

Willa Cather REVIEW

Volume 66 | No. 1 | Spring 2025

Hope will come back with the spring,
Joy with the lark's returning;
Love must awake betimes,
When crocus buds are a-burning.

Many people seem to think that art is a luxury to be imported and tacked on to life. Art springs out of the very stuff that life is made of.

She was struggling with something she had never felt before. A new conception of art? It came closer than that. A new kind of personality? But it was much more. It was a discovery about life, a revelation of love as a tragic force, not a melting mood, of passion that drowns like black water.

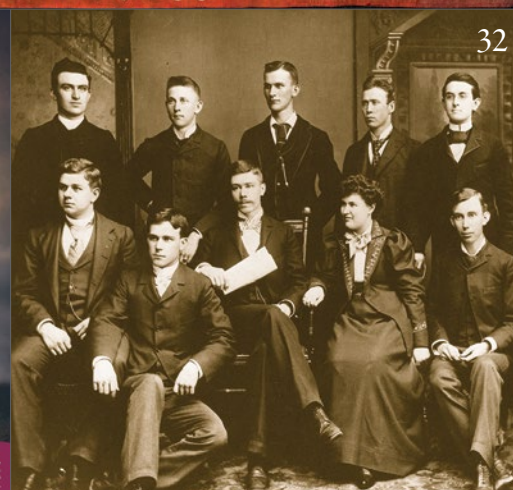
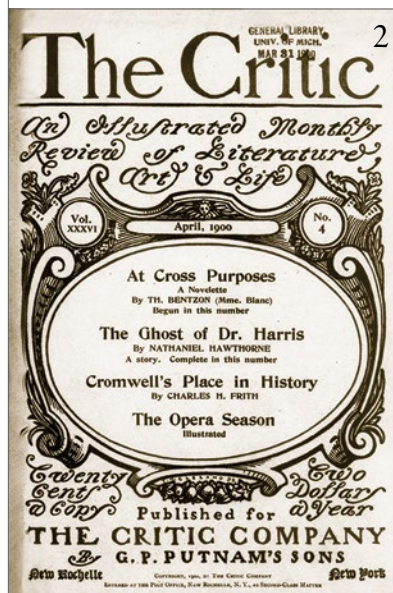
But ah, such description! All English description is odious. Careful, accurate, burdened with irrelevant detail, lifeless, leaving no picture in the reader's mind. But with the French it is a different matter. They write as they paint, to bring out an effect.

After all, the supreme virtue in art is soul, perhaps it is the only thing which gives art the right to be.



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Letter from the Executive Director Ashley Olson

Greetings and happy spring! It is a pleasure to introduce the first *Willa Cather Review* issue of 2025. A special welcome to our first-time readers! With each edition of the *Review*, we strive to bring you new scholarship and to illustrate the enduring attributes of Cather's literature. This issue is no exception. After reading these essays, perhaps you'll be enticed to revisit *April Twilights*, *Lucy Gayheart*, or *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Maybe you'll simply draw new connections between Cather's life and art, or consider her work in relation to our lived experiences.

Spring at the Cather Center is always a busy and exciting time. The most joyous occasion was a soft opening to celebrate the rehabilitation of the Potter-Wright building into a beautiful boutique hotel and event venue. After more than twenty-six months of construction, we were delighted to showcase the carefully renovated building and to welcome our first guests. An evening event with acclaimed author Karen Russell in discussion about her new novel, *The Antidote*, provided a delightful bookend to the day's festivities. Looking ahead, anyone who embarks on a literary pilgrimage to Red Cloud will soon see what an important

addition Hotel Garber is to enable visits that span a day or two to fully explore our museum and historic sites.

Outside our own museum walls, our work to elevate Cather's voice continues. The Big Read of *My Ántonia* has led to educational talks and traveling exhibits about the novel and its genesis, as well as selections of readings and screenings of the documentary *Willa Cather: Breaking the Mold*. Events have taken place at dozens of public libraries, high schools, colleges, and museums. And as an extension of the 150-year anniversary celebration of Cather, the Los Angeles Public Library hosted an incredibly memorable ALOUD program of specially curated readings and musical performances. Our next stop is Chicago on June 17 for "American Voice: An Evening with Willa Cather" at the Newberry Library. See willacather.org/events for more details!

Whether we are rehabilitating buildings or taking Cather on the road, the most rewarding aspect of our work is seeing lives enriched through engagement with Cather's literature. Sometimes it is as simple as providing paperback copies of *My Ántonia* to high school classrooms across the country. Often it's more involved, such as welcoming hundreds to a multiday conference that fuses Cather scholarship with the visual and performing arts. However our mission reaches you, we are grateful for your continued interest and support.



Letter from the President Mark Bostock

My, how time flies. It seems like I was just writing this article for the winter edition. At that point, we were on the final countdown to finish the Hotel Garber. I'm happy to report that the hotel is now finished and open. As with any large construction project, there are a few things left to do before we'll be entirely done. We're still working on completing the kitchen, which was delayed due to late-arriving equipment (also common with any large construction project).

The hotel looks beautiful. I had the chance to walk through the entire facility with our project manager, John Taylor, before the grand opening celebration on April 4. John Scwhichtenberg (our hotel manager) and his team, Ashley Olson and her team, and a lot of local folks did a fabulous job getting the hotel ready for the grand opening. Many thanks to them!

The grand opening, ribbon cutting, and celebration for donors was well attended by folks from across the country, and

the hotel was sold out that weekend. Donors had first dibs on getting to be the first hotel guests. We're delighted that feedback has been very positive. Now we're working hard to get the word out that the hotel is open for business.

A number of naming opportunities remain for areas in the hotel. Plus, for gifts of \$1,000 or more, your name will appear on the donor board, which is prominently located in the lobby. Our campaign for Hotel Garber is at 97% of the goal, with only \$230,000 needed to complete it. Anything that *Review* readers could donate would be very much appreciated.

We are now looking forward to the 70th annual Willa Cather Spring Conference, to be held June 5–7. It should be another great year, especially considering that conference attendees will have a nice new place to stay. We are excited about having Jane Smiley, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, as a speaker, as well as many other presentations. Frankly, I'm looking forward to being in Red Cloud and seeing friends and family who live there. Whatever your reason for coming, I believe you will enjoy the conference and childhood home of Willa Cather. Please try to join us.



Cather in the *Critic*: Readership and Reputation of a Poet

James A. Jaap

Willa Cather was first a poet who wrote poetry much of her life: her first published poem, "Shakespeare: A Freshman Theme," appeared in 1892; *April Twilights*, her first book of any genre, was published in 1903; and in 1923, at the height of her literary fame, she reissued the poetry collection, with significant additions and subtractions, as *April Twilights and Other Poems*. For decades, the authoritative texts on the publication history of Cather's poems have been Bernice Slote's 1968 bibliography that concludes her edited volume of *April Twilights* (1903) and Joan Crane's 1982 bibliography of all Cather's work. These bibliographies are invaluable for any student of Cather, but thanks to the digitization of newspapers and magazines, an update is necessary. Recent discoveries reveal that several of Cather's poems from *April Twilights* were published in a much wider selection of newspapers and periodicals than previously known. Three of these poems, "Grandmither, Think Not I Forget," "Asphodel," and "Winter at Delphi," first appeared in 1900 and 1901 in the *Critic*, an important American literary magazine founded in 1881 by influential editor and critic Jeannette L. Gilder and her younger brother Joseph. All three poems were published in a variety of newspapers across the nation, but only "Grandmither" appeared multiple times after *April Twilights* was published in 1903. A discussion of the publishing histories of these three poems, and Cather's relationships with two prominent literary critics, Jeannette L. Gilder and Charles Hanson Towne, reveals that Cather's poetry reached a wider audience and her reputation as a poet in the early twentieth century was much greater than previously considered.

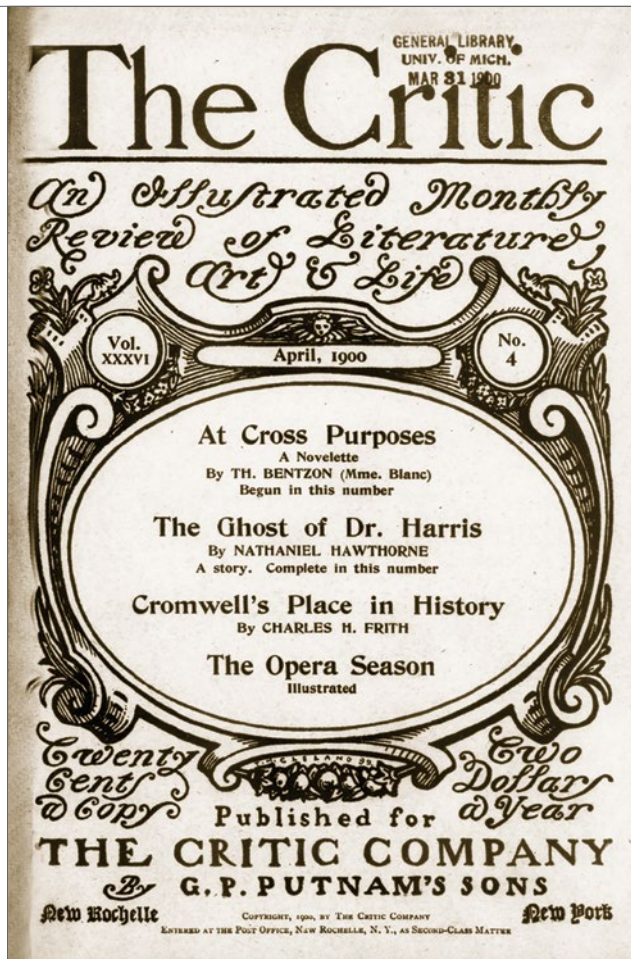
Poetry was always important to Willa Cather. According to Robert Thacker, Cather had a "creative engagement with poetry and poetics" all her life, but it was most pronounced between 1892, when her first published poem, "Shakespeare: A Freshman Theme," appeared in the June 1 issue of the University of Nebraska's *Hesperian* (see page 32), and 1923, when she released *April Twilights and Other Poems*. Between 1892 and 1900, Cather would publish seventeen poems and translations in the *Hesperian*, the *Home Monthly*, the *Lincoln Courier*, and *Library* the short-lived Pittsburgh literary magazine to which she also contributed multiple nonfiction pieces. Of these seventeen, only "Thou Art the Pearl," originally published in the March 1900 *Library*, would be included in *April Twilights*. In April 1900 Cather got her first

big poetry break when "Grandmither, Think Not I Forget" was published in the *Critic*. It was a banner month for Cather. Her first story in a major periodical, "Eric Hermannson's Soul," was published in *Cosmopolitan* that same month. Cather would publish two other poems in the *Critic*: "Asphodel" in December 1900 and "Winter at Delphi" in September 1901.

Of these three poems, "Grandmither, Think Not I Forget" has the most extensive publication history, which should be expected given its prominence in all editions of *April Twilights*. In the 1903 edition, the autobiographical epigraph "Dedicatory" opens the volume, followed by "Grandmither." Cather eliminated "Dedicatory" in subsequent editions of *April Twilights*, and "Grandmither" serves as the opening poem in these volumes.¹ According to Timothy Bintrim and Scott Riner, "Grandmither" was inspired in part by a work of Ethelbert Nevin's and was likely in manuscript in August or September 1899 when Cather vacationed in Red Cloud (25). "Grandmither" first appeared in the April 1900 issue of the *Critic* (published in late March) and then, according to Slote, in the *Pittsburgh Leader* on March 29, the *Lincoln Courier* on April 28, and in the May 1900 edition of *Current Literature* (79). I have located an additional thirteen publications of the poem before *April Twilights* appeared in 1903. After appearing in the *Critic*, the poem was published in the *Boston Evening Transcript* on March 31, 1900 (p. 19), and then in the *Nebraska State Journal* on April 3 (p. 6). This version is notable because it includes a short intro: "Miss Willa Cather has a poem entitled 'Grandmither, Think Not I Forget' in the April *Critic*. The following extracts show its general character" ("People You Know"). The newspaper then cut the third stanza.² The poem was published again on April 8 in the *Chattanooga Daily Times* (p. 10) and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (p. 33), on April 14 in the *Commercial Appeal* of Memphis (p. 4), and on April 15 in the *Kansas City Times* (p. 13). On April 29, "Grandmither" appeared in the *Morning Post* of Raleigh, North Carolina (p. 13), on May 17 in the *Seymour Daily Democrat* of Seymour, Indiana (p. 7), and on July 30 in the *Lead Daily Call* of Lead, South Dakota (p. 7). All include the third stanza, and all conclude with the tag, "Willa Sibert Cather in the April *Critic*" (or slight variation thereof). Nearly a year later, "Grandmither" found new life in four midwestern newspapers. On May 9, 1901,

the poem appeared in the *Burns Citizen* of Burns, Kansas, next to a column on “Suggestions about Celery” and another entitled “Time to Prevent Potato Scabs” (p. 5). On May 10, the poem was published in the *Attica Independent* of Attica, Kansas (p. 5), on June 20 in the *Solomon Valley Democrat* of Minneapolis, Kansas (p. 10), and on July 12 in the *Portage Daily Register* of Portage, Wisconsin (p. 3). All include the full poem, and all conclude with “Willa Sibert Cather in *Critic*.”

Cather’s other two poems in the *Critic* were also reprinted multiple times, but not as often as “Grandmither.” Her second poem in the *Critic*, the sonnet “Asphodel,” first appeared in the December 1900 issue and, according to Slote, the *Nebraska State Journal* on December 17 before publication in *April Twilights* (Slote 80–81). My recent discoveries reveal the poem was published at least ten additional times before April 1903. These include another publication in the *Nebraska State Journal* on December 9 (p. 5), and the *Brooklyn Eagle* on December 13 (p. 4). A day later, the poem appeared in the *Bloomfield Journal* of Bloomfield, Nebraska (p. 4), the *Battle Creek Republican* of Battle Creek, Nebraska (p. 3), and the *Lynch Journal* of Lynch, Nebraska (p. 7). On December 23, “Asphodel” appeared in the *St. Louis Republic* (p. 33), and on December 30 in the *New York Times* as part of a column entitled “Sparks from Magazines,” which includes excerpts from a variety of literary magazines, including *Harper’s*, *Scribner’s*, and the *Critic* (p. 17). The poem was published in the *Courier-Journal* of Louisville, Kentucky on January 6, 1901 (p. 30) and in the *Brooklyn Citizen* on the same day (p. 22). Six months later it appeared in the [Nashville] *Tennessean* on July 3, 1901 (p. 8). All appearances conclude with a variation on the tag, “Willa Sibert Cather in December *Critic*.” Although Cather included the poem in *April Twilights* in 1903, she removed it for the 1923 volume. The poem was again published in a collection from 1911 entitled *The Humbler Poets (Second Series): A Collection of Newspaper and Periodical Verse, 1885 to 1910*, but no further publications have been located.



“Grandmither, Think Not I Forget” was first published in the *Critic* in April 1900.

Cather’s third and final poem in the *Critic*, “Winter at Delphi,” one of several elegiac poems Cather wrote for Ethelbert Nevin, was first published in the September 1901 issue of the *Critic*, and, according to Slote, not again until *April Twilights* in 1903 (81). Recent research shows the poem was published at least two additional times; in the *Kansas City Star* on September 21, 1901 (p. 7), and the *Nebraska State Journal* on October 21, 1902 (p. 9). It appeared in the June 20, 1903 *New York Times* (p. 20) in an unsigned review of *April Twilights*, which also includes Cather’s poem “The Tavern.” Unlike “Asphodel,” “Winter at Delphi” appeared in 1923’s *April Twilights and Other Poems* and all subsequent editions of the book, but no further newspaper publications have been found.

Publishing in the *Critic* was an important step in Cather’s emerging career as a serious author. These were her first poems in a major publication, and while the circulation of the *Critic* was never “much about five thousand,” their republication indicates that Cather’s poems reached a much broader audience than previously considered (Hug 149). Between 1860 and 1900, the number of newspapers in the United States increased at a staggering pace: in 1860 there were 387 daily and 3,173 weekly newspapers in the United States; by 1899, those numbers had risen to 2,226 dailies and 12,979 weeklies (Johanningsmeier 17). This increase in quantity was accompanied by a large increase in circulation. According to Frank Luther Mott, in 1892 only four papers in the country had a circulation of over 100,000. By 1914, that number had risen to over thirty newspapers in a dozen cities (547). This era also saw the rise of the newspaper syndicates, which supplied printed material, including fiction and poetry, to the growing number of newspapers throughout the country. According to Charles Johanningsmeier, prior to the growth of syndicates, “it had been common practice for newspaper editors to clip news articles, features, fiction, and so forth from other ‘exchanged’ newspapers and magazines and reprint these items” (Johanningsmeier 39). If editors saw something worth reprinting, they could simply copy and include



it in their publication. All that was required was an acknowledgement of where the item was first published. The author received no compensation for the publication, but did receive the publicity, and the potential to reach vast audiences of American readers. The republication of Cather's poems in these newspapers, Johanningsmeier shared in a personal interview, was likely not part of any organized syndicate, but rather a simple exchange.

Publishing in the *Critic* also brought Cather into contact with Jeannette L. Gilder, the author, critic, and acquaintance who would play an interesting role in Cather's developing literary reputation. Born in Flushing, New York in 1849, Gilder went to work at the age of fifteen after her father died of smallpox while caring for Union troops during the Civil War. In 1868 she joined the staff of the *Newark Morning Register*, a newspaper established by her older brother Richard, the influential founder and longtime editor of *Century*. For three years she worked as the Newark correspondent for the *New York Tribune* but was fired when the editor discovered "J. L. Gilder" was a woman (Hug 150). She then worked as the literary editor for the *New York Herald*, and in January 1881 she and her brother Joseph established the *Critic*. The first edition of the *Critic* was published on January 15, 1881. A house advertisement in this first edition expresses the Gilders' high aspirations for the magazine:

The *Critic* comes forward to supply a need which all educated Americans will acknowledge. Science, the Arts, and the various branches of commerce, have innumerable exponents in the press. Literature has few; in New York it has none. The fecundity of the book-world, which was never so great as now, and the craving for literary news, which is daily increasing, have forced from the newspapers such recognition as the pressures of other matters would allow. But, in The *Critic*, literature will have the first place. ("The *Critic*" 18)

With editorial offices in New York, from 1881 to 1884 the *Critic* appeared biweekly, then transitioned to a weekly edition after merging with *Good Literature* in 1884. It remained a weekly for fourteen years until 1898, when the magazine shifted to a monthly and increased the quantity of reviews and poetry.



Miss Gilder at Her Desk at Home.

Jeannette L. Gilder as photographed for *Women Authors of Our Day in Their Homes*, James Potts & Company, 1903.

By the time Cather published her poems in the *Critic* in 1900 and 1901, the magazine had solidified its reputation as one of the nation's most influential literary journals and Jeannette Gilder as one of the nation's most important critics. In addition to the young Cather, contributors to the *Critic* included Oscar Wilde, Joel Chandler Harris, Frederick Douglass, Emma Lazarus, Bret Harte, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Walt Whitman, who primarily contributed prose late in his life. Whitman's piece on nature entitled "How I Get Around at 60, and Take Notes" appeared in the second issue, and other Whitman-penned essays in the *Critic* include "The Death of Carlyle," published on February 12, 1881, and "By Emerson's Grave," which appeared on May 6, 1882. One of the magazine's most popular features was a column by Gilder entitled "The Lounger," a gossip column of sorts related to New York's literary society. Frank Luther Mott in his well-known history of American magazines notes that the column "was the part of the magazine that many readers turned to first" (430-31). In 1906, after twenty-five years, the *Critic* was absorbed by *Putnam's Weekly* and ceased publication, although Gilder stayed on as associate editor until 1911.

Gilder was prolific. In addition to her editorial and review work at the *Critic*, Gilder edited several collections, including *Pen Portraits of Literary Women* with Helen Gray Cone (1887), *Authors at Home* with Joseph Benson Gilder (1889), and *Masterpieces of the World's Best Literature* in eight volumes (1905). She also published several plays, a novel, and two

autobiographies that brought some acclaim: *Autobiography of a Tomboy* in 1900 and *The Tomboy at Work* in 1904. The 1903 book *Women Authors of Our Day in Their Homes*, a collection of interviews and literary portraits of authors such as Frances Hodgson Burnett, Rebecca Harding Davis, and Edith Wharton, includes a chapter on Gilder. In the chapter, writer Julia R. Tutwiler states, “Jeannette Gilder’s achievement in the world of critical literature bulks large not only in its quantity, but in the influence it has had upon American literature and in the position it holds in England” (240). Tutwiler also praises the magazine: the *Critic* “stands to-day for the high impartiality, the scrupulous adherence to the unwritten as well as written canons of her [Gilder’s] profession, and the steadfast pursuit of literature for literary, as distinct from commercial, ends that have dominated Jeannette Gilder from the time when, a girl of seventeen, she worked for the *New York Register*” (235). Given the reputations of Gilder and the *Critic*, it is not surprising that editors around the country would read the *Critic* in their search for quality material to republish.

Later in her life, Gilder published columns in *Women’s Home Companion* and the *Chicago Tribune* among other periodicals. Although she and Cather did not overlap at *McClure’s*, she also has several connections to the magazine. In August 1913, Gilder’s account of the beginnings of *McClure’s* and her personal interactions with S. S. McClure, “When ‘McClure’s’ Began,” appeared in the magazine. According to an editorial note introducing the article, in 1893 the *Critic* and *McClure’s* occupied offices on different floors of “the old building of Charles Scribner’s Sons,” and Gilder, who “has one of the widest literary experiences of any person in America,” witnessed “the beginning of what was then a mere experiment in the publishing world—the fifteen-cent magazine—an institution which radically changed the whole business of magazine-making” (69). The piece includes numerous photographs and illustrations, and Gilder praises McClure for his work and vision. Gilder also had a regular review column in *McClure’s* from April 1914 to December 1915.

In addition to her significant publishing and editing activities, Gilder also worked as a literary agent. In 1895 she established a literary brokerage, “Miss Gilder’s Syndicate,” and “negotiated publication and dramatization rights to novels and performance rights to plays” (Hug 152). Little information is available on “Miss Gilder’s Syndicate,” but several documents in her papers at the New York Public Library Archives list individuals she represented, including Frances Hodgson Burnett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and the actress Helena Modjeska, among others. These papers indicate Gilder worked closely with several editors, including her brother Richard at *Century*, to publish the

work of her clients. Although it would explain the continuing publication of Cather’s poems in the months and year after the poems appeared in the *Critic*, Cather’s correspondence from April 1901 indicates she was not part of Gilder’s syndicate and did not know Gilder personally at that time. While she was shopping “The Player Letters” in April 1901, her proposed collection of short pieces addressed to famous theater actors, Cather wrote to Dorothy Canfield Fisher about contacting Gilder: “I had thought that Miss Gilder might be able to use some of them in the ‘Critic’ in the summer season when the theatres are closed and ‘copy’ runs low. Have you any means of access to her? I believe she thinks rather well of me. If she were to see some half-dozen of the better ones she might consider the scheme” (*Complete Letters* no. 0068). Nothing came of the “The Player Letters,” but Cather did eventually connect with Gilder. The “means of access” turned out to be Dorothy’s father James Canfield,³ and not for “The Player Letters” but for *April Twilights*. In a letter to Dorothy from May 1903, Cather writes, “I’m exultant about your father getting the books to such good people. Miss Gilder wrote me a very nice note—will have the book reviewed in the *July Critic*” (*Complete Letters* no. 0085). The book is briefly mentioned in a column on poetry by Edith M. Thomas in the July edition of the *Critic*, but not reviewed (81). Instead, Gilder reviewed *April Twilights* for the May 23, 1903 edition of the *Chicago Tribune* and includes all four stanzas of “Grandmither”: “Once in a while one happens upon the work of a real poet. By this name I would describe Miss Willa Sibert Cather, whose ‘April Twilights’ is just published (Badger). I have seen the work of Miss Cather from time to time in the magazines, but I know nothing of her beyond the fact that she lives in Pittsburgh and is connected with some newspaper in that city. . . . Read the first poem in this little volume, which I will quote, and tell me if you do not find something real in it” (“Among the New Books” 9). Gilder’s review column appeared again in the *Tacoma Daily Ledger* on June 7, 1903, and the poem was again included in its entirety. Gilder obviously knew more about Cather than that she lived in Pittsburgh and was connected to a Pittsburgh newspaper, so why the fib about not knowing “Miss Cather”? Perhaps Gilder did not want to indicate to readers that Cather was an acquaintance.

The relationship between the two grew in the ensuing years, and Gilder continued to champion Cather’s work until her death in 1916. In addition to the personal note and the poetry reviews, Cather’s first story collection *The Troll Garden* was reviewed in the November 1905 *Critic*, likely by Gilder: “There is real promise in these half dozen stories. . . . Miss Cather has sincerity and no small degree of insight. In fact, when she writes her novel one may venture to predict it will be far too good to be among the ‘best





Charles Hanson Towne in an undated photograph by Bain News Service. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ggbain-01767

sellers' of the month" (476). Gilder also reviewed the proofs of *O Pioneers!* In her glowing preview of the novel in the May 24, 1913 *Chicago Tribune*, Gilder writes of Cather: "That she is going to be a force in American fiction there can be no doubt, and I think, from glancing over the proofsheets of her new story, that "O Pioneers!" will put her in the front rank of writers of American fiction" (8). Gilder died before her prediction came true, but she obviously recognized Cather's potential as early as 1900. By publishing three poems in the *Critic*, Jeannette L. Gilder helped introduce Cather's poetry to a much larger audience than previously known, and significantly contributed to Cather's growing reputation and readership as a poet in the early twentieth century.

After the publication of *April Twilights* in 1903, no further newspaper publications of "Asphodel" and "Winter at Delphi" have been located. "Grandmither," however, was republished several times. The poem appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on June 3, 1903 (p. 11), and two stanzas of the poem appeared on June 25, 1904 in the *Maitland Weekly Mercury* of New South Wales, Australia, with the quote: "Some recent American verse which has attracted attention in England is Miss Willa Cather's *April Twilights*" ("Literary Notes"). The column then cuts both the second and third stanzas. On April 11, 1909, the poem was published in the *Louisville Herald* (p. 4), on April 19 in the

Kingston Whig-Standard of Ontario, Canada (p. 7), and on April 29 Cather herself republished it in *McClure's* (p. 649). Nearly two years later, on April 23, 1911, the *New York Times* published the poem in response to an April 2 "Queries and Answers" column on "Books, Authors, Poems, and Missing Lines" (p. 68). A decade later, the *Omaha World-Herald* published the poem on July 24, 1921 (p. 15).

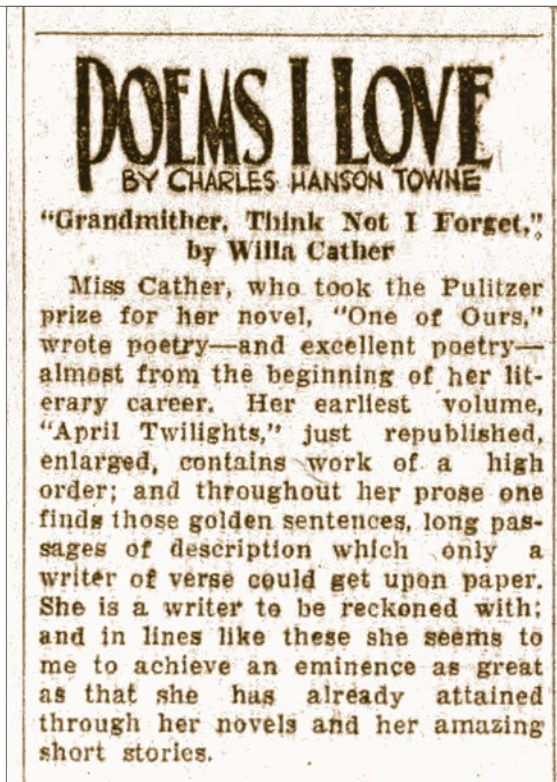
After *April Twilights and Other Poems* was published in 1923, the poem again had something of a revival, thanks to another influential literary critic, Charles Hanson Towne, who included the poem in one of his "Poems I Love" columns. Between December 1923 and April 1927, the poem appeared in this column at least twelve times in newspapers across the nation. These include the *Grand Rapids Press* (December 11, 1923, p. 6), the *St. Louis Star and Times* (December 31, 1923, p. 14), the *Journal Times* of Racine, Wisconsin (March 26, 1927, p. 5), the *Dispatch* of Moline, Illinois (March 26, 1927, p. 6), *New Castle News* of New Castle, Pennsylvania (March 26, 1927, p. 4), the *Parsons Daily Sun* of Parsons, Kansas (March 28, 1927, p. 3), the *Montana Record-Herald* of Helena, Montana (March 29, 1927, p. 8), the *Bayonne Evening News* of Bayonne, New Jersey (March 30, 1927, p. 4), the *Knoxville Journal* (April 4, 1927, p. 9), the *Seattle Union Record* (April 7, 1927, p. 8), and the *Muskogee Daily Phoenix and Times-Democrat* of Muskogee, Oklahoma (April 7, 1927, p. 13). All versions of the column include the same brief personal introduction by Towne, and all eliminate the third stanza.

Charles Hanson Towne (1877–1949) was an American editor, writer, poet, and literary agent. Born in Kentucky, he moved to New York and worked at *Cosmopolitan* as an editorial assistant in 1900, then at *Smart Set* from 1901 to 1907. He joined the staff of the *Delineator* as fiction editor from 1907 to 1910, then from 1914 to 1920 as managing editor at *McClure's*. One could argue he saved Cather from a bit of a controversy in 1916. After publication of "The Diamond Mine" in the October 1916 *McClure's*, the magazine *American Jewish World* of Minneapolis and St. Paul denounced Cather's description of Miletus Poppas as "a vulture of a vulture race." In a scathing October 6, 1916 article entitled "Vultures and Vultures," associate editor Gustavus Loevinger writes, "to condemn any human being in such terms is extravagant; to condemn an entire race is unjustifiable." "If the author is a Christian," he continues, "she must be profoundly humiliated to think that God made such a blunder as to use this 'vulture' race to bring forth a Christ" (9). Neither Cather nor the story are specifically named in the editorial. Towne's reply as *McClure's* managing editor was quoted in an editorial in the October 27 edition of *American Jewish World* under the title,

"A Graceful Retraction." Towne writes, "no one regrets more than I the insertion of that paragraph in Miss Cather's story. How it got by us, I do not know." The editors appear to have accepted his apology: "It is not likely that the editor of McClure's would humiliate himself by making an insincere apology. If it is sincere then in all probability greater care will be exercised in the future to avoid a repetition of the offense" (13). Cather made no apology; the passage was never removed from further publications of the story.

Like Jeannette Gilder, Charles Hanson Towne was prolific. He published numerous volumes of verse, fiction, travel writing, and newspaper columns, and even today one of his poems will sometimes appear on a website or in an anthology of favorite poems. Between 1922 and 1928, Towne published the popular column "Poems I Love" in newspapers across the nation, and a limited search reveals nearly 3,500 appearances of the column over five years. In these columns, Towne provides a very brief personal introduction, and then quotes the poem. Poems in his columns include, among other greats, "The Lamb" by William Blake, "If You Were Coming in the Fall" by Emily Dickinson, and "The Sound of the Trees" by Robert Frost. All were published multiple times in a variety of newspapers across the country. In his Cather column, Towne praises the recent Pulitzer winner who "wrote poetry—and excellent poetry—almost from the beginning of her literary career." *April Twilights*, he notes, "contains work of a high order." He also registers the poetics of her fiction: "throughout her prose one finds golden sentences, long passages of description which only a writer of verse could get upon paper." "Grandmither," Towne asserts, achieves "an eminence as great as that she has already attained through her novels and her amazing short stories."

Like Gilder, Cather knew Towne fairly well, although their relationship was not as cordial. In 1922, the two seem to have had a bit of a quarrel. Zoë Akins was friends with both Cather and Towne, and apparently gave Towne a proof copy of Cather's *A Lost Lady*. Towne was working for *Metropolitan* magazine at the time and hoped to serialize Cather's eighth novel. Cather was not happy with Akins and demanded the return of the manuscript. In a November 22, 1922 letter, Cather expresses



Charles Hanson Towne's "Poems I Love" columns featuring "Grandmither, Think Not I Forget" appeared in numerous newspapers between 1923 and 1927, always with this introduction. *Muskogee Daily Phoenix and Times-Democrat*, April 13, 1927.

her dislike of Towne: "I don't want to do anything through Charley Towne. I dislike him and his kind too much. I've always preferred being poor to having anything to do with cheap people of that sort." She then tries to placate Akins: "I know how generously you are doing this for my interests, but Towne never has any real authority anywhere. Get it away from him." She continues: "people like Towne make me physically ill and I can't owe them anything. I only wish I could keep my name out of their mouths, and my books out of their hands, even in print" (*Complete Letters* no. 0652). In a letter to Akins written a few weeks later she writes, "Charley Towne gets my goat." (*Complete Letters* no. 0655). In his 1945 autobiography *So Far So Good*, Towne makes no mention of the spat—perhaps he didn't know—and

claims he "closed a deal to purchase the serial rights, when the *Metropolitan* unexpectedly folded up" (196).

If Towne held any animosity for Cather, it is not apparent in his criticism or his autobiographies. Like Gilder, Towne was a great advocate of Cather's work, and praised her in multiple reviews throughout his career. For example, in 1935 in the *Washington Herald*, Towne called *Lucy Gayheart* "perfection," and in 1936 he praised *Not Under Forty*: "This is prose that rings and sings. Is anyone today able to match it in the country?" ("Just Off the Press"; "Books"). Cather was aware of his praise; in a November 1922 letter to Towne (written, interestingly, around the time of her letters to Akins), Cather writes: "Let me take this occasion to say that I appreciate the friendly feeling you have expressed in several reviews that have been brought to my attention" (*Complete Letters* no. 0642). On her part, Cather seems to have eventually put aside any dislike of Towne. In a letter to Ethelbert Nevin's widow Anne, believed to have been written in 1933, Cather recommends Towne to write an article for a planned Nevin memorial: "I should think Charles Hanson Towne might do it very well. He is an experienced article and editorial writer" (*Complete Letters*, forthcoming).

Willa Cather published three poems, "Grandmither, Think Not I Forget," "Asphodel," and "Winter at Delphi" in the influential literary magazine *the Critic* in 1900 and 1901, and all were republished in a variety of large and small newspapers across



the country. Although the specific number of readers is impossible to ascertain, the circulation and distribution of these thirty-seven previously undiscovered publications indicates Cather's poetry reached a much larger readership than previously considered. This was an important time for Cather. She was beginning to publish her poetry and short fiction in national magazines and gaining a reputation as a serious author of poetry and fiction. Two influential literary critics in the late 19th and early 20th century, Jeannette L. Gilder, editor of the *Critic*, and Charles Hanson Towne, writer of the syndicated column "Poems I Love," championed Cather's poetry throughout their careers, and by publishing her poems in their columns and magazines, both Gilder and Towne contributed to Cather's reputation as a poet. Today, Cather is recognized mainly for her fiction, but it may surprise us to think that many readers first encountered Cather not as a novelist, but as a poet.

NOTES

1. "Dedicatory" was included in the 1962 and 1968 reissues of *April Twilights* (Crane 231).
2. The poem is part of a column on the comings and goings of Lincoln residents, and as such, the removal of the third stanza does not appear to be for lack of space.
3. James Canfield (1847–1909), father of author and Cather friend Dorthy Canfield, served as chancellor of the University of Nebraska 1891–1895 and president of Ohio State University 1895–1899. He served as head librarian at Columbia University until his death in 1909.

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Figuring the Reader in *Lucy Gayheart* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*

Richard Millington

In this essay I propose to explore the idea that, in these two late novels, Cather turns with new focus and intensity to the figure of the reader and to the forms of thought and feeling we associate with reading. The result, I will argue, is not an overarching argument about or theory of reading, but something more open and interrogative: a sustained, complex, and surprising exploration, modernist in spirit, of the nature and value of the experience of aesthetic reception. While questions of reading and aesthetic responsiveness certainly occupy her earlier in her career—we might think of “Paul’s Case,” of Jim’s portrayal of *his* Antonia, of Niel Herbert’s self-thwarting attempt to “read” Marian Forrester—here I want to test out the notion that, in these later works, the reader’s share of the relationship that creates novelistic meaning presents itself to Cather, and to us, with new centrality, specificity, and generativity. In these two novels, we are invited to think about reading not analogically, as a way of figuring human social connection—as, say, when Isabel Archer, reflecting on her marriage to Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady*, realizes that “she had not read him right”—but more empirically, as a distinctive experience in itself. While either of these novels might, on its own, give an interpreter plenty to work with, it is their juxtaposition that enables us to see the open, richly exploratory quality of these valedictory engagements with the dynamics of reading and reception. Accordingly, I will look first at *Lucy Gayheart* and then at *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*; in each case my discussion will unfold via close attention to figurative enactments of reading within the text or to depictions of reading itself. And I will close, against the grain of this more observational enterprise, by putting these empirical depictions of reading into conversation with a pattern that emerges across Cather’s fiction—one that links gender and ways of reading together in a striking way.¹

In *Lucy Gayheart* Cather’s depiction of reading takes a figurative form, as Lucy’s responses to Sebastian’s singing and her experience of love come to represent the role played by aesthetic reception in Lucy’s self-formation. Yet, as the following sequence of passages will show, Cather’s depictions of Lucy’s experience, though provoked by music, evoke quite carefully the phenomena of reading itself.² Here is the book’s account of Lucy’s experience of hearing Sebastian sing for the first time (he performs a selection of Schubert *lieder*, followed by *When We Two Parted*, a setting of Byron’s poem):



John George Brown, *Reading on the Rocks, Grand Manan*, ca. 1877. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of Walstein C. Findlay, Jr. in memory of William Wadsworth Findlay.

She was struggling with something she had never felt before. A new conception of art? It came closer than that. A new kind of personality? But it was much more. It was a discovery about life, a revelation of love as a tragic force, not a melting mood, of passion that drowns like black water. As she sat listening to this man the outside world seemed to her dark and terrifying, full of fears and dangers that had never come close to her until now. (33)

Her response continues to reverberate after she returns home, and in the days that follow, and we need to hear more of it.





Edmund Charles Tarbell, *Girl Reading*, 1909. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photographic reproduction, Detroit Publishing Co. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, control no. 2016800575.

Lucy had come home and up the stairs, into this room, tired and frightened, with a feeling that some protecting barrier was gone—a window had been broken that let in the cold and darkness of the night. Sitting here in her cloak, shivering, she had whispered over and over the words of that last song. . . . It was as if that song were to have some effect upon her own life. She tried to forget it, but it was unescapable. . . . For weeks afterwards it kept singing itself over in her brain. Her forebodings on that first night had not been mistaken; Sebastian had already destroyed a great deal for her. Some people's lives are affected by what happens to their person or their property; but for others fate is what happens to their feelings and their thoughts—that and nothing more. (34–35)

We witness in this passage what might be called the heroicization of reception. Throughout the passage, there is little disposition to distinguish between thrilling and terrifying responses; as it was for the Romantic Poet, so it is for the Romantic Responder: intensity is all.³ Note, too, this passage's evocation of the immediacy, the solitude of reading; Lucy's response intensifies upon her return to her apartment—"sitting *here* in her cloak, shivering" (my italics; note the way that curious "here" make Lucy's room simultaneously the

location of her emotions and our own reading)—and it reverberates as the days go by. Our attention has been shifted from the singular drama of Sebastian's performance to the iterative drama of Lucy's response, and the effects of that response are transformative, self-creating: "Sebastian had already destroyed a great deal for her." Here, too, there is a subtlety of phrasing worth remarking: "for her" seems quite clearly to mean "on her behalf"—not "at her expense"; her response to Sebastian's singing has been the making of her.

As it is with art, so it is with love: the transformative power of Lucy's experience is fully released not in the immediate moment but in the solitary space of readerly reflection that follows upon it:

It was at night, when she was quiet and alone, that she got the greatest happiness out of each day—after it had passed! Why this was, she never knew. In the darkness she went over every moment of the morning again. Nothing was lost, not a phrase of a song, not a look on his face or a motion of his hand. In these quiet hours she had time to reflect, and to realize that the few weeks since the 4th of January were longer than the twenty-one years that had gone before. . . . Since then she had changed so much in her thoughts, in her ways, even in her looks, that she might wonder she knew herself—except that the changes were all in the direction of becoming more and more herself. She was no longer afraid to like or to dislike anything too much. It was as if she had found some authority for taking what was hers and rejecting what seemed unimportant. (99–100)

As Cather gives this scene to us, it is in the reading-like space of private reflection—in the replaying of the day, in "these quiet hours" in her room—that her relationship with Sebastian achieves its full power. And that power, we recognize, at once derives from her capacity for intense response—her readerliness—and emerges as a form of self-making: "the changes were all in the direction of becoming more and more herself"; "it was as if she had found some authority for taking what was hers." Though such moments occur during "quiet hours" in her room, they are, in emotional terms, anything but quiet. Lucy's responsiveness, as it is imagined here, is emphatically active, even aggressive: selfhood is realized not through admiring subordination but via a fearless, authoritative "taking." In passages like these we witness not mere tributes to the power of music or love, but enactments of the profoundly destabilizing and transformative quality of Lucy's responsiveness itself, as she achieves a kind of heroics of reception that is at the center of Cather's conception of this character and the understanding of reading's power implicit in it.⁴

If *Lucy Gayheart* figures reading as, potentially and in Lucy's case, a radical, even heroic form of human meaning making, neither subordinate to nor lesser than artistic expression, *Sapphira*

and the Slave Girl, via its pointed and sustained depiction of Henry Colbert as a reader, gives us a more self-scrutinizing, even skeptical interrogation of the uses of reading, and of the meanings it enables and evades. Yet for a good part of the novel, Cather seems engaged, via her detailed portrayal of Henry as a reader, in making her most explicit and celebratory case for the value—humane, ethical—of reading. While in *Lucy Gayheart* Cather’s exploration of reading was conducted figuratively, as a mode of aesthetic response, in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, the encounter with reading is direct and explicit. As with *Lucy Gayheart*, we’ll proceed sequentially, via a sequence of passages where reading is at stake.

The miller lived a rather lonely life, indeed. After supper he usually sat for an hour in the parlour with his wife, then went back to the mill and read. The pages of his Bible were worn thin, and the margins sprinkled with cross-references. When he had lit the four candles on his table and settled himself in his hickory chair, he read with his mind as well as his eyes. And he questioned. He met with contradictions, and they troubled him. He found a comforter in John Bunyan, who also had been troubled. (68)

Here Colbert seems to emerge as a demanding novelist’s ideal reader. Troubled by his entanglement in the system of slavery, he turns to his books, to the Bible and to John Bunyan, a writer especially important to Cather: “he read with his mind as well as his eyes. And he questioned.” The “contradictions” he meets with send him deeper into his books, and he finds in Nancy’s affinity to characters from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* a way to break out of slavery’s conceptual confines and to recognize and engage her personhood:

He had never realized . . . how much love and delicate feeling Nancy put into making his bare room as he liked it. Even when she was scarcely more than a child, he had felt her eagerness to please him. As she grew older he came to identify her with Mercy, Christiana’s sweet companion. When he read in the second part of his book, he saw Nancy’s face and figure plain in Mercy. (68–69)

Here the moral force of Henry’s reading seems apparent: it is precisely his reading-shaped capacity to “identify,” to recognize Nancy as person rather than slave that enrages Sapphira, and motivates her to invite Martin Colbert to visit the Mill House and launch her plot against Nancy.

Were we to stop our reading at this point, we might well expect that it would be Henry Colbert who would oppose Sapphira’s plot and set out to rescue Nancy, and we would seem to have an affirmation of the heroic view of reading we have inferred from *Lucy Gayheart*. Yet, surprisingly, Cather’s later depiction of the effects of this deep reading upon Henry are pointedly

complex, even contradictory. He suffers what might be thought of as a particularly readerly torment, an excess of empathy, as he struggles *not* to identify with Martin Colbert’s sensibility: “He told himself that in trying to keep a close watch on Martin, he had begun to see through Martin’s eyes. Sometimes in his sleep that preoccupation with Martin, the sense of almost being Martin, came over him like a black spell” (208). Most strikingly, it is the case that, for all the depth and richness of his reading, when the time comes for acting to rescue Nancy from the rape that Sapphira has plotted for her, he is all but paralyzed, caught in a self-thwarting, legalistic textualism that leaves his daughter—who simply knows what’s right and acts upon it—almost entirely on her own to effect Nancy’s escape.

Because the scene is so crucial to reading’s trajectory within the book, it is worth pausing over. It begins with Rachel’s explicit challenge to her father: “Then why don’t you do something to save her?” (222). Cather depicts Henry’s response to Rachel’s call to action as an internal crisis, witnessed by his daughter from the outside in, which suggests that the place of readerly engagement, when faced with the necessity of action, had become self-thwarting and self-consuming, a site of self-loss:

He made no reply. His daughter sat watching him in astonishment. His darkly flushed face, his clenched hands gave her no clue to what was going on in his mind; struggle of some sort, certainly. She had always known him quick to act, had never seen him like this before. (222)

As Rachel lays out her plan for Nancy’s escape, this deep reader becomes almost anti-linguistic: “Hush, Rachel, not another word! You and me can’t talk about such things. It ain’t right” (223–24). As he agrees to provide the money that will make the escape possible—as he confronts the impossibility of the recovery of the Nancy his reading had treasured—he seems unable to put even this oblique action into language: “Nothing must pass between you and me on this matter; neither words nor aught else. Tomorrow night I will go to bed early, and I will leave my coat hanging on a chair by the open window here—” (224). And yet: as he listens the next night for Rachel to pick up the money, he is once again able to take refuge in the private place we now recognize as the terrain of his reading:

He lay still and prayed earnestly, for his daughter and for Nancy. Not a sparrow falleth to the ground without Thy knowledge. He would never again hear that light footstep outside his door. She would go up out of Egypt to a better land. Maybe she would be like the morning star, this child; the last star of night. . . . (225)



It is quite beautifully composed, Henry's prayer: emerging from a place of solitary reflection—the space we occupied so often in *Lucy Gayheart*—this is a distinctly readerly prayer, full of quotation and allusion, as if this lovely language, already retrospective, might disguise the near paralysis and tormented inaction that gave rise to it.

Henry's reading, then, is presented as both powerfully humanizing and morally impotent and, as this phrasing indicates, my exploration of reading in these two texts has arrived at a quandary. What are we to make of the carefully constructed, strikingly explicit, and stunningly dissonant trajectory that Cather builds for reading within this novel? And what are we to think, as we ponder these two late interrogations of reading, if we add the powerfully active but internal version of reading's effects that we witnessed in *Lucy Gayheart* into the interpretive mix? Is Cather engaged here in a meditation on the role of the aesthetic, on the uneasy or complex relation between action in the interior, imaginative space reading carves out for Henry and for Lucy and action in the political world of consequences and cruelty inhabited by Nancy and by Rachel Blake? Henry's reading opens up a space of meaning between him and Nancy that subverts enslavement's enforced categories, but it is a kind of meaning that crucially fails to translate itself into action—or even direct speech. Is Cather implicitly working, in these two novels, to identify the places where reading's transformative capacity does—and does *not*—operate? Or might we hear, instead, in this dissonant juxtaposition a modernist unsettling of the confident linkage between reading and moral education that had underwritten Victorian fiction's claim to value?

Coda

My hope has been that this juxtaposition of these late, reading-focused novels has established—as the array of unresolved questions I have articulated suggests—the open and exploratory quality of these late texts, their investment in witnessing, in asking rather than arguing. Still, as I have thought through this theme of reading, not simply in these two novels but across Cather's career, I do think that some interesting and consistent patterns emerge, which I'll close by trying to articulate. As in *Sapphira*, these are moments when aesthetic response bumps up against questions of gender and power. One of the clearest of these is Cather's interest, across her career, in men reading women, whether along a trajectory of growth as in



Jozef Israëls, *Bible Reading*, ca. 1895. Private collection.

My Antonia, or as an attempt at containment and control, as in *A Lost Lady*. More interesting still, I think, is a pattern—we might even call it a syndrome—that might be named “male preservationism.” How easily, for Cather's fictional male readers, appreciation becomes an attempt at confinement, or a yearning for stasis. Here I'm thinking of Niel Herbert's regret that Marian Forrester “was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged; that she preferred life on any terms” (161). Or of Godfrey St. Peter's curious remark, as he reflects on Tom Outland's early days with the family, “When a man had lovely children in his house, fragrant and happy, full of pretty fancies and generous impulses, why couldn't he keep them? Was there no way but Medea's, he wondered?” (124). These striking but strange moments—are they mordant jokes?—point us toward

an arresting question that arises from the meditation on reading, and on aesthetic experience more generally that Cather implicitly conducts across her fiction. If the aesthetic encounter opens Cather's male readers to the perception and articulation of value and meaning, it seems simultaneously to lure them toward stasis, toward a desire to freeze or preserve the people—typically but not only female characters—who had provoked that meaning for them. Thus it is, to return to the novels that have mainly occupied us, that Book III of *Lucy Gayheart* is utterly occupied with Harry Gordon's effort to preserve, like a museum curator, Lucy's memory—an impulse emblemized by the three footprints in the cement outside her house. Thus it is that the wish to preserve the childhood that enabled their companionship prevents Henry Colbert from acting on Nancy's behalf when Martin Colbert's attentions and Sapphira's plot force sexuality upon her. And, finally, it may be that this static, evasive version of reading helps us to grasp the destabilizing force, the unappeasable volatility of the radically active way of reading that Cather gives to Lucy Gayheart.

NOTES

1. The critical discussion of readers and reading in Cather's fiction is a rich and varied one, though it tends to focus on the way her texts, via their formal strategies, implicitly shape their readers' experience—rather than directly on depictions of response, as I will be doing here. A number of

these critics, including myself, have sought to connect Cather's shaping of readerly response to her distinctive modernism, whether explicitly or implicitly. Significant examples of this critical tradition include Jo Ann Middleton's *Willa Cather's Modernism*, my "Willa Cather's American Modernism," and Deborah Lindsay Williams's "Losing Nothing, Comprehending Everything." Charles Johanningsmeier, drawing on letters from Cather's actual readers and the quite traditional kinds of response evident there, subjects this critical strain to some lively, skeptical scrutiny in "Cather's Readers, Traditionalism, and Modern America." For a particularly rich exploration of the relation between narrative form and the experience of reading in Cather's work, see Deborah Carlin's *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading*, especially the discussions of focalization in Cather's novels. (*Editors' note*: See also "'Art is made out of the love of old and intimate things': Imagining Readers Imagining Cather" by Jess Masters in this issue.)

2. In this discussion of the novel, I return to passages explored in an earlier essay on Lucy as a figure for the reader, but with an increased emphasis on the experiential intensity of these readerly moments. See my "An Elegy for the Reader: Europe and the Narrative of Self-Formation in *Lucy Gayheart*." I am grateful to the organizers of the 2024 Cather Foundation Spring Conference for selecting "Cather and the Readerly Imagination" as the conference theme, which provoked further thinking about the prominence of reading in these two late works, and to an anonymous reader and to Sarah Clere, coeditor of this issue of the *Review*, for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

3. Jonathan Gross discusses the romantic resonances of the novel in "Recollecting Emotion in Tranquility: Wordsworth and Byron in Cather's *My Antonia* and *Lucy Gayheart*." Gross expertly tracks specific Wordsworthian and Byronic allusions in the two novels, seeing the two poets as different models of romantic sensibility, one restorative (Wordsworth, Jim Burden), one dangerously alluring and egotistical (Byron, Sebastian). For me, it's the self-risking intensity of Lucy's response that's revealingly—and valuably—romantic.

4. In attending to the intensity of Cather's depiction of Lucy's capacity for response, I mean to push against the rhetoric of diminishment that one finds even in sympathetic readings of the novel, which tend to see Lucy as a failed or thwarted artist—rather than an instantiation of the potential power of readerly response. Even Cather's most distinguished readers, in perceptive treatments of the novel, seem to me to fall into this mode of diminishment, as when Joseph Urgo construes Lucy as uninteresting in herself, but valuable as an illustration of the way a life's meaning stays mobile after the body succumbs to the stasis of death (Urgo 117), or when Janis Stout sees her as admirable for taking, in her poignant life, a step *toward* becoming a real artist (Stout 264). In a new essay on the novel, Joshua Dolezal, drawing on work in cognitive science, engages—and escapes—the diminishment problem by tracking Lucy's capacity for "epiphany": See his "The Neuroscience of Epiphany in *Lucy Gayheart*."

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“Art is made out of the love of old and intimate things”: Imagining Readers Imagining Cather

Jess Masters

“You make such lovely pictures, Willa.”

Letter from May Willard, November 8, 1920.

In the longest interview of her career to date, Willa Cather explained to journalist Eleanor Hinman in 1921 that the greatest artists were those who took creative joy in everyday activities and found beauty in life around them. “Art springs out of the very stuff that life is made of,” she said, and it must “spring out of the fullness and the richness of life” (47). In this interview and at numerous points during her career, Cather deplored the prevalence of a superficial culture, where art is used to show status instead of experience, and the kinds of women who “run about from one culture club to another studying Italian art out of a textbook and an encyclopedia and believing that they are learning something about it by memorizing a string of facts” (46). Instead, not only must art be enjoyed through the “five senses,” but one can find it everywhere and in the most ordinary of moments: cooking, walking through a house one has lived in for many years, or collecting Nebraskan wildflowers. “Everywhere,” she said, “is a storehouse of literary material” (46).

Several weeks earlier, Cather had also given a talk on similar themes to the Omaha Society of Fine Arts, a talk covered in the local press. Noting that “the poorest approach to art yet discovered is by way of the encyclopedia,” it is instead within shared and common experiences that one can find beauty. “Art is made out of the love of old and intimate things. We always underestimate the common things” (Mason 149). Experiencing art and reading facts about it are a far cry from each other. The former can be found not only in traditional gallery spaces but in the minutiae of everyday living because “art appeals primarily to the senses” (“Willa Cather Raps Language Law” 146). The latter is at dry remove from art’s experiential value. Cather’s public statements on art and literature over her career often advocate for finding artistic value in ordinary acts of living, but also tend to metaphorically frame the act of writing literature as other kinds of art practice. This is regularly evidenced even in Cather’s private correspondence, with letters to friends and colleagues noting that characters are painted in so literally (*Complete Letters* no. 0635) or arguing that her own descriptive passages

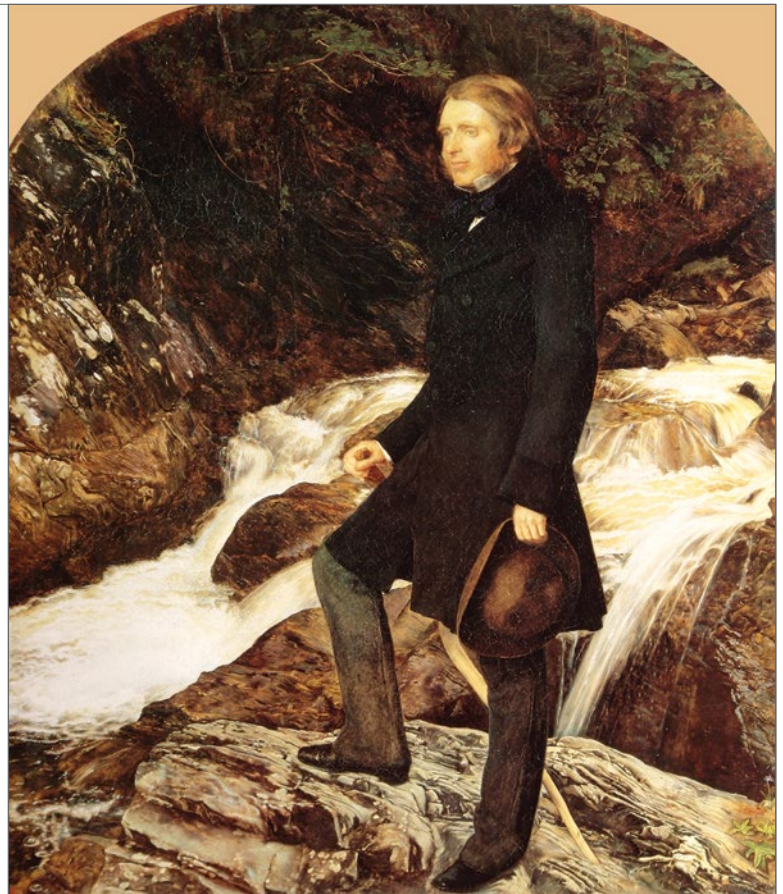
were no mere landscape painting (*Complete Letters* no. 3060). However, Cather’s unpublished fan letters, held in the Willa Cather Archive at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, also show similar aesthetic conceits regularly being used to describe and praise her work, as readers explained their experience of “reading Cather” back to Cather herself through the same metaphors. Along with critical reviews, many of which were compiled in scrapbooks by Cather and Edith Lewis and are currently kept in the Archive’s Charles E. Cather Collection, letters from admirers cite fine art forms like sculpture, tapestry, and painting to describe both Cather’s craftsmanship and their own personal, readerly experience. These letters demonstrate how Cather’s readers intuited from their reading of her fiction the same kinds of artistic analogies that informed her creative process. They also confirm her personal archiving practice—her choices to save particularly meaningful letters and reviews—as one that valued her readers’ use of fine art comparisons as a marker of both their esteem and the work’s significance.

Cather’s views on and relationships to various art movements, and capital-A Art as an ideal, have been considered in depth by scholars. From early on, scholars like Bernice Slote have demonstrated how Cather’s “first principles” of art were developed in her early journalistic years, and then returned to, worked over, and developed, throughout her later writings and interviews. More recently, scholarship connecting Cather with the late nineteenth-century aesthetic movement has grounded the formation of Cather’s aesthetic beliefs in the same period, including her agreement with John Ruskin—whom she called “the greatest living master of pure English prose”—that “beauty alone is truth and truth is only beauty; that art is supreme” (“Ruskin” 400, 402).¹ Ruskin’s writings, which also influenced the Arts and Crafts movement and the Pre-Raphaelites, as well as aesthetes like Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, led Cather to argue that Ruskin was “perhaps the last of the great worshippers of beauty” (400). However, unlike other figures of aestheticism who championed the credo of art for art’s sake, Ruskin emphasized that beauty has a moral dimension and is an expression of divinity—something which Cather agreed with and reemphasized later to readers like Read Bain, who asked her if her books *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock* meant she was to become Catholic. She was not, she wrote



to Bain in 1931, though if “the external form and ceremonial of that Church happens to be more beautiful than that of other churches, it certainly corresponds to some beautiful vision within” (*Complete Letters* no. 1079). Regardless of church affiliation, the central artist of all things, to Cather, was “this Painter, this Poet, this Musician, this gigantic Artist of all art that is, this God” (“Moral Music” 178). Perhaps more significantly, Cather also admired Ruskin’s understanding that art was primarily a category of experience. While Ruskin’s writing was erudite, “he himself scorned erudition” when it was removed from its conditions of origin or used without serious meaning. Instead, his life had been “one act of worship” shaped by the belief that “to know is little and to feel is all” (“Ruskin” 401). Slote argues that in Cather’s early writings, she uses the term *feel* as shorthand for art’s experiential quality, with a “personal encounter” the necessary condition for aesthetic response (Slote 46). Cather also distinguished between the artist’s own personal feelings and the emotions they may evoke in a viewer or reader, writing in 1895 that “to feel greatly is genius and to make others feel is art” (“Christina Rossetti” 348).

Cather explained to journalist Flora Merrill in 1925 that she began writing by imitating Henry James, but soon developed her own style.² Lessons from James, including his insistence that a work of art is only worth “the amount of felt life concerned in producing it” (Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* 1074) are echoed similarly in Cather’s early journalism, where she writes that art is to “keep an idea living” when transforming thought and emotion into “expression, expression, always expression” (Cather, “A Mighty Craft” 417). However, as Cather tells it in her 1931 essay “My First Novels [There Were Two],” she became a writer when she turned away from the literary inheritance of “Henry James and Mrs. Wharton” (93), and toward the people and places that interested her. Scholars such as Richard H. Millington have also indicated that Cather’s later work was animated by early twentieth-century ideas of cultural relativism, like those espoused by Franz Boas and the new science of anthropology, while Guy Reynolds has pointed to the pragmatist influence of William James and John Dewey on Cather’s artistic beliefs. In *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey argues that aesthetic experience should not be limited to the “museum conception of art” or separated from “the objects and scenes of ordinary experience” (Dewey 4). Instead, continuity should be restored between forms of experience recognized as works of art like the gallery or museum visit, and the “everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience,” such as Cather’s suggestions to Hinman of walking through an old house or collecting wildflowers (Dewey 2).



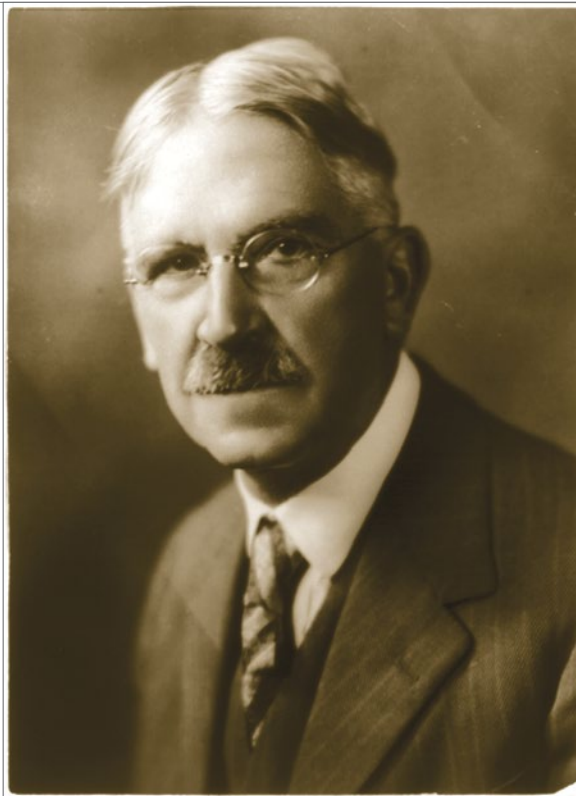
John Ruskin, “perhaps the last of the great worshippers of beauty.” John Everett Millais, *John Ruskin*, 1853–54. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

However, despite Cather’s advocacy for “common things” as the materials of great art, her use of other fine art metaphors to describe literature and the creative process of meaning-making remain largely consistent over her life. From early in her journalistic career, examples like when she described play actors “weaving the visible garment of New York” (“New Types of Acting” 46) or that “word artists” should “paint with emotion, not with words” (“Utterly Irrelevant”) would influence how her readers responded to her literature and the kinds of fan letters she preserved. Reading Cather’s personal archive of fan letters seemingly reveals how frequently her admirers used fine art comparisons—they note she has “sculpted” or “woven” a narrative so fine it is like a statue or tapestry, or praise her novels as “paintings” and “pictures”—over time and across locations to explain their reading. These letters pattern their readerly engagement onto other existing forms of art experience, describing their emotional response to one or more of Cather’s novels in terms of what it would be like to see and respond to, say, a classical Greek statue (Lafferty). The recurrence of fine art analogies in readers’ letters not only mirrors Cather’s own understanding of art and her own use of analogies as a key element scaffolding her creative process, but also demonstrates her appreciation for this specific kind of readerly response as central to her archiving practice.



It is no exaggeration to suggest that Cather deliberately kept letters that espoused artistic values similar to her own, and in fact, this has been suggested before: Courtney A. Bates's study argues that Cather's personal collection of fan correspondence demonstrates a deliberate curatorial strategy and illustrates the kinds of readerly engagement Cather preferred, regardless of whether said readers were professional or non-. Cather kept letters from a variety of readers, from nonprofessional fans to other writers, academics, and white-collar workers. Bates explains that fan letters provided readers with an alternative mode of reading experience, including an authorial interaction with Cather that was unavailable elsewhere. Charles Johanningsmeier has also analyzed Cather's fan letters, arguing that they deserve closer attention, not least because they are "strong indicators of how Cather herself wanted her fictions to be perceived and what she valued most in them" (Johanningsmeier 40–41). Not only did Cather select and preserve the letters most significant to her, which invariably display similar themes, but these letters also reflect Cather's own understanding of art as a process that combined technical skill and high passion, and one which literature, along with other kinds of practice, were all in service to a greater idea of "Art." As Cather noted in her letter to Bain in 1931, she received a great many fan letters, but "it is very easy to pick out the real ones" (*Complete Letters* no. 1033).

The following year, a review of *Shadows on the Rock* appeared in the *Irish Press* and noted that Cather "is one of the very few living novelists who make of their books works of art" (quoted in O'Connor 398–99). This paragraph has been circled in Cather's personal scrapbook of reviews, reflecting a regard for the phrase *work of art* as reflective of high achievement. Yet, it is the descriptive flexibility involved in the phrase and what different art forms share that Cather explores over her career. She explained in her interview with Merrill that she avoided "the usual fictional pattern" in *My Ántonia* by writing from "just the other side of the rug, the pattern that is supposed not to count in a story" (Merrill 77). In the same interview, however, Cather compares writing to painting, golf, tennis ("it is the most sportsmanlike sport we have"), playing the violin, and planting a field with corn



John Dewey in an undated photograph by Underwood and Underwood. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-51525.

(76). Her finished novels are likened to a rug and "a portrait like a thin miniature painted on ivory," and the memories and emotions that go into a work are like "colors in paints" (77). Or perhaps perfumes, or ghosts trying to find bodies. Cather's list of both high and low forms of culture reflects her agreement that not only can art be a form of experience rather than material object alone, but the recognition that different forms of culture, including experiences of living and working, can be sources of aesthetic encounter. However, Cather's readers rarely described the activity of reading her novels and stories as like planting crops or playing golf but rather drew on a more traditional language of fine art to signal their appreciation. If, as Dewey notes in the opening to

Art as Experience, the actual work of art is not the painting or statue but the experience it evokes in a viewer, then Cather's readers communicated back to her the value and depth of their reading experience by comparing her novels to fine art forms like sculpture, tapestry, and painting (Dewey 1).

Considering Cather's frequent use of artistic analogies to describe writing and finished works themselves, it is not surprising that her personal collection of fan letters mirrors these ideas. Several letters describing Cather's novels use sculptural analogies, including one from Samuel M. Lafferty who admired her novels as resembling Greek statues in a factory full of machines. Considering that Cather publicly decried "pictures, music, statues [that] are made by machinery" ("More or Less Personal" 12) and the "machine-made" novel, including in 1925 when she called the latter a "commuter's convenience" ("Machine-Made' Novel Deplored" 166), the comparison would have signaled to Cather that her novels were better received in comparison to the works of other, more middlebrow, women writers. Even her early work, such as the autobiography she wrote for S. S. McClure of *McClure's Magazine*, was commended by fans such as Booth Tarkington, who wrote "What you tell is very wonderful, and the way you tell it is just plain noble. . . . It's as simple as a country church—or a Greek statue (quoted in Woodress, *Willa Cather* 250).³ Later in her career in 1931, Jaroslav Novák, while serving as Consul General of Czechoslovakia in New York, also described the

newly published *Shadows on the Rock* back to her as though she had “created in it a living monument of old Quebec sculptures out of the purest marble of English words.”

The potential for sculpture as creative metaphor lies not only in the comparison between classical and modern machine-made statues, but sculpture’s capacity as a medium that channels life experience and expresses a sense of vitality and movement. This is conveyed more directly in Cather’s short story “The Namesake” (1907), where sculptor Lyon Hartwell tells seven American students the story of his uncle (killed in “one of the big [Civil War] battles of Sixty-four”) who had inspired his new statue *The Color Sergeant*. The narrator and other expatriates in Paris had seen Hartwell’s statue, of a young soldier running and clutching a flag, being crafted at various stages, and “the splendid action and feeling of the thing had come to have a kind of special significance” for them. Cather articulates the source of this feeling: “in every line of his young body there was an energy, a gallantry, a joy of life” (493). Hartwell explains that he was able to capture the spirit of his uncle’s statue after an epiphanic moment of finding his uncle’s copy of the *Aeneid* at the Hartwell homestead years ago, a moment where he came “to know him as sometimes we do living persons—intimately, in a single moment” (494). Saying that the rest of the house left him feeling “utterly detached” (495) by comparison, in his young uncle’s copy of the *Aeneid* Hartwell finds his uncle’s name, a sketch of the American flag, and the opening of “The Star-Spangled Banner” “written in a kind of arch,” when suddenly “wind and color seemed to touch it.” Taking the book outside to the garden, Hartwell recounts seeing the figure of his uncle in front of him, “his flashing eyes looking straight.” The experience of that night was the same feeling “that artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force, of purpose and security, of being glad that we have lived.” Hartwell’s creative epiphany, which establishes a touch of contact with a person long gone, is similar to the many epiphanies that inspired Cather’s writing career and that appear in novels such as *The Song of the Lark*. These moments, captured in Hartwell’s still sculpture, communicate his memory of feeling “as if the earth under my feet had grasped and rooted me, and were pouring its essence into me” (497). Hartwell’s own epiphanic and creative experience is channelled into material form, an object reflecting not only Cather’s belief that a work of art must include and convey its cultural and personal origins, but also foreshadowing various moments in her novels—ones which John J. Murphy describes as instances of “an art-generated and timeless ‘moment’ rescued from impermanence within natural surroundings”—where elements of nature become works of art (Murphy, “Gifts from the Museum” 4).

Another metaphor that Cather’s fan letters return to is one of creative work and writing as weaving tapestry. Weaving a story from threads of memory, place, and person is a metaphor that Cather deploys in *The Professor’s House*. To explain the importance of Godfrey St. Peter’s research, Cather uses the metaphor of Queen Mathilde weaving the Bayeux tapestry; just as Mathilde interweaves the “dramatic actions” of “knights and heroes” alongside more playful images of “birds and beasts,” St. Peter believes that “the most important chapters of his history were interwoven with personal memories” (100). As a scholar of history, the Professor brings the notes and the records and the ideas to his office, the room he shares with Augusta the sewing woman, where they are “digested and sorted, and woven into their proper place in his history” (26). Weaving as a method of sorting, ordering, and then storytelling becomes a process of aestheticizing the everyday into the artistic, and both into historical record. Cather’s preserved fan letters reflect this understanding: four years after *The Professor’s House* was published, Beryl de Zoete wrote to Cather exclaiming she had read the “beautiful and passionate” *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and Cather had “woven their memories of France into their Mexican world.” Thomas L. Spelman, writing from Chicago in 1931, also described *Death Comes for the Archbishop* to Cather as like “a vivid and variegated tapestry breathing forth arresting life and beauty and spirituality upon the panorama of the glamorous and chivalrous days of the Golden West.” Considering that Cather would “creep under the quilting frames” of quilt makers as a child and listen to their stories, the associations between narrative, handcrafts, and weaving were formed in Cather’s early life (Lewis 10). By comparing Cather’s novels to the grander art of tapestry as opposed to the domestic connotations of textiles like hand-stitched quilts, readers not only expressed their approval of her finesse but intimated what tapestry and Cather’s novels share. Tapestry panels in sequence often communicate a story in visual *tableaux*, and similarly, many of Cather’s novels must be apprehended holistically, with meaning emerging from how smaller inset stories and characters are interwoven with place, people, and history. In this regard, the fragmented design recognized in novels like *Shadows on the Rock* becomes, as Evelyn Funda comments, “a tapestry of community mythos” (quoted in Giorcelli 272).

In 1931, Cather wrote to Dorothy Canfield Fisher that her feeling toward writing *Shadows on the Rock* had been like the kind of gratitude one has to “an old fur coat that has kept you warm,” and that writing the book had been like “a little tapestry tent that I could unfold in hotels and sanitariums and strange places and forget the bleakness about me” (*Complete Letters* no. 1054). The following year, Cather kept a review by *The Scotsman*, which





The last of the *La dame à la licorne* tapestries, "À mon seul desir." Musée de Cluny, Paris.

called the novel a "vivid piece of tapestry," and a letter from Mary Moriarty which called it much the same: "an exquisite piece of tapestry." Cristina Giorcelli convincingly argues that the six panels of *La dame à la licorne* in Musée de Cluny, Paris, informed the structure and writing of *Shadows on the Rock*, as Cather hung large photographs of the panels at the end of her bed while writing. She also contends that Cather's mention of the tapestry tent in her letter to Fisher is a direct reference to *La dame à la licorne's* sixth and final panel, which shows the lion and unicorn drawing back ornamental tent flaps to reveal the lady inside (265–66). In this regard, Giorcelli explains how a weaver is also a storyteller, with language and cloth performing similar functions of constructing a social fabric by "establish[ing] ties, knots, networks between people" (263). These networks existed fictionally within Cather's novels but also between Cather and her readers, one of whom—Robert A. Raines—wrote to her professing that a novel like *One of Ours* was "like a rare piece of lace woven with an intricate design." The pattern of the lace, however, is "more discernible to some than others—each according to his appreciation and understanding." In keeping with the metaphor of weaving, Raines inadvertently illustrates how the lace of *One of Ours* reflects a similar knot of readers receiving her novels. Raines urged Cather to think of his letter as "an expression of a group of young men," instead of himself alone. "Every motif shows the masterful art of the maker," he wrote, and he was certain there was a "group who will read and appreciate" *One of Ours*, "but perhaps

not tell you." In professing his admiration as a representative example of the wider social fabric of male readers, Raines also mimics Cather's own writerly tendency to leave much unsaid or implied—or write from the "other side" of the rug.

Yet, it is toward painting, perhaps much more so than sculpture or weaving, where fans and reviewers turned after reading Cather's novels and stories. Fan letters after the publication of *My Ántonia* admired Cather's wonderful word picture of their life (Kroulic) and that the novel was "so beautifully written—as an artist should paint. (You must paint!)" (Forbes). H. W. Boynton's review of *My Ántonia* in the *Bookman* calls Cather "an accomplished artist" and states that "the effectiveness of such a portrait depends in an unusual sense upon the skill of the painter . . . no stroke is superfluous or wrongly emphasized; and we may be hardly conscious of how much of the total effect of the portrait is owing to the quiet beauty and purity of the artist's style" (quoted in O'Connor 83–84). For *A Lost Lady*, a review from the *New York Times* agreed Cather had painted a "vivid, brilliant little picture" (quoted in O'Connor 190), while a review in the *Kansas City Star* noted that "when she uses one of her sparing adjectives it colors the whole page" ("Big Theme" 6).

The prevalence of painting analogies in Cather's personal archive is likely not only because fans recognized the visual dimension of Cather's prose, but because Cather used the metaphor regularly in published statements and private letters. From as early as her journalist years, when reviewing French writer Pierre Loti and his book *The Romance of a Spahi* for the *Courier*, she wrote that the French "write as they paint, to bring out an effect" ("The Passing Show" 367). In 1931, Cather returned to

262 West 83 St.
New York City -
October 21, 1921

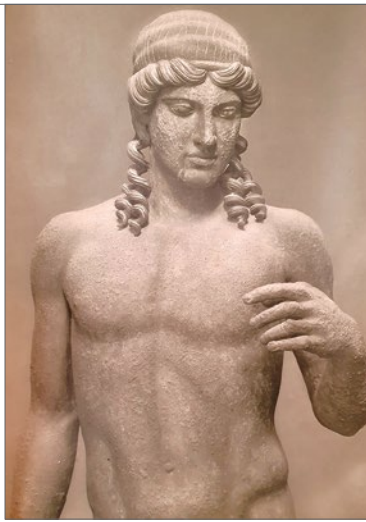
My dear Miss Cather:
Today has been a happy one for me with 'One of Ours' as a companion. The last page is finished, but the charm still lingers. It is like a rare piece of lace woven with an intricate design. The pattern being more discernible to some than others - each according to his appreciation and understanding. Every motif shows the masterful art of the maker and with an eager eye the admirer seeks its relation to the next object of beauty. When you read this, please try to think of it as expression of a group of young men, rather than one only, the group who will read and appreciate "One of Ours" but perhaps not tell you -
Cordially yours
Robert A. Raines

Letter to Cather from Robert A. Raines, October 21, 1921. Philip L. and Helen Cather Southwick Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

metaphors of painting to criticize *Alexander's Bridge* as “what painters call a studio picture,” and commented that too much detail “destroys in a book a very satisfying element analogous to what painters call ‘composition’” (“My First Novels” 91, 97). Describing writing a scene as though one is painting a picture also echoes Dewey’s comparison of painting and writing as similar means to order thoughts and feelings into artistic media: “As the painter places pigment upon the canvas, or imagines it placed there . . . the writer composes in his medium of words what he wants to say, [and] his idea takes on for himself perceptible form” (Dewey 78).

A review of *Shadows on the Rock* from *The Cherwell* in 1932 noted that if one “visited the studio of a first-class artist to watch him engaged on his latest picture and if, while he worked, he described the idea behind each stroke of the brush, the impression given would resemble that which one gets on reading *Shadows on the Rock*.” Later, in 1936, a fan letter from Nadya Olyanova called Cather a “great master,” because “you paint pictures in words of my very soul without even knowing me—or seeing me.” This sentence did not originally have the phrase “in words,” as it was inserted with a caret afterwards as an explanatory clause, a textual indicator of the immediacy and visual impact of Cather’s prose on readers. Olyanova’s original words to Cather, before editing them, read “you paint pictures of my very soul.” Other fans, like James A. Canfield, the brother of Dorothy Canfield, go beyond descriptions like “word-pictures” or “pictures in words” to say that Cather’s work (in this case, *The Professor’s House*) “belongs with Sargent’s portraits of the Wertheimer family in the National Gallery and that’s some praise from me, as I think they’re about the best pictures in the world.”⁴

Another reason we find ideas of painting so recurrently in the Cather Archive’s letters and reviews is Cather’s tendency to draw on paintings for the visual structure of many of her works: while James Woodress has explained that because Willa Cather had a “very retentive memory, the hundreds of books she read lay in the deep well of her unconscious . . . as a literary resource to be drawn upon,” the “deep well” of Cather’s unconscious was also filled with artistic history and influence (Historical Essay 302). *The Professor’s House* was inspired by Dutch Golden Age paintings, specifically those which depicted “interiors, whether drawing-room or kitchen, [and] there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of grey sea” (“On *The Professor’s House*” 31). *Death Comes for*



“Letters from admirers cite fine art forms like sculpture, tapestry, and painting to describe both Cather’s craftsmanship and their own personal, readerly experience.”

Apollo Citharoedus, Casa del Citarista, Pompeii, now held in Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. Image from Charles E. Cather Collection (MS-0350), Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

the Archbishop was also inspired by the visual techniques of Puvis de Chavannes’s series of murals, with Cather writing that since she first saw his “frescoes of the life of Saint Geneviève in my student days [though actually 1902], I have wished that I could try something a little like that in prose” (“On *Death Comes for the Archbishop*” 9). She expressed admiration for the paintings of Jean-François Millet, and her story collection *Youth and the Bright Medusa* is filled with sculptors, paintings, and musicians (“On the Art of Fiction” 102). In *My Ántonia: The Road Home*, John J. Murphy also discusses the various art movements that inspired the writing of *My Ántonia*, including impressionism and genre paintings, while critics like Jean Schwind have studied correlations between nineteenth-century painting, Cather’s restrained prose, and W. T. Benda’s illustrations for *My Ántonia*.

The readerly imagination that emerges from Cather’s unpublished fan letters, along with reviews of her work, is one that reflects back the wide variety of art forms and objects that inspired her writing. Jo Ann Middleton has argued that Cather anticipates the integral role of the reader in cocreating meaning in modern fiction, explaining that her essay “The Novel Demeublé” (1922) establishes the “mutual responsibility of writer and reader” (67). Middleton writes that for Cather, writing “is successful only if the reader has shared the writer’s vision and internalized the emotion that it expresses” (70). Together, the proliferation of artistic conceits in Cather’s unpublished fan letters, as well as annotated reviews of Cather’s works in the Cather Archive’s scrapbooks, intimate a fondness for artistic analogies as means of communicating high artistic value and to recognize the importance of each novel or work of literature having individual qualities: something to be evaluated on its own experiential terms, as opposed to the degree by which it may fit existing popular models for entertainment. These contribute to an artistic ideology that not only conditions a work of art’s relative importance, but also includes the means (human or machine, individual talent or imitation) by which it is produced. Perhaps, though, it is Eudora Welty who best describes why Cather’s work inspires such impassioned artistic responses from her readers. Welty explains that Cather’s prose “speaks of the world in a way to show it’s alive. There is a quality of animation that seems naturally come by” (3). As her readers wrote to her praising the vitality in her novels and stories, Cather achieved what artists had been striving to do for



centuries: infusing into static artworks like statues and paintings a sense of movement and life. “What she has given us,” says Welty, is, of course, “not the landscape as you and I would see it, but her vision of it; we are looking at a work of art” (4).

NOTES

1. See Joseph C. Murphy, “Cather’s Ruskinian Landscapes: Typologies of the New World,” *Cather Studies 8: A Writer’s Worlds*, edited by John J. Murphy, Françoise Palleau-Papin, and Robert Thacker, University of Nebraska Press, 2010, pp. 228–45, and *Willa Cather and Aestheticism*, edited by Ann Moseley and Sarah Cheney Watson, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012.

2. For additional scholarship on Cather’s relationship to Henry James, see John J. Murphy, “Kindred Spirits: Willa Cather and Henry James,” *Cather Studies 10: Willa Cather and the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Anne L. Kaufman and Richard H. Millington, University of Nebraska Press, 2015, pp. 223–42.

3. Cather later amended this phrase in a letter to Roscoe Cather, claiming inaccurately that Tarkington had written that *My Ántonia* was “simple as a country prayer meeting or a Greek temple—and as beautiful” (*Complete Letters* no. 2083).

4. James A. Canfield’s 1925 letter to Cather refers to a then-recent event in the museum world. Nine of the twelve portraits painted by John Singer Sargent of his patron Asher Wertheimer and Wertheimer’s large family had been bequeathed to the National Gallery in London, where they went on display as a group in 1923 to a mixed reaction. Jean Strouse’s *Family Romance: John Singer Sargent and the Wertheimers* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2024) tells the story of the artist, his patron, and the largest collection of works by Sargent of a single family.

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“The Highest Art”: Willa Cather as a Drama Critic

Xuesong Zhou

Long before Willa Cather was known as a novelist “of the soil” (Cather, “My First Novels” 93), she had a career in journalism regarded by James Woodress as “the long apprenticeship that leads to her mature artistry” (89). This journalistic career, which stretched from 1893 to 1912, started when Cather was a student at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and contributed many drama reviews to the local newspaper, the *Nebraska State Journal*. In the 1890s, “the greatest actors often appeared in the theatres of Lincoln” (Bullock 396), and despite her youth Cather “very soon acquired a reputation as the liveliest and least inhibited reviewer in the Midwest” (Woodress 92). The drama reviews written during this period reflect Cather’s developing artistic views that form the basis of her later aesthetic judgment when she becomes an established novelist.

Willa Cather had been fond of drama since her childhood in Red Cloud. The barnstorming companies always brought about “breathless, rapt attention and deep feeling” for the young Cather (*Complete Letters* no. 0985). The early years of drama watching not only helped her to accumulate a database necessary for being a drama critic in the future, but also cultivated her taste of and sensitivity to dramas, all of which contributed to the typical pungency that she was well known for in her future drama reviews. According to the managing editor of the *Nebraska State Journal*, “many an actor of national reputation wondered on coming to Lincoln what would appear the next morning from the pen of that meatax young girl of whom all of them had heard” (quoted in Slote 17). In 1895, the successful theater producer Gustav Frohman had a discussion on drama criticism with Willa Cather, admitting that “poor companies begin to tremble long before they get [to Lincoln]” (quoted in Woodress 92).

Cather’s reputation as a “meatax young girl” implies that honesty must be one of her principles in reviewing dramas. She did not stand in awe of the renowned actors, but could recognize the merits in many young, little-known ones. She believes that “a critic’s first instincts are the best because they are the truest,” and claims that the “highest art” in a timely review “is to reproduce to some extent the atmosphere of the play, to laugh if it was funny, to weep a little if it was sad, to say plainly and frankly if it was bad” (“As You Like It,” Dec. 16, 1894). Here words with similar meanings, such as “truest” and “plainly and frankly,” demonstrate Cather’s appreciation of honesty. And in the meantime, the quality of being honest is closely connected with some high standard, which is conveyed through the phrase “the highest art.”

In fact, even though the superlative expression “the highest art” is used here to state her perspective of a good drama review, it is a phrase that she frequently uses, sometimes with slight variations, to comment on dramas. For instance, she praises a student performer’s comedy as “of the highest type” (“The Curtain Falls”), comments on the acting of the Fowler Company as “not of the highest art” (“Music and Drama”), eulogizes Shakespeare’s plays as “the highest triumph of human art” (“More or Less Personal”), and argues that “the highest kind of art, whether in comedy or tragedy” is that “which is elevated by high artistic sincerity” (“As You Like It,” Dec. 9, 1894). Sometimes Cather does not use “highest” to directly modify “art,” but similarly applies this superlative word to express her understanding of ideal art. She holds that the “madness of Hamlet is the highest point in tragedy which Shakespeare ever reached” (“Shakespeare and Hamlet”). And after seeing Nat Goodwin’s acting in *A Gilded Fool*, she regards him as being “not of the highest order of artists who can shake off the fetters of the flesh and set aside the limitations of temperament” (“Amusements,” Dec. 4, 1894).

It is noteworthy that Cather’s fondness of using the adjective “high” in her early drama criticism persisted. In 1920, as a nationally acclaimed novel writer Cather states her view on “the higher artistic process” in the essay “On the Art of Fiction” (102); and in 1922, she again elaborates on “higher processes of art” in the famous essay “The Novel Demeuble” (40). Though then the middle-aged Cather mainly uses “high” in its comparative rather than the superlative form, which implies a fading of extremity in her language, there is a continuation of her consideration about art being “high” or not. In this sense, “the highest art” could be regarded as a crucial gateway to Cather’s creative world.

Undoubtedly, “the highest art” is a subjective expression, hence what it refers to can only be sought in Cather’s writings. In a drama review in February 1894, Cather writes that what makes the famous actress Clara Morris “fearfully and horribly great” is “power and passion” (“Amusements,” Feb. 7, 1894). In another drama review the next month, though for the most part Cather has high praise for the celebrated actress Julia Marlowe’s performance in the comedy *The Love Chase*, she argues that the actress had a significant defect of lacking passion—“she lives too beautifully to live very hard, dies too gracefully to die very effectively.” Upon this she proposes her view of “the greatest art in acting,” that is “not to please and charm and delight, but to move and thrill; not



to play a part daintily and delightfully, but with power and passion” (quoted in Bullock 398–99). She believes that “genius means relentless labor and passionate excitement from the hour one is born until the hour one dies” (“Plays and Players”). Cather’s view on Miss Marlowe was further explained in another review later that same year: “She knows nothing of the stronger, coarser emotions, ‘the ungovernable fury of the blood,’ with which high tragedy deals” (“Utterly Irrelevant”). Here the phrase “the stronger, coarser emotions” echoes her previous emphasis on “power and passion,” which she defined as the quintessential attribute of “the greatest art in acting.” A positive example or representation of “the greatest art” was the acting of the famous French actress Sarah Bernhardt, whom she greatly admired. She “referred to the actress nearly fifty times in the first three years of her reviews” (Funda 25), praising Bernhardt’s art for being so powerful and passionate that it “leaps up and strikes you between the eyes, makes you hold your breath and tremble” (“The Passing Show”). Moreover, the young Cather’s advocacy for “power and passion” can also be found in her outspoken critique of some critics of modern art, where she believes that

The curse of every school and phase of modern art is the guild of drawing room critics; critics who sneer at the great and powerful, and adore the clever and the dainty. They refuse to read any thing more stimulating than Howells’ parlor farces, and to hear any play more moving than “The Rivals.” This race of critics has declared Ruskin and Wagner and Turner and Modjeska blasé . . . they take the books that look well on their tables; the music that is not too loud for their parlors; the pictures that hang well on their walls. (“Between the Acts”)

Obviously, what Cather appreciated was “the great and powerful” art. Her biting sarcasm at the “drawing room critics” manifests Cather’s disdain for mediocre art which may provide pleasant comfort but lacks power in “moving” people.

It is not difficult to note that “power” and “passion” are two key words of romanticism. Young Cather’s repeated use of them



Sarah Bernhardt photographed by Napoleon Sarony, ca. 1880.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-38303.

shows her particular appreciation of high intensity in life. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke proposes the sublime as “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (36). This argument gave English romanticism a theoretical foundation and added legitimacy to their artistic expression of “the strongest emotion.” In the manifesto of the English romantic movement, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” William Wordsworth defines poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (175). According to Bernice Slote, during Cather’s university years, she read a lot and “her favorites were always nineteenth-century Romantics” (38). Indeed, Cather’s affirmation of romanticism can be found in her novel *The Song of the Lark*. When Thea gets inspiration from Dr. Archie, Cather writes that the teenaged heroine “learned the thing that old Dumas meant when he told the Romanticists that to make a drama he needed but one passion and four walls” (156). Alexandre Dumas père was the representative of French romanticism, of which Cather here singles out “passion” as the essential quality. Susan J. Rosowski had also pointed out that Cather’s “early principles” in writing “resemble those common to romanticism,” especially “an English tradition of romanticism,” mainly in four aspects: a dualism of mind and matter, the capacity of imagination, a deep understanding of commonplace life, and a gift of sympathy (6, 7, 10). This analysis is quite insightful, yet mainly concerned with conception and ability; Rosowski seems to neglect an emotional or passionate aspect in Cather’s view of art.

In fact, “passion” or “emotion” is something that young Cather cares much about in a piece of artistic work. As early as 1891, she argued that the charm of *Hamlet* lies in his “emotion” rather than “intellect.”

The emotional and intentional plane of life is infinitely higher than the intellectual: It is the source of every great purpose, of every exalted aim. It is not attained by study; it is not seen through a telescope, nor reached by mastering the pages of a Latin grammar. (“Shakespeare and Hamlet”)



Obviously, young Cather put extremely high value on “emotion.” Thirty years later, she again contended that emotion is the indispensable pillar of a work, without which the writing would be “unworthy of an artist.” She regards Tolstoy as the role model, in whose writing “the clothes, the dishes, the haunting interiors of those old Moscow houses, are always so much a part of the emotions of the people that they are perfectly synthesized” (“The Novel *Démeublé*” 39–40).

Meanwhile, Cather the drama critic’s frequent repetition of the “highest” or “greatest art” also denotes a hierarchy in her view of art. Indeed, it was not uncommon for literary or art critics to use words like “high” or “low” in the end of the 19th century. Historian Lawrence Levine points out that at that time adjectives of “‘high,’ ‘low,’ ‘rude,’ ‘lesser,’ ‘higher,’ ‘lower,’ ‘beautiful,’ ‘modern,’ ‘legitimate,’ ‘vulgar,’ ‘popular,’ ‘true,’ ‘pure,’ ‘highbrow,’ ‘lowbrow’ were applied to such nouns as ‘arts’ or ‘culture’ almost ad infinitum” (224). It was a time when the so-called “high culture” was constructed and differentiated from the “low culture.” A representative example of this transformation is the performance and reception of Shakespeare’s plays in America. In the early half of the nineteenth century, Shakespeare’s plays were “part and parcel of popular culture” which were “presented as part of the same milieu inhabited by magicians, dancers, singers, acrobats, minstrels, and comics” (Levine 22, 23). But in the last third of the nineteenth century, Shakespeare had become “highbrow” culture for elite circles. Willa Cather herself also took part in this transformation. Her essay on *Hamlet* mentioned above is titled “Shakespeare and Hamlet: The Real Significance of the Play,” which indicates a debate and clarification over what kind of “taste” the audience should have toward the play. In the essay, she calls Shakespeare “the man who wrote the greatest dramas in the English language,” and uses similarly extreme words to express her worship in sentences such as

“none of [Hamlet’s] great soliloquies are premeditated; all are perfectly spontaneous” (“Shakespeare and Hamlet”).

The construction of a cultural hierarchy in the late nineteenth century in America was related to some extent to British aestheticism. For Jonathan Freedman, British aestheticism is not simply a literary or artistic tendency or movement, but “an intricately articulated arena in which new definitions of the aesthetic and its relation to the social were negotiated and renegotiated,” helping to create the concept of “high culture”(xii). By the turn of the century, “the tastes, the perceptions, the very attitudes of British aestheticism had thoroughly penetrated the American cultural consciousness” (79). As a drama critic at the *Nebraska State Journal* and the editor of her university’s student newspaper, Willa Cather was required to see every theater production and to read the news in the papers for which she worked, so she “was very much a

part of her times and her culture” (Middleton 185). In this sense, Cather’s drama criticism with repeated expressions of “the highest” or “the greatest” art not only constituted, but also fostered the construction of cultural hierarchy in the end of the nineteenth century.

If we look at Cather’s writing as a novelist, we can find that such an understanding of “the highest art” had a foundational and lasting impact on her later view of art. In the end of her novel *The Song of the Lark* (1915), which is about a talented small-town girl’s progress to become a famous soprano, when Thea Kronborg finally achieves her artistic goal at the Metropolitan Opera, Cather concludes through the heroine’s music teacher Mr. Harsanyi that the “secret” of Thea’s success, which “is every artist’s secret,” is simply “passion” (525).

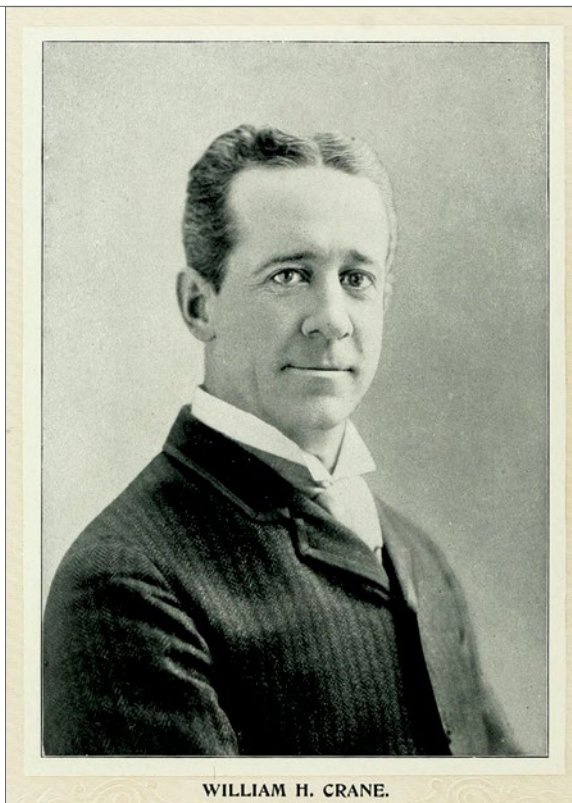
But it is significant to note that Cather’s emphasis of “power and passion” as the core of “the highest art” has nothing to do with any pompous way of acting in a drama. She criticizes in different places the “excessive emotion” which is



James McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Black, No. 3: Sir Henry Irving as Philip II of Spain*, 1876/85. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1910.

unnecessary and improper. In her very first article as a drama critic for the *Nebraska State Journal* in 1893, Cather criticized an actor whom she asserts “acts too much” and “declaims constantly and hisses an invitation to dinner as if it were a summons to the block” (“Amusements,” Nov. 22, 1893). She also wrote a review of the same play in the student newspaper of University of Nebraska, the *Hesperian*, where she was the editor, commenting on the actor’s performance that the “key of his voice” was “too high” and arguing that he “has one great fault of modern actors, he rants” and “lacks the delicacy and discrimination to know where excessive emotion becomes grotesque” (quoted in Bullock 396). The next year in a review of *Faust*, Cather again criticized this “great fault of modern actors” by contrasting the actor who played Mephistopheles with the great British actor Henry Irving who “never rants, never growls and never calls down a whole orchestra of thunder to reinforce a very ordinary sentence” (“Amusements,” Jan. 18, 1894). And if “excessive emotion” is not the proper representation of “power and passion,” then what is? There is a quote attributed to Goethe in Cather’s drama reviews that “the highest cannot be spoken,” which she elaborates as “the great actor’s tact and temptation is in repressing his emotion and keeping it under. He must always tame his highest flights and tone his loudest cries just as a literateur must cut out the passages that are dearest to him.” (“Amusements,” Feb. 20, 1894) This understanding is in line with William Wordsworth’s view of poetry which “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (175).

From late 1893 to 1895, Willa Cather was a diligent and prolific contributor with over one hundred drama reviews each year in the *Nebraska State Journal*. This quantity of articles allows her to elaborate on her artistic view in more depth. In many places she mentions that in order to achieve “the highest art,” one should have a “soul” or a “heart,” which is “the only thing” that “gives art the right to be” (quoted in Bullock 398). For example, the famous actor William H. Crane was given no “higher praise” praise by Cather than his being “an artist with a great heart” (“Amusements,” Apr. 5, 1894). And it is the same for playwrights who wish to achieve



William H. Crane, as he appeared in the *Marie Burroughs Art Portfolio of Stage Celebrities*. A. N. Marquis and Co., 1894.

“the highest art”; they must have a “heart” or “soul.” After watching *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, she criticizes the play itself that “abounds in cleverness, but lacks in imagination; is rich in words and poor in feeling and action.” This defect is imputed by Cather to Oscar Wilde’s lacking “a heart,” or “sincerity, the soul of all great work, art’s only excuse for being” (“Amusements,” Dec. 18, 1894).

It is relevant here to point out that even though “the highest art” is a common principle that Cather applies to view art, whether acting or playwriting, when reviewing she deals with the acting and the writing of a drama separately. In other words, a drama could achieve “the highest art” in acting even though its literary quality was mediocre. For example, in the article praising William H.

Crane for his “great heart,” Cather also frankly criticizes the defects of “the play itself”: “It is loose in plot and lacks finished technique. It has neither completeness nor logical sequence” (“Amusements,” Apr. 5, 1894). Similarly, Cather also praises the actor DeWolf Hopper as “a genuine comedian” who is “pure and simple,” while the comic opera he played is regarded as being “absolutely without plot, characterizations and situations” (“Amusements,” Apr. 7, 1894). Most of Cather’s drama reviews concern the performance, while comments on the plays account for a much smaller proportion. The priority of acting in Cather’s drama reviews was related to the overall state of drama in America at the end of the nineteenth century. At that time what mattered was “less the play than the player,” with the theater “dominated by spectacle and by the actor” (Bigsby and Wilmeth 2).

This attribution of “the highest art” to the artist’s having a “soul” or “heart” is nevertheless still quite abstract or vague and can hardly be taken as a practical guide for those who hope to refine their art. In fact, it was not until Cather had become an experienced novelist that she was able to develop a sort of methodology as to how to achieve “the highest art.” In 1922, Cather again values “passion” as the core of a drama by stating in “The Novel D  meubl  ” that “to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls,” again quoting Dumas (43). She explicitly proposes that “the higher processes of art are





Lincoln's Oliver Theatre was the Lansing until 1898, and here Cather saw many of the productions she reviewed for the *Nebraska State Journal*.

all processes of simplification.” She metaphorically describes this process: “throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre” (40, 42–43). What Cather means is that it is unnecessary to depict everything with the same level of detail in a novel; rather, a writer should simplify, or should have a unifying “passion” to determine whether the representation of certain material objects is proper and necessary. That’s why she also states in “The Novel D  meubl  ” that “the novelist must learn to write, and then he must unlearn it; just as the modern painter learns to draw, and then learns when utterly to disregard his accomplishment, when to subordinate it to a higher and truer effect” (40). Even though Cather is talking about novel writing, the comparison of a room “d  meubl  ” to “a Greek theatre” implies that this methodology of “simplification” can be applied in various forms of art. In other words, to simplify is the approach to achieve “the highest art.”

Even though Cather did not solve the problem of “how to” until about twenty years later, while a young drama critic she had already established an understanding of “power and passion” as the constitution of “the highest art.” Cather was only in her early twenties, but she had already demonstrated great capability in aesthetic appreciation. This capability was partly an aptitude, and partly acquired as she grew up. Her equation of “the highest art” with “power and passion” can also be considered as something related to her personality. Cather was not one of mild temperament, but “of strong loves and

equally strong hates” (Woodress 93). Viola Roseboro’, Cather’s colleague at *McClure’s* and probably the person who brought Cather to the attention of S. S. McClure, once remarked that “if Willa Cather had been a scrub-woman, she would have scrubbed much harder than other scrub-women” (Lewis 30). Similarly for Cather’s biographer Sharon O’Brien, who read many memoirs, letters, and personal reminiscences, the famous writer was “a strong, domineering woman” (3). Even though these opinions may not provide a direct answer to why Cather as a drama critic valued “power and passion” so much, they at least manifest something in common between

Cather and those performers who in her perspective interpreted “the highest art,” implying that she had an understanding of the “power and passion” from the heart.

In a sense, “the highest art” is a principle that not only guides Cather through the writing of numerous drama critiques, but also stimulates her to constantly surpass herself in literary creation. Over thirty years after she wrote her first drama review, Cather told the life story of an archbishop she admired greatly who was always overcoming adversities and trying to keep going. The archbishop in his old age could be seen as an example of those who realized “the highest art” in their life, with “power and passion” returning to him again in a very simple way: “In New Mexico he always awoke a young man. . . . His first consciousness was a sense of the light dry wind blowing in through the windows, with the fragrance of hot sun and sage-brush and sweet clover; a wind that made one’s body feel light and one’s heart cry ‘To-day, to-day,’ like a child’s” (*Death Comes for the Archbishop* 287).

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Reading Cather: What's Race Got to Do with It?

Sharon L. Kohout

The 2020 Willa Cather Spring Conference—and the unusual circumstances surrounding it—provided the backdrop for the formation of a reading group with shared interests in Cather, racial equity, and social justice. What follows is a description of how we as a group initially connected, how we have evolved, and how our discussions and common experiences have added value to our lives.

Spring 2020 was unsettling and disturbing in so many ways. As Covid-19 upended our lives, the amazing staff of the National Willa Cather Center managed to adjust and pull us all together into a virtual Spring Conference through the wonders of Whova, a virtual conference platform. As participants, we still managed to listen to remarkable papers and be present “virtually” at events. But for many of us there was an underlying measure of sadness and horror unfolding outside our computers, as the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis took center stage and the ensuing “Black Lives Matter” marches occurred across the country. We were engaged and settled in our literary cocoon of exploring Cather virtually in Red Cloud while anguish was unfolding across the country.

As the 2020 Spring Conference was ending, Sarah Bush, who was attending the conference virtually from San Francisco, reached out through the Whova platform and posted a question: “Would any other conference participants be interested in forming a reading group to discuss Cather’s fiction through the lenses of ethnicity and race?” Sarah’s inquiry presented an opportunity that appealed to a number of us attending the conference.

That summer I chose to participate in the online reading group—as a white woman from Lubbock, Texas, a city in West Texas with a substantial brown and Black population. Others from around the country joined too and we eventually called our virtual reading group “Cather & Racial Equity: Exploring Race Across the Divides.”

Since that summer of 2020 we have met on Zoom for monthly sessions of sixty to ninety minutes. Participants have joined us from Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa, New Hampshire, California, Massachusetts, Tennessee, Maryland, Colorado, Alabama, Virginia, and Texas. Membership has ebbed and flowed—as is true in many reading groups, especially during and after Covid—but a core group has endured and we now are beginning our fifth year of reading Cather in the context of both contemporary and historical issues impacting the United States.

Our original intentions were to retain a focus on Cather’s fiction as well as issues of race and equity in our society. At first, we were not sure where we were going with this kind of connection. We acknowledged that Cather’s direct references to race were infrequent and not necessarily consistent with contemporary standards. But as we discussed and reached consensus on topics for our meetings, we began to look more broadly across the period in which Cather lived and how she evolved as a writer from Red Cloud and Lincoln to her years in Pittsburgh, New York City, Jaffrey, Grand Manan, the Southwest, and Quebec. Our group used the lenses of whiteness, equity and social justice, and racism in our society then and now, in discussing the fictional worlds of Cather.

We eventually found value in exploring race not only in Cather’s writings, but in those of her contemporaries, like the African American poets Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson, and contemporary writers of today, like Toni Morrison and Margo Jefferson.

These key questions guided our interactions:

- How do we understand and connect with Cather and the places and times of her life?
- How do we inform ourselves about the various cultures Cather encountered and wrote about . . . including whiteness as a phenomenon in our society in her time and ours?
- How do we grapple with matters of ethnicity and race and class in Cather’s time and ours?
- How does race show up in our daily lives between meetings?

As we initially created our agenda, we benefited from Sarah Bush’s participation in a national organization called Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), which encourages white people’s advocacy for racial and economic justice and a recognition of whiteness as a cultural matter in the United States. Early on we often took turns researching the land where various members lived and shared with others our larger place-based histories. These thoughtful statements were personal and brought a sense of reverence to the beginning of each meeting. Examples included honoring the Abenaki in New England (including the town of Jaffrey, where Willa Cather and Edith Lewis are buried); the Ihanktonwan in South Dakota; the Calusa from Florida; and the Comanche, Pawnee, and Kiowa from the southern Great Plains. Such recognition connected us to Willa Cather’s own life in New Hampshire, Nebraska (and other nearby Plains states), and the Southwest, and the matter of place and landscape in her fiction.



The format for our meetings has evolved over time to include a check-in from each participant, a brief discussion of race and “otherness” in members’ lives from the last month, and a discussion of a Cather piece of fiction in the context of our own lives and our country’s current situation. No one is required to speak, but we have become more observant about how race functions in our lives and society and therefore have become more comfortable speaking about the subject. We value perspectives from members who represent rural, small town, and urban neighborhoods, and different regions of the United States.

Over the years we unpacked and reconstructed our views about race and social justice in our society as we read Cather’s novels and stories. Members would decide on a Cather work to read and discuss through our lenses of race, ethnicity, and social justice. Individuals in the group often would recommend other books, essays, poems, or films that related to our selected Cather stories and novels. A major turning point came in our group discussions when we recognized themes related to whiteness in our culture. This new perspective opened a different approach to Cather’s fiction.

Questions such as these emerged:

- What is said . . . and unsaid . . . by characters?
- What is said . . . and unsaid . . . about the characters?
- What ethnic and racial groups are present as major and minor characters . . . and what groups are absent or only occasionally present in her novels and stories?
- What major historical events and social trends appear in Cather’s fiction . . . and which are present occasionally or are absent?

As we began this journey, our focus on race, social justice, and equity felt justified as we explored a few of Cather’s early short stories, including “The Sentimentality of William Tavener” and “A Wagner Matinée,” and her novels *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. We enjoyed reading *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as a group and spirited discussions over several meetings ensued. Our focus was on the interactions of diverse characters—Indigenous, Mexican-American, recent European immigrants (including the two French priests), white Americans, and so on.

Cather’s last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, also provided characters, setting, text, and plot that led to lively discussions over several meetings. Here too applying the lens of race and social justice proved fruitful in looking at Cather’s depiction of a rural community in Virginia in the pre- and post-Civil War period. Cather’s own family history—as divided and ambivalent as the country’s then

and now—figures prominently as catalyst in her choice of characters and plot.

In concert with reading *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* we began to read and discuss contemporary African American writers who have identified Cather both as a source of reading pleasure and as a point of inquiry into race in our country. Specifically, members read and discussed Toni Morrison’s essay “Playing in the Dark” and Margo Jefferson’s *Constructing a Nervous System: A Memoir*, especially the chapter entitled “White Rapture.”

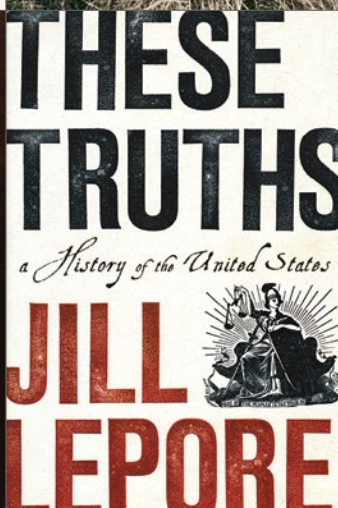
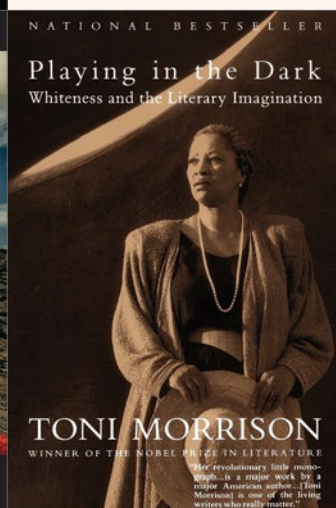
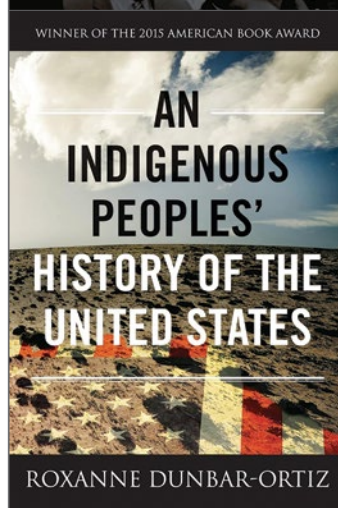
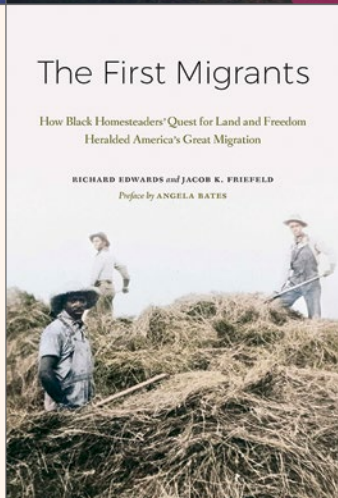
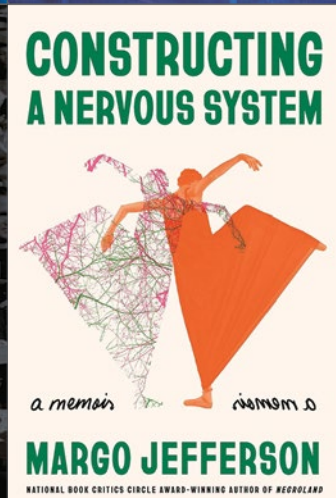
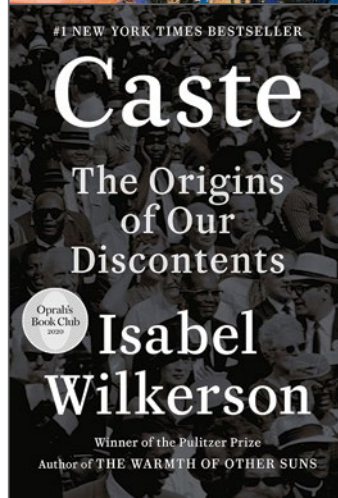
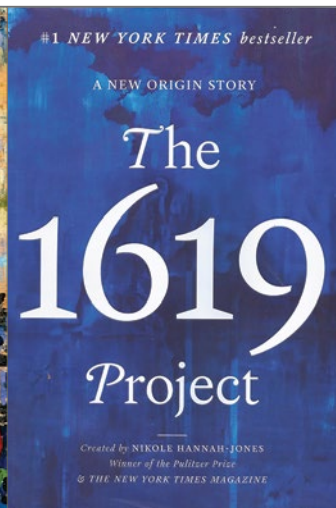
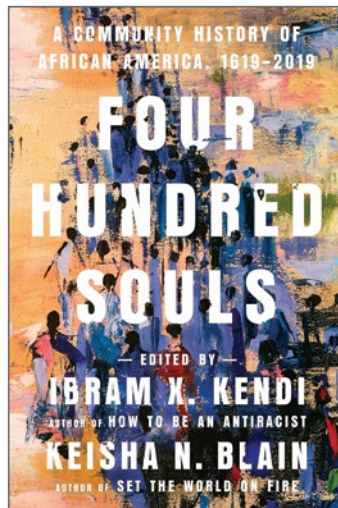
Our conversations led others to read and comment on works like Isabel Wilkerson’s *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents* and Jill Lepore’s *These Truths: A History of the United States* in the context of reading Cather, Morrison, and Jefferson. These works were representative of our desire to include supplementary materials that provided new perspectives on Cather’s work and legacy among contemporary readers.

In short, we looked at works that provided historical and literary perspectives and other reference materials that grounded us in what was happening over the course of Cather’s lifetime. We included, of course, *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* (edited by Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout). Some members also read and shared insights from recent biographies by Daryl Palmer (*Becoming Willa Cather: Creation and Career*) and Melissa Homestead (*The Only Wonderful Things: The Creative Partnership of Willa Cather and Edith Lewis*).

The focus on race and social justice prompted some members of the group to read popular and influential works like Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* and Resmaa Menakem’s *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Both works were helpful in understanding the “divides” in Cather’s life and fiction and the racial/ethnic “divides” in our own country and time. Both works stimulated conversations about racism, white supremacy, and white nationalism in our society and thoughts about what members of our group could do to acknowledge and move forward with an improved understanding of our “racialized divides.” (See additional works we discussed in the “Suggestions for Further Reading” list at the end of this essay.)

Actions followed with members choosing to go on civil rights tours in Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and North Carolina. One member chose to advise undocumented students applying to colleges from Nigeria, Haiti, and





read a Cather short story for each online meeting. Many of us are reading these short stories—such as “The Conversion of Sum Loo” and “A Son of the Celestial”—for the first time. We have come to a better understanding of Cather’s early efforts to write fiction set beyond the Great Plains. In doing so Cather thought and wrote about past (and current) issues of forced and voluntary immigration to our country and the lives of characters of color and diverse social classes. In conjunction with reading these two early stories we delved into the sacrifices of Chinese, Irish, and other immigrants who helped to achieve one of the greatest engineering feats of the nineteenth century. According to Stanford University’s Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project, approximately 15,000 to 20,000 Asian Americans worked from the western side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains to complete the first transcontinental railroad (“Stanford Project”). Members of our group from California connected the racism then with the undercurrents of antagonism toward more recent Asian immigrants during the Covid-19 pandemic. We also read another early story by Cather, “The Way of the World,” and later listened to the delightful reading by Sonia Manzano during the Selected Shorts program hosted by Ken Burns at Symphony Space in New York City in observance

elsewhere in the Caribbean. Other members contributed financially and in other ways to help bridge racial and other “divides” in our society. I chose to become a member of the health committee in the Lubbock, Texas chapter of the NAACP. During our monthly conversations participants in the reading group would speak about any efforts to alleviate the “divides” in our hometowns and elsewhere in the country.

This past year—in an effort to accommodate our busier lives post-pandemic—we simplified our format and have

of Willa Cather’s 150th birthday (the entire program can be heard at symphonyspace.org/selected-shorts/episodes/ken-burns-presents-willa-cathers-america). We discussed the role of “divides” by gender, geography, and age in this story.

Our members have enjoyed attending the National Willa Cather Center’s Author Series virtual monthly programs and recognized that several of the authors interviewed wrote about topics of particular interest to our group. We eventually reached out to two authors who enthusiastically agreed to



discuss their books with us on Zoom. The first author, Jonis Agee of Nebraska, joined us in July 2022. Agee's novel, *The Bones of Paradise*, won the Nebraska Book Award, the High Plains Book Award for Fiction, and the One Book One Nebraska designation in 2022. Agee's work is set in the Nebraska Sandhills after the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890. With our group, Agee spoke animatedly and cogently about Cather's influences on her writing, as well as the impact of the massacre at Wounded Knee. Our discussion of her characters and plot connected that period of Nebraska history to the years that Cather was coming of age in Red Cloud and Lincoln.

Another invited writer was organizer and historian Angela Bates, an African American descendant of migrants from Kentucky who settled in Nicodemus, Kansas. Bates wrote the introduction to a recent book *The First Migrants: How Black Homesteaders' Quest for Land and Freedom Heralded America's Great Migration* by Richard Edwards and Jacob K. Friefeld. After hearing Bates speak during the Willa Cather Author Series in January 2024, I arranged to meet with her at her Kansas home on a June afternoon while I was en route to the 2024 Cather Spring Conference. She agreed to share with our reading group the specific challenges faced by recently freed African Americans from the South and border states as they formed their own post-Civil War communities on the Great Plains. Our discussion with Bates via Zoom informed our group's reading of Cather's early story, "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional," about hucksters promoting settlements in arid areas of Kansas for white settlers from Virginia during the same post-Civil War period.

Our current project is reading Cather's later short fiction. Following this year's 2024 Spring Conference the group took the opportunity to dive into Cather's three works of short fiction in *Obscure Destinies*. "Two Friends" reminded us of the timelessness of the characters and plot of the story as it relates to the 2024 presidential election; "Neighbour Rosicky" took us in the direction of farming and climate change; and our upcoming discussion of "Old Mrs. Harris" will no doubt be equally engaging.

At the 2024 Spring Conference—"Cather and the Readerly Imagination"—I had the privilege of presenting on behalf of our Cather & Racial Equity reading group. Since that time, we have welcomed new members who have expressed gratification in discovering a group that finds ways to relate Cather and her works to issues they care deeply about. As one member said, "We like to imagine that Cather would appreciate us using her works as a springboard for discussing new and relevant ideas concerning contemporary issues."

What brought us together that summer of 2020—and continues to keep us meeting—is a shared love of Cather's language and fiction, a regard for small-town and rural America as epitomized by Red Cloud and its surrounding landscape, and an abiding respect for Willa Cather and the life she created for herself in various regions of North America. We also are readers who care deeply about social justice, a multiracial democracy, and Cather's enduring relevance as an author who wrote about people across the ethnic, socioeconomic, and racial spectrums. For the Cather & Racial Equity reading group, Cather's powerful and timeless advice has been a tool for learning and growth: "*Le but n'est rien; le chemin, c'est tout...*" We look forward to where the journey will take us.

Suggestions for Further Reading

The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story. Nikole Hannah-Jones and *New York Times Magazine*. One World, 2021.

African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle and Song. Kevin Young, editor. Library of America, 2020.

Chasing Bright Medusas: A Life of Willa Cather. Benjamin Taylor. Viking, 2023.

Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619–2019. Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain. One World, 2021.

A History of the Indians of the United States. Angie Debo. Oklahoma University Press, 1984.

The History of White People. Nell Irvin Painter. Norton, 2010.

An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. Beacon Press, 2014.

A People's History of the United States. Howard Zinn. Harper Perennial, 1990.

Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record. Edith Lewis. Knopf, 1953.

The Cather & Racial Equity reading group welcomes those who have an interest in the exploration of issues described here. If you would like to join us, please send an email to Sharon.kohout@gmail.com

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The Budding Poet

Willa Cather published her first poem in the University of Nebraska *Hesperian* in June 1892. Worldly and wise beyond her eighteen years, Cather begins “Shakespeare: A Freshman Theme” with these lines:

World poet, we now of this latter day
 Who have known failure and have felt defeat,
 The dwarfed children of earth’s sterile age,
 Who feel our weakness weighing on our limbs
 Unbreakable as bonds of adamant,
 Turn to thee once again, O sun born bard:
 To rest our weary souls a little space
 Beneath the shadow of infinitude.

Within a decade, Cather had written and published sufficient poetry to assemble *April Twilights* (1903), a collection that shows Cather’s continued interest in Shakespeare and the classics—interests she developed in her early reading life in Red Cloud. These foundational texts would surface again and again in Cather’s writing, and rereading and sharing her favorite works was one of Cather’s comforts when the world became too much. You can research Willa Cather’s poetry typescripts, her early personal library, her correspondence, and much more by appointment at the National Willa Cather Center. Contact archivist Tracy Sanford Tucker for arrangements at ttucker@willacather.org.

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Cather and the staff of the *Hesperian*, 1892. WCPM Collection, PHO-4-W689-1295.
 At top: *Hesperian* masthead, 1894. Krieger Collection, OBJ-327-001.



Contributors to this Issue

James A. Jaap is a teaching professor of English at Penn State University and board member of the Willa Cather Foundation. He and his family live near Cather’s Pittsburgh haunts, but he dreams of living in the mountains of the West.

Sharon Kohout has been an active member of the Cather Foundation since her 2012 retirement from the Centers for Disease Control, where she was a public health analyst. Early in her career she was a lecturer in the English Department at Texas Tech University. At the CDC she was chief coordinator on projects to reduce disproportionately high rates of tobacco use among low-income populations and people of color. In 2018 Sharon took her first of four civil rights tours of the South; she encourages others to educate themselves about our country’s complicated history.

Jess Masters is a Ph.D. candidate in English at the University of Sydney, Australia. She coedits book reviews for the journal *The Space Between: Literature and Culture, 1914–1945* and is the current graduate student

representative for the Modernist Studies Association. Her Ph.D. focuses on formal intersections between modernist literature and art works.

Richard Millington, Helen and Laura Shedd Professor Emeritus of English Language and Literature at Smith College, is the author of several articles on Willa Cather, each exploring an aspect of her distinctive American modernism. His books include *Practicing Romance: Narrative Form and Cultural Engagement in Hawthorne’s Fiction*; *The Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne*; the Norton Critical Edition of Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance*; and *Hitchcock’s America* (coedited with Jonathan Freedman).

Xuesong Zhou is associate professor of American literature at Zhengzhou University, China. She is the vice director of Center for British and American Literature Studies at Zhengzhou University. Her work on Willa Cather has appeared in China’s most authoritative academic journals in the field of international literature studies, such as *Foreign Literature* and *Foreign Literature Studies*. Her monograph on Cather’s later novels will be published in 2026 by China Social Sciences Press.

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A LEGACY THAT ENDURES

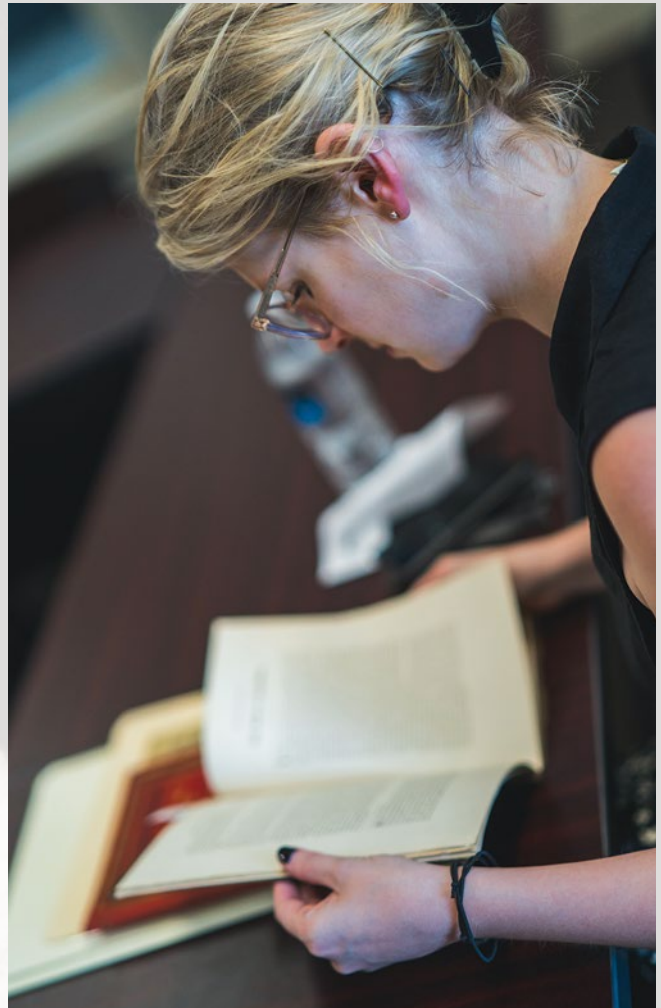
“... what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself,—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?”

The National Willa Cather Center's purpose is to enrich lives by advancing Willa Cather's legacy. Our commitment to the arts enables thousands of readers to engage with Cather's writing by way of educational programs, residencies, preserved historic sites, and archival collections.

Cather's ability to evoke a sense of place and to capture the undercurrent of human emotion is as meaningful today as it was more than a century ago. When you join the Cather Legacy Society and make gift arrangements to benefit the National Willa Cather Center beyond your lifetime, you help us share Cather's artistry with scores of readers and students 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.

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