

Willa Cather

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326 N. Webster Street
Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970
Telephone (402) 746-2653

The Chinese Connection: Cather and Pittsburgh's Chinatown

Li Zhu, Marquette University, and
Tim Bintrim, Duquesne University

"The Conversion of Sum Loo" (1900), the last of Cather's three short stories on the Chinese in America, the other two being "A Son of the Celestial" (1893) and "Affair at Grover Station" (1900), has seldom attracted favorable criticism. The few scholars who have ventured their opinions do not agree on its sources. David Stouck, in his "Mary Austin and Willa Cather," states that Cather's source "had to be largely literary and a quick perusal of American fiction in the late nineteenth century reveals that a number of writers, including Bret Harte, Frank Norris, and Mary Austin, found the Oriental in California an interesting subject for short fiction" (2). James Woodress, in *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, is puzzled that the story was "set in San Francisco, where Cather never had been" (146). But in as early as 1957, Mildred Bennett, in her *Early Short Stories of Willa Cather* had pointed to an Eastern city — Pittsburgh. Shortly before the publication of this story, Bennett noted, Cather had interviewed Yee Chin (misspelt as Lee Chin in Cather's article and subsequent criticism), the leading Chinese importer of Pittsburgh. Furthermore, Bennett found that in the story Sum Loo's merchant husband, Sum Chin, not only had the same given name as Yee Chin, but also that their life stories had many similarities (265).

Cather scholars also disagree upon Cather's treatment of the Chinese in the story. Bennett, in *The World of Willa Cather*, explains that Cather's antagonism was directed not at the Chinese but "against

missionaries to China," for Cather believes that "the ancient civilization of China could get along quite well without our cultural interference" (136). After comparing "The Conversion of Sum Loo" and Austin's "The Conversion of Ah Lew Sing," Stouck concludes that the tone of these two fictional treatments of Chinese immigrants is not "condescension but respect" (3). Marilyn Arnold, in *Willa Cather's Short Fiction*, notes

briefly that the tone of "Sum Loo" is ironic and somewhat lighter than that of the earlier "A Son of the Celestial," "for in the later story Cather enjoys a little joke at the expense of Christians who had wrongly assumed that their Oriental convert to Christianity was safe in their throng" (6). Woodress, however, pronounces decidedly that "the pathos" of the story is "feeble" and that "the story is certainly one of Cather's bad apples" (146).

So far, no study has treated Cather's three Chinese stories as a record of her developing understanding of the Chinese immigrants in America. The lack of solid criticism of Cather's Chinese stories may be due to the inaccessibility of Cather's journalism on Chinese subjects. Several of these pieces

have only recently been identified, but others have been known for decades. For example, Bennett's introduction to the *Early Short Stories* recalls that in 1948 she had been called to Pittsburgh by Rose Demorest, a Carnegie reference librarian, who thought she had discovered previously unknown writing by

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Yee Chin and his wife, in a photograph originally printed with Cather's 1900 article "A Chinese View of the Chinese Situation."

PITTSBURGH'S RICHEST CHINAMAN

The Tragedy of His Two Wives. Scrupulous Honor and Extreme Politeness. His Business Motto. Confucius and the Cow.

By Henry Nicklemann
(Written for The Sunday Gazette)

Yee Chin, the wealthiest Mongolian in Pittsburgh, is a wholesale merchant in Chinese commodities, and said to be worth upward of \$100,000, all of which he has accumulated in his business here. His place of business in River Avenue is a sort of storehouse full of Chinese wearing apparel, fireworks, dried fish, dried vegetables and fruits, nuts, teas, drugs, gums, spices and preserves. These he supplies to Chinese retail merchants in Pittsburgh, Altoona, Johnstown, and the smaller cities in the western part of the state. His business proper is largely due to his high character and unusual intelligence. The freight agents of the railroad over which all his shipping is done say that there is not a whiter man in Pittsburgh to do business with. All his business acquaintances affirm that his word is always a sufficient guarantee and that he has an unusually sound conception of upright conduct in business matters. He has a good memory for favors, and never forgets a man who has done him a good turn.

Yee Chin is an unusually tall man for a Chinaman, standing nearly six feet in his felt soles. He is straight, broad-shouldered and well-built, with muscular arms and well-shaped hands. His skin is a pale yellow and his face full, smooth and intelligent. His manner is both dignified and confident and his courtesy unflinching. He has in his bearing, in short, that unmistakable something which characterizes a gentleman of any race or color. Not a few women of the city go to his shop for various Chinese specialties, and declare that he could instruct many American shopkeepers in politeness, promptness and courteous attention.

Yee Chin has by no means lost touch with his native country, and returned to Canton every other year to buy his goods. Though he looks not more than 35 Chin is about 50 years old, and has a son in China of whom he will make a mandarin. A hundred dollars a year, he says, is sufficient to keep the young man at one of the best Chinese universities. The young man has passed his first examination, and also the second examination and had obtained the degree called in China, "the degree of the Flowering Talent." He is now a candidate for the third examination which will admit him to an honorable government post. The

young man has never been to this country and his father says he will never allow him to come until he is settled with life, for eastern and western ideas of education are so incompatible that six months in America would relax the boy's severe scholastic habits and give him ideas which would be injurious to his career as a scholar in China.

Yee Chin tells an interesting anecdote about the difficulties of Chinese scholarship. "Confucius, our great master," he says, "was once asked by the emperor if he knew all the Chinese language. Confucius replied: 'Sir, let the Chinese language be represented by all the hairs on the body of a cow; I am able to number only the hairs on one of her legs.'"

Some four years ago, on his return from China, Yee Chin married a Chinese mission girl of considerable beauty, in San Francisco. He brought his bride to Pittsburgh in the stateroom of a Pullman car and established her in the rooms over his shop. About a year after their marriage the girl became so bitterly homesick that she began to show signs of melancholia. There was only one other Chinese woman in the city whose birth and education made her companionable to Mrs. Yee Chin, and Chin persuaded her husband to occupy the building next to his shop and had a door cut through the wall that the two women might communicate freely. Chinese doctors were in constant attendance upon her, but about two years ago an American physician declared her mentally deranged and her husband at once engaged a stateroom and took her back to San Francisco, hoping that a few months in her father's home would restore her. She died there some weeks after her arrival.

His first wife, Yee Chin never brought to Pittsburgh at all, believing that the necessary isolation of a Chinese woman's life here would be unbearable to her. He left her in China with her son and spent some months with her every two years. On his fourth trip home she declared that she intended returning to America with him and grieved bitterly at his refusal to permit. On the night of his departure for the United States she committed suicide.

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Cather in the back files of two local magazines, the *Library* and *Home Monthly* (viii). Bennett confirmed Demorest's discoveries, which included "The Conversion of Sum Loo"; moreover, they noted that just two weeks before "Sum Loo" appeared in the *Library*, "Henry Nicklemann" (one of Willa Cather's pen names) had published in the same journal "A Chinese View of the Chinese Situation," an interview with Chinese importer Yee Chin about the Boxer Rebellion. A condensed and updated version of this interview, "Pittsburgh's Richest Chinaman," appeared again under Nicklemann's name two years later in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*.

Neither of Cather's two articles on Yee Chin has ever before been reprinted. William Curtin's *The World and the Parish* includes a brief sketch of a Chinese laundryman in Lincoln (23) and an article on Wu Tingfang, the Chinese Minister (803), but relegates Yee Chin to the footnotes (803). The continued unavailability of these pieces underscores Susan Rosowski's claim that "we need ready access to Cather's journalistic writing in its entirety . . . an updated and expanded edition that would expand upon, rather than attempt to replace, the superb work done by Sloté and Curtin" ("Prospects" 149). This year, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Bennett-Demorest collaboration, it is fitting to reprint "Pittsburgh's Richest Chinaman" (see page 2).

The earlier and lengthier article, "A Chinese View of the Chinese Situation" contains material about the politically sensitive Boxer Rebellion, a subject not mentioned in the later, reduced piece. It also examines the conflicts between Western Christianity and Eastern belief systems, a delicate matter that is at the core of "The Conversion of Sum Loo." Throughout, there are intriguing glimpses of Cather's sympathies for Chinese immigrants, commonly discriminated against by society and the law.

In mid-July 1900, while the U.S. Army, along with armies from several European nations and Japan, was marching on Beijing to help put down the Boxers, Cather took the unusual step of seeking a Chinese-American opinion on this contentious event. Although Yee Chin was a recognized spokesperson for his people, the Pittsburgh newspapers in those months preferred American views of the Chinese situation, usually voiced by missionaries and politicians ("In Great Danger"; "China's Story Told"). Before quoting Yee Chin's opinions on Chinese culture, language, and scholarship, and his speculations about the causes of the Boxer Rebellion, Cather deflates several stereotypes about the Chinese by testifying to Yee Chin's character. She confirms Yee Chin's "unquestioned" business integrity, saying that "as a man of business he is universally respected, and his relations with his bankers and shipping agents have become even cordial." She estimates his net worth, a figure which belies assumptions that all Chinese labor was cheap.

And she describes his height, physical robustness and pleasant looks, all of which blunt the caricaturist's pen. Finally, she commends Yee Chin for having "the courtesy and address of a man of the world and a fluent speaking knowledge of English."

Despite Yee Chin's superb personal qualities, he suffered from two marital tragedies, brought about in large part by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which had effectively sealed off immigration of Chinese, and especially Chinese women, to the United States. As a merchant rather than a common laborer, Yee Chin was not targeted for exclusion; he was supposed to be able to come and go as he liked. But contemporary reports suggest that even propertied merchants were subject to official harassment. A May 31, 1900 *Leader* article reveals that a Pittsburgh merchant named Yee Gep, upon his return from a visit home in China, was being detained in San Francisco by immigration authorities and was likely to be deported, even though he had been in America for eighteen years, owned property and a business in Pittsburgh, and even though Rev. E. R. Donehoo, pastor of the West End Presbyterian Church, had "taken a lot of affidavits" to San Francisco testifying to Yee's character and business status ("Chink Held Up"). It was even more difficult for Chinese women, including the wives of merchants, students, and diplomats, to travel to the United States. Even if they could come to America, once here, they would find little company. For Chinese women, who were used to living in big families and closely-knit communities, the loneliness in America would be unbearable. Because of these considerations, Yee Chin decided not to take his first wife to America, even when she begged him to do so. Not comprehending the difficulties of Chinese people and especially women in America, Yee Chin's first wife took poison and died the night before his departure.

In August 1898, Yee Chin married again, this time to a San Francisco Chinese girl whom he brought back to Pittsburgh. Of the three hundred Chinese living in Pittsburgh in 1900, only two were women, Yee Chin's wife and the wife of another merchant. The two husbands did their best to provide company for their wives: the two households arranged to live next door to each other, and "a door was cut through the partition, that their intercourse might be perfectly free." But "in spite of this," Cather reported in 1900, "loneliness, and lack of exercise and homesickness" had caused Mrs. Yee to suffer a mental breakdown, and Yee Chin was preparing to take his wife back to San Francisco, in the hope that a few weeks with her family would restore her health. Although Cather did not name the American laws that caused these tragedies, she could be one of the first American journalists to report the dire effects of the Exclusion Act on the lives of Chinese immigrants.

Perhaps to break the ice before asking Yee about the Boxer insurgency, Cather expressed her interest in Chinese scholarship. Although he was not himself a

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scholar, Yee Chin spoke enthusiastically about his son's progress through the rigorous Chinese educational system. He assured Cather that "there is no caste in China, and any boy may become a Mandarin if he has the ability and application, and his father is able to pay for his education" (16). Cather had voiced her approval of the Chinese meritocracy in September 1896, when she told young readers of *The National Stockman and Farmer* that "China has no hereditary nobility and the offices of state are filled by the men who have most distinguished themselves in the schools" ("Great Man of China" 19). Perhaps prompted by Cather, Yee Chin even went on to tell an anecdote from Confucius about the complexity of the Chinese language.

Despite his initial unwillingness to talk about politics or about the Boxer Rebellion, Yee Chin warmed to the topic at last, possibly swayed by Cather's interest and courtesy. He testified that the insurgency was less of a religious confrontation than a political issue, not the result of Chinese antagonism toward Christianity, but a revolt against Western imperialism. The common Chinese did not dislike missionaries, Yee Chin said, and "there was no general revolt when European missionaries went to China." When he lived in China "all missionaries who were gentlemen were well liked, and all who were not were detested." What the Chinese disliked, according to Yee Chin, was the greed of the European politicians, their intolerance of other religions, and their attack on the age-old practices which formed the very fabric of Chinese culture. Yee Chin could not but feel bewildered: "You must remember that to the average Chinaman the precepts of your religion seem very like those of his own, and it is difficult for him to understand why his ceremonies and forms are altogether bad."

Yee Chin observed that religion was used by some European powers as an imperialist tool to extort more territorial concessions from China. He explained to Cather that life in China, made hard enough by the population pressure and the scarcity of land, was made unendurable by the European imperialist's aggression. After losing various wars to the European nations, the Dowager Empress "[began] cutting off slices of the Empire and giving them to Europe." Faced with further indemnities for wars they never wanted, the Chinese people were "maddened at the prospect of losing the land they have held since two thousand years before Christ." Many believed that "the railroad, the telegraph, Christianity were only the forerunners of this wholesale theft of land — means to facilitate the division of the Empire among Western nations." Yee Chin mused, "Suppose China should decide she wanted San Francisco and take it, and France should take New Orleans and the Mississippi, and Germany New York; what would your people do?"

After enumerating the achievements the Chinese had made over the past centuries in literature, trade and inventions and expressing the Chinese people's respect for and readiness to adopt "Western systems of medicine and science," he asked: "are steam, electricity and Christianity to cost the land of his fathers?" He concluded solemnly that "the Chinese were very well satisfied with their own religion and they think their Empire a dear price to pay for a new one." This clash of cultures is a theme Cather would develop two weeks later in "The Conversion of Sum Loo."

While the emphasis of "A Chinese View of the Chinese Situation" is on Yee Chin's analysis of the causes of the Boxer Rebellion, "Pittsburgh's Richest Chinaman," published two years later in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, is a profile piece, focusing on Yee Chin's integrity and his tragic family life. It was the last of Cather's investigative reports on Pittsburgh's ethnic communities for the newspaper between 1901 and 1902. The series started with "Pittsburgh's Mulberry Street" (8 Dec. 1901) on the various ethnic communities in the city and "On the Christmas Side" (22 Dec. 1901) about Christmas traditions on the Germanic South Side, continued with "A School for Servants" (13 April 1902) and "A Factory for Making Americans" (8 June 1902), and concluded with the profile of Yee Chin (8 June 1902). The piece was also published only six weeks after the second renewal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in April 1902. Cather had voiced her criticism of this xenophobic legislation in her first Chinese story, "A Son of the Celestial," several months after the first renewal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1892. Breaking the frame of this story, Cather's authorial voice interjects:

It was not because of the cheapness of Chinese labor that the Chinese bill was enacted. It was because church and state feared this people who went about unproselyting and unproselyted. Who had printed centuries before Gutenberg was born, who had used anesthetics before chloroform was ever dreamed of. Who, in the new west, settled down and ate and drank and dressed as men had done in the days of the flood. (8)

When read as a response to the renewal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, "Pittsburgh's Richest Chinaman" suddenly gains critical currency.

In this brief article, Cather reiterates much of the information in the previous interview, but with two intriguing additions. First, she puts more emphasis on Yee Chin's sterling reputation for fair and honest dealing during his thirty-year career. As proof of Yee Chin's integrity, and with a sideways thrust at skeptics, she adopts the racialized rhetoric of the time to make her point. Yee Chin's complexion is "pale yellow," she acknowledges, but "the freight agents of the railroad over which his shipping is done say there is not a whiter man in Pittsburgh to do business with." Moreover, the fashionable ladies of the city who frequent Yee Chin's shop say that Yee "could instruct many American shopkeepers in politeness, promptness, and courteous attention." But Cather offers her highest

praise upon her own authority: "He has in his manner, in short, that unmistakable something which characterizes a gentleman of any race or color." Cather's pronouncement may be the most positive remark accorded to a Chinese immigrant in America at the end of the nineteenth century, comparable to Sui Sin Far's "A Plea for the Chinaman," published in Canada four years earlier.

The second addition in this profile is the erroneous report of the death of Yee Chin's second wife. It is hard to imagine that Cather would miss the small notice in the *Leader* of August 17, 1900, reporting Mrs. Yee's full recovery and the couple's impending return to Pittsburgh. This was, of course, only one week after "The Conversion of Sum Loo" appeared in the *Library*. The fact that Mrs. Yee did survive is confirmed by her prominent place in a *Leader* article "A Picturesque People Are the Celestials of Pittsburgh," dated March 20, 1904. The questions remain: did Cather make an appalling mistake in reporting Mrs. Yee's demise, or did she have subtler motives in fabricating her death? The timing of the publication of "Pittsburgh's Richest Chinaman" points in both directions. That this was Cather's last journalistic submission before her departure for her first European trip might imply that she was simply in a hurry and did not bother to check facts. But coming so soon after the renewal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1902, Cather's article also suggests a possible deliberate crossing from fact to fiction. If Cather did fabricate Mrs. Yee's death, did she do that in conformity with the "Madame Butterfly syndrome," a generic convention which required the death of the Asian woman in fiction and on stage? Cather's familiarity with this syndrome is revealed in her favorable review of Carlton Dawe's oriental romance *A Bride of Japan* in May 1898. An early 1899 interview of Yee Chin's second wife in the *Pittsburgh Leader*, "Life in Chinatown," possibly written by Cather, calls this new bride from San Francisco "A Bride of China" and "real life Sasa San" ("Life in Chinatown"). However, given evidence of Cather's positive treatment of Yee Chin in her two articles, can we surmise that Cather deliberately compounded Yee Chin's tragic family life to solicit sympathy for him from her newspaper audience? Whatever the answers are, Cather's sympathetic portraits of Yee Chin call attention to the political, religious, and literary controversies of her time, and even now call for our reassessment of her Chinese stories.

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Desert Landscapes and the "Male Gaze": Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

J. Gerard Dollar
Siena College

"Nature is hard to be overcome,
but she must be overcome."

Henry David Thoreau,
Walden (268)

"If Father Vaillant were here, he would say, 'A miracle'; that the Holy Mother, to whom he had addressed himself before the cruciform tree, had led him hither. And it was a miracle, Father Latour knew that. But his dear Joseph must always have the miracle very direct and spectacular, not with Nature, but against it."

Willa Cather,
Death Comes for the Archbishop (29)

We have recently marked, in 1997, not only the 70th anniversary of Willa Cather's novel of miracles, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, but also the 150th anniversary of the conclusion of Henry David Thoreau's two-year sojourn on Walden Pond (1845-47). The coincidence of these anniversaries, as well as the recent publication of a provocative, feminist analysis of landscape in American literature — Louise H. Westling's *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction* — leads me to question whether Cather's novel, with its beautiful evocation of desert landscapes, follows in a Thoreauvian, transcendental tradition; whether Thoreau's pervasive imagery of digging deep into the earth — putting down roots and laying foundations — in order to reach spiritual heights also characterizes Cather's approach to desert nature; and finally, whether the feminist critique of Thoreau advanced by Westling and other scholars might be applied to Cather's novel.

Put simply, Louise Westling's revisionist reading of *Walden* questions whether Thoreau really argues for immersion in nature, for a redemptive losing of the self in the natural world, as a famous passage from "The Village" (Chapter 8 of *Walden*) would indicate:

Not till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations. (118)

This quotation notwithstanding, revisionist critics of *Walden* claim that Thoreau is in fact viewing — indeed looking down upon — a feminized nature from an Emersonian and masculinist position of superiority (Westling 44, 52), and that Emerson's and Thoreau's "male gaze" always means an intellectual separating of the self from beautiful but ultimately threatening nature. From this revisionist perspective *Walden's* covert message is that male will — expressed by the "male gaze" — must control and shape female nature, and



Statue of Archbishop Lamy at The Cathedral of St. Francis, Santa Fe.

Photo by J. Murphy

that ultimately transcendence comes in a struggle *against* nature, as the above quotation from "Higher Laws" indicates, rather than in communion *with* "her."

The terms of this debate — redemption through nature vs. redemption against nature; a feminized, elemental nature vs. a masculine construction of landscape; a natural world to be lost in vs. a natural landscape to be gazed upon — appear early in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, in the first New Mexico scene, when Father Latour considers the miracle of his salvation from the hostile landscape of the identical red sand-hills and the appearance of the cruciform tree as a sign of divine intervention — specifically, the intervention of the Holy Mother — in his fate.

In many ways this early scene serves as a microcosm of the entire novel: the coming of European man, bearing the true faith, to a beautiful but hostile environment — a natural environment of, at times, mind-numbing repetitiveness (the same sand-hills, or the same junipers, piñons, rabbit-brush over and over again), or as a later description — reminiscent of the beginning of *My Ántonia* — puts it, country that "was still waiting to be made into a landscape" (95).² This quotation is important in that it distinguishes between "country" and "landscape," between elemental nature

and the ordering of nature — for example, between the raw ingredients of a soup and the thousand years of tradition that tell you how to put these ingredients together in just the right way, converting nature into art.

Responding to the tremendous challenge of undifferentiated country to the order-imposing French mind, the novel presents a triumph of will and faith over the environment, and the finding of meaning and beauty in landscape — but a transcendent and culturally inscribed beauty, as the cruciform juniper embodies and symbolizes a higher truth, the reflection of cultural meaning in an object of nature. A hostile and undifferentiated nature is thereby lifted up and made both beautiful and sacred by the cultural heritage, and strong faith, through which the Bishop “reads” and shapes the natural world.³

Much as Thoreau shapes the nature of Walden Pond into a coherent artistic and spiritualized landscape, Willa Cather celebrates the conversion of nature into landscape in her famous novel. And as Thoreau, particularly in “Higher Laws,” recognizes a savage nature within which must be overcome, as man progresses from the larval stage to the transcendent butterfly, Cather too recoils from elemental nature unmediated by culture, particularly religious culture. In the “nightmare” landscape of the identical red sandhills, in the snowstorms and sandstorms that erase individual identity, in the primal rock of Acoma and cave of Jacinto’s people, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* affirms Bishop Ferrand’s remark, in the novel’s Prologue (“At Rome”), that “the desert down there has a peculiar horror” (17).

The Irish bishop’s remarks come, we recall, in the context of the beautiful “finished” landscape of the Sabine Hills overlooking Rome. The year is 1848 — the year after Thoreau left his cabin on Walden Pond and, in the American West, the year that gold was discovered at Sutter’s mill on the American River. Also in the West, and just a year prior to this, Brigham Young had gazed upon the Utah landscape and declared that “This is the place,” reminding us that the missionary Catholics of the Southwest had religious rivals, with quite a different “desert vision,” to the north. 1848 was also a tumultuous year in Europe, although you would never know it from Cather’s placid and serene Prologue.

These opening pages are important in part because they present the novel’s first landscape — the first of many — and the emphasis is certainly on a perfected and “finished” landscape. Nature is largely controlled and contained: the clerics dine beside potted orange and oleander trees, and ilex trees planted no doubt for their esthetic value; and the priests gaze upon the beauty of the countryside from an elevated, indeed privileged position. To some extent nature is staged, rendered theatrical, by Cardinal de Allande, as he chooses his vantage point and time of day very carefully. There is a dramatic drop-off into the air just beyond the Cardinal’s hidden garden, so that this

setting for the priests’ dinner resembles a private box at the opera of nature. But, despite the nearby cliff, there is no danger that any of these men will meet the fate that befalls Fray Baltazar of Acoma later in the novel. For these refined and superior European men have clearly conquered the savage within themselves, as Fray Baltazar has not, and will therefore not evoke a corresponding savagery from those beneath them. The horrors of the American desert and the savagery of Indians — who just last year, Father Ferrand reports, murdered and scalped the “American Governor and some dozen other whites” (10) — are worlds away and indeed very difficult to imagine for men who are drinking fine wine as they gaze across the “soft and undulating” landscape to the dome of St. Peter’s — “bluish grey like the flattened top of a great balloon” (3).

The great basilica in the distance completes the picture, serving as a focal point for the surrounding landscape and the perfect symbolic backdrop to the clerics’ discussion of the future of the Church in New Mexico. In this carefully “painted” scene the impression of the natural world as a finished work of art, bearing religious significance, is furthered by the Spanish Cardinal’s careful choice of the perfect natural light to bring out the full beauty of the scene: “The light was full of action and had a peculiar quality of climax — of splendid finish” (3-4). Thus the beginning of Cather’s novel contains its end, for the climax, the splendid finish of Latour’s heroic life, will be the beautiful cathedral which will heighten the natural setting of Santa Fe and “complete” the landscape. Father Joseph even compares the beautiful yellow stone Father Latour has found to the colonnade of St. Peter’s). “Nature is beautiful,” Cather is here saying, but at its finest when given artistic and religious meaning by human endeavor. St. Peter’s, the Mother Church of Roman Catholicism, represents the ideal that Father Latour, after many years of hard work, will come to realize in the New World: the transmuting of the natural into the spiritual, the lifting up of elemental rock to the glory of God. The rock is beautiful in and of itself, just as Thoreau’s Walden Pond possesses an elemental beauty; but both rock and pond are converted into art, and lifted up to the realm of the symbolic, becoming a reflection of the divine; and it is in this process of becoming subject to human will and human aspiration — of being cultivated — that nature is refined into landscape.

My remarks thus far suggest that the transcendent ideal in both *Walden* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* comes “with Nature” — through a process of lifting up nature and instilling it with symbolic significance — but both texts also devote considerable attention to the struggle against nature. Especially in “Higher Laws” Thoreau admits to the pull of the savage within — the side of him that wants to eat a woodchuck raw — and argues that we must rise above this base nature. To be merely natural, like Thoreau’s

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DESERT LANDSCAPES

(Continued)

friend, the Canadian woodsman, is not to be fully human. Despite Thoreau's supposed love for the earth, for digging down, for cultivating the New England soil as he plants his beloved beans, and for celebrating the emergence of organic earth in the spring, there is in *Walden* a fear of earthiness, a need to rise above physical needs as one pursues greater and greater spiritual refinement.

Similarly in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* we find an ambiguity, even a doubleness, concerning the earth and elemental nature. On the one hand there is the pervasive imagery of cultivation, especially to describe Latour's and Vaillant's religious mission. Early in the novel Latour realizes that "the Faith planted by the Spanish friars and watered with their blood was not dead; it awaited only the toil of the husbandman" (32). And Father Joseph laments that "that is a missionary's life; to plant where another shall reap" (39). But if we look closely at the pervasive garden imagery we find there is a certain mistrust of native species; the French ideal in cultivating — in both a religious and horticultural sense — is to bring in cuttings from elsewhere, to graft the foreign on to the native. Padre Martinez immediately sees this as wrong when he tells Latour that "our religion grew out of the soil, and has its own roots" (146). But these native roots are distasteful, sometimes even abhorrent, to Latour, whose gardens include cuttings brought in from Saint Louis and exotics such as lotus flowers in his artificial pond. Native rootedness to Latour means a regression to the primal, the pagan, the unchristian. Getting too close to the earth, going too far down, as in the famous cave episode, brings a nauseous losing of one's spiritual bearings, a sense of being cut off from divine spirit. And, to take a Freudian perspective, Latour's instinctual recoiling from the cave, and the terrifying thought of a great serpent within the cave, bespeaks a profound anxiety with, and will to repress, the primal scene — primal nature as sexual union. Perhaps to counter this anxiety over sexual union, much of Latour's — and Vaillant's — deepest religious devotion is addressed to the Virgin Mary. To some extent their story plays out between the two extremes of Mother Earth and the Virgin Mother.

The ideal for Latour is always transcendent — to lift the rock into the sky, as in the building of his cathedral; the failure to rise skyward means to be people of the rock, like the primal, rock-bound "turtles" of Acoma. Indeed a pattern of "reptilian imagery" — applied, for example, to the vicious Buck Scales, and to the Indians suspected of serpent worship — colors those who lack the spiritual power to rise above the earth. And in the many passages on trees in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* — junipers, pinons, acacias, tamarisks, cottonwoods, fruit trees — we find that Latour looks upward to the blossoming branch, the miracle of the trees, reach skyward, whereas Vaillant typically

contents himself with the roots — down where the earth is, where the people are.

But associated with primal or elemental nature in both Thoreau and Cather is human sexuality, and here too we find a recoiling from the natural as both works celebrate chastity and privilege the celibate male. In Cather's novel sexual desire and potency are either associated with depravity, as in the case of Buck Scales, Padre Martinez, and Trinidad Lucero; or, more covertly, linked with failure and disappointment (Jacinto's infant is sickly; Eusabio's only son dies; the Olivares have produced the one ascetic child who will herself be celibate; Kit Carson and his wife have apparently had but one child). Otherwise sexual desire appears as a natural weakness of "the people" — a formless natural force which must be given cultural and religious expression. An important part of Father Joseph's ministry is to consecrate unions, lifting up natural relationships to the sacred level of Christian marriage. And this too forms a part of the novel's central theme of the goodness and rightness of converting nature into "landscape" — that which is shaped and framed by the will of strong, superior men — a Bishop Latour, a Father Vaillant (or, in other novels, a Captain Forrester, a Professor St. Peter — both cultivators of gardens — or an Archbishop Laval). The garden as ideal natural space runs throughout Cather's fiction, but it also runs the risk of becoming a place of isolation — of too much safety.

In terms of the novel's religious theme, the superior French priests are not only celibate but they never even entertain thoughts that might lead them astray. They are simply "above sex," whereas the fallen "native" priest Martinez, like those prickly and suspect native species which will be banished from the Archbishop's European garden, is clearly a lesser species of priest: a man presumptuous enough to flaunt his sexual past and to argue that rootedness in humanity — necessary for being a good priest — means as well a rootedness in sex, and in sin. To become too immersed in the earthly, to be too flesh-bound, means to risk becoming a gross sensualist, like Padre Martinez and Fray Baltazar, both of whom suffer a fall (a literal fall in the case of Fray Baltazar); whereas an interesting passage in "The Great Diocese" tells us that Father Joseph also loves good food and good wine, but he always succeeds in converting his physical appetite into spiritual activity.

In presenting his unconvincing apologia to his young bishop, Padre Martinez claims that celibacy goes "against nature" — and this marks the second appearance in the novel of that phrase, with which I began. To some extent then, the miraculous in the novel — especially the miraculous ministries of Latour and Vaillant — does go against nature, but I feel that Cather's emphasis is on the ordering of nature, the heightening or "correcting" of nature and natural process so that the boundary between the natural and the supernatural becomes blurred — and the perception of the wondrous, in a famous passage from the

novel, becomes simply natural vision corrected by divine love.

The celebration of natural beauty that we associate with *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is therefore based on this divine correction, and on a heroic conversion of nature into landscape — the imposition of a cultural perspective on an otherwise meaningless and at times threatening natural world. But does this mean entirely going “against Nature”? Certainly not. We recall that towards the end of his life Father Latour faces a choice of landscapes: the Old World landscape of Clermont or the New World landscape of New Mexico. In making his choice — the right choice — he realizes there is such a thing as too much cultural overlay on nature — too much human meaning, too much past — and his ideal is the borderland between the wild and sacred. It is possible to behold the beautiful cathedral of Santa Fe and see both the beauty of elemental stone and the Christian meaning of the cathedral.⁴ Surely that is the ideal here — the miraculous, the redemptive “with Nature.”

As Thoreau's *Walden* becomes “earth's eye,” reflecting heaven and leading us up to the spiritual, while at the same time concealing mysterious depths, so the natural world of New Mexico also contains those hidden depths — presenting “peculiar horrors,” as Bishop Ferrand warned — but it ultimately gains meaning and beauty from its pointing upward, from leading the spirit outward and upward. Yet only within a context of masculine will and spirit does nature appear as the “something soft and wild and free” which “picked the lock, slid the bolts, and released the prisoned spirit of man into the wind, into the blue and gold, into the morning, into the morning!” (273).

Both *Walden* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* beautifully describe and celebrate this “morningtime nature” which lifts the human spirit and frees the self, but in both it is the celibate male — torch-bearer of a sacred intellectual or religious tradition — who is empowered to gaze upon and thereby define a natural world which, independent of male control, threatens culture and undermines the self.

NOTES

¹ Westling argues that for Thoreau the “feminine ‘other,’ which is the land and living things outside the male subject, is beautiful and magnetic but somehow horrifying in its material being, subject to decay like the body” (48). Westling detects in both Emerson and Thoreau “a sentimental masculine gaze at a feminized landscape and its creatures that masked the conquest and destruction of the ‘wild’ continent” (52).

² In the first few pages of *My Ántonia* Jim Burden recalls his nighttime arrival in Nebraska as a young, recently orphaned child: “There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (7).

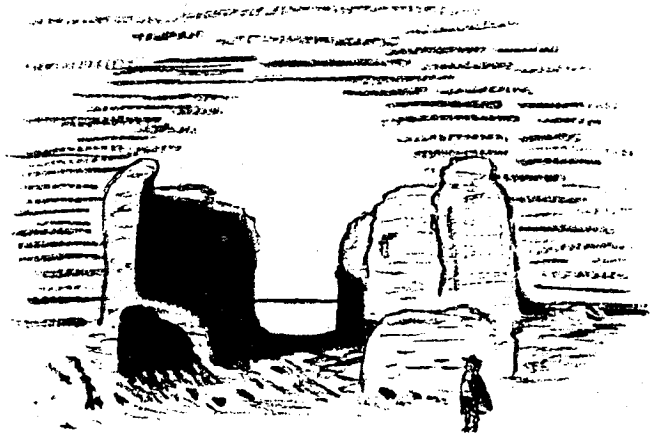
³ David Stouck, drawing on Cather's acknowledgment of the inspirational Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of Saint Genevieve, links the form of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* with the “saint's life”; Stouck argues that “landscape and its phenomena assume a divine topography” (131). Latour

therefore “reads” the landscape in terms of parallels with the life of Christ: “Through the suggestive nature of the landscape, the pattern of Christ's life emerges as the pattern of the priest's” (136). For Susan J. Rosowski, on the other hand, the harsh desert landscapes present no such allegorical “suggestive nature”: “Here is realism in its most extreme form, rendered in a scene that resembles Cubism in art. Like the Cubist, who eschews a human perspective that organizes objects into forms, Cather created a landscape characterized by the breakdown of form into flattened shapes” (165). But countering the severity of an alien landscape Rosowski describes a “miracle of mood that defies setting” and the emergence from the desert landscape of “a sense of great beauty” and “among people made cruel by a cruel land . . . a feeling of fellowship” (165).

⁴ In an excellent discussion of desert landscapes in Cather's fiction, Judith Fryer argues that Latour, through the building of his cathedral and the planting of his garden, “has achieved a kind of synthesis between the vastness of the landscape and the intimacy of inner space that is for him felicitous” (46). Fryer therefore does not view place as the object of male gaze but rather as a “subject of meditation” (44).

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E. Murphy, after Von Schmidt

Remembering *Trilby*: Willa Cather and the Unwilling Singer

Janis P. Stout
Texas A & M University

In October 1894, as a senior student at the University of Nebraska and also a columnist for the *Nebraska State Journal*, Willa Cather turned aside from her more usual role as theater critic to comment on a literary sensation sweeping the country: George Du Maurier's *Trilby*. Referring to it as "the Trilby fad," she nevertheless pronounced the novel "the great book of the year."¹ A century later, that assessment is likely to seem surprising. Even though the villain's name, Svengali, has entered the language, few of us now are acquainted with this sad but at the same time oddly humorous chronicle of a statuesque beauty who falls into the hands of a demonically enamored mesmerist and is made, all unwittingly, into a concert singer. At the time, however, it was not only a wildly popular but a controversial book, and Cather's interest was understandable for both reasons. Her interest was in fact more than a passing one. She returned to *Trilby* in succeeding columns and wrote a tribute to Du Maurier (real name, George Louis Palmella Busson du Maurier) upon his death two years later. But *Trilby* remained in her memory even beyond that, to emerge some eighteen years later in another story of a fine singer of impressive physique, *The Song of the Lark*.

Trilby was indeed an astonishing literary phenomenon in many respects — as an object, with its abundant and thoroughly integrated illustrations done by the author himself; as the work of a man in his fifties whose career had not been as a writer but rather as a cartoonist for *Punch*; and especially as a public sensation. Serialized by *Harper's* in 1894 and published in book form that same year, it swept the country. Booksellers and public libraries couldn't get enough copies to satisfy the demand. According to one report, a "housecleaning" at the St. Louis Public Library some years afterward turned up — in the basement holdings of this one library — some four hundred "battered" copies.² Stage versions were quickly launched, causing Cather to fret, in April 1895, that the book might be cheapened by amateurish productions. Debate raged over its morality³, since the heroine was admittedly generous with her love and made her living partly by posing in the nude for Paris artists. When the Episcopal Church of Beatrice, Nebraska, planned a program of "Trilby tableaux" (presumably not in the nude) on the church lawn, some members refused to let their daughters take part — to the scorn of the youthful Cather, who saw their misgivings as an example of false morality (*W&P* 118, 131-4).

Today's readers, probably less concerned than those of the mid-1890s with the scandal of nude modeling, are likely to be troubled by a very different moral issue in connection with *Trilby*: its blatant anti-

Semitism. Probably the most notorious anti-Semitic element is one of the smaller of the book's illustrations, showing Svengali, the mesmerist, with features recognizably Jewish according to still-persisting stereotype, in the guise of a spider waiting in a web.⁴ Du Maurier's biographer, Leonée Ormond, interprets the drawing as an indication of Svengali's dual nature and insists that the "castigation" of Svengali should not be seen as an indication of "unthinking and general prejudice," since there were "many Jews whom he admired" (p. 454). But the anti-Semitic note is struck repeatedly and with no subtlety whatever: in some twenty separate illustrations featuring Svengali's exaggerated features; in an insistent pattern of ethnic labeling (at one point he is referred to as "an Oriental Israelite Hebrew Jew");⁵ and in general in a language of overt hostility. For example, after the comic hero, Taffy, wrenches Svengali by the nose for having spat upon the main hero, Little Billee, he recalls with pleasure "the feel of that long, thick, shapely Hebrew nose being kneaded between his gloved knuckles" (p. 364).⁶

The anti-Semitism that now seems so distressingly obvious did not dampen public enthusiasm for the novel at the time. Nor did the young Cather notice it any more than the rest of the general reading public. Or if she did, she did not record an objection. Returning to "the Trilby fad" two months after her initial comment in October 1894, she called it a "gentle and fatherly" book by a man of "tender" heart (*W&P* 133). In the December 1896 *Home Monthly*, in her obituary notice of Du Maurier's passing, she declared that his "name and work will live" because of a quality of "undefinable sympathy and tenderness" in his writing (*W&P* 317) — a quality which, to be sure, he did not extend to the likes of Svengali. In none of these columns, at any rate to the extent that we can judge by the excerpts collected in *The World and the Parish*, did she make any objection to Du Maurier's calumny of Jews. For that matter, neither did the genial bookman John Winterich, writing some thirty years later (in a decade of strong exclusionary sentiment against Jews, Italians, and other groups). At no point in his essay on the *Trilby* craze did Winterich note the fact that its popularity may have reflected widespread anti-Semitism on the part of its readers.⁷ Either anti-Semitism was itself invisible to both writers or else they considered it so ordinary as to be unworthy of comment.

My point is not that Cather's ignoring of what now appears as an outrageous indication of ethnic hostility marks her as an anti-Semite, but that it illustrates her participation in a culture that was pervasively anti-Semitic. Her response to *Trilby* is not an isolated phenomenon in Cather's career, but additional evidence of a cast of mind revealed in her November 1893 newspaper sketch of a "peculiar-looking baby . . . of an unmistakable race" who stops crying and "settles back on his pillow with a long sign of content" when handed a coin (*W&P* 21). The same cast of mind is

manifest more fully, but perhaps less shockingly, in the portrait of Louie Marsellus in *The Professor's House*. And in "The Diamond Mine," published in October 1916,⁸ the manipulation of Trilby by Svengali is explicitly offered as a parallel to the manipulation of the singer Cressida Garnet by her accompanist, Miletus Poppas. Poppas, who has a disagreeable "lupine face" (a description that might well recall Du Maurier's drawings of Svengali), is labeled a "Greek Jew."⁹ The traces of *Trilby* that I see in *The Song of the Lark* are of a very different order, being more in the nature of echoes and parallels than direct allusion and being, as well, centered on issues other than Svengali's villainy or his Jewishness. As is well known, the portrait of Thea Kronborg was drawn from life in the person of singer Olive Fremstad as well as Cather herself. But the singer who emerges from a relatively humble background to take the New York music world by storm also recalls Trilby, who emerges from a genuinely humble background (as washerwoman) to take all of Europe by storm. Even the "long, firm lines" of Thea's body¹⁰ are suggestive of Trilby's height and slenderness. But the most obvious parallel is between two climactic performance scenes. Thea's entrance in the role of Elsa in *Lohengrin* the first time Dr. Archie sees her on stage, late in the novel, strikingly recalls Trilby's halting entrance in the decisive scene near the end of Du Maurier's novel, when she is unable to sing because the hypnotist Svengali has died in his box overlooking the stage and thus is no longer manipulating her. Led in "smiling rather vacantly," Trilby "stared — but she didn't sing"; the conductor spoke to her twice; she "tried, but failed to begin," until "the house was in a state of indescribable wonder and suspense"; she then reluctantly began to sing a simple ditty, but emitted only a tuneless croak (pp. 376-8). In the corresponding scene in *The Song of the Lark*, Thea "advanced slowly, as if she were walking in her sleep. Someone spoke to her; she only inclined her head. He spoke again, and she bowed her head still lower . . . She made a sound, a faint one. The people on the stage whispered together and seemed confounded" (p. 318). Then she sings — magnificently.

Cather may also have been responding to *Trilby* in *The Song of the Lark* in developing a theme of the personal cost of art. One of the costs of Thea's art is a certain hardening of manner, a certain detachment from persons who have been important in her life. As a result of her commitment to her career, for example, she does not return home when her mother is dying. Trilby is suspected of just such a hardening or detachment after she has become a diva, when Taffy, Little Billee, and the Laird, her three old friends, think she has actually cut them on the street. Their suspicion is false; she is in a hypnotic trance at the time. But the incident might well have served as the germ of the idea Cather later developed more purposefully. The high cost of art is seen in a more specific way, though, after Thea's performance in *Lohengrin*, when she is so tired that her face is "drawn and deeply lined" and she

looks "forty at least" (p. 320). Similarly, after Trilby's ordeal as the puppet of Svengali her old friends notice "how rapidly she had aged"; wrinkles have "gathered round her eyes" and she looks "thirty at least" (p. 398).

In Thea's case, the cost is willingly paid. Indeed, this is the central and determining difference in Cather's portrayal of Thea — but by the same token, perhaps the most important evidence of the lingering of *Trilby* in Cather's mind. As in the climactic onstage scene when Thea sings though Trilby does not, it is a response by inversion. While Trilby sings only under hypnotism, Thea sings because of her own sense of vocation, her own determination to be an artist and to pursue a career. Drawing on elements from the hard-working and determined Fremstad's story, as well as her own, yet remembering this hit novel about a phenomenally successful performer (the performer, in a sense, that she might have hoped to be, whose story sold books in numbers), Cather amalgamated the three in a way that revises the model provided by Du Maurier. Patterning her heroine partly after the impressive but passive singer manipulated by another, she rewrites her into an active agent who, by the end of the book, is answerable to no one but herself. In doing so, she rewrites victim as victor and transforms the Latin Quarter artist's model into a model of the strong, capable woman pursuing clearly defined goals and making her own decisions, whose voice, while it might be slow in coming, is triumphantly beautiful at last. She transforms the voiceless Trilby into the Willa Cather that she wants to be.

NOTES

¹ William M. Curtin, ed., *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), pp. 118, 131.

² John T. Winterich, "George Du Maurier and *Trilby*," in *The Romance of Great Books and Their Authors* (New York: Halcyon House, 1929), p. 105. See also Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 188-90.

³ But according to Leonée Ormond, in *George Du Maurier* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1969), p. 460, only in the United States, where the "ethics of *Trilby* were discussed in pulpits and in the press."

⁴ The illustration is reproduced, for example, in Jonathan Freedman's article "Angels, Monsters, and Jews: Intersections of Queer and Jewish Identity in Kushner's *Angels in America*," *PMLA* 113 (1998): 95. Freedman does not point out that the cover of *Trilby* shows an angel's wings and heart (in gold) trapped in the spiderweb (in black).

⁵ George DuMaurier, *Trilby* (New York: Harper, 1894), p. 370.

⁶ His act of spitting demonstrates, of course, the alienness of Svengali to decent society. It is surprising, though, that the virtuous Taffy is allowed to feel such glee about having roughed him up, since the reader has been made abundantly aware, by this point, of Taffy's remarkable size and athleticism and, in particular, that he is a boxing enthusiast, while Svengali's ill health has been equally stressed. Apparently Du Maurier did not see bullying as being so despicable as the fact of being sickly and Jewish itself.

(Continued on page 12)

REMEMBERING *TRILBY*

(Continued)

Svengali, it seems, deserved being slapped around by a man who far outweighed him and outclassed him in pugilistic skill. After all, he is not nice.

⁷ Winterich, "George Du Maurier and *Trilby*."

⁸ The October 1916 publication of "The Diamond Mine," with its verbal allusion to *Trilby*, came a year to the month after the publication of *The Song of the Lark* and thus adds to the confidence with which we can believe *Trilby* was in her mind as she wrote the novel.

⁹ Cather, *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920: rpt. *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, ed. Sharon O'Brien New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 308. The use of *Trilby* in "The Diamond Mine" is noted by John Marsh in *A Reader's Companion to the Fiction of Willa Cather*, ed. Marilyn Arnold (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 774. Deborah Williams has suggested that traces of Svengali may have appeared even later in the portraits of the sinister Mockford and the manipulative Clement Sebastian in *Lucy Gayheart*; personal communication, February 4, 1998.

¹⁰ Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (1915; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 328. I am grateful to Sherrill Harbison for pointing out that Olive Fremstad, the most direct model for Thea, though she "was not tall . . . gave the impression of being, because she had such commanding presence"; personal communication, February 10, 1998.

Cather in the Mainstream (Cont.)

Loretta Wasserman
Annapolis

With my "Mainstream" folder bulging from recent contributions, I see that I must set about and assemble another chapter. (Readers new to these pages should know that from time to time I have gathered references to Cather in "mainstream" — that is, nonacademic — writing and submitted them to the *Newsletter*. My thought is that such references are an index to Cather's reputation in the general culture.)

Clearly the gold star for contributions this time must go to Robert Henigan, both for quantity and variety. Among his most intriguing discoveries is the appearance of *My Ántonia* as a significant prop in a 1958 movie, *Tarnished Angels*, based on Faulkner's *Pylon*. Using the screenplay, Henigan describes three scenes:

In the first, the flyers are taking part in an air show; they have no place to stay, and the reporter (played by Rock Hudson) invites them to his apartment. When he returns with groceries he finds LaVerne curled up in an easy chair reading a book (LaVerne, played by Dorothy Malone, is the wife of the flyer Roger Schuman). LaVerne says she has picked up one of the reporter's books, and viewers can see the title and author, *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather. LaVerne explains: "Nostalgia in Nebraska. Lost farm and faded lives.

Brings back memories of home. That's what I was and how I was when I first started to read it." She left it behind when she ran away from home.

In another scene, we see her still reading the book while a noisy party is going on across the hall.

At the end, after Roger has been killed in a plane crash, LaVerne and her young son are shown getting into a small cabin plane to go home to Iowa. At the last minute the reporter climbs the steps and says, "I want to return this, permanently." He holds up the book, and we can see the title, *My Ántonia*, with Cather's name below.

Mr. Henigan notes that there are no references to Cather in Faulkner's novel. Clearly, the screenwriter, George Zuckerman, is relying on his 1950s audience to be familiar with *My Ántonia* or to have associations with Cather's name, and uses these to convey LaVerne's growing disillusion with the dangerous glamour of barnstorming and her longing for the quiet of life at home on the farm.

Mr. Henigan also calls our attention to a series of contemporary references to Cather in "The Humboldt Murders" (*The New Yorker*, 13 Jan. 1997), an account of a sensational Nebraska murder trial. Writing in a style reminiscent of *In Cold Blood*, the novelist and screenwriter John Gregory Dunne describes his travels to Falls City, Nebraska, to witness the trial and to seek out information about the circumstances and personalities of the murderers and their victims. Early in the essay, Dunne tells us that he prepared for his first trip to Nebraska by re-reading *My Ántonia* and *Obscure Destinies*. At Humboldt, Nebraska, he got out of his car and walked through a tiny, rocky cemetery, where a Czech name was chiseled on every stone. "They were the spiritual kin of Cather's Bohemians, who had settled in Webster County, to the west."



Along the "Mainstream"

It would seem that Dunne is using Cather much as did the screenwriter of *Tarnished Angels* — to evoke impressions of a wholesome and honest world, remote from the sordid present. In Dunne, the Cather references dramatically frame the underworld the criminals inhabit.

However, halfway through his report, Dunne brings in Cather for quite another purpose. One of the victims of the crime, Teena R. Brandon, is a strangely androgynous young woman. Dunne begins his description of her by turning to Cather's youth, when she "cropped her hair short in the sort of brush cut a Marine lieutenant might favor"; he then goes on to her friendships with Isabelle McClung and Edith Lewis. He quotes from *My Ántonia* to show how "discreet about her Lesbianism" Cather had to be in a small town in the 1880's. Here Dunne is using Jim's adolescent exasperation with the quiet life of Black Hawk: "This guarded mode of existence was like living under a tyranny. People's speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed. Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was bridled by caution." Dunne then contrasts Cather's defenses against this tyranny — talent, status, money — with the plight of Teena Brandon, from the "marginalized world of mobile homes, grungy rentals, public housing The tyranny from which she could not escape was less that of gender than of class, a prison more tyrannical than Willa Cather's prairie town."

In yet a third spot in his rather lengthy report, Dunne turns again to Cather: "It is interesting to speculate on the degree of empathy Willa Cather might have displayed toward Teena Brandon I suspect that Teena Brandon would have made Cather impatient One can assume that Cather would have regarded her obsession with gender and its discontents as self-indulgent, and her gender confusion as an excuse to abdicate personal responsibility." Here (if I interpret Dunne correctly) he is invoking Cather (albeit speculatively) to voice an opinion he does not share, one that might be called old-fashioned, or too rigidly moral. Indirectly, he is asking for more sympathy for Teena Brandon than Cather, so he imagines, would have felt.

Dunne's three references to Cather, I think, provide an instructive contrast, suggesting the altering cast of what the name Cather may evoke — from homespun goodness to gender anxiety. (In this regard, see the interesting report by John Anders, "Cather-as-Code" in a recent *Newsletter* — Summer/Fall, 1997.)

An analysis of another widely reported legal case in Nebraska (poor Nebraska!) also refers to Cather — the case of the unfortunate Iraqi refugees who married very young Iraqi girls, a practice common in their culture, but against Nebraska law (Margaret Talbot, "Baghdad on the Plains," *The New Republic*, 11 & 18 Aug. 1997). Making the point that the melting pot was never quick and easy, that immigrants clung to their languages and ways, the author says, . . . "just read Willa Cather. Of the Nebraska county where she grew

up in the last part of the nineteenth century, Cather wrote, 'On Sunday we could drive to a Norwegian church and listen to a sermon in that language, or to a Danish or a Swedish church I have walked about the streets of Wilber, the county seat of Saline County, for a whole day without hearing a word of English spoken.'" This passage would seem to come from an early interview (no attribution in the article), which suggests some research. I looked through the interviews in *Willa Cather in Person*, but failed to turn up the source.

A New York correspondent referred me to an article by Roger Shattuck on the Marquis de Sade, "Rehabilitating a Monster" (*The New York Times*, 31 Mar. 1996). Professor Shattuck is deploring what he sees as a growing tendency among academics and writers to speak admiringly of de Sade's works, quite apart from content. He says, "I don't believe we want our grandchildren to be reading Sade along with Austen, Dickens, Tolstoy, and Willa Cather — and perhaps instead of them. Some literary revivals defile us more than they enlighten us." As Professor Shattuck is one of my critic/heroes, I was very pleased to see him list Cather's name with those of such indisputably great literary figures. They are notably figures who do not shy away from moral judgments, which, interestingly, is what Dunne also suggests about Cather, but without approval.

Moral judgment is attributed to Cather also in an article appearing in *Notre Dame Magazine* (Summer 1997), sent in by Joan Wylie Hall. Several authors are participating in a symposium on the question, What is the good life? Joseph Epstein, in his article, looks at the answers of a number of authors, beginning with Plato, and toward the end writes: "I have lately been reading the novels and stories of Willa Cather, and in *The Professor's House*, one of her darker books, she has her protagonist, Godfrey St. Peter, remark to a classroom of students, 'Art and religion (they are the same thing in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had.' St. Peter would seem to be speaking for Cather here. And yet not really, for in other of Cather's fiction the good life, or something very close to it, is lived by immigrant girls, . . . missionary priests, young men and women who are able to live for something outside themselves. The good life, Cather makes plain, can never be the selfish life."

A particularly perceptive reference to Cather's style, also sent in by Mr. Henigan, appears in a review article discussing Suzanne Farrell's autobiography, *Holding On to the Air*, (*The New Yorker*, 15 Oct. 1990). The author, the dance critic Arlene Croce, discusses what the book may reveal about Farrell's long friendship with Balanchine, but concludes, "*Holding On to the Air* isn't really the inside story of Suzanne Farrell and George Balanchine. The real inside story would take a writer of Willa Cather's stature to deal with. In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather's novel about a girl

(Continued on page 14)

The NSHS Computer Index and the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Photo Collection

Joanna Lloyd
Lincoln, Nebraska

To appreciate the richness of the some 1800 photos of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial photo collection and to acknowledge the difficulties that both scholars and the general public have had in trying to make fullest use of that collection, the Nebraska State Historical Society has created a computer index available for use both at the Historical Society in Lincoln and at the WCPM at Red Cloud. The index has been designed by John Carter, NSHS Curator of Photographs, with Cather work done by Joanna Lloyd, Independent Scholar, and consultation by Ann Billesbach, NSHS Director of Reference and former Curator, Red Cloud. Original photographs have been and will be kept at Red Cloud, with microfiche at the Historical Society. Both the Historical Society and Red Cloud have the new index, and copies are also available for researchers' private use. The plan has been to make the resources of the collection more accessible both to scholars and to the general public.

The computer index is designed to record, as much as possible photo by photo, names, subjects, descriptions, photographers, dates as available, and restrictions where known, through which the computer can search, which it will be able to scan. Principal sources of information are the previous (noncomputer) index; work by Mildred Bennett, James Woodress, Lucia Woods and Bernice Slote, Elizabeth Turner and Kari Ronning, and Mabel Cooper-Skjelver; and the Red Cloud centennial book of 1971. Researchers can get photocopy, slides, prints, and permission to use most photos, for reasonable fees. They can borrow microfiche from the Historical Society or through interlibrary loan. They can correct and/or add to the index by submitting contributions in writing.

Some comments should be made upon the collection. Nebraska-based but not limited to Nebraska, it has considerable range — from the most famous of portraits of Cather, to photos of Cather's family and friends, of Red Cloud and Webster County, of prototypes of Cather characters, of Virginia, of the work and history of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial including its restorations. There is more emphasis on Red Cloud friends than on later friends. There is no photo of Edith Lewis.

Previously, the NSHS staff and the WCPM staff have been the chief sources as to what may be of significance for researchers. To an extent this is still true, but the computer index should compound the number of photos that any one person can take into consideration and should otherwise be helpful in exploring the collections. The computer index can also serve as back up for recall. Individual researchers will be able to work with limited assistance or will be able

to work on their own, with photos (at Red Cloud), with microfiche (at the Historical Society or on loan from the Historical Society), and/or with a computer programmed with the index (at either location, or on their own).

Now, according to John Carter, "we will soon be scanning a larger number of the photos" with plans that "they will be available on various web sites related to Cather." All of which should be significant for Cather studies.

CATHER IN MAINSTREAM

(Continued)

from a prairie town who becomes a great Wagnerian soprano, we discover the true dimensions of a life lived for art Croce also quotes Cather's own criticism of her novel: "The interesting and important fact that, in an artist of the type I chose, personal life becomes paler as the imaginative life becomes richer, does not, however, excuse my story for becoming paler." Croce adds, "*The Song of the Lark* does not, for me, become paler, but *Holding On to the Air* illustrates Cather's point."

I was rather startled recently to see Cather appear in a list of academic novelists. The list included John Williams's *Stoner*, Alison Lurie's *The War Between the Tates*, Randall Jarrell's *Pictures From an Institution*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation of a Small Guest*, Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*. (The book under review was a new novel by Richard Russo, *Straight Man*; *Washington Post Book World*, 24 Aug. 1997). I had never thought of *The Professor's House* as being particularly revelatory about academic life. Still, the reviewer (David Streitfeld) may have perceived something I didn't — St. Peter's vanity and self-assurance (sometimes bordering on smugness) may be more of a trait of the professoriate than I like to think.

A newspaper clipping (Associated Press, July 14, 1997) about the revival of chautauqua, sent by Mr. Henigan, reports that an actress playing Cather has been appearing in the Midwest along with actors portraying other American figures — John Muir, Buffalo Bill Cody, Louisa May Alcott, and Thoreau. Here the company she is keeping seems to be broadly cultural and historical.

Mr. Henigan must be a crossword puzzle fan: among his contributions were four puzzles, each of which uses a Cather novel in clues.

Cather i Sverige Idag / **Cather in Sweden Today**

Timothy R. Cramer
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Early in September 1996, I walked into *Akademi Bokhandeln* (the Academy Bookstore) in central Stockholm. I was in Sweden as a Fulbright Award recipient to study the recent Swedish reception of Willa Cather and had decided to start my research at the largest, most popular bookstore in the country. I immediately went to the "foreign titles in translation" section. I knew that during her lifetime, Cather enjoyed great popularity in Sweden, and this was the first country in Scandinavia to publish a Cather book in translation, ultimately issuing ten Cather titles in translation. I was curious to see how many were still being published in Swedish. On the shelves were plenty of titles by Jane Austen, Pat Conroy, Ernest Hemingway, Peter Høeg, Sigrid Undset, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, even Charles Schultz — but no Cather.

I was not too concerned, however, for I also knew that Sweden is basically a bilingual country, and most Swedes are quite capable of reading novels in English. So I moved on to the large section of books in English: Charlotte Bronte, A. S. Byatt, Raymond Carver . . . Willa Cather! I was excited to find *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* on the shelf. I turned to the clerk and asked if he could tell me if these books were popular sellers. He looked on his computer and told me something I didn't want to hear: The books had been sitting there since 1992. *Akademi Bokhandeln* had not sold a Cather book in over four years.

It was surprising to me that Cather had fallen out of favor with the Swedish reading public, particularly since she had experienced such acclaim in Sweden during her career. Initially, Cather was introduced to the Swedish people in 1918 by Swedish critic August Brunius, who in the popular magazine *Idun* called Cather's writings "works of art" possessing an "epic calmness." "Willa Sibert Cather deserves to be read by Swedes," he proclaimed, "not only because she has written about Swedes but because she is an artist with something important to say to us . . ." (170).

Certainly one of the fundamental reasons why Cather caught the attention of Swedes was because her pages are populated with people very close to their hearts: the friends and families who left Sweden to pioneer a new life in the American heartland. From the mythical and successful Alexandra Bergson to the intensely artistic Thea Kronborg, Swedish Americans appear as major components in Cather's canon. Eventually, as the century wore on, Swedish critics and readers came to recognize and appreciate Cather's commentary on such things as materialism in American society, and her readership and acclaim continued to grow throughout her life.

After her death, however, the Swedish interest in Cather ebbed, a waning that remains in effect in Sweden today. Even after the new wave of Cather criticism began to swell in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s in the United States and England, renewed interest in Cather did not reach the Swedish shores, and most Swedish critics, while aware of Cather's writings, remain rather ambivalent toward Cather and her work. During the past fifteen years only a handful of articles on Cather by Swedes has appeared in Swedish journals and newspapers, and I was able to locate only a single monograph, *Willa Cather's Swedes*, written by the well-known Swedish Cather scholar Mona Pers.

Not only is Cather virtually ignored in Swedish scholarship, she is relatively absent from classrooms across the country as well. While in Sweden, I contacted the English department of every university and *högskolor* (similar to a community college) to see if Cather was being taught in the classroom. While nearly all of the educators who responded were familiar with Cather, only five included Cather in a literature course, "Neighbour Rosicky" appearing as the story of choice, perhaps because it is often anthologized. (One respondent curiously stated, "She's included in our survey of American Lit. They don't read any of her works only *about* them!") Among the five teaching Cather were two American scholars serving as foreign lecturers at Swedish *högskolor*. Sadly, Uppsala University, one of the most well-known and respected universities in Europe, does not currently include Cather in the classroom, despite the fact that Uppsala is considered the center for American literature studies in Sweden.

From the responses I received it is clear Cather does not appear in Swedish classrooms because most teachers are not sure *how* to include her. The American literature teacher at *Högskolan Dalarna* in Falun speaks for the majority when explaining why she has never taught Cather:

I teach American Literature at A, B, and C levels. The problem is where to put her. A is contemporary literature; B is an historical survey where Chopin and Perkins-Gilman are taught for the early feminist writers. We use *The Norton Anthology* which includes "Neighbour Rosicky," but I have never dealt with it or with her for she seems set apart from the social movements of the time and thus difficult to justify in an already overloaded historical survey. In our C course, our current theme is Race, Gender, and Cultural Identity. There are so many really strong works in English (Faulkner, Morrison, Joyce, Conrad, etc.) that once again Cather is passed over.

Cather is not without Swedish champions, however. The writers and critics discussing Cather in Sweden today are calling on the Swedish population to reacquaint themselves with Cather's work, and the common theme running throughout echoes August Brunius's 1918 proclamation that Cather deserves to be read by Swedes not only because she has written

(Continued on page 16)

CATHER IN SWEDEN TODAY

(Continued)

about Swedes but because she is an artist with something important to say.

One Cather advocate is Torsten Eliasson, who, in a feature article for *Arbetet* (the Labor) newspaper, names *My Ántonia* his favorite book, extols Cather's fresh perspective on European immigrants, and praises her portrayal of the difficulties new communities face when dissimilar groups attempt to live together. Eliasson recognizes Cather's unique ability to portray clearly the diversity of humanity while managing simultaneously to strike a chord of commonality deep within all of us. He also describes his well-worn 1961 edition of *Min Ántonia* and laments the fact that it is available only in the library: "That is a great pity," he writes. "It is difficult for me to think of another novel that has so much to offer — like a rich mine of life — to so many, many people." He ends his article by calling on Swedish publishers to reissue a new edition in the Swedish language.

Jöran Mjöberg also calls for a reevaluation of Cather in an article entitled "The Woman Who Should Have Received the Nobel Prize," a title which undoubtedly alludes to Sinclair Lewis's comment that it was Cather not he who should have received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1930. Mjöberg calls Cather one of the foremost portrayals of American life at the turn of the century and an "international writer" deserving a place next to the "Trinity" of Selma Lagerlöf, Sigrid Undset, and Virginia Woolf. He also believes Cather's Swedish immigrants comparable to Karl-Oskar and Kristina, the immigrants from Victor Moberg's immensely popular Swedish emigration epic (*The Immigrants, The Emigrants*, etc.). Mjöberg notices an importance difference between Cather's and Moberg's immigrants, however. While Kristina and most of the women in Moberg's novels suffer from extreme homesickness, in Cather's novels the circumstances are reversed: the men are the ones looking back while the women look with strength and confidence to the new land and make it their own.

Yet another Swedish critic calling for a rediscovery of Cather is Carl-Eric Nordberg. In an article for *Arbetet*, he compares Cather and Edith Wharton and asks, "Edith Wharton has been rediscovered but who remembers Willa Cather?" Nordberg begins his discussion with an evaluation of Wharton's current resurgence in popularity, a resurgence undoubtedly incited by the contemporaneous Swedish release of the film *The Age of Innocence* starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Michelle Pfeiffer. Nordberg is perplexed that Cather has been virtually forgotten in Sweden not only because she is an artist who "certainly measures up to Wharton" but because she stands out as one of the most remarkable American writers during the entire period between the world wars. "And the fact that Sweden has forgotten her is even more strange," he writes, "since the main character in *O Pioneers!* — her

breakthrough work about the Western pioneers — is actually the daughter of a Swedish emigrant." Nordberg continues "With both bold, pointed pencil strokes yet mild colors, Cather paints Alexandra. The result is a portrait that I will not forget." He also senses a "strong prairie wind" blowing throughout the novel and admires Cather's ability to depict a varied range of pioneer existence — from the hopefulness seen in eyes turned toward the horizon to the destruction that can come in the flash of lightning. Nordberg advises Swedish readers to visit their local antiquarians and invest a few *kronor* on Willa Cather, promising them a return of "gold" in their hands.

Of all Cather scholars, none has done more to keep Cather alive in Sweden than Mona Pers. She received her doctorate from Uppsala University writing about the role of children in Willa Cather's work, and she is well-known by many American Cather scholars. In 1995, Pers published a book entitled *Willa Cather's Swedes* and in it aimed "to trace the origin, describe the nature, and analyze the artistic results of Willa Cather's interest in Swedish immigrants" (3). In an interview with Kersti Bergold in *Vestmanlands Läns Tidning* following the book's release, Pers explains that Cather was well ahead of her time, that while much of North American literature was dominated by East Coast writers, Cather was casting her eye toward the pioneers and the West. Pers believes that what is remarkable about Cather is how many themes directly relate to today. Pers continues: "Cather clearly shows the silence and loss for words often created by the transition to a new language and describes how those who grow up between two languages can draw on words from both." According to Pers, Cather sees the "drunkenness, depression, psychosis, mania, and religiosity that can occur as a result of rootlessness and homesickness," and Pers finds striking "how thoroughly this American writer — who had never visited Sweden — relates the immigrant woman's memories of Gotland and how she truthfully captures [them]." When asked if other books on Cather are needed, Pers replies that there are already enough books giving an overview of Cather's works, yet she believes more special studies in clearly defined areas are needed to deepen our knowledge of Cather's art.

Will these few voices be enough to encourage a renewed Swedish interest in Cather, or will Sweden have to wait for a major motion picture release to boost Cather's popularity? (Film releases recently made Jane Austen a "hot" property in Sweden; I saw many Stockholm subway riders reading Swedish translations of *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility*.) Perhaps we will just have to wait and see, but in the meantime is there anything we in America can do to encourage the study of Cather's art in Sweden and elsewhere abroad? First, we need to support organizations such as the United States Information Agency, the Institute of International Education, the Fulbright Commission and others which offer scholarly ex-

changes between nations. While abroad I considered myself not only a researcher but an ambassador for Cather studies. Hopefully, my association with educators in Sweden influenced some of them to reconsider Willa Cather's importance to American literature and include her on future reading lists. Second, we can help by promoting lively discussions of Cather's work, encouraging a variety of view points, and not shying away from controversial issues. It is vital for scholarship on Cather to be multidimensional and intriguing, thus ensuring Cather a place beside Faulkner, Morrison, Joyce, Conrad, and the other "really strong works" found in courses such as the C-level "Race, Gender, and Cultural Identity" course at *Högskolan Dalarna* in Falun. By maintaining a lively, scholarly, international dialogue, we can sustain enough interest in Cather to encourage the public — at home and in Sweden — to take her books off the shelf, blow off the dust, and read.

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La Nieve d'Ete

Kathy Wynn Burkholder, Greenfield, Illinois
with thanks to Willa Cather

Cottonwood fluff
Carried on the breeze,
A soft, gentle play of white down
Wafting across the view.
No blizzard,
No chill wind,
Only the softest,
Kindest,
Friendliest storm
Piling drifts against walls and fences.
A gift from nature,
An illusion of cool, moving whiteness
In the heat of June.
The Frenchman's "summer snow."



Antonette Kort, age 92, only living child of Annie Pavelka (Ántonia), models a shawl given to her mother by Willa Cather. Pictured to the left is Kay Skupa, great-granddaughter of Annie (descended from Julia); to the right, Mildred Neff, Antonette's daughter and Annie's granddaughter.

New Items From the WCPM Director . . .



Pat Phillips

❖ WONDERFUL NEWS FOR THE OPERA HOUSE!!!

Governor Ben Nelson and Maxine Moul, Director of the Nebraska Department of Economic Development, have announced the award of a \$150,000 grant for restoration of the Red Cloud Opera House. The grant came through a special \$1,000,000 Nebraska Tourism Development Initiative (TDI) from the federally funded Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. The first Nebraska TDI was announced last July. Fifty-four projects submitted applications by the September 15 deadline requesting \$7,000,000. Of that total, nine projects across the state were funded.

While the Opera House capital campaign goal is for \$2 million, actual construction costs are 1.1 million dollars. The \$150,000 grant is for the renovation portion of the project. We are making good progress. To help bring the project to fruition, OPERA OMAHA will provide four orchestra tickets for the November 11 world premiere performance of ERIC HERMANN'S SOUL for a drawing open to anyone contributing \$100 or more to the Opera House Renovation Fund between now and October 15. Two

(Continued on page 18)

New Items (Continued)

names will be drawn and each winner will receive two tickets. The four ticket holders will also be invited to attend the opening night reception for national critics and the post-performance cast party. In addition, the Redick Hotel will donate two rooms on November 11 for the winners. Total value of the drawing will be worth about \$600. Jane Hill, Executive Director of Opera Omaha, said, "Opera Omaha will do everything we can do to help you. I look forward to a day when we can bring some performers to the renovated Red Cloud Opera House!" Send your donation today and find out if your name will be one of those drawn for this exciting **WORLD PREMIERE EVENING!**

❖ **ANOTHER PIECE OF GOOD NEWS!** Jack and Marilyn Wilson of Clarks, Nebraska, have given the WCPM a \$5,000 gift to establish a scholarship in memory of his parents, Leslie and Helen Wilson. The scholarship will be awarded annually to a senior graduating from Red Cloud High School who plans to major in secondary education or agriculture.

❖ **WILLA CATHER'S 125TH BIRTHDAY** Take note and plan now to attend the special celebration for Willa Cather's 125th birthday on Sunday, December 6, 1998. The WCPM and the Republican Valley Arts Council will sponsor a **CHRISTMAS TOUR OF HOMES** through Cather connected houses in Red Cloud. Nancy and Bernie Picchi of Bernardsville, New Jersey, have agreed to open and decorate the Harling House for a Victorian Christmas. The Cather Childhood Home will be decorated for a pioneer Christmas, and the Auld Mansion (now the Webster County Museum but earlier the home of Jessica Cather Auld, Willa's sister) will be specially decked out in early holiday splendor. Following the Tour of Homes, at 5:00 p.m., the St. Juliana Choir will present a concert at the Grace Episcopal Church. Refreshments will be served following the concert. On Willa Cather's birthday, Monday, December 7, the Rev. Charles Peek will offer a noon Mass at Grace Episcopal Church. Lunch will follow the service at Elavoni's Restaurant.

J. ROBERT KERREY
NEBRASKA



UNITED STATES SENATE
WASHINGTON, D. C.

June 3, 1998

Ms. Patricia Phillips
Director
Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial
326 North Webster
Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970

Dear Ms. Phillips:

Enclosed is a copy of a Congressional Record entry on May 21, 1998 recognizing Willa Cather.

I am pleased to have been able to help recognize the 75th anniversary of her Pulitzer Prize, the 80th anniversary of the publication of My Antonia, and the 125th anniversary of her birth.

Sincerely,

J. Robert Kerrey

❖ **NEW HISTORIC STREET LIGHTS** Chances are, the next time you are in Red Cloud you will notice the beautiful new historic street lights. They should be up by September, for sure. Besides generally looking better, the lights replace ugly overhead wires. The installation process was very interesting, neat, clean, and relatively unobtrusive as the Lincoln electric firm bored beneath the sidewalks to install the wiring. The absence of overhead wires will certainly enhance the historic ambience of Red Cloud's downtown. Major grants from Nebraska Lied Main Street and the Nebraska Department of Roads as well as privately raised matching money from Red Cloud Main Street have made this improvement possible. When you visit, notice the plaques on the street lights and the bricks laid into the sidewalk corners at the intersection of Highways 281 and 136. The lights were purchased by individuals or families for a donation of \$2,000 and bricks were purchased for \$100.

❖ **COLLABORATING ORGANIZATIONS** The Bess Streeter Aldrich Society, the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, the John G. Neihardt Foundation, and the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society are looking for

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U.S. Senator Bob Kerrey's Tribute to Willa Cather

(See his letter on facing page.)



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 105th CONGRESS, SECOND SESSION

Vol. 144

WASHINGTON, THURSDAY, MAY 21, 1998

No. 66

Senate

TRIBUTE TO WILLA CATHER

Mr. KERREY. Mr. President, writer Willa Cather fashioned from her experiences uncommon stories of the character of Nebraska's people and landscapes. It is my pleasure to pay tribute to Cather because, like many Nebraskans, her writing continues to inspire me.

This year, we celebrate three major anniversaries in Cather's life. Seventy-five years ago, Cather won the Pulitzer Prize for 'One of Ours.' One of her best known novels, 'My Antonia,' will have its 80th anniversary on September 21st. Finally, December 7th marks the 125th anniversary of her birth.

Cather's writings illustrate a Nebraska of stark landscapes, epic frontiers, and mysterious grandeur. Her characters are often placed in a Nebraska panorama to which Cather gave breathtaking expression. Shortly after moving from the east to Nebraska at the age of nine, Cather realized that "that shaggy grass country had gripped me with a passion I have never been able to shake. It has been the happiness and the curse of my life."

For Cather in 'My Antonia,' Nebraska is raw and vast, the "material out of which countries are made... naked as the back of your hand." Out of the passion she felt for Nebraska's materials, Cather wrote with unparalleled sensitivity about the soil, trees, and wildflowers of the landscape. In The 'Song of the Lark,' the cottonwoods are the "light-

reflecting, wind-loving trees of the desert, whose roots are always seeking water and whose leaves are always talking about it, making the sound of rain."

The inhabitants of the land are connected to and determined by this landscape. Thus, in many of Cather's novels, the character is a pioneer, whether literally or as artist, one breaking new ground, finding his or her own path, creating his or her own landscape. In the hands of Cather's sparse and evocative prose, questions of the pioneering self shaped by experience and tested by difficulty indicate Cather's commitment through her characters to integrity.

Readers continue to feel the special relationship between the wonder of Nebraska and the dignity of its people through Cather's well known novels 'O Pioneers,' 'My Antonia,' 'One Of Ours,' and 'Death Comes for the Archbishop,' as well as her poetry and other stories. I invite you to join me in honoring Willa Cather on the 75th anniversary of her Pulitzer Prize, the 80th anniversary of 'My Antonia,' and in memory of her 125th birthday.

In 'The Wild Land,' Cather writes, "The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman." Thanks to Cather's artistry, we continue to be moved by the written recordings of Nebraska's history.

*Her stories are the
stones of our foundation.
Bob Kerrey 6/4/98*

New Items (Continued)

ways to promote their historic sites together. Directors from the four societies have been meeting monthly to learn more about each other's properties and work in order to cross-promote better. We have concluded that a brochure highlighting each of our sites would be a worthwhile investment and agreed to inform our own audiences of the activities going on at the other sites. Each organization has an annual celebration and those dates will be published in upcoming newsletters. Aldrich, Cather, and Sandoz have web sites and Neihardt is working on one. Check these web sites:

Aldrich: Lincolnne.com/nonprofit/bsaf

Cather: www.willacather.org

Neihardt: www.sightsmag.com/usa/ne/banc/sights/jone/jone

Sandoz: www.csc.edu/library/resources/sandoz/sandoz2

❖ **CATHER IN THE NEWS** We were happy to see articles about Willa Cather in **CROP DECISIONS** (March 1998 — "Famous Farms — Prize-winning Lady Author Brings Rural Nebraska to the World" by Ron Brunoehler) and **A JOURNAL OF THE MIDWEST, Streams, Trails & Tales** (April/May and June/July 1998 — "Willa Cather and the Land, A Sense of Place" and "Willa Cather and the People, A Sense of Identity" by Susanne George). **CROP DECISIONS** discusses the Cather farm in Webster County and includes information from Bill White of the Austin Company in Milford, Nebraska, who manages the Cather property. The company began managing the property in 1968 when the farm had seen serious erosion. By instituting various conservation practices and using modern production methods, dryland milo yield has increased from 40 to 103 bushels per acre, and corn yield from 50 to 140 bushels per acre. The article also contains information on the Cather house in town (on 6th and Seward). Willa Cather's niece and goddaughter, Helen Cather Southwick, recalls: "I spent many happy days there, especially when Aunt Willa was visiting. The house had a two-story porch on the front, and Aunt Willa's bedroom had a door which opened directly onto the porch. She liked to have tea on the porch during the summer. My cousin, Mary Virginia Auld, and I took the tea service to her." Mrs. Southwick also describes her aunt's little studio in her parents' backyard where she would go after breakfast to write: "She worked until lunch time. After lunch she went to her room to rest before getting dressed for tea. Afterward, there was a drive in the country, or we would go shopping or call on friends. After dinner we usually sat on the screened porch and listened to Victrola records."

❖ **TOUR AND VISITORS** May was especially busy with tours, groups from high schools, elementary schools, colleges, universities, and of home-schoolers, senior citizens, and retired teachers, as well as mystery and club tours. In addition, we

have had numerous fourth graders utilize the Little Red School House. Interesting discoveries sometimes occur as people pass through Catherland. For instance, when Dr. Elmer Baker from York College was out on the Cather prairie in June, he met a woman from Arizona painting in watercolors from the back of her Ford Explorer, her easel set up and her paints and supplies on the tailgate. One cold Sunday afternoon in March, one of our guides, Katy Cardinal, toured a Czech attache visiting the University of Nebraska-Kearney around Catherland. They found a common bond in their interest in weaving, and the attache later sent us informative material about the Czech Republic, including a video tape which may be viewed at the bookstore. This year out-of-state tours have come from Oklahoma; Birmingham, Alabama; Bethel College and Ellsworth High School in Kansas; teachers from Texas Tech College of Education, and a National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar from the University of Kansas. Additionally, in early June, faculty from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln toured all the town sites. On this tour, we were especially pleased to have Chancellor and Mrs. James Moeser participate. I have noticed that Chancellor Moeser quotes Willa Cather quite often!

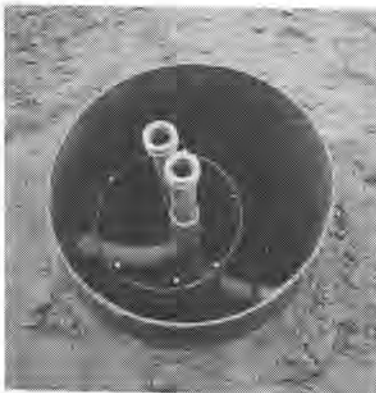
❖ **1998 NORMA ROSS WALTER SCHOLARSHIP WINNER** The May 30, 1998 *Omaha World Herald* reported that our NRW Scholarship winner, Rose Mellion from Omaha's Burke High, was listed as one of ten Omaha students who spent a weekend with some of today's brightest minds at the American Academy of Achievement in Jackson, Wyoming. "The students discussed and solved problems with 30 Nobel Prize winners, and such people as George Tenet, the CIA director; Gen. Henry Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Gen. Colin Powell, retired chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Also attending were entertainers such as Morgan Freeman and Quincy Jones." That was quite a nice cap to a very successful high school career! Rose will attend Middlebury College in Vermont next year.

Workmen have removed sections of sidewalk on Webster Street and Fourth Avenue for directional boring so electric wires can run underground for "historic" street lights.



❖ **NEW IN
THE BOOKSTORE**

- Alexander's Bridge* (paperback) \$7.95
 Edited with an Introduction and Notes by
 Marilee Lindemann
- Alexander's Bridge* \$22.00
 Handsome hardback book with black and
 white photographs from Boston and London
 and one photograph of Hell Gate Bridge in
 New York, also signature and photograph of
 Willa Cather laid in on back cover
- Willa Cather: Writer of the Prairie* \$19.95
 by Sara McIntosh Wooten
 for young readers
- The Stuff of Our Forebears: Willa Cather's
 Southern Heritage* \$29.95
 by Joyce McDonald
- Through the Window, Out the Door* \$39.95
 Women's Narratives of Departure, from Austin
 and Cather to Tyler, Morrison, and Didion
 by Janis Stout
- Writers for the Nation: American
 Literary Modernism* \$34.95
 by Barry Chabot
 (Cather Chapter: Willa Cather and the Limits
 of Memory)
- Prospects for the Study of American
 Literature* \$19.50
 edited by Richard Kopley
 Willa Cather chapter written by Susan J.
 Rosowski
- The Nebraska Lectures* \$5.00
 "The Place of Literature and the Cultural
 Phenomenon of Willa Cather"
 by Susan J. Rosowski
- The Willa Cather Reader* \$8.98
 Hardback;
 includes *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, "The Sculp-
 tor's Funeral", "Paul's Case," and interview by
 Archer Latrobe Carroll
- Simply My Ántonia* \$25.00
 by Dr. Barry Turner
 (Antonia's great-grandson)



The ready conduit
 where the new lights
 will be installed once
 they arrive.

VIDEO TAPES:

- Nebraska Historic Shorts*
Willa Cather \$9.95
 Seventeen minute video produced by the
 Nebraska State Historical Society and Nebras-
 ka Educational Television
- Singing Cather's Song* \$19.95
 Mildred Bennett, WCPM founder
 Produced by Nebraska Educational Television
- Love and Loneliness on the Plains* \$21.95
 (Nebraska Educational Television)
 Three short dramas from the best works of
 Willa Cather and Mari Sandoz. Program
 hosted by Julie Harris with additional readings
 by E. G. Marshall. Twenty-nine minutes
- "The Sentimentality of William Tavener"* \$12.95
 (Nebraska Educational Television)
- Blossoms on the Prairie* \$23.95
 Produced by Nebraska Educational Television

AUDIO TAPES:

- The Song of the Lark* \$59.95
- One of Ours* \$53.95
- Chilling Tales of Bygone Days* \$24.95
 by Various Women Writers
- Youth and the Bright Medusa* \$24.95
- The Troll Garden* \$29.95
- Early Short Stories* \$20.95
 by Willa Cather
- April Twilights* \$19.95
- Alexander's Bridge* \$20.95
- O Pioneers!* \$29.95
- Victoria Magazine presents
"Well-Spoken Companions" \$11.95
 Marian Seldes as Willa Cather reading selec-
 tions from *My Ántonia* and *Lucy Gayheart* and
 more. 1 hr. 35 min.

❖ **WATCH FOR
THESE UPCOMING EVENTS!**

- Street Car Days August 8 & 9
 Red Cloud
- "Rim of the Prairie" Day August 8
 (Aldrich), Elmwood, Nebraska
- Nebraska Literature Festival September 19
 Wayne
 The Cather session at 9:00 a.m. will feature
 "Candid Glimpses into the Mind of the Writer:
 Willa Cather's Letters and What They Reveal"
 by Marilyn Arnold.
- Benefit Dance September 19
 for the Opera House,
 Red Cloud
- Bess Streeter Aldrich Remembrance
 Day, Elmwood October 4
- Western Literature Association October 14-17
 Banff, Alberta, Canada
 Check their website at [http://www.usu.edu/
 ~westlit](http://www.usu.edu/~westlit)
- Cather's 125th Birthday
 Celebration, Red Cloud December 6 & 7



Cliff Palace Ruin, Mesa Verde.

— Photo by David Stouck

1999 Cather Symposium on Mesa Verde

Planning has begun for a three-day scholarly symposium at Mesa Verde, Colorado, October 20-24, 1999. The event will be sponsored by the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation and Occidental College in Los Angeles, California.

Cather first saw Mesa Verde and its ancient cliff dwellings in 1915, when, prevented by the war from visiting Europe, she and Edith Lewis chose the American Southwest for a summer holiday. A decade later she vividly recreated the landscape and wrote a fictionalized account of the cliff dwellings' discovery and early excavations in "Tom Outland's Story," the central section of *The Professor's House*, where Tom discovers:

a little city of stone, asleep . . . I knew at once that I had come upon the city of some extinct civilization, hidden away in this inaccessible mesa for centuries, preserved in the dry air and almost perpetual sunlight like a fly in amber, guarded by the cliffs and the river and the desert.

The symposium will be based on the mesa top about four miles from Tom's Cliff City, in the Far View Lodge, a resort with meeting rooms, dining, and accommodations for about one hundred participants. The program will focus on *The Professor's House*, Cather's Southwest, and her passion for recovering and writing about a significant American past. It will include scholarly papers, plenary addresses and performances, visits to the cliff dwellings, and time for exploration of Mesa Verde, a national park of extraordinary natural beauty.

More information and a call for papers will be published in the winter of 1998-99. In the meantime those interested in the symposium should contact John Swift, Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies, Occidental College, Los Angeles, California 90041 (phone 323-259-2804; fax 323-341-4942; e-mail swiftj@oxy.edu).

From the Retiring WCPMN Editor

This newsletter issue is the first published under the new multiple editors system I proposed to the WCPM Board of Governors for approval in summer 1997. Editing *WCPMN* (our Modern Language Association acronym) is too heavy a job to extend beyond the ten years I will have been at it by the end of the 1998-99 volume.

During the years since the death of Mildred Bennett, founder of WCPM and editor of the newsletter, we have faced a variety of challenges. Interest in and scholarly activity on Cather have dramatically increased in quantity and geographically, as well-attended Cather seminars and conferences in Nebraska, New Mexico, Utah, Quebec, Virginia, and New Jersey indicate. The academy is interested in Cather for a variety of legitimate and illegitimate reasons, and much of the activ-



John J. Murphy

— Photo by B. Cooper

ity and interest extends well beyond Nebraska and even the United States. *WCPMN* must embrace a national and international scholarly readership as well as those who were intimate with Mrs. Bennett and primarily interested in Cather's connection to Webster County, Nebraska. This is not to say that the latter should be sacrificed to the former, but that WCPM and its newsletter-review must be more than local or provincial. If we are not inclusive, other organizations will be developed to represent those whose interest in Cather we fail to represent.

While WCPM must avoid being a ponderous academic publication, it must also avoid becoming a memorial to Mrs. Bennett (the last thing she would

want) or a booster pamphlet for the economic resurrection of Red Cloud. While some *WCPMN* issues get a bit heavy on the scholarly side, the best issues contain as much Webster County Cather news as when Mrs. Bennett was editor. Our biggest problem, however, has been gathering a sufficient amount of appropriate Catherland news, since Mrs. Bennett is no longer with us to generate it and write it up. As a result of lack of news, issues frequently have been held up, seriously impacting our publication schedule. To help solve this problem, Bruce P. Baker, recently retired from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, has agreed to be our News Editor and to work with our Red Cloud personnel in getting out news. But Bruce will need more than local and Nebraska news items and will depend on you, our subscribers, for items of interest to readers and scholars of Cather. Since his job will include making assignments to cover an increasing number of Cather events and conferences, please let Bruce know if you are willing to help him. Send any Cather news you think significant to him at home: 11419 Castelar Circle, Omaha, NE 68144.

The development of the scholarly component of *WCPMN* also has involved outreach. Where once we had to seed our publication with essays by academic members of our Editorial Board (first rate Cather critics) in order to have scholarly representation to balance news, we now regularly receive contributions from distinguished critics who a few years ago would have not considered *WCPMN* as a journal for their work, among them James Woodress, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Joseph R. Urgo, Janis P. Stout, Blanche Gelfant, Guy Reynolds, Elsa Nettels, Patrick W. Shaw, and Ann Fisher-Wirth. Also, we have tried to encourage younger scholars and, as an extension of the classroom, work with them toward publication. The criticism and essays in *WCPMN* increasingly inform Cather scholarship in general and are cited in more and more articles and book-length studies.

Three members of the Board of Governors have agreed to share the preparation of critical articles and publications: John Swift of Occidental College (1600 Campus Rd., Los Angeles, CA 90041) will edit our spring issues and work toward a submission deadline of 1 April; Ann Romines of George Washington University (770 Rome Hall, Washington, DC 20052) will edit fall issues with a deadline of 15 July, and Merrill M. Skaggs of Drew University (Madison, NJ 07940) will edit our winter issues and work with a 15 January deadline. Submissions are to be made to these editors, who will share them with each other and other members of our Editorial Board. I am grateful to each of them for volunteering. Our correspondence indicates that not all newsletter readers realize that newsletter jobs represent contributed services and that mailing, copying, and phone calls are frequently out of pocket expenses.

For the next two issues, I will receive copy from these editors and the news editor, assemble the newsletter, and deal with the printer. However, in the

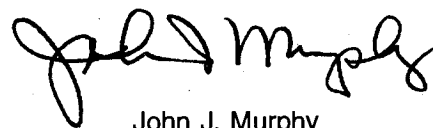
spring of 1999 this job will be passed on to WCPM's new Education/Outreach Director, who is expected to come aboard sometime this fall. The following job description has been published in newsletters of the American Studies Association, the American Association of State and Local History, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Public History News*, the MAC newsletter, and the web site of the American Literature Association.

**EDUCATION/OUTREACH DIRECTOR
of the
Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial
and Educational Foundation:**

Full-time position at the nonprofit Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation, Red Cloud, Nebraska. Responsible for educational and outreach programs, grant writing and assistance in fund raising, knowledge of and supervision of archives. Communication skills a necessity. Desired minimal qualifications: Master's degree in literature, history, museum studies, or related fields; knowledge of Cather's work; and experience in program development and administration. Send application, resume, and names of three references to Dave Garwood, President, WCPM/EF, 401 N. Webster, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970. Application deadline: August 1, 1998.

We have had many letters from our readers during the past decade applauding the development of *WCPMN*. Of course, there have been dissenters as well. One reader became vehement because we failed to capitalize a preposition in a novel's title (not one of Cather's), misspelled a name, and got a library name wrong in a note. Another, resentful of the encroachment of scholarship from third-rate professors on Webster County news, questioned the validity of a source, and dismissed yours truly as "lazy and inept." Of course, the second distinction is an opinion anyone is welcome to; however, the first label violates the facts.

Cheers,



John J. Murphy

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER

Issue Editor: John Swift, Occidental College
Managing Editor: John J. Murphy, Brigham Young University
News Editor: Bruce Baker, 11419 Castelar Circle, Omaha, Nebraska 68144

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Willa Cather Newsletter welcomes articles, notes and letters to the editor. Address submissions to Ann Romines, Merrill Skaggs, or John Swift. News items should be sent to Bruce Baker. Essays and notes are currently listed in the annual MLA Bibliography.

YOU CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE AND GROWTH OF THE WILLA CATHER PIONEER MEMORIAL

- By being a Cather Memorial Member and financial contributor:
ANNUAL MEMBERSHIPS

Benefactor	\$1000.00
Patron	500.00
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Sustaining	50.00
Family	30.00
Basic	25.00
Student	15.00

(Foreign Subscription: add \$5.00 to membership category; if air mail, add \$10.00)

WCPM members receive: • Newsletter subscription
• Free guided tour to restore buildings

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

ALL MEMBERSHIPS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND BEQUESTS ARE TAX DEDUCTIBLE

Under Section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1965

AIMS OF THE WCPM

- To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with the Nebraska State Historical Society.
- To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
- To perpetuate an interest throughout the world in the work of Willa Cather.

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Inside:

Cather's Chinese Connection
J. Gerald Dollar on *Archbishop*
Janis Stout on Cather's Response to *Tribby*
Loretta Wasserman on the Mainstream
Cather and Sweden
News and Editorial Changes



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