

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

The Willa Cather Society


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Red Cloud Opera House Restoration/Reuse Study

News Items from the WCPM Director . . .

 These are exciting times for the WCPM. In this issue of the *Newsletter*, there is information about the restoration of the Opera House. This is, of course, a subject very much on our minds at the WCPM. After lunch on this (1996) Spring Conference Saturday (May 4), our architect George Haecker, our consultant John Boomer, and members of the Board will unveil the schematic drawings and a scale mock-up of the Opera House. We want to share our excitement and enthusiasm with our members and apprise them of our progress to date. Conferees should stay nearby the luncheon site to hear the latest news on this important project.

 Plans for the forty-first annual Spring Conference (May 3 and 4, 1996) are set. As always, we hope for many Cather aficionados and GOOD weather. Next year (1997) the date of Spring Conference will not be the first Saturday in May but April 25

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The Artist's Palette: Early Cather

Cynthia Griffin Wolff
Massachusetts Institute of Technology


All great authors must be able to combine the meticulous job of training their talents and editing their creations with a relaxation of those monitoring processes by which repressed, often painful material is routinely prohibited from intruding into ordinary thought. Thus, in *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, Ernst Kris makes a telling assertion about the process of aesthetic creativity:


Schematically speaking we may view [the creative process] as composed of two phases which may be sharply demarcated from each other, may merge into each other, may follow each other in rapid or slow succession, or may be interwoven with each other in various ways. [We often call these INSPIRATION and ELABORATION; however, in so designating them], we refer to extreme conditions: one type is characterized by the feeling of being


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NEWS FROM WCPM (Continued)


and 26, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Willa Cather's death on April 24, 1947. We made this change only after consultation with the John G. Neihardt Foundation, which usually assigns this weekend for the Neihardt Conference. Those of you who attend both conferences realize that there will be no conflict.


 Winter, as far as our tourist season goes, is a slow time of year, but we assure our members that we are working year-round. Our hours of operation are Monday through Saturday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and Sundays, 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. We are closed New Year's Day, Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Through the years, the hours of operation for both the Museum and the WCPM offices have fluctuated, and this has caused confusion. Tours through the Nebraska State Historical Society's buildings are scheduled daily at 9:30 and 11:00 a.m., 1:30, 2:45, and 4:00 p.m. The building tours begin at the WCPM's Art Gallery and Bookstore and include the Museum, Childhood Home, Burlington Depot, St. Juliana Catholic Church, and Grace Episcopal Church. When we boast that we carry the most complete collection of books by or about Willa Cather, we are not exaggerating. This sounds like a commercial! Nearly every publication concerning Cather is available by mail order through us.


 Dr. Charles Peek said the Mass at the Grace Episcopal Church on December 7 in celebration of Willa Cather's 122nd birthday. Twenty-four attended Mass that day — an increase from the last few years. Most of the attendees lunched together afterwards at the Simple Grace Cafe. On the Sunday prior to the birthday we opened the Cather Childhood Home for the annual Victorian Christmas Tea. Several of the WCPM tour guides decorated the house for Christmas with a freshly cut tree, homemade ornaments, and strings of popcorn. The Prairie Friends Club provided and served delectable cookies and candies, wassail, and coffee. Events such as this one are made possible in Catherland because of generous volunteers. We are grateful to them and we thank them heartily.


 Nebraska Public Radio Network (NPRN), with the endorsement and support of NPRN manager Steve Robinson, has gone to great lengths to help Nebraskans "hear" Cather's words. Since 1990 NPRN has helped celebrate Willa Cather's birthday through special programming or readings. This year was no exception. Twice on December 7 and again on December 10, NPRN premiered John Sorensen's "Aunt Willa' and the Menuhins." Sorensen, a Nebraska native who now lives in New York City, wrote, directed, and produced this radio special which was underwritten for NPRN by Lincoln (NE) Telecommunications. "Aunt Willa' and the Menuhins" presents such anecdotes as the young Yehudi keeping his snow sled at Cather's apartment, Cather forming the "Shake-


spare Club" to share the reading of Shakespeare's works with the Menuhin children, and Yehudi turning often to Cather as his favorite confidante — seeking her advice on art, a career, and on life . . . even on his choice of a wife!

 Throughout December the Nebraska Public Radio Network celebrated the holidays with seasonal readings of three of Nebraska's favorite authors — Bess Streeter Aldrich, William Kloefkorn, and Willa Cather. "A My *Ántonia* Christmas" was read Christmas Eve.

 Applicants for the Norma Ross Walter Scholarship are now being evaluated. The \$8,000 scholarship is awarded annually to a female Nebraska high school senior who plans to major in English at the college of her choice. The first scholarship was awarded in 1987. Since that time, five girls have graduated and four more are completing their undergraduate years in colleges across the country. These girls have maintained extremely high G.P.A.s and have been very active in campus life. This year, nearly sixty girls responded to the scholarship offering. For the first time the assignment was to respond to one of Willa Cather's short stories. Applicants were asked to discuss, in 1,000 to 1,200 words, parent-child relationships in Willa Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky," using quotations from the text where appropriate. We may be able to print the winner's essay in a future *Newsletter*. The winner and runners-up will be announced at the Spring Conference banquet.

 Besides Spring Conference, upcoming events include "Pastime and Playthings" for elementary students at the Cather Childhood Home on May 14, 15, and 16; the Prairie Institute, June 3-7, 1996; and the resumption of "An Old-Fashioned School Day" at the Little Red Schoolhouse. The school day (for fourth graders) must be scheduled in advance. The Prairie Institute, which is co-sponsored by the WCPM and the University of Nebraska-Kearney, will focus on "The Ecology of Community." We welcome back teachers Dr. Charles Peek, Dr. Mark Eifler, and James Fitzgibbon. This interdisciplinary course may be taken for three hours of graduate or undergraduate credit. A brochure with a complete course description and registration information was mailed regionally in mid-February. For information call us at 402-746-2653, or write to the WCPM, 326 North Webster, Red Cloud, Nebraska 68970.

 Sally Wagner, Northern State University, South Dakota, recently spent a day with us learning about the Cather tours and programs so similar activities can be arranged for the "OZ" (Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* series) Conference during the summer of 1997. We will try to keep you posted when details on this are available.

 Opera Omaha has received a grant to support the first production in a trilogy of short operas by Minneapolis composer Libby Larsen, who has chosen Willa Cather's short story "Eric Hermann-

son's Soul" as the subject for the first opera in the trilogy. It is hoped that additional commissions can be established to complete the project, which will include "Nanette, an Aside" and "Peter." More about this project can be found in Mellanee Kvasnicka's article in this issue.



Hopefully you have seen Joan Acocella's article in *The New Yorker* magazine. If you have not, find the November 27, 1995, issue. Joan worked long and hard on this piece and attended the Spring Conference in 1994 to learn more about Willa Cather and to have an opportunity to visit with Cather readers and scholars. Willa Cather was also mentioned in *The New Yorker* in Wendy Wasserstein's "Jill's Adventures in Real Estate or I Can Get It for You at 3.2," a play in nine scenes, in the October 16, 1995, issue.



We have enjoyed the frequent visits of Board member and scholar Bruce Baker. Dr. Baker, on a semester sabbatical from the University of Nebraska-Omaha, has been reading Cather letters housed in our archives. Note the picture of him studying diligently in our crowded space (page 26).



Just to keep you abreast of happenings in our community, Red Cloud's Main Street Association won a \$90,000 grant from the Nebraska Department of Road's Transportation Enhancement Provision to enhance the Main Street area. Historic street lighting will be restored in four blocks in the downtown area. No longer will the tall, modern, mercury vapor lights obstruct vision and interfere with photographs of the historic street. Motivation for this project comes from the Main Street Association's desire to restore with authenticity the ambience of Willa Cather's era. And what a nice setting for the restored Opera House!

Regional News Expanded

Betty Kort, Vice President
WCPM Board of Governors

Long-time readers of the *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter* have surely noticed the development of this publication over the last several years, thanks, in large part, to the capable editorship of John Murphy and the editorial board. The *Newsletter* is now recognized nationally and listed in the Modern Language Association Annual Bibliography as a respected and important source of information for Cather scholars and readers. Although academic, national, and informational aspects of the publication have expanded over time (with the burgeoning of Cather-related activities), it has come to the attention of the *Newsletter* staff that the reporting of local and regional events related to Willa Cather needs expanded coverage as well.

To accomplish this, Mellanee Kvasnicka has agreed to provide coverage of Cather-related activities

in the Omaha metropolitan area, and Elizabeth Turner will be providing information about activities at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and surrounding Lincoln area. Pat Phillips, Director of the WCPM, will remain as the correspondent for local Red Cloud happenings and continue to provide information about events on the national and international scene as they cross her desk. With this staff in place, the *Newsletter* should be better able to keep readers informed of Cather-related events in Nebraska.

In this issue Mellanee Kvasnicka reviews a new project sponsored by Opera Omaha and the College of Fine Arts at UNO to develop an evening-length opera based on three short stories by Willa Cather. She also reports on Cather's appeal to behaviorally impaired students at Omaha South High School. Mellanee is a WCPM Board member and published Cather scholar. She is an English teacher at Omaha South and also serves as Chair of the English Department there. In addition, she is completing a doctorate in English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Those who have attended the Spring Conferences in Red Cloud will remember her appearances in "The Passing Show." Mellanee's time is obviously valuable, and we appreciate her help and support.

Elizabeth Turner earned a Ph.D. at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1994, under the supervision of Dr. Susan Rosowski, and presently serves as a lecturer in the Department of English at UNL. Elizabeth is the founder and coordinator of the Cather Colloquium, an organization based in the English Department at UNL. Many readers may have already met her in person or know of her through her previous publications in the *Newsletter*. In this issue, Elizabeth reviews recent Cather Colloquium activities. In addition, she has written an article based on an interview with Joel Geyer, Nebraska ETV Network Producer/Director of the video programs *Singing Cather's Song* and *The Sentimentality of William Taverner*. Elizabeth reports on Geyer's thoughts concerning these productions, his continued interest in Cather's writing, and new projects underway.

Pat Phillips continues her "News from the Director" column and, in addition, has provided an informative article about the history of the Opera House in Red Cloud and the plans for its renovation. The task of restoring the Opera House has provided real excitement for WCPM Board members, and we are extremely pleased that Pat is sharing our plans with the membership through the *Newsletter*. Opera House activities were certainly crucial to Willa Cather during her formative years. We have reprinted the 1929 *Omaha World-Herald* article "Willa Cather Mourns Old Opera House," which attests to this importance better than anything we could add. Particularly exciting for the WCPM will be the addition, in the lower sections of the Opera House building, of much needed offices and archival space that will finally allow the WCPM to house its fine collection of Cather letters and mem-

(Continued on page 4)

REGIONAL NEWS EXPANDED (Continued)

orabilia in one place. This should be good news to scholars using the collection, since everything will be accessible and there will be ample space in which to review materials. (Bruce Baker bemoans this space problem in a note appearing in this issue.)

Of course, there is much work to do, and *Newsletter* readers will be enthusiastically invited to participate in the process. Much more information about the actual project will be presented at the Spring Conference in May.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone connected with the *Newsletter* for the fine work they are doing. Aside from the WCPM staff and the printer, all work is done on a volunteer basis. The contributions of time are enormous, especially for John Murphy. Working with him as I have recently, I realize the extent to which his work supports and enhances the WCPM. He deserves our thanks many times over.



Undated photograph of the south side of the 1885 Opera House. The moon-shaped window on the far right side is above the entrance leading upstairs to the Opera House. The north half of the Opera House is not shown.

— Photo Courtesy of the Morharts, given to them by the Tennure family, with the help of Veda Tennant

WCPM Board of Governors Committed to Restoration of the Red Cloud 1885 Opera House

Pat Phillips, Director

True to the WCPM mission "to restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing . . . or relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather," the WCPM's current Board of Governors has made a commitment to restore the 1885 Red Cloud Opera House. After long and hard debate the

Board has concluded that it cannot waste the priceless heritage represented by this piece of property. For Willa Cather, the Opera House represented an awakening to art and a life-long love of the theatre. To Cather enthusiasts, it is one more precious landmark in Red Cloud, Nebraska, that embodies the genesis of a great American artist. Restoration of this landmark will not only preserve its heritage but will also provide much needed office space for the WCPM, an environmentally controlled archives to house the rare WCPM Cather collection, and an exhibit area.

In 1978, when through legislative action the WCPM gave all its restored properties to the State of Nebraska, it was probably not WCPM's intention to embark on any more major restoration projects. In reality, that work seemed finished, even though there were other sites important in Willa Cather's life which were not restored, for these sites were privately owned and not available. This changed in 1991 when Frank and Doris Morhart of Hastings, Nebraska, owners of the Opera House building, decided to give this important

Cather site to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. Frank (grandson of Adam Morhart), his first wife Henrietta who predeceased him, and their daughter Judy Hudson of Santa Rosa, California, had always been interested in the building's restoration. The Board accepted this property, acknowledging its significance and its desire not only to restore the Opera House but also to rehabilitate the first floor and basement space to provide for office, an archives and exhibit areas. In 1992 the Omaha and Lincoln firm of Bahr, Vermeer, and Haecker was engaged to draw up plans for the project. Accompanying this article are schematic drawings, a photograph of the building in its early days, an early interior photograph at graduation time, and photographs of two posters taken from the Opera House (artist John Blake Bergers painstakingly removed these very brittle posters, pieced them back together, and returned them to the WCPM where they now hang in the office).

In May, 1995, the Board engaged John Boomer Consulting Services of Lincoln, Nebraska, as special consultants for a two-million-dollar fundraising project. Funds raised will not only restore a significant building but also provide for ongoing programming and maintenance of the facility.

The mandate in the community for an opera house began more than 110 years ago when, on April 20, 1883, this statement appeared in *The Red Cloud Chief*: "One of the greatest needs of the City of Red Cloud is an Opera House." And on November 30, 1883, there followed these additional sentiments:

We need it, and need it bad, and by all means Red Cloud should have an Opera House. The Court-house is not a proper place, nor either is it a good place to hold entertainments and exhibitions of the like character. The arrangement of the room is inconvenient and unhandy and [the room] is not large enough to hold the people who attend such places. We believe there would be money for someone who would build a brick block and fit up the second story for a hall.

The Red Cloud Argus chimed right in with these comments in the December 20, 1883, edition:

Alma [Nebraska] is very proud of her new opera house, and the citizens of that burg are reveling in amusements. Red Cloud, the "gate city of the valley," can only catch a snide [bogus] show occasionally, and until there are good accommodations for dramatic companies, we can expect nothing better. We trust the movement to build an opera house here will meet with proper encouragement. Every one who possibly can should take hold and help the matter along by subscribing to the capital stock. Let us have an opera house, and not be behind every town surrounding us in this particular any longer.

Apparently there was a proposal by a group of five investors in the spring of 1884 responding to the need for both an opera house and a roller-skating rink; and although plans were announced in the April 18, 1884, issue of *The Chief* to build a \$4,000, 40' x 100' structure on Webster Street, the "Red Cloud Building Association" did not proceed with the proposal. However, a little over one year later, the firm of Morhart and Fulton, hardware dealers, and B. F. Mizer, grocer and queensware dealer, announced plans to construct a new building which would include a second floor opera house. Final plans included the construction of two new brick buildings:

Last week we announced the purchase by Mr. Chas. Wiener of the lot adjacent to the First National Bank [north of the Miner Brothers building], on which he is about to commence the erection of a fine brick building. This week Messrs. Morhart & Fulton, the enterprising hardware dealers, have purchased the lot adjoining the Red Cloud National Bank building [State Bank building] on the north meanwhile Morhart & Fulton are burning the midnight oil over various plans and specifications, and propose to commence at an early date the building of a mammoth brick edifice on their recently acquired site. Mr. B. F. Mizer and Mr. T. J. Mosher have also been seized with the brick mania, as well as a number of others of our prominent business men, from which tangible (brick) results may be expected soon. *The Chief* has planted a little brick in the ash pile and fondly hopes some day to see it developed into a full grown brick block with plate glass trimmings. (*The Red Cloud Chief*, May 24, 1885)

The following portion of the agreement made between Robert Fulton and Adam Morhart (first party) and Benjiman F. Mizer (second party) on the 24th day of April, 1885, indicates architectural plans for their building:

That where-as said first party is to build a brick building on lot ten in block five in the town of Red Cloud Webster County Nebraska and said 2nd party is to build a brick building on lot nine in said block five in said town county and state as afore-said said buildings to be two stories in height. And said parties to this agreement deeming it to their mutual interest profit and benefit that said second stories of said buildings shall not be divided but shall be used as one common room and for one common purpose and it is always understood and agreed by the respective parties to these presents [sic] that no dancing shall ever be allowed in said room — nor shall any immoral shows entertainments or performances be allowed in said room.

As the building(s) progressed, these tidbits appeared in *The Chief* between April and August: "The managers of the opera house have let the contract for building to Carpenter Bryant. The boys propose to push matters and will have it ready at an early day. The opera house will be a big improvement over the present place of holding entertainments" (April 23, 1885). "Morhart & Fulton and B. F. Mizer have begun work on their new opera house block and before many moons will be comfortably located in the same building" (June 19, 1885). "The Opera House front is now complete, and together with the Red Cloud National Bank block, are the handsomest buildings in the city" (August 21, 1885). "A sidewalk has been laid in front of the new opera house, to the great joy of the average pedestrian" (August 30, 1885).

Opening night was scheduled for October 26, 1885, with the Georgia Hamlin Dramatic Company playing all week. The program was to change nightly and include "some of the best plays of the day." In the weeks leading up to the opening, *The Chief* kept the public aware, whetting its appetites for opening night, explaining how the forty or more gas jet lights would work and that they were "much superior to the old oil lamps with tin backs heretofore used" (October 12, 1885). The community was assured that the gas tank would be buried seven or eight feet underground in the alley and would make an explosion "from extraneous causes" nearly impossible. The Opera House was to have 600 chairs and "Professor Tschudi, the scenic artist, and a force of carpenters" were making the scenery which included eight complete settings and a handsome drop curtain (October 23, 1885).

In the Spring 1991 issue of *Nebraska History*, Layne Ehlers points out that Nebraska opera house facades fall into several groups, including: two-story commercial blocks, usually brick, with the opera house above a retail space; first-floor opera houses; and grand opera palaces, confined to larger cities. Obviously, Red Cloud's 1885 Opera House is in the first category. It is very plain inside; and, unlike most opera houses, does not have a pressed tin ceiling. Nonetheless, the Opera House was a source of pride and a center of culture for the community of nearly 2,500 people.

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OPERA HOUSE RESTORATION

(Continued)



Two posters (above and below) featuring the Heywood Brothers' Mastodon Minstrels. The posters were removed from the Opera House, restored by John Blake Bergers, and now hang in the WCPM offices.

— Photos by John English

Many theatre companies and several popular minstrel shows performed here during the time Willa Cather frequented the Opera House. Dramatic companies included the Georgia Hamlin Company, the Anna Eva Fay Company, the Jay Simms Theatrical combination, the Monte Christo Theatrical Company,



the McFaddens of Boston Troupe, the Gaiety Theatre Company, the Old Reliable Chicago Comedy Company, Fifth Avenue Theatre Company, the Bittner Dramatic Company and Marine Band, the Andrews Opera Company, the Alonzo Hatch Opera Company, and musical prodigy Blind Boone.

In addition, graduations, plays by local talent, lectures, Decoration Day services, local musical entertainments and recitals, benefits, and eventually balls were held in the Opera House. One event of note was held on Saturday evening, February 4, 1888, when Willa Cather and several of her friends decided to stage a benefit to help the people left destitute after the blizzard of 1888. The children, with the help of Mrs. Sill and Will O'Brien, raised \$40.00 for the needy with the performance of "Beauty and the Beast." Willa

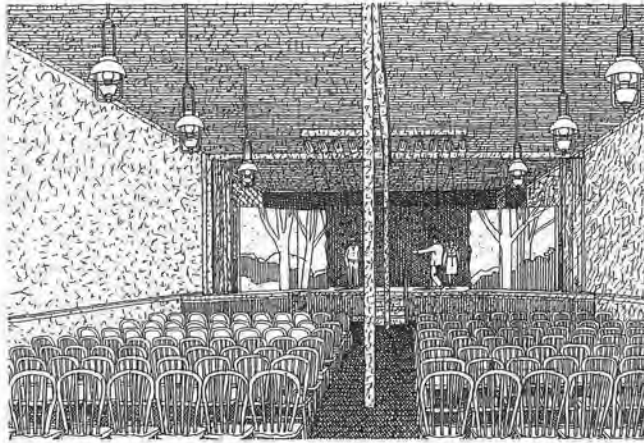
Cather took the role of the Merchant. A review in the *The Red Cloud Chief* included the following comments:

On last Saturday evening as announced the entertainment at the Opera House for the benefit of the indigent poor of this city took place with a large and appreciative audience present. It was probably the largest crowd that was ever present at any like entertainment in this city. The young folks who took part in the comedy were in training for about two weeks, under the management of Mr. W. F. O'Brien and Mrs. Sill, and to say that they merit great praise in the matter would be putting it in a light form. Every thing seemed to be perfect, and the various parts taken by the young ladies were rendered with that ease and perfection that only characterises [sic] the most perfect training at the hands of the instructors and the adaptation of each part best suited to the individual who would be most apt to go through with it without failure. For instance WILLA CATHER took the part of "The Merchant" and carried it through with such grace and ease that she called forth the admiration of the entire audience. It was a difficult part and well rendered. (February 6, 1888)

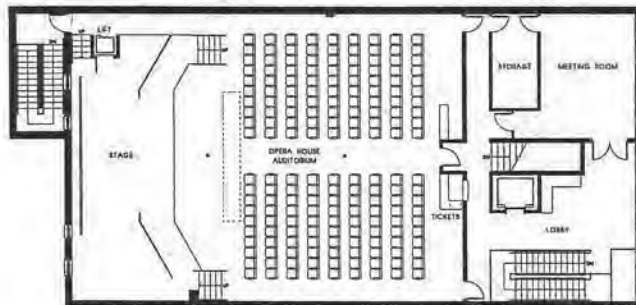
Opera houses were an important part of life in many small towns. People everywhere thirsted for artistic stimulation, culture, and entertainment. The worlds of opera and theatre Willa Cather so loved, and which would inform her fiction, first came to her on the stage of the Red Cloud Opera House. In 1890, she delivered her high school graduation oration, "Superstition vs. Investigation" from the stage of the Opera House. The Opera House remained an integral part of the Red Cloud community until it closed in 1919. Cather mourned the closing and expressed exactly how she felt about the Opera House in a letter to Harvey E. Newbranch, published in the Diamond Jubilee edition of the *Omaha World-Herald*, October 27, 1929. Readers will find this letter reprinted on pages 7-9 in this issue of the WCPMN.

On April 10, 1989, Mildred Bennett announced in the *Omaha World-Herald* her plan to build a four-million-dollar Cather center. It was to be a new, modern building on a square city block at the corner of Third and Webster. Shortly after this, Mildred died, and it seemed that the dream died with her. However, in Frank and Doris Morhart's offer, the WCPM Board of Governors saw an opportunity to realize the dream and, in addition, restore an important Cather site. The restored Opera House not only will create environmentally sound archival space for the WCPM Cather collection but also provide a stage for a variety of Cather and other activities.

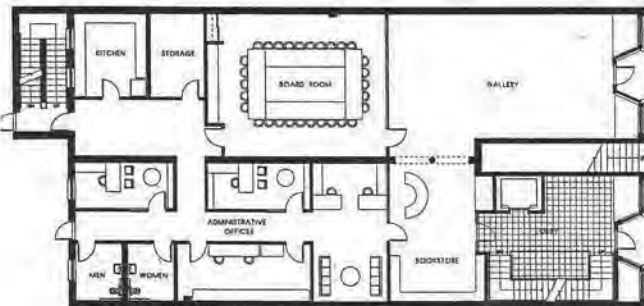
Dr. Barry Turner's book *My Ántonia: A Family's Perspective* should be available in early May. Dr. Turner is the great-grandson of Anna Pavelka (Ántonia).



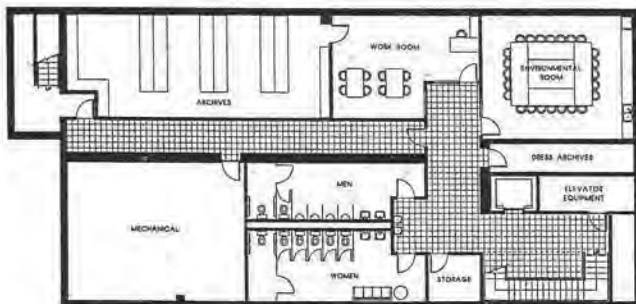
Red Cloud Opera House Restoration/Reuse Study



SECOND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



BASEMENT FLOOR PLAN

*Schematic drawings on pages 1 and 7 by
Bahr Vermeer and Haecker, Omaha and Lincoln.*

Willa Cather Mourns Old Opera House

[A letter from Willa Cather to Harvey E. Newbranch published in the Diamond Jubilee edition of the *Omaha World-Herald* on October 27, 1929. This letter was reprinted in *The Red Cloud Chief* and also appears in *The World and the Parish*, William M. Curtin, editor, and in *Willa Cather in Person*, L. Brent Bohlke, editor.]



Present-day view of the Opera House, second floor above the Coast to Coast business. The upper story was stuccoed in the thirties when Elbert and Mabel Morhart constructed an apartment for themselves in the north half of the frontal space.

— Photo by Pat Phillips

Dear Mr. Newbranch: It's a newspaper's business, is it not, to insist that everything is much better than it used to be? All the same, we never gain anything without losing something — not even in Nebraska. When I go about among little Nebraska towns (and the little towns, not the big cities, are the people), the thing I miss most is the opera house. No number of filling stations or moving picture theatres can console me for the loss of the opera house. To be sure, the opera house was dark for most of the year, but that made its events only the more exciting. Half a dozen times during each winter — in the larger towns much oftener — a traveling stock company settled down at the local hotel and thrilled and entertained us for a week.

That was a wonderful week for the children. The excitement began when the advance man came to town and posted the bills on the side of a barn, on the lumberyard fence, in the "plate glass" windows of drug stores and grocery stores. My playmates and I used to stand for an hour after school, studying every word of those posters: the names of the plays and the nights on which each would be given. After we had decided which were the most necessary to us, then there was always the question of how far we could prevail upon our parents. Would they let us go every other night, or only on the opening and closing nights? None of us ever got to go every night, unless we had a father who owned stock in the opera house itself.

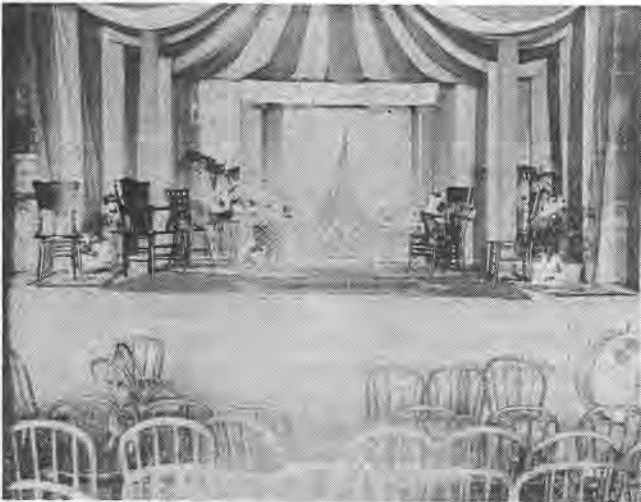
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CATHER MOURNS OPERA HOUSE

(Continued)

If the company arrived on the night train, when we were not at school, my chums and I always walked a good half mile to the depot (I believe you call it "station" now) to see that train come in. Sometimes we pulled younger brothers or sisters along on a sled. We found it delightful to watch a theatrical company alight, pace the platform while their baggage was being sorted, and then drive off — the men in the hotel bus, the women in the "hack." If by any chance one of the show ladies carried a little dog with a blanket on, that simply doubled our pleasure. Our next concern was to invent some plausible pretext, some errand that would take us to the hotel. Several of my dearest playmates had perpetual entry to the hotel because they were favorites of the very unusual and interesting woman who owned it. But I, alas, had no such useful connection; so I never saw the leading lady breakfasting languidly at nine. Indeed, I never dared go near the hotel while the theatrical people were there — I suppose because I wanted to go so much.

How good some of those old traveling companies were, and how honestly they did their work and tried to put on a creditable performance. There was the Andrews Opera Company, for example; they usually had a good voice or two among them, a small orchestra and a painstaking conductor, who was also the pianist. What good luck for a country child to hear those tuneful old operas sung by people who were doing their best: *The Bohemian Girl*, *The Chimes of Normandy*, *Martha*, *The Mikado*. Nothing takes hold of a child like living people. We got the old plays in the

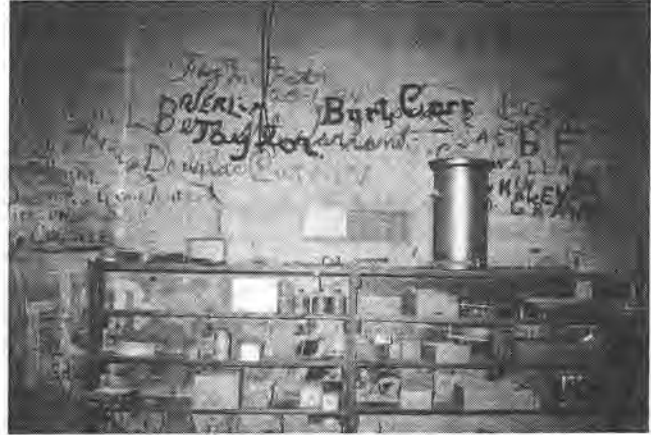


The Opera House stage set for the graduation class of 1903.
— Photo Courtesy of Judy Morhart Hudson, Santa Rosa, California

same day [way?], done by living people, and often by people who were quite in earnest. *My Partner*, *The Corsican Brothers*, *Ingomar*, *Damon and Pythias*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

I know that today I would rather hear James O'Neill, or even Frank Lindon, play *The Count of*

Monte Cristo than see any moving picture, except three or four in which Charlie Chaplin is the whole thing. My preference would have been the same, though even stronger, when I was a child. Moving pictures may be very entertaining and amusing, and they may be, as they often claim to be, instructive; but what child ever cried at the movies, as we used to at *East Lynne* or *The Two Orphans*?



Interior photograph of the Opera House showing signatures from early times. Douglas Cather's signature is near the center of the photograph. Willa Cather's name may be to the left of the fourth shelf down (near the cigar box).

— A Morhart photograph

That is the heart of the matter; only living people can make us feel. Pictures of them, no matter how dazzling, do not make us feel anything more than interest or curiosity or astonishment. The "pity and terror" which the drama, even in its crudest form, can awaken in young people, is not to be found in the movies. Only a living human being, in some sort of rapport with us, speaking the lines, can make us forget who we are and where we are, can make us (especially children) actually live in the story that is going on before us, can make the dangers of that heroine and the desperation of that hero much more important to us, for the time much dearer to us, than our own lives.

That, after all, was the old glory of the drama in its great days; that is why its power was more searching than that of printed books or paintings because a story of human experience was given to us alive, given to us, not only by voice and attitude, but by all those unnamed ways in which an animal of any species makes known its terror or misery to other animals of its kind. And all the old-fashioned actors, even the poor ones, did "enter into the spirit" of their parts; it was the pleasure they got from this illusion that made them wish to be actors, despite the hardships of that profession. The extent to which they could enter into this illusion, much more than any physical attributes, measured their goodness or badness as actors. We hear the drama termed a thing in three dimensions; but it is really a thing in four dimensions, since it has two imaginative fires behind it, the playwright's and the actor's.

I am not lamenting the advent of the "screen drama" (there is a great deal to be said in its favor), but I do regret that it has put an end to the old-fashioned road companies which used to tour about in country towns and "cities of the second class." The "movie" and the play are two very different things; one is a play, and the other is a picture of a play. A movie, well done, may be very good indeed, may even appeal to what is called the artistic sense; but to the emotions, the deep feelings, never!

Never, that is, excepting Charlie Chaplin at his best — and his best — I have noticed, really gets through to very few people. Not to his enormous audience, but to actors and to people of great experience in the real drama. They admire and marvel.

I go to the picture shows in the little towns I know, and I watch the audience, especially the children. I see easy, careless attention, amusement, occasionally a curiosity that amounts to mild excitement; but never that breathless, rapt attention and deep feeling that the old barnstorming companies were able to command. It was not only the "sob stuff" that we took hard; it was everything. When old Frank Lindon in a frilled shirt and a velvet coat blazing with diamonds, stood in the drawing room of Mme. Danglars' and revealed his identity to Mme. de Morcerf, his faithless Mercedes, when she cowered and made excuses, and he took out a jeweled snuff box with a much powdered hand, raised his eyebrows, permitted his lip to curl, and said softly and bitterly, "A fidelity of six months!" then we children were not in the opera house in Red Cloud we were in Mme. Danglars' salon in Paris, in the middle of lives so very different from our own. Living people were making us feel things, and it is through the feelings, not at all through the eye, that one's imagination is fired.

Pictures of plots, unattended by the voice from the machine (which seems to me much worse than no voice), a rapid flow of scene and pageant, make a fine kind of "entertainment" and are an ideal diversion for the tired business man. But I am sorry that the old opera houses in the prairie towns are dark, because they really did give a deeper thrill, at least to children. It did us good to weep at *East Lynne*, even if the actress was fairly bad and the play absurd. Children have about a hundred years of un-lived life wound up in them, and they want to be living some of it. Only real people speaking the lines can give us that feeling of living along with them, of participating in their existence. The poorest of the old road companies were at least made up of people who wanted to be actors and tried to be — that alone goes a long way. The very poorest of all were the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* companies, but even they had living bloodhounds. How the barking of these dogs behind the scenes used to make us catch our breath! That alone was worth the price of admission, as the star used to say, when he came before the curtain.

Very cordially yours,

Willa Cather

OW-H, 27 October 1929

ARTIST'S PALETTE (Continued)

driven, the experience of rapture, and the conviction that an outside agent acts through the creator; in the other type, the experience of purposeful organization, and the intent to solve a problem predominate. The first has many features in common with regressive processes: Impulses and drives, otherwise hidden, emerge. The subjective experience is that of a flow of thought and images driving toward expression. The second has many features in common with what characterizes "work" — dedication and concentration.'

Although the operations of "inspiration" and "elaboration" generally work in concert once the creative process is underway, at the beginning (of a career or of an individual work), "inspiration" must *precede* "elaboration." No one, however technically gifted, can become an artist unless she is able to loosen the monitoring processes that suppress and control emotions, thereby releasing unconscious material. It is, by nature, a challenging, exhausting, often frightening ordeal; moreover, it is an ordeal about which Cather herself often wrote.

As readers and critics, we behold only the finished product; and if any single element of Cather's fiction strikes us as remarkable, it is, perhaps, the majesty of her craftsmanship — lean, elegant imagery; gracefully understated learning; singing, poetic prose; and a wily, mischievous sense of surprisingly bawdy humor. Many of these elements are things that Kris might see primarily as the product of "elaboration," her habit of reworking every text — editing extensively, rewriting, and ruthlessly cutting. Yet when Cather herself writes about the creative process, she refers with surprising frequency to that *other* component, inspiration: the insistent emergence of something which has been hidden — something covert, painful, and possibly dangerous. Consider these well-known pronouncements (*italics added*):

The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper — whether little or great, it belongs to Literature. "The Best Stories of Sarah Ome Jewett"

It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, *the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed*, that give high quality to the novel. "The Novel Demeuble"

You look for the definite, whereas the domain of pure art is always the indefinite . . . the fact under the illusion. "The Count of Crow's Nest"

Nobody can paint the sun, or sunlight. He can only paint the tricks that shadows play with it, or what it does to forms. He cannot even paint those relations of light and shade — *he can only paint some emotion they give him*. "Light on Adobe Walls"

Sometimes, Cather even seems to echo Kris's theories — employing language and concepts remarkably like his:

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ARTIST'S PALETTE

(Continued)

In all great impersonation there are two stages. One in which the object is the generation of emotional power; to produce from one's own brain a whirlwind that will sweep the commonplaces of the world away from the naked souls of men and women and leave them defenseless and strange to each other. The other is the conservation of all this emotional energy; to bind the whirlwind down within one's straining heart, to feel the tears of many burning in one's eyes and yet not to weep, to hold all these chaotic faces still and silent within one's self until out of this tempest of pain and passion there speaks the still, small voice unto the soul of man. . . . This is classical art, art exalted, art deified. "Nanette: An Aside"

Here, then, is the process that defines greatness — marvelous, but also strenuous, painful, and potentially damaging. The singer, "Tandutorri[,] is the only woman who has given us art like this," the narrator of "Nanette" confides; "And now she is dying of it."²

"Inspiration," art's necessary beginning, is also life's most intimate and compelling theatrical; for when the compassionate curtains of consciousness part, they disclose a private shadow land of everything we love and fear the most: secrets, panics, longings, rages, illusions — a wilderness of butterflies and dragons. The vitality of this drama is the wellspring of creative power; thus to write with authority, to write as *artists* write, Cather was obliged to explore the shadow world, a realm whose dangers she could never know until it was too late to return to blessed ignorance. Such a venture requires courage; in her case, it seems to have required time as well. Willa Cather got something of a slow start as a novelist: although she had published seven short stories before her graduation from college (in 1895 when she was twenty-two), her "two first" novels were not published until 1912 and 1913 when she was almost forty. Economic need impeded her progress, years spent in teaching and journalism; however, necessity is an insufficient, unsatisfactory explanation. (Compare her case with Stephen Crane's, her equally impoverished contemporary.³) Something more held her back: some reluctance or ambivalence, or even fear.

Marilyn Arnold and more recently Sharon O'Brien have examined the early short stories in depth.⁴ Both discuss the generalized prejudice against all "serious" women writers; both discuss Cather's ambivalence about the "cost" of becoming a serious writer — the (to her mind) inevitable sacrifice of all the rewards of a "normal" life; and O'Brien in particular addresses what she perceives to be the principal block for many years — Cather's conflict about gender preference and gender role, a conflict that grew primarily out of her problematic relationship with her own mother. The insights of both critics are persuasive and illuminating of Cather's work; O'Brien's complex discussion of Cather's resistance to rigid gender roles is especially

so. However, in the end, even the gender dilemma seems inadequate to explain (1) the unusual length of the apprenticeship, (2) the idiosyncratic *content* and *tonality* of Cather's work, or (3) what is perhaps most interesting, the unique nature of Willa Cather's artistic achievement in the great novels that followed her two "firsts."

I would suggest, then, an additional, perhaps even an over-riding dilemma: the unruly, violent, and confused energies in the shadowland of Cather's inner drama, the half-forgotten and half-repressed realm that "inspiration" disclosed as soon as she began to write fiction. On the positive side, this vision was replete with power. Paradoxically, however, power was its negative element as well, for power alone is never enough to authenticate art; as Cather told an interviewer: "Art is form. . . . Sincerity demands form. It is some other impulse that runs to formlessness."⁵ Nor is it possible for any artist to evade the complex contours of her own inner life: she must know all of her own secrets; for, as Cather herself said, "the writer's 'sole duty is to put *himself* on the paper."⁶ Thus to reach the years of achievement with which we are familiar — for which we revere her and her work — Willa Cather was obliged both to confront the demons that had been roused by the beginnings of inspiration and to find a strategy for imposing aesthetic limits upon them and giving them form. The most telling traces of her struggle can be found in the unrefined early fiction.

The insistent intrusion of death reflects the most obvious struggle: Cather published seven stories during the years 1892-1894, and each is preoccupied with death. Five conclude with death (three of them, bloody, violent deaths). Another, "The White Pyramid" is the first fiction to present a creative artist: he is an architect, and his masterpiece is an elaborate *tomb!* Moreover, the narrator of this tale concludes his cryptic account by referring to ominous secrets *which cannot be put into language*:

Of the great pyramid and of the mystery thereof, and of the strange builder, and of the sin of the king, I may not speak, for my lips are sealed.⁷ (CSF 533)

Still another, "The Fear that Walks by Noonday," is a ghost story that takes as a given the inescapable, violent influence of the past upon the present.

In real life, Cather experienced persistent, preternatural anxieties about death. She had deep-seated phobias (in later life she would not take journeys by airplane, for example, even when her cross-country trips became physically exhausting), and she suffered from recurrent panic attacks. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant recalls the striking expression that Cather gave of one such terror during the *McClure's* years; the two women were discussing Cather's impending trip to Nebraska for a visit home:

I learned that, after a few months in the city, she got wildly homesick for the West. She would dash out to see her "family" — "my mother and father especially," and the wheat harvest, and then

flee back to Pittsburgh to Isabelle McClung — for fear of dying in a cornfield.

Died in a cornfield? I was puzzled.

You could not understand[, Cather replied]. You have not seen those miles of fields. There is no place to hide in Nebraska. You can't hide under a windmill. She retreated obliquely.⁸

This striking image of terror — so puzzling to Sergeant — was evidently not merely a casual statement, but rather the expression of an abiding anxiety, for one finds it strikingly prefigured in a story of this early period, "The Elopement of Allen Poole."

The explicit romance suggested in the title word "elopement" is betrayed by its action: the hero is killed on the evening of his intended marriage by "revenuers" who have caught him making moonshine. Written in 1893, this was Willa Cather's first "Virginia" fiction, and it contains a striking depiction of the precise fate that still inspired terror ten years later when Cather voiced her anxieties to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant about death in a cornfield:

Allen ran on, plunging and floundering through the corn like some wounded animal, tearing up stalk after stalk as he clutched it in his pain. . . .

"Stay with me, Nell, [he pleads when his sweetheart finds him]; stay with me. I'm afeerd to be alone." (CSF 577)

Evidently, neither the general anxiety nor this peculiarly explicit image of it ever departed from Cather's imagination.

The story is interesting for an additional reason: it touches briefly upon a theme that intrudes into a great deal of Cather's published work, but most awkwardly and insistently into these early tales, abuse — particularly the abuse of women:

"It's mighty hard to lose yo', Nell, [the dying Allen Poole gasps,] but maybe it's best. Maybe if I'd lived an' married yo' I might a' got old an' cross an' used to yo' some day, an' might a' swore at you and beat yo' like the mountain folks round here does, an' I'd sooner die now." (578)

Proposed as a "final" apprehension while life ebbs away, this is a truly bizarre concern! Poole seems reconciled to death — almost grateful for extinction. The unstated assumption is that it is the only force capable of preventing some ultimate brutality towards his wife. In fact, violence and abuse are so pervasive in these early stories that they acquire almost the status of a "given." Or, to state the case another way, it would seem that Willa Cather could only rarely conceive of a fictional world that did not contain brutality as an essential element.

In "Peter," the son mistreats his father, and (as the old man reflects, shortly before his suicide) "he works the girls too hard, women were not made to work so" (CSF 543). In "Lou, The Prophet," the title character is cleansed by the burning vision of a sinful human race, compelled by a furious God to make amends for his transgressions. His own sanctity lies in unique

gentleness: "The boys were very fond of Lou; he never teased them as the other men did, but used to help them" (CSF 537). "A Tale of the White Pyramid" accepts slave labor as an unquestioned given. "A Son of the Celestial" introduces violence indirectly but none the less ominously. Its Caucasian narrator explodes with racist indictments of an Asian culture with sinister inclinations and dangerous mysteries he deeply fears: "You ought to be a feeling passionate people," he expostulates, "but you are as heartless and devilish as your accursed stone gods that leer at you in your pagodas. . . . You are dead things that move!" Nor does his Chinese friend deny the charge, but only "smiled his hideous smile" (CSF 527).

All of Cather's very earliest work bears some imprint of the Gothic; however, none renders the miasma of sadistic violence more relentlessly or intensely than "The Clemency of the Court." Based on an actual scandal in the Nebraska State Penitentiary at Lincoln, the story is most revealing in its combining of journalistic fact with fictional invention. The *Nebraska State Journal* had printed a series of stories about a prisoner, Abel Powell, who had been found in his cell dead of strangulation. Like Serge Povolitchky in Cather's story, Powell had been brutally punished for inadequately hooping barrels, and like Serge, he had been tortured by guards who attached a rope to his neck so that any motion of his arms would result in suffocation. Cather transforms this exposé by drawing upon fictional models from Hugo and Turgenev, and by providing a *background* and a *context* for her central character.⁹ What had been a mere local scandal is expanded and infused with meaning: no longer an all-but-anonymous victim of "police brutality," Serge is simultaneously humanized and universalized; he becomes "everyman" who has yearned for affection, for kindness, for safety, for order, and finally simply for release from pain.

Overwrought and maudlin, the story is nonetheless harrowing in its relentless rehearsal of abuse: Serge's mother has committed suicide; his foster mother alternately beat him and told him "beautiful stories" about "awful [Siberian] marches in the mud and ice" and how her sister-in-law was imprisoned, and shortly thereafter

knouted to death at the command of an officer.

After that her husband tried in many ways to kill himself, but they always caught him at it. At last, one night, he bit deep into his arm and tore open the veins with his teeth and bled to death. (CSF 516)

Like someone blinded by glare and ice, Serge eventually loses the ability to see things clearly: when his puppy is casually killed, it seems somehow automatic — "normal" — to butcher the killer. In prison, he longs for the lost puppy and for the brown fields of freedom; but he longs with almost equal intensity for the *baba* who had beaten him and told him tales of snow and starvation.

(Continued on page 12)

ARTIST'S PALETTE (Continued)

"The Clemency of the Court" proposed a vision of life that was to recur throughout Cather's work (though never again in such maudlin, unrelieved terms): no place can be entirely exempt from danger, from turmoil or violence or abuse or the drunkenness that so often accompanies them; and no ultimate realm of "security" and "happiness" (no "great good place") is postulated, in the great work of her maturity. There are no safe havens in the worlds of Willa Cather. The shadowland of her inspiration contained many creatures; some are excellent and fair, yet other occupants appear to have been monstrous — savage and hideous and dangerous. Confronting *all* of these, not just the beauties but the beasts as well, and giving *form* to the unruly contents of her imagination was perhaps the most difficult burden of Cather's apprenticeship. Only when she had completed the task would she progress from journalist and storyteller to "Artist."

Many of the stories in *The Troll Garden* address one or another aspect of this dilemma of creation; however, "The Profile," a tale written in 1904 and originally intended for inclusion in that collection, yields unique insight into the curious vision that characterized those earliest fictions. In many ways, as Rosowski has observed, it represents a turning point in Cather's development.¹⁰

When Aaron Dunlap, an American portraitist living in Paris, is commissioned to paint Virginia Gilbert, a woman whose face has been hideously scarred on the right side, the deformity requires him to paint her in "profile." At first entirely unnerved, he gradually learns to tolerate her deformity and then even to love her. Eventually, the two marry. Before the marriage, Dunlap had accommodated himself to a singular condition of Virginia Gilbert's life: no one, neither she nor any of her family, ever speaks of her wound or even acknowledges its existence. Always present and impossible to ignore, *it is never named*. At first, Dunlap assumes that marriage will eliminate the barrier and that the unspeakable will find expression. However, he soon discovers otherwise; even in intimacy, the scar is never mentioned. Moreover, a flaw in his wife's character begins to emerge, an incongruous compulsion for self-adornment; brazenly, she calls attention to her appearance while ignoring the one feature that cannot be overlooked, her horrifying mutilation. Time passes, and husband and wife become disaffected with each other. They have one daughter, Eleanor (named for Virginia's mother), but Virginia shows no interest in the child.

When the little girl is four years old, a change occurs. The mother's cousin (also named Eleanor) comes to live with them while she is studying in Paris. This cousin showers the child with precisely the affection that Virginia had withheld, and the child's father grows to love Eleanor Vane, who treats his daughter so generously. Still, the situation is not brought to a head until Dunlap oversteps the bound-

aries of silence with his wife. Watching her dress for a party in a "more than usually conspicuous and defiant" way, he expostulates: "You ought really to be more careful about such extremes. They only emphasize the scar" (CSF 133-134). The unspeakable thing has finally been named; his wife leaves the house in a cold rage, never returns and eventually obtains a divorce.

The melodramatic crisis of the tale occurs the very evening that the scar is named. As she does regularly with the child Eleanor at her side, Eleanor Vane lights an alcohol lamp in her bedroom. On *this* night, however, the lamp inexplicably explodes, and the woman receives the full force in her face. The little girl is frightened — her hair and dress are scorched — and the older woman's face is permanently disfigured. After this melodramatic crescendo, Cather's conclusion is inconclusive: "Society, always prone to crude antitheses, knew of Dunlap only that he had painted many of the most beautiful women of his time, that he had been twice married, and that each of his wives had been disfigured by a scar on the face" (135). Indeed, the entire story is poorly-crafted: laden with ponderous symbolism, it fails to achieve full aesthetic coherence. Yet, like "The Clemency of the Court," it is profoundly suggestive.

O'Brien reads "The Profile" as a narrative about Cather's relationship with her own mother (who, like Dunlap's wife, was named Virginia).¹¹ Given both the vexed nature of Cather's feelings for her own mother and the story's muddled preoccupation with mothering relationships, there is little doubt that the convolutions of this primary relationship inform the fiction in *some* way; however, its primary subject is other, more universal and with elements that curiously echo the violence of her earliest fictions.

This is a tale of "vulner"-ability — of wounds, wounding, and the ability to inflict wounds — an apotheosis of violence with a subtext of defenselessness.

To be sure, this is also a "Virginia" story (in many ways, a companion piece to "The Elopement of Allen Poole") — not even primarily in its spectral evocation of Virginia Boak Cather, but rather in the horrific violence of the painter-hero's origins; there were no safe havens in the West Virginia of Aaron Dunlap's youth:

[He] had come from a country where women are hardly used. . . . on a farm in the remote mountains of West Virginia, and his mother had died of pneumonia contracted from taking her place at the washtub too soon after the birth of a child. [He was] apprenticed to his grandfather . . . who, in his drunken rages, used to beat his wife with odd strips of shoe leather. The painter's hands still bore the mark of that apprenticeship, and the suffering of the mountain women he had seen about him in his childhood had left him almost morbidly sensitive. (CSF 126)

Little wonder, then, that he fled. Paris became his refuge, a city of feminine charm that filled him with

"fanciful romance" and

trained his hand and eye to the subtleties of the thousand types of subtle beauty in which she abounds; made him, after a delicate and chivalrous fashion, the *expiator* of his mountain race. He lived in a bright atmosphere of clear vision and happy associations, delighted at having to do with what was fair and exquisitely brief. (127, my emphasis)

Here, his wounded hands were rehabilitated, "his stripes were healed, his agony of ignorance alleviated" (126); and here, at last, the boy who had been abused believed that he had found a sanctuary of safety.

Of course his work reiterates his conviction: he paints women, "preferably pretty women"; he has an uncanny capacity to detect a core of loveliness in even the most unpromising subject; and his talent expresses a strange extremity of *sexual* discretion:

He had the faculty of transferring personalities to his canvas. . . . He was finely sensitive to the merest prettiness, was tender and indulgent of it, careful never to deflower a pretty woman of her little charm, however commonplace.

Nicer critics always discerned, even in his most radiant portraits, a certain quiet, element of sympathy, almost of *pity* in the treatment. (125, my emphasis)

Apparently rehabilitated himself, he revives and rescues with every lovely canvas the "suffering mountain women" whose injuries he had shared. And two unspoken premises inform his work: that all women have somehow suffered — and that all possess some inner beauty of character which it is the peculiar mission of his art to discover. To some extent, of course, he has, unthinkingly, made similar assumptions about himself.

The story opens with Dunlap surveying a painting that perturbs him because it presents a radically different vision of the world; it is "a picture of *Circe's Swine*,"

a grotesque study showing the enchantress among a herd of bestial things, variously diverging from the human type — furry-eared fauns, shaggy-hipped satyrs, apes with pink palms, snuffing jackals, and thick-jowled swine, all with more or less of human intelligence protesting mutely from their hideous lineaments. (125)

The work is both offensive and threatening. It violates Dunlap's decision to render only the charms of his subject, and it challenges his meticulous sexual accommodations by depicting the brute force of carnality, both in the sinister power of the enchantress (so different from the "suffering," passive women of his youth) and in the loathsome bestiality of her victims. However, the most searing implication of the painting is that each of us harbors memories and fantasies of gross animality: none are exempt, neither the women whom Dunlap has ennobled (and with whom he identifies) nor the craftsman himself. In fact, the vehemence of his response suggests that the real reasons for his many tactics of avoidance lurk in the secret recesses of his own mind.

Cather's use of scars is intriguing.¹² At first glance, the story seems to argue that scars are the particular province of females, and Freud's well-known inference seems relevant: every woman bears the devaluing scar of castration, and this genital loss imposes lasting pain. Yet the scars on this male painter's hands belie such an easy inference. He is as "wounded" as the females in the tale; indeed, as "wounded" as the outlandish, half-human/half-beast "men" in the picture that offends him. In general, he finds uncorrected imperfections intolerable. Hence his "prettifying" portraits are as much an appeasement to himself as they are to the women he depicts, a form of camouflage that permits him to concentrate on technique (or what Kris would call "elaboration") without exposing himself to the perils of "inspiration." The result of this evasive tactic is that he has never really become an *artist*, merely a dabbler of the very highest order.

His various reactions to Virginia's scar are telling: the first is "shocked" (*CSF* 127); thereafter he resorts to denial, "the conviction . . . that it had just happened, had come upon her since last she had passed a mirror"; next, he acquiesces in a complicity of silence by portraying her in "profile" to conceal the wound; and finally he concocts a remarkable, paradoxical transformation:

All that he had tried to forget seemed no longer dim and faraway — like the cruelties of vanished civilizations — but present and painfully near. He thought of his mother and grandmother, of his little sister, who had died from the bite of a copperhead snake, as if they were creatures yet unrelated from suffering. . . . [Yet] as time went on, he was drawn to [Virginia] by what had once repelled him. Her courageous candor appealed to his chivalry, and he came to love her, not despite the scar, but, in a manner, for its very sake. (128-29)

Having resurrected the role of "Southern gentleman," Dunlap harbors the self-serving, semi-sexual vision of himself as a hybrid husband/therapist: "The moment must come when she would give him her confidence; perhaps it would be only a whisper, a gesture, a guiding of his hand in the dark" (129). Yet he very soon discovers that an "armor of unconsciousness . . . sheathed her scar" (130).

Whatever the wound of Cather's story represents (and its significance is tantalizingly ambiguous), violence, brutality, sexuality, and perhaps even sadism all play some part in it. Moreover, the author clearly means her reader to infer that this "wound" has a history that is coextensive with the history of mankind: an ancient version is revived by the salon painting of *Circe's Swine*; another, more recent, was played out in the hills of West Virginia; still another, in an elegant Paris apartment; and still another in the formulation of the narrative itself, which is explicitly designed to remind the reader of Hawthorne's tale, "The Birthmark." The threat of this "vulner"-ability is ubiquitous and eternal: no one can be certain of escaping its horrific consequences; nor can anyone assume self-

(Continued on page 14)

ARTIST'S PALETTE (Continued)

righteously that he will never become a perpetrator. Although there is no evidence that Dunlap realizes this fact, his long charade of passive silence has made him an accomplice in the trap that eventually wounds both his daughter and the woman he loves. Ironically, he has become brutal in spite of himself. The world offers no safe havens to even the most temperate of its dwellers.

There is no evidence that the painter himself has learned this difficult lesson. Nor have we any reason to suppose either that his work has been altered by the concatenation of misfortunes he has suffered or that he will ever be able to move beyond this apprenticeship of "pretty" portraiture to enter the high realm of art. However, the evidence of Willa Cather's own development tells a different story. Despite its shortcomings, "The Profile" exhibits the beginnings of mastery: potentially unruly, violent material is still present (the curtains to her shadowland have remained open); however, by 1904 when she wrote this story, Cather had begun to develop aesthetic strategies that made this primitive, turbulent material both tolerable and meaningful. Perhaps most important, although her *painter-hero* has declined to expose himself to the perils of "inspiration," this tale demonstrates that Willa Cather had rejected the route of evasion. Despite its flaws, then, it bespeaks the promise of greatness to come.

NOTES

¹ Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965), 59.

² "The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett," "The Novel Demeuble," and "Light on Adobe Walls," from Willa Cather, *On Writing* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), pp. 47, 41-42, 123-124. "The Count of Crow's Nest" and "Nanette: An Aside" from *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction*, ed. Virginia Faulkner and Mildred R. Bennett (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), pp. 453 and 408. Hereafter, references to stories in this collection will be in the text as *CSF*.

³ Crane died at the age of twenty-nine — the author of four novels, a volume of poetry, and a great many superb short stories and journalistic essays.

⁴ Marilyn Arnold, *Willa Cather's Short Fiction* (Athens, Ohio & London: Ohio University Press, 1986) and Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁵ *Willa Cather In Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*, ed. L. Brent Bohike (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) pp. 110-111.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷ O'Brien sees this "bizarre story" as an expression of the epitome of "Cather's conflict in drawing on emotional and erotic material that she simultaneously wanted to keep hidden." She asks: "What is the 'mystery' that demands silence? The most obvious possibility is implied in the text where Cather hints at a homosexual relationship between the king and his builder. The only possible referent in the story for 'the sin of the king' is his unpopular relationship with the stranger" (198-199). In other words, O'Brien suggests that

these elements are the more or less *conscious* and *explicit* subjects with which Cather is working here. Some of O'Brien's insights are clearly useful: the possibility of erotic friendship was clearly in Cather's mind during this period; moreover, the early use of inner space to indicate an infinity of mysterious possibility is also of interest. However, O'Brien has overlooked what seems to me an essential fact: the story appeared in the December 22nd issue of *The Hesperian* — i.e. its *Christmas* issue. The architect, "a youth of the Shepherd people of the north," patently presages Christ — may be meant explicitly to represent Joseph; and the King's "sin" is most likely his subjection of God's "Chosen People" to slavery. In *this context*, it seems unlikely that homoerotic conflicts would find such a central (and *explicit*) place in the tale.

Indeed, the more likely interpretation might be that even in her effort to write a striking and unusual Christmas story (the kind of bravura behavior that was characteristic during this period), Cather could not prevent a *melange* of troubling elements from tumbling into the fiction — and that what the reader principally discerns is the chaotic and threatening nature of these elements which, because they are so poorly integrated into the work, botch the story.

⁸ Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1953), p. 59.

⁹ See Sheryl L. Meyering, *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Willa Cather* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1994), 32-37.

¹⁰ Susan J. Rosowski, *Willa Cather's Romanticism* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 212. Rosowski and I disagree about Cather's early treatment of "the grotesque."

O'Brien supposes Virginia Dunlap to be a representation of the psychologically cold and harsh elements in Virginia Cather, the author's mother.

¹¹ It is a "daughter's revenge on the beautiful mother who made her feel she was not pretty or ladylike enough to win her approval; [and] the scar is a complex sign, reflecting the daughter's search for closeness as well as her feelings of abandonment, her love as well as her anger" (O'Brien, p. 50).

Cather's use of names is, as always, suggestive: Virginia calls to mind not only the author's mother, but her birthplace — and, of course, a pre-sexual female condition; Aaron, Moses' "assistant" fell into the sin of worshipping the golden calf of the heathens; Eleanor is a variant of *Helen*, recalling (as so many variants — like "Lena" — do) the woman who caused a calamitous war.

¹² This interpretation is supported by the abhorrence with which amputation is treated here: "Lop away so much as a finger," an old painter declares at the story's opening, "and you have wounded the creature beyond reparation" (*CSF*, p. 125).

AMERICAN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA
MAY 30 - JUNE 2, 1996

"Problematic *My Mortal Enemy*, 1925-1995"
"Contextualizing Cather"

CONTACT: John Swift, Occidental College
1600 Campus Road
Los Angeles, CA 90041-3314

Editors of the Cather Scholarly Edition are asking for help in locating copies of the 20th and 21st printings of the first edition of *Shadows on the Rock*. If you own such a copy, and would be willing to provide xerox copies of certain pages from it for the editors to examine, would you contact Frederick Link, Textual Editor for *Shadows on the Rock*, Dept. of English, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska 68588-0333; phone (402) 435-2654.

Cather Short Stories to be Performed

Mellanee Kvasnicka
Member, WCPM Board of Governors
Omaha Correspondent

Willa Cather's abiding love of the opera has provided a critical venue for many of today's Cather scholars. Even more interesting is the creative outlet Cather's works are providing for musical artists. An innovative project sponsored by Opera Omaha and the College of Fine Arts at the University of Nebraska at Omaha promises an exciting new opportunity to experience Cather's work in a non-literary form.

Minneapolis composer Libby Larsen, one of the collaborators in this project, will be the beneficiary of a \$14,000 grant awarded by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Opera for a New America program to develop an evening-length opera based on three short stories by Willa Cather: "Eric Hermannson's Soul," "Peter," and "Nanette: An Aside." Opera Omaha staff members and UNO students will be involved in the development of the piece in its earliest stages.

Larsen, who had considered an opera based on the work of Ray Bradbury, ultimately decided on Cather's work partly because of its appeal to students. Also, each of the Cather stories relates in some way to music. Ms. Larsen appeared at Omaha South High where she spoke to my Advanced Placement English students about the challenge of adapting one genre to another. She mentioned the bittersweetness of Cather's stories: "In all her stories, there's this almost fall light, the first kind of autumn light. It will be easier to capture musically than it is to describe in words, I'm sure" (*Omaha World-Herald*, October 21, 1995).

Music for "Eric Hermannson's Soul" will be the first composed. Larsen expects this first part of the trilogy to be forty minutes long. It will be presented on April 10, 1996, in a workshop production at UNO. Opera Omaha's resident company will fill main roles, and UNO students will fill supplementary roles as actors or chorus members. Libby Larsen is responsible for more than sixty works, including six operas and three symphonies. The composer has had commissions from the Cleveland String Quartet, the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, the Baltimore Choral Society, and the Minnesota Orchestra.



In the bedroom of Cather's childhood home in Red Cloud, Joel Geyer directs Julie Baker, as Thea Kronborg, in a scene from *Singing Cather's Song*.

— Photo Courtesy of Joel Geyer

Joel Geyer Captures the Magic of Drama

Elizabeth A. Turner
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln Correspondent

When asked how he became interested in bringing Willa Cather's literature to the screen, Joel Geyer, Producer/Director of *Singing Cather's Song* (1991) and *The Sentimentality of William Tavener* (1995), explained, "All beginnings involve passion." Geyer's passion for Cather began twelve years ago when he was in Santa Fe shooting *Melody of a City: Santa Fe* for German National Television and looking for books about Santa Fe; when he read *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, he was stunned by the way it captured the atmosphere of the place and by its "transcendent moments." Later when reading *The Song of the Lark* Geyer was drawn to the visual quality of the work; he saw it in his mind's eye and soon after discussed the possibility of working on Cather with Ron Hull, Associate General Manager of Nebraska Educational Television, where Geyer works as a Cultural Affairs Producer/Director.

When Hull proposed that Geyer focus on Mildred Bennett, Geyer hesitated at first, but he soon headed to Red Cloud. His initial impression of Bennett was that she was full of "yeps" and "nopes," too terse and succinct to "make good television." However, after spending several long days touring the backroads of Cather country, they began to exchange childhood stories of struggles with organized religion; it was then that Geyer felt that they were beginning to "touch each other's souls." Geyer's imagination was sparked when he learned that Bennett, raised a Seventh Day Adventist, was forbidden to read fiction. Geyer explains, "As soon as I heard that, I knew we had a story. If I could describe Mildred's journey from sneaking behind the couch to read Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra* to her mature celebration of Cather, I was certain it would be great television." In *Singing*

(Continued on page 16)

GEYER CAPTURES MAGIC (Continued)



Cork Ramer is William Tavener.

—Photo Courtesy of Joel Geyer

Peg Sheldrick is Hester Tavener.

—Photo Courtesy of Joel Geyer

Cather's Song, which he produced, directed, and wrote, Geyer integrates Bennett's struggle against organized religion with similar struggles in Cather's works: Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* and Eric Hermansson in "Eric Hermansson's Soul."

After completing *Singing Cather's Song*, Geyer continued to be interested in Cather; his goal was to create "minimalist drama" that would reveal Cather's visual quality while remaining true to her text and capturing some of her magic. Geyer read through the short stories, looking for one which he could produce and direct as a ten-minute film. Although Geyer considered "The Enchanted Bluff" and "A Wagner Matinee," he selected "The Sentimentality of William Tavener" because of its recovery of a long-lost intimacy as well as its concern with the dilemma of the intensity of modern life and the pressures that drive couples apart.

The production is a "read story" that comes to life on the screen as true as possible to the author's words. The reader for "Tavener" is E. G. Marshall, whom Geyer felt possessed an intuitive understanding of Cather and an ability to strike the appropriate energy level and tone. While Marshall's scenes were filmed at ETV in Lincoln, the dramatized story was filmed at the Stuhr Museum in Grand Island; for the cast and props, Geyer relied on nearby resources, including the Lincoln and Omaha Community Playhouses and the University of NE-Lincoln's Theater Department. Local actors Cork Ramer and Peg Sheldrick are William and Hester Tavener, and the boys who play their sons, Don Rockford and Bill Catlett, were recruited from the Grand Island School System. To soften the shift from the readers' images of Cather's characters to the actual people who were to play them on the screen, Geyer's production focuses on the actors' photographs used as props in the Tavener household before bringing the actors in those photographs to life. Throughout two nights of

filming in Grand Island Geyer's goal was, always, to capture the magic of that transformation.

The Sentimentality of William Tavener was broadcast during prime-time on the Nebraska ETV Network, and the NET Schools TeleLearning Service has televised the ten-minute film in schools, where it can easily be viewed and discussed during one class session. *William Tavener* is the first in a series of short dramatized readings featuring the work of Nebraska's writers and entitled "Plains Voices." Currently in preparation is *Winter Memories*, excerpts from *O Pioneers!* to be read by Julie Harris and filmed in Red Cloud at Cather's home and at the Stuhr Museum; Constance McCord will star as Alexandra. In September Geyer had hoped to film Mari Sandoz's "Mirage" from *Old Jules*, but on the day that filming was to begin Geyer and his cast and crew were faced with a sudden snowfall that forced him to cancel the location filming at the Jules Sandoz homestead; Geyer expects to film this story in the spring. The ten-minute films in the "Plains Voices" series are ideal for filling programming niches at NETV, and in August the films will be brought together in a thirty-minute production entitled *Love and Loneliness on the Plains*, which will premiere on NETV. Viewers recently had the



Cork Ramer and Peg Sheldrick as William and Hester Tavener.

—Photo Courtesy of Joel Geyer

opportunity to enjoy Geyer's two-hour documentary, *Last of the One Room Schools*, and they can see Geyer's reenactments of struggles of Oregon trail pioneers, shot in Kansas, Wyoming, Idaho, and Oregon, in a three-hour special, *In Search of the Oregon Trail*, to be broadcast nationally on PBS at 7 p.m. on April 29th.



NOTE: Copies of *Singing Cather's Song* are for sale through the WCPM, and *The Sentimentality of William Tavener* will soon be available.

Spring Conference in Red Cloud May 3-4, 1996

Theme Book: *My Mortal Enemy*, 1926

This year's annual conference will turn our attention to one of the most enigmatic novels in the Cather canon: The story of Myra Henshawe, her marriage to Oswald, her frustrations and decline, her eventual death by the sea. Friday afternoon, May 3, will be a time when conference participants can engage in independent exploration of the Cather sites in Red Cloud. This will be followed by a late afternoon paper session discussing Cather's work, and the day will conclude with an evening slide show of material relevant to *My Mortal Enemy*. Something new this year is a late-evening service at St. Juliana's church (if we can arrange some kind of lighting!).

Saturday's activities will begin with a service at the Grace Episcopal Church, where Cather and her parents were confirmed in 1922. The service will be conducted by the Rev. Jane Heenan of Lincoln. This event will be followed by "The Passing Show," where Professor John Murphy will present a paper on the theme novel and our guest panelists from the East and West coasts (Marilyn Callander, JoAnn Middleton, and John Swift) will informally continue the discussion. Following lunch, prepared by the excellent cooks in Red Cloud, conferees will gather for a brief meeting announcing in more detail the WCPM's plans for restoration of the Red Cloud Opera House. The afternoon tour will feature a first-ever visit to the Opera House itself. The evening's banquet will include music associated with *My Mortal Enemy* provided by Anne Devries, an associate of Opera Omaha, with readings and narration by Marya Lucca-Thyberg, of the Omaha Community Playhouse.

Put us on your calendar now!

Cather's Immortal Art and *My Mortal Enemy*

Mary C. Carruth
University of New Orleans

Since Cather herself identified Oswald Henshawe as the "mortal enemy" of her enigmatic novella (Woodress 385), the mystery for critics to solve is not *who* is the mortal enemy, but *why* Oswald is his wife's antagonist. Most scholars have answered this question in light of the novella's themes of love and religion. Only Richard Giannone has interpreted the character of Oswald in terms of the overlooked theme of art in *My Mortal Enemy*, arguing that Oswald lacks the "lasting spirit" manifest in Myra's artist-friends as well as in Catholicism's rites (175-176). Indeed, as the novella's imagery suggests, Oswald is his wife's betrayer because he is identified with the new social order, with what Cather called the "forwardgoers," and so lacks the capacity to protect her from aesthetic deprivation and to provide her with aesthetic enrichment. *My Mortal Enemy* is not only about the failure of love and the solace of religion, but also the decline of the artistic spirit in postwar American culture.

Like the beautiful Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady* (1923), Myra Henshawe evokes the artistic spirit that Cather associated with an older order, with the time-period before 1922, the date she claimed that the world split in two, producing a philosophical and artistic gap between what she called the "backward" and the "forwardgoers" (*Not Under Forty* preface). Associated with the present-day order, the forwardgoers represent all that Cather hated — ugliness, acquisitiveness, utilitarianism, unimaginative conformity, and coarseness — while the backward, identified with the old order, recalled all that she valued — beauty, imaginativeness, individuality, vitality, and sensitivity (Bloom 80-81). Just as Marian Forrester's beauty becomes altered by the materialistic values of the "forwardgoer," so Myra Henshawe's creative spirit is gradually extinguished by an aesthetically devoid and insensitive culture. Identified with this new order, her husband, Oswald, becomes her betrayer.

As early as the fall of 1895, Cather associates the commonplace world with mortality and the aesthetic realm with immortality. In a review she sets forth her aesthetics through an analogy between art and the stage:

Certainly we go [to the theater] to change our atmosphere, to get for a moment into the atmosphere of great emotions that are forbidden in our lives. I hope that the stage will keep its illusions, that the footlights will always be a boundary line beyond which men deign to feel and dare to love. I want them to be the dead line of the practical. The dress circle, the parquet, the orchestra chairs — that is all the dead world of fact; but right beyond that line of lights are the tropics, the kingdom of the unattainable, where the grand passions die not and the great forces still work. (*The Kingdom of Art* 66-67)

(Continued on page 18)

IMMORTAL ART (Continued)

In her much later essay "The Novel Demeublé," she distinguishes between the cheap novel, which is a form of entertainment, and the quality novel, which is a form of art; the latter, she insists, is made of "the stuff of immortality" (*Not Under Forty* 44). Oswald Henshawe, then, is the antagonist in *My Mortal Enemy* because he cannot provide Myra with either the material or the spiritual resources necessary for her vitality. While he represents the "dead world of fact," his wife embodies art's immortal spirit, one that is still durable in part one of the novella.

On narrator Nellie Birdseye's first meeting with Myra, it is the woman's artistic spirit — what Nellie later describes as "a compelling, passionate, overmastering something" in her nature (48) — that captures the girl's fascination. Richard Giannone suggests that music (in which he includes characters' lyrical voices) in Cather's fiction "represents the spiritual bond between creator and receiver" (7). When Nellie first meets Myra, she is softly strumming a guitar, and the girl is immediately struck by her "beautiful," and "bright," and "gay" speaking voice, itself a fluent instrument (5-6). Later in part one Nellie notices that Myra's voice possesses the creative power to invest "the name [of someone she admired] with a sort of grace" (43).¹ In fact, by speaking to the creative spirit in others, Myra divests them of their ordinariness and endows them with uniqueness. As Nellie explains:

When she addressed Aunt Lydia, for instance, she seemed to be speaking to a person deeper down than the blurred, taken-for-granted image of my aunt that I saw everyday, and for a moment my aunt became more individual, less matter-of-fact to me. (143)



"Madison Square Garden . . . looked to me so light and fanciful, and Saint-Gaudens' Diana, of which Mrs. Henshawe had told me, stepped out freely and fearlessly into the grey air."

When Nellie visits the Henshawes in New York City, it is not Myra's artist-friends that impress Nellie as much as Myra's creative rendering of them. Nellie admits, "Her account of her friends was often more interesting to me than the people themselves" (40). Every nuance of the environment Myra inhabits, from her brownstone residence to Manhattan itself, contributes to an aura of beauty. Whereas the homes in the West (except for the Driscoll Place in Parthia) do not inspire comment from Nellie, the "absolutely individ-

ual and unique" appointments in the Henshawes' apartment, from the plum-colored velvet curtains lined in cream to the soup tureen painted with birds, delight her (926-27). Even winter in the East with Myra is an aesthetic spectacle — like "a polar bear led on a leash by a beautiful lady" — rather than a destroyer (25).

Not until the Henshawes' New Year's Eve party does Nellie intuit the source of Myra's personal magnetism — her artistic spirit. In this scene, Helena Modjeska, whom Cather characterized in an early review as a consummate artist (*The World and the Parish* 38), incarnates Myra's creative spirit while the singer Emelia serves as its instrument of expression. Evoking "another race and another period" (45), Helena Modjeska is described as ageless and transcendent of the ordinary plane of existence. Her "beautifully modelled hands" with so much humanity in them are "fashioned for a nobler worldliness . . ." (46). The moon, a symbol of transcendent female beauty, sends beams "falling across her knees" (47). During the singing of the aria, Myra's position "crouching low beside" Emelia reinforces her identification with artistic expression (47). That her body is "crouching" and that her head is "in both hands" (48) indicate both bowed reverence and anguish. Her striking posture mirrors the dramatic gestures of performers of grand opera, underscoring the parallel between her and Norma, the heroine of Bellini's opera who feels a conflict of loyalties between her roles as celibate priestess and lover of a military enemy and betrayer in love. More importantly, Myra's poignant posture foreshadows the defeat of the artistic spirit in part two of the novella.

Under the spell of the aria, Myra becomes more human in Nellie's eyes, as her natural and vulnerable posture suggests. The music and the scene live in Nellie's memory as manifestations of Myra's "hidden richness":

For many years I associated Mrs. Henshawe with that music, thought of that aria as being mysteriously related to something in her nature that one rarely saw, but nearly always felt; a compelling, passionate, overmastering something for which I had no name, but which was audible, visible in the air that night, as she sat crouching in the shadow. When I wanted to recall powerfully that hidden richness in her, I had only to close my eyes and sing to myself: "*Casta diva, casta diva!*" (48)

During the aria, Oswald, in contrast to his wife, stands woodenly "like a statue behind Madame Modjeska's chair" (47). Formerly, in Nellie's eyes, the ingratiating host and tolerant husband, Oswald now appears less vital, his sentry-like station foreshadowing his dutiful relationship to Myra in part two. While he is generous in his attention to his wife's visible needs, exemplifying what Nellie later identifies as an "indestructible constancy" (103), he is small in artistic sensibility, in his need and capacity for aesthetic enrichment. He is, indeed, grounded in the "dead world of fact."

Part two of the novella ushers in the ugly, prosaic new order. The anonymity of the California city to

which Nellie moves underscores one of the characteristics of the progressive society — stultifying sameness. As symbols of the poor quality the present order spawns, the apartment-hotel in which Nellie and the Henshawes live is “wretchedly built and already falling to pieces, although it [is] new” (58), and the college in which she has a position is “experimental and unsubstantial as everything else in the place” (57-58). Although Nellie hears a Schubert air hummed by her neighbor, its incongruity with its surroundings, heightened by the irony that its lyrics welcome spring and positive change, makes it a mere vestige of art. Imprisoned in this graceless abode, Myra Henshawe is a cultural anachronism, “crippled but powerful in her brilliant wrappings” (65). Weeping as she listens to Nellie read a verse by Heine, Myra resembles the tear in the poem that “was not of the present, an old one, left over from the kind he [Heine] used to weep . . . A tear that belonged to a long dead time of his life and was an anachronism,” (79). Contrasting this verse with the degenerate art of the new order, she asks Nellie, “You don’t really like this new verse that’s going round, ugly lines about ugly people and common feelings — you don’t really?” (80).

Myra attributes much of her misery to her noisy overhead neighbors, members of the new order who possess “no sensibilities whatever — a race without consonants and without delicacy” (67). In fact, while the cause of Myra’s fatal illness is nebulously defined as a “malignant growth” that “had taken hold of” an anonymous “vital organ” (91) — an apt metaphor for the disintegration of the artistic impulse — its source is consistently linked to the coarse Poindexters. Whenever their overhead trampling begins, Mrs. Henshawe’s “features [become] tense, as from an attack of pain” (66), and Nellie even times her visits to Mrs. Henshawe according to the Poindexters’ schedule, for “[w]hen they were in and active, it was too painful (for Nellie) to witness Mrs. Henshawe’s suffering” (71). Confirming that her affliction springs from the Poindexters and the vulgarity they represent, Myra tells Oswald, “I’ve two fatal maladies, but it’s those coarse creatures I shall die of” (74). Interestingly, it is not as much the Poindexters’ lack of consideration that Myra decries as their lack of refinement. Thus, like Niel Herbert’s disillusionment with Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady* (Morrow 287-305), Myra’s complaint about the Poindexters is more aesthetic than moral. Colluding with the new order’s insensitivity, the mercantile management will not intervene on behalf of Mrs. Henshawe because the Poindexters pay a higher rent than the Henshawes (68). Hence, Myra’s degraded position stems from her lack of money, which, in turn, stems from her marriage to the impoverished Oswald. Her enigmatic words about Oswald — “Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?” (95) — may be understood in light of her symbolism as the extinguished artistic spirit.

After blaming her illness and inevitable death on the Poindexters’ noise, Myra deliriously merges Os-

wald with these neighbors (chapter five). Nellie notices that in the last stages of illness Myra “had certain illusions; the noise overhead she now attributed entirely to her husband. ‘Ah, there, he’s beginning it again,’ she would say, ‘He’ll wear me down in the end. Oh, let me be buried in the King’s highway’” (92). This allusion to *Richard II* aligns Myra with Shakespeare’s king, the poetically-inclined lover of beauty and luxury, whose murder calls for the penance of Henry Bolingbroke, the inaugurator of the new order. Myra’s categorizing Oswald with the Poindexters, although puzzling to Nellie, is a logical progression of the novella’s theme of the extinction of beauty and of the artistic sense. Although Oswald provides love, care, and an “indestructible constancy,” he is unable to offer his wife what actually sustains her — money. Myra’s need for money is not merely materialistic; she realizes that economic deprivation usually results in aesthetic deprivation: “Oh, that’s the cruelty of being poor; it leaves you at the mercy of such pigs. Money is a protection, a cloak; it can buy one quiet, and some sort of dignity,” she tells Nellie (67-68). For Myra, then, money has existential, rather than monetary, value; it facilitates a life sensitive to quality, a life superior to the ordinary plane of mere existence. Money and the beautiful things it buys — like the silver tea things she brings out to “feel less shabby” (71) — allow her to transcend momentarily the commonplace. Indeed, she hides money for “unearthly purposes” (86), such as a mass for Madame Modjeska, despite her and Oswald’s strained finances. Penniless, Oswald cannot shield Myra from the ugliness that offends her aesthetic sensibility.

Although Myra’s death is inevitable, her fidelity to the aesthetic is unflagging. As she lies ill, Myra shuns the new books the librarian brings to her and instead chants poetry from the classics *Richard II* and *King John*. As critic Giannone points out, she celebrates the immortality of art (175), telling Nellie, “How the great poets do shine on . . . Into all the dark corners of the world. They have no night” (82). Her tribute to Madame Modjeska, which appears to give her as much solace as the sacrament she later takes is more broadly a tribute to the universal artistic soul. Myra’s immersion in Catholicism is less for moral and theological reasons than for aesthetic ones. It is not dogma she cherishes, but “holy words and rites” (85). Her practices dramatize the observation made by Godfrey St. Peter in *The Professor’s House* (1925) that art and religion are really the same thing (69). Her request for candlelight as she dies rather than modern electric light is based on aesthetic as much as spiritual preferences: her request to “at least let me die by candlelight; that is not too much to ask” is spoken “accusingly at [Oswald] rather than to him” (93) because she associates her husband with the mortal world of the prosaic and the ugly; he is not as much a person to her now as he is a symbol.

(Continued on page 20)

IMMORTAL ART

(Continued)

Myra's death at what she calls Gloucester's cliff is itself an artistic enactment, a transformation of herself into a heroic figure. To a degree, like Gloucester she has experienced familial betrayal, for her husband could not provide her with the environment necessary for her survival, and again like Gloucester, she has been disappointed and broken by an inferior and false civilization. Unlike the pragmatic Marian Forrester, Myra refuses to compromise herself to the new order's mediocrity and instead elevates herself to tragic magnitude. Through her death at Gloucester's cliff, she allows herself "to be dissolved into, something complete and great" (*My Ántonia* 18). Although heroic, her death nevertheless signals the defeat of the artistic spirit by prosaic new values.

The conclusion of the novella suggests the decline not only of art and creative impulse, but also of the temperament capable of perceiving, shaping, and interpreting them. Memoirist Nellie's vision, as the surname "Birdseye" suggests, is too myopic to accommodate and understand Myra's enigmatic figure. Dwelling on the disturbing image of the necklace and Myra's mysterious dying words, Nellie concludes:

I have still the string of amethysts, but they are unlucky. If I take them out of their box and wear them, I feel all evening a chill over my heart. Sometimes when I have watched the bright beginning of a love story, when I have seen a common feeling exalted into beauty by imagination, generosity, and the flaming courage of youth, I have heard again that strange complaint breathed by a dying woman into the stillness of night, like a confession of the soul: "Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy!" (104-105)

Cather's juxtaposition of Nellie's reference to beauty with Myra's question, "Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?" exposes the narrator's limited vision at the same time that it reinforces Myra's symbolism as the artistic impulse. Although Nellie recognizes Myra's aesthetic power to exalt "a common feeling . . . into beauty," she fails to understand its relationship to Myra's dying words.

While Niel Herbert in *A Lost Lady* coherently and insightfully reconstructs the person of Marian Forrester, thereby succeeding in the art of memoir, Nellie Birdseye falters. This fact reinforces the theme of the defeat of the creative spirit by the new forwardgoers and illustrates Cather's deep despair in the mid-1920s about the demise of beauty as well as the failure of love.

NOTE

1. Myra's artistic needs and nature far exceed those of Oswald, whose obliviousness to art is established in chapter one, in which Myra has given away her husband's six new shirts to the janitor's son. Her motive for this extravagant act is not charitable but aesthetic: as Oswald listens to her "with

amusement, incredulity, and bitterness" she asserts, "You shan't wear shirts that give you a bosom, not if we go to the poorhouse. You know I can't bear you in ill-fitting things" (9).

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Truth and Myth in Willa Cather's *My Mortal Enemy* and Katherine Anne Porter's *Old Mortality*

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In both Willa Cather's *My Mortal Enemy* and Katherine Anne Porter's *Old Mortality*, novellas of nearly equal length which "give the impression of the mass of a novel" (Warren 61), young female protagonists struggle to distinguish truth from romantic illusion, to discern the meaning of the past. These two novellas bear a striking resemblance in characterization, theme, and structure. Yet, although Katherine Anne Porter wrote an affectionate essay about Willa Cather, describing her as one of the three or four writers whom she most admired, surprisingly little critical attention has been paid to the remarkable relationship between these works.

Similarities in the novellas' protagonists begin with their names. Porter's Miranda (from the Spanish "mirar," to behold) and Cather's Nellie Birdseye are essentially observers. (The object of Nellie's observations is Myra, whose name evokes the word "mirror.") The protagonists' youthful innocence and their distance from the stories' principal actors serve to keep the "true" nature of events ambiguous. At first Nellie and Miranda merely swallow undigested the stories they

TRUTH AND MYTH (Continued)

hear; but gradually they become aware (along with the reader) of alternative interpretations. Each work is divided into time periods identifiable by the protagonist's age: she appears first as a young girl and finally as a woman. Structure thus reinforces the novellas' common theme: reality is not a single recognizable truth, but rather a series of snapshots, each conveying a partial truth.



Karl A. Buehr, "The Flower Girl," c. 1912.

"Nothing ever took that girl from me. She was a wild, lovely creature, Nellie. I wish you could have seen her then."

The similarity of Cather's and Porter's storylines is clear. A young protagonist leading a "monotonous," "immured" life is enamored by a romantic heroine. The protagonist hears mythic stories of the heroine's dramatic, hastily-arranged marriage which goes forward despite a disinheritance. In *My Mortal Enemy*, Myra Driscoll is warned by her rich uncle that if she marries Oswald Henshawe he will "cut her off without a penny" (979). In *Old Mortality*, Amy, who for years has spurned the attentions of Gabriel, abruptly changes heart when he tells her he has "been cut off with a dollar" (135). Amy responds, "If we get married now, there'll be just enough time to be in New Orleans for Mardi Gras" (135). Marrying in the face of such an obstacle and setting off for an exotic land suggests a spirit of romantic adventure; the couples grow legend-

ary in the eyes of the townsfolk. Myra and Oswald "were the theme of the most interesting, indeed the only interesting, stories that were told in [Nellie's] family" (976).

My Mortal Enemy and *Old Mortality* raise a common question: How much of the past is a romantic myth? When Nellie hears from her Aunt Lydia that Myra and Oswald are only "as happy as most people," she finds the answer "disheartening; the very point of their story was that they should be much happier than other people" (980). Likewise, Miranda expresses disappointment when she discovers Uncle Gabriel to be "a shabby man with bloodshot blue eyes . . . and a big, melancholy laugh." "Is that Aunt Amy's handsome romantic beau?" she asks. "Is that the man who wrote the poem about our Aunt Amy?" (144). To counter the romantic worldview, the young protagonists are offered an alternative, anti-romantic perspective. For Miranda this outlook comes from Cousin Eva (whose name means "she who brings knowledge"), who tells her, "Knowledge won't hurt you. You can't live in a dramatic haze about life" (168). Eva's counterpart in *My Mortal Enemy* is Aunt Lydia, who tells Nellie: "I'm sick of [Myra's] dramatics . . . A man never *is* justified [in being unfaithful to his wife], but if ever a man was [Oswald would be]" (991).

A principal element of the romantic worldview is the glorification of physical beauty. In *Old Mortality*, Miranda has been instructed to admire a certain type of beauty: "First a beauty must be tall . . . the hair must be dark . . . the skin must be pale and smooth" (112). Miranda "believed that she would one day suddenly receive beauty, as by inheritance, riches laid suddenly in her hands through no deserts of her own. She believed for quite a while that she would one day be like Aunt Amy" (113). Later, Miranda hears from Eva a contradictory view of beauty, a beauty that is illusory and transitory: "[Amy] had a lovely complexion But it was tuberculosis, and is disease beautiful?" (173). By the same token, in *My Mortal Enemy*, Myra is described as "attractive" and possessing "good looks . . . which gratified the old man's pride." Later, Nellie sees her as "a short, plump woman in a black velvet dress" who is sensitive about her double chin (976).

Another key tenet of the romantic vision is the idealization of love. Both Nellie and Miranda see this image of romantic love dissolve before their eyes. They find that in the real world love is not as simple or magical as in fairy tales. Marilyn Callander sees a fairy tale substructure in *My Mortal Enemy*, pointing out that young Nellie "thought of [Myra's house] as being under a spell, like Sleeping Beauty's palace" (980). But Nellie learns that Myra does not live "happily ever after" following the arrival of her prince. In real life, Myra says, love can sometimes bear a strange proximity to hate! "People can be lovers and enemies at the same time A man and woman draw apart from that long embrace, and see what they have

(Continued on page 22)

TRUTH AND MYTH (Continued)

done to each other" (1000). "Why must I die like this," Myra asks, "alone with my mortal enemy?" (1002). For Nellie and Miranda, these conflicting, antithetical emotions of love and hate are not part of the fairy tale which they have been taught. Interestingly, Katherine Anne Porter wrote an 1948 essay called "The Necessary Enemy." In it, she describes a young woman who "married for love" but "finds herself facing the oldest and ugliest dilemma of marriage . . . that she is capable of hating her husband, whom she loves faithfully" (182). Though Porter makes no reference to Cather's novella, the parallel is clear.

Perhaps the most gripping scene in each novella occurs when the young protagonist discovers firsthand the cracks in the marital facade. Nellie and Miranda are present to witness the ire of Myra and Honey, respectively. (In this context, it is interesting to consider Honey as the woman Amy might have become had she lived.) Both Myra and Honey are miserably jealous toward younger, romanticized rivals with whom they feel inadequate to compete. The scenes contain an undercurrent of violence. Opening the door, Nellie is greeted by Myra's "angry laugh, and a burst of rapid words that stung like cold water from a spray" (989). Likewise, Miranda notices Honey's hand extended "straight as a paddle" (151) and "her lids flicker[ing] toward them as if they were loathsome insects" (154). The startling immediacy of these scenes provides stark contrast to the gauzy, visionary accounts of life on which the protagonists have been weaned.

Another theme central to both works is the romanticization of suffering and death. *My Mortal Enemy* is framed by two deaths, Myra's uncle's and Myra's own. Early on, Nellie wonders, "Was it not better to get out of the world with such pomp and dramatic splendor than to linger on in it, having to take account of shirts and railway trains, and getting a double chin into the bargain?" (981). Myra seems to concur with the sentiment of this question, staging her own death as though she were an actor in a tragedy (such as *King Lear's* Gloucester, to whom she refers). She asks Nellie for the crucifix by her bed: "Give it to me. It means nothing to people who haven't suffered" (1001). Later she carries the crucifix with her to the seaside cliff where she lies down to die. The idealization of death is equally apparent in *Old Mortality*. Amy (four times referred to as an angel) agrees to marry Gabriel (his name an obvious reference to the biblical angel) only after she is convinced of her impending demise. Like Myra, Amy suffers a protracted illness, then hastens her death with an apparent suicide. Though her motivations for marrying Gabriel are obscure, one must ask if the decision is motivated by fatalism. "Now what would I look like in white satin?" Amy asks her mother. "I shall wear mourning if I like. It's my funeral, you know" (121). Gabriel also takes part in this romanticization of death, as Amy seems to anticipate

he will. He inscribes Amy's tombstone with a verse he entitles "Old Mortality":

She lives again who suffered life,
Then suffered death, and now set free
A singing angel, she forgets
The griefs of old mortality. (119)

Like *Old Mortality*, *My Mortal Enemy* links romantic love to death, implying that earthly love is not enough. Oswald carries Myra's ashes with him to Alaska, recreating through memory and death the ideal love which was so imperfect in life. Like Oswald, Gabriel is able to possess his romanticized love only after Amy is gone. He remains morbidly faithful to Amy until he is finally laid to rest by her side (instead of beside his second wife Honey). "Poor dear," Eva says of Honey. "After listening to stories about Amy for twenty-five years, she must lie alone in her grave in Lexington while Gabriel sneaks off to Texas to make his bed with Amy again" (166). Whether or not to embrace this tragic view of life is a decision Nellie and Miranda must make. As a young girl, Miranda felt there was "a life beyond a life in this world, as well as in the next; such episodes confirmed for [her] . . . the romantic value of tragedy" (117). Only years later does Eva convince her that such blind romanticism can be destructive. "Well, she coughed blood," Eva says of Amy, "if that's romantic" (172).

Another question both novellas explore is the connection between the physical and the spiritual aspects of love. Eva characterizes Amy as "simply sex-ridden, like the rest . . . She pretended not to know what marriage was about, but I know better." She says women like Amy "simply festered inside" (174), adding:

"It was just sex . . . their minds dwelt on nothing else. They didn't call it that, it was all smothered under pretty names, but that's all it was, sex." (174)

Similar realism can be found in Willa Cather's review of *Princess Sonia* by Julia Magruder, where Cather writes of "the eternal fact of sex [which] seems to be at the bottom of everything" (152). In *My Mortal Enemy*, Myra ultimately recognizes the limitations of physical love and, as Cather puts it in her review of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, ceases to "expect the passion of love to fill and gratify every need of life" (171). Myra's triumph is that she "turns against [herself] and all [her] idolatries" (1002) to the truths of religion. According to Susan Rosowski, Myra's encounter with Father Fay, the Catholic priest who attends Myra in her last days, prepares the reader for that turn (151). Instead of receiving instruction, Myra instructs the priest, telling him that "Religion is different from everything else: because in religion *seeking is finding*" (1002, italics in text). Nellie, who throughout the novella has been more observer than commentator, opines: "She seemed to say that in other searchings it might be the object of the quest that brought satisfaction, or it might be something incidental that one got on the way; but in religion, desire was fulfillment, it was the seeking itself that rewarded" (1002). Cather's work

appears to have a more clearly religious message than does Porter's. Although Cousin Eva, a teacher in a Female Seminary, delivers a similar message of spirituality over carnality, Miranda's acceptance of it is far less complete than Nellie's seems to be.

An interesting question for the protagonists as well as the reader is the extent to which Myra and Amy are willing participants in their romantic myths. After she has ridden horseback and cloakless to the Mexican border to kiss her brother good-by, Amy tells her mother, "It was splendid, the most delightful trip I ever had. And if I am to be the heroine of this novel, why shouldn't I make the most of it?" (132). Should we take Amy at her word? Or is the phrase "if I am to be" an indication not of her willingness to play the role but rather her helplessness to avoid it? Amy is a victim of a culture in which women are worshipped as spiritual beings but denied their humanity. (This point is reinforced by the fact that Miranda's father "held his daughters on his knee if they were prettily dressed and well-behaved, and pushed them away if they had not freshly combed hair and nicely scrubbed fingernails" [123].) Not surprisingly, Amy appears most vital when she is defying her father's commands on how to dress, her family's desires on whom she should marry, and Gabriel's wishes on how to wear her hair. But gradually, the demands placed by those around her diminish and weaken her. Perhaps feeling that a marriage to Gabriel would be a final capitulation of her humanity tantamount to death, she makes the only choice she feels she has left — to take her life.

Myra is equally ambivalent about her romantic role. Strong-willed like her uncle (a cause for his pride as well as his condemnation), she marries against his wishes, for love. Though increasingly disillusioned, she clings to her romantic image for now it is all she has. At times she seems to relish her role, holding her head high to conceal her double chin, match-making younger couples, and socializing in high circles. She is an enthusiastic admirer of Madam Modjeska, a famous melodramatic actress of the day (also mentioned in *Old Mortality*). But eventually Myra's efforts to live up to the romantic role which she has been assigned take their toll, emotionally and physically. She displaces her frustration onto Oswald, feeling an increasing antipathy. Reflecting on this feeling, Myra says, "Perhaps I can't forgive him for the harm I did him" (1000). "My poor Oswald," she says, "you'll never stagger far under the bulk of me I should have stayed with my uncle. It was money I needed. We've thrown our lives away" (996). Interestingly, this deromanticization of poverty can be found in both Cather's and Porter's works. Myra comes to believe not that poverty is an important ingredient of pure romance, but rather that, as her uncle has told her, "A poor man stinks, and God hates him" (979). As Myra tells Nellie, "it's very nasty being poor" (987). Like Nellie, Miranda is appalled by the squalid conditions in which her romanticized heroes live. When she encounters Miranda on the way to Gabriel's funeral, Eva

says, "Poor fellow, what a life he had" (163). "I hope you married rich" (169).

Many parallels can be seen in the roles played by Oswald and Gabriel. They are "devoted to a fault" (*My Mortal Enemy* 985), long-suffering, and ultimately defeated by poverty and unrealistic expectations. They try to cope by escaping into alcohol, gambling, and romantic fantasies. True to their chivalric tradition, they romanticize and deify their lovers beyond any recognizable reality. They refuse, to the grave, to give up their romantic illusions. "Pretty as pictures," says Gabriel of Miranda and her sister. "But rolled into one they don't come up to Amy" (145). "These last years," says Oswald, "it's seemed to me that I was nursing the mother of the girl who ran away with me. Nothing ever took that girl from me. She was a wild, lovely creature, Nellie. I wish you could have seen her then" (1004). While Myra is slow to relinquish the romanticism that has engulfed her, she nevertheless resents Oswald for his. "[Isn't it] a great pity," she says, "to . . . try to spoil the past for anyone? Yes, it's a great cruelty. But I can't help it. He's a sentimentalist, always was; he can look back on the best of those days when we were young and loved each other, and make himself believe it was all like that. It wasn't. I was always a grasping, worldly woman. I was never satisfied" (1000).

Again, we return to Cather's and Porter's central theme of myth versus reality, of discerning the meaning of the past for the present. Ultimately, this determination is left to protagonists Nellie and Miranda. But a close reading shows that such a judgment is not as simple as rejecting romanticism for realism. For as Nellie sees, Myra's realism — greedy, worldly, bitter — is not an altogether appealing substitute for Oswald's romanticism. Nor is nihilism the answer. To argue at the end of *My Mortal Enemy* that Nellie "is tragically disillusioned with life is to exercise the reductive sentimentality that Cather exposes" (Rosowski 154). By the same token, Miranda does not view Eva's reality — which reduces life to economics and biology (Warren, 63) as an acceptable alternative for Gabriel's delusive romanticism. Miranda recognizes Eva's view as equally false: "Of course it was not like that. This is no more true than what I was told before, it's every bit as romantic" (174). Miranda initially rejects Eva's view for the "reality" of her father. But then, as Robert Penn Warren point out, "there is another shift. Miranda discovers that she is cut off from her father, who turns to Cousin Eva, whose 'myth' contradicts his 'myth,' but whose world he can share" (Warren 64). Like Nellie, Miranda rejects family and marriage and sets out to try to understand a truth of her own. But Porter has for the reader a final reversal, as Miranda makes this decision in her "hopefulness, her ignorance" (182).

In the final analysis, Katherine Anne Porter, like her influential predecessor Willa Cather, seems to suggest that the struggle to escape from a world of myth to a world of truth is, on various levels, a mortal one.

(Continued on page 24)

TRUTH AND MYTH (Continued)

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Willa Cather's graduation portrait, 1895.

— Photo Courtesy of The Nebraska State Historical Society

Lincoln's Cather Community

Elizabeth A. Turner
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln Correspondent

At the heart of many Cather-related events in Lincoln is the Willa Cather Colloquium, a group of scholars and readers based in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Department of English. Founded in 1990, the Cather Colloquium has sponsored talks by noted Cather scholars, discussed papers in progress, held preview showings of Cather-based films, organized walking tours of Lincoln sites, hosted theme parties, potluck gatherings and informal discussions, and publishes a newsletter, *The Mowers' Tree*.

In 1995 the Colloquium organized its biggest event, a three-day conference focusing on the anniversary of Willa Cather's graduation from the University of Nebraska entitled "Willa Cather's University Days: A Centennial Celebration." On April 4 the Nebraska Legislature passed Resolution 85, that "recognizes and commends the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Department of English and the Center for Great Plains Studies for organizing this seminar on aspects of the



On loan from Helen Cather Southwick, Cather's map of ancient Rome, which is described in *My Ántonia*, was on display throughout the Centennial Celebration.

— Photo by Elizabeth Turner



Cather Centennial Celebration Committee members pose at the bust of Willa Cather in the Nebraska State Capitol prior to the reading of Legislative Resolution 85. From left to right: Susan Rosowski, Elizabeth Turner, Steve Shively, Kari Ronning and Phil Coleman-Hull.

LINCOLN'S CATHER COMMUNITY

(Continued)

life of Willa Cather." Held April 6, 7 and 8, the celebration presented participants with information about Lincoln and the University in the 1890s through an interdisciplinary approach that brought together scholars from a variety of fields. (For more about the celebration see Deb Forssman's article on pages 16-17 of the Spring 1995 issue of the *WCPM Newsletter*.)

In the fall of 1995 the Colloquium returned to hosting events more typical of its five-year history. On October 8, participants of the International Cather Seminar met to exchange "Reminiscences of the ROCK" in informal talks that highlighted their time in Quebec and on Grand Manan; photographs and souvenirs were passed around as stories were exchanged. On November 12, "Nanette: An Aside," a short film based on Cather's story, was shown in the English Department lounge while audience members enjoyed pizza. On November 27, Colloquium and community members were invited to Nebraska Public Radio for a preview of "Aunt Willa and the Menuhins," a radio profile, after which listeners spoke with producer/writer/director John Sorensen. Joan Acocella's essay in *The New Yorker*, "Cather and the Academy," was the topic of discussion at an informal gathering on December 8. And on December 12, the Colloquium convened for a holiday party.

New Audience for Cather's Fiction

Mellanee Kvasnicka
Member, WCPM Board of Governors
Omaha Correspondent

James Woodress has written of Cather's appeal to a wide variety of readers whose interests range from the scholarly to the personal. At South High School in Omaha, Cather's stories have found a new group of readers. Roseanne Carmichael, a special education teacher for fifteen years, has been enormously pleased with the success she has found in teaching "Neighbour Rosicky" and *O Pioneers!* to students with behavior and learning disorders.

Students who exhibit behavioral disorders often have impaired relations with others, making it difficult for these students to function socially. Those with learning disorders have perceptual difficulties which make it hard to decipher language codes. Dyslexia is a typical example of a learning disability.

Carmichael believes that Cather has great appeal to her special education students for many reasons, but most basically because her stories deal with "real people who are most importantly good people." Many of Carmichael's students come from single-parent homes, so a story such as "Neighbour Rosicky" presents enormous possibility for examining family life, traditional values, and the importance of male role models. One of her students commented after reading the story that "this is the way families are supposed to be." Students also love the Nebraska setting. They feel a certain kinship to learn that Marie Tovesky is from Omaha, and they understand what Rosicky means when he says he doesn't want Rudolph to go to the stockyards, which are located about three blocks from South High School.

(Continued on Next Page)



During the opening night reception, Centennial planner Steve Shively listens to pianist Burns Davis' selection of popular song arrangements, arias, and piano sketches from the 1890s.

— Photo by Elizabeth Turner

NEW AUDIENCE (Continued)

Cather's style also makes these works appealing to special students. Carmichael reports that the vocabulary is easily accessible yet instructive for her students. Cather's concrete imagery helps them visualize and read with greater fervor, which for these young people is a difficult task. Students are able to read Cather's work quite independently. Even the most reluctant readers go far beyond the assigned number of pages. They report to Carmichael that *these stories are worth reading*. In *O Pioneers!*, "The White Mulberry Tree" was discussed enthusiastically by Carmichael's class, which clung to the speculation that Frank would die mysteriously and Emil and Marie would be free to run off together. Although the students understood why the novel has to end as it does, they also demonstrated the adolescent longing for a happy ending. Another hotly debated issue was Alexandra's forgiveness of Frank. Students were not sure they could be so generous to Frank, and they were a bit impatient that Alexandra seemed to let Emil "off the hook" too easily. With Alexandra and Carl's proposed union, they did find their happy ending of sorts, however. Students discussed the relationship between these two characters and the methods they used to solve problems.

In short, this discussion of the human beings in Cather's works put these readers (as it does all readers of Cather) in touch with those issues which please and excite and confound us. For reluctant readers, such as the students of Roseanne Carmichael, Cather has opened a world which may be familiar but which they perhaps rarely encounter in the pages of a book.

Call for Papers

The Western Literature Association will meet October 2-5, 1996 in Lincoln, Nebraska. WLA invites papers, readings, and other presentations on all aspects of Western American Literature. For this meeting, to be held jointly with the Western History Association, panels and papers that examine the interplay of literary imagination and historical experience will be especially welcome. Other topics of special interest include the works of Tillie Olsen, Ron Hansen, and writers of the Great Plains.

Send manuscripts of no more than ten, typed, double-spaced pages and a 125-word abstract by June 15, 1996, to Susanne George, English Department, University of Nebraska at Kearney, Kearney, Nebraska 68849. For more information, please call (308) 865-8867 or consult our Internet Home Page [<http://www.unk.edu/departments/english/wla/>].



Dr. Bruce Baker studying in the Cather Center's Archives.

— Photo by Pat Phillips

Scholar Studies WCPM Letter Collection

Bruce Baker
University of Nebraska-Omaha
Member, WCPM Board of Governors

Over the years of my Cather commitment (from the 1960s on) I have, of course, consulted the WCPM letter collection in Red Cloud, looking, for material relevant to whatever project I was then pursuing, but I have never had the sustained time to read our collection systematically — from the first letters in the 1890s to the last letter written just three months before Cather's death in 1947. Thanks (many thanks) to a Professional Development Leave from the University of Nebraska at Omaha this academic year, I have been devoting considerable time to doing just that. Spending sustained time on the project has allowed me the opportunity to live the sometimes day-to-day thoughts of Cather, as she wrote candidly and warmly to a number of correspondents, primarily her long-time friend Carrie Miner Sherwood (to whom *My Ántonia* is dedicated).

Reading the letters chronologically has allowed me to see the journey of an obviously bright and enthusiastic young woman in Red Cloud to international acclaim in her late years, as an author desiring her privacy and lamenting a world bereft of some of its most important values and recovering from a devastating war.

My intensive study in the archives of the WCPM has resulted (in addition to many fascinating matters I hope to pursue) in two basic observations:

1. Our collection is extraordinarily valuable: revealing, relevant, and significant.

2. Our research facilities are deplorable. I had to read the often indecipherable letters on a small table in the back room of the Garber Bank building with tourists wandering through (thank God for them, though), precious little light, and the audible flushing toilet just a few feet behind me!

SCHOLAR STUDIES COLLECTION

(Continued)

In short, I was impressed and struck by the extraordinary research collection we have and the woefully inadequate facilities we have to use it in. As an organization, we must dedicate ourselves to making changes to improve access to and study of our invaluable resources.

Clarification

We received the following clarification from Professor Brunauer, which I hope will clear up an unfortunate misunderstanding.

— The Editor

In reading the Fall 1995 issue (39) of the *Newsletter*, I was both troubled and saddened when confronted with Virgil Albertini's "Correction" item on page 37. Highlighted by an eye-catching frame, the box in effect states that, in my biographical essay (*WCPMN* 37:24-27), I had made a "claim" that I was the first person in the world to have completed a thesis on Willa Cather. The "correction" then goes on to demonstrate that this "assertion" was false because it had come to Albertini's attention that Marion Marsh Brown had written her Master's thesis on Cather at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1929 — "almost 20 years before Brunauer's endeavor."

What troubled me about the form of this "correction" was what it might be interpreted to imply — that, at best, I had adopted a cavalier approach to investigating the historical accuracy of my purported "claim" and, at worst, that I had made a false "assertion" with gross disregard for the truth of the matter. Let me set the record straight. My essay made no flat "claim" or "assertion" that I was the first to write a thesis on Cather. What I stated was that I was the first person at a Hungarian university to write a thesis on an American author and, much later, that "I *heard* that I *might* have been the first person anywhere to write a Master's thesis on Willa Cather" (emphasis added).

My statement of what I "heard" refers to a conversation at the International Cather Seminar to which I had been invited by Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner. In that conversation, Bernice Slote flatly stated that mine was the first thesis written on Cather — as an assertion with which Virginia Faulkner (who was present) concurred. With such authoritative individuals as my source, with no one having contradicted their statements in the intervening two decades, and with no mention of any earlier dissertation by any other author in Marilyn Arnold's *Willa Cather: A Reference Guide* (the most authoritative guide on the subject), I felt that I was fully justified in stating that "I heard that I might

have been the first person" to write a thesis on Cather. That statement is absolutely true and does not itself stand in need of retraction — only of clarification based on the subsequently revealed existence of Brown's thesis.

What saddens me is that neither Albertini nor the *Newsletter* contacted me personally before going into print with the supposed "Correction." Doing so would have enabled me promptly to clarify my essay statement and to apologize personally to Brown for the consequences of my ignorance of her thesis, the existence of which I had been unable to discover and which had never been brought to my attention. If I could not be the first to have written a Cather thesis, at least I would have been given the opportunity to be the first to deal with those consequences. I have labored in the vineyard of Cather scholarship since 1946 and have published 15 scholarly articles and monographs on her. Much of that work was done before anyone suggested that I might have been the first to write a thesis on Cather. While the possibility of having been "first" was as gratifying to me as it would have been to any Cather scholar, it was never a matter of self-aggrandizement or a motivating factor for any of my work. That has always been and will continue to be a labor of love generated by Cather herself.

Dalma H. Brunauer
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Board Member Albertini Receives Award

Dr. Virgil Albertini, professor of English at Northwest Missouri State University and member of the WCPM Board of Governors, has received the Turret Award, presented to individuals who have provided exemplary and uncommon professional and personal service to the University.

Northwest President Hubbard, in presenting the award, acknowledged Albertini's excellence in the classroom, recognition as a Cather scholar, and expertise as a bibliographer. Albertini writes the annual Cather bibliography for the *Newsletter*.

Dr. Albertini and his wife Dolores have co-authored a book on the history of Northwest Missouri State. Albertini is Northwest's faculty representative to the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletic Association and was one of the first faculty members to participate in an exchange program to the People's Republic of China.

WILLA CATHER NEWSLETTER

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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.

Inside This Issue:

- ◆ The Red Cloud Opera House Project
- ◆ Cynthia Griffin Wolff on Cather's Early Stories
- ◆ Cather News from Omaha and Lincoln
- ◆ Spring Conference News
- ◆ Perspectives on *My Mortal Enemy*

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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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