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The Little House and the Big Rock: Wilder, Cather, and the Problem of Frontier Girls

Plenary Address,
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In August 1931, Alfred A. Knopf published Willa Cather's tenth novel, *Shadows on the Rock*. The publisher numbered Cather among the "family" of authors he was proud to publish.[1] Then, in the following month, Knopf contracted to publish the first book by a contemporary of Cather's, the children's novel *Little House in the Big Woods* by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Before the year was out, however, Wilder learned that the exigencies of "depression economics" were closing down the children's department at Knopf. "I am heartbroken about the whole thing," wrote the Knopf children's editor, and she advised that Wilder submit her manuscript to Harper, which published *Little House in the Big Woods* in 1932 (Anderson 327-28), initiating the enormously popular Little House series.

At this point you may be wondering (nervously) why I am beginning this ominously long talk by telling you about such a small coincidence of business. And I must confess: while I've been reading and writing about Willa Cather for the past ten years, I've also been writing a book about Laura Ingalls Wilder. At a wonderful conference like this one, surrounded by kindred Cather people, whenever I gaze at the horizon, it is dominated by the commanding presence of *Mount Willa*. But for me, in recent years, *Mount Laura* has intruded insistently on this landscape. And as I continue to gaze, the horizon has complicated itself, growing knobby with competing, coexisting presences, against a constantly changing skyscape of historical events, cultural patterns and circumstances.

So — what happened to me when I began to try to plan my paper for today was that my two projects refused to remain separate in my mind, and I had to envision a picture with a place for Willa Cather and Laura Ingalls Wilder. That meant I had to think about new ways to *historicize* both careers. And that's why I was so delighted to recognize the bit of information with which I began. It places Wilder and Cather — who almost but not quite shared a publisher in 1931 — in the same literary and cultural landscape. Women of about the same age with Midwestern childhoods far behind them, they were writing and publishing novels about frontier girlhoods at the onset of the Great Depression. Today I want to argue that, by enlarging our frame to accommodate both these writers in the last decades of their careers, we can gain a more complex understanding of the important cultural dynamics of both *Shadows on the Rock* and the Little House series.

Laura Ingalls Wilder at 85 signing books for girl fans in 1952.
— Courtesy of William Anderson

When Willa Cather was writing *Shadows on the Rock*, between 1928 and 1930, she was going through the experience and the aftershocks of her father's

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sudden death, her mother's long and debilitating final illness, and the breakup of the parental Cather household in Red Cloud, which she had continued to think of as her "home," despite her long residence in New York.[2] Inevitably, these circumstances must have led Cather to rethink her own girlhood, and in *Shadows* she wrote her first extended portrayal of a girl since *The Song of the Lark*, sixteen years earlier.

These same years, of course, saw the 1929 stock market crash and the onset of the nationwide Great Depression. However, Nebraska and other farm states had actually been under siege since the early twenties. As Deborah Fink points out, "following the heady farm economy of the World War I period, farm prices fell flat, ushering in an agricultural depression that preceded the general 1930s depression by nearly ten years. . . . Drought, dust storms, grasshoppers, no money — the combination threatened the survival of rural Nebraska" (46). These conditions affected many of Willa Cather's longtime friends; by 1931, she was habitually sending money and food to several Nebraska farm families. The fledgling agricultural community in a new state to which Charles and Virginia Cather had brought their family in the 1880s, like that family itself, appeared gravely "threatened." In *Shadows*, Cather explained to Governor Cross, she was interested in how a "little . . . household . . . went on trying to live decently, just as ants begin to rebuild when you kick their house down" (21).

At the same time, Laura Ingalls Wilder was interested in the same thing: the survival of a little house. Wilder, born in 1867, had grown up in Wisconsin, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa and Dakota as the child of homesteaders and would-be small farmers who endured a series of frontier disasters. As a young woman, she left her parents and sisters behind her in a Panic year, 1894, and backtracked to rural Missouri, where she and her husband lived on a small, rocky farm for the rest of their long lives. Wilder worked as a farmer, housekeeper, and journalist, the Home Editor for the *Missouri Ruralist*. (Her one child was the well-known journalist and fiction writer Rose Wilder Lane.) The Wilders felt the effects of the agricultural depression in their Missouri community and, like Cather, they sent contributions to "destitute" family members back in South Dakota. Furthermore, their daughter, Rose Lane, who had been assisting her parents from her large earnings, was financially wiped out by the 1929 crash. By the late twenties, following the deaths of her parents and older sister, Laura Ingalls Wilder, with her daughter's collaboration, was beginning to write autobiographical fiction for children that drew from her own frontier childhood. *Little House in the Big Woods* was followed by seven more bestselling Little House books. In the middle of this Depression writing project, Wilder told a Book Fair audience that she was writing out of a sense that the world of her childhood was irretrievable — except in writing:

> I began to think what a wonderful childhood I had. How I had seen the whole frontier, the woods, the Indian country of the great plains, the frontier towns, the building of railroads . . . homesteading and farmers coming in to take possession. I realized that I had seen and lived it all. . . . It seemed to me that my childhood had been much richer and more interesting than that of children today. ("Book Fair Speech" 217)

Like Willa Cather, Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote her historical fiction not from the perspective of the highly dramatized events conventionally recounted in North American frontier history — the "Indian raids or the wild life in the forests" — but from the perspective of a sheltered daughter, whose prescribed and always precarious seat was "in the close air by the . . . [domestic] fire" (WC to Governor Cross 21). The late twenties and early thirties, as I've indicated, found both women, with familial frontier histories far behind them, suddenly thrust again into the conditions of abrupt change, dissolution and uprooting that had marked their childhoods. According to Lillian Schlissel, such conditions shaped the emotional lives of families on U.S. frontiers:

> Through all the uprooting, and amid all the change — perhaps because of it — families on the frontier yearned for the home they left behind. Living precariously, sometimes desperately, on the perimeters of change, they longed for an image of home outside of time. In the daily deconstructions of their frontier lives, they escaped from family only to yearn to see it woven back together again. (242)

For both Cather and Wilder, daughters who had lived most of their adult lives far from their families of origin, the fiction of the early thirties was such a project of weaving together, with the "image of home outside time" that Schlissel describes at its center.

Another aspect of the U.S. Depression years that may be pertinent to Wilder's and Cather's writing is changing attitudes toward women.[3] Cather, of course, as a much-honored Pulitzer Prize winner, was a thoroughly established writer by 1930. Wilder had been publishing her journalism regularly since 1910, and her successful writer-daughter continued to urge her toward the frank professionalism of the enfranchised New Woman. But during the Depression/New Deal years, there was widespread hostility toward such professionalism in the U.S.[4] Labor markets were flooded with jobless, dislocated and demoralized men; increasingly, women were urged to make their first priority jobs and support *for men*. According to Barbara Melosh,

> the strains of economic depression reinforced the containment of feminism that had begun after the winning of suffrage. As men lost their jobs, wage-earning women became the targets of public hostility and restrictive policy. One slogan exhorted, "Don't take a job from a man!" (1)

The novels that Cather and Wilder published in 1931 and 1932 contain no wage-earning women, with

the single exception, in *Shadows*, of an innkeeper-prostitute who is termed a "bad woman" by the other women of Quebec. At the center of both books, as protagonists, are girls, Laura Ingalls and Cécile Auclair. Both are receiving intensive domestic indoctrination to prepare them for lives of unpaid household labor. To Laura and her sister, "each day had its own proper work. Ma used to say: Wash on Monday,/Iron on Tuesday," and so forth (*Big Woods* 29). Before her death, Cécile's mother repeated similar instructions to her daughter:

> "The sheets must be changed every two weeks . . . . Keep folding the soiled ones away in the cold upstairs, and in April, when the spring rains come . . . . have big Jeanette come in and do a great washing . . . . Beg her to iron the sheets carefully. They are the best of linen and will last your lifetime if they are well treated." (*Shadows* 24)

Both these novels have aspects of the instructive housekeeping manuals that had circulated widely among U.S. women since the nineteenth century. They recount specific, conservative household strategies — churning butter, putting down doves in lard — that must have had renewed pertinence in a Depression economy where the slogan "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without" was newly popular (Ware 2). In the Ingalls' Little House, for example, sewing scraps make a rag doll for Laura and curtain the windows, and Cécile recycles her outgrown clothing — preserved by her mother because "all serviceable things deserve to be taken care of" (99) — to keep little Jacques warm. Such emphases were timely, according to Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, since Depression families commonly "sought to cope by adopting more labor-intensive household practices . . . . [F]alling back on their own resources, many Americans tried to return to an earlier state of self-sufficiency" (137-38), and popular historical fiction, such as that of Wilder and Cather, reinforced their efforts.

Another striking common feature of these 1930s texts is the fact that both are memorial homages to fathers. Many of Cather's critics have surmised that she was thinking of her own beloved father, with whom she had enjoyed untroubled rapport, when she placed the relationship between motherless Cécile and her gentle, reflective father at the center of *Shadows*. Laura Ingalls Wilder was explicit; she said that her father's stories were the "best" part of her childhood and that she wrote her first book because she "always felt [the stories] were too good to be altogether lost" ("Laura's Book Fair Speech" 217). A series of "inset stories" told by Charles Ingalls is a prominent feature of *Big Woods;* they recount prototypical male adventures — such as an escape from a panther — in the woods where no women are allowed to venture.

As acts of paternal homage, these books honor and preserve patriarchal arrangements. Cécile's mother makes it clear to her that, although she may be fatigued by the numbing repetitions of domestic work, she will "come to love" her "duties" because her *father's* "whole happiness" depends on them (24). And Laura is schooled to honor her father's authority above all else — even the season changes, she thinks, because "one day Pa said that spring was coming" (101). The circumstances of both girls' lives are determined by paternal fiat. When Cécile receives gifts from her French aunts — dress, lingerie and jewelry suited to a young woman — she is perplexed: "What did it mean?" Her father readily interprets: "It means that you are growing up . . . and must dress like a young lady" (213). The story he tells her — albeit reluctantly — is a conventionally patriarchal one, in which an adolescent daughter must be richly dressed, so that she will appear to advantage in the marriage market.

Behind Euclide Auclair's patriarchal authority stands a clear line of succession: he is backed by his patron, Frontenac, who is backed by the French king. When Frontenac dies, Auclair is stripped of many of his patriarchal attributes; instead he appears a fragile mortal man, physically and emotionally exhausted. This is a moment when Cécile might learn the lessons Patricia Yaeger urges on contemporary feminist readers: that paternity and patriarchy are not inseparable concepts, and that the *father* need not be simply a phallogocentric source of law, but instead, a mortal who may be "anatomized, fragmented, shattered — or cherished" by his daughter (19). However, in Cather's novel, by the final illness and death of Frontenac there exists a wedge between Cécile and her father; they grieve separately, shut in separate rooms. The girl feels "reproachful" that her father has neglected his paternal duties, forgetting to buy the supplies for her cooking. She seems to long for the reinstatement of a securely patriarchal order — and on the novel's last pages, her anxious desire is fulfilled by the Canadian Pierre Charron, who shores up the distraught Auclair. Pierre eschews patronage (but not patriarchy); he scorns succession to any male authority except that of his own intrepid resourcefulness. To Cécile (whom he will marry), he becomes "the strong roof . . . over her and the shop and the salon and all her mother's things" (265). In this image, the power of the patriarch and the shelter of the house have merged into the single commanding figure of Pierre — the *rock.* In Pierre, *rock, house* and *man* are inseparable. Wilder's Little Houses are similarly associated with Pa Ingalls (whom Pierre resembles); it is he who builds them and defends them.[5]

But, although house and man may be *inseparable*, the patriarchs in Wilder's and Cather's books are, of course, not tied to houses. In fact, Pierre Charron's "authority," praised in the last words of *Shadows*, derives from his *mobility*, his refusal to stay too long under any one roof. Thus he has a wide and passionate "knowledge of the country and its people" (268); it is that very knowledge that draws Cécile to him, just as young Laura Ingalls is drawn to her father's stories of male adventure that she cannot share. As the figure

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of Pierre suggests, *houses* are an inextricable part of patriarchal identity and authority, but patriarchs cannot be tied to the constant tending and maintenance — the house*keeping* — that houses require. Thus the maintenance of patriarchy requires a steady supply of immobilized daughters, keeping house. Laura Ingalls is such a daughter; at four, she can already knit, set the table and recite the weekly order of housework. And in Quebec, it is obvious that men have an especial investment in perpetuating Cécile's housekeeping. Frontenac says to her, "I am very well pleased with you, Cécile, because you do so well for your father" (58), and Bishop Laval, who has rejected domestic comforts for himself, nevertheless requests a sprig of Cécile's carefully nurtured parsley and carries it "away in his hand" like a talisman (26). In this city of Quebec, a woman who will not keep to her house is shocking — it is for her mobility, not her prostitution, that 'Toinette Gaux is most severely chastised. When she leaves her son Jacques untended to go sledding, she is reprimanded by Laval himself, who proprietarily enters her house without knocking. When he silently confronts 'Toinette, "she felt all his awfulness; the long line of noble blood and authority behind him, the power of the Church and the power of the man. She wished the earth would swallow her" (76). The old bishop is the embodiment of patriarchal enforcement; he wields the enormous "power of the man" in his culture, and even a woman as defiantly willful as 'Toinette is so overwhelmed by his authority that she desires annihilation.

In young Cécile's pious imagination, the entire little city is a containing shelter; the altar of her favorite church even presents a stone fortress house, "made in France by people who knew" (64), as an object of worship. To the girl, "all these things seemed . . . like layers and layers of shelter, with this one . . . room" in her father's house "at the core" (158). Much of this novel, like *Little House in the Big Woods*, celebrates the "goodness of shelter" (66). Actually, of course, the core of the patriarchal shelter is Cécile herself, and by the time she is thirteen, she is so thoroughly conditioned to maintain that indoor position that she cannot happily travel as far as the Ile d'Orleans; she flies back to her town, her house and her kitchen and — although she has not slept for two nights — immediately rushes to the stove and begins to prepare an elaborate dinner for her father and Pierre, the two commanding patriarchs in her life.

Women's work on the Isle of Orleans, Quebec. The Leblond family weavers of Ste. Famille, 1928.

Obviously, then, the "layers on layers of shelter" in which Laura and Cécile are contained and to which they are supposedly committed are a *problem* as well as a source of "goodness" — a problem that both authors must find ways to acknowledge. When Cécile and Laura chafe at the confining walls of their shelters, *stories* are a special solace to them, providing many of their "best times." Pa Ingalls' stories are exciting and alluring to Laura, as I've said, because they are the only way she can access the woods. And for thrilling stories of adventures in the Canadian forest, Cécile must rely on missionary priests and on male traders, like Pierre. When he visits, the child greets him much as Laura greets Pa, with dancing "delight." She asks, "Oh, Pierre, have you been to the great falls again, and Michilimackinac?" He replies, "Everywhere, everywhere!" (171). Later, when Cécile rebels against her father's patriarchal plans for her return to France, she fantasizes about putting

herself in Pierre's "everywhere" and exploring the places about which men have told her. Cécile says to the docile Jacques, who is *not* patriarch material, "I wish you and I could go very far up the river in Pierre Charron's canoe, and then off into the forests to the Huron country, and find the very places where the martyrs died. I would rather go out there than — anywhere" (234).

In *Little House in the Big Woods*, there are no female storytellers — a fact that presents an implicit paradox, since readers are aware that the girl protagonist, Laura, will grow up to become the author of this book. And in *Shadows*, although Cécile does hear tales of adventure by and about women, those women are all nuns, and it is apparent that Cécile herself has no religious vocation. Housekeeping women, such as she is becoming, tell no tales. Pa Ingalls' copious inset stories presented a structural problem for Wilder and Lane when they attempted to continue a *girl's* story in their sequels. And in the epilogue of *Shadows*, of course, Cécile is entirely banished into obscurity; the tale of her marriage is told by her father to the returning Bishop Saint-Vallier. In this formal paradigm, it is again patriarchal storytelling that prevails. Some of Willa Cather's earlier female protagonists, such as Alexandra Bergson or Ántonia Shimerda, profoundly altered patriarchal arrangements. As far as we can tell, Cécile Auclair does not. Nor, in *Little House in the Big Woods*, does Laura Ingalls.

I meant to suggest, with my earlier references to a Depression cultural climate, that both *Shadows* and *Big Woods* were significantly marked by the conservative social values of those years. In a period when discretionary income was reduced for most U.S. consumers, such values sold books, and they were featured in the advertising for both writers in the thirties. Both books sold briskly and participated significantly in the project of shoring up a sagging patriarchy. Yet they were written by *daughters* who had achieved significantly more financial success than their fathers. When Charles Cather died, his daughter Willa was famous and well-to-do, as he had never been. And when Charles Ingalls died at sixty, he had failed as a farmer and homesteader and was doing day labor as a carpenter. In their fictional homages to their fathers, both writers chose not to inscribe any intimations of their own successes, which did challenge patriarchy. However, that story was implicitly told by the facts of their authorship.

Another aspect of depression-era conservatism was expressed in the increasing popularity of Western fiction and films. Such fiction dramatized survival strategies in a culture where much appeared to be crumbling. According to Jane Tompkins, the Western was also a project in shoring up embattled male authority. She sees the Western as a defensive response to "the dominance of a women's culture in the nineteenth century [U.S.] and to women's invasion of the public sphere between 1880 and 1920" (44). Tompkins says, "The Western doesn't have anything to do with the West as such. . . . It is about men's fear of losing their mastery . . . which the Western tirelessly reinvents" (45), especially by privileging outdoor mobility and violent, wordless physical action over the ineffectual language with which women are associated in Western texts.

Such popular traditions obviously raise difficulties for Wilder and Cather, since both *Shadows* and the Little House series are clearly related to Western frontier conditions. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather had just completed a book that both revised and perpetuated the dynamics that Tompkins describes. *Shadows*, although set in Eastern Canada, is also clearly a frontier text; Cather described it as a tale of "early settlers" living at the edge of a forest populated by native peoples, at the beginning of a "new society" (WC to Governor Cross 21). Similar emphases are more obviously apparent in Wilder. Some of the most interesting and innovative properties of these two texts come from their efforts to reconfigure "Western" or "frontier" fiction to make it more responsive to the experience of *girls*, who are notably absent in prototypical Western texts.

Most of the comment on both Cather and Wilder as "Western" writers has been framed in the terms of Frederick Jackson Turner's definition of the specifically U.S. frontier that putatively closed in 1890. However, both the Little House series and *Shadows* better lend themselves to readings that take off from more recent and more inclusive conceptions of "frontiers." One such conception was articulated by Annette Kolodny in 1992. She urges

> that we let go our grand obsessions with narrowly geographic or strictly chronological frameworks and instead recognize "frontier" as a locus of first cultural contact, circumscribed by a particular physical terrain in the process of change *because of* the forms that contact takes, all of it inscribed by the collisions and inter-penetrations of language. . . . [This is experienced by] a currently indigenous population and at least one group of newcomer "intruders." (3,5)

Such frontier texts, Kolodny says, include both "those that . . . participate in that first moment of contact" and those "composed after the fact, reworking for some alternate audience or future generation the scene and meaning of original contact, or 'recovering' the primary texts" for "new readings" (5). *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is one of Kolodny's examples of such an "after the fact" frontier text, and I would argue that *Shadows on the Rock*, like the Little House series, is clearly one as well.

Kolodny's paradigm is valuably revisionary because it cuts the concept of *frontier* free of cultural, geographical and historical specificities; to her, Ellis Island is as much a frontier site as Dakota Territory. Her emphasis is on early contact among disparate cultures, on resulting environmental change, and on language.

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Such a definition allows us to see more specifically what is inherently problematic about frontier experience for North American girls of European ancestry who are growing up in a patriarchal culture. The "layers and layers of shelter" that surround Cécile and Laura insulate them: for example, although they live in places surrounded by native inhabitants, neither girl exchanges a single word with an Indian. Restricting such contact seems to be conceived as culturally necessary; throughout the Little House series, for example, Laura's Indian-hating mother threatens her with the dire prospect of becoming "brown as an Indian" if she fails to wear her sunbonnet. These girls will bear children, children who will be cultural standard-bearers — "The Canadians of the future," as Euclide Auclair proudly describes his grandchildren. Those children must be white-skinned.

Languages are essential to frontier experience, Kolodny says. But in these books, multiple languages are reserved for men. In *Shadows*, Mother Juschereau — lively, intelligent and conservative — reproves Auclair for teaching his daughter Latin; she asks "him whether he had perhaps forgotten that he had a girl to bring up, and not a son" (40). Pierre excuses the Latin lessons only because Cécile is an accomplished cook. But he is multilingual himself; like other male traders and missionaries, such as Father Hector, his frontier survival and success are largely dependent on his ability to speak with Indians. (Languages facilitate Pierre's mobile life in the forest, and for the benefit of such woodsmen, the Canadian church alters language: the beaver is redefined as a fish, "so that hunters off in the woods" may eat it "on Fridays" (224) and remain good Catholics.) In the Little House series, the Ingalls — who speak only English — cannot communicate with their Indian and immigrant neighbors and thus make some disastrous mistakes, such as ignoring a warning of a grasshopper plague. Again, the only persons who speak more than one language are mostly male Indians. In *Little House on the Prairie*, the eloquent Osage chief, Soldat du Chêne, uses his French and multiple Indian languages to persuade the intertribal war council not to exterminate white settlers in Kansas (including the Ingalls). Pa regards this frontier hero with great respect and says regretfully that he wishes he had picked up some of the chief's "lingo" — French — himself. The implication is that Pa has had opportunity to learn French. Laura, of course, has not.

Excluded from many of the rich possibilities of frontier experience, both Cécile and Laura sometimes chafe against the cultural forces that contain them. As we've seen, Cécile fantasizes about forest travels. When Pierre takes her on her first river voyage, she is eager to plan further adventures, but Pierre replies, protectively and patriarchally, "I'd rather you never went with anyone but me" (187).

Laura too longs for outdoor adventures and a chance to see railroad men working and to hear their forbidden "rough language." In Kansas Territory, when she is only six, she watches raptly from the doorway of the Little House as a long migratory procession of Osage Indians passes by. Suddenly she cries, "Pa . . . get me that little Indian baby! . . . . I want it! I want it!" (*Little House on the Prairie* 308). Laura's outcry is shocking not only because it objectifies a child of another race but also because it expresses her desire to experience a frontier situation more fully than is permitted for a girl. She wants to possess an Indian child, include it in her family, speak a common language — and implicitly, perhaps, she is asking to *bear* such a child. (Significantly, Laura's first adolescent romantic interest will be a "half-breed," a man of mixed blood.) Ma tries to placate her, saying, "We have . . . our own baby." But Laura sobs, "I want the other one too!" (310) Frontier characters like Laura's father and Pierre Charron have access to woods and interact with the Indians they meet there, while retaining their ties to Little Houses. "The other one" is an important part of these men's lives. But young Laura has no language in which she is permitted to express her own desire for such an inclusive life. Choked with inadmissible desire, "she could not say what she meant" (309). Conversely, Cécile is permitted to make another woman's child her own. But it is a *French* child, Jacques, she "adopts" and instructs in Christian and domestic piety. Her culture has nothing but praise for her, for she is perpetuating it as a good daughter should and supplanting a "bad woman."

In another pertinent reconception, Lillian Schlissel describes a *carnival frontier*, a Bahktinian "wildly disordered" place of extremes and reversals, "high stakes and low jokes," where "hunger, desperate effort, and fear could be transformed by hilarity. On the frontier as Carnival . . . one wore different faces and lived different lives that needed no accounting" (234). Pa Ingalls seems to experience the exhilarating release of such a frontier during his long offstage absences from the Little House. And the Canadian forest is clearly a carnival site; think of the Indians "making merry" over Noel Chabanal as he vomits up their feast of human flesh and of Pierre, with other woodsmen, spending half of his earnings on "drink and women and new guns" (173). Pierre, whom Cather romanticizes more than any other character in this book,[6] is never castigated for including the carnival frontier in his life; no one argues with his simple formula: "religion for the fireside, freedom for the woods" (175). But to Cécile, Quebec offers only half of this equation; for her, as for Laura, the fireside is the whole portion, and thus, again, access to *frontier* is blocked.

In *Big Woods* and *Shadows*, girls must look very hard for any cracks in the shelter through which they may catch glimpses of revisionary *women* who taste frontier experience for themselves. For example, at a sugaring-off dance, Laura is mesmerized by her

energetic Grandma Ingalls, who comes out of the kitchen to dance, "beating" her own son in a vigorous jigging contest. But the risks of such a heady, carnivalesque gender reversal are apparent; in her absence from the kitchen, Grandma almost lets the sirup overcook. She risks spoiling the large, valuable batch of maple sugar and jeopardizes the family's agricultural enterprise (148-51). After this, Grandma is banished from the series. In *Shadows*, Cécile eschews any literal scenes of frontier contact and carnival. Even the Harnois children's farmyard discoveries are too much for her; they keep "telling her about peculiarities of animal behaviour that she thought it better taste to ignore" (190) and she is repulsed at the mud they bring to bed and at mosquitoes in their house. But Cécile is powerfully drawn to Jeanne Le Ber. I'd argue that the recluse nun makes shelter and architectural seclusion into a *psychic* frontier — instead of going out into the forest, she *goes in*. Pierre Charron, accustomed to the physical frontier, describes Jeanne's retreat in the language of darkness, atrophy, and barren seclusion with which the actual forest, *his* frontier, is described on the first pages of this novel. Jeanne, like the passionate Sister Catherine who vows to die in Canada and the French nun with "burning eyes" who dreams of New Mexico in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, exemplifies a woman who desires a frontier beyond the boundaries of patriarchy. Jeanne's retreat is the most painful fact of Pierre Charron's life. But to Cécile, the recluse is an object of rapt attention; her story expresses a desire that the girl can scarely name.

As Cather's novel ends, that desire remains almost unexpressed — it is an impulse that a girl cannot fulfill in Quebec, and another instance of the anacoluthon that, as Cather said, characterizes this text. In the novel proper's last words, Cécile's desire is deflected onto the frontiersman Pierre; she thinks of "*his* daring and *his* pride" (268, emphasis mine). *Big Woods* also ends problematically for the girl Laura, who lies in bed listening to her father singing and playing his fiddle. She thinks,

> "This is now."
>
> She was glad that the cosy house, and Pa and Ma and the firelight and the music, were now. They could not be forgotten, she thought, because now is now. It can never be a long time ago. (237)

Like Cécile, Laura is fixed in her shelter, the Little House, with her patriarch in residence. Both endings project security and content. In Laura's childish mind, the log house and its rituals are permanent, static and endogamous. But if *now* can never become "a long time ago," it is impossible to tell any new tales about Laura Ingalls. As tellers of a girl's story, Wilder and Lane found themselves at an impasse on the publication of *Big Woods*. Although they had created a market for their series, their format — dominated by Pa's stories and Laura's immobilization — had left them nowhere to go. In order to continue a narrative of a girl's experience, Wilder and Lane had to preempt the patriarchal voice that is such a strong presence in their first book. Never again will Pa's stories be so dominant. Instead, as the Ingalls family begins its trek West, they find ways to make the Little House itself portable and mobile, the center of a continuing, exploratory *female* immigrant narrative. As a student, daughter, housekeeper and a teacher, in a series of jobs inside and outside the little house and in a long courtship, Laura tests the limits of possibility for a girl on the Dakota frontier, where many elements of patriarchy still stand in place.

But, if Wilder's Little House is portable, Cather's Big Rock is not. Twelve years later, the adult Cécile is still living in the city of Quebec, under her husband Pierre's "commodious" roof, in a family of males to which the narrative has no access. Unlike *Big Woods*, *Shadows on the Rock* has no sequel.

However, after *Shadows*, Cather's fiction is full of female adolescents. I would argue that, through these characters, Cather continued to probe the questions raised by the fugitive figure of Cécile, much as Wilder did in the last four books of her series, all of which are devoted to Laura's adolescence. Just after completing *Shadows*, Cather wrote "Old Mrs. Harris," with the passionate, androgynous and autobiographical figure of Vickie. Next, Lucy Gayheart bets her life on the little house of heterosexual romance that she builds around the reluctant patriarch Sebastian; at the novel's end, she has become an enigmatic text to be studied by a man — the single image, in concrete, of her girlhood "footprints, running away." Then there is Nancy, a *slave girl* conceived by Cather as a runaway adolescent so torn by desire, anger and homesickness that, like Cécile's, her story is truncated by another kind of narrative removal. Even the late stories pursue these issues. Leslie Furguesson of "The Best Years" is a young prairie teacher whose story resembles Wilder's sterner narrative of Laura's teaching career. Finally, it's worth remembering that Cather's last Canadian story, "Before Breakfast," has at its center an adolescent *"girl"*, a daughter travelling with her father, who is a pink and intrepid figure of new beginnings. The male narrator of the story, when he sees this girl risking a solitary morning swim, prepares to effect a rescue — but discovers that his patriarchal impulse is unneeded. For the man, rethinking the possibilities of this girl is enormously restorative and liberating. She becomes for him what Pierre Charron was in *Shadows*, the very image of "plucky youth." Alone in the Canadian woods, acting on her own desires, she appears as the frontier female that Laura and Cécile were never permitted to be.

The Little House series was complete in 1943; two years later, Cather completed her last published writing. In the conservatism of the Great Depression and during personal upheavals, both women had rethought their own early years and what it had meant to be a girl and a father's daughter in the little houses of North America. Wrestling with history and contin-

(Continued on page 32)

gency in the medium of frontier girls' stories, they had rediscovered what Jean Bethke Elshtain has observed: while a patriarchal "social order" is likely to provide a boy with a model of a coherent life narrative, such coherence is less accessible for girls. "The social medium for girls . . . has sharp breaks, roads that turn back upon themselves, and deep valleys that girls crawl out of with increasing difficulty" (294). On the page, as Cather and Wilder discovered, such a social terrain translates into anacoluthon, grammatical and narrative disjunction — especially, as we've seen, in *Shadows* and *Big Woods.*

In their last writing years, spent in a Depression milieu, these two kindred and vastly different authors shared an important project, something much larger than the Knopf imprimatur that they almost shared in 1931. Memorializing their fathers and acknowledging the attractions of patriarchal institutions that had, in some ways, served them both, they made a case for *girls' stories* and girls' frontiers in a historical period that largely ignored them. They paid attention to the "deep valleys" and domestic cul de sacs that threatened girls, as Elshtain says, with loss and oblivion. And they did this, too, by fictionalizing their own girlhood stories and claiming their own success as storytellers and writers. Wilder, of course, reinvented herself as the protagonist of the Little House series. And Cather, as you recall, inserted her childhood self in her last novel. At the end of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, young Willa — like young Laura in *Big Woods* — is five years old. And like Laura, she is poised before the beginning of a frontier girlhood and a writer's life in the twentieth century.

NOTES

[1] Susan Rosowski discussed Knopf's attitudes toward the authors he published in "Editing the Imagination: Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*," a paper presented at the American Literature Association, 27 May 1995.

[2] Woodress has been my primary biographical source for this essay.

[3] Even fashions reflected this change. According to Susan Ware, the boyish "ideal figure" of 1929 was supplanted in 1931 by a combination of small waist, "tapering hips" and "molded bust" that required women to resume wearing corsets (xvii-xviii).

[4] 1930's polls document this change; for example, a 1936 Gallup poll showed that 82 percent of 'Americans' believed that wives should not "work if their husbands had jobs" (Ware 27).

[5] I discuss the subject of building in more detail in "Writing the Little House: The Architecture of a Series."

[6] Hermione Lee notes this tendency; she writes that Pierre's "roughness is thoroughly romanticized" (300).

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St. Juliana Church

Spring Conference Homily at St. Juliana Church
Red Cloud, 25 April 1997

"Snake Root": Latour's Descent into Hell in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

Steven P. Ryan, S.J.
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The historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, has helped us illumine the spiritual dimension of the human person. Eliade distinguishes between two types of humanity: sacred and profane. Religious humanity believes it lives in a sacred world formed out of an original chaos by the creative intervention of its god, goddess, gods, and/or goddesses. We of the Judaeo-Christian heritage identify immediately with Eliade's analysis (Genesis is a fine example of his point), although it may trouble us to find so essential a connection with religions we consider to be so different from our own. But Eliade, I suspect, would hope it would intrigue, console and enlighten us.

Eliade's religious humanity is vitally concerned with the preservation of its sacred world — which is, of course, the only world it knows. Its beliefs depend on its survival, and its rites seek to insure it. This is because this sacred world comes with no guarantees. The forces of chaos subdued at creation have not been destroyed — merely cloaked. From time to time they threaten to break out and overcome the order of the sacred world.

Willa Cather's fiction reflects this tension, in which chaos is the frequent antagonist of a sacred order, whether incipient or established. Its common manifestations are wilderness, uncontrolled waters, and serpents. Examples of this conflict are found in the early pages *O Pioneers!*, in Jim Burden's battle with the serpent in *My Ántonia*, and, in the forests and waters that threaten Quebec in *Shadows on the Rock.*

Bishop Latour, too, must grapple with the serpentine forces of chaos. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, from its earliest pages, is a story of the struggle of a religious worldview to establish itself in a hostile environment, a struggle of light vs. darkness, order vs. disorder. Soon after Latour's arrival in Santa Fé, a darkening atmosphere forebodes the impending battle. The first skirmish comes with the repulsive Buck Scales, whose name suggests a reptilian creature who would do anything — including murder — for a dollar. Bearing a "malignant look"[1] which betrays his homicides, Buck approaches the subhuman: "all white men knew him for a dog and a degenerate."[2] Warned by Scales' terribly abused Mexican wife, Magdalena, Latour and Vaillant narrowly escape treachery.

The heart of the battle comes in Book IV, entitled "Snake Root." Word of Father Vaillant's having fallen ill in a remote pueblo initiates a steadily intensifying mood of menance. Latour and his Indian guide, Jacinto, rush to Vaillant's aid. Jacinto's people, meanwhile, teeter on extinction: "The tribe was dying out; infant mortality was heavy . . . the life-force seemed low."[3] The virulent diseases brought by the white man certainly contribute to this decline; but other factors are suspected as well:

> There was also the snake story, reported by the early explorers, both Spanish and American, and believed ever since: that this tribe was peculiarly addicted to snake worship, that they . . . somewhere in the mountain guarded an enormous serpent which they brought to the pueblo for certain feasts. *It was said that they sacrificed young babies to the great snake*, and thus diminished their numbers.[4]

A tightening knot of factors portend the drama of the journey Latour and Jacinto will undertake. They will depart from the same pueblo as Coronado's ill-fated expedition to find the seven cities of gold.[5] The ruins of the old mission church "[yawn] gloomily" before the bishop,[6] while an ominous cloud rises in the west, unsettling the air:

> The wind, [Latour] knew, as blowing out of the inky cloud bank that lay behind the mountain at sunset; but it might well be blowing out of a remote, black past. The only human voice raised against it was the feeble wailing of [Jacinto's] sick child in the cradle.[7]

(Continued on page 34)

The spectre of failure, the faint cry of a helpless infant before the advance of an ancient, inscrutable evil[8] warn of a rapidly unfolding cosmic confrontation.

Early the next morning, Latour and Jacinto set out into the teeth of the oncoming storm. Soon they are engulfed in chaos:

> The sun was nowhere to be seen, the air was thick and grey and smelled of snow. Very soon the snow began to fall — lightly at first, but all the while becoming heavier. The vista of pine trees ahead of them grew shorter and shorter through the vast powdering of descending flakes. A little after midday a burst of wind sent the snow whirling in *coils* about the two travellers, and *a great storm broke.* The wind was *like a hurricane at sea*, and the air became *blind* with snow. *The Bishop could scarcely see his guide* — saw only parts of him, now a head, now a shoulder, now only the black rump of his mule. Pine trees by the way stood out for a moment, then disappeared absolutely in *the whirlpool of snow. Trail and landmarks, the mountain itself, were obliterated.*[9]

The storm is a descent into chaos of oceanic — and, thus, precosmic — proportions. The snake-like coils of snowflakes obliterate man, trees, pathway — any landmark which would indicate world. The darkness, the thickening air, and snowy engulfment suggest envelopment, the "going under" which often threatens Cather's characters with both loss of world and erasure. Abandoning their useless animals, the pair press on, even though Latour is "blind" and "breathless."[10] Latour "clamber[s] over half-visible rocks, [falls] over prostrate trees, [sinks] into deep holes and struggle[s] out," as he stumbles through what gives every appearance of being a disintegrating world.[11]

Jacinto leads his companion to a mountain cavern unknown to the white man. They enter by means of "a mouthlike opening" which suggests "two great stone lips,"[12] into "the throat of the cave,"[13] coming eventually to the very "ribs"[14] deep within the rock. The imagery evokes both the belly of the monster and the *vagina dentata*, i.e., "a perilous descent into a cave or crevasse assimilated to the mouth or the uterus of Mother Earth — a descent," Eliade explains, "that brings the hero to the other world."[15] Mythic heroes the world over undergo one or the other of these ordeals. Both scenarios involve the hero's *regressus ad uterum*, or return to the womb.[16]

Despite the need for shelter, Latour finds the fetid coldness of the cave deeply distasteful. Inside, Jacinto carefully tends to the remnants of a now-dead fire, and deftly seals what appears to be a passageway to another cavern. Once inside, Jacinto confides, "Padre, I do not know if it was right to bring you here. This place is used by my people for ceremonies and is known only to us. When you go out from here, you must forget."[17] All these elements suggest that there may be truth in the grim rumors about the Pecos religion, and that Latour has found its black heart. Presently, he grows aware of a drumming sound, and Jacinto leads him into a tunnel reaching deep into the heart of the mountain. There Jacinto unseals a fissure in the stone floor, and Latour stoops to listen:

> Father Latour lay with his ear to this crack for a long while, despite the cold that arose from it. He told himself he was listening to *one of the oldest voices of the earth.* What he heard was *the sound of a great underground river*, flowing through a resounding cavern. The water was far, far below, perhaps as deep as the foot of the mountain, *a flood moving in utter blackness undcr ribs of antediluvian rock.* It was not a rushing noise, but the sound of *a great flood* moving with majesty and power
>
> "It is terrible," he said at last, as he rose.[18]

Deeply shaken, Latour steals a swallow from his pocket flask.[19]

In "Snake Root," then, one finds manifestations of precosmic chaos — turbulent waters, (unseen but deeply suspected), and maw of the beast — in concentrated assembly. Latour's disturbing adventure has seemingly lead him to the realm of primordial chaos itself, uncontrolled waters roiling in darkness — at once awesome and terrifying. He has come to the center of all that is anti-world, the very antithesis of both Rome and the timeless, golden pueblo which Latour later visits with Padre Martinez. Just as in Jim's vital confrontation with the serpent in *My Ántonia*, Latour's entrance into the snake cave symbolizes a decisive battle against the precosmic forces of chaos, darkness, and death. Latour has found the "lair" of the snake, just as Jim and Ántonia unwittingly do while playing in the prairie dog mound. Latour's adventure, however, takes the confrontation a step further in his symbolic entrance into the belly of the "beast." Latour does not engage in any killing, however — indeed, he never does in any of his encounters with the forces of chaos.[20]

Latour's only weapon, feeble as it may seem, is prayer. The bishop, in fact, who, as noted earlier, is found at prayer within paragraphs of the first chapter, returns to it repeatedly throughout the novel, especially in "The Mass at Ácoma" and "Snake Root," among the novel's darkest chapters.[21] Deep within the snake cave, "Latour [reads] his breviary long by the light of the fire . . . and [makes] Jacinto repeat a *Pater Noster* with him, as he always did on their night camps."[22]

In so doing, Latour sustains the link with the sacred with which the novel opened in the episode before the cruciform tree. In this way, then — much as Alexandra does in her recurrent dream (in *O Pioneers!*), and young Jim does in his repeated experiences of cosmic consciousness (in *My Ántonia*) — he maintains the vital relation that both creates and sustains any world of religious man.[23] Latour thereby illustrates Eliade's point that human spiritual activity contributes to the ongoing sanctity of world. *Whenever religious man imitates his gods* — as Latour does in his eucharistic gestures and his repetition of Christ's

prayer — he "remains in the sacred"; simultaneously, Eliade explains, through "the continuous reactualization of paradigmatic divine gestures" — that is, by re-enacting the deeds of his gods — "the world is sanctified."[24]

In contrast, the novel's less admirable clerics exercise their devotions sporadically or foolishly. For example, Fray Baltazar, the corpulent, decadent pastor eventually tossed from his mesa-top parish by an exasperated congregation, neglects his breviary for days on end.[25] The "irritatingly stupid"[26] Trinidad makes a fool of himself at the intense Passion Week observances at Abiquiu. In comparison with Latour's and Vaillant's "devotions", Trinidad's rituals are "extravagant"[27] and from Latour's perspectives gruesome and excessive, intense efforts at compensation for characteristic dereliction.

The "Snake Root" account brims with elements of deep significance to religious man. As the *regressus ad uterum* means the return of the hero to an embryonic state, his emergence means rebirth to a new mode of living. Eliade stresses, moreover, that the mythical adventurer does not make the transit alone:

> The symbolism of return to the ventral cavity always has a cosmological valence. It is the entire world that symbolically returns, with the candidate, into cosmic night, in order that it may be created anew, that is, regenerated. . . . The work of time must be undone, the auroral moment immediately preceding the Creation must be reintegrated; on the human plane, this is as much as to restore the "blank page" of existence, the absolute beginning, when nothing was yet sullied, nothing spoiled.
>
> Entering the belly of the monster . . . is equivalent to a regression to the primordial nondistinction, to cosmic night.[28]

For the hero making such a descent, Eliade observes, *coming out of* the beast, rather than *killing* it, is the point. The object is not so much to destroy the powers of chaos (which is not possible) as to confront them on their own turf, and survive. *"To emerge from the belly,"* he explains, *"is equivalent to a cosmogony."*[29] Both hero and world thus return from the adventure newly created.

The defeat of the chaos which drove Latour and Jacinto into the cave is realized upon their emergence:

> The next morning they crawled out through the stone lips, and dropped into *a gleaming white world.* The snow-clad mountains were red in *the rising sun.* The Bishop stood looking down over ridge after ridge of wintry fir trees with *the tender morning breaking over them,*[30] all their branches laden with soft, rose-coloured *clouds of virgin snow.*[31]

The sunrise over an immaculately white landscape suggests that Latour and Jacinto find a freshly re-created world upon their exit from the "beast." Wilderness, once again, has been broken. Other struggles await Latour — Padre Martinez looms as its largest — but their outcome cannot be in doubt. Latour has descended to the netherland where the forces of anti-world teem, and he survived. He is, therefore, equal to any of its challenges.[32]

NOTES

[1] Cather, *Archbishop* (Vintage 1990) 67.

[2] Cather, *Archbishop* 71.

[3] Cather, *Archbishop* 122.

[4] Cather, *Archbishop* 122 (emphasis added). Buck Scales, whose snake-like qualities have previously been discussed, kills each of the three children he fathers by Magdalena "a few days after birth, by ways so horrible that she could not relate it" (72). Infanticide, therefore, emerges as a deeply disturbing theme in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and one linked to snakes.

[5] Cather, *Archbishop* 123.

[6] Cather, *Archbishop* 119.

[7] Cather, *Archbishop* 124.

[8] A strikingly similar situation is found in the 1903 story "A Death in the Desert" (*Youth and the Bright Medusa*, Vintage 1975). Katharine Gaylord, whose devotion to the unappreciative Adriance Hilgarde lasts her lifetime, recalls a period years before when she rushed to Florence and the bedside of her beloved, who lay seriously ill:

> I arrived at dusk, in a terrific storm. They had taken an old palace there for the winter . . . . [Adriance] was sitting by a wood fire at one end of the room, looking, oh, so worn and pale! . . . Outside, the rain poured down in torrents, and the wind moaned and sobbed in the garden and about the walls of that desolated old palace. How that night comes back to me! . . . [The fire] glowed on the black walls and floor like the reflection of purgatorial flame. Beyond us it scarcely penetrated the gloom at all. Adriance sat staring at the fire with the weariness of all his life in his eyes, and of all the other lives that must aspire and suffer to make up one such life as his. *Somehow the wind with all its world-pain had got into the room, and the cold rain was in our eyes, and the wave came up in both of us at once — that awful vague, universal pain, that cold fear of life and death and God and hope — and we were like two clinging together on a spar in mid-ocean after the shipwreck of everything* (274-5; emphasis added).

In both stories, an ominous wind seems to bear cosmicidic forces threatening to overwhelm the human world with chaos.

[9] Cather, *Archbishop* 125 (emphasis added).

[10] Cather, *Archbishop* 126.

[11] Cather, *Archbishop* 126.

[12] Cather, *Archbishop* 126.

[13] Cather, *Archbishop* 127.

[14] Cather, *Archbishop* 130.

[15] Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth* (Harper 1958) 52.

[16] Religious man, in turn, endlessly repeats this passage symbolically in his rituals of initiation. (Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth* 49-57; *Myth and Reality* (Harper 1975) 79-81.)

[17] Cather, *Archbishop* 128.

[18] Cather, *Archbishop* 129-30 (emphases added).

[19] He is careful, however, to wait until Jacinto is otherwise occupied, for "he never liked to drink spirits in the presence of an Indian" (*Archbishop* 130).

[20] To do so would be unseemly for a clergyman. Latour draws his pistol on Buck Scales, but does not fire. Scales, checkmated by the weapon, responds shockingly — but characteristically, considering he is a profane man — by hurling a profanity at the priests (*Archbishop* 69). Scales' execution will come at the hands of civil authorities (77).

[21] While in Pecos, he prays over the humble meal he shares with Jacinto's family (*Archbishop* 121). Here "the

(Continued on page 36)

bishop said a blessing and broke the bread with his hands." The scene is reminiscent of the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19) and, therefore, eucharistic in tone. Latour and Jacinto pray beside their dying campfire prior to turning in (93); the night before their engulfment in the malestorm, Latour reads "his breviary by the fire-light for an hour," while the infant cries in its cradle (124); the next morning Latour prays before crawling out of his blankets (124).

[22] Cather, *Archbishop* 131.

[23] This assessment of the success of Latour's prayer is not shared by all, however. John J. Murphy writes that "Latour tries unsuccessfully to control dark, chaotic impulses by having his Indian guide join him in the formula prayer Christ taught his disciples: 'He made Jacinto repeat a *Pater Noster* with him' (131). Latour is similarly disarmed at Ácoma, where he feels the challenge of pagan mysteries while saying Mass" ("The Missions of Latour and Paul: *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and the Early Church." *Literature and Belief* 8 [1988]: 61). Still, considered from Eliade's perspective, Latour's prayer has vital efficacy.

[24] *Sacred and Profane* (Harper 1961) 99 (emphasis added).

[25] Cather, *Archbishop* 111.

[26] Cather, *Archbishop* 144.

[27] Cather, *Archbishop* 154.

[28] Eliade, *Sacred and Profane* 195-6 (emphasis added).

[29] Eliade, *Sacred and Profane* 195-6 (emphasis added).

[30] This image may well be an allusion to Zechariah's canticle in the gospel of Luke (1:68-79), in which the father of John the Baptist prophesies his new born son's adult ministry will herald the day of blessing which, "through the tender mercy of our God," "shall dawn upon us from on high" (Luke 1:78). The imagery suggests the re-creation of the world in the promised messiah.

[31] Cather, *Archbishop* 131-2 (emphases added).

[32] A curious and intriguing inverse of Latour's adventure can be found in "The Diamond Mine." Cressida Garnet finds herself encircled by greedy opportunists. She is appreciated neither as a person nor an artist, but only as an economic feast, and her existence is thereby ruined. Preparing to return from a winter concert tour in England, Cressida sends her party on ahead while she waits for "the first trip of the *sea monster*" (emphasis added), i.e., the *Titanic* (Cather, *Youth and the Bright Medusa* [Vintage 1975] 117). When disaster strikes she seemingly makes no attempt to escape, for "apparently she never left her cabin. She was not seen on the decks, and none of the survivors brought any word of her" (117). Cressida, therefore, exhausted by a lifelong struggle against engulfment, chooses not to emerge from the "beast," and finally surrenders to the powers of obliteration.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Cather Spring Conference Sessions
Red Cloud, Friday, April 1, 1998

Papers on the featured novels, *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady*, are particularly welcome, although papers on all Cather topics are acceptable. Abstracts due December 1, 1997; completed papers, February 1, 1998. For papers and abstracts contact: Susanne George, 204 Thomas Hall, U of Nebraska-Kearney, Kearney, Nebraska 68849-1320 (e-mail: georges@platte.unk.edu).

Since we have not published a bibliographical essay since our Spring 1995 issue, Duke University Press and Jo Ann Middleton have given us permission to print the following chapter from the forthcoming American Literary Scholarship 1995.

Cather Bibliographical Essay for Works Published in 1995

Jo Ann Middleton
Drew University

There's something for everyone in the studies of Cather published during 1995. Philip Gerber's *Willa Cather, Revised Edition* (Twayne) not only updates his 1975 seminal work for a superb introduction to and overview of Cather's life and work, but serves as an example of scholarship in evolution, as he expands, reconsiders, and synthesizes his earlier insights with those of scholars who have followed him. Gerber arranges his material chronologically by genre, emphasizes the short stories as "a major literary accomplishment in their own right," even-handedly and thoughtfully considers the "question of Cather biography," particularly with reference to sexual orientation and its possible impact upon the fiction, then summarizes the critical response to Cather in a masterful chapter that reminds veteran Catherites of how far we have come, identifies "the best of the new work," and suggests the rich possibilities Cather continues to offer for future study. Joan Acocella's "Cather and the Academy" (*New Yorker*, November 27, 1995:56-71) takes a less sanguine view of Cather criticism, finally concluding that the only two groups who actually like Cather are writers and readers.

Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration (Illinois), Joseph R. Urgo's study of Cather's "aesthetics of migration" splendidly confirms Gerber's optimism. Reminding us that Cather kept her own suitcases under her bed, Urgo locates transience at the center of American culture, identity, and global empire, then brilliantly redefines Cather as the first major writer whose body of work provides a comprehensive resource for the centrality of cosmic homelessness and the demarcation of an empire of migration in that culture by raising both to the level of an aesthetic ideal. Urgo's fresh and perceptive readings of the novels with the "migratory critical acumen" that "Cather's aesthetics demand" persuasively support his thesis that the vision of American culture Cather projects is one "of continuous movement, of spatial and temporal migrations, of intellectual transmission and physical uprooting." In *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *A Lost Lady* Cather provides a vision of America that rests on the "metaphysics of homelessness and

human movement, both physical and intellectual." Cather's two kinds of memory, remembering and forgetting, inform *The Professor's House*, *Lucy Gayheart*, *Shadows on the Rock*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and provide a basis for comprehension of the settled community within an ideology of transit. *The Song of the Lark*, *One of Ours*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* identify the logical and inevitable progression from ambitious migration to U.S. empire. This substantial contribution to both cultural studies and Cather studies gives credence to Urgo's proposition that Cather's work is indeed substantial enough to redirect American literary history by showing how thoroughly transit has marked Americans.

For those who do not have a copy, Mildred R. Bennett's ground-breaking work *The World of Willa Cather* (Nebraska) has been reprinted, making accessible material on Cather's family, her friends, and the Red Cloud that formed her sensibilities. *Willa Cather's University Days: The University of Nebraska, 1890-1895* (Center for Great Plains Studies), Kari Ronning and Elizabeth Turner, eds., opens the door to yet another avenue of scholarship with six essays on Cather's undergraduate experience, a chronology of her university days, 14 photographs, and the speech (printed here for the first time) she gave at a reunion of the Class of 1895. Guy Reynolds traces Cather's "networks of friendship" and convincingly explicates affinities and reciprocities between Cather's themes of immigration and cultural transmission (as well as the development of an American folk-culture) and those in her college friend Louise Pound's work in philology, folklore, and literary criticism, "Louise Pound and Willa Cather: An Intellectual Network?" (*WCPMN* [Cather Newsletter] 39:69-72). Susan J. Rosowski's "Willa Cather's Ecology of Place" (*Western American Literature* 30:37-51) demonstrates how fruitful this avenue can be by linking Cather's close attention to nature with "the ecological model" and botanical principles of her Nebraska professor Charles E. Bessey. Not only does *O Pioneers!* demonstrate Cather's inheritance from Bessey and her intellectual affinity with her college friends and botanists Edith and Fred Clements, but the novel illuminates Cather's understanding of place as "a matter of consciousness," crystallizing the ecological dialectic that informs her work and locating her as the forerunner to Wes Jackson.

In *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction* (Nebraska), Diane Dufva Quantic draws on the work of cultural geographers, historians, and literary critics to elucidate the ways in which a remarkable number of writers, including Cather, Ole Rølvaag, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Bess Streeter Aldrich, Wright Morris, and Wallace Stegner, depict "the interrelated influences of the various westering myths, the land itself, and the establishment of society." Quantic reads *O Pioneers!* as a complex version of the garden myth; *The Song of the Lark* as an example of the unique connection between words and place; "Neighbour Rosicky" as an elegy to the myth of the yeoman farmer and the democratic utopia; *The Professor's House* as an exploration of the interrelations of past and present; and *A Lost Lady* as an illustration of "the ways we alter old myths to fit our more prosaic world."

Several scholars pair Cather with others. *In A Certain Slant of Light: Regionalism and the Form of Southern and Midwestern Fiction* (Louisiana State U), David Marion Holman illustrates the movement from romance to realism in literature by citing works from Cather and Ellen Glasgow to demonstrate their common artistic goal: bringing the past and present together into a meaningful, understandable relationship. For Cather, this enterprise means measuring the present by the past by means of an aesthetics that incorporates "a nineteenth-century romantic view handled with the techniques of the modern world." Holman offers *O Pioneers*, *My Ántonia* and *The Professor's House* as examples of Cather's reaction against the realism of her peers, "indictment without instruction," and concludes that she was, in the midwestern tradition, "a lecturer, a moralist, and a social critic" (pp. 96-110).

John J. Murphy's thoughtful essay "*Shadows on the Rock*, *Maria Chapdelaine*, and the Old Nationalism" (*WCPMN* 39:1-6), puts Cather's and Louis Hemon's novels next to Marcel Chaput's 1961 polemic on French-Canadian separatism to demonstrate how these works inform the current debate on nationalism and to point out where both novels part company with contemporary attitudes as they define a traditional rather than new nationalism. Scott L. Newstrom puts *A Lost Lady* next to "The Waste Land" and *Hamlet* and proposes that Cather intentionally chose her novel's epigraph in order to allude at once to a source (*Hamlet*) and to another allusion ("The Waste Land") in "Saying *'Goodnight'* to "Lost" Ladies: An Inter-textual Interpretation of Allusions to *Hamlet's* Ophelia in Cather's *A Lost Lady* and Eliot's 'The Waste Land' " (*WCPMN* 39:33 -37); all three texts examine the sexuality, suppression, and social roles of women in a patriarchal world.

Daniel J. Holtz links Cather's treatment of "aesthetically unimaginative, narrow-minded money-grubbers" in *O Pioneers!*, "Neighbour Rosicky," and "The Sculptor's Funeral" to the artistic temperament and to Bess Streeter Aldrich's treatment of similar characters in *The Rim of the Prairie* and *A Lantern in Her Hand* and her perception of self as a story-teller, in "Willa Cather and Bess Streeter Aldrich: Contrasting Portrayals of Money-Grubbers and 'Olafarians' " (*Heritage of Kansas* 28,i:4-10). Cather perceives the pursuit of money as an impediment to art, correlating with provincialism, hypocrisy, and conspiracy, while Aldrich may, in fact, couple that same pursuit with an artistic sensibility.

In "Words and Music Made Flesh in Cather's 'Eric Hermannson's Soul' " (*Studies in Short Fiction* 31:209-16), John Flannigan expertly explores the reverberations of the intermezzo from Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* that extend beyond their role releasing of Eric's artist soul. The power of Cather's allusion

(Continued on page 38)

emanates from the fact that the sexual jealousies, violence, and religious tensions of Mascagni's opera *"in its totality"* also form an integral part of the thematic fabric in her story. Artistic sensibility — or lack thereof — is the subject of Merrill Skaggs's astute and ingenious pairing of Thea Kronborg and Clement Sebastian, "*artists* who are . . . counterpointed in polyphonic lines" in "Key Modulations in Cather's Novels about Music" (*WCPMN* 39:25-6, 28-30). *The Song of the Lark* and *Lucy Gayheart* provide studies of two kinds of art, one good and one bad; by applying Kronborg standards to Clement Sebastian, "one sees why Cather killed him off first."

The Song of the Lark inspired three fine essays this year. In "The 'Wonderfulness' of Thea Kronborg's Voice" (*Western American Literature* 30:257-74), Sharon Hoover relies on paradigms of male and female development described by Carol Gilligan to convincingly read Thea's character from a female developmental pattern that values integration of social/community obligations and individual obligations to determine that Thea represents a whole and healthy woman linked to her own mother and to the ancient mothers of Panther Canyon. Thea's realization of her self-identity, her appropriation of a singular voice, and her recognition of "older and higher obligations" allow her to interpret Fricka as a strong, loving, and responsible woman/goddess. Following the pattern of woman-centered imagery through which Cather shows distorted womanhood, sterility and death, Evelyn I. Funda offers Mrs. Archie's sexual repression and distorted passion as an important contrast to Thea's femininity and artistic passion in "Womanhood Distorted: Mrs. Archie as Thea's Foil in *The Song of the Lark*" (*WCPMN* 39:30-33) and points out how this imagery reverses itself as Thea grows to full possession of her sexuality, creative power, and artistic passion. Cather's appropriation of the ideas, words, and images of the Christian Eucharist undergirds Steven B. Shively's compelling thesis and that this novel heralds Cather's changed attitude toward religion, art, and sacrifice in "'A Full, Perfect, and Sufficient Sacrifice': Eucharistic Imagery in Cather's *Song of the Lark*" (*Literature and Belief* 14[1994]:73-86) rejects Old Testament rigidity in favor of a decidedly Christian and traditionally ritualistic sacramental view enabling Cather to open the Kingdom of Art to women. Asad Al-Ghalith, in "Willa Cather: Light and Mystical Journey" (*International Fiction Review* i, ii:31-36), contends that some of Cather's characters, including Thea Kronborg, Lucy Gayheart, and Jim Burden, go through the phases or stages of the mystic on the quest for ultimate knowledge and union with the Divine. Cather reveals elements of her own "mystic consciousness" when she is most concerned with artistic temperament, and, like the mystic writer, she uses light imagery to signify moments of awakening and illumination.

In her superb essay, "A New World Symphony: Cultural Pluralism in *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia*" (*WCPMN* 39:1, 7-12), Ann Moseley counters critics who label Cather "racist" and misguidedly judge her work by contemporary standards, with a clearly reasoned and timely explanation of the context in which Cather created her multi-ethnic characters. Like Anton Dvorak's *New World Symphony*, Cather's *Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia* reflect sociologist Horace M. Kallen's metaphor of America as "a symphony of cultures"; Cather displays a remarkable appreciation of the value of each separate culture to American civilization and, for one of her ethnic background, situated as she was in the early twentieth century, makes an unusually progressive commitment to cultural pluralism. Calling Cather's characters "'peculiar Americans' rather than 'peculiarly American'," Hermione Lee suggests that Cather's lifework can be seen as a continuing study of American identity in which the unassimilated, the peculiar, the maladjusted, those who have the "more civilised" self-consciousness arouse her artist's imagination, in "Cather's Bridge: Anglo-American Crossings in Willa Cather," pp. 38-56 in *Forked Tongues?: Comparing Twentieth-Century British and American Literature* (Longman, 1994), Ann Massa and Alistair Stead, eds. Using cultural struggle as a way of writing about personal fears, repressions, and confusions, Cather invokes large questions on the relation of culture to ethnicity, on the creation of nationality, and on the best life for the individual at a crossing-point between possible identities. For Karen M. Hindhede, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* works as a site of interplay among Mexican, Indian, and Anglo myths, particularly those emphasizing feminine power, and she explores Cather's use of such Native American and Mexican myths as those of Yellow Corn Girl, Salt Woman, and Grandmother Spider as they intersect with Anglo-Christian spirituality, in "Allusion and Echoes: Multi-Cultural Blending and Feminine Spirituality in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, (*Heritage of Kansas* 28,i:11-19). Latour comes close to experiencing the power of feminine spirituality kneeling with Sada in prayer to the Virgin Mary and finally reflects the spherical, cyclical and internal world-view of "feminine" and Native American thought as he lies on his deathbed, his consciousness unbound by linear space and sequential time. Terence Martin in *Parables of Possibility: The American Need for Beginnings* (Columbia, pp. 142-57) proposes that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* puts "Cather-the-artist in a primary position of completing the Creator's work" by engaging the imaginative possibilities of the Southwest to encompass character, event and history "in a harmony of place and spirit." Latour's initial sense of human diminishment and disorientation in the face of a boundless and not-yet-completed land is ultimately transformed as he surrenders to the landscape in a series of trials and new beginnings that culminate in a state of mind to which "nothing has been lost, nothing has been outgrown; all is proximate — and fully comprehensible."

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Ann Romines breaks new ground with her intelligent and reflective reading of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Shadows on the Rock*, and "Old Mrs. Harris" as examples of Cather's exploration of the process and progress of aging in "Willa Cather and the Coming of Old Age" (*Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 37:394-413). Although Latour's and Frontenac's last days are similar, they actually suggest compelling differences in Cather's views of aging. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* concerns a life in which old age brings dignity, value, and completion and the novel ends with the news of a "good death"; *Shadows on the Rock* becomes a more obviously modernist view of the complexities of aging as the focus shifts to the process of aging and dying. Neither novel narrates the scene of an old woman's death, but, in "Old Mrs. Harris", Cather is able to narrate the story of Mrs. Harris's unobtrusive, dignified, and resonant death in spite of physical decline, lack of money, and the partial disregard of her family.

Shadows on the Rock garnered the lion's share of attention to individual novels this year. In "Historicism and the Sentimental: Sources of Power in Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock*" (*WCPMN* 39:63-67), Elaine E. Limbaugh points out that Cather's blending of historicism and the sentimental in *Shadows on the Rock* allow her to construct a social context that reconstructs values, crosses class and gender lines, and manifests spiritual renewal. Cather's selection of a historical moment in time shapes the novel's mood as well as its message; the book's ethical position derives from the sentimental nurture of domesticity and virtue. My own essay, "Historical Space in *Shadows on the Rock*" (*WCPMN* 39:49-53), investigates Cather's modernist inquiry into the intricate complexities and subtle relationships among memory, human consciousness, and imagination in this novel and suggests the consequences of such interaction for human understanding of time and history. Janis Stout asks if Cather's emotionally weighted use of great rocks as images of strength and security has anything to do with the old hymn "Rock of Ages," in "Cather's Firm Foundations and the Rock of Ages: A Note" (*WCPMN* 39:59), and answers that it probably does. Heather Stewart's discerning "*Shadows on the Rock:* The Outsider, the Disfigured, the Disadvantaged, and the Community" (*WCPMN* 39:54-58) draws on Emmanual Levinas's understanding of "the other" to elucidate the value to the community and the formative influence on Cécile's life of "disadvantaged" Jacques, "disfigured" Blinker, Bishop Lavel, and Madame Pommier, and "outsiders" Jeanne Le Ber, Pierre Charron, Father Hector, and Noel Chabanel.

In "Language, Gender, and Ethnicity in Three Fictions by Willa Cather" (*WL* 28:52-56), Helen Wussow identifies Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, and Ántonia Shimerda as outsiders, marginalized and denied access to power because of their gender, their disturbing androgynous qualities and their unwillingness to accept traditional female roles. All three find themselves caught between patriarchies and between languages, preserve their heritage through speech, and create alternative communities comprised of others likewise marginalized because of gender, class, ethnic, or linguistic background.

Critical work on Cather's men continues. Unlike those who see clear differences between Alexandra's relationship to the land and her father's, in "Getting Back to Cather's Text: The Shared Dream in *O Pioneers!* (*Western American Literature* 30:151-62), Neil Gustafson convincingly demonstrates that Alexandra develops her love for the land as she begins to understand and make her father's vision her own. Calling Paul the "saddest of all," Patricia Ellen Martin Daly includes "Paul's Case" in *Envisioning the New Adam: Emphatic Portraits of Men by American Women Writers* (Greenwood), an anthology aimed at "peaceful affiliation and the dissolution of armed gender camps." Although Paul cannot fulfill his potential, his sensitivity, gentleness, wistfulness, and passionate yearning for the beautiful make him a "New Man" of the "New Age."

Ernest Hemingway's famous dismissal of *One of Ours* continues to irritate Cather scholars and to prompt splendid readings of the novel, such as D. A. Boxwell's "In Formation: Male Homosocial Desire in Willa Cather's *One of Ours*" (*Genders* 20[1994]:285-310). Boxwell takes issue with appraisals of *One of Ours* as "an inauthentic, male-identified glorification of war" and argues that Cather's significant deconstruction of gender and sexual identities in *One of Ours* was acute enough to throw Hemingway into "a fit of defensive contempt" for her rendering of the unstable and incoherent nature of male homosocial relationships as well as the misogynistic base upon which they rest. Cather destabilizes and questions male identities and gender relations as they are inscribed normatively in literature about war, reveals a profound awareness of male homosocial desire as a motivation for war as well as the problematic nature of that desire in war, and suggests that efforts to negotiate a way out of the double bind of homosocial desire can only end in a kind of panicked silence or denial. Throughout the novel, Claude's desire for male comradeship is "fostered and exploited and rewarded by all the regimes of social acculturation that have formed the sex/gender/sexuality structures in which he is located; he enters the "ritual realm of prescribed conduct" by killing the enemy, the other in terms of nationality, class, sexuality, and gender transitivity.

Amy Kort identifies Claude as "an unmistakable Nietzschean hero" and pairs him with another, Myra Henshawe, in "Coming Home from Troy: Cather's Journey into Pessimism in *My Mortal Enemy*" (*WCPMN* 39:38-41), to illustrate what happens when that hero lives to experience inevitable disillusionment. Claude, perhaps the last of Cather's true individualistic heroes, cannot survive; Myra surrenders individuality, adopts detachment, and moves from heroism to self-denial, finally achieving "Shopenhauer's happiness of

(Continued on page 40)

CATHER BIBLIOGRAPHY ESSAY
(Continued)

release." Blanche H. Gelfant reads *My Mortal Enemy* beside Ethel Wilson's *Love and Salt Water*, pp. 119-81 in her *Cross-Cultural Reckonings: A Triptych of Russian, American, and Canadian Texts* (Cambridge), as novels which make visible through stark minimalist form economic motifs intrinsic to both writers' work and to the novel as a genre linked historically to the rise of bourgeois society, and she skillfully interprets "murky" clues in the text to show how *My Mortal Enemy* struggles — in vain — to deny, affirm, or reconcile the truth of Driscoll's legacy to Myra: "A poor man stinks, and God hates him."

Alistair Stead explicates Cather's adaptation of the medieval myth of Sherwood Forest in *A Lost Lady* in "Pastoral Sexuality in British and American Fiction" (pp. 295-314 in *Forked Tongues?*), refocusing the material from a feminine perspective. Captain Forrester's vision, courtesy, and selfless generosity grant him Robin's mythic status; Marian (Maidy, Maid Marian, Lady Forrester) finds herself unable to keep to the script. Cao Jinghua attributes Marian's ambiguity, contradictions, discontinuity, and indeteminacy to her essential nature and the "disparate self-parts" of her modernist self in "Marian Forrester, Cather's Fictional Portrayal of the Modernist Self" (*WCPMN* 39:12-16). Viewed positively, Marian's self-fragmentation is a form of self-diversification and self-plentitude allowing her to triumph in the end.

"The Subversive Language of Flowers in Sapphira and the Slave Girl" (*WCPMN* 39:41-44) adds to scholarship on Cather's use of flower imagery as Francoise Palleau-Papin's analyzes the flower-encoded sexual innuendoes and questioning of interracial relationships that demonstrate how, through the novel's discourse on slavery, flowers become a means of expression for the slave woman as well as the narrator herself. Diane Roberts finds echoes of the classic fugitive slave narrative and the old-fashioned abolitionist novel in *Sapphira* and suggests that, for different reasons, Henry and Sapphira both seek to rid their world of disruptive bodies; the Old South runs on mutual antipathy so deep that separation is the only safety for Nancy and the only peace for Sapphira — and for Henry.

Finally, three unrelated items of note deserve mention. Susan Rosowski, Charles Mignon, Kari Ronning, and Frederick M. Link's "Editing Cather" (*Studies in the Novel* 27:387-400) give us an insider's look at the monumental task, the occasional surprises, and the delights involved in preparing and publishing the Cather Scholarly Edition. Rosowski ("Rewriting the Love Plot Our Way: Women and Work," pp. 29-38) and Ann Fisher-Wirth ("Love, Work, and Willa Cather," pp. 11-18) contribute moving personal essays on the meaning of Cather scholarship in their lives to *Private Voices, Public Lives: Women Speak on the Literary Life* (No. Texas), Nancy Owen Nelson, ed.

ALA panelists in Baltimore: Janis Stout, Robert K. Miller, Kathleen Davies. — Photo by Ann Romines

Cather Sessions at 1997 ALA

Two lively Cather sessions sponsored by the Willa Cather Society were presented at the American Literature Association Conference in Baltimore in May. "Willa Cather: Reading a Career," organized and chaired by Ann Romines, took the fiftieth anniversary of Cather's death as an occasion to discuss shifting readings of Cather's career. Papers included "Mencken, Cather, and the American Professoriate, 1917-1925" by Robert K. Miller of the University of St. Thomas; "Playing in the Mother Country: Cather, Morrison, and the Return to Virginia" by Janis Stout of Texas A & M University; and "The Pastoral Closet: Willa Cather's New Career as 'Lesbian Writer'" by Kathleen Davies of Ohio State University at Lima. The second session, "Willa Cather's Modernism Revisited," was chaired and organized by Jo Ann Middleton of Drew University. It included papers by two veteran scholars: Laura Winters of the College of St. Elizabeth discussed "Teaching Willa Cather and Virginia Woolf" and Independent Scholar Sherrill Harbison discussed "Cather as Wagnerite and Symbolist." Two additional scholars gave their first Cather papers: Noreen O'Connor of the George Washington University presented "Cather and the Great War: Considering *One of Ours* as a High Modernist Work," and Carol Chaski of the U.S. Department of Justice presented "Detecting Clues to Cather's Style."

The 1998 ALA meeting will be held in San Diego next May. If you would like to propose a paper for presentation at one of the sessions sponsored by the Willa Cather Society, contact John Swift at Occidental College, 1600 Campus Road, Los Angeles, California 90041-3314.

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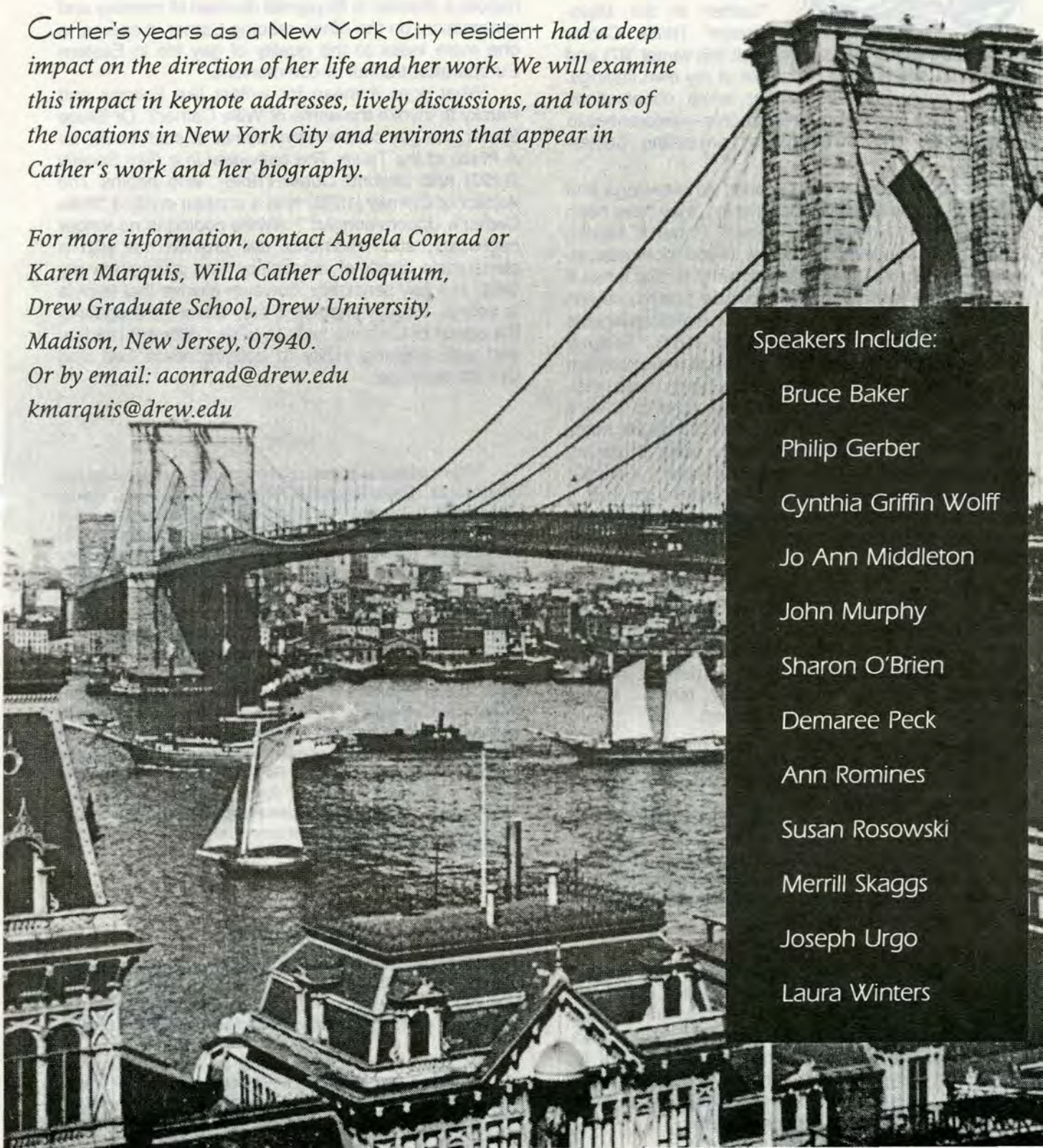

Speakers Include:

- Bruce Baker
- Philip Gerber
- Cynthia Griffin Wolff
- Jo Ann Middleton
- John Murphy
- Sharon O'Brien
- Demaree Peck
- Ann Romines
- Susan Rosowski
- Merrill Skaggs
- Joseph Urgo
- Laura Winters

Cather-as-Code

John P. Anders
Lincoln, Nebraska

I have been following with interest and delight Loretta Wasserman's columns on "Cather in the Mainstream" (*Willa Cather Newsletter*, winter '95; summer/fall '96; winter '97) and have even shared with her a few of my own findings. Here, though, I'd like to offer some observations different from Professor Wasserman's — references to Willa Cather in gay texts, or what I am calling "Cather-as-code."

Literature has always encoded its meanings and gay texts are no exception; if anything, they have been necessarily more covert and indirect. Robert K. Martin, for instance, suggests that by the 1880s "homosexuality seems to have emerged sufficiently so that it has a public profile (certain authors, certain poems, certain subjects), while in the 1840s it was indistinguishable from other forms of male friendship" (181). Gregory Woods adds that "it is difficult to find an important text on male homosexuality, at least among those published before 1969, which does not refer to Plato's dialogues" (96). And Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes that "Whitman — visiting Whitman, liking Whitman, giving gifts of 'Whitman' — was of course a Victorian homosexual shibboleth, and much more than that, a step in the consciousness and self-formation of many members of that new Victorian class, the bourgeois homosexual" (28).[1]

It has come to my attention that Willa Cather is becoming the modern exemplum of this phenomenon. Two recent books support this claim. In *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* (1996), Will Fellows interviews gay men from across the country who had grown up on Midwestern farms. In his "afterword," he mentions Willa Cather:

> Among the many things that have influenced my approach to this project has been my acquaintance with the life and writings of Willa Cather. A lesbian who grew up in rural and small-town Nebraska in the 1880s, Cather was a quintessential misfit who felt that she couldn't live in her home state as an adult. But from the comfortable distance of the urban Northeast, she was able to write many novels and short stories based on her Nebraska childhood. (315)

As Cather "searched for books telling about the beauty of the country [she] loved, its romance, and heroism and strength and courage of its people" (quoted in Bohlke 37), she did not find them and so she wrote *O Pioneers!*. Looking for stories about rural gay youths, Fellows did not find them either and thus began his Gay Farm Boys Project. In the process, Cather becomes a paradigm not only for his own life, but also for the lives of the men he interviewed.

In *Boyopolis: Sex and Politics in Gay Eastern Europe* (1996), Stan Persky visits a string of cities from Berlin to Tirana. Quite unexpectedly, his "tomboyish" guide in Vilnius, Lithuania, tells him she is reading *My Ántonia* and comments on its "implied lesbian aspects" (368). This candid remark opens their conversation and prompts Persky to inquire about the local gay bars. On the one hand, a reference to *My Ántonia* enhances a chapter in *Boyopolis* devoted to memory and imagination; on the other, reading Cather, it seems, is one more index to the quality of gay life in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism.

What does it mean for writers like Fellows and Persky to invoke the name of Willa Cather? Or Bruce Bawer, the gay conservative author of such books as *A Place at the Table: The Individual in a Gay Society* (1993) and *Beyond Queer* (1996), who begins *The Aspect of Eternity* (1993) with a chapter entitled "Willa Cather's Uncommon Art"? While coding is no longer necessary, such moments still provide me with a pleasurable spark of recognition and strengthen my belief in a gay sensibility, however elusive that term is to define. Equally important, they attest once again to the power of Cather's texts to attract different readers and their ongoing ability to accommodate new and diverse readings.

NOTE

[1] This tradition of coded references has many interesting implications. David Bergman, for instance, argues in *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* that through a strategy of inclusion and exclusion, F. O. Matthiessen "erected in *American Renaissance* virtually a gay canon of American literature" (96), one in which Walt Whitman exemplified "The Great American Writer" (97). In her early articles and reviews, Cather shows similar daring in her references to writers like Whitman, Wilde and Housman, and the French authors she admired such as Verlaine and Pierre Loti. Her novels convert this audacity into an allusive literary style. If one argument is that by freely and willingly alluding to homosexual writers, Cather reveals she has nothing to hide about herself and her life (Acocella 66), another is that by coded references Cather is entering the modern discourse on sexual identity. As Guy Reynolds points out in *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire*, "[R]ather like Jane Austen, this apparently *désengagée* author was caught up in a fictional exploration of many of the leading intellectual, social and political ideas of her time" (13).

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The Song of the Lark and *A Lost Lady*: The Evolution of Lark into Woodpecker

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In *The Song of the Lark* and *A Lost Lady,* Willa Cather uses birds prominently as organizing images. Published In 1915, *The Song of the Lark* continually associates Thea Kronborg with the lark and other birds. *A Lost Lady,* published eight years later, is intricately woven around the scene in which Ivy Peters cuts the eye of a female woodpecker. In *The Song of the Lark,* Cather uses the lark to represent Thea's vocal talents, but slides the metaphor to include other birds which she then can use to emphasize the caged, trapped, and "nested" consequences of Thea's situation, which in turn necessitate Thea's flight response. In *A Lost Lady*, Marian Forrester is like the woodpecker, both trapped and attacked; despite these problems, however, Marian is finally free at the end of the novel. By examining these two novels, we can see how Cather has transformed bird imagery from the inconsistent and unclear references in *The Song of the Lark* into the tight, clear, and central woodpecker in *A Lost Lady.*

Thea Kronborg is associated with the lark from the very beginning, the title. Cather's title is taken from a painting by Jules Adolphe Breton which Thea admires while she is visiting the Art Institute of Chicago (157). Ironically, in this painting, the lark is hardly present (there are distant birds in the sky); we only see a peasant girl listening to the bird's song. The absence of the lark illustrates an important characteristic of it; larks generally sing only in flight (and usually out of sight of the listener).[1] If Thea is to be the lark, then it would seem imperative that she be free so that she can sing.

The first nests and cages from which Thea must be liberated are in Moonstone: her music teacher Wunsch; Ray Kennedy, who would likely have become her husband; and her home and family. Wunsch symbolically liberates Thea by destroying the wooden dovehouse during a drunken escapade. Cather is careful to have the dovehouse destroyed without mentioning any birds being hurt; the violence in this novel is not directed at the birds but at their cages. Wunsch's drunkenness and destructiveness lead to his being ostracized by the community and ultimately to his departure. After he leaves, he sends Thea a birthday postcard with a white dove on it; this dove refers back to the dovehouse that he recently destroyed and whose inhabitants were violently freed. In order for Thea to progress, she must be freed from Wunsch; so long as she has a mentor in Moonstone, she will be reluctant to go to Chicago or New York to study under better teachers. The dove also represents Thea who will be thrust from Moonstone under violent circumstances, namely Ray's death. When Ray is killed, his caboose becomes a "pile of splintered wood and twisted iron" (115), recalling the scene of the splintered dovehouse. The destruction of the caboose is significant because it has been a cage for Thea; the twisted iron suggests a violent escape from a prison or cage. The narrator describes the cupola of the caboose as a little box which frames Thea: "Ray got such pleasure out of seeing her face there in the little box where he so often imagined it" (92). Earlier, one of Ray's friends compares his fussiness about his caboose with that of an "old maid about her bird-cage" (88). Cather's use of "little box" and "bird-cage" in describing the caboose functions as an authorial commentary which cannot be dismissed: no matter how good Ray may be, he will ultimately cage the artistic spirit of Thea. Ray's death provides a second narrative function: his $600 life insurance policy allows Thea to leave Moonstone and study in Chicago. The expulsion of Wunsch and the death of Ray together create the impetus and opportunity needed for Thea to leave her safe little nest in the attic.

Harsanyi is the next nest to which Thea flies. She is comfortable with him and is reluctant to leave him when he finds out that her voice holds more potential than her piano playing. Harsanyi compares Thea's arrival to that of a bird: "it was like a wild bird that had flown into his studio . . . [a] crude girl in whose throat it beat its passionate wings" (150). Thea, despite her vocal talent, would rather have inferior lessons or stay with the piano than go to an unknown instructor. Finally, Harsanyi is able to get her under the tutelage of Bowers, the leading voice instructor in Chicago; she is pushed out of one nest into another, the bower. The significance of the name is yet another way in which Cather infuses Thea's relationships with images of "enclosure," "arbor," and "bridal chamber." Cather insists that we read Thea's moves from nest to nest or from cage to cage.

Fred Ottenburg is the one who then lures Thea out of the bower. Fred, like Ray, appears to be a good

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person for Thea. However, Cather relates him to highly explosive and aggressive terminology. When Bowers discovers that Thea likes Fred, he makes a seemingly lighthearted statement: " 'Oh, he's a lady-killer, all right!' " (212). Nevertheless, one should also consider reading it as a serious remark, especially given later references to Fred. At one point, the narrator states that "[h]e would attack her when his lance was brighter" (230). By arming Fred with a lance, Cather makes him both a physical and sexual threat to Thea. Fred is a hunter and Thea is his prey. This comment also refers back to Wunsch's violent but necessary attack on the dovehouse, during which he had to strike at the birds with his axe to prevent their flying in his face. Both comments also look forward to *A Lost Lady* in which all the men, even the supposedly good ones, symbolically attack Marian Forrester through violent acts.

In spite of his violent potential, Fred is similar to Ray in providing the means for Thea to leave her present environs. He is the one who suggests the trip to the cliff dwellings and who enables her to go. While exploring the cilff dwellings, Thea is alone and at peace; the narrator refers to one of the dwellings as Thea's nest: "This was her old idea: a nest in a high cliff, full of sun" (235). Soon afterwards, Fred arrives and mentions that Thea is not one to settle down. " 'You're not a nest-building bird. You know I've always liked your song' " (250). Fred's statement suggests that nest building is somehow incompatible with singing by implying that if Thea were to nest, her song would be diminished and he may not enjoy it anymore. This association is paramount because throughout the novel, Thea must leave her nests and cages, forcibly or on her own, to further her career. Fred lures her away from the cliff dwellings and Chicago with a proposal of marriage. In fact, he provides numerous reasons for not returning to Chicago but for going to Mexico City instead: the first is that they are " 'exceptionally free' " of all other people (259); and secondly, " 'it will be a lark for you' " (259). Here Fred is emphasizing the freedom of the flight, when in fact marriages throughout the novel are artistically stifling: Spanish Johnny is only artistically free after Mrs. Tellemantez has died, and Dr. Archie, although not an artist, is only free after his wife has died. Thea seems to desire the nest, but Fred's own stifling marriage makes marriage to Thea impossible.

By not being able to marry Fred, Thea ends up in New York with the opportunity to study in Germany, although she is reluctant to go overseas. Fred is with her the night before she is scheduled to leave, but his mother has had a fall and he is needed at home in St. Louis. Fred's absence removes the semblance of a nest in New York, and thus bolsters Thea's ability to leave for Europe.

Earlier, while in Arizona, Thea finds a shard of pottery which spurred her to think of art as a means to capture a moment of life: "what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself — life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose" (240). Being that Thea's art is her voice and her self, this treatise on art suggests that she must imprison herself in her art, or for her art. And such is the case: while in Germany, Thea's nest bcomes a self-imposed cage. Her mother is dying, but her artistic career in Germany would be sacrificed if she leaves for Moonstone; therefore, she forces herself to stay and in return receives an entry into the operatic world. When she returns to New York, Thea's career confinement becomes more evident; when Archie sees her, he notes that she looks "distinctly clipped and plucked . . . like a fugitive" (321). This image of Thea is not one of the lark flying free overhead but of one whose wings have been clipped and whose plumage has been plucked. Shortly thereafter, Archie talks to Fred about "how tired she looked, plucked of her feathers" (327). Success for Thea comes at the expense of her freedom. Even while she is singing, the shape of the stage is that of the "little box," the confining cupola of Ray's caboose.

In Thea's final, telling scene, there is the suggestion that she will never again be truly free. Spanish Johnny is waiting for Thea to appear after a concert; she walks out and does not recognize him. This scene is important because it signifies her lack of freedom. It was with Spanish Johnny at his house that she was the most free; after the dance, she sang without inhibition. Also, at the dance, there were no images relating to nests or cages; she was out in the open night. Spanish Johnny's unnoticed appearance represents Thea's inability to soar and sing; she can still sing remarkably, but she seems to be singing from a cage in which she has placed herself (or has been placed indirectly by the men who control her life).

Although *The Song of the Lark* is filled with bird imagery, the imagery does not entirely relate to Thea and fails to be consistent in direction or meaning; in *A Lost Lady*, however, Cather concentrates the bird imagery in one scene with a woodpecker and revolves the novel around this scene. The early episode sets the tone of the novel and establishes the conflict. Niel Herbert and some other boys are playing near Marian Forrester's marsh when Ivy Peters comes upon them. Ivy spots a female woodpecker (Niel is the one who lets us know it is female) and shoots it down from the tree with his slingshot. Ivy then blinds the bird, claiming while he is doing it that woodpeckers "spoil the old man's grove" (22); his reasoning identifies him, like Niel later is, as a protector of the Captain. Unlike the wild violence of Wunsch, Ivy is meticulous and skilled in his actions: "He held the woodpecker's head in a vice made of his thumb and forefinger . . . . Quick as a flash, as if it were a practiced trick, with one of those tiny blades he slit both the eyes that glared in the bird's stupid little head" (24). The bird struggles to navigate and finally makes it back to its hole in the

tree. Niel then tries to climb the tree so he can put the bird out of its misery; or, as I will argue later, so he can kill the bird because it no longer represents an ideal to him. Niel falls from the tree and breaks his arm before he can reach the bird and is carried to the Forrester home by Ivy. Niel and Ivy are the only two boys allowed in the house; it is at this point that their rivalry to replace the Captain as controller of the house and of Marian begins: Ivy wants to sit in the Captain's big leather chair; Niel is enraptured by the beauty of the Captain's things, including Marian.

Chronologically, the first scene directly related to the woodpecker episode is the one in which the Captain meets Marian. The Captain rescues her many years before Ivy blinds the woodpecker, but we are not told of the rescue until near the end of the novel. Marian had been hiking with another man, Harney, when they fell off a cliff. Harney was killed, but Marian "was caught in a pine tree, which arrested her fall. Both her legs were broken" (165). A tree saves Marian from death, just as a tree saves the woodpecker from being killed by Niel; also, both of Marian's legs are broken just as both of the woodpecker's eyes are blinded. Both handicaps serve to confine the two females to their respective trees. The rescue scene retrospectively establishes the association of Marian with the woodpecker throughout the novel.

Marian is associated with the woodpecker, but Niel and Frank are associated with Ivy. Niel is associated with Ivy when he cuts the roses to bring to Marian. Niel uses a knife, as did Ivy, to cut the roses from a bush in the marsh where the woodpecker event took place. We are told that the roses have red thorns, which could be a reference to the woodpecker's head, its blood, or Ivy's red knife case. Furthermore, the roses are described as being defenseless, as was the woodpecker in Ivy's hands. Finally, after Niel hears Marian and Frank in the house, he throws down the roses to be trampled in the mud, his eyes "blind with anger" (86). Cather is careful in her association of these two episodes. The narrator describes the relationship between Frank and Marian not as an affront to a moral scruple, but to "an aesthetic ideal" of Niel's (87). Marian no longer fits the ideal image in which Niel has previously seen her; like the woodpecker, she is not perfect in his eyes, and he cannot accept anything which does not fit his sense of the ideal. Later, he is associated with Ivy's capturing of the woodpecker. Marian is in the same glade where the woodpecker scene occurred, when Niel "stepped forward and caught her suspended figure . . . in his arms. How light and alive she was! like a bird caught in a net. If only he could rescue her and carry her off like this" (110). The place and Niel's actions, catching and holding Marian, parallel Ivy's actions with the woodpecker, and his desire to carry her away parallels the actions of the Captain when he rescues her.

Frank is also associated with Ivy and the woodpecker episode when he cuts the boughs for Marian. Frank and Marian are in the marsh under the guise of collecting Christmas boughs. After making love, Frank decides to cut cedar boughs with his hatchet: "When the strokes of hatchet rang out from the ravine, he could see her eyelids flutter . . . soft shivers went through her body" (67). In this scene and the woodpecker one, the focus is on eyes responding to the blows of blades. Frank is no more of a liberator than the others; he too represents a threat to Marian's freedom and well-being.

The most important men in *A Lost Lady* attempt to rescue Marian, which brings them together in an unholy fraternity. The Captain was her first rescuer. Ivy and Niel vie to be the one to rescue her as the Captain's health begins to wane: Ivy is the one who administers the economic rescue by draining the swamp and making it productive; Niel tries to rescue Marian by staying home from school to help during the Captain's convalescence. Niel feels that if he can save the Captain, then all will be well. In actuality, it is Ivy's charge of the Forresters' finances which enables them to survive and which eventually enables Marian to escape. Niel performs his own great act of chivalry when he cuts the telephone line; he thinks to himself that "For once he had been quick enough; he had saved her" (134). In fact, we do not know when the line is cut, but we do know that the town gossip still finds some dirt to pass on. Frank Ellinger, Judge Pommeroy, and the Blum brothers also act or try to act to save Marian, but they function best as doubles of the first three, the Captain, Ivy, and Niel.

The Captain may seem to be the least implicated by the woodpecker scene, but a comment by Marian associates him with both Ivy and Niel. She tells Niel that she feels caged by the Captain: "I'm struggling to get out of this hole . . . out of it! . . . If it weren't for that —" (126). The context of the argument indicates that the hole is both her house and the rural environment; the word that would follow "that" would seem to be one which indicts the Captain. It is also important to remember that the woodpecker "disappeared into its own hole" (25) and that the Captain joins those who force the woodpecker into a hole: Ivy who blinds it and Niel who tries to kill it. Marian, like Thea, is the caged bird; but unlike Thea, Marian is depicted as being constantly attacked rather than constantly freed. In one of the final scenes, Marian symbolically frees herself. After the Captain has died, she allows Niel to carve the duck, a job which had been the Captain's. Clearly, cutting the duck refers back to Ivy's cutting of the woodpecker, but the difference is that Marian is now directing the moment; she, and not any of the men, is deciding the action. In giving Niel the knife, she is instating him as the Captain's successor, but as a captain who has neither ship nor crew. The house is not Niel's and neither is Marian; she goes off to California. The woodpecker has finally flown from its hole in tree, with a new vision that has taken years to develop.

(Continued on page 46)

EVOLUTION OF LARK (Continued)

In both *The Song of the Lark* and *A Lost Lady*, Cather associates her protagonist with a bird or birds. In doing so, she creates them as caged or flying. The men in these novels, while their actions may at times seem beneficial to the women, are also depicted as aggressive, threatening, or ensnaring. By looking at both novels, we can see the bird imagery progress from being a fragmented pattern to an organizing motif. In *The Song of the Lark,* while avian references may relate back to Wunsch's destruction of the dovehouse, there are others which seem arbitrary, contradictory, or even forced. For example, Ray finds a yellow canary blanket, which he thinks is the most beautiful thing he has ever found, and he admires Thea's yellow hair. While one could say that he sees her as a caged bird (canary), the connection does not conform to the flight imagery which predominates in the Moonstone passages. In *A Lost Lady*, the woodpecker scene controls the novel; the interactions of the men with Marian ultimately refer back to it. In this novel, we can see the progress of Cather from a good writer to a writer in control of her prose and imagery. *The Song of the Lark* exposes a conflict in Cather: does a woman have to be caged (or under the control of a man) to be artistically successful? The answer which the novel provides for this question seems problematic for Cather, and thus her imagery reflects a conflict over freedom and confinement; the epilogue, in which Thea is finally married to Fred, feels forced. How does this relate to the eagle that disappears beyond the restraining canyon in "The Ancient People"? Is the lark to be caged or free? It is as if Cather herself is reluctant to let Thea fly. By the time of *A Lost Lady*, Cather seems to have shifted her position to one which is more openly supportive and desirous of woman's freedom. The woodpecker is not lost to herself, but only to those who would want to control her.

NOTE

[1] Information about the lark is taken from *The World Book Encyclopedia.*

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Chautauqua '97

Jennifer Yatskis Dukart entertains as Willa Cather at Chautauqua in Red Cloud.
— Photo Courtesy of Hastings Tribune

1997 NORMA ROSS WALTER SCHOLARSHIP WINNING ESSAY

Black and White: A Reflection on "Paul's Case"

Angela Christine Turek
Hastings High School

The tainted colors of fantasy are an easy escape from the real world for anyone. This enchanted escape can be dangerous though, if one refuses to distinguish between a fantasy world and reality. Willa Cather explores this danger in Paul, a teen-age boy caught in a hazardous fantasy, in her story "Paul's Case." Paul sees the world through his own set of glasses tainted with false colors; when Paul removes the glasses to see black and white, reality's sting is far too biting to bear.

Paul's entire disposition is an illusion. He survives by lying, a tool "indispensable for overcoming friction" (182). He lies to the Principal about why he wants to come back to school, he lies to his father about where he is going on Sunday night, and he lies to himself about reality. Cather writes, "The drawing master had come to realize that, in looking at Paul, one saw only his white teeth and the forced animation of his eyes" (184). Paul does not know how to be genuine in the presence of his teachers or his family: everything is an act. When Paul arrives at the gallery, he is happy to be alone, except for the guard, for here he can truly be himself, a person lost in the world of dreams. When Paul studies the blue Rico or hears the symphony, he is lost in fantasy, the only happiness he experiences. According to Cather, "the first sigh of the instruments seemed to free some hilarious spirit within him" (187). Paul has no interest in becoming a stage actor or musician; he simply longs for the fantasy part of their world: "what he wanted was to see, to be in the atmosphere, float on the wave of it, to be carried out, blue league after blue league, away from everything" (197). Each time Paul returns to loathed Cordelia Street he falls into a depression because everything he dreads is located in this world of reality. When Paul finally escapes to live in his fantasy, the subsequent fall to reality is too hard to handle.

Paul devises an intricate scheme to travel from reality to fantasy. He ends up in the grandest hotel in New York City, living as a rich man whose only purpose is to enjoy life. He sleeps until late afternoon, takes an hour to dress in extravagant clothing, and rides carriages to the park. In the park the black and white of reality is lost to him just as he gets lost in the colors of hot-house flowers. Cather describes the white snow melting to color:

> Here and there on the corners whole flower gardens blooming behind glass windows, against which the

> snowflakes stuck and melted; violets, roses, carnations, lilies of the valley — somehow vastly more lovely and alluring that they blossomed thus unnaturally in the snow. (203-04)

The world Paul creates for himself cannot be permanent; thus he struggles to live in a tainted fantasy. And ultimately he loses sight of his past: "He doubted the reality of his past. Had he ever known a place called Cordelia Street" (205). Now that Paul lives on stolen money in the world of lavish material possessions, he finally seems happy. Cather writes, "He could not remember a time when he had felt so at peace with himself" (207,). Paul's only peace is that which he finds in this world of fleeting fantasy. However, his peace is disturbed by a figure from Cordelia Street.

Paul discovers in the newspapers that his father is coming to New York to find Paul in his hotel hideaway. All the colors of clothes, cigarettes, and carriages return to black and white, and "all the world had become Cordelia Street" (210). The only reality Paul sees is that he cannot sustain fantasy. He is not strong enough to return to the harsh world and decides that the ultimate escape is the only solution. In his death Paul travels from colorful fantasy to cold reality: "Paul took one of the blossoms carefully from his coat and scooped a little hole in the snow, where he covered it up" (212). Paul's dream and his happiness are extinguished. When the train hit Paul, "the picture making mechanism was crushed, the disturbing visions flashed into black, and Paul dropped back into the immense design of things" (212). The image of beauty vanishes and Paul's eternity is dark reality.

Paul's artificial temperament causes him to live in his own world, from which he refuses to return. Like so many of us, Paul's case is one where reality is rejected because it is harsh, but where it is the only safe place to live. Unnaturally sustained colors cannot replace a black and white life without consequences.

WORK CITED

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Celebrating Cather's Birthday

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 6 — 11 a.m.-3 p.m.
Prairie Walk on Cather Memorial Prairie
Sponsored by Nature Conservancy
1722 St. Mary's Avenue, #403, Omaha, NE 68102
Reservations Necessary — Cost: $10.00

♦ ♦ ♦

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 7 — 2-4 p.m.
Victorian Christmas Tea
Cather Childhood Home, 3rd and Cedar
4:00 p.m. — Premiere Showing of
new Cather Introductory Video
Grace Episcopal Church, 6th and Cedar

News Items from the WCPM Director . . .

Pat Phillips

❖ **WHERE HAS THE SUMMER GONE?** It seems as if we've only come up for air a few times since Spring Conference. However, this is not a complaint. Being busy in Catherland is wonderful and desired.

❖ **SEPTEMBER 20** was an exciting and full day here, packed with Cather goings-on. **Sigma Tau Delta** English honorary selected Red Cloud for its regional meeting. Members met Friday, Saturday, and Sunday at Lincoln Elementary School. The Lutheran ladies provided Saturday's banquet and sack lunches for the Sunday tour. Graduate students from Dr. Bruce Baker's University of Nebraska at Omaha summer seminar were here to scrape, prime, paint, and clean the Pavelka farm home. Both groups were fortunately present in the evening when **OPERA OMAHA** came to town to share snippets of Libby Larsen's new opera on "Eric Hermannson's Soul." This workshop/performance began at 7:00 p.m. Anyone interested was invited to join the UNO group's work day; in fact, two of the teachers who were here earlier with the Nebraska Scholars Academy volunteered to come back for this work day and the Opera Omaha program. The evening program by Opera Omaha was for everyone and was a gift to all of us from that organization.

❖ **THE FOLLOWING** are some things that have transpired here since spring: Spring Conference, Prairie Institute, Chautauqua, University of Nebraska-Kearney and Nebraska Wesleyan University Elderhostels, Nebraska Scholars Academy, HistoryAmerica tour, Congressman Bill Barrett's visit to the Cather sites, Nebraska State Poetry Society meeting, University of Nebraska-Omaha seminar class, as well as many, many group tours for varied audiences. The Prairie Institute and the UNO seminar class both met here for a week. While UNO was here, the Elderhostel from Nebraska-Wesleyan University also spent two days in town. Besides taking the town and country tours, this group visited the Bladen Opera House, where Antonette Turner, granddaughter of Annie Pavelka (Ántonia), spoke to them, and then spent an evening on the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie with Ralph Ferebee, retired Soil Conservation specialist, who identified many of the plants and grasses surrounding the participants.

❖ **NORTH AND SOUTH** sides of the tower at the Willa Cather State Historical Site were painted in preparation for the new sign which now clearly marks the museum. Additionally, to help visitors find the Cather buildings, a new hanging sign has been

(Continued on page 48)

NEWS ITEMS (Continued)

placed on the front of our building which indicates "Tours," and the letters on the building have been painted a noticeable color. The trim at the Episcopal Church has been painted, windows glazed, and the window coverings on the painted glass windows washed and remounted to give the windows breathing space. The Cather Childhood home was rewired and received spot painting and repair in late summer. All the windows at the Museum will be glazed and painted and the depot will receive a complete coat of new paint this fall. With all of this, the painting party at the Pavelka place and the improved plantings at the childhood home, it seems that most of the properties will have received needed maintenance and care by autumn. One giant step for renovation of the Opera House will be the new roof to be completed by October 1. Our architectural firm, Bahr Vermeer and Haecker, will supervise construction; Ziemba Roofing of Hastings, Nebraska, was awarded the roofing contract.

Work in progress — the new sign high atop the Willa Cather State Historic Site clearly marks the Museum Building (The Farmers' and Merchants' Bank Building).

— Photo by Pat Phillips

❖ **WOULD YOU BE** interested in organizing a Cather Chapter in your community? The Board of Governors has given serious consideration to developing Cather Chapters throughout the country. Guidelines are being worked on now and we would like to know how many are interested. You can call, write, or contact us by e-mail or through the web site.

❖ **THE LITTLE RED SCHOOLHOUSE** opportunity for fourth graders resumed in September. The Board of Governors met on September 27 in Lincoln. The Western Literature Association meets in Albuquerque October 15-18 and will offer several Cather sessions. Please see our web site or call for more information. This year, in honor of Willa Cather's birthday on December 7, we will debut the new introductory video which will be shown thereafter at the bookstore prior to buildings tours. The video was funded by the Nebraska State Historical Society and co-produced by it and Nebraska Public Television. The showing will be in the afternoon at the Episcopal Church. This will also be the day of the annual Victorian Christmas Tea at the Childhood Home and the Christmas Tour of Homes around Red Cloud.

This summer's Prairie Institute participants enjoyed a lunch one afternoon in the Garber Grove east of Red Cloud.

— Photo by Pat Phillips

❖ **REMEMBER** to think of the WCPM when looking for books by or about Willa Cather. We try to stock all works by or about Willa Cather and consider ourselves a great resource for Cather enthusiasts and scholars. Also, if you haven't seen our web site, please try to access it. You will find it at www.willacather.org.

U.S. Congressman Bill Barrett was in Red Cloud at the end of March. He toured the Willa Cather sites with Pat Phillips. Barrett said he had been aware that the historical sites were here but had never made the time to explore them. He was impressed with the preservation efforts.

— Photo Courtesy of Red Cloud Chief

Scholars Review Cather's "Best"

Beth Bohling

Nearly 200 scholars and fans of Willa Cather's writing came here this weekend (April 25-26) from across the nation to review what many call her best book.

The sixteen states represented at the 42nd annual Willa Cather Spring Conference included Washington, Florida, Connecticut and California. The two-day event took place on the 50th anniversary of Cather's death.

Death Comes for the Archbishop, published seventy years ago, was the featured book. It won the Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, which recognizes the most distinguished work of American fiction.

WCPM Executive Director Pat Phillips introduces John Blake Bergers, the official WCPM artist who painted the rendition of the 1885 Red Cloud Opera House at her right. Mr. Bergers lived in Red Cloud from 1979 to 1981 and painted a number of sites from Willa Cather's writings. The original paintings are on display at the WCPM, some prints of which are for sale. Phillips stated that over 700 of his prints have been sold with one-half of the proceeds being donated back to the WCPM.

— Photo Courtesy of Red Cloud Chief

Willa Cather enthusiasts leave Grace Episcopal Church in Red Cloud Saturday. Cather was a member of the church at the time of her death 50 years ago.

— Photo Courtesy of Hastings Tribune

Cather and the critics considered the novel her best work, and on Saturday it was acclaimed as "far and away the great book of Willa Cather" by a panel of scholars who addressed its art and meaning.

Panel moderator Bruce Baker, of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, said the book is unique.

"Nothing like this has been published before or since," he said.

Other panel members were Marilyn Arnold, of Brigham Young University, who read some of Cather's letters; and Steve Shively of Lincoln, who is finishing work on his doctorate in Cather studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

John Murphy, BYU professor, shared insights from his research as general editor of the scholarly edition of the novel to be issued by the University of Nebraska Press. Murphy showed slides comparing French and New Mexican religious figures and architecture as he discussed how the novel combines the two cultures.

At Saturday's banquet, Marya Lucca-Thyberg of Omaha performed a dramatization of the book with her husband, Steve Thyberg, and Gary Sullivan and Shively.

Reprinted from the *Hastings Tribune*, April 28, 1997

In Memoriam

DAVID E. SCHERMAN
1916 - 1997
***Life* Magazine Photographer and Editor**
and
WCPM Board Member

Dave's 1951 twelve-page photographic essay in *Life* magazine was the first pictorial to bring national attention to Willa Cather's world (March 19, 1951) as he photographed the seasons and sites in Nebraska as well as Cather's Quebec and the Southwest.

Cather Syllabi: A Study

Virgil Albertini
Northwest Missouri State University

Ann Romines, Program Director of the Seventh International Willa Cather Seminar, held in Winchester, Virginia, on June 21-28, 1997, charged me with gathering Cather syllabi from those who teach Cather in their classes and then reporting my findings at a plenary session at the Seminar. At first, I balked, but she is persuasive and convinced me that I would be up to this pedagogical task. I am glad that she won me over, for the task proved to be a rewarding and curious one. Because of her request, all of us now have some idea what we are doing with Cather in our classrooms.

My rural delivery milkman started bringing syllabi in big brown envelopes on April 15 and did not stop until June 19 (eighteen days after the deadline and two days before the Seminar). Incidentally, five syllabi were given to me at the Seminar. Those five increased the total number of this study to seventy-two. Several of them were multiple ones by individuals, showing that some teach a plentitude of Cather; for example, one instructor submitted nine, one eight, and another six. One professor teaches three different classes on Cather. Course titles and numbers vary, but these are indeed whole classes on Cather. (Her chair and dean obviously respect her choices and must also like our author.) Many others include Cather in various courses and may assign only one novel or maybe one, two, or three short stories. Cather, nevertheless, is being taught, and both students and instructors are liking it, following the theory that we teach what we like, at least whenever we can.

At times, I felt like a voyeur being allowed to peek at what instructors are doing in their classes. The syllabi, of course, are available to all, and, for the most part, they are interesting, challenging, thoughtful, carefully planned, and diversified. The following are the results of my study, and I hope that my findings do not read like a stock market report.

Of her twelve novels, the top choice probably does not surprise too many of us. *My Ántonia* ranks first and is listed on thirty-eight syllabi. Curiously, *Shadows on the Rock* is twelfth and is taught by only five of the respondents. The remaining ten novels, along with the two just mentioned, are ranked according to the number found in the seventy-two syllabi.

	Listed in Syllabi	Rank
My Ántonia	38	1
A Lost Lady	29	2 (tie)
The Professor's House	29	2 (tie)
O Pioneers!	27	4
Death Comes for the Archbishop	25	5
One of Ours	15	6
The Song of the Lark	12	7 (tie)
Sapphira and the Slave Girl	12	7 (tie)
My Mortal Enemy	11	9
Lucy Gayheart	8	10
Alexander's Bridge	7	11
Shadows on the Rock	5	12

Cather's short stories are not taught as frequently as her novels. Eleven of her stories, however, are offered by two or more instructors. "Neighbour Rosicky" is the most popular with eight listings. The stories are ranked as follows:

"Neighbour Rosicky"	8	1
"A Wagner Matinee"	6	2 (tie)
"Peter"	6	2 (tie)
"Old Mrs. Harris"	5	4 (tie)
"The Bohemian Girl"	5	4 (tie)
"Paul's Case"	5	4 (tie)
"The Sculptor's Funeral"	4	7

Special Edition Auction

A long-time friend, very supportive of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, owns a Riverside Literature Series Edition (hardback) of *My Ántonia* with the signature of Carrie Miner Sherwood (Frances Harling in the novel).

In the 1960s during a visit to Red Cloud, this person called on Carrie Miner Sherwood and asked her to sign the book beneath the dedication:

To Carrie and Irene Miller
In memory of affections old and true.

We are confident that fewer than twenty-five of these books signed by Mrs. Sherwood are in existence.

The friend of the Cather Foundation has donated the book for a silent auction to be held at the Saturday banquet of the Cather Spring Conference, May 2, 1998.

The Cather Foundation wants all of its members to be able to join in the bidding, the proceeds of which will be donated to the Opera House Restoration Fund. The first sealed bids will be accepted beginning April 15, 1998. All other bids, of course, will be accepted at the banquet.

"On the Divide"	3	8 (tie)
"Coming, Aphrodite!"	3	8 (tie)
"Eric Hermannson's Soul"	2	9 (tie)
"The Old Beauty"	2	9 (tie)
"The Enchanted Bluff"	2	9 (tie)

Stories listed once include "The Best Years," "The Enchanted Bluff," "Flavia and Her Artists," "The Garden Lodge," "The Diamond Mine," "A Gold Slipper," "Scandal," "Lou, The Prophet," "The Treasure of Far Island," "Two Friends," "On the Divide," and "The Sentimentality of William Tavener." The single entry of the last story is a surprise since it is one of Cather's early stories (1900) offering its readers another picture of life on the Divide. As Marilyn Arnold states in *Willa Cather's Short Fiction*, it "bears little resemblance" to her earlier stories and "suggests a solidity, a gentle tone that would be felt again in the stories of Ántonia and Rosicky and Bishop Latour."

No poems by Cather appear in any of the syllabi, but three instructors require essays from *Willa Cather on Writing*, and one assigns several from *Not Under Forty.*

Several courses combine Cather with other writers. For example, Edith Wharton is taught with Cather by seven instructors. Two of those also include Henry James and three Ellen Glasgow. One involves Sarah Orne Jewett and Kate Chopin, and another Katherine Anne Porter. Virginia Woolf joins Cather in one course, and D. H. Lawrence is obviously effective with Cather in another. One teacher offers a fascinating juxtaposition with Ernest Hemingway. Some of the above are intriguing and prompt me to consider a combination course with a living author like Chris Crutcher.

Sixteen syllabi concentrate on Cather only — eleven of them are graduate classes and five undergraduate — and include from six to ten novels with several short stories. One, however, assigns all twelve of the novels, and one syllabus lists the complete novels plus Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw.*

Cather is also offered in traditional courses like the American Novel Before World War I, Modern American Novel After World War I, The American Novel, American Masterpieces, Studies in Nineteenth Century Literature, American Realists and Naturalists, Recent American Fiction, Twentieth Century American Women Writers, and Literature of the American West. Courses with interesting and appealing titles involving Cather include Man and Woman in Literature; Ethics in American Literature; Literature and Society; The Hero in Ancient and Modern Society; Ethnicity, Race, and Regional Culture in Early Modernism; Shapes of the Imagination, Cather and Landscapes, Great Plains Literature, Exploring the American Experience, and an introduction to literature course called Imaginative Literature and Critical Writing.

Two of the syllabi locate Cather and her works in specific parts of the country. Cather Around New York focuses on nine short stories and nine novels, and The Nebraska Works emphasizes eleven short stories, five novels, and five films. This three-week summer course also features a week-long residence in Red Cloud.

Cather is represented in six American literature survey courses with mostly short stories, but one includes *My Mortal Enemy.* In a course in France "Neighbour Rosicky" is taught to junior level English majors.

Two courses specifically relate to gender — Gender and Western (U.S.) Texts, and Studies in Gender Theory. The Cather work for the former is *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and for the latter *A Lost Lady.*

Two more captivating syllabi are from secondary school English teachers. The first one is a five-week Cather Advanced Placement course, and the second a semester long multicultural Junior English class also adapted for an honors program.

Three instructors find *My Ántonia* viable in their freshman composition classes, and one instructor provides an in-depth study of *O Pioneers!* and its film adaptation in a course she calls Literature and Film.

The syllabi collection contains five seminar courses. One is a series of summer sessions for middle and secondary school teachers from Kansas who teach English, history, social studies, and biology. The professor labels her course Literature and Ecology on the Great Plains. Three of the syllabi reveal senior capstone seminars, and one describes a freshman seminar team taught by members of an Arts and Sciences faculty. The instructors request weekly writing assignments, a mid-term paper, a final exam and paper, and include *My Ántonia* among the required texts for their freshmen.

I have not considered offering Cather to my Young Adult Literature classes since I have wanted to stay with authors who have been writing since the mid-1960s. I may, however, want to modify that decision after studying one syllabus on Young Adult Literature in which the instructor lists *My Ántonia.* The novel really looks good there, positioned with the solid contemporary young adult writers she teaches. Obviously, *My Ántonia* is a fine read for young people.

Secondary sources are also required by some. There are many individual listings, but James Woodress is the favorite critic, as six instructors ask students to study specific pages from his *Willa Cather, A Literary Life.*

The syllabi represent seventeen states, Washington D.C., and two foreign countries. The longest one contains sixteen pages, while the shortest has one. Twenty-five female and six male instructors submitted syllabi, and incidentally, both women and men team teach two of the courses.

Because the syllabi are a valuable pedagogical tool for teachers of Cather, they are, thanks to Ann Romines and her special assistant Jerilyn Zulli, available for a minimal fee. Contact WCPM for information about acquiring the packet.

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER

Editor: John J. Murphy, Brigham Young University
News Editor: Patricia K. Phillips, WCPM
Bibliographer: Virgil Albertini, Northwest Missouri State University
Editorial Assistant: Sally Murphy, Salt Lake City, Utah

Willa Cather Newsletter welcomes articles, notes and letters to the editor. Address submissions to John J. Murphy, English Dept., Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah 84602. Essays and notes are currently listed in the annual MLA Bibliography.

Call for Papers

American Literature Association Conference San Diego, May 28-31, 1998

The WCPM/Willa Cather Society will sponsor two scholarly panels — one devoted to examining *My Ántonia* at 80 and one open to general current approaches to Cather's work — at the 1998 American Literature Association meeting, to be held May 28-31 at the Bahia Resort Hotel in San Diego, California. Those interested in presenting 20-minute papers should send a 250 word abstract by December 1, 1997 to John Swift, ECLS, Occidental College, 1600 Campus Road, Los Angeles, California 90041 (e-mail: swiftj@oxy.edu).

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

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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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