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## Teaching Resources and Suggestions for Willa Cather's Short Story "A Wagner Matinée"

Developed by the National Willa Cather Center's 2022 Teacher Institute cohort: Cindy Adams, John Elster, Elizabeth Lafleur, Marcy Mahoney, and Stan Szczesny

### Bell Ringers/Opening Discussion

#### DAY 1 Opening:

1. Bell Work/Teaser Lead-in – Spend five minutes thinking and writing about the thing that means the most to you right now.
2. Follow Up Bell Work - What does success look like for someone from our group when they're 30 years old (about 12-14 years from now)?
3. Assign to read "A Wagner Matinee"
  - a. Text as anthologized or available in the [Willa Cather Archive](#).
    - i. Note there are slight differences between the linked text (originally published in *Everybody's Magazine*) and the traditionally anthologized version (also published in Cather's *The Troll Garden* (1905) and *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920)). There aren't many and they don't significantly change the meaning of the work.
  - b. Originally published 1904. Set in "present time" roughly 1904.

#### DAY 2 Opening:

1. Bell Work/Opening Discussion Prompt - Think back to yesterday's bell work and the short story read for today.
  - a. How do you know Georgiana's life was a success/failure when she's 30 (about the time she married Uncle Howard (~1870))?
  - b. Is her life successful/a failure at 60 (about the age she returns to Boston (~1904))? in Georgiana's mind? By modern society? By your standards?

### Point of Discussion: Homesteading

1. Homesteading propaganda
  - a. PURPOSE: to understand why Georgiana would leave, what it means to leave everything behind
    - i. Nebraska-booster advertising: [The Immigrant Experience](#)
    - ii. Dugout [Dugouts images](#)

### Point of Discussion: Biographical Connection of Georgiana to Cather's Aunt

1. Cather Review Article: "From Our Collections" by Tracy Sanford Tucker
  - a. [Cather Review article on Aunt Franc](#) Page 40 of the linked PDF
2. [1892 article in Red Cloud paper about Mrs. Franc Cather's literary society meetings](#)
3. [History of Mount Holyoke College](#)
4. [Images of Aunt Franc prototype of Aunt Georgiana](#)
5. [Aunt Franc's literary circle notes](#)

### Point of Discussion: Significance of Passage of Time

**(Mozart is to Wagner as Bing Crosby is to Jimi Hendrix)**

1. [Wagner at the Metropolitan Opera \(NYC\)](#)
2. Discuss: Importance of identity and what it means to let it go of something loved
3. Passage of time. Wagner's music is a major shift/evolution in classical music. Georgiana would not have heard anything like the music of Wagner. For context, consider these major changes over 30 years in more recent history:
  - a. Music – examples of 30 year gaps in music – '40's big band with '70's rock; '90's rap with '22's rap; '70's Zeppelin vs '99's NSYNC, New Kids on the Block vs BTS
    - i. [1937 Bing Crosby - "Sweet Leilani"](#)
    - ii. [1967 Jimi Hendrix - "Purple Haze"](#)
    - iii. [1997 Aqua - "Barbie Girl"](#)
  - b. Video games
    - i. Atari (1971) [Pong \(Released 1972\)](#)
    - ii. Game Cube (2001) [2002 FIFA World Cup \(Released 2002\)](#)
    - iii. PS5 (2020) [FIFA 22 \(Released 2021\)](#)
  - c. Clothes/fashion
    - i. [1870s Fashion](#)

- ii. [1900s Fashion](#)
- iii. [1990s Fashion](#)
- d. TV Shows
  - i. [The Andy Griffith Show \(1963\)](#)
  - ii. [Full House \(1993\)](#)
  - iii. [Stranger Things \(2022\)](#)
- 4. Writing assignment
  - a. Self-Analysis Essay
    - i. Is that still going to be important to you at 30?
    - ii. What is important to 30 year olds?
    - iii. Can that thing still be part of your identity at 30?
  - b. Oral history of a family member – mom, dad, aunt, uncle, grandma/pa – importance of something from youth, do they still do it, how did they accomplish it? If not, why not? Why did they stop?
    - i. Must be specific to hobby – music, interests,
    - ii. Shoot for something 23-35 years gone

### Deeper Dives/ Extensions/ Resources

1. Book: *Cather and Opera* by David McKay Powell ISBN: 978-0-8071-7711-2
  - a. This book, published in 2022 includes a thorough and thoughtful review of “A Wagner Matinée” in the context of Wagner’s music, public and family reception, and an analysis of the story’s characters
2. Full-Text Audio: <https://youtu.be/JPISeiEn6EI>
3. Photos of Boston Conservatory 1904 and 1870s
  - a. Boston Conservatory of Music established 1867
    - i. <https://bostonconservatory.berklee.edu/about/history>
4. [Songs Mentioned in “A Wagner Matinee” Spotify Playlist](#)
5. Clothing Worn Traditionally During Operas (1904)
  - a. Cather’s Opera Coat
  - b. Edwardian evening dress  
<https://vintagedancer.com/1900s/edwardian-evening-dress-history/>
6. Primary Source Biographical Information Incorporation with Passage of Time
  - a. what it is, why it matters, what it looks like – especially journalism, oral history

- i. what “oral history” means, what they are, why they matter; for definitions and resources, visit [OralHistory.org](http://OralHistory.org)
- b. Compile – students look through and “discover”
  - i. letters, descriptions of Franc Cather and her life
  - ii. Letters about leaving Nebraska from Willa Cather, abandonment
- c. Connections to family – Dad’s copy of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* - importance of family throughout life – stories of grandparents dying and wanting to have their story written – Oral history

**Applicable 2021 Nebraska State Standards:**

LA.12.RP.2 Analyze the development and interaction of literary elements such as characterization, setting, and plot, and how they contribute to the meaning of the work as a whole.

**LA.12.RI.2 Synthesize and evaluate how the interaction of individuals, important events, and key ideas contribute to the meaning of the work as a whole.**

LA.12.RP.3 Evaluate an author’s use of point of view and how it contributes to the meaning, significance, or aesthetic of a literary text.

LA.12.RP.4 Evaluate how an author develops structure in a literary text to contribute to its overall meaning and aesthetic impact.

**LA.10.RP.5 Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from the Bible)**

LA.12.W.2.a Identify and use resources and inquiry tools to plan, organize, and draft writing.

Photos of Aunt Franc's house in Bladen, Nebraska (view from porch and front-facing). Photo Credit: Cindy Adams





Home of Francis (Franc) Cather. Photo Credit: Cindy Adams.

## **Educational Resources from the National Willa Cather Center**

The National Willa Cather Center provides resources for teachers, students, libraries and book clubs to improve and supplement their study of Willa Cather and her work. Current Nebraska Department of Education standards have been used in development of curriculum.

As always, the National Willa Cather Center is available to provide additional resource material, arrange for a Cather guest lecturer, or schedule a tour of Willa Cather's Red Cloud for your group. Please contact education coordinator Rachel Olsen, at [rolsen@willacather.org](mailto:rolsen@willacather.org) for more information about our educational services or if you are an educator and would like to contribute a lesson plan or activity based on teaching Willa Cather in your classroom.

The Teacher Institute at the National Willa Cather Center is a unique program that offers five days of immersive literature and history study in the largest collection of nationally designated historic sites dedicated to an American author. Special lectures augment historic site tours, visits to the archive, and one-on-one conversation with Cather scholars, but participants can also expect comfortable B&B lodging and generous time to relax and plan for the coming year. Those who complete this retreat-style professional development workshop receive a certificate of completion and support packet which details contact hours and curriculum.



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