

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

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Because My Ántonia is nearing its 75th anniversary, the WCPM chose to represent this novel in Red Cloud's annual Street Car Days celebration. Ántonia (Amy Hanson), her brood, and WCPM took first place honors in the "open" division. The float was designed and decorated by Darin Stringer and Janice Nikodym.

Cather, Mérimée, and the Problem of Fanaticism in Shadows on the Rock

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When Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock* appeared in August 1931, critics and readers who had been entranced by *Death Comes for the Archbishop* were understandably mystified. Cather was clearly writing at the height of her powers, and the powerful impression that Quebec had made on her in June 1928 is evident on almost every page. The novel enjoyed brisk sales and got generally favorable reviews. Yet something seemed to be missing. Lionel Trilling for one disapproved of the novel's sparseness: "The novel has been *démeublé* indeed; but life without its furniture is strangely bare" (13). Later critics have

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WCPM News

CATHER'S BIRTHDAY

On December 5, the Sunday prior to Willa Cather's birthday (December 7), the Willa Cather Historical Society (a branch museum of the Nebraska State Historical Society) participated in Red Cloud's Old Fashioned Christmas by hosting a Victorian Christmas Tea and Open House. Dr. Charles Peek, University of Nebraska-Kearney, offered a memorial Mass in honor of Willa Cather's 120th birthday. Participants lunched together afterwards at the Quality Street Restaurant. Nebraska Public Radio rebroadcast an interview with Sayra Cather Wagner about her restoration of the George and Frances Cather home in rural Bladen (the house in *One of Ours* and "A Wagner Matinee"). Included in the rebroadcast was a reading of "A Wagner Matinee" by Dr. Harold Shiffler of Hastings College.

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CATHER, MÉRIMÉE, AND THE PROBLEM OF FANATICISM IN *SHADOWS ON THE ROCK*, (Continued)

also tried to explain their frustrations with *Shadows on the Rock*. James Woodress notes that it "is definitely the work of an aging author" (433), while Hermione Lee describes it as "a children's book for adults" (301).

Cather herself was aware of the risks she ran, and in a letter to Wilbur Cross she tried to explain her motives: "I took the incomplete air [of Quebec — "a kind of thinking, a mental complexion inherited, left over from the past, lacking in robustness and full of pious resignation"] and tried to give it what would correspond to a sympathetic musical setting (*On Writing* 15). Cather's comments are revealing; "left over from the past" implies that she consciously chose material that was anachronistic. Moreover, "pious resignation" in a novel that appeared during the increasing gloom of the Depression was sure to offend some of Cather's more liberal critics. Yet it seems that Cather was fully aware of what she was doing, and even chided other writers who were less daring than she when it came to experimenting with different "brands" of fiction (*On Writing* 17).

Cather's "experiment" in *Shadows on the Rock* is less mystifying if it is compared with the works of Mérimée, particularly his historical novel *Chronique du règne de Charles IX* (1829). Like Cather's Quebec, Mérimée's evocation of sixteenth century Paris consists of a series of tableaux anchored to a historical background by a variety of characters (some actual and some invented), often resembling a child's cartoon collection. But Mérimée's novel and Cather's too are misleadingly simple. In a curiously "adult" chapter entitled "Conversation Between Reader and Author," Mérimée answers the objections of a hypothetical reader who has just complained about the strange vision of history that the novel seems to project. The dejected "reader" tells Mérimée, "Sir, I am sorry to perceive that I shall not find what I sought in this story of yours," to which the author replies, "Really, I am very much afraid you will not" (105). Mérimée offers no apologies, no excuses.

Nor, it seems, does Cather. Like Mérimée, she used a fictional account of historical events to respond to the inability of contemporary readers to perceive the historical process in action. In the *Chronique*, amid tales of religious wars between Catholics and Huguenots, there is the unpleasant notion that none of the history contained in the novel will be understood by Mérimée's contemporaries, who instead will seek out the author and inquire about more "important" subjects: the manner of dress at the court of Charles IX; the romantic intrigue between Henry of Navarre and Marguerite; in short, anything that *doesn't* concern the religious upheaval that lies at the novel's center. Cather also understood how the "pious resignation" of Jeanne Le Ber, Noël Chabanel, or Cécile Auclair —

characters who form the heart of her novel — could never satisfy readers raised on stories of the banking system or the stock exchange ("Novel Dé-meublé" 46).

In her essay "On the Art of Fiction" Cather used her most severe critical tone to connect the act of writing with a kind of spiritual fervor or religious vocation, proclaiming that the art of fiction was "always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new and untried, where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values" (*On Writing* 103). In this light, *Shadows on the Rock* can be read as a form of homage to Mérimée, a writer for whom Cather had enormous respect and with whom she shared an abiding interest in the problems of stability and fanaticism in a turbulent world. *Shadows on the Rock* is thus by design a book out of step with its time. More than any other Cather novel, it tests the way that readers make use of the past they read about in fiction, tests this not in order to achieve mastery over that past but to develop a sense of wonder at their own weaknesses in an ever-shifting present.



In print and in interviews, Cather was forthright in expressing her admiration for the works of Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870).¹ His lapidary prose style was widely admired, and Cather no doubt would have agreed with Henry James's assessment that "there have been poets who scanned their rhythm as narrowly as Mérimée, but we doubt whether there has ever been a prose writer" (563). Mérimée was also a distinguished historian and public servant, serving for many years as Inspector-General of Historic Monuments. Like Cather, he had a fine eye for architectural detail. One of his most significant projects as Inspector-General was the restoration of the Pope's Palace at Avignon, a building which made a lasting impression on Cather (Lewis, 190). Yet as David Stouck has pointed out, there has been strangely little critical attention paid to Cather's "close and lasting affinity with Mérimée's mind and art" (64 n.1).

A trait shared by Mérimée's and Cather's fictions is the use of a chiseled prose style to explore subjects of unusual brutality. The central event in the *Chronique du règne de Charles IX* is the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of the Huguenots in 1572, an event told in grisly detail; and throughout Mérimée's fiction there are scenes of murder, mutilation, retribution, and animalism. But instead of being repelled by the violence of Mérimée's subject matter, Cather was no doubt attracted to it. She persistently complements the quiet world of Quebec in *Shadows on the Rock* with images of bloodshed, torture, sexual license, and squalor, as if to reinforce Walter Benjamin's thesis that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (256).

Mérimée's *Chronique* furnishes a glimpse of the violent religious fanaticism that swept civilized France

during the century preceding the action of *Shadows on the Rock*. The plot revolves around the story of the fictional Huguenot Bertrand de Mergy, his romantic pursuit of the Catholic Countess de Turgis, and his disagreement with his brother George who has infuriated the de Mergy family by converting to Catholicism. Unlike Cather, Mérimée was an agnostic who conceived his novel as a rather ambiguous commentary on the futility of religious fanaticism in his own time, the reign of the bigoted Bourbon king Charles X (1824-30). According to his biographer A. W. Raitt, Mérimée was nonetheless decidedly ambivalent about the late sixteenth century, "when men were less afraid to be themselves than in the modern era" but also depended on crime and violence as tools of survival (89).

It is not clear how familiar Cather was with the *Chronique*, but it is likely that she knew of its existence even if she did not rely on it as a model. It was "one of Mérimée's most popular works . . . [and] survived being prescribed for generations as a school text" (Raitt 88). Moreover, she was probably aware of how Mérimée had already supplied Thornton Wilder with material for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), the Peruvian setting of which, together with a prominent character (La Périchole), were drawn from Mérimée's play *Le Carrosse de Saint-Sacrement* (Goldenstein 51).

In addition to shaping a historical context for the Auclair family, whose progenitors are referred to throughout Cather's novel, the *Chronique* bears interesting stylistic and narrative resemblances to *Shadows on the Rock*. Mérimée's novel is loosely organized and attempts to combine the issues of historical importance, as embodied in the use of actual figures of history, with the day-to-day lives of representative fictitious characters. The introduction to the *Chronique* explains this method, using terms that could be applied to Cather's novel as well: "Anecdotes are the only part of history that I love, and among anecdotes I prefer those where it seems to me that I find a true picture of manners and characters at a given time" (1). Mérimée's choice of anecdotes provides an interesting background for the world of Cécile Auclair in New France, a culture that clings tenaciously to its heritage while sedulously breaking its ties to the mother country.

Both novels employ an anecdotal treatment of the problems associated with medical practice, and both depend on the figure of an apothecary as a unifying narrative device. Ambroise Paré, like Auclair in Cather's novel, is a figure of stability in Mérimée's world of petty jealousies. Auclair himself looks back to "the time of Ambroise Paré, and still further back to the thirteenth century, as golden ages in medicine" (29). Even though he is a vehement Huguenot in Mérimée's novel, Paré is respected by all faiths for his integrity. Bertrand de Mergy's companion Béville commends his wounded friend to Paré's care, noting that the surgeon seems to rise above religious prejudices: "he is in such repute that the hottest Catholics resort to him" (146).

Paré's two appearances in the novel rank him below Auclair in terms of visibility, but his scenes are memorable because they constitute the only relaxations of religious tension in Mérimée's novel. His importance is heightened as well by Mérimée permitting Paré to remain aloof from the mindless, even barbaric animosity between Catholic and Huguenot groups.

Like Auclair, Paré is out of step with his time and is opposed by the followers of primitive, superstitious notions of medicine. When Bertrand de Mergy is wounded in a duel and is treated by Paré, he overhears a conversation between his nurse and a mysterious witch-like visitor secretly performing voodoo-like rituals to speed de Mergy's recovery. The nurse Camilla castigates Paré: "He, the dunce! What does it matter what he says? I give you my word that the wound is deep, dangerous, and terrible, and that it can only be cured by the rules of magic sympathy" (151). Auclair inherits this climate of superstition and meets resistance to his sound medical practices throughout his career: "The brilliant reign of Louis XIV was a low period in medicine; dressmakers and tailors were more considered than physicians" (29).

The anecdotal treatment of religion in the *Chronique* avoids any sense of the "pious resignation" detected by Cather in Quebec. Strongly anti-clerical in his beliefs, Mérimée got a great deal of amusement from religious themes. George de Mergy, who has abandoned the Protestant faith for Catholicism, pays little attention to religious matters and admits that his only motivation for converting was to remain in favor at court. Diane de Turgis on the other hand is tedious on the subject of religion; her furtive trysts with Bernard become bogged down in her relentless efforts to convert him to Catholicism; one of their arguments concerns the power of Diane's relics to save de Mergy in his imminent duel with Comminges (129). Near the end of the book, Bernard and another Huguenot Dietrich Hornstein disguise themselves as Franciscans in order to escape capture in the days following the massacre, and during a visit to an inn they are ordered to baptize two dead chickens with the names "Carp" and "Perch" so that the lodgers may eat "fish" on Friday (264).

Yet Mérimée's lampoons of religious fervor have echoes in *Shadows on the Rock*. Euclide Auclair is skeptical if not downright suspicious of certain religious practices. After listening to Father Saint-Cyr's story of Noël Chabanel's vow of perpetual stability, Auclair wonders "whether there had not been a good deal of misplaced heroism in the Canadian missions" (154-55). Cécile's excitement when she hears of the magical conversion of a prisoner brought about by his eating a morsel of the Jesuit martyr Jean Brebeuf's skull is restrained by her father, who puts little stock in relics (126). Jacques Gaux's introduction of the beaver into Cécile's crèche brings a smile to the reader as it causes consternation for Cécile: "the animal was so untraditional — what was she to do with him?" (111). Pierre Charron, like George de Mergy, is ill at ease



The Environs of Shadows on the Rock.

among the clergy: "The old man [Laval] is my Bishop," exclaims the woodsman. "But I could do without any of them" (174). And in another anecdote involving the beaver that closely parallels Mérimée's episode with the baptizing Franciscans, Pierre Charron expresses mock wonder at the weekly miracle that changes the animal "into a fish, so that good Catholics may eat him without sin" (224).

There is no counterpart in Mérimée's work, however, for the characters of Jeanne Le Ber and Noël Chabanel, and Cather's focus on these two historical figures is crucial to understanding the differences between the two novels and between the vantage points that each author has with respect to their chosen histories. Even though Le Ber and Chabanel are to some extent "fanatics," their respective devotions force them to withdraw from their familiar surroundings, into seclusion in Montreal in one case and missionary work in the wilderness in the other. Neither alternative seems possible in the *Chronique* where fanaticisms, Catholic and Protestant alike, are continually locked in battle. The examples of Le Ber and Chabanel enable people like Cécile to recognize how religious devotion can be domesticated into a means of survival itself in a world that continually threatens annihilation.

Susan Rosowski has noted how Cécile's rediscovery of the beauty of her own kitchen after her visit to

the squalid Harnois cottage represents the end of a kind of novitiate and the taking of her own vow of perpetual stability to Canada (182). But it is also striking how quickly Cécile breaks the spirit if not the letter of her vow at the time of Frontenac's death when the Auclairs' world seems to be collapsing around them. Cécile implores her father, "But you wish to live on my account, don't you, Father? I do not belong to the old time. I have got to live on into a new time; and you are all I have in the world" (261). Euclide has surrendered to despair, and as father and daughter sit in silence around the sputtering fire Cécile speaks what is literally the most chilling line of the novel: "Let the fire burn out; what of it?" (264). It seems fair to say that in no other Cather novel, except perhaps *The Professor's House*, is there such a close brush with oblivion as there is at this moment in *Shadows on the Rocks*. Demoralized as Euclide and Cécile are by Frontenac's death, they represent the perennially steadfast colonists brought low by their precarious positions. No one in the novel, save perhaps Bishop Laval, has been as stubbornly devoted to ritual and perseverance as Cécile. But as soon as the colonists on the lonely rock of Quebec let down in their defenses as Cécile and her father seem to have done, the "uncharted continent choked with interlocking trees, living, dead, half-dead, their roots in bogs and swamps" (6-7) begins its inexorable march toward the

lonely outpost and engulfs it. At such a moment of crisis, stability means more than sentimental attachment to religious icons; it is survival itself.

The Auclairs' loss of faith is disturbing because it almost negates all of the preceding anecdotal history of the colony of Quebec. Although Pierre Charron's sudden reappearance gives Cécile and Euclide an excuse for resuming their domestic rituals, it is clear that the figures of the Jesuit martyrs and the recluse at Montreal also play parts in sustaining the Auclairs in their more secular vocations. For Noël Chabanel and Jeanne Le Ber have each faced their own unique visions of annihilation, and their steadfast refusal to participate in their familiar worlds is important on both symbolic and narrative levels. Symbolically, each represents a way of fashioning a life to suit individual needs that in the eyes of rational people like Euclide and the Le Ber family is unimaginable. Jeanne takes the path of greatest resistance in the eyes of contemporaries who cannot comprehend her rejection of wealth and physical comforts. Chabanel takes his vow of perpetual stability not out of blind devotion but because he is fully aware of how weak a man he is.² On a narrative level, Jeanne's withdrawal from life is essential because it enables Pierre Charron to return to the Auclair household and eventually marry Cécile. Chabanel's death wish induces Saint-Cyr to make his own vow of perpetual stability, forcing him to break another vow he had made to Cécile's mother to accompany the Auclairs back to France. Saint-Cyr's decision entails his abandoning Cécile and her father, but it also helps make the latter's ultimate decision to remain in Quebec a fait accompli.

The epilogue to *Shadows on the Rock* is set fifteen years after the Auclairs' harrowing evening around the fire, and in it Cather leaves the reader with a reassuring picture of life in the years following Frontenac's death. Cécile is married to Pierre, has four sons, and is "well established" in the world. Saint-Vallier has returned to Quebec, appropriately humbled by his long exile and imprisonment. Quebec now seems like a blessed refuge to him after his trials rather than a site of religious oppositions. There is no further mention of the Jesuit martyrs, nor of Jeanne Le Ber. As Ann Romines notes, Jeanne has become her own "mysterious legend" (152) that haunts the reader's memory instead of advancing the novel's action. "Stability" has moved away from something associated with religious devotion in difficult circumstances to a condition of everyday life. Auclair pats himself on the back for living in a place remote from the disasters looming at Versailles; those struggles belong to other people now.

The closing pages of Cather's novel, when compared to the end of the *Chronique*, illustrate how continuity can be achieved even when living in an outpost like New France. The "Canadians of the future," Cécile's sons, are already ensconced in a position of power in dramatic contrast with the uncertain political situation in France where rumors of

poisonings and intrigue cast doubt on the legitimacy of the holders of power. In the pages of the *Chronique*, on the other hand, Mérimée obliterates his characters after isolating them in the irony of their religious beliefs. During the siege of La Rochelle, after Bertrand de Mergy shoots his brother George and mortally wounds him, the surgeon Brisart (Paré's student) intervenes in an argument between a priest and Protestant minister about who will give religious comfort to the dying George, who angrily dismisses them both after learning from Brisart that he is doomed. The irony of having the surgeon usurp traditional figures of religious authority in a novel obsessed with religious "devotion" is devastating. Moreover, Mérimée offers no reassurance whatsoever about the aftermath of his novel's action. After posing a rhetorical question to his reader about what happened to Bertrand and Diane after the siege of La Rochelle, he dismisses the need for an answer: "I leave these questions to the decision of the reader, who can thus in every case suit the conclusion of the story to his own taste" (309). Besides being disturbingly modern as a narrative device, Mérimée's withdrawal from the narrative in its closing lines emphasizes how Bertrand and Diane are literally lost in the whirlpool of history, only to re-emerge inevitably in the shape of their descendants — Mérimée's readers. Yet Mérimée deliberately avoids any suggestion that de Mergy or Diane have specific counterparts in nineteenth century France. The greatest damage caused by fanaticism in the *Chronique* is in fact the canceling of personal histories, creating a social world in which individual people become invisible, even unimportant.

But Cather's complex ordering of event in her novel makes it clear that fanaticism, far from being the mindless exercise of energy and bigotry that it is in Mérimée's *Chronique*, is absolutely essential to survival in an isolated city like Quebec. This reordering of values is difficult for many modern readers who have learned to distrust all forms of religious devotion. Yet even Mérimée, who abhorred violence, was sympathetic to the notion that contemporary readings of historical events are necessarily contaminated by "modern" ideas of propriety and excess that were hardly useful in dire circumstances. In the *Chronique's* preface, Mérimée admits that "we must not use our nineteenth century ideas in judging sixteenth century conduct. What is criminal in a state of advanced civilization is only a bold deed in a state more backward, and in a state of barbarism may perhaps be a laudable action" (3).

This ambiguity about the history that occupied his thoughts is unsettling, but in the end it is the only statement that Mérimée is able to make about the meaning behind the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre. History does not give its readers much privilege when it comes to making moral judgments, and the same grim violence that seized Paris in 1572 is never very far away, as Mérimée's last days show. Mérimée, who had survived the reigns of Charles X and Louis-

Philippe, left Paris during the disastrous final weeks of Napoleon III's reign for his retreat at Cannes, where he died on September 23, 1870. His long friendship with the exiled Empress Eugénie and his associations with prominent figures of the Second Empire brought down the wrath of a mob who ransacked and burned his house in Paris during the mindless bloodbath of the Commune in the spring of 1871, destroying all of his personal papers. It is as if the insane world of 1572 had revisited itself on Mérimée and the "civilized" French capital that he had known and loved (Raitt 354-55).

Cather herself did not share the religious devotion of people like Le Ber and Chabanel, but like Mérimée she was reluctant to jettison from her world of familiar symbols the stories that history seemed to insist upon, despite all pleas of rationality and coolheadedness. Cather's deep devotion to Quebec as a fragile symbol of continuity is an example of what William Monroe calls her appreciation of "the loss [in contemporary life] of a complex cultural context that includes suffering, sacrifice, and victimage" (304). It was at this point, where pious resignation becomes a tool of survival, that critics parted company with Cather. It was one thing to write a *démeublé* novel like *Shadows on the Rock*, fulfilling the "great principle" of the elder Dumas that "to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls" ("Novel Démeublé" 51); it was another matter to insist that the passion that made life possible on the rock of Kebec, the very passion that kept four walls together, was nurtured by a clear understanding of what life without *any* walls could be like. This kind of passion, if we ever come face to face with it, is so disconcerting that we are unable to accept it as part of our well-cushioned lives. Yet it represents the narrative thread that keeps the Auclairs' fire burning long after it should have gone out; it drives Jeanne Le Ber and Noël Chabanel to avenues of self-expression that are foreclosed to most people; and it maintains our own tenuous lives even when we are least able to envision what life without walls, without religious fervor, without history even, is really like.

NOTES

¹Cather asks in "The Novel Démeublé": "But where is the man who could cut one sentence from the stories of Mérimée?" (47). In an interview with John Chapin Mosher in 1926, she included Mérimée with Tolstoy, Conrad, and Proust in naming her favorite authors (*In Person* 92), and in 1940 she told Stephen Vincent Benét that Mérimée's *Colomba* "seemed the best writing I'd ever read" (*In Person* 133).

²Chabanel was born in 1613 in southern France, "near Mende, soon after the Huguenots had devastated that region" (Wynne 16). Saint-Cyr's retelling of Chabanel's trials, vow of perpetual stability, and martyrdom, amounts to a systematic retelling of the relevant portions of the *Jesuit Relations* (Thwaites 151-57). Cather must have noticed in the *Relations* a further quotation from Chabanel that explained his conversion following the taking of his vow.

I do not know what is working within me, or what God wills to do with me; but, in one respect, I feel entirely changed. I am naturally very timorous; but, now that I am going to a most dangerous post, and, as it seems to me, death is not very far away, I no longer feel any fear. This frame of mind springs not from myself. (158)

Chabanel attributes his new-found strength to a source beyond him, inexplicable but irresistible. Although Hermione Lee maintains that Chabanel's story in fact endorses "Auclair's philosophy of resigned stoicism . . . rather than the trusting faith of nuns and children" (306), Chabanel's own words suggest a passionate mystical attachment to his search for martyrdom rather than a stoic suffering. Moreover, such a devotion is indeed possible for nuns and children; Saint-Cyr remarks on Cécile's instinctive grasp of his story: "See, she understands me! From the beginning women understand devotion" (150).

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Two Hands: Colette's "The Hand" and Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky"

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Sidonie Gabrielle Colette (1873-1954) and Willa Cather (1873-1947), two giants of modern literature, reveal in their fiction vastly different perspectives on men, marriage and family. Two short stories that illustrate these differences are Colette's "The Hand" (1924) and Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky" (1932).

In Colette's story, a newly-wed young bride, apparently in love with her husband, carefully studies his hand as he sleeps beside her, and gradually her feelings of love for him turn to disgust and loathing. By the end of the story the husband's hand has become, for the bride, a symbol of the monstrous authority he exercises over her. In "Neighbour Rosicky," Polly, another young wife, observes the hand of her seriously ill father-in-law, Anton Rosicky, and realizes for the first time in her life the power of true love. For Polly, Rosicky's hand reveals complete trust and unqualified acceptance.

In Colette's "The Hand," a husband has fallen asleep beside his young wife. She contemplates fondly his long eyelashes, his full mouth, his pink skin, his unwrinkled brow. Then the husband's right hand quivers beside her and, like "some animal," comes to life. The wife thinks, "It's so big! It really is bigger than my whole head." She observes "the powerful knuckles and the veins engorged . . . a few red hairs, at the base of the fingers, all curved in the same direction, like ears of wheat in the wind . . ." Suddenly "an electric jolt" runs through the hand and the thumb stiffens, "horribly long and spatulate," and the hand takes on "a vile, apelike appearance." At the noise of a passing car the hand tenses, resembling a crab ready for battle. As the sound recedes, the hand relaxes, lowers its "claws" and becomes a "pliant beast." The wife notices the curve in the little finger, the "fleshy palm" which resembles a "red belly." She

thinks, "And I've kissed that hand! . . . How horrible! Haven't I ever looked at it?"

The hand seems to react to her disgust. It opens wide, splays its "tendons, lumps, and red fur like battle dress," grabs the sheet and squeezes "with the methodical pleasure of a strangler." The young wife's cry of fear wakes the husband, and as he takes her in his arms, the hand disappears. However, the next morning over breakfast the wife again studies the hand, "with its red hair and red skin, and the ghastly thumb curving out over the handle of a knife." At her husband's offer to butter the toast for her, the wife shudders in disgust. But "then she concealed her fear, bravely subdued herself, and beginning her life of duplicity, of resignation, and of a lowly, delicate diplomacy, she leaned over and humbly kissed the monstrous hand."

The wife comes to believe that the individual who shares her bed is the enemy. Since he cannot be matched by brute force, he must be outwitted. The husband's hand, clearly a phallic symbol, is, to her, vile and repulsive. But to survive, the wife submits meekly and kisses the "beast" that degrades her.

In Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky," Polly, a city girl married to a farmer's son, is dissatisfied with the tedium of life on the farm. Her kind and sympathetic father-in-law, Anton Rosicky, does his best to keep the young couple together. One day Anton, while helping Polly and his son Rudolph with some work in the fields, suffers a heart attack. Polly comes to his aid and after he falls asleep closely studies his "warm, broad, flexible brown hand." She considers it a "kind of gypsy hand . . . so alive and quick and light in its communications . . ." Anton's hand is "like quicksilver, flexible, muscular, about the color of a pale cigar, with deep creases across the palm . . . a warm brown human hand, with some cleverness in it, a great deal of generosity, and . . . something nimble and lively and sure, in the way that animals are." The hand is an awakening for Polly who "had never learned so much about life from anything as from old Rosicky's hand. It brought her to herself; it communicated some direct and untranslatable message." From Rosicky's hand, Polly learns unconditional, unrestricted love. She also learns about herself; she lets fall the barriers of social suspicion and ethnic hostility that have prevented her from being a willing, generous, and equal partner in marriage. She learns acceptance.

In both Colette and Cather, the hand symbolizes, among other things, masculinity. Striking, of course, is how differently the brides in the two stories perceive the essential nature of the male.

It would be presumptuous to make generalizations about either Colette or Cather based on these two stories. The striking similarities in technique, however, cause one to speculate whether Colette had any influence on Cather, especially since "Neighbour Rosicky" was published eight years after "The Hand." Unfortunately, although Cather was clearly a life-long

Francophile, there seems to exist no indication that she knew Colette's work. In an interesting article, "Willa Cather and Colette: Mothers of Us All," appearing in *World*, 27 March 1973, Ellen Moers focuses on the two authors' mutual obsession with the mother figure but then concludes, "I do not think Willa Cather ever read Colette, or would have liked her work, for all her wide enjoyment of French culture." Jane Lilienfield, in "Reentering Paradise: Cather, Colette, Woolf and Their Mothers," *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (Ungar 1980), similarly finds no biographic link between Colette and Cather. Nor does James Woodress, in his massive *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Nebraska 1987) mention Colette, although he does catalogue in great detail Cather's love for French literature, art and architecture. Woodress does provide biographical background for Cather's creation of the character Anton Rosicky, explaining that "the emotional power of the tale derives from Cather's feelings about her father; and the title character's death by heart failure parallels the death of Charles Cather." This might explain why Cather described Rosicky's hand so idealistically. Realistically, most of the hard-working farmers in Nebraska, as Polly recognizes in the story, probably had "huge lumps of fists, like mauls . . . knotty and bony and uncomfortable-looking, with stiff fingers." Cather ignored the rough farmers she must have observed and chose to portray the ideal man of the soil as a personification of selfless, magnanimous love.



Detail from
Education of the Virgin,
Georges de La Tour.

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"He Turned Off the Lights": A Study of Darkness in My Mortal Enemy

Christine Kephart
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"*My Mortal Enemy* encapsulates the story of a couple who risk all for love and eventually lose all, to the dismay of a young friend who tracks their downward plunge and later tells their tale," reads Merrill Maguire Skaggs's one sentence plot summary (91). The retrospective tale that Willa Cather puts in the hands of Nellie Birdseye, the "young friend," is defeatist. It steadily moves toward the death of Myra Henshawe and its progression is accompanied by the recurrent play of light and darkness imagery. Myra's overwhelming defeat endures in Nellie's narrative reconstruction as the prevailing mood of the story, a mood of darkness that enshrouds Nellie's memory of the Henshawes and exists beyond the narrative in Nellie's private psychology.

Cather's fascination and skill with light is evident in almost all of her fiction and expressly so in the essay "Light on Adobe Walls," in which she discusses subjective renderings of light in art. Cather scholars, like Marilyn Arnold in "Coming, Willa Cather!", have often concentrated on Cather's use of light imagery. In considering *My Mortal Enemy*, they have focused on individual scenes in the novella where light plays a role, such as Myra on the cliff on moonlit nights, leaving relatively untouched the dominant role throughout of the contrasting darkness. Yet, Cather's dramatic use of darkness carries the tone of death and despair that guides the story to its inevitable conclusion.

Nellie Birdseye is not a reliable narrator. Her name immediately suggests a problem — the inability to view a scene in its entirety as humans do. She sees as a bird sees, from the periphery, "from only one eye at a time," as Skaggs reminds us (93). "Thus," Skaggs continues, "Nellie's name itself poses a question about how well the narrator sees the other two principals" (94), namely, Oswald and Myra Henshawe. Nellie's reliability is further called into question for exaggerating aspects of Myra's personality (Skaggs 101), and for revealing herself as a believer in romantic fairy tales and, in Susan J. Rosowski's terms, the "sentimental notions of marriage" (149). I add to this the fact that the Henshawe story is a retrospective account, which challenges the accuracy of Nellie's memory.

Human eyes are prone toward biases and an inability to secure scenes with objective entirety. This is especially the case when recollecting, when the tendency is to color events and emphasize certain occasions and details while omitting others, a matter pointed out in 1973 by Harry B. Eichorn in "A Falling Out With Love: *My Mortal Enemy*." The issue then becomes these modifications and their cause(s). For

Nellie, the cause is the unbearable reality of the Henshawe situation as Myra conveys it, a "personal truth so painfully honest," writes Rosowski (150), that it can only be ended in death. The truth for Myra is that "people can be lovers and enemies at the same time We [she and Oswald] were" (88). But she continues, "In age we lose everything; even the power to love" (89). Myra's fateful, unnerving ending, then, results in the significant modifications and accents apparent in Nellie's story, for Nellie tells her tale absorbed in the darkness of the end of Myra's life.

Along these same lines, it is also important to note that Myra's deterioration and eventual death, which comprise part two of the story, take place most recently in Nellie's memory — ten years after their less painful association in part one. The last lines of the book reveal how haunted Nellie continues to be by the truth Myra "confessed":

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!" (104-5)

The "*bright* beginning of a love story," "the *flaming* courage of youth" (my emphasis) are for Nellie only short-lived fantasies at best, for their brightness fades, like the furnishings have in the Henshawes' West Coast apartment, into the darkness of reality, "into the stillness of night." Thus, Nellie, who has learned through the Henshawe experience, has the prudence to employ the practical knowledge she has gained in the retelling of the Henshawe relationship.

With her acquired awareness of the ending, it is important for Nellie to recount the "black velvet dress" that Myra wore on their first meeting (5) and "her black hair done up on her head," contrasting with "curly streaks of glistening white in it" (6), and drawing attention to the dominance of black. Furthermore, she is careful in describing the Henshawes' heavily draped New York apartment on the north side of [Madison] Square:

I loved it from the moment I entered it; such solidly built, high-ceiled rooms, with snug fireplaces and wide doors and deep windows. The long, heavy velvet curtains and the velvet chairs were a wonderful plum-colour, like ripe purple fruit. The curtains were lined with that rich cream-colour that lies under the blue skin of ripe figs. (26-7)

The room is monastic in construction: "solidly built" with high ceilings, "wide doors and deep windows." The windows would allow light to enter, but the velvet curtains are heavy enough to block it. Moreover, the color of the curtains indicates the prevalence of darkness: they are a deep plum color, only lined with lighter cream. Clearly, these tonal contrasts are deliberate signals pointing early on to the secret of the Henshawes' life disclosed in part two.

Likewise, Nellie's awareness of time and weather, which have everything to do with the light and darkness of certain occurrences, seems a calculated technique of her storytelling. A pattern develops in part one that functions consistently: on overcast days, in evenings or nights, the calm, seemingly untroubled and contented side of the Henshawes' life emerges, while on bright, sunny days the disturbing side surfaces. The darkness serves as blind romanticism obscuring the ugly truths of the Henshawe marriage, while light exposes the romantic facade and unearths these painful realities.

First, Nellie's introduction to the Henshawes takes place on an evening when everything goes smoothly and charmingly, and Nellie reveals, from the stories she has been told, that Myra and Oswald eloped at night, truly the happy romance of their youth. Myra meets Nellie and Aunt Lydia at Jersey City station on their way to New York on "a soft, grey December morning" (20), a muted day when tempers are calm. On yet another evening, Lydia and Nellie "glanced up and saw [the Henshawes] standing together in one of their deep front windows, framed by the plum-colour curtains" (35). Nellie thinks back to that evening and remembers, "When she [Myra] was peaceful, she was like a dove with its wings folded" (35). Additionally, the night of the Henshawes' New Year's Eve party, when the actress Modjeska is present and Emelia sings from *Norma*, is bathed in the calm light of the moon, while everyone listens to the aria in deep thoughtfulness. The moon, a consistent image in *My Mortal Enemy*, lights up the night sky only a few days each month, yet even during those few days its light is merely a dim contrast to the vast darkness that enshrouds it.

Accordingly, exposure to bright light results in scenes of naked certainties where darkness cannot impose its deceptive influence. An example: the first time Nellie describes a bright day, a day when "the sun shone blindingly on the snow-covered park" (32), Oswald reveals a "dark" side of himself. "I want you to give me a Christmas present," he tells Aunt Lydia, namely the topaz "sleeve-buttons" he has received from "a young woman who means no harm" (33-4). Oswald wants to wear this gift while keeping its source secret, but Myra later finds out the truth and implies that her husband engages in extramarital affairs. On another occasion, "as a fine sunset was coming on," Nellie glimpses Myra's insane ambition in bright light as she and Myra, in a rented hansom, happen to pass a rich woman acquaintance in a carriage. "Mrs. Henshawe bowed stiffly [to the woman], with a condescending smile."

Mrs. Myra was wishing for a carriage — with stables and a house and servants, and all that went with a carriage! All the way home she kept her scornful expression, holding her head high and sniffing the purple air from side to side as we drove down Fifth Avenue. When we alighted before her door she paid the driver, and gave him such a large fee that he snatched off his hat and

said twice: "Thank you, thank you, my lady!" She dismissed him with a smile and a nod. "All the same," she whispered to me as she fitted her latchkey, "it's very nasty, being poor!" (40-41)

Thus is revealed the brooding resentment Myra harbors against Oswald for her marginal social status and financial situation. Later that same week, when Myra takes Nellie to visit Miss Aylward, bright light reveals another kind of disease: that young woman's tuberculosis is obvious in her "sunlit study up under the roofs" (42). And on a similarly sunlit afternoon Nellie interrupts a serious disagreement between Oswald and Myra about a supposed key to a safety deposit box. In all cases, the light bares grave aspects of Cather's text.

In the novella's second half, which centers on the gradual mental and physical deterioration of Myra Henshawe, darkness becomes the dominant symbol of this disintegration and steadily increases as Myra's condition worsens. Here Cather replaces her initial use of darkness as blinder with darkness as unweaver. Thus, the illuminating light fades into revealing and dominant opacity. Nellie coincidentally meets up with the Henshawes who happen to be residing in the same West Coast complex as she. Myra is now incurably ill and has become "acutely sensitive to sound and light" (71). "The electric bulbs in the room," therefore, "were shrouded and muffled with coloured scarfs . . ." (62). Electric light is now painful to her, and so the Henshawes resort to candlelight, the softest, lightless (if I may) light.

But there is at least one exception to this muted light in part two. Nellie takes Myra to the coast on a brilliantly sunny day: "The afternoon light, at first wide and watery-pale, grew stronger and yellower, and when [Nellie] went back to Myra it was beating from the west on her cliff as if thrown by a burning-glass" (72-3). This brilliance is not allowed to govern, however, for Myra wears black and Nellie relates a disturbing thought expressed by Myra: "Light and silence: they heal all one's wounds — all but one, and that is healed by dark and silence" (73). Here she seeks the darkness of death, which she now foreshadows:

"I'd love to see this place at dawn," Myra said suddenly. "That is always such a forgiving time. When that first cold, bright streak comes over the water, it's as if all our sins were pardoned; as if the sky leaned over the earth and kissed it and gave it absolution." (73)

Her previous statement seeks the darkness for healing, while this one contradicts it as a longing for light, the light of forgiveness and salvation John J. Murphy discusses in "Cather's New World Divine Comedy: The Dante Connection." Myra does return to this spot to die, the headland she had earlier compared to Gloucester's cliff in *King Lear*, where Gloucester progressed the vision of his blindness. Ambiguities prevail about whether or not Myra saw "that first cold, bright streak." As Skaggs observes, "The place she selects for her death . . . is a site sacred to the triple

goddess of the tides, the moon, and the night" (108). It is thus not a place of light but of darkness, and Myra will not see the first streaks of dawn if she faces west as on that first visit.

Rosowski, in *The Voyage Perilous*, discusses the structure of *My Mortal Enemy*. "Death frames the book: in the opening scenes, that of John Driscoll; in the final ones, that of Myra Henshawe" (152). Nellie describes Driscoll's funeral: "The high altar blazed with hundreds of candles, the choir was entirely filled by the masses of flowers" (18). In this scene, light and color, as opposed to darkness, have everything to do with Driscoll's death. Nellie remembers that "it was as if he had been translated, with no dark conclusion to the pageant, no 'night of the grave' about which our Protestant preachers talked" (18-19). In fact, it was as if "he had gone straight to the greater glory, through smoking censurers and candles and stars" (19).

Similarly, though Myra does not have a funeral, her mental and physical degeneration in part two is accompanied by candles. As noted above, Myra surrounds herself with candlelight toward the very end of her life: "she asked us to use candles for light during our watches, and to have no more of the electric light she hated . . ." (93). And candles become a fixation with her. She asks Nellie, "Why is it, do you suppose, Nellie, that candles are in themselves religious? Not when they are covered by shades, of course — I mean the flame of a candle. Is it because the church began in the catacombs, perhaps?" (94). While the candle symbolizes here the beginnings, birth in death, of "the church," it is nonetheless subsumed by the church, for catacombs are subterranean religious burial grounds in which darkness is perpetual unless lit by the flicker of a candle. But even then, we are aware that the candle will melt and the flame expire.

Because she knows the outcome of the Henshawe story, Nellie's inclinations lead her to steep her recounting of it in that total darkness which ultimately engulfs the novella, a darkness dictated primarily by those unforgettable words — "Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy." Myra's deepest dolorous confession haunts Nellie after Myra's death and causes her to view the Henshawe experience as a dark and negative one. Indeed, the theme continues to be the most interesting story for Nellie Birdseye, for whom darkness remains a certainty: "[Myra] and her runaway marriage were the theme of the most interesting, indeed the only interesting, stories that were told in [Nellie's] family, on holidays or at family dinners" (3).

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An Interdisciplinary Approach to "Neighbour Rosicky"

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I first came to "Neighbour Rosicky" as a high school teacher at Beatrice, Nebraska, and many of my comments come from that teaching experience. I believe that both the casual reader and the scholar can be enriched by an awareness of the historical, artistic, and sociological dimensions of the story.

When I was assigned to teach Sophomore English, I was pleased to find "Neighbour Rosicky" in the anthology. Soon, however, I learned that teaching the story presents some challenges. Many students complain about the lack of exciting action, and they don't readily appreciate what those of us who love the story might call its "sacredness." The story is ultimately very accessible and a tremendous tool for teaching lessons about literary language, but first a way must be found to engage the students' interests. One way to do this is to tap the many layers of knowledge which Cather put into this story. There's something here for everyone — either something students already know, thus a starting point for their journey, or something in which they can be interested.

An obvious example is history. Despite many historical references, the story has a certain timelessness to it. When I asked when the story took place, I always got a wide range of answers — from the 1870s to the 1950s — and some would vehemently defend their choice. Once a boy told me that his father had read the story and said, "That's exactly the way it was when I was growing up." The trouble was that the father was born several years after Willa Cather died; he had to quit high school to work on the farm when his brothers were drafted for service in the Vietnam War! Nevertheless, there are several events from history that students can research or that can be discussed: the slum conditions of the poor working class in Victorian London (reminiscent of the works of Charles Dickens), the massive migration of Central and

Eastern Europeans to America, the importance of the giant packinghouse industry in Omaha, etc. Or consider the introduction of alfalfa as a crop on the Great Plains. It's no accident that alfalfa is important in this story: Mary mentions that during the hardest times it "hadn't been invented yet" (46) and Anton "set great store by that big alfalfa field" (62). The green color of the alfalfa "woke early memories in old Rosicky, went back to something in his childhood in the old world. When he was a little boy, he had played in fields of that strong blue-green color" (62). It was caring for alfalfa that brought on Anton's heart attack. There is history here too — the story of alfalfa as a crop and what it meant to the farmers of Middle America. Put a farm kid to work researching that topic and watch him become engaged in this story.

Students (and if we're honest, most of us) are visually oriented. This story is rich with visual artistic images, and those images can come alive through various media. My students created some marvelous photographic essays of old rural cemeteries, and displays that contrasted solitary graves with the homey, communal cemetery of this story or with the "cities of the forgotten [dead]" (71) that Dr. Ed bemoans and that are easily visualized, for example, by Nebraska students who have seen the cemeteries flanking the main streets in the heart of their capital city of Lincoln. Encourage students to work with the image of Rosicky's hands, developed so extensively by Cather:

After he dropped off to sleep, [Polly] sat holding his warm, broad, flexible brown hand. She had never seen another in the least like it. She wondered if it wasn't a kind of gypsy hand, it was so alive and quick and light in its communications . . . like quick-silver, flexible, muscular, about the colour of a pale cigar, with deep, deep creases across the palm. It wasn't nervous, it wasn't a stupid lump; it was a warm brown human hand, with some cleverness in it, a great deal of generosity, and something else which Polly could only call "gypsy-like" — something nimble and lively and sure. . . . It seemed to her that she had never learned so much about life from anything as from old Rosicky's hand. (66-7)

One student rendered a wonderful charcoal sketch of that hand, and another was inspired to put together a very moving photographic portfolio of the hands of people in a local nursing home.

This story also offers an opportunity to explore the necessity of art in our lives — particularly during rough times. And that's something to which teenagers, who so often retreat to the world of their music, their videos, their drawings, can relate. This approach invites discussion of the violin boy in London, practicing under intolerable conditions, and of the opera in New York, and of Rosicky sending Polly and Rudolph to the movie to lift their spirits. And I think the lilacs in the churchyard and Mary's red geraniums are part of this too.

There's a lot of what I call sociology here. Once again, the timelessness of the story stands out: impor-

tant issues that are still contemporary — the conflict between rural and town interests and between ethnic groups — can spark lively discussion or further research. And my students always wanted to talk about the family issues in this story. Some of the best class discussions I ever heard were about whether or not Anton and Mary were good parents, an issue that is easy to overlook in our positive feelings about this family. The title calls for an examination of “neighborliness” — and for a consideration of the irony that I think is implicit in Cather’s use of the word “Neighbour” in the title.

I was lucky enough to have a great place to take students to experience the “disciplines” of this story. We went to the Homestead National Monument just outside Beatrice. We walked about and talked to experts about prairie ecology and restoration; most appropriately, we stood at the foot of the graves of first homesteaders Agnes and Daniel Freeman, reading their histories on the stones, then looking in one direction at the restored prairie and in the other at the ultra-modern fertilizer plants. Then we tried our hands at creative writing, using the kinds of sensory descriptions we had studied in the story. Any resourceful teacher can find a similar location where history, biology, family, community, and visual images come together.

In one sense this story is like Cather’s metaphor for Rosicky — he’s like a tree that has one tap root that goes down deep (32). But like many metaphors this one is limiting. Rosicky is many-sided, and so is his story. An awareness of its multi-disciplinary aspects can lead us deeply into the story, as well as carry us beyond it, helping us grow through varied response.

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Portrait of the Artist by a Young Woman

Bruce P. Baker
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When I began my own studies of Willa Cather’s work in the late 1950s, one of the first articles I read was Edward and Lillian Bloom’s “Willa Cather’s Portrait of the Artist,” published in the *University of Toronto*

Quarterly in 1958. I remember being intrigued then, as I still am today, at Cather’s keen insight into the nature of the artist, what the Blooms believed to be one of the three major themes in her work, a theme most extensively explored, as they pointed out, in the lengthy 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark*, the story of Thea Kronborg’s journey from a small mid-western town to international fame as a celebrated Wagnerian soprano. Cather’s chief interest, as she herself confirmed in her 1932 “Preface” to a new edition of that novel, was her attempt to tell the story “of an artist’s awakening and struggle; her floundering escape from a smug, domestic, self-satisfied provincial world of utter ignorance.” She had originally intended to “call the story ‘Artist’s Youth,’ but my publisher discouraged me,” she reveals, adding with characteristic candor, “wisely enough.” Nevertheless, it is clear that Cather’s chief concern in *The Song of the Lark* is both the triumph and the

tragedy of the life of one who has, in her words, “deliver[ed] himself completely to his art.” (Cather had little trouble with what we today consider gender specific pronouns!) Cather continues, “As Thea Kronborg is more and more released into the dramatic and musical possibilities of her profession, as her artistic life grows fuller and richer, it becomes more interesting to her than her own life. As the gallery of her musical impersonations grows in number and beauty, as that perplexing thing called ‘style’ (which is a singer’s very self) becomes more direct and simple and noble, the Thea Kronborg who is behind the imperishable daughters of music becomes somewhat dry and preoccupied. . . . [Her] personal life becomes paler as the imaginative life becomes richer” In short, *Song of the Lark* is Cather’s fullest and most explicit exploration of some of the same concerns James Joyce chronicles in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, published just one year after *Song of the Lark*.



Although there are sufficient parallels between those two novels (both similarities and differences) to deserve further study, my purpose here is to suggest

that several of Cather's earliest writings, some well known and others relatively neglected, represent her attempt to define the nature, the role, the function, and the sacrifice demanded of one who devotes herself to the "kingdom of art," a phrase Cather used in an 1898 column in the *Nebraska State Journal*. Early stories like "Peter" (1892) and "Nanette: an Aside" (1896), and several columns and letters written during these apprentice years represent Cather's portrait of the artist at a time when she was exploring that portrait in an abstract sense and striving to find her own voice and her own way, deciding, as did Stephen Dedalus, to fulfill her destiny as an artist, to dedicate herself fully to the demanding god called Art.

Cather's first published story, "Peter," which appeared in a Boston literary magazine, *The Mahogany Tree*, on May 31, 1892, contains her earliest portrayal of a sensitive, if minor, artist who finds himself in a world that neither recognizes nor values the creative spirit. Old Peter Sadelack has immigrated with his son Antone to the "dreariest part of southwestern Nebraska," where Antone has homesteaded and his father been drained physically and spiritually by the hostile environment. Peter is desperately homesick for his native Bohemia and particularly for the opportunities for his art he had enjoyed there. Cather uses Peter's violin to enhance the story's theme and intensify its emotion: that beautiful instrument represents not only his dearest possession but also those values to which Peter has been dedicated. The first two sentences point up the conflict between father and son over the violin and characterize their respective points of view: "No, Antone, I have told thee many times, no, thou shalt not sell [the violin] until I am gone." His son Antone replies, "But I need money; what good is that old fiddle to thee? Thy hand trembles so thou canst scarce hold the bow." The forces of materialism seem ready and eager to consume artistic expression. Thus, when Peter finds that he can no longer make music — the only thing he has valued in his new life on the plains — and when Antone is insistent upon selling the symbol of what seems to him both frivolous and useless, Peter takes his own life after breaking his violin over his knee to save it from a rather stereotyped American materialism and "practicality." Indeed, the son's desire to get rid of the fiddle is symbolically akin to his attitude toward his father: neither is of any *real* use or value.

Although Cather does, of course, succeed in eliciting the reader's sympathy for Peter, she attempts to qualify his portrait: Peter drinks excessively (willingly pawning anything but his pipe or his violin in order to get whiskey), and it is clear that he is of very little help in meeting the difficulties of making a living by farming on the western plains. The artistic temperament, young Willa Cather seems to feel, is essentially (and stereotypically) incompatible with hard physical labor or practicality. Nevertheless, the overriding sympathy in this first story is for a sensitive, artistic man whose music is central to his life and undervalued and de-

meant by Antone and those of his ilk. It is when music is no longer possible that Peter commits suicide; life without music is simply not worth living, and those who represent "success" on the Divide would appear to have triumphed by silencing it.

The final irony of the story is succinctly conveyed in the very last paragraph:

In the morning Antone found [Peter] stiff, frozen fast in a pool of blood. They could not straighten him out enough to fit a coffin, so they buried him in a pine box. Before the funeral Antone carried to town the fiddle-bow which Peter had forgotten to break. Antone was very thrifty, and a better man than his father had been.

But what about this fiddle-bow? Antone will, no doubt, be able to sell it and convert the instrument into money. And yet, the bow will "live on" to help some violinist or another create music again. Art, Cather seems to be suggesting, will transcend the materialism so rampant on the Divide. Cather has transformed the oral tale she heard soon after having moved to Red Cloud into a thematic commentary on the survival of art.

Even earlier than this first published story, Cather was exploring her concept of the artist in "Shakespeare and Hamlet," an essay published in the *Nebraska State Journal* for November 8, 1891, and in a letter to Lincoln friend Mariel Gere dated August 4, 1896, from Pittsburgh, where Cather had taken a job in the editorial offices of the *Home Monthly*. In this letter Cather uses imagery drawn from religion to indicate her devotion to Art. Her devotion is not, she insists, an affectation; she is willing to give herself to the pursuit of a personified Art and Beauty, even though she might fail in her endeavor and experience unhappiness because of it. Her worship of Art, she tells Mariel, grows stronger as she grows older; it has led her to Pittsburgh and will, no doubt, lead her to other cities. But she will follow, whatever the cost. Thus Willa Cather shared with Henry James the belief that artists must dedicate themselves to their art with devotion and sacrifice, the very qualities demanded for those called to religious orders; "religion and art spring from the same root," she suggested in the 1939 essay "Escapism" and earlier in Godfrey St. Peter's lecture in *The Professor's House*.

However, as early as 1891 Cather was acutely aware of the demands Art makes on its devotees. She seems to have accepted early what young Paul Overt learns from the well-known novelist St. George in Henry James's story "The Lesson of the Master" (1889): art requires dedication to what St. George calls an "idea of perfection" and "a life in which the passion is really intense." A writer, he insists, must not be concerned with "everything's being made comfortable, advantageous, propitious." Paul asks the inevitable question: "The artist — the artist: Isn't he a man all the same?" St. George's answer might well have been the credo of Willa Cather: "Sometimes I really think not. You know as well as I what he has to do: the concentra-

tion, the finish, the independence that he must strive for, from the moment that he begins to respect his work."

Cather's own essay on "Shakespeare and Hamlet," written just two years after publication of James's story, explores similar themes. A great artist, Cather feels, "must undergo the pain, the suffering, the separation from other men, the solitude and the loneliness which [creative art] involves." Too often, however, writers "are not strong enough for the sacrifice, so they say 'we will serve both men and art.' They serve the one, but the other they prostitute. They do not intend this, it comes upon them gradually." Like Paul Overt of the James story, young Willa Cather is aware of how difficult such devotion and sacrifice will be: "Authors are not made of marble or of ice, and human sympathy is a sweet thing. There is much to suffer, much to undergo; the awful loneliness, the longing for human fellowship and for human love. It is a hard thing to endure, and only love can endure it, a love as deep and as serene as the eternal force of the universe Shakespeare loved," she concludes. In her column in the *Nebraska State Journal* for March 1, 1896, Cather articulated the theme which fills her letters of these years: "In the kingdom of art there is no God, but one God, and his service is so exacting that there are few born of woman who are strong enough to take the vows." Willa Cather was prepared to give such service and love, for the world of art was the world that mattered, and she was determined to become a part of it, whatever the cost.

It is perhaps "Nanette: an Aside," a story published in the *Lincoln Courier* for July 31, 1897, that is Cather's most explicit early portrait of the artist. Indeed, the piece so overtly explores what Marilyn Arnold labels "The Cost of Art" that she appropriately defines it "something of an essay." The protagonist Madame Tradutorri, an opera singer, embodies those qualities of voice that Cather describes in her early reviews as belonging only to the finest of artists: "beauty," "power," "a peculiar soul-note," an "undescrivable quality" that transcends analysis. In a rather lengthy passage that intrudes on the narrative, Cather includes those qualities of the truly great she would later associate in "The Novel *Démeublé*" with the ability to convey more than was articulated, what she delineates as "the thing not named, . . . the overtone divined by the ear, but not heard by it." Regarding Tradutorri's gift Cather observes, "Other singers there are who feel and vent their suffering. Their methods are simple and transparent: they pour out their self-inflicted anguish and when it is over they are merely tired as children are after excitement. But Tradutorri holds back her suffering within herself; she suffers as the flesh and blood woman of her century suffer. . . . It is this stifled pain that wrings your heart when you hear her. . . . This is classical art, art exalted, art deified."

The story itself concerns Tradutorri's suffering when she learns that Nanette, her personal aide and

serving woman who has been with her some ten years, has fallen in love and plans to marry and leave her position. At first, Madame Tradutorri is dismayed, claiming, "Of course you can not leave me. Why, who could ever learn all the needs of my life as you know them. . . . Leave me? I think it would break my heart." But later, while pointing out those things she quite honestly (if a bit selfishly) feels Nanette will miss ("changes and money and excitement"), Madame nevertheless acquiesces in a Jamesian renunciation scene: "How strange that this should come to you, Nanette. Be very happy in it, dear. Let nothing come between you and it; no desire, no ambition. It is not given to every one. There are women who wear crowns who would give them for an hour of it." But Tradutorri has been given another gift, not of personal happiness (her husband is absent and feeble and her daughter crippled and "hidden away in a convent in Italy"); rather, she has been given the gift of talent, of artistic genius, a gift that has required her to sacrifice traditional personal happiness to the god of Art. "It is the same thing florists do," she tells Nanette, "when they cut away all the buds that one flower may blossom with the strength of all." The story ends with an image of Tradutorri weeping but nevertheless wearing "upon her brow . . . the coronet that the nations had given her when they called her queen."

To be sure, "Nanette: an Aside" is melodramatic, heavy-handed, and didactic; but as Joyce's portrait, this early story represents a young artist delineating a portrait, finding a vocation, coming to terms with particular gifts, defining a role, assessing costs, looking for a voice, assessing its promises — knowing, somehow, that it was to the kingdom of art the artist would be devoted, a kingdom promising both fame and pain, glory and despair, the admiration of the world and personal loneliness, and, perhaps, even private despair.

Dear Friends,

Once again it is membership time! If you are not a member of the WCPM, consider joining now; if you are a member, it is renewal time. Remember that with membership come the newsletter, which is published four times a year, and free visitation through the Cather buildings in Red Cloud. For your convenience, a membership form is included with the newsletter. In the event that this becomes separated, you will also find a membership form printed on the back side of this newsletter.

Your contribution to the WCPM is important. The level of your gift matters. Membership in the WCPM helps us maintain the bookstore and art gallery; offer tours of Catherland; continue, develop, or pursue new educational programs on Willa Cather; obtain new acquisitions for Cather study; and participate locally, regionally, and nationally in other activities which relate to the study or promotion of Willa Cather's life and art.

Please help us maintain the quality of work we do and aid in our continued growth.

Thank you, Patricia Phillips, Director

Upcoming Events

JANUARY 28 - FEBRUARY 6

Songwriter John Kunz will present a multi-media concert featuring songs based on the stories of Willa Cather after Omaha Workshop Theatre's performances of a pair of one act plays dealing with families from Omaha's past at the Grande Olde Players Theatre, 2339 North 90th Street, Omaha.

MARCH 4 - MARCH 27

The Ahmanson Foundation will sponsor the Omaha Playhouse's premiere of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* at The Playhouse, 6915 Cass Street, Omaha ([402] 553-0800). Playhouse director Charles Jones has written a two part script. Part I, the first winter in Nebraska, debuts this year; Part II will be performed early in 1995.

MAY 6 - MAY 7

The Cather Spring Conference (May 7) theme this year will be "Willa Cather and American Traditions" and feature six stories: "The Enchanted Bluff" and "Before Breakfast"; "Jack-a-Boy" and "The Best Years"; "Eric Hermansson's Soul" and "Coming, Aphrodite!" Activities will begin on May 6 with sessions featuring these and other Cather fiction. Submission deadline for papers is April 10. For information write Bruce P. Baker, Dept. of English, U of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska 68182-0175.

JUNE 2 - JUNE 5

The American Literature Association will return this year to San Diego. WCPM is planning two sessions on Cather and jointly sponsoring one on Cather and Faulkner with the Faulkner Society. For information on the conference write Susan Belasco Smith, Conference Director, English Dept., California State U, Los Angeles, California 90032.

Notes

Clement Pavelka, last living son of Annie Pavelka, died in December in California. Of Annie's thirteen children, only one, Antonette Kort of Hastings, Nebraska, survives.

Board member Betty Kort represented the WCPM at the 1993 Nebraska Literature Festival, held September 18 on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus. She spoke on "The Willa Cather/Hartley Burr Alexander Connection." WCPM was well represented at the book festival, an important part of this annual event.

Board member Virgil Albertini, professor of English at Northwest Missouri State University, has been selected by the students of Sigma Tau Delta

English Honor Society as Teacher of the Year. This is the second time in four years he has received this honor.

The Western Literature Association Meeting, Wichita, Kansas, October 7-9, included eighteen papers on Cather by veteran and younger critics. Ann Moseley, Susan Rosowski, and John Murphy were among the veterans who presented papers. Younger scholar Evelyn Funda was awarded the best graduate paper prize for "The Breath Vibrating Behind It: Intimacy in the Storytelling of *Ántonia* Shimerda." Painter John Blake Bergers used slides in a discussion session on his illustrations of Cather's fiction.

The John March Handbook

Finally, after seven years of intense scrutiny and editing by Marilyn Arnold and a staff led by Debra Lynn Thornton at Brigham Young University, the John March Handbook has been published under the title *A Reader's Companion to the Fiction of Willa Cather*. Those who ordered this book several years ago at the prepublication price of \$50.00 can expect it in about one month. Those who did not order this valuable piece of Cather scholarship should consider the following estimate by publisher Greenwood Press:

This reader's companion contains thousands of lively and informative entries on persons, places, and events, fictional and real, and on quotations, works of art, and other items to reveal meanings or provide background for understanding Cather's fictional world. At the same time, it offers insights into her real world and time, her interests, and her astonishingly broad frame of reference. A lifetime project of encyclopedist John March, the manuscript and notes have been verified, clarified, amplified, and organized by literary scholar Marilyn Arnold, with the assistance of Debra Lynn Thornton. The goal was to develop a work that would be useful to the reader while preserving March's "authorial presence": what has resulted is a dictionary that will both enlighten and delight.

A Reader's Companion to the Fiction of Willa Cather by John March, edited by Marilyn Arnold, with Debra Lynn Thornton. \$99.50 (cloth binding), plus \$4.50 shipping.

Other New Books and Editions

Willa Cather: Landscape and Exile by Laura Winters. \$27.50, hardcover, plus \$3.00 postage, insurance, and handling.

Willa Cather by Edward Wagenknecht. \$19.95, hardcover, plus \$3.00 postage, insurance, and handling.

My Ántonia. New Penguin edition with introduction, explanatory notes, and bibliography by John J. Murphy. \$6.95, plus \$3.00 shipping and handling.

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.

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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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