a Paris production of *Der Rosenkavalier* featuring Garden (62–63). When Hugo von Hofmannsthal conceived his libretto for *Der Rosenkavalier* in March 1909, he wrote to Strauss that he envisioned the character Octavian as “a graceful girl dressed up as a man, à la Farrar or Mary Garden” (Hofmannsthal 27).

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Last year, the anniversary of *Youth and the Bright Medusa* provided an opportunity for the National Willa Cather Center to begin new artistic collaborations which highlighted “A Wagner Matinée.” To help our artists—illustrators, dramatists, actors, and musicians—understand and embrace the woman who inspired Aunt Georgiana in that short story, we used recent additions to our Willa Cather Foundation collections and archives to tell her story.

Frances Smith Cather was a Mount Holyoke-educated woman who came west with her husband George Cather to homestead in Nebraska in 1873. Despite the many challenges of frontier life, Franc Cather, as she was known by her family, never stopped being a teacher. She had taught in Vermont and Illinois before college, and afterward taught in Virginia at the Winchester Female Institute. After moving to Nebraska, Franc taught in a Webster County country school and participated in the Webster County Teachers’ Institute. Her thoughts were never far from teaching, however, and artifacts in our collection demonstrate that she continued to review and evaluate school text books, desks, and other items necessary to the proper administration of a classroom.

She also led the Catherton Literary Club, a group that met regularly on the Divide. “The Literary,” as it was sometimes called in the newspapers, was part of a larger movement; several country communities had their own literary societies where members—both men and women—met to share recitations and reviews of classical and more modern literature, songs and musical interludes, and speeches.

A recent donation provides additional evidence of the literary club’s activities and, particularly, Franc’s role in the Catherton chapter. An eagle-eyed antique hunter, on a “junk jaunt” in Western Nebraska, spotted the Cather name in some old books and wondered if there might be a connection to Willa Cather; a quick Google search brought him to the National Willa Cather Center website and put him in contact with museum staff. Despite our Covid closure, two books belonging to Franc Cather and two belonging to her daughter Blanche soon joined our collections. One of the texts, *The French Reader*, published in 1866, is a teacher’s examination copy, with “Franc S. Cather” inked inside in Franc’s hand.



Frances Smith Cather

*Roman and Medieval Art*, also belonging to Franc, held within its pages several meeting plans, written in pencil, with assignments listed for members of the club, including Franc Cather herself, her daughters Carrie and Blanche, nearby neighbors, and other relatives. Their meetings included lectures on Cicero, Ovid, Virgil, and the literature of Rome, as well as readings about King Arthur, transcendentalism, and Shakespeare. Ever interested in education, Franc even included sixteenth century educational theorist Roger Ascham’s *The Schoolmaster*, which proposed wholesale changes to Elizabethan-era English teaching. Club members also performed both classical and popular music.

These new items provide concrete details about this part of Franc’s life; much material in our earliest collections tends to focus on Franc’s husband George and his civic activities (census enumerator, election official, notary public, Sunday school superintendent) and on the farm itself. It is useful, particularly in the context of “A Wagner Matinée,” to know more of Franc’s intellectual life during these years, if only to contrast it with her role as capable farmwife and manager of a considerable grain and cattle operation.

Many materials in our collections help to illustrate her diverse skills. For example, a 1910 photograph shows the Cathers’ harvest field with a threshing crew of nine men led by their son Grosvenor. The house that George and Franc built for themselves dwarfed their homestead dugout, for it had to accommodate not only their family but workers they hired. Though theirs was a largely successful farm, George and Franc sometimes struggled, and, as a result, even their children played a pivotal role in making the farm successful. In the terrible drought of 1894–95, daughter Carrie Cather reported to her grandmother Caroline Cather, “I have twenty three turkeys that are growing nicely, forty seven chickens and thirty two ducks. I have three pet lambs this year. The boys herd the sheep about five hours every day.” Though the children seemed happy enough with their farming chores, Franc worried. On May 22, 1895, she wrote to her mother-in-law: “Oats and rye are suffering. Some pieces are too far gone for rain to help. . . . I hope it will rain soon. The frost did not kill all our fruit. There will be more apples and peaches than last year, but not quite as many plums and



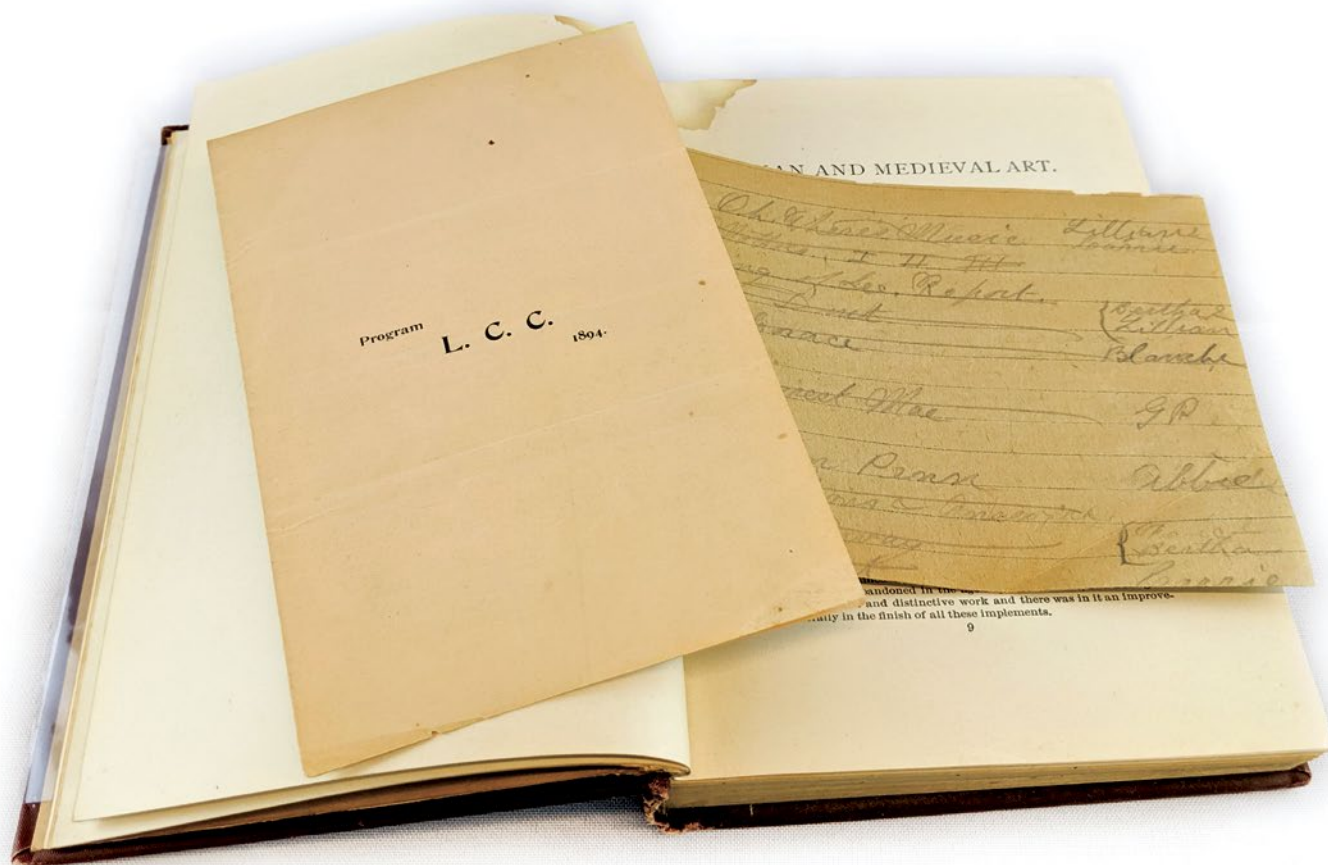
cherries. We are going to try and have a garden, for a wonder. G. P. fenced in a little piece by the windmill so we can run water on it.” As was the case with many farm families, the small livestock and garden crops that Franc and the children raised served as a buffer against major setbacks. In those same 1895 letters, however, Franc clearly tells correspondents that the children are studying their music lessons, no doubt under her trained eye.

Though we recognize that Cather fictionalized the account of “A Wagner Matinée,” her inspirations for Aunt Georgiana were clear, so clear, in fact, that some in Cather’s own family found the uncharitable physical descriptions of Aunt Georgiana objectionable. When the story was published in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* sixteen years later, Cather revised her text, omitting several specific physical characteristics of Georgiana, while retaining the “gaunt moulting turkeys,” the bad water, the bleak monotony of the landscape. “A Wagner Matinée” presents only a partial portrait of Aunt Georgiana, a portrait that suited Cather’s artistic purposes. Artifacts in the National Willa Cather Center collections provide a more complete picture of Franc Cather as an inspirational, enduring pioneer woman.

The end result of artistic partnerships undertaken in 2020, of course, is the creation of new and novel ways of experiencing Cather’s work—whether from a seat in front of the Opera House stage or through a stream of digital signals sent halfway round the world. It is a privilege to use our long-held and newfound collection pieces to help creators new and old as they learn to inhabit Cather’s universe.



*The information and analysis in this article are drawn from a variety of artifacts in the collections of the National Willa Cather Center. The archivist, Tracy Sanford Tucker, is available to guide interested parties to specific items and to help researchers explore the collections. An increasing amount of information has been digitized and is or will be available by electronic means; new ways of searching the collections are also available and help make the archival treasures of the National Willa Cather Center more widely available.*



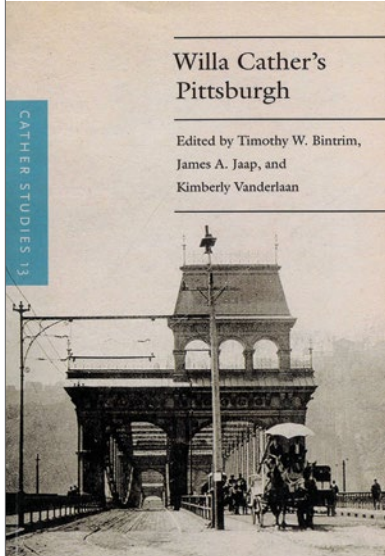
Frances Smith Cather’s copy of W. H. Goodyear’s *Roman and Medieval Art* (1893), a Chautauqua Reading Circle book, contained many enclosures, including advertisements for the “Idaho Pear” sold by Stark Bro’s Nurseries and enrollment cards for the Nebraska Teachers’ Reading Circle. Also inside was a program from the Red Cloud Ladies Clio Club (“L.C.C.”), and handwritten lists of readings for the Catherton Literary group. “Franc S. Cather, Oct 1st, 1893” appears in Franc’s hand inside the front cover.



# New Titles for the Cather Bookshelf

## Cather Studies 13: Willa Cather's Pittsburgh

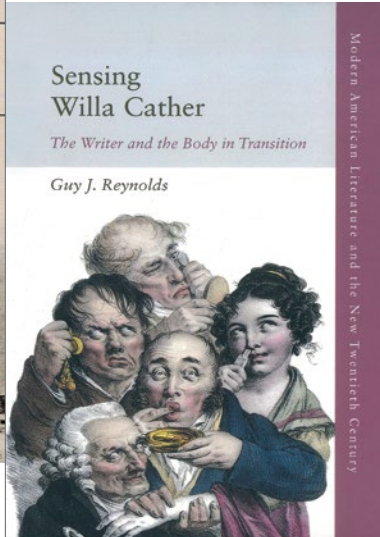
University of Nebraska Press



Editors Timothy A. Bintrim, James A. Jaap, and Kimberly Vanderlaan's latest volume in the Cather Studies series gathers a dozen essays by Cather scholars exploring the myriad ways Cather's Pittsburgh years shaped her life and work.

## Sensing Willa Cather: The Writer and the Body in Transition

Edinburgh University Press



Guy J. Reynolds positions Cather at the transition from late Victorian to modernist modes of representation and uses the concepts and techniques of body studies in this insightful new study of embodiment and narrative in the work of this "most sensuous of writers."

## Willa Cather: The Critical Conversation

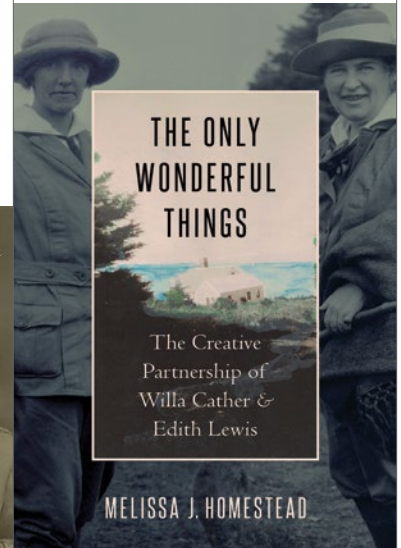
Camden House



Kelsey Squire provides a nuanced overview of Cather criticism from her emergence as a significant figure of twentieth-century literature to the present, examining also the broader issues of canon formation and historic trends in literary criticism.

## The Only Wonderful Things: The Creative Partnership of Willa Cather and Edith Lewis

Oxford University Press



Melissa J. Homestead's groundbreaking and exhaustively researched study has as its center the decades-long relationship between Willa Cather and her life partner Edith Lewis, focusing on the profound influence Lewis had on Cather's work. Responding to the near erasure of Lewis so common in Cather portraits, Homestead introduces us to the complex life of the accomplished woman who was not just Cather's companion but also her close literary collaborator and editor.

The National Willa Cather Center is pleased to congratulate the authors of these new books—and in the case of *Cather Studies 13*, the editors and contributors—all of whom have appeared in our pages. These books are available from the National Willa Cather Center, online at [www.WillaCather.org](http://www.WillaCather.org) or at the Center's shop in Red Cloud, Nebraska.

When you purchase from the Cather Center, you directly support our mission.

**20% off all titles through September 30**



# Lucia Woods Lindley and Daniel A. Lindley

Ann Romines

On December 14, as the horrific pandemic year of 2020 was finally ending, I received the sad news of the death of a dear friend, Lucia Woods Lindley, who had been a deeply committed supporter of the Willa Cather Foundation for all her adult life. Although Lucia had been suffering for several years from the effects of a major stroke, her death was hastened by Covid-19.

Immediately my email box began to fill with messages from Cather friends, also mourning our loss of Lucia. Nancy Sherwood recalled Lucia's "beauty and grace;" and Susan Maher agreed: Lucia was "grace embodied." Jane Hood, recalling Lucia's support of the Cather Foundation, remembered her as a "wonderfully generous woman," also expressed by her commitment to work on behalf of women. John Jacobs also remembered Lucia as "open and generous"—often anonymously so. Ron Hull wrote that "Lucia was one of the memorable players in the early development of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. She was a unique, singular person, a perfectionist—as meticulous in her choice of furniture for her New York apartment as with the art of her photography. She brought careful and inspired insight to the Cather Foundation Board." These memories, and many more, mixed with my own: of how much fun Lucia could be, whether exploring a museum exhibit or debating a Cather novel or sharing a restaurant table (and continuing her perpetual quest for the perfect biscuit).

Although Lucia was born into a world of privilege that most of her Cather friends did not inhabit, again and again she invited us to share that world. At a 1987 Cather conference in Utah, she treated a large group of attendees to an impromptu visit (with dinner) to Sundance. During the 2007 International Willa Cather Seminar in Paris, she invited me to dinner at an elegant restaurant that she remembered from a childhood visit, promising

a wonderful surprise. While we were enjoying our desserts, the surprise arrived: the ceiling above our table suddenly opened, revealing the starry night sky. I was amazed and enchanted, and Lucia gazed up with the same delight she had felt as a child. Again and again, Lucia's generosity brought delight—and often knowledge—to others. Thanks to the National Museum of Women and the Arts, with support from Lucia's philanthropy, Washingtonians experienced the eye-opening surprise of a drive-by outdoor display of Niki de Saint Phalle's enormous, voluptuous, exuberant Nanas. Because of Lucia's persistent support, New Yorkers can enjoy a statue of Eleanor Roosevelt (by sculptor Penelope Jencks) on Riverside Drive, one of few statues in that city depicting a woman. And through Lucia's years of work as a skilled photographer, viewers all over the world can explore the worlds of Willa Cather.

Born in Chicago in 1937, Lucia Woods was the daughter of Louise Brewer Woods and Frank H. Woods Jr. and the granddaughter of Nelle Cochrane Woods and Frank H.

Woods, who founded the Woods Charitable Fund in 1941, with their three sons. Lucia grew up in Chicago, attended Concord Academy, and then graduated from Sweet Briar College, in Virginia, in 1959. She studied interior design in New York and London, and studied photography with David Vestal, Dan Budnik, and Helen Buttfeld, in New York.

Lucia grew up hearing about—and eventually reading—Willa Cather. Her grandmother Nelle Woods had known Cather since their years as fellow students at the University of Nebraska, and her father corresponded with Cather in the 1940s and made several visits to Red Cloud while he was heading the Woods Charitable Fund in Lincoln. The Fund was an early supporter of



Lucia Woods Lindley at home, by Dan Lindley, 2010. Courtesy of Ann Romines.





“...The Only Ornaments of the Severe and Shadowy Room.” *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Nambe, New Mexico, 1972. Lucia Woods Lindley. Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY.

to restore the 1885 Opera House, then “nearly inaccessible, littered with debris, and structurally unsound. We knew that if we decided to move forward it would change the nature of the Foundation, and there were strong arguments on both sides. Lucia asked the hard questions, knowing that we would have to grow immensely as an organization to take on this task. Then, after the vote, she pulled out champagne! And we all drank to the new effort, which would

the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, now the Willa Cather Foundation, and Lucia continued that support throughout her life. Betty Jean Steinshouer recalls Lucia’s visits to Red Cloud in the early days of the WCPM, at times when founder Mildred Bennett and others were “worried about doing upkeep on important properties” such as the Pavelka farmhouse or “just keeping the lights on at the WCPM. Lucia would ask a few questions and then pull out her checkbook to cover whatever was needed.” Later gifts made possible the 2003 restoration of the 1885 Red Cloud Opera House auditorium, where Willa Cather was introduced to the performing arts; that auditorium is now named for Lucia’s Woods grandparents and her father. More recently, Lucia was especially concerned that the National Willa Cather Center, restored and reopened in Red Cloud in 2017, needed a safe and accessible space for its growing and invaluable archives, and she funded our current capacious, state-of-the-art archives, which is simply designated “From a Descendant of Frank H. Woods.”

Lucia served on the Foundation’s Board of Governors from 1979 to 1993 and then on the Advisory Council for the rest of her life. Betty Kort, former president of the Board of Governors and Executive Director of the Cather Foundation, remembers the 1992 meeting when the Board made the momentous decision

take more than ten years. Lucia’s donation of a quarter of a million dollars (an estimated fifth of the total cost at the time) assured the success of the fundraising campaign, and the Opera House became a living reality.”

Ashley Olson, the Executive Director of the Cather Foundation, says, “Lucia had a vision for what the Foundation could and should be, and she wasn’t shy about asking the tough questions, making critical assessments, and pushing everyone to take things to the next level. She understood the role of philanthropy in creating meaning and lasting change. There will never be another Lucia Woods Lindley, but the world is most definitely a better place because of her.”

In addition to her support of the Cather Foundation, Lucia worked to make the world “a better place” through many other organizations. She was a “founding mother” of the Chicago Foundation for Women, aiming both to improve and enhance the lives of women and to encourage philanthropy by women, and she personally established the Sophia Fund in support of women’s issues, which is now a part of both the Chicago Foundation for Women and the Ms. Foundation. From 1980 to 1990, she was a trustee of the Woods Charitable Fund of Chicago, and from 1990 to 1993, she served as the first woman president of that fund.

In the early 1970s, Lucia turned her skills as a photographer to a major, enduring project: *Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir*, with photographs by Lucia Woods and text by Bernice Slote, was published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1973, the centenary of Cather's birth. Lucia's photographs bring to life the places that Cather wrote about. For example, when I first read *My Antonia*, in green Virginia, I could not imagine the Nebraska red grass, "the color of wine-stains," that Cather described. But Lucia's photograph of red grass, under a sky faintly marked by a rainbow, made me see what Cather meant. For innumerable readers, Lucia's art has similarly complemented and extended the art of Willa Cather's fiction.

Richard Wilson remembers that, as a University of Nebraska undergraduate, he was recruited by Bernice Slote to "drive Lucia around Cather country as she gathered her photographs for the book. She was a meticulous artist and a generous friend. We had great times together as we traversed the landscape and she recaptured the magic of Cather's writing through her photographs." Examples of that magic are visible in the Art Institute of Chicago's collection of Lucia's photographs (see page 44).

Betty Jean Steinshouer remembers another picture of Lucia as a photographer. Betty Jean had "dragged" her eighteen-year-old niece Julia to the 2007 Cather Seminar in France, "hoping that she would be bitten by the Cather bug. What she remembers most is Lucia, taking time with her to help her learn her new camera. Sometimes Julia would disappear when I was engrossed in a session and I would look out across the beautiful grounds of the Saint-Michel de Frigolet Abbey and see the two of them off in the distance, with Lucia sharing her remarkable perspective on light and shadow. It takes a special person to have a view always to the future, whether in preserving history or nurturing a young person. Lucia did that on a variety of levels, using her family's resources for the greater good."

I remember a similar experience. When I mentioned to Lucia that my goddaughter, Amy, was currently living in Brooklyn, she demanded her phone number and soon called her with an invitation to a family Easter lunch. Amy arrived for lunch somewhat intimidated (having Googled Lucia), but she relaxed when Lucia greeted her at the apartment door in a Snoopy t-shirt (Snoopy being another of Lucia's heroes), and had a wonderful time. Later, Lucia took Amy to a meeting of the Ms. Foundation, introducing another young woman to some of the causes that were so important to her.

Lucia's independent life had changed dramatically in 1978, when she married Daniel Allen Lindley Jr, in New York. As

she said, she acquired, all at once, "a car, a house, a husband, and two children." Dan, who directed teacher education in English at the University of Illinois in Chicago for twenty years, had degrees from Yale, Harvard, Florida State University, and Loyola University of Chicago, and had also been a high school teacher. Later, he became a practicing Jungian analyst. He was the author of two books, *This Rough Magic: The Life of Teaching* (1993) and *On Life's Journey: Always Becoming* (2006). And, after his marriage to Lucia, he became an active participant in Cather studies, and he frequently accompanied Lucia to Cather Foundation events.

Cather teachers and scholars will particularly remember Dan's talks and his essay in *Teaching the Works of Willa Cather* on teaching Willa Cather's great story, "Paul's Case." His approach combines his roles as a literary scholar and as a psychoanalyst. He ends his essay: "The question is not, 'How shall I teach 'Paul's Case'?' Rather, the question is, 'Where is 'Paul's Case' in me?'. . . All I can do is urge you to bring that question, and your answer, into your classroom. Our deepest and richest teaching forms in our own heart's core." Steve Shively says that Dan was a "wonderful teacher and teacher of teachers," and Virgil Albertini, who edited *Teaching the Works of Willa Cather* with Steve, adds that "anyone teaching 'Paul's Case' should read Dan's comments." Steve says, "Dan and Lucia were interesting, intelligent people. They shared a deep knowledge of Cather and her world."

Four days after Lucia's death, Dan died, on December 18, 2020. Although he was dealing with cancer, his death was also hastened by Covid-19. The Lindleys had been happily married for almost forty-three years. Betty Kort said that, although she was "saddened" to learn of both deaths, "perhaps it is fitting—their hearts entwined as they were. They were a strong couple, always presenting a united front."

For me and many others, Lucia and Dan became unforgettable friends. They were generous with their abilities—Lucia as an artist in so many ways, Dan as teacher and writer; both as passionate readers. They will be deeply missed. But—as we enjoy a Cather performance in the Red Cloud Opera House auditorium, or research the treasures in the spacious archives at the National Willa Cather Center, or turn to Lucia's photographs as we explore the sites of a Cather novel—or to Dan's advice as we teach a Cather story for the first time—we and future readers of Willa Cather will say "thank you," again and again, for the intelligent, persistent, and artful generosity of our friends, Lucia Woods and Daniel Lindley.



# Remembering Our Friend Lucia

Lucia Woods Lindley's accomplishments as a philanthropist and photographer are a fundamental part of the history of the Willa Cather Foundation. Many individuals and organizations have played a role in our growth, but Lucia is uniquely one whose legacy is also a powerfully visual one. These images of Cather country in Webster County, Nebraska are drawn from an extraordinary body of work inspired by Willa Cather.



The Burlington & Missouri Depot, Red Cloud, Nebraska, 1971. A scene of many arrivals and departures in Cather's life and work.



Bone Gully, Fossil Bed, Webster County, Nebraska, 1969.



Lone Tree, Webster County, Nebraska, 1972.



The Dane Church, Webster County, Nebraska, 1969.



# Remembering Our Friend Lucia *continued*



"In Media Vita," *April Twilights*, Virgin Prairie Spring, Webster County, Nebraska, 1971. Cather's early poem "In Media Vita" contrasts springtime images of new life with "the dead, under all!"



Ivar's Pond, Franklin County, Nebraska, 1972.





Willa Cather's Bedroom Window, Red Cloud, Nebraska, 1972.

These photographs and the one on page 42 are reproduced by arrangement with Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource.



## Contributors to this Issue

**Michael Burton** is assistant professor in textiles and art at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and serves as director of the Robert Hillestad Textiles Gallery. He is coproducing a historical animation with faculty from the English and History departments with a media production grant from the NEH. His latest animation, *A Gold Slipper*, is available on Amazon Prime.

**John H. Flannigan** is a retired professor of English at Prairie State College, Chicago Heights, Illinois. His articles on Cather and opera have appeared in the *Willa Cather Review*, *Cather Studies*, and elsewhere, and his essay on Cather’s friendship with Pittsburgh pianist Ethel Herr Litchfield appears in *Cather Studies 13*.

**Diane Prenatt** is professor of English emerita at Marian University, and faculty mentor, scholarly concentration in medical humanities, Indiana University School of Medicine. Her essay in *Cather Studies 13* is one of several she has published on Cather’s fiction. She is writing the biography of Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant.

**Ann Romines**, professor emerita of English at The George Washington University, is author or editor of numerous essays and books about Willa Cather, a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation, and an issue editor of the *Willa Cather Review*.

**Alex Ross** has been the music critic of *The New Yorker* since 1996. He is the author of *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*, *Listen to This*, and *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*.

**Elaine Smith**. With exquisite timing before the Covid shutdown, Elaine Smith retired from the University of South Florida where she had taught American studies, women and gender studies, and American and English literature with an emphasis on connections between literature and social history. She has been published in these pages. Her particular interest is in Willa Cather and domesticity.

**Tracy Sanford Tucker** joined the Willa Cather Foundation in 2012 as education director. A certified archivist, Tucker oversees the WCF collection and presents regularly on Cather and the literature and landscape of the Great Plains. A graduate of Kansas State University and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln with degrees in American literature and creative writing and a specialization in Great Plains studies, she is an affiliate fellow of the Center for Great Plains Studies. Her publications include the *Willa Cather Review*, *The New Territory*, and a chapter in *Unknown No More: Recovering Sanora Babb* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2021).

**Elizabeth Wells** earned her Ph.D. in English at Louisiana State University in 2018 and since then has received multiple awards and fellowships for her research on disability representation and realism, including the Woodress Fellowship in 2019 for research on Willa Cather. In addition to forthcoming publications in *Dickens Quarterly* and the *Henry James Review*, she has an article forthcoming in the September *Modern Fiction Studies* on *My Antonia*. She is at work on a book on disability studies, entitled *Démeublé: Disability Aesthetics in Willa Cather’s Works*.

## Farewell to Toni



Antonette Willa Skupa Turner – September 2014.



On her wedding day in 1943.

She was named Antonette Willa, a given name to honor her family and a middle name to honor her grandmother’s friend, the author Willa Cather, who transformed the story of her grandmother’s life into American literary history. From her youngest days she had heard of the famous New York author who sent the coral beads at her birth, and though she never expected to, she found herself speaking about her family’s history and its connection to Nebraska’s famous daughter. She remembered that her knees shook in those early days, but she believed she had a calling and she was encouraged by the questions, especially from the children. It was important to reach the children especially, and make them proud

of their own families and curious about their own histories. She spoke also of acceptance and friendship, love and faith, and the courage to persevere when life has been hard. The story of *Ántonia*, and the woman who had inspired it, taught her those lessons well. She spent a lifetime sharing them.

Antonette passed away on Friday, August 13, 2021, at the age of 101. She was a blessing to all who met her, and our circle is already diminished by her loss. But she touched the lives of thousands as she traveled across the Great Plains to tell her grandmother’s story. Antonette’s friends—and to Toni, we were all friends—will tell you of her unshakable faith, her passion for service, her pride in her family’s legacy, her joy in all she did. Taking a moment today to remember her in that light would make her so happy. Let that moment be her gift.

—Tracy Sanford Tucker



Ashley Olson, *Executive Director*

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James P. Southwick

John N. Swift

Gary W. Thompson

Joseph R. Urgo



# IN NEBRASKA AND BEYOND

# FINDING MEANING IN CATHER'S WRITING

## Mary Vaughan's Inspiration

*"On some level Cather helps us all live a better life.  
It was true for my mother and me. It is still true, for me."*

— Mary Vaughan



Evadne and Mary Vaughan in Quebec City for the Sixth International Cather Seminar, 1995.



Mary Vaughan's mother, Evadne, began taking her to Cather gatherings in the 1970s. Over many years, they traveled to Red Cloud, Santa Fe, Winchester, Grand Manan, Quebec City, and Middlebury.

The camaraderie of the extended Cather community and the warm memories of their Cather adventures inspired Mary to support the Willa Cather Foundation with a planned gift. A well-regarded painter, Mary credits her mother and Willa Cather as influential figures that shaped her as an artist.

## The Cather Legacy Society

### Here's How You Can Enrich Lives

A charitable bequest is an excellent way for you to leave a legacy and help further our mission. A bequest is also one of the easiest gifts you can make. Your estate planning attorney can include a provision in your will that leaves a lasting gift to us: a specific asset, a dollar amount, or a percentage of your estate. A bequest could also be made from the residue of your estate or what is left after all gifts have been made to your heirs.

The Cather Legacy Society was created to recognize individuals who make charitable gift arrangements to benefit the Willa Cather Foundation beyond their lifetime. Make an impact today by providing significant support to future generations and leaving a lasting statement about who you are and what's important to you.

*For more information about planned giving opportunities, visit:*

[www.willacather.org/planned-giving](http://www.willacather.org/planned-giving)

*Or contact:*

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