Willa Cather REVIEW

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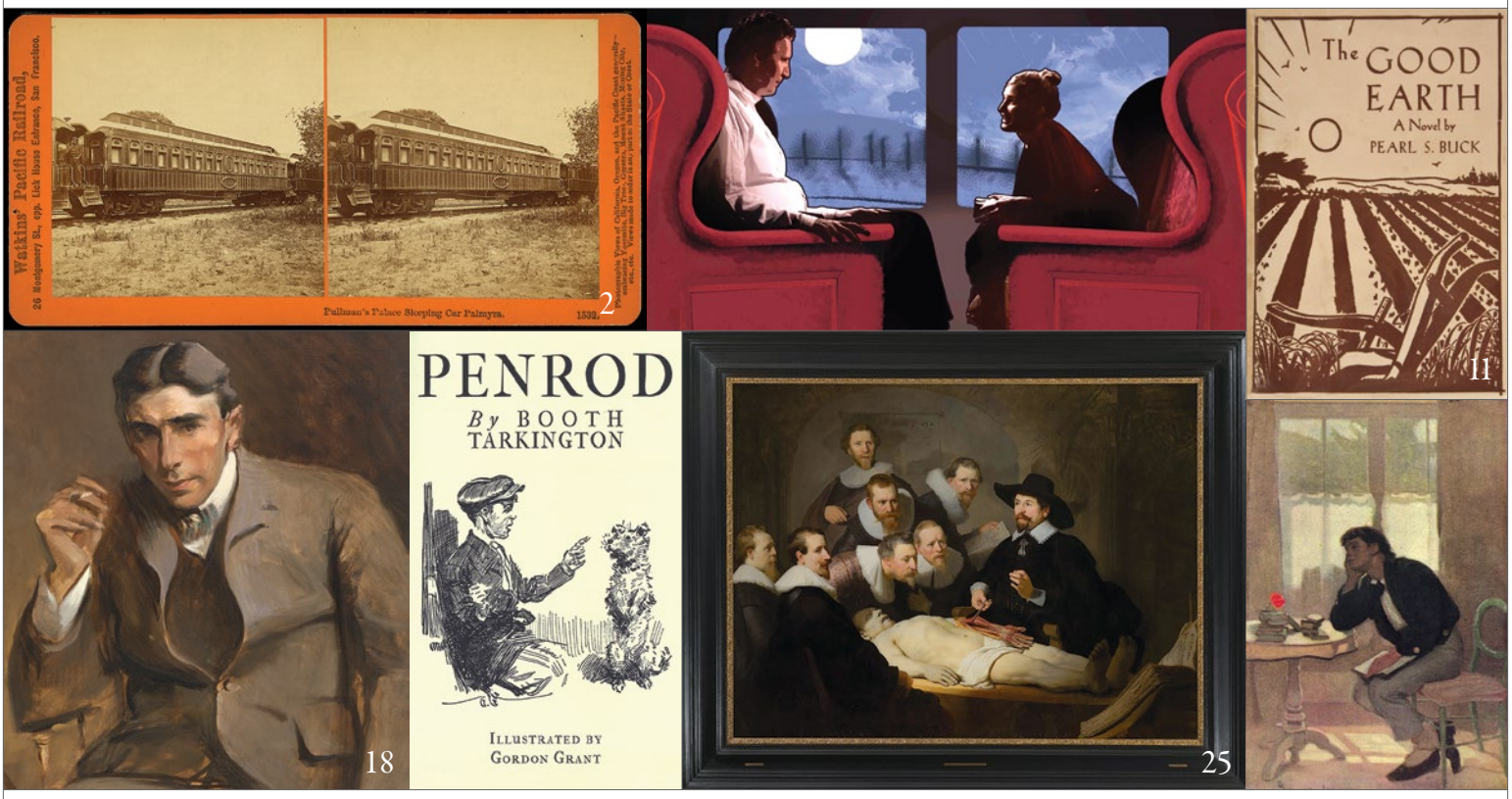

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Front cover: **About to Be Reborn**
Depicted some months into its comprehensive restoration, the Childhood Home starts to shake the dust off.
Digital illustration based on original photograph by Ashley Olson.

Letter from the Executive Director

Ashley Olson

The crisp fall mornings and the bluestem grasses that are fading to reddish bronze on the Cather prairie have been gentle reminders that fall is upon us. Summer came and went in what felt like the blink of an eye as we transitioned from one program to the next. Space here does not allow for a full recounting of all the details, so I'll offer an abbreviated summary.

This year's Spring Conference was a lively commemoration of Cather's 150th year. The evocative prose about the land that was a setting in some of Cather's most celebrated stories was enlivened through music and visual art. Lectures and new scholarship examined the evolution of Cather's writerly imagination and the adaptation of her work into other mediums.

The long-awaited unveiling of Littleton Alston's larger-than-life bronze sculpture of Willa Cather in National Statuary Hall of the U. S. Capitol was a momentous occasion. Cather joined civil rights leader Ponca Chief Standing Bear as a notable citizen selected by the state Legislature to represent Nebraska; she is the twelfth woman and the lone Pulitzer Prize winner in the collection.

Following the festivities in our nation's capital, we traveled to New York City for the 18th International Cather Seminar. This event, a collaboration with the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and the New School, offered new insights into Cather's life in the city and in the Greenwich Village environs where she resided between 1906 and 1932.

The Willa Cather Teacher Institute and an NEH Institute titled "Willa Cather: Place and Archive" brought high school educators and higher education faculty to Red Cloud for the creation of new classroom resources and for place-based study. Meanwhile, summer theater workshops provided area youth with opportunities to ignite their creativity by developing new work and honing their talents on the stage.

In the background of our programs for more than a year has been the rehabilitation of the Willa Cather Childhood Home. The need for this project and the conservation of the original wallpaper in Cather's attic room has been discussed for more than a decade. Now construction is nearly complete, and the wallpaper conservation is set to take place next spring. Collections staff will soon return furniture and artifacts to the house. Visitors can expect to see family possessions given pride of place as the site is reinterpreted. Many of you have visited this site, and we hope you'll come again. A lot has changed, but entering the tiny house is still one of primary ways to understand Cather's life and literature more fully.

Letter from the President

Robert Thacker

I tend to think titles. As I've pondered over what I wanted to write about here, the titles that occurred were "Celebrating Cather in 2023," or perhaps "Taking Manhattan Once More." Either will do, since here at the National Willa Cather Center we are engaged in a year-long program of anniversary celebrations focused on Cather and, as ever, on her works. On the centennials of three key works—*April Twilights and Other Poems, A Lost Lady*, and "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle"—and, more broadly, on the sesquicentennial of Cather's birth in Back Creek, Virginia in 1873. (Notably, too, the house in which she was born has just come into local hands, people intent on its preservation. A *very* good thing.) Celebration abounds: Littleton Alston's Cather statue was unveiled in Statuary Hall in June in Washington, a vivid demonstration of the prominence Cather deserves as a cultural presence in this country's imagination. About two weeks later an International Willa Cather Seminar was finally held in New York City, the site of her most significant magazine work at *McClure's* as well the place of her longest residence. And among the numerous Cather programs held this year, late September saw "Selected Shorts: Ken Burns Presents Willa Cather's America" at Symphony Space on the Upper West Side in New York City and, in October, Cather returned to her own New York Society Library on East 79th Street. As that library had it absolutely correctly a few years ago in its year-long exhibit of Cather materials, "The New York World of Willa Cather." "Taking Manhattan Once More."

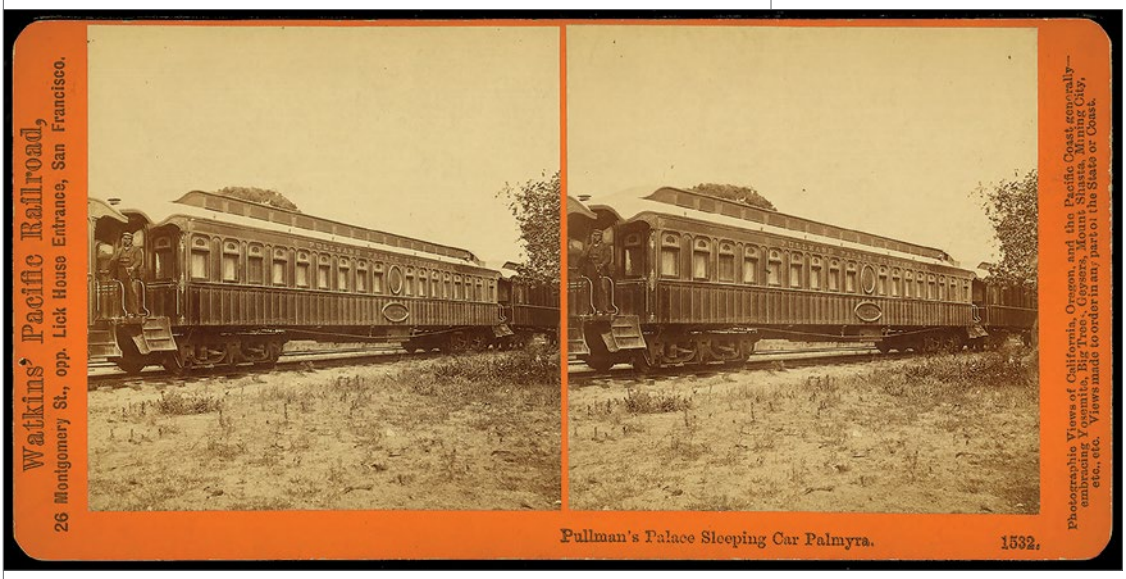
Beyond the city, Cather's ongoing presence among us is being noticed through numerous other programs across the country and through notable publications. She and her Red Cloud roots were featured in *Smithsonian* in its July-August 2023 issue and her sesquicentennial was highlighted in *Fine Books & Collections* this summer with "Mapping Willa Cather." And this November, just in time for Cather's 150th birthday, a new biography will appear from Penguin Random House, Benjamin Taylor's *Chasing Bright Medusas*.

All this is happening just as Cather's refurbished Childhood Home is being opened for visitors here in Red Cloud and the new Hotel Garber in the Potter Block moves toward its completion. As our founder Mildred Bennett had it, "The World of Willa Cather" is broad. It is. Celebrate Cather at 150, celebrate her publication centennials, visit *all* her places.

"A Gold Slipper" and a Pullman Sleeper: Willa Cather's Adaptation of a Modern Urban Legend

Steve Siporin

Folklore-in-literature scholars have long been interested in Willa Cather's fiction. Traditional foodways and narratives, folk speech, folk song, folk dance, superstitions and beliefs, holiday customs, and descriptions of folk material culture, often in immigrant and ethnic contexts,[1] have been teased from her work, most commonly from her fiction about rural life. This inclination was natural, given the historical tendency of American folklore scholars, working in a European tradition of peasant ethnography, to view folklore primarily as rural tradition.



"Pullman's Palace Sleeping Car Palymyra." Stereoview photograph ca. 1866-1872 by Carleton Watkins. Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, New York Public Library. *New York Public Library Digital Collections.*

Today—and now for many years—folklorists no longer limit their subject to rural settings. In fact, one of the folk genres most studied during the past fifty years has the word "urban" in its name, the "modern urban legend." The present essay considers an example of folklore in Willa Cather's fiction that fits neither the rural immigrant nor ethnic paradigms. Instead, I focus on Cather's adaptation of a particular modern urban legend known to folklorists as "The Cut-Out Pullman" in her short story "A Gold Slipper." Ever the master of narrative, Cather was not interested in merely showcasing, highlighting, or recording this provocative, humorous legend. She did not simply retell "The Cut-Out Pullman" with minimal changes. Rather, making it her own, Cather drew upon the legend's inherent drama, characters, setting, plot, and psychology to develop her own pungent story.

Before introducing the legend, I would like briefly to refresh the reader's memory of Cather's story, especially its two main characters, Marshall McKann and Kitty Ayrshire. McKann is a successful, Babbitt-like businessman. He is a churchgoer without spiritual passion who considers music a waste of time—a philistine, in short. He is badgered by his wife into attending a concert in Pittsburgh's Carnegie Hall. Kitty Ayrshire is a lively, attractive singer, the performer of the concert. The two accidentally encounter each other during Ayrshire's recital and later end up on the same train to New York, in the same car, a Pullman sleeper. They engage in a conversation that brings their conflicting characters and values to a head. Afterward, they go their separate ways to their own berths, but during the night, Kitty sneaks one of the gold slippers she wore that evening into McKann's bed. He discovers the slipper in the morning.

"The Cut-Out Pullman"

Noted folklorist Wayland D. Hand identified the legend I hypothesize Cather adopted in "A Gold Slipper." Hand first heard the legend in the 1940s, when he often traveled on trains, and named it "The Cut-Out Pullman" (231–35). The title refers to the practice of shunting individual train cars from a continuing train at different stations along the route or switching such cars to other lines. Passengers unaware that their car was going to be removed from the train could end up at a different (and distant) station from the one they intended, especially if passengers were asleep in a Pullman sleeper that was shunted during the night. In one version Hand heard repeatedly, a philandering businessman is separated from more than his destination:

> A New York businessman was once returning home from a conference in Chicago on an overnight New York Central

train. Since he was fagged out and couldn't sleep, he went to the club car for a nightcap at about ten or eleven o'clock, clad only in a silk bathrobe and house slippers. An unattached woman of considerable charm was at the bar, and they soon fell into conversation. After a few drinks the businessman announced that he had to turn in because of a big conference in New York the following day. The girl suggested that he might care to find one for the road in her compartment. Against his better judgment he accepted. What went on is glossed over, but can be inferred from the fact that he woke up next morning in the Pullman yards in Buffalo, bereft of his wallet. The girl, who probably had pulled this trick on many an unsuspecting customer, had failed to tell him that she was in the Buffalo car. (231–32)

Woman reading in a Pullman car berth. George R. Lawrence, 1905. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, control no. 2012649451.

Hand reports other versions of the legend, with varying details, from Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and even England.[2] In other words, it was once widespread. The predominantly western settings in Hand's texts might reflect the facts that he lived in the West, collected folklore in the West, and taught at UCLA for most of his career. But they do not necessarily reflect the geographic distribution of what at one time was probably a national, if not international, diffusion of the narrative.

Because long-distance train travel was a regular part of Willa Cather's life, we should not be surprised that overnight travel, sometimes by Pullman sleeper, figures in many of her stories and novels. Indeed, one of her earliest short stories begins on a moving train: "I heard this story sitting on the rear platform of an accommodation freight that crawled along through the brown, sun-dried wilderness between Grover Station and Cheyenne" ("The Affair at Grover Station"). She often made the journey from points east to Nebraska and back, in addition to trips to Chicago and farther west—to Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming—all states mentioned by Hand as sites where the events of "The Cut-Out Pullman" legend are said to have taken place. It is possible, even probable, that Cather would have heard one or more versions of this story, maybe while traveling by train, an appropriate and likely context in which to recount what may have been a common, titillating, yet ultimately moralistic story.

One of Hand's informants, a brakeman, asked if he had ever heard the tale of the hoodwinked businessman, remarked, "Hell, yes! It happens all the time" (232). This comment makes a nice rejoinder to skeptics who object that because a given story has multiple versions with slight variations, it likely did not really happen, and thus is "only a legend." The brakeman's comment "it happens all the time" offers a simple explanation for the existence of multiple versions: multiple occurrences. From the point of view of the brakeman, there was nothing unique about the incident: it was common; it happened repeatedly.

Because Hand recalls that he heard the story in the 1940s and "A Gold Slipper" was published in 1917, the legend must have circulated orally well before Hand documented it for Cather to have used it for inspiration. Such an assumption is not a stretch. American folklorists did not begin to pay much attention to what came to be called "modern urban legends" until the late 1960s, so it is reasonable to assume that versions of the cut-out Pullman were being told earlier (perhaps much earlier) than the first collected versions. The fact that we have no pre-1940s recorded texts is more a reflection of the limited, narrow interests of folklore collectors at the time than of the range of stories people were actually telling.[3] The legend Hand identified may have been told as soon as licentious liaisons on trains became imaginable—in other words, as soon as there were sleeper cars. George Pullman's comfortable sleeper cars were introduced in 1865, so it is also reasonable (on technological grounds) to think that the legend could have been in circulation well before 1917, the original publication date of "A Gold Slipper." Hand calls the legend a "modern-day kind of Boccaccio tale" (232), seeing it as a contemporary example of the ageless human impulse to tell and retell racy stories (as well as act them out), and adapt them to new technological environments.

But, readers may ask, what does "The Cut-Out Pullman" have to do with "A Gold Slipper"? In both the short story and the oral legend, a vulnerable businessman and a bewitching woman have

an encounter in a Pullman sleeping car on a train headed for New York City. Is that enough to claim that the oral legend is a source for the literary tale? After all, Cather's story lacks not just the act of adultery, the stolen wallet, and the man losing his clothes (in some versions), but also the cut-out Pullman delivering the businessman to a different destination than the one he intended.[4] Nevertheless, her story maintains not only the setting and characters but also the theme that she adapted from the oral legend: namely, seduction. In other words, Kitty Ayrshire "seduces" Marshall McKann, and enticement takes place, as in the legend, in a Pullman sleeper. Although Cather's seduction story lacks a sexual liaison, McKann does desire Kitty, falls for her charm, and is tricked into revealing his flawed character, like the hapless male in the urban legend. While the prank of leaving McKann her gold slipper is a major turning point in McKann's meager inner life, for Kitty (as for "the girl who probably had pulled this trick on many an unsuspecting customer" in the legend), it is not even memorable. Cather adds, "As for Kitty Ayrshire, she has played so many jokes, practical and impractical, since then, that she has long ago forgotten the night when she threw away a slipper" (167).

Mary Garden, ca. 1905. Garden is seen as one of the prototypes for Kitty Ayrshire in "A Gold Slipper" and "Scandal." Richard Gordon Matzene for Bain News Service. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, control no. 2014686795.

There is another significant similarity between Marshall McKann and the male protagonist of "The Cut-Out Pullman." Folklorist Hand, during his research on the legend, asked a railroad worker on the Santa Fe line whether "this kind of thing happened on the Santa Fe." The railman answered, "It sure does. Many a time, big New York tycoons will be sitting around the roundhouse at Williams, Arizona, in borrowed overalls, waiting for clothes to come" (233). Big tycoon would be an accurate description of Marshall McKann, considered a heavyweight even among Pittsburgh's stable of millionaires. Hand also mentions a version in which the victim is a "high-ranking officer in either the Army or Navy" (232). The drama of an important, prominent, successful male figure brought low by the practical joke of a female protagonist of lower status is a necessary element of the legend that Cather fleshes out to great effect.

Cather employs hints of temptation and physical seduction during a conversational battle of wits in which Ayrshire bests McKann, as the woman on the train bested the businessman. This scene—the core of the story—constitutes Cather's transformation of a modern urban legend into a sophisticated dramatization of failed character. Awareness of the cut-out Pullman story points to the centrality of the seduction theme and focuses our attention on Cather's intent.

Kitty Ayrshire

Kitty Ayrshire is full of life, successful, beautiful, and, above all, self-possessed and confident. The night of her performance, she challenges her staid and conservative Pittsburgh audience with her "really quite outrageous" gown and enjoys "the stimulus of [their] disapprobation" (143–44). Despite resistance, Kitty gradually seduces the audience, foreshadowing her later seduction of McKann. Her encore "brought her audience all the way. They clamoured for more of it, but she was not to be coerced. She . . . blew them a kiss, and was gone" (147–48), symbolically escaping into the air, as her name implies.[5] We learn here, with Kitty's first appearance, that she likes to tease. The plot will culminate in another provocative tease when Kitty sneaks her gold slipper into McKann's bed. Her two seductions—one involving the audience and one involving McKann, each followed by her disappearance—bookend her actions in the story.

Iconoclastic and impudent, Kitty Ayrshire is also described in places either as a serpent or as draped with a serpent, perhaps referencing Eve's association with the original tempter, offering knowledge and sexuality. Note Cather's pointed language: Ayrshire's gown at the concert is "green velvet—a reviling, shrieking green. . . . The narrow train . . . kept curling about her feet like a serpent's tail, turning up its gold lining as if it were squirming over on its back" (143). She is called a "green apparition" with a "supple and sinuous and quick-silverish" figure (145). Each time she enters and departs the stage during the concert, she brushes against McKann, who sits onstage in the front row. One time, "her prehensile train curled over his boot" (146).[6] In another

scene, set earlier, in Paris, Ayrshire is described as wearing a "boa" (142). Not to push the serpent characterization too far, but it may be relevant that constrictor snakes are "prehensile" and can snatch and squeeze their prey, which, it could be claimed, is exactly what Ayrshire eventually does (metaphorically, of course) to the marmot-like McKann.

Hints that Kitty Ayrshire is not just a flirtatious free spirit but a libertine add to her characterization as the seductress of Marshall McKann, paralleling the seductress of "The Cut-Out Pullman." For instance, she says of herself that she is "like the Queen of Sheba" (165). Although she explains that by this she means she is willing to learn, libidinous associations inevitably arise when invoking the Queen of Sheba, which is surely Cather's intention. In the cab on the way to the train station, Ayrshire comments on the name of its location, the suburb of East Liberty:

> "An odd name, anyway. It is a Bohemian quarter, perhaps? A district where the law relaxes a trifle?"
>
> McKann replied grimly that he didn't think the name referred to that kind of liberty.
>
> "So much the better," sighed Kitty. "I am a Californian . . . and out there when we called a place Liberty Hill or Liberty Hollow—well, we meant it." (151)

Although Kitty avers "so much the better," her query initially sounds hopeful, and her sigh could be interpreted as regret. McKann, on the other hand, registers severe disapproval by replying "grimly" regarding "that kind of liberty." Their opposition as a free spirit and a judgmental prude is subtly established in their first verbal exchange, which regards the—one would think—neutral topic of a toponym.[7] Kitty's words "we meant it" also signal that she values directness, which will become more apparent in her later conversation with McKann. Elsewhere she is described as possessing a "wayward charm," but Kitty Ayrshire as a libertine is McKann's exaggerated, defensive perception rather than an objective description of her. He refers to her once as a "hussy" and twice as a "minx," meaning a sly or wanton young woman. Before he even meets her, McKann disapproves of her reputed affair with a French composer, "old enough, he judged, to be her father" (141). In McKann's disapproval, one may detect repressed envy.

Kitty's physical gestures and conversational prodding may not culminate in a sexual encounter between the two, but the possibility is present, and the language and action of the story intimate underlying sexual tension. Kitty's subtle, physical teasing—like when she brushes against McKann repeatedly in the concert hall—appears to be intentional and probing. She even suggests, provocatively, at the peak of their argument, that "if you and I were shipwrecked on a desert island I have no doubt that we would come to a simple and natural understanding" (162). Before she takes leave of McKann at the end of their conversation, she utters a few suggestive words: "Dream of me tonight" (164). Ultimately the seduction is not sexual, but psychological: Ayrshire uses her charms to lure McKann into revealing himself and his "custom-made prejudices that save [him] the trouble of thinking" (162). As Michael Burton puts it, the morning after, in his berth on the train, McKann "awakes only to question how his life might have been different" (15). Kitty as the seducing serpent delivers painful knowledge, like the serpent in the old story.

The Seduction

During her performance at Carnegie Hall, Kitty Ayrshire touches McKann several times, as mentioned above. On one occasion, "Her velvet train brushed against his trousers as she passed him" (142); on another, "she again brushed lightly against him" (145). Although possibly unavoidable, the contact launches Ayrshire's teasing of McKann and gets his attention, perhaps arousing his desire:

> She displayed, under his nose, the only kind of figure he considered worth looking at—that of a very young girl, supple and sinuous and quick-silverish; thin, eager shoulders, polished white arms that were nowhere too fat and nowhere too thin. McKann found it agreeable to look at Kitty. (145)

Physical contact, *always initiated by Kitty*, continues—subtly

Kitty leaves the stage and brushes by Marshall McKann, from Michael Burton's 2020 animated short film of "A Gold Slipper."

suggestive, always indirect, never overt. For example, once they are on the train and encounter each other again, seated just outside Kitty's room, she "rested her elbow on his Gladstone" (153). After McKann sits down and they engage more fully in their dialogue, "she tapped the edge of his seat with the toe of her gold slipper" (157). A little later she is described "tucking her slipper up on the edge of his seat" (159). These gestures may seem trivial, but they display Kitty crossing into McKann's personal space, trespasses which could be interpreted either as flirtation or an effort at making him uncomfortable—or both. Cather describes nothing without purpose, and the reader is rewarded for paying close attention to such details. In light of the symbolic meanings of the gold slipper, these acts may appear even more suggestive.

Marshall McKann can barely concede Kitty Ayrshire's artistic skill and attractiveness to himself, let alone to her. Just after the concert, before he unexpectedly runs into Kitty again, McKann "had not, he admitted to himself, been so much bored as he pretended" (148). Deep into the conversation on the train, McKann inches closer to acknowledging her charm, but only to himself:

> She was certainly a lovely creature—the only one of her tribe he had ever seen that he would cross the street to see again. Those were remarkable eyes she had—curious, penetrating, restless, somewhat impudent, but not all dulled by self-conceit. . . . She was, he thought, very much like any other charming woman, except that she was more so. (156, 159)

It may be worth noting that although the story is written in the third person, we are privy to McKann's inner thoughts, as in the quotation just above. That is not the case with Ayrshire. She is presented almost solely through her words and actions, perhaps because she is open while McKann is closed. He does not share his feelings and thoughts until Ayrshire pries them loose. Thus, we need to hear his inner thoughts to know what he is thinking, which is not the case with her.

Physical intimacy never materializes. However, Cather creates a slightly improper, furtive aura surrounding McKann and Ayrshire through her description of other passengers who eye the pair sitting and talking just outside Kitty's bedroom: "Half-clad Pittsburghers were tramping up and down the aisle, casting sidelong glances at McKann and his companion" (154). And again, "Certain half-clad acquaintances of his . . . had been wandering up and down the car oftener than was necessary" (159–60). Like the male character in "The Cut-Out Pullman" who is "clad only in a silk bathrobe and house-slippers," the bedroom dress of the onlookers suggests the possibility, perhaps even the expectation, of transgression. These supercilious voyeurs know who McKann is and will always suspect him of an affair with Kitty Ayrshire regardless of the outcome. McKann is already compromised.

A subtle insinuation of indirect intimacy lies in the fact that Kitty occupies the drawing room bed that McKann tried to purchase. She "had taken the last one," the bed he had sought. McKann might be resentful or discomfited, but more significantly, she is, in a certain sense, *in his bed*—like the seductress of the legend who spends the night in the bed of her male victim.

There is no inner monologue in either character to indicate that sexual intimacy is explicitly contemplated or desired. Indeed, they seem an unlikely match, even for a short fling. (Or maybe—if sparks of anger sometimes indicate attraction—the perfect match.) But if one compares the Ayrshire/McKann interaction with that of the couple in "The Cut-Out Pullman," it appears that neither story bases the seduction on mutual attraction. The businessman desires the woman he meets on the train (as McKann desires Ayrshire although he cannot quite admit it), and both women exploit desire in calculated ways—the anonymous woman of the legend for financial gain and Kitty Ayrshire for the satisfaction of confronting a Babbitt, besting him, and forcing him to see his own hypocrisy. Similarly, the high-status male in Hand's train legend is exposed and shamed in public.

Unlike the businessman in "The Cut-Out Pullman," Cather's McKann is not shamed publicly; his humiliation is internal, private guilt rather than shame. Yet for McKann the fear of public exposure remains: when he returns home, he hides the gold slipper "in a lock-box in his vault, safe from prying clerks" (167). He, like the protagonist of the legend, has learned something about himself that he would rather have left hidden.

The slipper, from the multimedia exhibit accompanying Michael Burton's animated film.

He has been indiscreet and is hoping to limit the damage. But locking up the token of his indiscretion will do little good because, due to the conversation with Kitty Ayrshire, he can no longer hide from himself.

On the train, McKann got entangled in a conversation he would not have begun had he not been attracted to Kitty Ayrshire. But now he pays for his "indiscretion"—she called him out and made him recognize that he was afraid to embrace "everything new" (164). Kitty's relentless questioning led to his involuntary confession. He was seduced into telling the truth.

McKann's humiliating epiphany—equivalent to the moment the protagonist of "The Cut-Out Pullman" wakes up without his wallet and sometimes without his clothes—comes the next morning when McKann finds the gold slipper in his train compartment. Rather than losing an object—his wallet and/or clothing, as in the legend—McKann has gained one: Kitty's gold slipper. But the losing and gaining are functionally equivalent because both resolve the action of their respective plots. Both the loss and the gain are tokens and symbols of seduction by a beautiful woman who exposes the male protagonist's weakness and hypocrisy, resulting in humiliation. Even so, one might recognize that Kitty, like the woman in "The Cut-Out Pullman," actually *has* stolen something from McKann—his peace of mind and self-satisfaction. Like the exposed victim in the legend, McKann feels naked and embarrassed. The slipper represents self-knowledge that he can't shake off, just as the slipper keeps returning to him despite his efforts to get rid of it.

McKann and Kitty together on the train, from Michael Burton's film.

A Gold Slipper: The Multilayered Symbol

It is no wonder that the gold slipper provides the story's title. Cather turns this object into a symbol that carries several layers of meaning as well as the punch of the plot. Each term, "gold" and "slipper," bears symbolic meanings that Cather develops in the story. Gold, of course, as a precious metal, can symbolize value. In competitions, gold signifies the first place, often in the form of a trophy. But for McKann, the gold slipper is an ironic trophy, the prize for a "debate" he actually lost and a "conquest" that he failed even to attempt. Gold trophies are awarded in public ceremonies before admiring crowds, but this trophy is given stealthily, in the dark of night, with no one present. Gold trophies are meant to be displayed, but this trophy is hidden away.

The slipper is also worth considering as a symbol, independently of its gold color. According to Freud, "shoes and slippers symbolize the female genital organs" (187). Freudian symbolism may be unpopular these days, but nevertheless I turn to folklorist Alan Dundes, who concedes that "no one likes to accept an *ex cathedra* pronouncement that a shoe can symbolize female genitalia" ("Metafolklore" 56) yet argues that Freudian analyses of folklore can be insightful. Dundes insists that what we call "Freudian symbolism" is often identical with *folk* symbolism, consciously present in countless items of folk expression. As an example, Dundes cites the nursery rhyme, "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe / She had so many children she didn't know what to do," as a folk text that, he claims, features the shoe as a female genital symbol. He quotes a variant collected in the Ozarks to make his case: "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe, she didn't have any children, she knew what to do" ("Metafolklore" 56).

In a similar Freudian vein, McKann, lacking self-awareness, articulates his reductionist attitude regarding women in the midst of his Pullman car conversation with Kitty as he "studied the toe of her shoe,"[8] saying "With a woman, everything comes back to one thing" (162). Why is McKann studying Kitty's shoe precisely when he makes this pronouncement? Does the shoe stand for the "one thing" a woman is for him? Repeated references to Kitty's footwear in the seduction scenes and in her taunting, final gesture suggest Cather wrote this scene and others with the shoe/slipper as a female genital symbol in mind.

Cather may also have been aware of the male custom of keeping an article of a lover's clothing, usually an undergarment, as a trophy of conquest. Although in this story, the trophy is not an undergarment but rather a slipper, footwear does have strong sexual overtones, as Freud suggests. The slipper makes for a good stand-in for the undergarment without loss of sexual meaning.

Indeed, the gold slipper is more subtle and ambiguous, and these qualities suit Kitty's oblique, teasing manner well. The indirect sexual significance of the gold slipper is what makes it such an unnerving taunt, the kind that gets under one's skin and does not leave.

In the context of folklore, readers may ask if Kitty's gold slipper bears any relationship to Cinderella's glass slipper. Indeed, Cather encouraged this association by writing that McKann, upon finding the gold slipper in his berth, "was conscious that he did not look a Prince Charming in his sleep" (166), a clear and mocking reference to the Cinderella story. Both Cinderella and Kitty Ayrshire lose a slipper to a male character (let's hear it for Freud again): one accidentally, the other intentionally. In "Cinderella," Prince Charming sets out to find the owner of the lost slipper, but McKann, in "A Gold Slipper," does not. If we imagine a crestfallen Prince Charming who failed to find Cinderella and was left to contemplate her lost slipper for the rest of his life, we might gain more understanding (and maybe a little sympathy) for McKann's mournful state. His possession of only one slipper (in contrast to the completed pair in the resolution to "Cinderella") suggests incompleteness, the lack of resolution.

One might ask why the title is "A Gold Slipper" rather than "A Golden Slipper," which sounds more natural. I take a gold slipper to mean a slipper made of gold, while a golden slipper would be one that is gold in color. Obviously, Kitty Ayrshire's slipper is really golden, not gold, except in the symbolic sense referred to above—as an ironic trophy. Then why not call the story and the object "a golden slipper?" Cather may have wanted to avoid a particular red herring. Were "A Golden Slipper" the title, it might suggest "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers," a popular minstrel song from the late nineteenth century, still well-known in Cather's day, an association that has nothing to do with the story and thus could be misleading.

"Gold slipper," or commonly "golden slipper," can refer to several types of yellow flowers, including orchids, of the species *Cypripedium calceolus pubescens* and *C. calceolus parviflorum*. This subtle, almost hidden dimension of "gold slipper"—gorgeous, bright yellow flowers—reinforces the femininity and sexuality of Kitty Ayrshire and the appropriateness of the story's central symbol.

"He often puts the tarnished gold slipper on his desk and looks at it." A still from Michael Burton's film.

McKann's Decline

When McKann discovers the slipper in his bed in the morning, Kitty's aura of subtle teasing and ambiguous intimacy returns with it: she was there, in his compartment, in the night, only the two of them—yet he was unaware of her presence. For Kitty, the slipper in his compartment is at once a prank, a taunt, and a reminder that she got the best of him. But McKann takes it badly; he is wounded, as if stung by a medusa or bitten by a snake. As Kitty had warned him, "'I'm going to haunt you a little'" (165). The haunting begins with McKann's discovery of the gold slipper in his compartment and continues as his health declines.

Kitty's slipper, like the tycoons' loss of their clothing in "The Cut-Out Pullman," arouses McKann's embarrassment and damaged vanity: "He wondered whether he might have been breathing audibly when the intruder thrust her head between his curtains. He was conscious that he did not look a Prince Charming in his sleep" (166). Like the businessmen in "The Cut-Out Pullman," McKann has lost his dignity. He is reduced to hiding the slipper from the porter who will be making up his berth. Subsequently, McKann tries to get rid of the slipper in the wastebasket in his hotel room, but the chambermaid retrieves it. Later, when he returns home, he feels compelled to hide the slipper and places it "in a lock-box in his vault" in his office. Locking up the slipper implies repression of what the slipper means to McKann—sexuality, "liberty," and life, all wrapped-up in Kitty herself. The gold slipper has become, on the one hand, a reminder of his humiliation and his bad conscience—all that he is trying to hide. Yet at the same time the slipper has also become a powerful reminder of, in Michael Burton's formulation, "how his life might have been different."

The slipper recalls a squandered awakening, a lost chance at feeling and intimacy, even passion. Caught in a perverse dilemma, McKann seeks simultaneously to hide and to memorialize what he learned that night.

The slipper is now a double-edged object of contemplation. In later years, "he often puts the tarnished slipper on his desk and looks at it. Somehow it suggests life to his tired mind . . . life and youth" (167). For McKann, Kitty's gold slipper has become much more than the reminder of a momentary taunt, an anti-trophy. In contrast to the two-dimensional, publicly embarrassed character in the modern urban legend, McKann's awareness that he has been made a fool remains private and thus poisons him with regret and anguish, as the story suggests.

McKann's decline follows. The second-to-last paragraph tells us that "McKann has been ill for five years now . . . his clerks find him sadly changed—'morbid,' they call his state of mind" (167). He has been wounded by a seduction that gave him self-knowledge he was unable to embrace and act upon. The serpent or medusa, Kitty, has bitten or stung him with a slow-acting poison, and he is slowly dying.

The comeuppance of the philandering male at the end of "The Cut-Out Pullman" gives the legend a moralistic conclusion. This type of outcome is typical of American modern urban legends, in which morally questionable actions and behaviors are generally punished. McKann is also punished, for in the final words of the story, he is left, metaphorically, with "a thorn in the side" (167), a torment without respite. Cather has taken the conventional morality of the American modern urban legend to a subtler level. McKann is not punished for overt transgressions like adultery as in "The Cut-Out Pullman," but for subtler sins to his own soul: prejudice, hypocrisy, and cowardice.

Hearing the Legend

I like to imagine Willa Cather riding on a train going west, listening attentively to another passenger who is regaling a group of travelers with "The Cut-Out Pullman." Having heard another version of it before, Cather recognizes not only the folkloric nature of the narrative but its potential for a literary story, a story she is already conceiving.

NOTES

1. For representative examples of folklore scholarship regarding Willa Cather's works, see S. M. Bennett, "Ornament and Environment: Uses of Folklore in Willa Cather's Fiction," *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin*; Marilyn Berg Callander, *Willa Cather and the Fairy Tale*, UMI Research Press, 1989; Robin Cohen, "Jim, Ántonia, and the Wolves: Displacement in Cather's *My Ántonia*," *Great Plains Quarterly*, Winter 2009; Evelyn Funda, "*My Ántonia* and Czech Mushroom Folklore," *Louise Pound: A Folklore and Literature Miscellany*, 2019; Debbie Ann Hanson, "Setting the White Bear Right: Willa Cather's Use of Folk Narratives in *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *Shadows on the Rock*, University of Illinois Ph.D. dissertation, 1989; Evelyn Thomas Helmick, "Myth in the Works of Willa Cather," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, 1968; David Murphy, "Jejich Antonie: Czechs, the Land, Cather, and the Pavelka Farmstead," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 1994; J. Russell Reaver, "Mythic Motivation in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*," *Western Folklore*, 1968; Elinor Velma Sharpe, "Willa Cather's Works as They Reflect Early American Folkways," 1951, University of Southern California M.A. thesis; Janis P. Stout, "'Down by de Canebrake': Willa Cather, Sterling A. Brown, and the Racialized Vernacular," *Cather Studies 12*, 2020; and Roger L. Welsch and Linda K. Welsch, *Cather's Kitchens: Foodways in Literature and Life*, University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

2. In England, "among train crews and others knowing of the situation," a special night train that had a reputation for similar incidents "was called 'The Flying Fornicator'" (Hand 234).

3. Although Cather transformed the story Hand named "The Cut-Out Pullman," her telling also pushes the record of the existence of the legend back at least twenty-five years beyond folkloristic documentation. She would not be the first literary author to record legends that no one else had noted. For instance, the seemingly "modern" urban legend of alligators in the sewers of New York City, popular in the 1960s and 1970s, has a possible ancestor in stories about an octopus in Roman sewers recorded two thousand years ago. See Camilla Asplund Ingemark, "The Octopus in the Sewers: An Ancient Legend Analogue," *Journal of Folklore Research*. That we know a legend similar to "alligators in the sewers" was told in ancient Rome is due only to its fortunate mention by two Roman writers. Analogously, Willa Cather, an American literary author attuned to living folklore, rural and "urban," provides folklorists indirect evidence that "The Cut-Out Pullman" circulated orally before 1940, the date of Wayland Hand's recollection—indeed, before 1917, the original publication date of "The Gold Slipper."

4. The fact that the urban legend is called "The Cut-Out Pullman" and there is no cut-out Pullman in "A Gold Slipper" might appear to raise a problem for my claim that Cather conceived her story with this modern urban legend in mind. However, the cut-out action is not an essential part of the legend (and was not necessarily part of the versions Cather hypothetically heard). I believe Hand mistitled "The Cut-Out Pullman," mistaking the separated train car to be the defining element of the story, while it is actually an optional element. Many of the versions he himself reported in his article do not contain the cut-out train car motif.

The cut-out Pullman is neither necessary to the plot nor its meaning. What is necessary is the seduction, the woman's flight, and the ensuing humiliation of the male character. The cut-out motif

merely underscores and compounds the embarrassing conclusion by dramatically isolating the philanderer in a distant location, unable to escape the consequences of his actions. In some versions the same effect is achieved when his transgression takes place in his own berth rather than the woman's, and he arrives at his intended destination in his underwear, because the woman has taken his suitcase containing his clothing, as well as his wallet. His wife and children are awaiting him at the train station. No cut-out sleeping car is needed to reach the same humiliating conclusion.

5. Regarding McKann's name, he seems to consider himself a "can do" sort of man, a man of action. If "can" is indeed the meaning of his name, Cather intends the name to be ironic. The story shows that he is a man who *can't* compete with Kitty, *can't* cope with her prank, and can only live a narrow, passionless life.

6. According to Elizabeth Wells, these passages describe Kitty Ayrshire as a medusa or jellyfish, "a seducer who attracts and stings its victims," which is a graphic and metaphoric way of describing what Ayrshire does to McKann. Wells writes: "The combination of beauty and stinging nettles resonates with the *femme fatale* qualities of Kitty Ayrshire in 'A Gold Slipper.'" This characterization of Ayrshire as a medusa has much to recommend it and ties "A Gold Slipper" closely to the title of the collection in which the story appears.

7. Cather may be making a small, wry joke here. East Liberty is the neighborhood in Pittsburgh where she first boarded 1896–97 while editing the *Home Monthly*, and it is the setting of "Cordelia Street" in "Paul's Case" (1905). Even in 1917, it was considered a "staid settlement" ("East Liberty").

8. Cather notes at the beginning of the debate scene with McKann that Kitty is still wearing the gold slippers she wore to the performance earlier that evening. She does not change them during their conversation. Thus, the reference to her "shoe" here is merely synonymous with "slipper," perhaps to vary the word choice but with no change of meaning.

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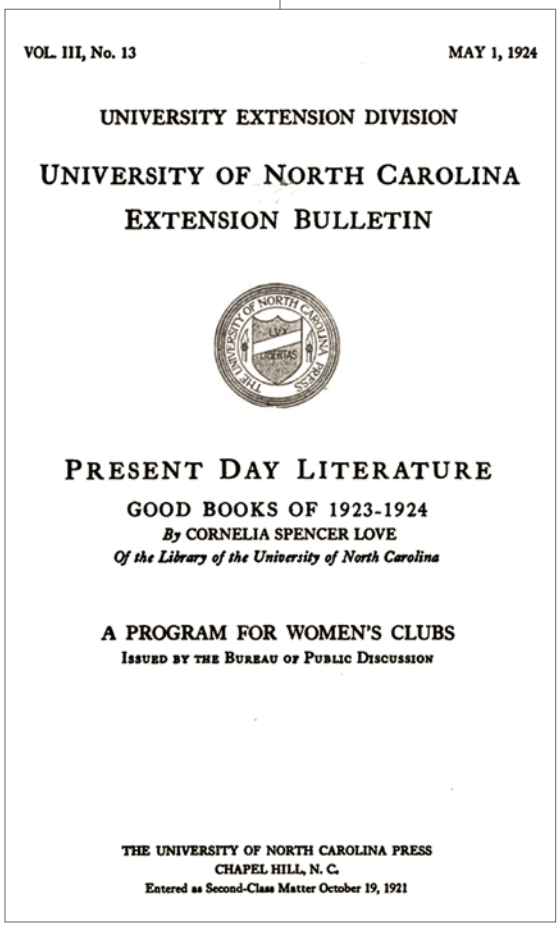
Willa Cather and the Sisterhood of the Pulitzer

Sarah Clere

If the number of Pulitzer Prizes they garnered was any indication, the period from 1921 to 1942 was a fertile one for American women novelists. When *The Age of Innocence* won the 1921 award, Edith Wharton became the first female Pulitzer recipient in the novel category. Her win initiated a run of eleven female winners in nineteen years. This preponderance of female winners has yet to reoccur. Indeed, after Ellen Glasgow's 1942 win for *In This Our Life*, no woman would be awarded the prize until Harper Lee won for *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1961. Lee's win, far from signaling a sea change, began a trickle of eighteen female winners between 1961 and 2022. In the prize's more than one-hundred-year history, only twenty-nine women have won it.[1] After Cather's own 1923 prize for *One of Ours*, Margaret Wilson won in 1924 for *The Able McLaughlins*, followed by Edna Ferber in 1925 for *So Big*. The 1920s would be the last time three women in succession would win the award.

Willa Cather's status as a Pulitzer Prize winner during the period that the Pulitzer Prize for the novel (which in 1947 became the Pulitzer Prize for fiction) had its greatest number of female winners provides another angle for considering her connections with other women writers and her reception by critics and readers. This essay will examine Cather's connections to three separate dyads of Pulitzer winners and the literary gatekeepers who helped (or hindered) their success: Edna Ferber (1925) and William Allen White; Julia Peterkin (1929) and H. L. Mencken; and Pearl Buck (1932) and Dorothy Canfield. While the prize conferred literary and cultural legitimacy, the selection of winners was not necessarily a fair or even particularly organized process. The experiences of these early female Pulitzer winners highlight the vexed nature of the award for the novel and the increasing tension between literary reputation and commercial success. The Pulitzer was (and still is) an undeniable driver of publicity and sales. An awareness of the award's continuing financial benefits may have played some part in the steep decline in female winners. Cather's Pulitzer win made her part of a circle of middlebrow novelists that she at times would perhaps have preferred not to join; at the same time, it both introduced and legitimized her writing to a wide cross-section of American readers. This combination of commercial success, loyal readership, and literary awards made the critical turn against her in the 1930s far less harmful, since neither her sales nor her reputation among general readers depended on the approval of the mostly male critical establishment.

The large number of female Pulitzer winners for the novel helped make the interwar years a high point for not only the popularity but the cultural legitimacy of middlebrow female authors. The Pulitzer Prize for the novel itself initially dovetailed with the middlebrow desire for uplift. Joseph Pulitzer's will specified that the prize should go to "the American novel published during the year which shall best present the whole atmosphere of American life, and the highest standard of American manners and manhood" (Fischer and Fischer 3). While the creators of highbrow literature typically either saw their works as aloof from or reacting against contemporary cultural concerns, middlebrow writers demonstrated a belief in literature's instrumentality and timeliness, that is its ability to improve readers in more or less definable ways and its firm grounding in the circumstances of the present. Even works that are categorically genre fiction are often written and received in a manner that connects them to current social issues. Cather's intentions regarding her fiction clearly differed from those of her middlebrow contemporaries; however, as Janis Stout, writing about Cather and Dorothy Canfield Fisher, comments, "The border between middlebrow and aesthete was porous" ("Dorothy Canfield" 29).



VOL. III, No. 13 MAY 1, 1924

UNIVERSITY EXTENSION DIVISION

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
EXTENSION BULLETIN

PRESENT DAY LITERATURE

GOOD BOOKS OF 1923-1924

By CORNELIA SPENCER LOVE

Of the Library of the University of North Carolina

A PROGRAM FOR WOMEN'S CLUBS

ISSUED BY THE BUREAU OF PUBLIC DISCUSSION

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS
CHAPEL HILL, N. C.
Entered as Second-Class Matter October 19, 1921

"The overlap between middlebrow and literary fiction . . . the tension between literature as enrichment and literature as entertainment."

Present Day Literature: Good Books of 1923–1924; *A Program for Women's Clubs,* a 1924 bulletin released by the

University of North Carolina Extension Division, illustrates the overlap between middlebrow and literary fiction. *Present Day Literature*, written by UNC librarian Cornelia Spencer Love, was one of a number of programs for women's clubs that the university's extension services offered. These bulletins, which could be ordered for fifty cents, took a club through a series of meetings with suggested works of literature and presentation topics for individual members. Literary programs for women's clubs such as the one Love developed are one of the methods noted by Joan Shelley Rubin for the "popularization of literature" (xii) that would develop into middlebrow culture. Love chose Edna Ferber's *So Big* as one of the weekly topics for *Present Day Literature*.[2] Her introduction illuminates the tension between literature as enrichment and literature as entertainment: "Edna Ferber, hitherto known only as the writer of popular magazine stories—clever but shallow—has at a bound leaped out of this class to join the earnest students of American life. In 'So Big' she has written what the critics are calling 'a great novel,' 'a masterpiece,' and 'the best American novel of the year'" (13). Love carefully distinguishes between Ferber's magazine stories and *So Big*, which itself was initially serialized in *Woman's Home Companion*. *So Big* signaled Ferber's rescue from cheap and disposable amusement and elevation to the status of novelist fit for serious discussion. Love provides a partial list of those "earnest students of American life" whose number Ferber now joined. One of the suggested topics in the *So Big* module is "The Predominance of Women in the Best American Fiction of Today," and the three authors listed are Pulitzer winners Edith Wharton, Margaret Wilson, and Willa Cather. According to Love, "All these writers combine the deepest sincerity with the art of telling a good story, and telling it well" (13). "Deepest sincerity" is far from the ironies of modernism, reaching back to sentimental fiction's concern with sympathy and transparency. "Telling a good story;" however, skates very near the "clever but shallow" "popular magazine stories" of Ferber's that Love dismisses. "Telling it well" redeems a compelling plot, indicating a concern with style that prevents these writers from descending to the page-turning thrills of the pulps. Love's description could be a summation of the middlebrow. Ferber herself was aware that she was sometimes cast as the popular hack in opposition to the more sophisticated Cather. In a 1931 letter to her sister, she says, "I'm enclosing the Times review of Willa Cather's new book. It pans it, which gives me a little feeling of joy for no reason at all except that I'm just that malicious. She's been getting too much of this goddess stuff just because she wrote one good book" (quoted in Gilbert 351). Cather might not have received critical acclaim, but *Shadows on the Rock* sold well. Paralleling what Ferber had experienced for years, Cather's 1931 novel was dismissed by critics but embraced by general readers.

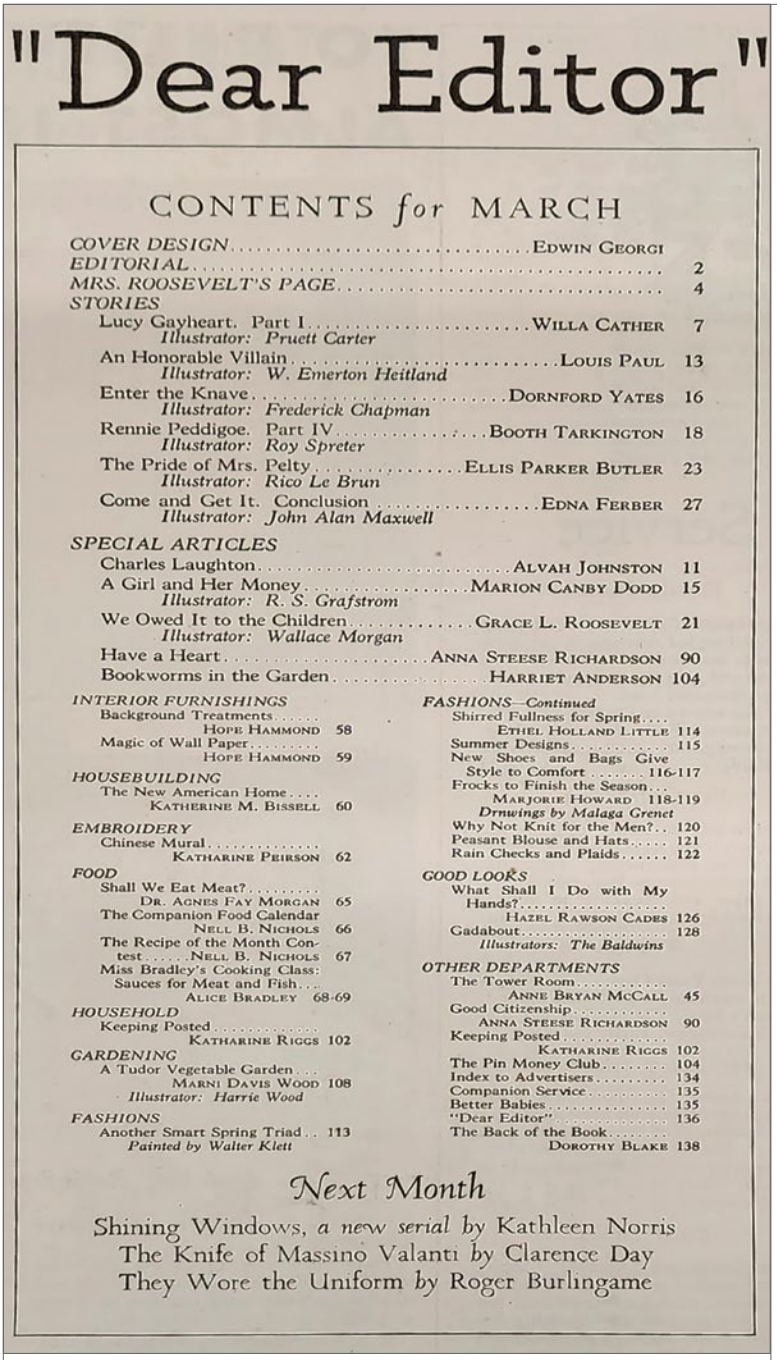
In 1924 *So Big* had not yet won the Pulitzer, but its popularity was undeniable, and its inclusion with novels by the only three female winners of the award for the novel

Pulitzer Prize novels: Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (1923), Edna Ferber's *So Big* (1925), Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1929), and Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* (1932).

shows both the prescience of Love herself and the influence of female librarians as early twentieth-century literary tastemakers and drivers of book sales. J. E. Smyth writes that "Doubleday marketed the book as both a runaway best seller and a work of great literature" (44). What Doubleday didn't do, however, was enter *So Big* for the Pulitzer, an astonishing lapse considering that two-time Pulitzer winner Booth Tarkington was a Doubleday author. That oversight would be remedied by famed Kansas newspaper editor William Allen White (who won the 1923 Pulitzer for editorial writing), a friend of Ferber's and Pulitzer juror, who waged a brazen, one-man PR campaign on behalf of *So Big*. Smyth gives a detailed account of the controversy surrounding *So Big*'s Pulitzer. Unhappy with his fellow jurors' preference for Joseph Hergesheimer's *Balisand*, White wrote a letter advocating for *So Big* to Frank Fackenthal, who administered the prize on behalf of Columbia. Fackenthal showed the trustees the letter, and they overruled the decision of the committee and granted the award to *So Big* (Smyth 44–46). Juror O. W. Firkins, a professor at the University of Minnesota, was so disgusted that he returned his one-hundred-dollar honorarium check, telling the committee, "I will not soil my fingers with pay for any share that I may have had even in the innocent preliminaries that have issued in the iniquitous decision" (Fischer and Fischer 76). Cather's own Pulitzer, despite the indisputable popularity and financial success it brought, was, like Ferber's, not an unalloyed triumph. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine an accolade more tepid than the jurors' recommendation of *One of Ours*: "I might perhaps add that this recommendation is made without enthusiasm. The Committee, as I understand its feeling, assumes that the Trustees of the fund desire that the award should be made each year. In that case, we are of the opinion that Miss Cather's novel, imperfect as we think it in many respects, is yet the most worth while of any in the field" (quoted in Fischer and Fischer 68).

While the Pulitzer was certainly an important victory for Ferber as a female author who had often been dismissed by the critical establishment, it also paradoxically indicated the outsized influence of male cultural arbiters such as White. H. L. Mencken, another such figure, had in 1922 featured in the reception of Cather's own Pulitzer Prize–winning novel. In an oft-discussed February 1922 letter asking him to review *One of Ours*, Cather flatters Mencken, attempting to show their shared literary taste. She begins by disparaging the type of American literature she and Mencken supposedly deplore as "Old Chester Tales and Booth Tarkington platitudes" (*Selected Letters* 308), thus insulting both Tarkington and her old friend Margaret Deland. Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* had won the 1919 Pulitzer, beating *My Ántonia*, and it is perhaps not too farfetched to speculate that losing the award to Tarkington might have stung Cather a little. Tarkington would also soon win the 1922 award for *Alice Adams*, proving that what she deemed his "platitudes" were still very much in style. *The Old Chester Tales* are a series of small-town stories written by Deland, a friend from Boston. After Cather underwent abdominal surgery in 1912, she lived with Deland for three weeks while she recuperated. Cather earlier denigrated Deland's writing in an April 1912 letter to S. S. McClure written while visiting her brother Douglass in Arizona, commenting that Deland's bestselling 1911 novel, *The Iron Woman*, is "the one book everyone is talking about in Nebraska, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. . . . They are piled up in the Santa Fe 'Harvey Houses' and every brakeman owns a copy" (*Complete Letters* no. 0222). Cather's mockery of the intellectual pretentions of Tooker, the brakeman with whom Douglass shared a house, and her transformation of him into the idealistic but hapless Ray Kennedy in *The Song of the Lark*, suggests she is obliquely disparaging the quality of Deland's writing to McClure, another powerful male cultural figure.

Cather's 1922 criticism of Deland to Mencken at first seems puzzling. Although her novel *An Old Chester Secret* had come out in 1920 after being initially serialized in *Harper's*, by 1922 Deland's greatest years of popularity as a novelist were behind her, and Cather herself had just achieved critical success with *My Ántonia*. Deland, however, had additional contemporary relevance. In late 1917 the sixty-one-year-old writer had gone to France on behalf of the hugely popular magazine the *Woman's Home Companion* and worked at a YMCA canteen in Paris that served American soldiers. Deland sent a number of pieces about her experience to the *Companion* with titles such as "Their Great Moments" and "Marching Gayly." A more ruminative essay, "Beads: War-Time Reflections in Paris," which expressed doubts about the nationalistic fervor she witnessed, was published in the July 1918 issue of *Harper's*. Given Cather's admitted anxieties about the reception of *One of Ours* as a war novel, Deland's involvement in World War I might have made her a bit insecure. In a February 1917 letter to her mother, Cather writes that "Mrs. Deland wrote me for ten dollars for the Belgians last week. As I had been ill in her house for three weeks after that operation in Boston, I could not well refuse" (*Complete Letters* no. 1954). Since Cather was aware of Deland's fundraising on behalf of the Authors' Fund for the relief of Wounded Soldiers of the Allied Nations, an



"Dear Editor"

CONTENTS for MARCH

Next Month

Shining Windows, *a new serial by* Kathleen Norris
The Knife of Massino Valanti *by* Clarence Day
They Wore the Uniform *by* Roger Burlingame

The March 1935 *Women's Home Companion* featured the first installment of its serialization of Cather's *Lucy Gayheart* and the final installment of Edna Ferber's *Come and Get It* (with Booth Tarkington nearby).

organization she had begun, it seems probable that she knew something of her war work in France and attendant articles. Unlike the older writer, she had not been in France during the war and conceivably felt her lack of direct experience acutely during the composition of *One of Ours*. I suspect that Deland's access to an immediacy of perspective that Cather herself lacked might have been galling. Whatever Cather knew or did not know about it, Deland's war work placed her among other better-known American women writers—including Wharton, Canfield Fisher, and her friend Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant—who were in France and actively engaged in relief efforts.

In multiple letters, Cather insists that in *One of Ours* she was not concerned with providing a realistic, detailed depiction of war, yet her research suggests otherwise. In September 1922 she writes to Elizabeth Moorhead Vermorcken: "I tried to treat the war without any attempt at literalness—as if it were some war way back in history, and I was only concerned with its effect upon one boy" (*Complete Letters* no. 0620). Back in April she had told Dorothy Canfield Fisher, whom she had asked to read the novel in proof, something similar: "I tried to keep the French part vague, seen from a distance, and only what he sees" (*Complete Letters* no. 0589). Later in the month, however, after Canfield Fisher had read the entire novel, Cather answered her questions about various military particulars and remarked, "I could never tell you what work I put in on these details" (*Complete Letters* no. 0588). Her research demonstrates the pains she took to make the second part of the novel realistic, undercutting her remarks about war's lack of centrality to the story.

When writing to Mencken and others, Cather refers to the novel as "Claude," persisting in the habit even after she had agreed to change the title to *One of Ours*. She also personifies it further by referring to it as "this boy." Her letters, particularly those to her close friend Canfield Fisher, indicate her deep investment in *One of Our*s, which drew significantly from the life of her cousin Grosvenor Cather, who was killed in action in France. Her repeated personification of the novel attempts to establish the novel's authenticity and code it as masculine. Her insistence on the novel as a character study might also be an attempt to deflect criticism from any perceived historical inaccuracies. She instructs Mencken, "Remember: this one boy's feeling is true. This one boy I knew as one can only know one's own blood" (*Selected Letters* 309). About a month later she writes to Canfield Fisher, that the novel is "a narrative that is always Claude, and not me writing about either France or the doughboys" before noting, perhaps in response to an earlier question from Canfield Fisher, "No I wasn't in France during the war" (*Complete Letters* no. 0596). By repeatedly reducing the novel to a main character whose fidelity to life she insists upon, Cather pursues a type of literary realism that Janice Radway identifies as a component of the middlebrow novel. Radway writes that Book-of-the-Month club judges exemplified middlebrow taste in selecting novels that "demanded . . . a rich and elaborate realism of character" (281–82). Cather's previous novel, *My Ántonia*, has the name of a compelling central character in its title and also deals with elements of her biography; Cather frequently refers to it in abbreviated fashion as "Antonia"; however, I can find no letters where she elides the main character and the novel itself the way she does with *One of Ours*.

Cather's letter to Mencken formed part of her promotion campaign for *One of Ours*. As Stout and Robert Thacker have discussed, Cather attempted to engineer the reception of *One of Ours*, writing not only to Mencken but to Sinclair Lewis (who would also review the novel) and Carl Van Doren. After aligning herself with Mencken's literary viewpoint and insulting Tarkington and Deland, she writes a bit about the composition of *One of Ours* before asking Mencken to read a review copy of the novel and give her his honest opinion, telling him, "And if I've done a sickly, sentimental, old-maid job on him, tell me so loudly, like a man, rub it in, pound it down; I'll deserve it and I'll need it for my soul's salvation" (*Selected Letters* 310). That Cather eagerly sought out Mencken's opinion shows both the critical power he wielded in the 1920s and how she wanted her novel to be received. If she can take criticism "like a man," by extension she should also be able to write like one, as opposed to a "sickly, sentimental old maid." Stout writes that Cather "had attempted to disarm the very criticism to which she knew she was most vulnerable by naming it herself before her critics had a chance to do so, but her strategy did not work" ("Willa Cather" 38), while Thacker remarks succinctly, "Mencken did as he was bid" (133).

Although some reviews of *One of Ours* were positive—Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote a glowing piece in the *New York Times Book Review*—Mencken and other influential reviewers, including Sinclair Lewis and Edmund Wilson, panned the novel, particularly the part involving Claude's experiences in World War I. In a sexist put-down, Mencken claims in his *Smart Set* review that the second portion of the novel "drops precipitately to the level of a serial in *The Ladies' Home Journal*" (141). *The Ladies' Home Journal* gibe stung; Cather repeated it in a letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant (*Complete Letters* no. 0625). She herself had previously ridiculed the magazine. In her January 12, 1896 *Nebraska State Journal* column, "The Passing Show," a much younger Cather writes, "Over most other periodicals there has hung a dim superstition that literature was a craft apart and by itself and not everyone who runs may write. But not so with *The Ladies' Home Journal*. It is devoted exclusively to the great and the unknown wives of the great; to how Henry Ward Beecher liked his mutton chops; to how Paderewski ties his shoes, to how 'the Duchess' wears her back hair" ("Passing Show"). Mencken, who had called *My Ántonia* "not only the best done by Miss Cather herself, but also one of the best that any American has ever done, East or West, early or late" (88–89), casually tossed Cather into the ranks of the middlebrow writers such as Deland whom she intentionally constructed herself against. White, Ferber's champion, chuckled at the discomfiture of highbrow critics and suggested to Cather that he liked the novel (*Complete Letters* no. 0625). In a January 1919 letter to her brother Roscoe about *My Ántonia*'s critical reception Cather had ridiculed White's penchant for plainspoken Midwestern realism, remarking, "He thinks he is presenting things as they are, but what he really presents is his own essentially vulgar personality" (*Complete Letters* no. 2085). Her assessment of White had obviously changed by 1922, since in an October letter she repeats his positive comments to Canfield Fisher, prefacing them with "what a nice man" (*Complete Letters* no. 0624).

Mencken's own dislike of bourgeois American taste is well known, and his disdain extended to the Pulitzer, which in 1926 he famously (and successfully) encouraged Sinclair Lewis not to accept. Another female Pulitzer winner and one-time Knopf author under Mencken's influence was Julia Peterkin, who reached out to both Mencken and Carl Sandburg (winner of the 1919 Pulitzer Prize for poetry) early in her writing career. Mencken connected Peterkin with Knopf, but she found the Knopfs insufficiently interested in her work, and in the manner of Cather leaving Houghton-Mifflin for Knopf, moved to the much less prestigious Bobbs-Merrill. Mencken did not forgive what he saw as Peterkin's rejection of his patronage and refused to review or publicize any of her later books or indeed help her at all. Her biographer Susan Millar Williams writes that "Mencken was famous for holding grudges" (123). As one example she describes his response to Mrs. Edward MacDowell's request for a reference letter for Peterkin's residency at the MacDowell writers' colony. He acknowledged receiving the note but wrote Peterkin that "unluckily I cannot decipher" it (Williams 123). Peterkin repeatedly attempted to make peace with Mencken. When she won the Pulitzer in 1929 for *Scarlet Sister Mary*, Williams writes that "Still hoping for a reconciliation, she went on the offensive and sent *him* a wire" (148). There were no congratulations from Mencken; he advised her to reject the prize as Lewis had.

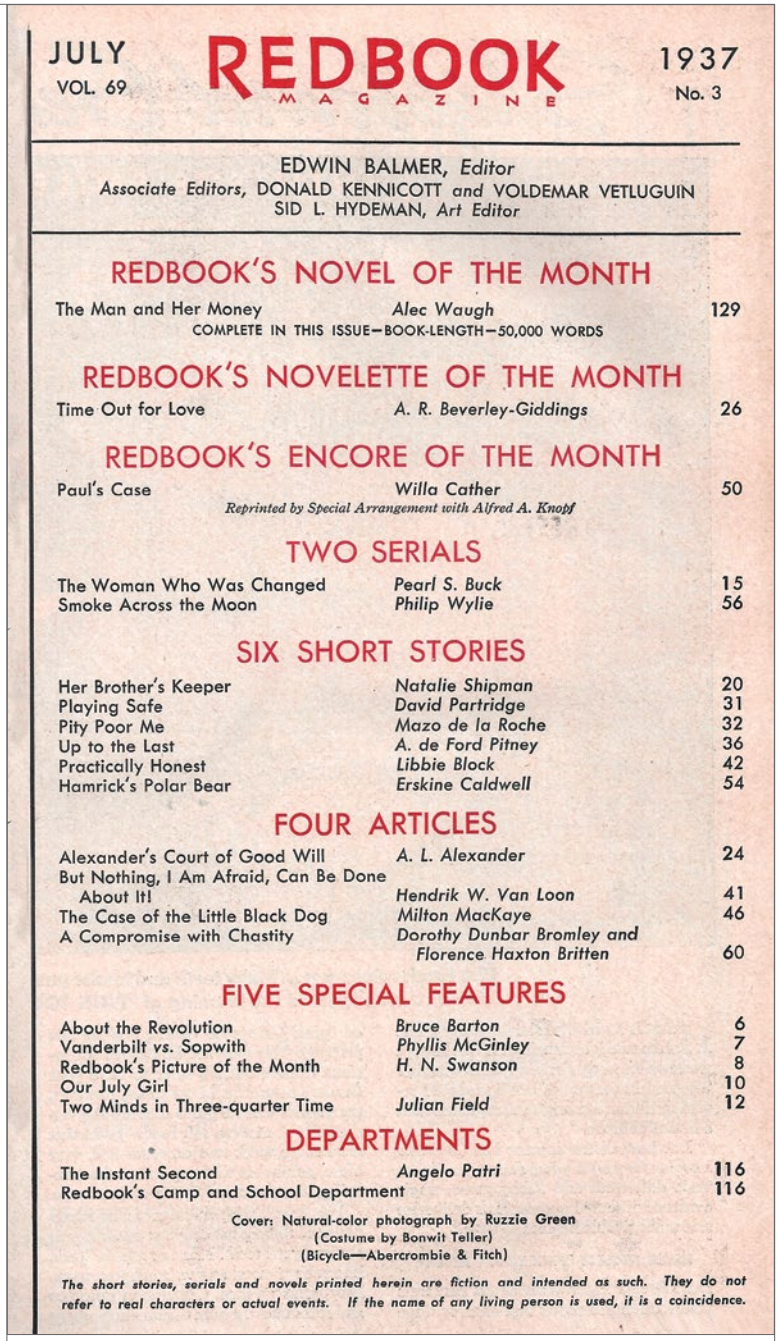
Mencken writes about both Cather and Peterkin in an August 15, 1931 diary entry, lumping them together with the line, "My relationships with women novelists have been somewhat unhappy" (33). He denies a rumor that he was responsible for Cather leaving Houghton-Mifflin for Knopf and criticizes the recent success she has had with *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*. He also claims that he banned Cather from the *American Mercury* for supposedly complaining to Knopf about a review Mencken wrote of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. According to Mencken, he told Knopf that "I was not prepared to consider her wishes in such matters—that if she tried to influence me through him I'd bar her from the magazine altogether. This I have done ever since" (33). He also once again insults *One of Ours*, writing, "Cather is 100% American as *One of Ours* shows and does not like the *American Mercury*" (33).

Cather was in good company. A bit later in the same entry Mencken states that Peterkin is also persona non grata at the *American Mercury*:

> I brought her out in the old *Smart Set* and induced Knopf to print her first book, "Green Thursday," in 1924. It naturally had hard sledding, and Knopf lost money off it. He knew in advance that this would be the case, but published it with the hope of recouping later on. But Peterkin took her next book to Bobbs-Merrill without consulting either Knopf or me, and on her third, *Scarlet Sister Mary*, they made a lot of money. For this I have barred her from the *American Mercury*. (34)

Despite arguing against popular taste and disparaging Cather's successful sales numbers, Mencken is aggrieved that Peterkin left Knopf, thus depriving the publishing house of profit on her later, more successful works, including Pulitzer Prize winner *Scarlet Sister Mary*. He is upset at what he sees as Cather seeking to influence him via Knopf, but is angry that Peterkin did not consult him before she left Knopf. This diary entry shows both Mencken's investment in his role as literary and cultural arbiter and the length and pettiness of his grudges. It is an amazing example of a literary figure's journal as a means of score settling and validates the rhetorical strategies both Cather and Peterkin used to approach him. Peterkin's difficulties with Mencken have to me been particularly illuminating with regard to the letter Cather writes him about *One of Ours*, the obsequiousness of which has always seemed uncharacteristic. I dislike her trashing of her friend Margaret Deland and find the letter's bluff and hearty tone cringe-inducing.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher's interventions in U.S. literary culture provide a refreshing contrast to Mencken. Her heightened engagement with Cather's work coincided with the establishment of the Book-of-the-Month club in 1926. Canfield Fisher was the only woman on the selection committee (William Allen White was also a member) and took a particularly active role in book recommendations and author recruitment. Mark Madigan has given a detailed treatment of Cather's extensive relations with the Book-of-the-Month club, which began in 1926 with the inclusion of *My Mortal Enemy* in the "Other New Books Recommended" section of the "Book of the Month Club News" and reached its height when Cather allowed *Shadows on the Rock* to be a featured selection in 1931. *Shadows on the Rock* was also considered for the Pulitzer. Although it generated less positive critical attention than Cather's earlier novels (most enduringly in Granville Hicks's famous 1933 condemnation of Cather, "The Case Against Willa Cather"), it became the only novel of Cather's to make *Publisher's Weekly*'s annual bestseller lists, ranking second in 1931 behind *The Good Earth*, by the then-unknown writer Pearl Buck.



JULY
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REDBOOK
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1937
No. 3

EDWIN BALMER, *Editor*
Associate Editors, DONALD KENNICOTT *and* VOLDEMAR VETLUGUIN
SID L. HYDEMAN, *Art Editor*

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Cover: Natural-color photograph by Ruzzie Green
(Costume by Bonwit Teller)
(Bicycle—Abercrombie & Fitch)

The short stories, serials and novels printed herein are fiction and intended as such. They do not refer to real characters or actual events. If the name of any living person is used, it is a coincidence.

The July 1937 *Redbook* featured an "encore" of Cather's "Paul's Case" and the first installment of Buck's story "The Woman Who Was Changed."

Canfield Fisher's advocacy of *The Good Earth* helped catapult Buck to literary celebrity. *The Good Earth* became the best-selling American novel of both 1931 and 1932, won the 1932 Pulitzer, and played a significant role in Buck's 1938 Nobel Prize. Canfield Fisher and Buck had similar views of the instrumentality of literature. Jaime Harker calls *The Good Earth* "in effect a fictional act of diplomacy" stating, "Buck wanted the novel to encourage understanding and sympathy between two vastly different cultures" (14). The two women moved from a professional relationship to a close friendship, exchanging a number of affectionate personal letters that ranged from the quotidian details of their lives to the complexities of world events. In an August 1943 letter, Canfield Fisher addresses her

friend as "Dear, dear Pearl" and continues "How you and I always feel the impulse to put our heads together, to clasp hands closely, to share what is in our hearts, in grave moments of crisis!" (Fisher 226).

The July 1937 issue of *Redbook* features the first installment of Buck's new short story "The Woman Who Was Changed" and a reprint of Cather's 1905 story "Paul's Case," showing that the ordinary reading public encountered them in the same media and probably received them in similar ways. Cather and Buck were often lumped together by highbrow literary consumers as well. After Buck became the first American woman to win the Nobel, a number of critics said the award should have instead gone to Cather. In fact, when Buck died in 1973, the *New York Times* obituary noted, "When Mrs. Buck won the prize in 1938 it was fashionable in literary circles to complain that if any American woman was entitled to a Nobel, it was Willa Cather, not Pearl Buck" (Krebs). This statement damns Cather with faint praise, since it indirectly questions whether any American women writers deserved the Nobel. Cather and Buck also won consecutive William Dean Howells medals, Cather in 1930 for *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and Buck in 1935 for *The Good Earth*. These career similarities bear out Stout's assertion regarding the permeability of the border between the middlebrow and literary elite.

Especially in its early years, the Pulitzer Prize contributed to the establishment and expansion of middlebrow literary culture and female authors' fraught place within it. The numerous intersections among these Pulitzer winners and their literary advocates—or, in Mencken's case, adversaries—illustrate the way the Pulitzer Prize bridges the contested territory between critical acclaim and popular appeal.

NOTES

1. An African American would not receive the Pulitzer Prize in fiction until James Alan McPherson in 1978, for *Elbow Room*, a story collection; in 1983 Alice Walker became the first African American woman to win, for *The Color Purple*.

2. Dorothy Canfield Fisher's translation of Giovanni Papini's *Life of Christ* is also one of the weekly topics Love selected.

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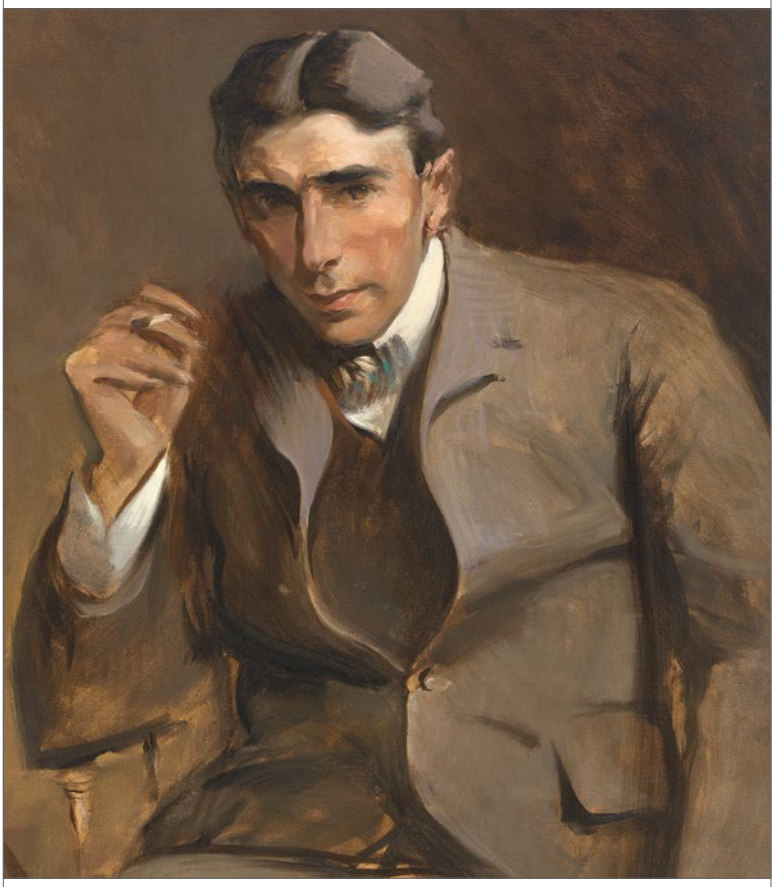
A Tongue-Tied Generation Goes to War: Cather's Claude Wheeler and Tarkington's *Ramsey Milholland*

John H. Flannigan

Critical opinion surrounding Willa Cather's *One of Ours* has been divided since its publication, but there is no doubt about the novel's popularity with the book-buying public. In her historical study *Remembering World War I in America*, Kimberly J. Lamay Licursi ranks six war novels according to the number of weeks they appeared on best-seller lists. *One of Ours* (1922), a best-seller for twenty-eight weeks, is ranked first, outlasting its nearest rival, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), by eight weeks (Lamay Licursi 96–97).[1] In fifth place, another novel, *Ramsey Milholland* (1919), by the enormously popular Booth Tarkington (1869–1946), is the earliest of the six. It began serialization just days before the Armistice in the November 1918 issue of the *American Magazine* and was published in book form the following summer. *Ramsey Milholland* is an unabashed love story whose protagonist is still alive at the conclusion. But even though it eschews the grim ending of Cather's novel, it was a best seller for only eight weeks and, like most of Tarkington's works, has been forgotten (Lamay Licursi 96–97).

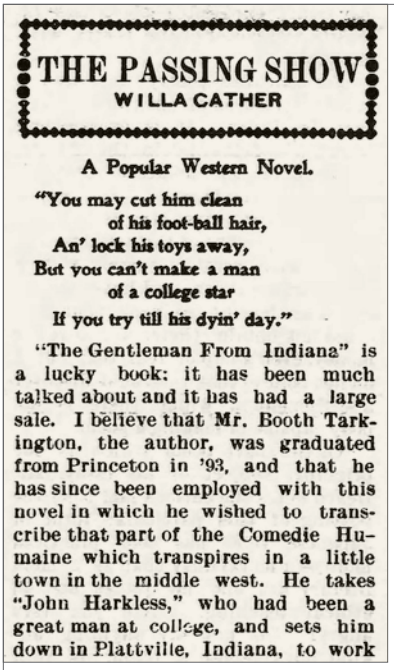


Newton Booth Tarkington ca. 1906, by John White Alexander (1856–1915). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

The decline of Tarkington's importance in literary studies coincides with the rise of Cather's, and the eclipse of *Ramsey Milholland* and the survival of *One of Ours* would be unremarkable except that the two novels share striking resemblances. Both are coming-of-age stories about inarticulate, quick-tempered college dropouts from prosperous families who abandon their safe Midwestern homes for war-torn France. Moreover, Tarkington was shrewder than Cather in shaping his plot. The latter was criticized for her depiction of Claude Wheeler's battle experiences leading to his death, but Tarkington hardly shows the war at all, allowing it only a few paragraphs of idealized description, and gives his eponymous hero a chance to avoid Claude's fate and to return some day to reunite with his college classmate, Dora Yocum, whom he has known since childhood.

Despite their different conclusions, both Cather and Tarkington's novels portray clumsy, tongue-tied characters with unpromising futures who, perhaps because their chances for success at home are so slim, are willing, even anxious, to join a struggle they barely comprehend. Both also portray insular Midwestern cultures in their twilight years before the war's concussions change them forever. And both profile a generation of idealistic men who, in their haste to flee their lackluster pasts and reassert their masculinity, risk losing both their idealism and their lives.

A comparison of *One of Ours* and *Ramsey Milholland* brings together two authors who also share striking resemblances although they are seldom linked in scholarly discussions. Cather and Indianapolis-born Tarkington were close contemporaries and, during their careers, were honored by the literary establishment with the same accolades. Both authors received the Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Cather in 1930 and Tarkington in 1945. Cather was awarded the National Institute of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Fiction in 1944, the same honor that was bestowed on Tarkington in 1933. Tarkington received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918) in 1919 and again for *Alice Adams* (1921) in 1922, the year before Cather won the Pulitzer for *One of Ours*.



THE PASSING SHOW
WILLA CATHER

A Popular Western Novel.

"You may cut him clean
of his foot-ball hair,
An' lock his toys away,
But you can't make a man
of a college star
If you try till his dyin' day."

"The Gentleman From Indiana" is a lucky book: it has been much talked about and it has had a large sale. I believe that Mr. Booth Tarkington, the author, was graduated from Princeton in '93, and that he has since been employed with this novel in which he wished to transcribe that part of the Comedie Humaine which transpires in a little town in the middle west. He takes "John Harkless," who had been a great man at college, and sets him down in Plattville, Indiana, to work

The opening section of Cather's review of Tarkington's *The Gentleman from Indiana* (1899); *Lincoln Courier*, Jan. 20, 1900.

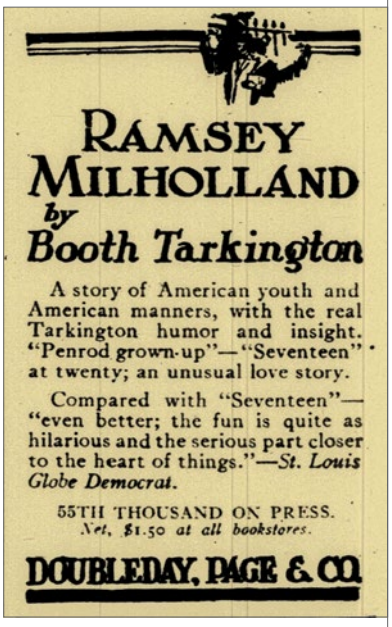
Moreover, Cather and Tarkington pursued parallel careers. They owed their literary breakthroughs to the same man, Samuel S. McClure, who published their early fiction and remained their respected friend. The two were also ardent travelers and Francophiles with adopted refuges close to each other on the eastern seaboard, Cather at Grand Manan Island, New Brunswick, Canada, and Tarkington at Kennebunkport, Maine. Cather's love of music and opera resembles Tarkington's passion for drawing and for collecting art. Both endured chronic ailments—Cather's debilitating muscle pain and Tarkington's episodes of partial or total blindness—that interfered with their writing. Both were strongly opposed to Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal and grew increasingly nostalgic for a vanished past. Most interesting, the two attracted the same scholar, James Woodress (1916–2011), to write their standard biographies: *Booth Tarkington: Gentleman from Indiana* (1955) and *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (1987).

Long before she wrote her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), Cather had reviewed Tarkington's first novel, *The Gentleman from Indiana* (1899). She had found it "shallow and puerile and sophomorically sugary" even though its early chapters and descriptions of small-town life were "exceedingly well written" ("Passing Show" 2–3). The review is Cather's only published mention of Tarkington—according to Woodress, "Cather never thought much of him"—and there is no evidence the two authors ever met nor that they corresponded with each other (*Willa Cather* 249). During her literary apprenticeship and tenure at *McClure's Magazine*, however, Cather could not have escaped knowing of Tarkington's stories, novels, and plays, a steady stream of which had made their author a household name by 1915.

Cather does, however, mention Tarkington in two letters. In the first, written Thanksgiving Day 1918 to her brother Roscoe, she proudly shares critical commentary about *My Ántonia* (1918) and includes the sentence, "Booth Tarkington writes that 'it is as simple as a country prayer meeting or a Greek temple—and as beautiful'" (*Complete Letters* no. 2083). Tarkington's words of praise were drawn not from a review of the novel, however, but from an October 1913 letter Tarkington had written to Samuel McClure praising the latter's *My Autobiography* (1914), which Cather had ghostwritten (Lyon 347). David Porter suggests that Cather may have also "ghosted" the dust jacket for McClure's *Autobiography*, for it includes a blurb, quoting the same Tarkington letter, that praises the quality of her writing (Porter 317n.17). Unless he learned the truth behind the *Autobiography*'s authorship, Tarkington may have never realized that he had once unknowingly expressed admiration for Cather's writing.

The second Cather letter mentioning Tarkington is to H. L. Mencken from February 1922 and responds to the latter's recent *Baltimore Sun* column "The National Letters." Mencken had praised Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and others for striking a blow against "American Puritanism" and heralding a "new literature" whose "roots are to be found . . . not in the text-books of English literature, but in the soil of the American Midlands" (Mencken). To anyone who doubts that "a good beginning" has been made by these writers, Mencken advises, "simply compare Willa Cather's 'My Antonia' to any novel written by an American woman before 1917" (Mencken). Cather tells Mencken that his article "gave me much joy. That's just it, when we're at all true to facts and existing conditions, when we get away from 'Old Chester Tales' and Booth Tarkington platitudes, we seem foreign!" (*Selected Letters* 308–309). Neither Margaret Deland (1857–1945), the author of *Old Chester Tales* (1898), nor Tarkington is mentioned in Mencken's article, suggesting that these two authors typified for Cather the "old formulæ and old authority" whose loosening grip on literary taste Mencken had celebrated (Mencken). The fact that Cather's letter, in addition to mentioning Tarkington, solicits a favorable review of *One of Ours* from Mencken also raises the possibility that Cather knew of *Ramsey Milholland* and wishes to emphasize her war novel's superiority to Tarkington's.

It is easy to justify Cather's distinguishing herself from Tarkington and supplanting him in the canon. In her



RAMSEY MILHOLLAND
by
Booth Tarkington

A story of American youth and American manners, with the real Tarkington humor and insight. "Penrod grown-up"—"Seventeen" at twenty; an unusual love story.

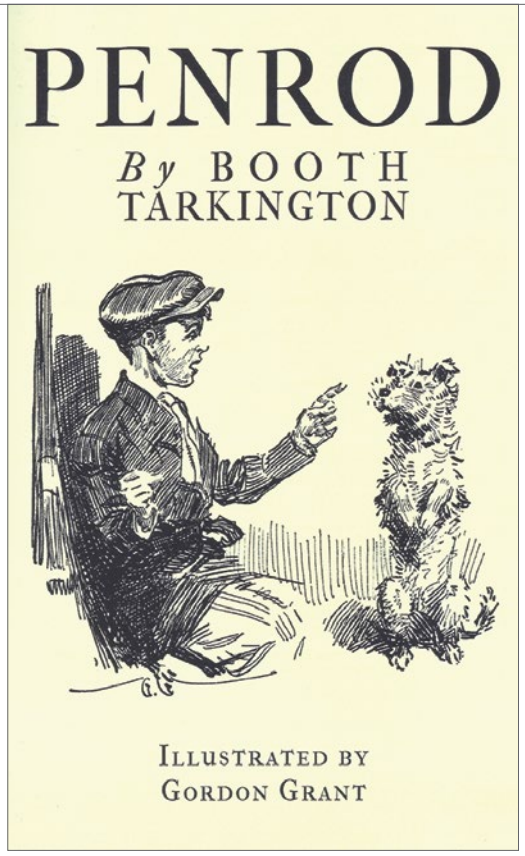
Compared with "Seventeen"—"even better; the fun is quite as hilarious and the serious part closer to the heart of things."—*St. Louis Globe Democrat.*

55TH THOUSAND ON PRESS.
Net, $1.50 at all bookstores.

DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & CO.

Advertisement for *Ramsey Milholland* in the *New York Times*, Sept. 7, 1919, p. 454.

mature fiction, Cather avoids the sentimentality that frequently mars Tarkington's works and cultivates a *démeublé* style that contrasts strongly with Tarkington's occasional verbosity. Cather creates complex characters confronting complex situations whereas Tarkington, whose "temperament fitted him to write comedy," always enjoyed a reputation as "an inveterate optimist, and an old-fashioned gentleman" (Woodress, *Booth Tarkington* 85, 7). Yet the two authors shared similar outlooks on their respective pasts, a fact emphasized by comparing their war novels. Both Cather and Tarkington were steeped in Midwestern small-town culture and understood its suffocating effect on many young Nebraskans and Indianans. As a result, both—perhaps unavoidably—produced novels about the war that underscored its irresistible appeal for such youths.



The title page of Tarkington's *Penrod* (1914). Illustration of Penrod and his dog, Duke, by Gordon Grant (1875–1962).

Both, too, became trapped by their projects. As Steven Trout observes, "Had it not been for G. P. Cather's death, Willa Cather probably would never have written a novel dealing so extensively with the First World War" (38). Her decision to model Claude Wheeler after her cousin, however, compelled her to depict the horrors of war, thereby irritating critics who ridiculed her depictions of battle (Woodress, *Willa Cather* 333). In a letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher following the publication of *One of Ours*, Cather laments her surrender to her novel's subject: "God save me from ever again tying up with a theme that has any journalistic aspect. It's a misfortune to me—but it couldn't be helped. It was something I couldn't get out of" (*Complete Letters* no. 0621).

By contrast, Tarkington vehemently supported his country's involvement in the war and, according to Woodress, "turn[ed] out propaganda with indefatigable zeal" (*Tarkington* 201). Yet in writing his war novel, Tarkington, too, found himself constrained, not by a family member's story but by his literary reputation. *Ramsey Milholland*, a much more patriotic (even jingoistic) novel than Cather's, followed three Tarkington books depicting American youth, all of them hugely successful: *Penrod* (1914), *Penrod and Sam* (1916), and *Seventeen* (1916). *Ramsey Milholland* was even advertised as a sequel to these books and its hero as an adult version of the characters Penrod Schofield and Willie Baxter, a "boy and girl story of the genus Penrod," as one reviewer called it ("A Regular Tarkington Boy"). Moreover, artist Gordon Grant, who had illustrated the Penrod books, also provided the artwork for the book version of *Ramsey Milholland*, inviting readers to conflate their main characters (see illustrations on pages 21 and 22). The popularity of Penrod, whom a reviewer in the *Boston Globe* had called "as real a boy of this age as Tom Sawyer was real in his," may have forced Tarkington to produce a novel that softened the war's brutality ("The Doings of a Boy"). Like Cather, Tarkington had no firsthand experience of warfare, but, even had the opposite been true, he could no more have risked disappointing, not to say demoralizing his fans by depicting a Penrod-like character's death in battle than Cather, haunted by memories of her cousin, could have written a novel that did *not* culminate with its hero's death.

At first glance, Cather's and Tarkington's novels seem to resist comparison, for they are dissimilar in size and focus. *One of Ours*, with almost 127,000 words, is nearly three times as long as *Ramsey Milholland*. The latter, with 46,000 words, is only slightly longer than book 5 of Cather's novel, which alone runs to 39,000 words. Much of Tarkington's novel is set at a Midwestern college perhaps modeled on Purdue University, which Tarkington attended for two years, whose students are divided by pacifism, anarchism, and militarism whereas Cather pits the tranquility of rural Nebraska against the forces of materialism, Prohibition, and religious fervor. Nevertheless, Tarkington, like Cather, knew firsthand the war's transformative power over unremarkable men and made it a centerpiece of his novel. He had written to a friend that Ramsey represented "the 'average young fellow' I saw turning into a soldier in Indiana in 1917—the boy who got in at the first" (in Woodress, *Tarkington* 202). Also, like Cather, he portrayed a young man who prefers military service to following in his father's footsteps. Ramsey, the son of a lawyer, is half-heartedly drifting toward a legal career while lacking any of the skills a successful lawyer must acquire. Similarly, Claude, constantly teased by his father, has left college and failed at farming and, like Ramsey, yearns for a meaningful life that has eluded him.

Both Claude and Ramsey are ill at ease in their social circles, and both express their otherness in conversations with close

friends. When Bohemian-born Ernest Havel tells Claude of his plans, the latter sounds nonplussed:

> "After I get a place of my own and have a good start, I'm going home to see my old folks some winter. Maybe I'll marry a nice girl and bring her back."
>
> "Is that all?
>
> "That's enough, if it turns out right, isn't it?"
>
> "Perhaps. It wouldn't be for me. I don't believe I can ever settle down to anything." (*One of Ours* 78)

Ramsey sounds as aimless as Claude when Fred Mitchell, Ramsey's "most intimate friend" from boyhood, engages his friend during their freshman year at college about their plans (85):

> "I guess I'll go in with my father, in the wholesale drug business," said Fred. . . . "Then I'm going to marry some little cutie and settle down. What you goin' to do, Ramsey? Go to Law School, and then come back and go in your father's office?"
>
> "I don't know. Guess so."
>
> It was always Fred who did most of the talking; Ramsey was quiet. (119)

Fred misinterprets Ramsey's reticence as evidence that his friend has been "toyed with" by a now-married high-school classmate, Milla Rust, who resembles Claude's friend Peachy Millmore, and "this [misunderstanding] created a great deal of respect for Ramsey" (121). Tarkington's ironic treatment notwithstanding, however, Ramsey, like Claude, is an inscrutable figure out of step with his contemporaries, a quality that seems to mark both men as peculiarly vulnerable to the allure of war.

Although neither Cather's nor Tarkington's is truly a "war novel," an earlier war still haunts them. Both feature characters who recall the Civil War, the Wheelers' servant Mahailey and Ramsey's grandfather. Tarkington's novel opens on Decoration Day 1906 as Ramsey hears his grandfather's tales of fighting the "Rebels," and he reflects on this day at key moments, notably as he is about to enlist (4, 206). Both novels also profile hotheaded characters whose allegiance to a chivalric code erupts at awkward moments. Thus, Claude's touchiness causes him to overreact to Leonard Dawson's punching of Claude's brother Bayliss and to Phil Bowen's reading aloud Peachy Millmore's "slushy" letters for Julius Erlich's fraternity brothers (*One of Ours* 28–29, 83). In Tarkington's novel, ten-year-old Ramsey picks a fight with his unkempt classmate Wesley Bender when the latter starts scrubbing his neck to impress Dora Yocum (30–35). Years later, at a college debate society meeting, Ramsey punches his classmate Linski, a rabble-rousing Chicago anarchist, who has disrupted the event and attacked Ramsey for not arguing that "the capitalis' United States is fat already on the blood of the workers of Europe" (106) (see illustration on page 22). Other students assume Linski's personal insult triggered Ramsey's anger, but the reader understands that Ramsey thought he was defending not himself but his country and capitalism (108).

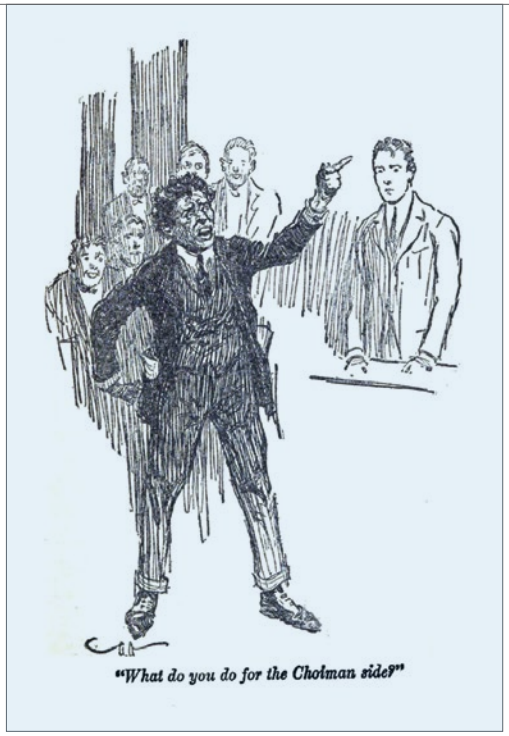
As army officers, Lieutenant Wheeler and Corporal Milholland learn to control their tempers, but they also acquire a confident voice they have always lacked. Early in Cather's novel, Claude finds it easier to spring into action than to speak. During visits to the Erlichs' home, he is afraid of mispronouncing a new word: he "would blush and stammer and let someone finish his sentence for him" (*One of Ours* 68). His "moods of desperate silence" cast a pall, too, over his marriage (281). One of the novel's tenderest scenes depicts Claude's speaking when no one can hear him. As he moves out of his house, he finds his black barn cat in the snow, "left behind to pick up her living" catching mice. Claude retrieves her and, in a scene of Chekhovian poignance, talks to her: "Well, if you are bad luck, I guess you are going to stay right with me!," to which the cat "did not even mew" in response (301). After becoming a soldier, however, Claude loses much of his verbal awkwardness. Trout draws attention to the "silent stretches" of book 3 and contrasts them to the quantity of spoken discourse between Claude and his army friends in book 4 (101).

Gordon Grant's illustration of Ramsey and his grandfather, from *Ramsey Milholland*.

Ramsey's clumsiness in handling words is more vividly portrayed than Claude's, and Tarkington even uses it to shape his novel's dramatic arc. In elementary school, Ramsey recites "declamations" full of mispronunciations and bad grammar that are humorously contrasted with Dora Yocum's smooth performances (*Ramsey Milholland* 24–28). His infatuation with Milla Rust is comically portrayed in tortured conversations emphasizing his

extreme discomfort (53–56). Just before his fight with Linski, Ramsey argues the affirmative position in a college debate with Dora on the question whether the German invasion of Belgium is justified. His idiotic-sounding repetitions, mispronunciations, and malapropisms make him an easy victim for pacifist Dora, who performs flawlessly (96–103).

Dora later tells Ramsey, however, that, when she confessed to him her hatred of German atrocities, his reluctance to speak had comforted her: "You're so quiet and solid—I've always felt I could talk to you just anyhow I pleased, and you wouldn't mind" (181). But when she learns that Ramsey supports students who are going to enlist, she breaks with him. The first member of the class of 1918 to join the army, Ramsey leaves without telling Dora, who blames herself for his decision. In the novel's conclusion, Tarkington quotes Ramsey's letter to her, written from France, absolving her of responsibility. The letter occupies nearly three pages of text and is by far the novel's most fluent, sustained instance of Ramsey's voice. Free of the halting, garbled English the reader has come to expect from this character, Ramsey's letter constitutes the novel's eloquent denouement (213–15).



Gordon Grant's illustration of Ramsey's classmate Linski as he disrupts a college debate, from *Ramsey Milholland*: "What do you do for the Choiman side?"

Ramsey Milholland received mixed reviews when it appeared in August 1919. The finicky critic for the *New York Times* deplored its characters' sloppy diction: "Dora is the only one among the young people in the book who does not commit frequent outrages upon her mother tongue" ("Blasco Ibanez"). Gordon Ray Young, in the *Los Angeles Times*, called Tarkington's novel "cheap work" and criticized its ending: "The splashing of patriotism at the end with Ramsey the first to enlist is the sort of thing one rather expected Mr. Tarkington's experience, if not his taste, would protect him from" (Young). The critic for the *New Republic* was offended by the novel's lack of seriousness and claimed Tarkington "has done the sacrifice of America into caricature mixed with melodrama" (Review).

Other critics, however, found much to praise in the novel. Heywood Broun in the *New York Tribune* admired Tarkington's "characteristic skill in depicting the moods and manners of adolescence" and regretted the novel's rushed conclusion: "'Ramsey Milholland' is too interesting a piece of work to be ended so abruptly" ("Tarkington's New Novel"). The reviewer for the *New York Sun* quoted Tarkington's own description of his novel—"a performance in simplicity"—and felt it was "the finest description that could be given of it; it is also superlative praise" ("A Regular Tarkington Boy"). In a brief review in the *Chicago Tribune*, Fanny Butcher added a modifier to Tarkington's phrase and called the novel "a great performance in simplicity" ("Tabloid Book Review"). Butcher believed that "under the bubble of youth, under the Huckleberry Finnish quality, under the moving picture of life in a little town," Tarkington had created a "strongly articulated skeleton of the youth of all America tensely preparing for the time when they were boys no more, but soldiers."

This review contrasts sharply with the one Butcher wrote of *One of Ours*. A friend of Cather's, she had successfully urged the author to drop her novel's working title, "Claude," but she remained troubled by the work (*Complete Letters* no. 2515). Her review in the *Chicago Tribune* of September 10, 1922, opens with an anguished confession: "This review of 'One of Ours' is going to be the hardest thing I've ever done" ("News and Views of Books"). She praised the novel's earlier sections, in which Cather traces Claude's life "without a scrap of sentiment," but believed that when "Claude goes to war and . . . finds himself no longer a clod, . . . Cather suddenly becomes a champion for Claude where before she had been a mere observer." As a result, "during the sickening days on the transport, during the actual army life and the fighting, one feels a sense of unreality" ("News and Views of Books"). Other critics echoed Butcher's concerns and praised the novel's earlier sections while dismissing the concluding chapters. The reviewer for the *Washington Herald*, for example, believed that "the picture of the Wheeler family is accurate and living. The study of the boy, groping for expression and achievement and ideals, his pathetic failure to find them in marriage, are done with exceeding care." Even so, "Claude's unexpected finding of his outlet in the war is rather maudlin" ("M. D.").

Although Tarkington escaped such censure by avoiding treating the war in any detail, Woodress admits *Ramsey Milholland* "suffers artistically because of its didactic content" (*Tarkington* 202). The novel resurfaced in spring 1922 when it was republished serially, with new illustrations, in various small-town newspapers. Cather's hometown paper, the *Red Cloud Chief*, for example,

featured it in eighteen consecutive weekly installments between April 6 and August 3, 1922 (*Red Cloud Chief*). Yet its luster had already begun to dull. Three months after writing his positive review in August 1919, Broun mentioned the novel again but less enthusiastically than before: It "starts brilliantly, even though it covers a field already much tilled by the author, but it loses merit rapidly toward the end, when the author finished lamely and inconclusively" ("Peeks Among Peaks"). F. Scott Fitzgerald, in a generally favorable review of Tarkington's later novel *Gentle Julia* (1922), looked back on *Ramsey* with contempt: "[Tarkington's] ideas, such as they are, are always expressed best in terms of his characters . . . and when his ideas can not be so expressed, they are seldom worth expressing. *Ramsey Milholland*, one of the most wretched and absurd novels ever written, showed this" (72).

By 1922, readers disillusioned by the war may have been discomfited by both Tarkington's and Cather's portrayals of men who eagerly embrace it. Tarkington's patriotism, apparent in passages from *Ramsey* such as the following about the country's mood in April 1917, may have rung hollow to later readers: "The portentous days came on apace, and each one brought a new and greater portent. The faces of men lost a driven look besetting them in the days of badgered waiting. . . . The President went to the Congress, and the true indictment he made there reached scoffing Potsdam with an unspoken prophecy somewhat chilling even to Potsdam, one guesses—and then through an April night went almost quietly the steady word: we were at war with Germany" (197–98). *One of Ours* generally avoids this kind of solemn editorializing about external events although Cather, too, was vulnerable to charges of descending, in Trout's phrase, to "patriotic blather" in her novel's final section (190).

In defense of both authors, they had lived many of the same experiences their characters had and knew well the worlds they portrayed, and they also understood the war's fascination for men with limited horizons. Ramsey's college career, like Tarkington's own years at Purdue and Princeton, is an unreal, dreamlike whirl of social engagements, calling cards, snowball fights, and fraternity gossip—a charmed life that nevertheless imprisons restless students who crave adventure in the real world. And Cather profiles a character based on her cousin who, like herself, had run into a dead end in Nebraska and needed to escape. As early as 1914, Claude realizes that life on a farm is not "worth the trouble of getting up every morning" (*One of Ours* 145). Joining the war offers Claude a clear alternative to his grim future. At the novel's conclusion, Evangeline Wheeler bitterly rejoices in her son's death because he has escaped the horrifying possibility of realizing in the war's aftermath that his idealism has been wasted (604–605). She must realize, too, that, even if Claude had skipped the war, he would not have improved his chances to prosper in postwar Nebraska.

Nor is Ramsey any more hopeful than Evangeline Wheeler that the war will bring peace. Ramsey foresees the appeal of Linski's radicalism for a new American underclass and is downcast to learn that, after the debate episode, Linski has dropped out of college and gone back to Chicago. "He couldn't do any harm here," Ramsey muses to Fred Mitchell. "He'll prob'ly get more people to listen to him in cities where there's so many new immigrants and all such that don't know anything, comin' in all the time" (118). Tarkington, like Ramsey and perhaps Cather, too, could have worried that simmering tensions about race, gender, class, Prohibition, and immigration that the war had suppressed would erupt in its aftermath and menace his familiar world.

Despite his nostalgia, however, Tarkington was an accurate chronicler of his place and time. Woodress recounts in his Tarkington biography how he began rereading the author in 1950 and "discovered that he had portrayed urban, middle-class, Midwestern America better than anyone else" and was "a writer whose best works ought not to be left unread" (*Booth Tarkington* 8). Novelist Thomas Mallon, in an essay in the May 2004 issue of the *Atlantic*, praises the "twin peaks" of *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Alice Adams* while admitting that "Tarkington lacked the great steady artistry of Cather and the flashier sort of Wharton—either of which might have left him a writer with much still to say to us" (Mallon). The Library of America issued a volume of Tarkington's fiction, edited by Mallon, to mark the 2019 sesquicentennial of Tarkington's birth. Yet Robert Gottlieb, in a November 2019 *New Yorker* essay, identifies two obstacles blocking a Tarkington renaissance: his "utterly unbearable" depictions of African Americans and "his deeply rooted, unappeasable need to look longingly backward" (Gottlieb).

Critics have occasionally decried, too, Cather's racial stereotypes and "need to look longingly backward," so considering other links between Tarkington and Cather can improve our understanding of both. Certainly Tarkington's best novels compare favorably to Cather's works. It requires no stretch to find in Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* the same attentiveness to detail and eloquent depiction of the American heartland's decline that ennoble Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) and *Lucy Gayheart* (1935). Nor is Tarkington's *Alice Adams* far removed from Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925), for both movingly dramatize collisions between shallow postwar materialism and failed illusions. And Woodress's praise of "the bulk of Tarkington's work"—that it "contributes to a more perceptive understanding of the shifting society in which we live"—applies equally well to Cather's fiction (8).

Mallon makes a keen observation about Tarkington and his self-awareness as a writer that is peculiarly relevant to a discussion of *Ramsey Milholland* and *One of Ours*: "One senses that he knew . . . that the more adaptable aspects of his American place and time would find later, living avatars, while his books got trapped in time's amber" (Mallon). Both Tarkington and Cather lived long enough to realize that "adaptable aspects" of their times included an ever-renewing supply of new Ramseys and Claudes, of global conflicts to decimate them, and of fictions that, for a time, keep their stories alive. Despite their different reasons for memorializing the Great War, Tarkington and Cather expressed their artistic kinship in their novels of the war and came very close to speaking with a single, compassionate voice about two men who gamble their futures to assuage sufferings halfway across the globe. Most poignantly, Tarkington and Cather, in a final, bittersweet gesture, give Ramsey and Claude the confident voice they have always desired and grant them a few precious months to exercise it before they, too, become "trapped in time's amber."

NOTES

1. *A Farewell to Arms* "vastly outsold" Cather's novel, however, after "legions of adoring critics and scholars . . . made [it] the seminal American book about World War I long after it was first published" (Lamay Licursi 97). The other three war novels Lamay Licursi ranks are Dorothy Canfield's *The Deepening Stream* (1930) (no. 3), Humphrey Cobb's *Paths of Glory* (1935) (no. 4), and Elliot White Springs's *War Birds* (1927) (no. 6).

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A Museum without Walls: Willa Cather and John La Farge at *McClure's*

Joseph C. Murphy

In her short story "On the Gulls' Road," published in *McClure's Magazine* in December 1908, Willa Cather's narrator, an American ambassador and amateur artist, recounts the voyage from Genoa to New York twenty years earlier when he fell in love with Alexandra Ebbling, the ship engineer's wife. At one point on that voyage he encountered on board a group of American women engaged in an overbearing discussion of "the baseness of Renaissance art. They were intelligent and alert, and as they leaned forward in their deck chairs under the circle of light," he remembers, "their faces recalled to me Rembrandt's picture of a clinical lecture" (147). This reference to Rembrandt's 1632 painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* is remarkable for several reasons. First, it gives these women a gender ambiguity Sarah Orne Jewett detected in the narrator himself.[1] Moreover, the narrator's familiarity in his youth with this Old Master work registers his cultivation: by the late 1880s, when the main plot unfolds, he had apparently either visited the Mauritshuis in The Hague or studied a relatively exclusive reproduction. But for devoted readers of *McClure's* in the early twentieth century—and for Cather herself, who became the magazine's managing editor in 1908, shortly before the story appeared there ("Chronology")—the Rembrandt image was closer at hand. Specifically, it recalled the picture heading John La Farge's essay "Rembrandt" in the magazine's April 1902 issue. Captioned "Detail from the Anatomy Lesson (1632)" (503), this photographic reproduction pinpoints precisely the detail Cather describes in her story: the two central spectators "lean[ing] forward . . . under the circle of light," spellbound by Dr. Tulp's dissection. Cather's reference to Rembrandt is therefore, in context, also a nod to La Farge (1835–1910), whose late-career reign at *McClure's* as the nation's preeminent art critic intersected with Cather's literary rise at the magazine and contributed to the first wave of mass-circulated photographic art reproductions in American history.

Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632. Mauritshuis, The Hague.

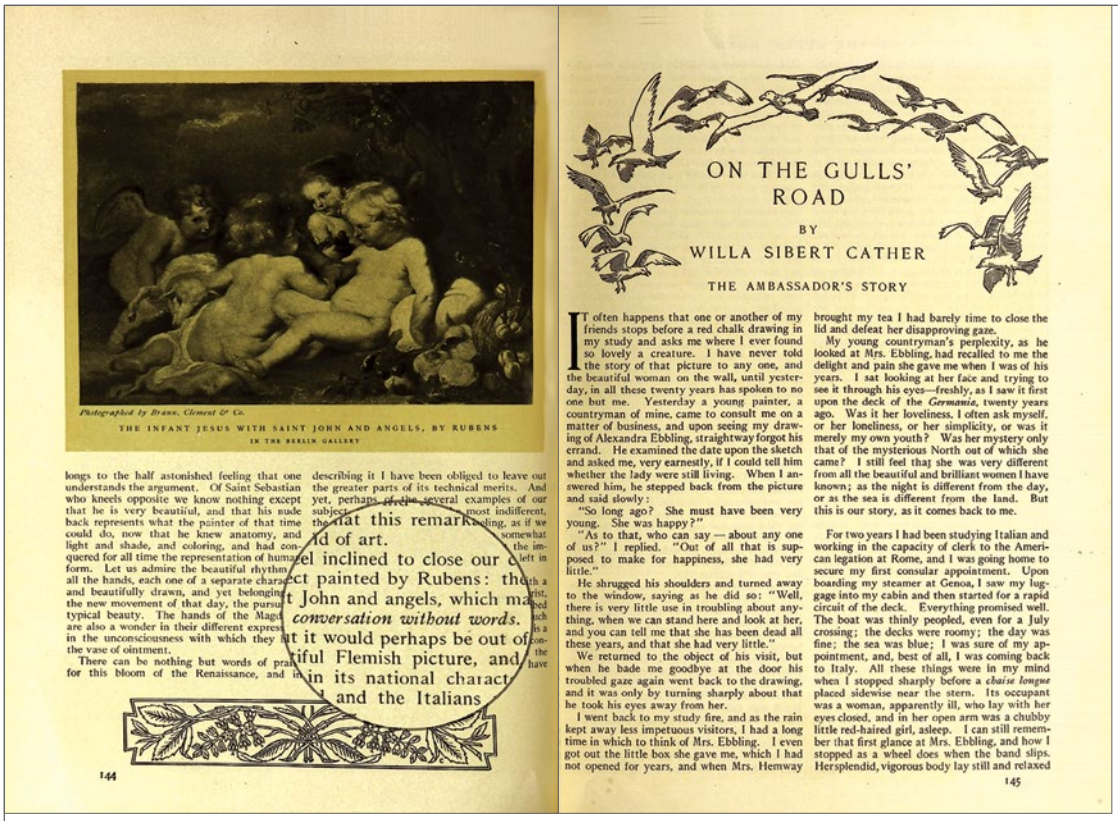
DETAIL FROM THE ANATOMY LESSON (1632).
IMPERIAL MUSEUM, THE HAGUE.
From a photograph by Braun, Clement & Co.

REMBRANDT.

BY JOHN LA FARGE,
Author of "Michelangelo," "Raphael," etc.

McClure's Magazine, vol. 18, Apr. 1902, p. 503 (detail). HathiTrust Digital Library.

Despite Cather's noted admiration for La Farge as a painter and stained glass artisan,[2] the crosshatching between their careers at *McClure's* has largely escaped critical attention. Joseph Urgo, in an illuminating study of the cohesion



Photographed by Braun, Clement & Co.

THE INFANT JESUS WITH SAINT JOHN AND ANGELS, BY RUBENS
IN THE BERLIN GALLERY

longs to the half astonished feeling that one understands the argument. Of Saint Sebastian who kneels opposite we know nothing except that he is very beautiful, and that his nude back represents what the painter of that time could do, now that he knew anatomy, and light and shade, and coloring, and had conquered for all time the representation of human form. Let us admire the beautiful rhythm all the hands, each one of a separate character and beautifully drawn, and yet belonging the new movement of that day, the pursuit typical beauty. The hands of the Magdalen are also a wonder in their different expression in the unconsciousness with which they hold the vase of ointment.

There can be nothing but words of praise for this bloom of the Renaissance, and in describing it I have been obliged to leave out the greater parts of its technical merits. And yet, perhaps, of the several examples of our subject [illegible] most indifferent, the [illegible]at this remark[illegible]ding, as if we [illegible]d of art. [illegible]el inclined to close our [illegible]ect painted by Rubens: th[illegible] John and angels, which ma[illegible] *conversation without words.* [illegible]t it would perhaps be out of [illegible]iful Flemish picture, and [illegible] in its national charact[illegible] and the Italians [illegible]

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ON THE GULLS' ROAD

BY

WILLA SIBERT CATHER

THE AMBASSADOR'S STORY

It often happens that one or another of my friends stops before a red chalk drawing in my study and asks me where I ever found so lovely a creature. I have never told the story of that picture to any one, and the beautiful woman on the wall, until yesterday, in all these twenty years has spoken to no one but me. Yesterday a young painter, a countryman of mine, came to consult me on a matter of business, and upon seeing my drawing of Alexandra Ebbling, straightway forgot his errand. He examined the date upon the sketch and asked me, very earnestly, if I could tell him whether the lady were still living. When I answered him, he stepped back from the picture and said slowly:

"So long ago? She must have been very young. She was happy?"

"As to that, who can say — about any one of us?" I replied. "Out of all that is supposed to make for happiness, she had very little."

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away to the window, saying as he did so: "Well, there is very little use in troubling about anything, when we can stand here and look at her, and you can tell me that she has been dead all these years, and that she had very little."

We returned to the object of his visit, but when he bade me goodbye at the door his troubled gaze again went back to the drawing, and it was only by turning sharply about that he took his eyes away from her.

I went back to my study fire, and as the rain kept away less impetuous visitors, I had a long time in which to think of Mrs. Ebbling. I even got out the little box she gave me, which I had not opened for years, and when Mrs. Hemway brought my tea I had barely time to close the lid and defeat her disapproving gaze.

My young countryman's perplexity, as he looked at Mrs. Ebbling, had recalled to me the delight and pain she gave me when I was of his years. I sat looking at her face and trying to see it through his eyes—freshly, as I saw it first upon the deck of the *Germania*, many years ago. Was it her loveliness, I often ask myself, or her loneliness, or her simplicity, or was it merely my own youth? Was her mystery only that of the mysterious North out of which she came? I still feel that she was very different from all the beautiful and brilliant women I have known; as the night is different from the day, or as the sea is different from the land. But this is our story, as it comes back to me.

For two years I had been studying Italian and working in the capacity of clerk to the American legation at Rome, and I was going home to secure my first consular appointment. Upon boarding my steamer at Genoa, I saw my luggage into my cabin and then started for a rapid circuit of the deck. Everything promised well. The boat was thinly peopled, even for a July crossing; the decks were roomy; the day was fine; the sea was blue; I was sure of my appointment, and, best of all, I was coming back to Italy. All these things were in my mind when I stopped sharply before a *chaise longue* placed sidewise near the stern. Its occupant was a woman, apparently ill, who lay with her eyes closed, and in her open arm was a chubby little red-haired girl, asleep. I can still remember that first glance at Mrs. Ebbling, and how I stopped as a wheel does when the band slips. Her splendid, vigorous body lay still and relaxed

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McClure's Magazine, vol. 32, Dec. 1908, pp. 144–45. Modernist Journals Project.

between Cather's *McClure's* fiction and the magazine's overall content, does point out that "On the Gulls' Road" immediately follows the La Farge feature "One Hundred Masterpieces of Painting: Sacred Conversations" in the December 1908 issue, and that—taking off from a red chalk drawing in the narrator's study—it exemplifies La Farge's concluding observation that an image can encompass "a *conversation without words*" (La Farge, "One Hundred Masterpieces" 144; Urgo 64–65). However, Urgo omits La Farge's larger involvement at *McClure's* and its association with Cather's. La Farge's 1908 article was, in fact, the last of twenty-one contributions since 1901, most of which were collected in two books for general readers: *Great Masters* (1903) and the posthumous *One Hundred Masterpieces of Painting* (1912).[3] Complementing La Farge's dispatches on art history, all six of Cather's *McClure's* stories from 1905 through 1908 ("The Sculptor's Funeral," "Paul's Case," "The Namesake," "The Profile," "Eleanor's House," "On the Gulls' Road") grapple with problems of capturing an authentic "image" of life, and four of them focus specifically on the visual arts and the figure of the artist. A central theme running through La Farge's criticism and Cather's early fiction at *McClure's*—in line with the project of the magazine as a whole—is the construction of durable images from the stream of experience and the communicability of those images in a modern American marketplace.

A proto-modernist of prodigious learning like his friend Henry Adams, La Farge viewed art history as a dialectical unfolding of subjectivity, memory, and artistic production. As La Farge never tired of repeating, the artist's way of seeing is the sum total of his accumulated "memories," visual or otherwise, concretized in the work of art. Addressing art students at the Metropolitan Museum in 1893, he explained: "the sight of the moment is merely a theme upon which we embroider the memories of former likings, former aspirations, former habits, images that we have cared for, and through which we indicate to others our training, our race, the entire educated part of our nature" (*Considerations on Painting* 182). However, for La Farge the artwork is not simply an archive of the artist's past: it is a living image of its own creation, as the experience of a lifetime comes to a point in the artist's moving hand. "The work of plastic art records in the same way as real life does, the mass of feelings that belong to the moment of its production," he writes in his preface to the "One Hundred Masterpieces" series in the December 1903 *McClure's* ("Preface" 148). "As . . . a painting is the result of much combination of thought, so is there time to have the work accumulate the many impressions which the artist has received . . . and which he hands to us" (148). Paradoxically, La Farge suggests that the more the work registers the hurly-burly of its production, the more durable the image it captures. The masterwork is one that penetrates fleeting fashions to discover "the life of all mankind" showing forth in the revelation of the artist's idiosyncratic and dynamic self (149).

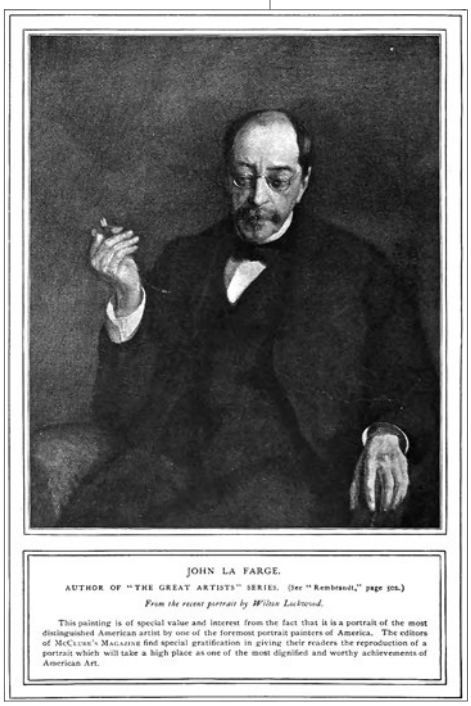
La Farge matched his figure of the artist in action with a corresponding figure of the spectator as co-creator and a cultural agenda bridging the two across time. "In a work of art, executed through the body and appealing to the mind through the senses," he declared, "the entire make-up of its creator addresses the entire constitution" of its intended viewer (*Considerations on Painting* 14). Because "an appeal to another mind . . . cannot draw out more than that mind contains" (42), La Farge set out to expand the intellectual equipment of the average spectator. He wrote the *McClure's* "Masterpieces" series, he explained, so that "any one sensitive to the impression of a work of art might learn more about its method, its origins, and the special circumstances which have helped to make it: the personality of the maker, the habits of his time, and those matters which allowed him freedom or tied

him down." The study of art, he said, aims to liberate "our mental action" as spectators by bringing it in line with the action that produced the work ("Preface" 149). In La Farge's teleological art history, the memories of the artistic genius, not fully understood by contemporaries, await a convergence with the memories of future spectators. Always ahead of its time, the masterpiece "will only be understood as other people's memories accumulate" impressions from nature and from subsequent works of art, until it is recognized retrospectively as a "bridge to a new land" (*Considerations on Painting* 152). It is essential, then, for a culture to continually refresh its commonwealth of images in order to progressively unveil the works of the past, and by extension, sustain the historical memory that only great art has the power to perpetuate. In 1893 La Farge appealed to "the guardians of such vast intellectual property as we detain in museums" to "aid by many means the diffusion of their knowledge," in order "to make common intellectual property of this accumulation" (161–62).

La Farge's late-career run in *McClure's* is entirely consistent with his ambition to foster—through broad cooperation among museums, educators, and publishers—a shared and expanding national archive of visual images, a museum without walls. Clearly, a key component of La Farge's project was the dissemination of the state-of-the-art photographic reproductions that adorn his *McClure's* articles, frequently credited to the era's leading art publishers, Braun, Clément & Co., a French firm that vastly expanded the visibility of European art in North America through its New York branch ("Noted Family" 8). At a time when American industrialists were absorbing European collections and gifting works to American museums,[4] La Farge cooperated with *McClure's* in making European art broadly available in print. When *McClure's* lionized La Farge with a frontispiece portrait in the April 1902 issue containing his Rembrandt essay, the editors underscored their commitment to publishing reproductions of American art as well: "This painting is of special value and interest from the fact that it is a portrait of the most distinguished American artist by one of the foremost portrait painters of America," runs the caption beneath the portrait by Wilton Lockwood. "The editors of *McClure's Magazine* find special gratification in giving their readers the reproduction of a portrait which will take a high place as one of the most dignified and worthy achievements of American Art."

By recalling, in "On the Gulls' Road," the lead Rembrandt image from one of La Farge's popular essays, Cather joined his effort at *McClure's* to stock the nation's pictorial consciousness and stoke the memories of their shared readership. In fact, Cather's *McClure's* stories dramatize an obsession, similar to La Farge's, with fashioning authentic images that will secure the accumulation of memory against the diminishments of time. These images typically have European precedents but follow a narrative drive toward embodiment in American modernity. Just as La Farge enriched the nation's shared cultural legacy through the mechanical reproduction of European art, Cather in the same pages chronicled the struggles of American expatriates to bind their European experiences to American realities. At *McClure's*, both La Farge and Cather sought to expand the synapses of American memory through the preservation, communication, and recombination of images.

Cather's "The Namesake" (March 1907), for example, studies the construction of national images, from conception to reception, in terms that align closely with La Farge's principles. The story centers on an expatriate American sculptor in Paris, Lyon Hartwell, who has attracted into his orbit seven young American acolytes hailing variously from New Hampshire, Colorado, Nevada, and the Midwest, with the narrator himself from California. To them, Hartwell seems "to mean all of it—from ocean to ocean" (492). This stature rests on his having executed in bronze a series of nationalist icons—the *Scout*, the *Pioneer*, the *Gold Seekers*—embodying "all the restless, teeming force of that adventurous wave still climbing westward in our own

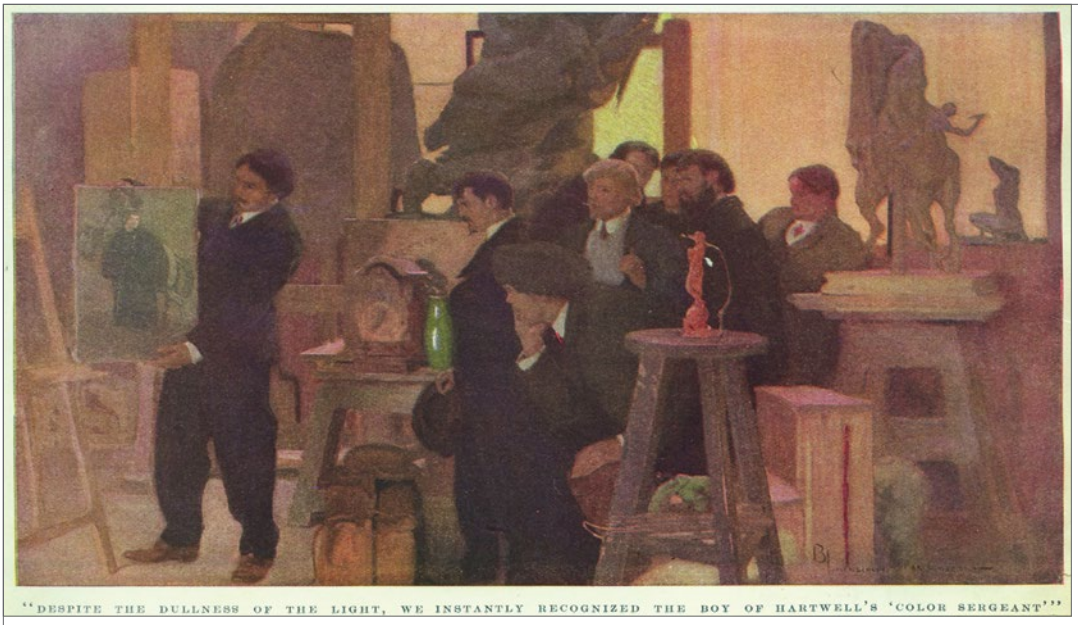

JOHN LA FARGE.

AUTHOR OF "THE GREAT ARTISTS" SERIES. (See "Rembrandt," page 501.)

From the recent portrait by Wilton Lockwood.

This painting is of special value and interest from the fact that it is a portrait of the most distinguished American artist by one of the foremost portrait painters of America. The editors of McClure's Magazine find special gratification in giving their readers the reproduction of a portrait which will take a high place as one of the most dignified and worthy achievements of American Art.

Frontispiece image of John La Farge from *McClure's Magazine*, vol. 18, Apr. 1902, and the 1891 portrait by Wilton Lockwood on which it was based. Portrait: Hayden Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. *McClure's* page: HathiTrust Digital Library.



"DESPITE THE DULLNESS OF THE LIGHT, WE INSTANTLY RECOGNIZED THE BOY OF HARTWELL'S 'COLOR SERGEANT'"

Painting by E. L. Blumenschein. *McClure's Magazine*, vol. 28, Mar. 1907. National Willa Cather Center.

land across the waters." His latest project in this vein is a Civil War monument called *The Color Sergeant*, "the figure of a young soldier running, clutching the folds of a flag, the staff of which had been shot away" (493). Flanked by his students in his Paris studio, Lyon Hartwell reveals the original of the color sergeant to be the uncle for whom he is named—a scene depicted in an illustration by American modernist painter E. L. Blumenschein, a friend of Cather's.[5]

Hartwell, trained in Rome and Paris, then shares the remote American experience that inspired not only this work but all his signature achievements. Years earlier, returning from Europe to his ancestral home near Pittsburgh to care for an invalid aunt, he became transfixed by the story of this uncle who died heroically, aged sixteen, in the Civil War. Hartwell's pursuit of Lyon's living image culminates in the discovery of the boy's personal possessions, including a copy of the *Aeneid* with a sketch of a flag under an inscription from the national anthem. "I seemed, somehow, at last to have known him," Hartwell says of this encounter with his namesake's personal traces, "to have been with him in that careless, unconscious moment"—pictured in another Blumenschein illustration, with the equivocal title "Lyon"—"and to have known him as he was then" (497). After a European upbringing, this American epiphany made him feel for the first time "the pull of race and blood and kindred," a tie to the very earth, and it gave birth to his major phase. In language that resonates both aesthetically and politically, he says: "It was the same feeling that artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force, or purpose and security, of being glad that we have lived" (497).

Hartwell's reference to "union" is decisive. In Cather's poem "The Namesake," originally published in 1902, her persona addresses an uncle who died "barely twenty-one" serving in the Confederate army (28). In *April Twilights* (1903), the poem is dedicated to "W.S.B.," Cather's imprecise shorthand for her Confederate uncle James William ("Willie") Boak, who died at nineteen from wounds suffered at Second Manassas (Romines 6–8, 15). Her shift from a Confederate uncle in the 1902 poem to a Union uncle in the 1907 story of the same name aligns with the pursuit of unifying, national images in her *McClure's* fiction. As Ann Romines observes, "To make the Civil War ancestor a Union soldier . . . makes possible Hartwell's personal and artistic act of union with the dead solider, a union that advances his career—as the publication of the story in a major national magazine, *McClure's*, may well have advanced Cather's career" (8).

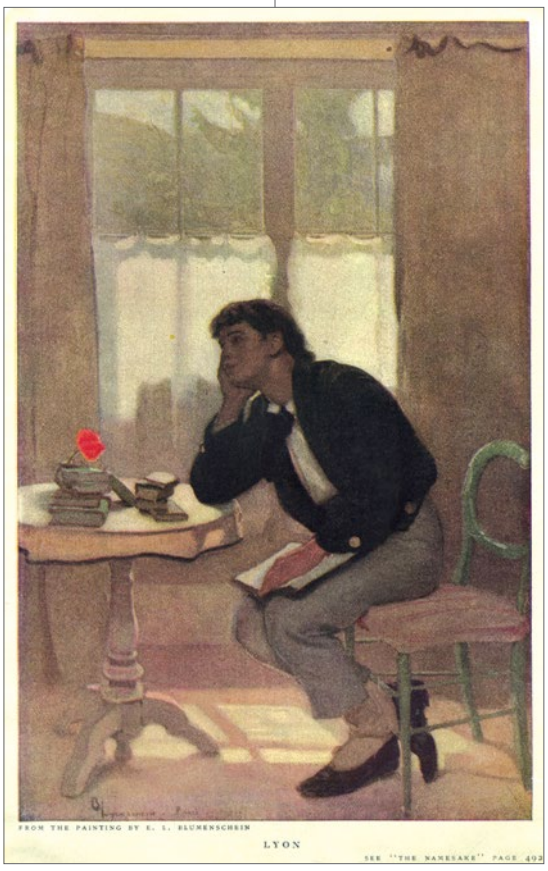
"The Namesake" is in several ways a fictional companion to La Farge's essays in *McClure's*. First, it strikingly dramatizes La Farge's idea that a work of plastic art records, during the course of its production, the artist's accumulated impressions. Second, the story upholds La Farge's passion for the reproduction and circulation of images as "common intellectual property" that is continually reappraised through the education of spectators. Hartwell's foundational experience during his Pittsburgh sojourn resuscitated the memory of his uncle, who was "nothing but the dull image in the brain" of his elderly aunt (496), and embodied it in the succession of bronze masterworks that have already fixed themselves in the popular mind. In so doing, he grafts his family's memories onto the nation's, and, however reluctantly, taps into "the very incandescence of human energy," the "tumultuous life" of Pittsburgh's "great glass and iron manufactories" bearing down on his ancestral home (494). Hartwell yokes personal memory to "the feeling of union with some great force, of purpose and security" (497). Finally, Blumenschein's illustrations expand the memorial foundation of the fictional Hartwell's sculptures. "Lyon" graphically merges the sculptor's identity with that of his namesake. Blumenschein's studio scene—an adaptation of Henri Fantin-Latour's *A Studio in the Batignolles*, the famous 1870 portrait of Édouard Manet's circle (Jaap 134)—repurposes European intellectual property in American terms, as Cather does with Rembrandt in "On the Gulls' Road."

The "Namesake" paradigm of fleeting images achieving American embodiment via European culture informs

Cather's other early *McClure's* stories as well, albeit with more ambivalence. In "The Sculptor's Funeral" (January 1905), the late Harvey Merrick escaped the vulgarity and provinciality of his Kansas upbringing to pursue "the yearning of a boy, cast ashore upon a desert of newness and ugliness and sordidness, for all that is chastened and old, and noble with traditions" (333). In a celebrated transatlantic career, Merrick fashioned, on the model of La Farge, images that epitomize the moment's experience: "Upon whatever he had come in contact with, he had left a beautiful record of the experience—a sort of ethereal signature; a scent, a sound, a color that was his own" (333). Only as he approached an early death did he reveal, in his wish to be buried back in Sand City, an unfulfilled desire to ground his memory in the frontier where his genius sprouted so uneasily. In "The Profile" (June 1907), set in Paris, the American expatriate painter Aaron Dunlap's emotional and artistic battle with a scar on his American wife Virginia's face likewise betrays unfinished business with his American origins. Unable to repel the disfigurement lurking just beyond the borders of his wife's profile, his spiritual reading of her image is of a piece with the psychological "mark" he bears from his brutal West Virginia childhood and his revulsion at her typically Californian "mania for lavish display" (136, 139). In "Eleanor's House" (October 1907) an American expatriate in England, Harold Forscythe, desperate to preserve the image of his deceased wife Eleanor, runs off to the house in Normandy they once shared, dishonoring his recent marriage to a younger American woman of less cultivation. Forscythe shares Lyon Hartwell's anxiety about the fragility of images and the need to secure them: "Sometimes I think the image of [Eleanor]—coming down the stairs, crossing the garden, holding out her hand—is growing dimmer, and that terrifies me," he says. "Some people and some places give me the feeling of her" (625). His new wife, however, succeeds in usurping the image of her predecessor and delivering him back to America. In all these stories, memories impinge upon "the sight of the moment," as La Farge has it, and characters submit, however grudgingly, to the gravitational pull of their American origins.

In "On the Gulls' Road," the ambassador-narrator's memories of the terminally ill Scandinavian beauty Alexandra Ebbling, wife of the ship engineer, range across a similar American teleology. Their mutual infatuation unfolds on a voyage that lingers protractedly amid the color-saturated vistas of the Mediterranean, as if reluctant to enter the Atlantic—which Alexandra calls "the real sea . . . where the doings of the world go on" (150)—and cross to New York. Their relationship will founder upon landing in America, but twenty years later Alexandra's image will be unpacked in a *McClure's* short story, stimulated by an American painter's interest in the narrator's drawing of her.

Significantly, it is the narrator's perception of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson* in the guise of his American countrywomen—and, on another level, Cather's allusion to the detail in La Farge's Rembrandt feature—that set this image-making process in motion. After guiding the ailing Alexandra to her ship cabin, the narrator reports, he "returned to the deck and joined a group of my countrywomen, who, primed with inexhaustible information, were discussing the baseness of Renaissance art. They were intelligent and alert, and as they leaned forward in their deck chairs under the circle of light, their faces recalled to me Rembrandt's picture of a clinical lecture" (147). The narrator's vision upholds La Farge's principle that "the sight of the moment is merely a theme upon which we embroider the memories of," among other things, "images we have cared for . . . the entire educated part of our nature." Moreover, these American women—"intelligent and alert" and "primed with inexhaustible information," possessing the "common intellectual property" La Farge advocated—are themselves stand-ins, in a sense, for the readers of *McClure's*, engaged in the collective work of aesthetic judgment. If their dissection is too "clinical" for the narrator's taste—he says he listens to them "against my will"—his painterly perception of them inspires him to arrest Alexandra's image from the stream of experience, as he retreats to the ship's stern for a smoke: "My mind played constantly with her image. At one moment she was very clear and directly in front of me; the next she was far away. Whatever else I thought about, some part of my consciousness was busy with Mrs. Ebbling; hunting for her, finding her, losing her, then groping again" (147). Two days later he begins drawing her, for "an opportunity to study her face" (149), and produces the captivating red chalk sketch that hangs in his present-day study.



From the painting by E. L. Blumenschein, *McClure's Magazine*, vol. 28, Mar. 1907. National Willa Cather Center.

Henri Fantin-Latour, *Un atelier aux Batignolles (A Studio in the Batignolles)*, 1870. Copywright RMN–Grand Palais (Musée d'Orsay)/Patrice Schmidt.

It is worth noting that La Farge judged *The Anatomy Lesson* an immature masterpiece, fixed on "*appearances*" and "a power of formulation" ("Rembrandt" 513); only in his later work, especially his drawings and etchings, did Rembrandt distill his identity, experience, and "extraordinary sympathy" for his subjects (514). Within the scope of his amateur talents, the "Gulls' Road" narrator follows a similar course: transcending the "inexhaustible information" of his compatriot travelers, he draws Alexandra Ebbling with profound sympathy, but as the story closes he is still fingering a preserved coil of her hair. The ambassador's story is itself an anatomy lesson: a postmortem articulation of his beloved's image, for an interested circle of readers.

While "The Sculptor's Funeral," "The Profile," "Eleanor's House," and "On the Gulls' Road" complicate the paradigm of "The Namesake," "Paul's Case" (May 1905) inverts it. Here an impressionable Pittsburgh youth, transfixed by an idealized image of the artistic life, never makes it to Europe but briefly performs his imagined script, on stolen money, in New York. Unable to reconcile his artistic vision with the American bourgeois culture that, for better or worse, funds the arts, Paul is prey to what La Farge calls "false ideas" that "limit and cramp our mental action"; he disregards the "special circumstances" of art's production (La Farge, "Preface" 149). In a telling scene at the Carnegie's art gallery, missing from the magazine text but included in the earlier McClure Press's *Troll Garden* (March 1905) and subsequent versions, the exhibits give Paul no insight into creative process, but instead stimulate romantic reverie and jocular contempt, sealed with his "evil gesture at the Venus of Milo as he passed her on the stairway" ("Paul's Case" 203–4). As his New York escapade careens toward suicide, he is mentally torn between two disjointed archives in his "picture-making mechanism": on one side are "images" of faces he has seen in New York and on the ferry, metonyms for "the ugliness of the world"; on the other are hyperreal images of the Old World, "the blue of Adriatic water, the yellow of Algerian sands"—each archive too pure to blend with the other (83). Paul's tragedy is that, in contrast to other *McClure's* figures like Lyon Hartwell, Harvey Merrick, and the ambassador, he does not survive to a maturity that might balance the forces of Europe and America, art and pragmatism.

Following La Farge's slow-burning conception of the moment as an epitome of personal and cultural memory, Cather's major fiction compresses unwieldy lifespans and conflicting traditions into incandescent images struck from the onrush of American progress: the Virgilian plow on the developing prairie magnified against the setting sun; Latour's French Midi-Romanesque cathedral rising theatrically above a tangle of Southwestern Native, Anglo, and Hispanic cultures; Rosicky's Nebraska grave absorbing the accidental sweep of his own transatlantic odyssey. Such images, deeply personal repositories of national memory, are latter-day legacies of the modern visual culture Cather advanced with La Farge at *McClure's*.

NOTES

1. In a letter to Cather dated November 27, 1908, Jewett deems the story's male narrator "something of a masquerade," and suggests "you could almost have done it [the narration] as yourself—a woman could love her [Alexandra Ebbling] in that same protecting way" (246–47).

2. Manhattan's Church of the Ascension, which La Farge outfitted with four opalescent windows as well as the mural *The Ascension of Our Lord* (1888) above the altar, was Cather's "favourite church in New York," according to Edith Lewis (151). In 1942 Cather studied the stained glass at Williams College's Thompson Memorial Chapel, which features La Farge's *Abraham and an Angel* (1882), dedicated to the memory of President James A. Garfield (*Selected Letters* 612; Murphy 265).

3. La Farge's magazine articles appeared primarily in *McClure's*, but he contributed occasionally to "highbrow" periodicals like *Scribner's* and *The International Monthly* as well (Katz 107). At *McClure's,* August Jaccaci, who

served as art editor from 1896 to 1902, shepherded La Farge's early contributions into print and stayed involved in the "One Hundred Masterpieces of Painting" series published between 1903 and 1908 (Yarnall 275).

4. In "Princely Aspirations," Andrea Bayer et al. survey the impact of wealthy collectors and benefactors like J. Pierpont Morgan on the Metropolitan Museum in the early twentieth century.

5. James A. Jaap documents Cather's friendship with Blumenschein and discusses the artist's illustrations for "The Namesake."

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The *Willa Cather Review* welcomes scholarly essays, notes, news items, and letters. Scholarly essays should generally not exceed 5,000 words, although longer essays may be considered; they should be submitted in Microsoft Word as email attachments and should follow current MLA guidelines as articulated in the *MLA Handbook.*

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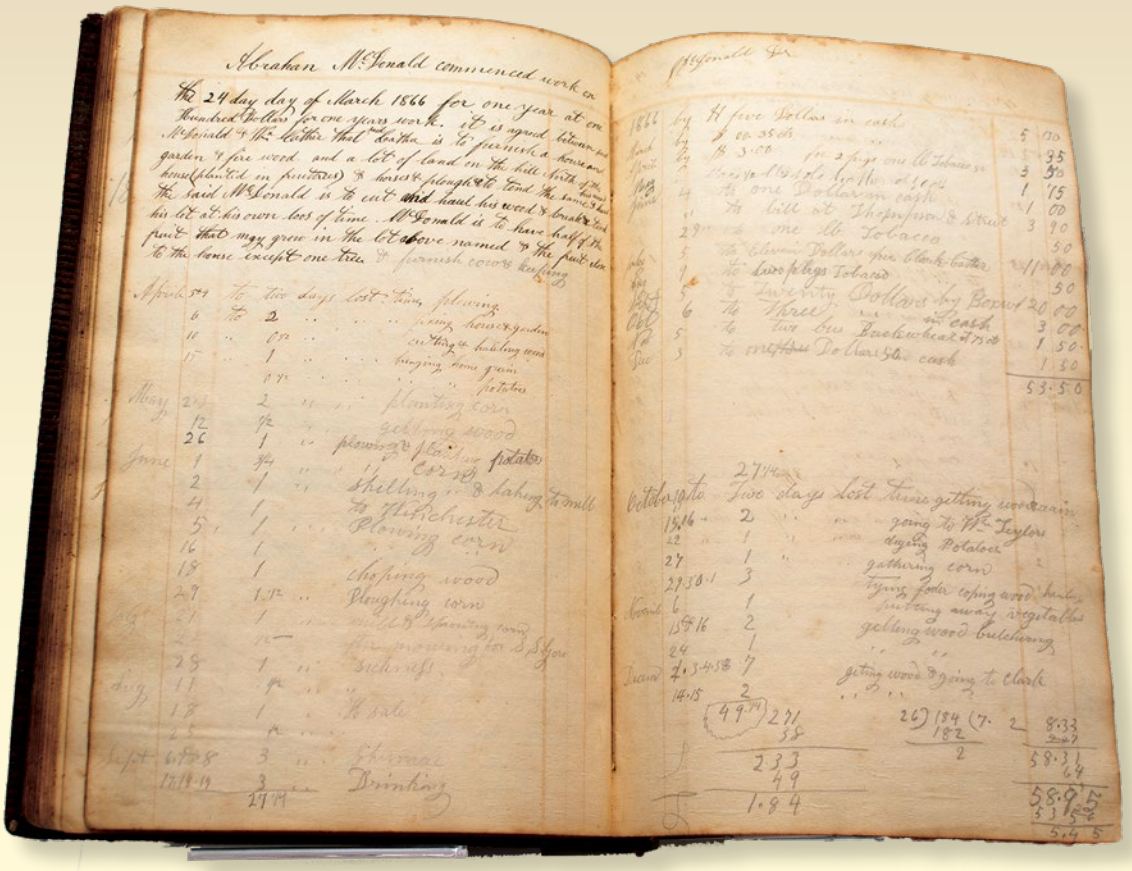


From the Blanche Cather Ray Collection at the National Willa Cather Center.

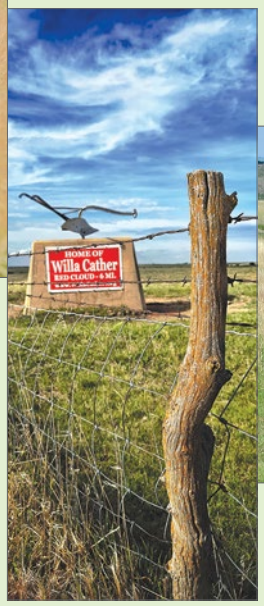
From the Collection

William Cather's day book, with entries from 1841 through 1868, details both antebellum and postbellum farm life in Frederick County, Virginia. It documents William's income, expenses, and the labor practices of his small farm—a farm that Charles Cather would take over when William moved to Nebraska with his wife, Emily Ann Caroline Cather. Sadly, few detailed entries elaborate on the Cathers' personal lives beyond their buying habits; no notes, for example, detail William's marriage in 1846, nor the birth of his son Charles—Willa's father—in 1848. Oddly, the Civil War years are entirely absent.

The entries that do exist, however, paint a picture of a tight-knit rural community where subsistence farming is supplemented by cash labor. William Cather's "butter acct." figures largely in his income, as does his sale of soap and rents collected for his pastures. The book also contains agreements between William and his hired help, along with an accounting of "time lost" from work, for reasons ranging from "3 days lost drinking" to "hunting a girl."

"Life was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together."

—One of Ours



The National Willa Cather Center's purpose is to ensure that Cather's literature inspires and enriches lives. Our commitment to preservation and conservation allows visitors to walk through the unbroken prairie; sit in the Burlington Depot that ushered in her greatest adventures; gaze out the window of her attic bedroom; and experience other settings from her most celebrated works.

When you join the Cather Legacy Society and make gift arrangements to benefit the National Willa Cather Center beyond your lifetime, you help us serve thousands of readers and visitors each year. Your estate planning attorney can include a provision in your will that leaves a lasting gift to us: a specific asset, a dollar amount, or a percentage of your estate. A bequest can also be made from the residue of your estate or what is left after all gifts have been made to your heirs. You can make an impact and support future generations with a gift that makes a statement about who you are and what's important to you. **What will your legacy be?**

For more information or to notify us of a planned gift, please contact Jeniffer Beahm at 402-746-2653 or jbeahm@willacather.org.

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