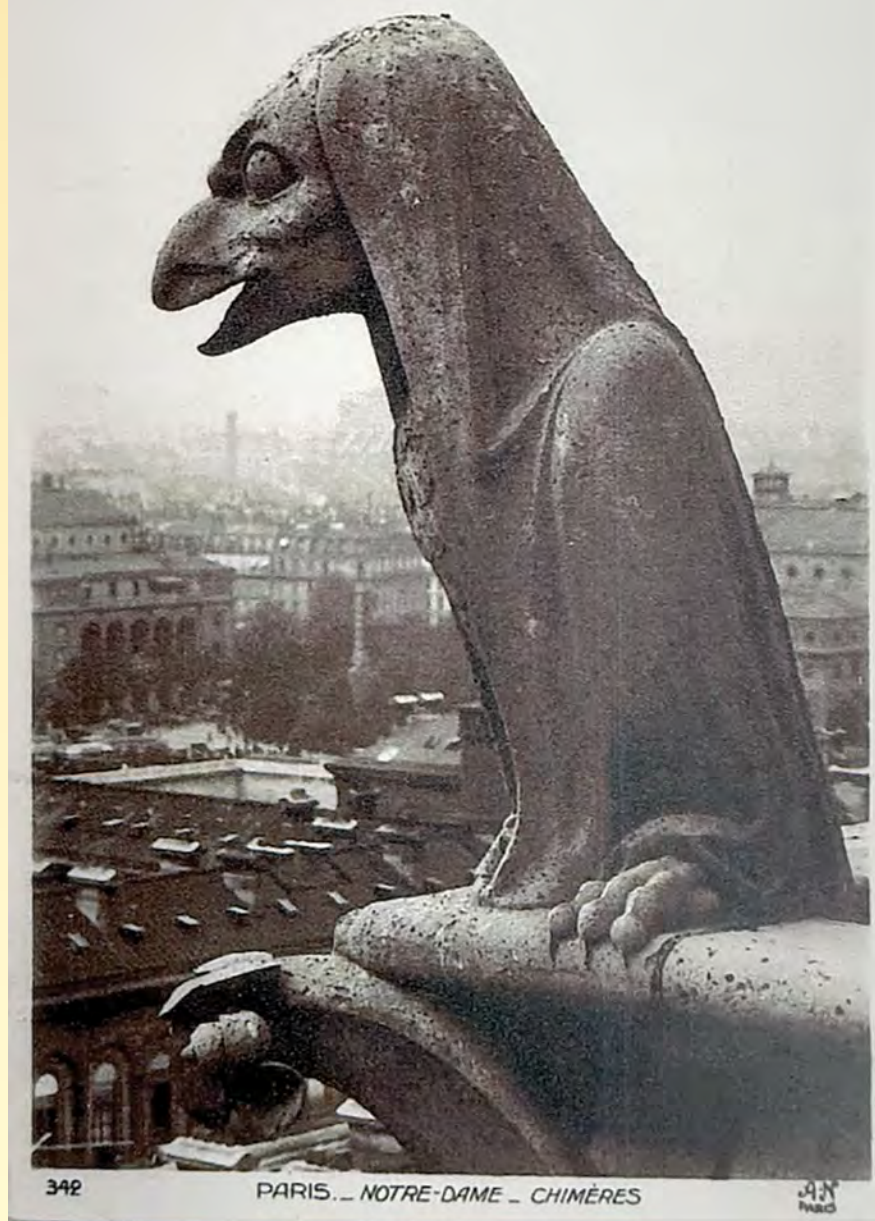


Willa Cather REVIEW

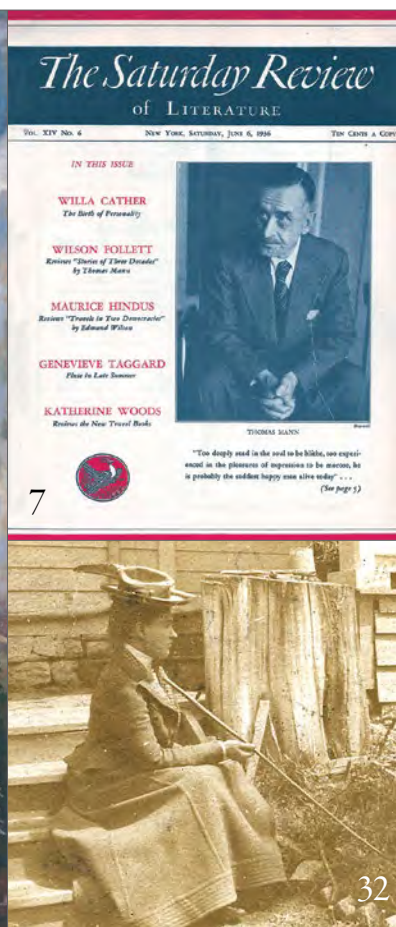
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Isn't this a chudgred old bird?

Willa Cather REVIEW

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On the cover:

"Isn't she a dreadful old bird?"

Cather sent this postcard from Paris to her niece Margaret Cather in May 1930 and introduced her message with this apt phrase. The dreadful old bird is one of the beloved *chimères* on the Cathedral of Notre-Dame. See story on page 14.

Roscoe and Meta Cather Collection (MS316), University of Nebraska—Lincoln Libraries, Archives & Special Collections.



Letter from the Executive Director Ashley Olson

In an often-cited 1929 letter to newspaper editor Harvey Newbranch, Cather expressed concern about the demise of small-town opera houses. She recalled the thrill of seeing actors take the stage and described how dramatic theater can awaken and stir emotion. In Cather's words, "Only real people speaking the lines can give us that feeling of living along with them, of participating in their existence." She went on to suggest that drama could be more powerful than printed books or paintings because a story unfolds live, with human beings pouring themselves into their roles.

Whenever I sit in a theater to watch an adaptation of a Cather text, I think of these sentiments and imagine what Cather—in her days as a "meat-ax" drama critic—might have written about the performance, the actors, and, in the case of opera or musical theater, the vocals. I'm not a critic, but I've enjoyed thinking about what Cather might have made of the shows we've encountered this year, and I'm pleased to share some news about them.

We gathered at the historic Ritz Theater in Minneapolis this spring for the world premiere of Theater Latté Da's *My Antonia*, a new musical inspired by one of Cather's most beloved novels. The extended run spanned six weeks, and there were so many glowing

reviews that it would be impossible to summarize them here. Writing for *The Pioneer Press*, Ron Hubbard called it the most "breathtakingly brilliant" new musical he'd encountered in quite some time and shared his belief that it could become a Broadway hit.

On stage at the Red Cloud Opera House was a production of *The Bohemian*, an adaptation of Willa Cather's memorable short story "The Bohemian Girl." With a simple set—and while simultaneously handcrafting and baking a loaf of bread—Jonathan Fielding and Brenda Withers took on multiple roles as they breathed new life into this vibrant story.

Other adaptations are in the works as well. In the years ahead you might expect opera productions of *The Song of the Lark* and *Lucy Gayheart*. If the stars align, a Cather biopic and film adaptations of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock* could also become realities.

At the Cather Center, we do not yet have a fund dedicated to supporting worthwhile projects like those described above. Yet with 62 percent of Americans reporting in the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts that they hadn't read one novel or short story in the past year, theater and film offer wonderful avenues for introducing Cather's work to people who may not otherwise encounter it. If you share our belief in the value of presenting Cather's stories to new audiences—and in the power of contemporary artists making those stories live again—we'd love to talk with you about supporting this work.



Letter from the President Peter Cipkowski

One of the pleasures of being part of the Willa Cather Foundation is being reminded, again and again, that Cather's work is anything but settled. Her books continue to travel—to new places, new generations, and readers whose lives she could scarcely have imagined. And wherever they go, they continue to provoke questions about how we live, how we love, what we sacrifice, and how we understand the stories we tell about ourselves.

2026 marks the centenary of *My Mortal Enemy*. It is a small book with an astonishingly long shadow. Myra Henshawe is magnetic, exasperating, generous, cruel. Cather refuses to explain her away or make her easily admirable. Instead, she asks us to spend time in the presence of a complicated human being—and leaves us with questions difficult to confine to the novel: What happens when the life we have chosen turns out differently than we hoped? How fully can we ever understand another person—or ourselves?

Those questions remain strikingly alive a hundred years later.

I've been thinking about that vitality especially this year because I had the privilege of bringing Cather to readers in very different circumstances. In Poland, I spoke about her work with students in

American Studies programs at three universities. This summer, I spent eight weeks reading and discussing Cather with a small class of incarcerated men in New York. Their lives could hardly be more distant from Myra Henshawe's—or from Antonia Shimerda's, or Archbishop Latour's. Yet those conversations reminded me that great literature does not require us to share a character's circumstances. It can carry us across those differences into some more mysterious territory, where another person's story somehow reflects something in our own. We recognize ourselves where we might least expect to find ourselves. And sometimes come away understanding our own lives differently, or even feeling, in some small way, comforted.

That same sense of discovery animates this issue of the *Cather Review*. These essays explore resonances and perspectives in Cather that are reminders of how many ways there still are to encounter and engage with her work—and how much there is still to discover. I hope you'll continue that journey with us: by visiting the Cather Center, taking part in our in-person and online programs, and supporting as generously as you can all that we do to bring Cather's writing to new generations of readers.

It is this continuing engagement with Cather—and with one another—that gives our community its vitality. We preserve and study Cather not because her work belongs safely to the past, but because it continues to speak—sometimes unexpectedly—to the present. A century after *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather is still asking difficult questions, and we are still discovering where those questions might lead us.



Allusions to John the Baptist in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*

Song (Joseph) Cho

One of the most evocative characters in *O Pioneers!* is Ivar—"Crazy Ivar," as he is occasionally referred to—a Norwegian hermit and mystic who, in Part I of the novel, lives in a dugout next to a large pond in the rough country, "without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done" (40). He is described as a "queerly shaped old man, with a thick, powerful body set on short bow-legs. His shaggy white hair, falling in a thick mane about his ruddy cheeks, made him look older than he was. He was barefoot." Ivar "had a peculiar religion of his own and could not get on with any of the denominations" (40). He is subject to visions that periodically cause him night terrors: he fears God will punish him for his own sins. Although most of the community view Ivar as a madman or a fool, Alexandra respects him and seeks his advice.

Recently, critics have considered Ivar a proto-environmentalist, focusing on his conservation ethic (Nadir 79; Dooley 69), particularly his regard for animals (Donovan 65). This essay will focus instead on his role as Alexandra's spiritual counselor in the wake of her existential crisis. More specifically, I argue that Ivar evokes John the Baptist, whose ministry of baptism together with the novel's recurring water imagery provide a framework for interpreting Alexandra's conversion from profound grief to spiritual renewal.

Several scholars have compared Ivar to Old Testament figures. For instance, John J. Murphy posits that "Ivar resembles Noah. Gentle and protective toward all God's creatures, he is especially solicitous about the shooting of birds" ("Comprehensive View" 115). Extending the traditional analogy of the prairie to a sea of grass, Murphy notes that Ivar's cave with its "single window and door visible at the end of a broad, flooded pond suggest the ark" (115). Jessica G. Rabin compares Ivar to "Old Testament prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Joel, all post-Exilic prophets who personally experience displacement and alienation" (92). Alternately, Matthias Schubnell views Ivar as a Christian desert monk: "Cather carefully models him on the early monastic desert Christians who sought a new spiritual vision through solitude and closeness to nature" (41). All these Old Testament analogues have merit. But in the following pages,

I consider Ivar's resemblance to an important New Testament prophet: John the Baptist.¹

John, who lived in the wilderness of Judea, was known as the Forerunner, the Baptizer, and the Immerser. He preached a message of repentance in preparation for Jesus's ministry. By associating Ivar with John the Baptist, Cather invites readers to interpret her two-part pastoral in the context of John's ministry of baptism and to reflect on the theme of spiritual rebirth. Significantly, the novel demonstrates a preoccupation with cleanliness. This preoccupation leads Cather to infuse the text with recurrent scenes of water imagery that bring to mind the preacher's work in the Jordan River.

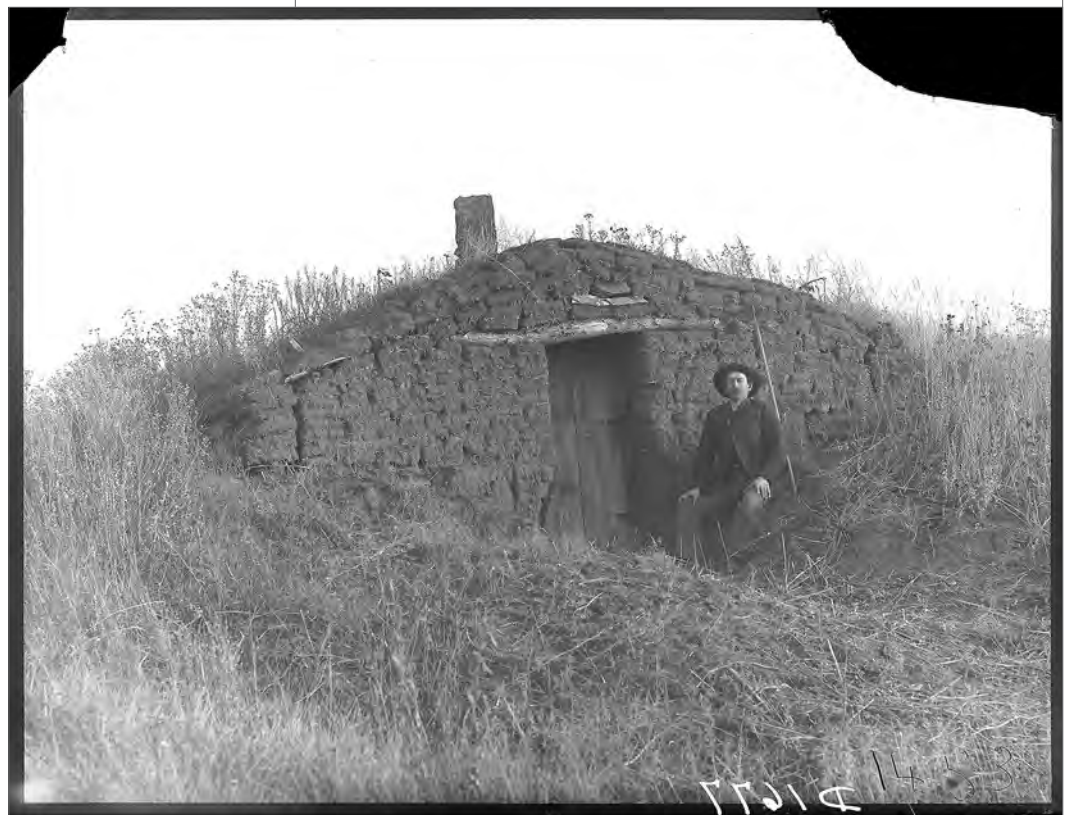
Before he becomes Alexandra's spiritual advisor, Ivar ministers to nonhuman animals by providing them with a safe harbor and clean food and water. When Carl and Emil first meet him as Alexandra and the older boys visit at his big pond, he cries out, "No guns, no guns!" (42). Protective of birds, he paraphrases a verse from the words of Jesus: "But these wild things are God's birds. He watches over them and counts them, as we do our cattle; Christ says so in the New Testament" (43). Notably, Ivar emphasizes clean fodder and fresh water as essential for preventing disease in animals. Alexandra asks Ivar what can be done to protect her hogs from cholera, to which Ivar replies: "You feed them swill and such stuff? Of course! And sour milk? Oh, yes! And keep them in a stinking pen? I tell you, sister, the hogs of this country are put upon! They become unclean, like the hogs in the Bible. If you keep your chickens like that, what would happen? You have a little sorghum patch, maybe?" (46). Ivar then gives Alexandra the following prescription to keep the hogs disease-free: "Put a fence around [the sorghum patch], and turn the hogs in. Build a shed to give them shade, a thatch on poles. Let the boys haul water to them in barrels, clean water, and plenty. Get them off the old stinking ground, and do not let them go back there until winter. Give them only grain and clean feed, such as you would give horses or cattle. Hogs do not like to be filthy" (46–47). Likewise, Ivar understands migratory birds. When young Emil asks, "Do the birds know you will be kind to them, Ivar? Is that why so many come?" (44), Ivar emphasizes that these birds need water and a safe place to rest and feed before they

continue: “See, little brother, they have come from a long way, and they are very tired. From up there where they are flying, our country looks dark and flat. They must have water to drink and to bathe in before they can go on with their journey” (45). In this way, Ivar exhibits that he cares about keeping them safe from harm, their nourishment, and their cleanliness. It is also noteworthy that Cather uses the term “ablutions” to describe Ivar’s morning washing (116). Such a word carries religious connotations, such as ritualized washing and baptism. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “ablution” can mean “The action or an act of washing the body as a religious rite; ritual or prescribed washing of oneself or of another.”² Alexander Men notes that “The word ‘baptism’ in Greek means ‘ablution.’ A holy ablution in deep antiquity signified a turning point in the life of a person, as washing off from his or her soul and body of some dark elements, both physical and spiritual” (163).³

Despite, or perhaps because of, his cleanliness rituals, Ivar is targeted by his neighbors. Ivar complains to Alexandra that her brothers wish to send him to an asylum because he is different: “I am despised *because I do not wear shoes, because I do not cut my hair, and because I have visions*. At home, in the old country, there were many like me, who had been touched by God, or who had seen things in the graveyard at night and were different afterward” (88; emphasis added). Art historian Diane Apostolos-Cappadona writes that “In Christian art, [John] was depicted as an emaciated but muscular man with dark hair and beard dressed in animal skins. . . . His special birth and early religious discipline destined the young John to the spiritual life. He led an austere existence in the desert and was represented barefoot and accompanied by wild animals” (141). Similarly, Ivar cannot abide shoes and ministers to birds, horses, and pigs, and “never [eats] meat, fresh or salt” (46). John the Baptist lived on a diet of locusts and wild honey. We know nothing of Ivar’s birth in Norway, and his age is hard to determine. Although his uncut hair has turned white, Cather allows that his shaggy mane made him appear older than he was. His compact torso and bandy legs belie his reserves of

strength: past middle age, he still hires out in harvest season and confesses that his carnal temptations continue.

It is significant to this discussion that Ivar not only refuses to cut his hair but that he has visions. Before John was born, the angel Gabriel told his father—Zechariah—what kind of person John will be: “many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:14–16). It is believed that John the Baptist lived under Nazarite-like vows. According to the Book of Numbers, those taking the Nazarite vow must neither drink wine nor cut their hair. Ivar’s refusal to cut his hair signals his outward resemblance to the Baptizer; despite his being subject to fits, Alexandra knows that he is never intoxicated (242). John’s account of Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan River is a favorite subject of Christian art. The Baptizer witnesses the Holy Spirit attending Jesus, saying, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost” (John 1:32–33). In context of these passages, Ivar’s vigil beside his pond gains added significance.



Solomon D. Butcher, *Roten Valley, Custer County, Nebraska*, 1892. Nebraska State Historical Society.



Ivar's clothing is noteworthy. On a winter's day after he has come to live with Alexandra, Cather writes, "In cold weather he sits by the kitchen fire and makes hammocks or mends harness until it is time to go to bed. Then he says his prayers at great length behind the stove, puts on his buffalo-skin coat and goes out to his room in the barn" (84). The Baptizer's clothes, meanwhile, were made of camel's hair. Both Ivar and the Baptizer reject ostentation and material comforts. Regarding John the Baptist, Jesus asks the crowd, "But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet" (Matthew 11:8–9). Despite John's humble appearance, Jesus assures the people, "Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11).

Just as John is depicted barefoot in paintings, Ivar does not wear shoes. Signa, one of Alexandra's Swedish hired girls and afterward her friend, asks Ivar: "will you tell me why you go barefoot? All the time I lived here in the house I wanted to ask you. Is it for penance, or what?" (247). Ivar replies: "No, sister. It is for the indulgence of the body. From my youth up I have had a strong, rebellious body, and have been subject to every kind of temptation. Even in age my temptations are prolonged. It was necessary to make some allowances; and the feet, as I understand it, are free members." He explains further, "There is no divine prohibition for them in the Ten Commandments. The hands, the tongue, the eyes, the heart, all the bodily desires we are commanded to subdue; but the feet are free members. I indulge them without harm to any one, even to trampling in filth when my desires are low. They are quickly cleaned again" (247–48). Like a Nazarite, Ivar practices self-restraint.

John occupies an important role in the New Testament. He preached repentance, and the people came to him to be baptized in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. Biblical scholar Walter Wink explains that "The God that had called Israel out of Egypt and led it across the Jordan River was now creating a new people by passing them through the waters of baptism in that same river" (371). The Baptizer's "message of radical repentance was enacted in a rite of immersion in which the sin of presumption and the whole of one's old life were washed away. Those who rose out of the waters were as newborn infants (John 3.3–8), or as those who had passed from death to life, having been buried and raised from the dead (Rom. 6.1–11)" (372).⁴ Alexandra comes close to dying after losing Emil and Marie, for Emil's future was her reason for living. Three months after their deaths, Signa, her servant-turned-nurse, frets, "I can't believe it's Alexandra Bergson come to this. . . . I have to tell her when to eat and when to go to



El Greco, *St. John the Baptist*, ca. 1600. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

bed" (246). But Ivar is cautiously hopeful. He assures Signa, "She will have a message from those who are gone, and that will bring her peace. Until then we must bear with her. You and I are the only ones who have weight with her. She trusts us" (247).

Overwhelmed with grief, Alexandra seeks this message in the graveyard on an October day where she is surprised by a storm. When Ivar finds her drenched and chilled, he exclaims: "*Gud!* You are enough to frighten us, mistress. You look like a drowned woman. How could you do such a thing!" (249). Alexandra calmly responds: "Ivar, I think it has done me good to get cold clear through this, once. . . . Ever since Emil died, I've suffered so when it rained. Now that I've been out in it with him, I shan't dread it. After you once get cold clear through, the feeling of the

rain on you is sweet” (249–50). Describing the message she has received, she adds, “It seems to bring back feelings you had when you were a baby. It carries you back into the dark, before you were born; you can’t see things, but they come to you, somehow, and you know them and aren’t afraid of them” (250). Alexandra uses language that reinforces the imagery of death and rebirth. Her newfound peace is described as a return to feelings in the womb. In place of formal baptism, the drenching rain washes away her grief. Alexandra has found a way to live as Ivar helps her up and bundles her into the waiting buggy.

Baptism is a symbol of dying and rising—dying to the old self and being raised to new life in Christ. Ivar’s description of Alexandra as a “drowned woman” is particularly noteworthy. David Stancliffe notes that drowning imagery was used to describe dying with Christ in baptism (141). After Ivar brings Alexandra home, Signa gives her a hot footbath. In the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus washes his disciples’ feet. Craig R. Koester comments that “Jesus washed feet in anticipation of his death, which was his greatest act of love. Similarly, the command that his disciples should wash feet calls them to show love in various forms of service, even laying down their lives for one another when necessary ([John] 15:12–13; 1 John 3:16)” (133). Koester adds, “Christian interpreters have often associated the footwashing with baptism, which was mentioned in John 3 and was called a ‘washing’ in other early Christian writings” (133). A similar scene of pious service occurs in Cather’s 1932 short story “Old Mrs. Harris.” Grandma Harris works tirelessly to take care of her family. Mandy, the servant girl, “performed one of the oldest rites of compassion” as she gives Grandma Harris a foot bath (80). In *O Pioneers!*, after Alexandra recovers her will to live, she turns her compassion toward Frank Shabata, not only visiting him to offer her forgiveness but also seeking the pardon of his life sentence (263).

Moreover, Amédée’s inset story evokes John the Baptist. The name “Amédée” means “beloved of God.” When John baptizes Jesus, he hears a voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Significantly, the name of Amédée’s infant son is Hector Baptiste, which is reminiscent of the preacher’s name. Furthermore, the baby was “christened” three weeks before Amédée died suddenly of appendicitis. In other words, Amédée had taken his newborn son to the church for baptism. The baby’s name may be another compelling indication that Cather had in mind the ministry of John the Baptist. Though Cather does not use the verb “to baptize,” she deliberately employs “to christen,” thereby recalling the idea of baptism. The name “Baptiste” and the term “christened” are redolent of John’s baptizing in the Jordan River.

In his article “Epilogue: Why Willa Cather? A Retrospective,” John J. Murphy emphasizes the spiritual dimension of Cather’s fiction. Murphy observes that “As an artist Cather cherished and delighted in the physical world. . . . Always, however, something somewhere beyond is predictably present if unnamed, what Flannery O’Connor explains as the mystery ‘left over’ that ‘cannot be accounted for’ when the fiction writer is done with nature and manners” (312). Murphy writes that “the transcendent aspect of Cather’s fiction is my main concern here, the ongoing offering of grace and vision to her characters when acceptance is tantamount to human transcendence. . . . In *O Pioneers!*, the mystery left over from Alexandra Bergson’s ‘resolution’ to go to her brother’s killer, Frank Shabata, in jail, is an example, a decision ‘formed’ during the several days she lies bedridden” (315). Cather’s characters receive moments of grace and vision that allow them to move toward spiritual transcendence. On the surface, *O Pioneers!* may seem a celebration of Alexandra’s triumph against all odds in turning a harsh land into a fruitful enterprise. Cather, however, does more than that. In this novel, she provides a fictional terrain through which to explore the theme of spiritual rebirth by evoking the ministry of John the Baptist. Her use of ordinary details such as water and bathing may seem tangential, but they gain greater relevance when viewed through the prism of John’s ministry. By making allusions to John the Baptist, she allows baptism to emerge as a meaningful lens through which to interpret Alexandra’s symbolic passage from grief toward renewal after Emil’s death. Alexandra forgives Frank Shabata for murdering her brother, and her act of forgiveness suggests a movement from paralysis toward new life. In this way, the transformation of the prairie can be read in conjunction with spiritual transformation. By echoing the ministry of the Baptizer, Cather invites readers to reflect on the theme of spiritual rebirth as characters settle in a new land.

NOTES

1. It bears noting that John’s words appear in Cather’s 1922 novel *One of Ours*. Claude Wheeler expresses amazement that his fellow soldiers from small prairie towns have become part of something larger than themselves as they board the ship the *Anchises*, echoing the words of John the Baptist: “*Out of these stones can my Father raise up seed unto Abraham*” (377, emphasis in the original). Allusion to the Baptizer is also made in *The Professor’s House* when Professor Godfrey St. Peter says: “It’s the laboratory, not the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world. You’ll agree there is not much thrill about a physiological sin. We were better off when even the most prosaic matter of taking nourishment could have the magnificence of a sin” (68). The phrase “Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world” comes from the Gospel of John when the preacher sees Jesus by the Jordan River: “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (1:29).



2. "Ablution, *N.*" *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, doi.org/10.1093/OED/3237031068.

3. Like Cather's other novels, *O Pioneers!* contains numerous biblical allusions. Sharon Hoover points out that "The greatest number of direct references to a single book (or books) in Cather's work is from the Protestant Bible, a book she both read and heard." Relatedly, Marilyn Arnold calls the Bible "an important source, or at least a confirmation, of her values. Her grandfather Cather was a devoted reader of the King James Bible, and her grandmother Boak regularly read to young Willa from the Bible" (230–31). Ivar studies his Bible daily in his native Norwegian and memorizes long passages of scripture. Adopting the cadences of the King James version, Cather explains that Ivar "best expressed his preference for his wild homestead by saying that his Bible seemed truer to him there. If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land . . . if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant" (41).

4. Cather's other works also appear to reflect an interest in baptismal imagery. Cather's 1911 short story "The Joy of Nelly Deane" devotes significant attention to Nelly Deane's baptism. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea Kronborg's bath in Panther Canyon is described in religious terms: "When Thea took her bath at the bottom of the canyon, in the sunny pool behind the screen of cottonwoods, she sometimes felt as if the water must have sovereign qualities, from having been the object of so much service and desire. That stream was the only living thing left of the drama that had been played out in the canyon centuries ago" (334). The passage further emphasizes the ritualistic imagery of this passage: "In the rapid, restless heart of it, flowing swifter than the rest, there was a continuity of life that reached back into the old time. The glittering thread of current had a kind of lightly worn, loosely knit personality, graceful and laughing. Thea's bath came to have a ceremonial gravity. The atmosphere of the canyon was ritualistic" (334). It is also interesting to note that early in *My Ántonia* Jim takes a bath in his grandmother's kitchen.

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As codirector of *A Digital Library of Willa Cather’s Literary Manuscripts* (to be published on the *Willa Cather Archive*), I have been writing document descriptions of every extant prepublication form of Cather’s works, whether manuscript, typescript, or proof. I went into this process drawing on my previous work with Cather’s fiction and Edith Lewis’s role as her editorial collaborator. One of the biggest surprises of gathering together these materials from libraries across the country was that Cather’s later nonfiction, namely *Not Under Forty*, her 1936 collection of critical essays, is so richly documented. Scholars (including myself) have written about her substantial revisions to her 1925 preface to *The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett* into “Miss Jewett” in *Not Under Forty*.¹ However, scholars have largely relied on other essays as collected in *Not Under Forty* and have ignored them in their earlier forms and contexts. The table below juxtaposes their order in *Not Under Forty* with their chronological order and context of earlier publication.

Original publication (with later titles if different)	<i>Not Under Forty</i>
“The Novel D��meubl��,” <i>The New Republic</i> , April 12, 1922	“A Chance Meeting”
“The House on Charles Street” (“148 Charles Street”), <i>The Literary Review</i> , Nov. 4, 1922	“The Novel D��meubl��”
“Preface” to <i>The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett</i> (The Mayflower Edition) (“Miss Jewett”) (1925)	“148 Charles Street”
“Katherine Mansfield”: <i>The Borzoi</i> 1925	“Miss Jewett”
“A Chance Meeting”: <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i> , Feb. 1933	“Joseph and His Brothers”
“The Birth of Personality: An Appreciation of Thomas Mann’s Biblical Trilogy” (“Joseph and His Brothers”), <i>The Saturday Review of Literature</i> , June 6, 1936	“Katherine Mansfield”

The title *Not Under Forty* and her statement in the preface that “the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts” have also been influential in Cather criticism, casting her as increasingly turning away from the modern world in the 1930s and retreating into the past. The rest of this essay will draw on my research for the *Digital Library* and on the *Complete Letters of Willa Cather* to explain how Cather built this influential volume. Although revisions to some of the essays clearly reflect Cather’s shifts in thinking after their original publication, Cather did not descend from the mountaintop in 1936 because of an internal drive to respond to that moment: the evidence suggests that the volume was publisher-driven and Cather’s process of selecting and revising essays was somewhat haphazard and certainly last-minute. Rather than representing the dire drama of Cather’s backward turn, her

process of assembling *Not Under Forty* and writing its famous preface reveals an ironic self-deprecation during her late career.

Because Cather was in New York City in the spring of 1936 and because she had a telephone, much of her communication with Alfred and Blanche Knopf of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., about *Not Under Forty* is not preserved in writing. Indeed, the first documented mention of a planned collection of critical essays is in a letter to Ferris Greenslet at Houghton Mifflin. On March 8, 1936, she wrote:

I am getting up a short book of essays for Alfred Knopf because we have been bothered with a good many requests to reproduce certain stray pieces of writing, which I think Mrs. Fields would have called “papers”. I want to include a little sketch of Mrs. Fields which I did as a review of Mark Howe’s “Memories of a Hostess”, and following that a short article on Miss Jewett. The latter I haven’t yet clearly planned,

because I wanted first to know from you whether you would be quite willing that I should use a considerable portion of the preface I wrote for the Mayflower edition [*The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*]. (*Complete Letters* no. 1301)

Greenslet quickly granted the necessary permission. By April 12, Cather wrote to J. Florence Rubin, a staff member at Knopf, reporting

that “Mr. Knopf intends to use this ‘Atlantic’ article in a small book of essays” (that article being an account of how Cather met novelist Gustave Flaubert’s niece, Caroline Grout, in France) and could she attend to having the publisher assign the copyright to her (*Complete Letters* no. 1312). On April 30, she wrote Cyril Clemens declining his request to reprint her essay “Escapism,” just published in the *Commonweal* magazine, because “the article really belongs to Mr. Knopf, and he is including it in a book of prose essays by me, which he will bring out next winter” (*Complete Letters* no. 1317). Perhaps Cather did consider including “Escapism” in the volume, or perhaps she only used its supposed inclusion as an excuse because Clemens was making a pest of himself. In any event, the letter suggests that decisions about what to anthologize were still in flux.

On May 1, she sent Alfred Knopf a draft of her prefatory note, which disclosed her intended title for the volume, and asked for his feedback (*Complete Letters* no. 2741)—I will return to the drafts of the prefatory note later. In a follow-up letter the same day anticipating an objection to *Not Under Forty* as a title, she explained that “conventional titles such as PERSONALITIES AND OPINIONS” would “not be very satisfactory, as the best paper among them is certainly the one called THE NOVEL DEMEUBLE.” “You would be much more reconciled to this title,” she continued, “if you had gone through the text of the various essays. But you want a description of the book immediately and the paper on Thomas Mann will not be finished and properly typed before the week after next. There will be, I fear, only five essays in all, and of these you have read only the one on Mme. Groux [sic]” (*Complete Letters* no. 2683). Combined with her earlier letter about getting the copyright for “A Chance Meeting” transferred to her, I would surmise that Knopf proposed the collection because he thought *The Atlantic* essay deserved reprinting. And even though Cather was a Knopf author by the time “The Novel Demeuble” appeared in *The New Republic* in 1922, she did not presume that he remembered it. As Cather also noted, her essay on Thomas Mann (the English translations of whose works Knopf published in the U.S.) had not yet been submitted to *The Saturday Review*.

In 1936, Cather and Lewis left New York City for Grand Manan in time to be there in early July, and there is no further correspondence with anyone at Knopf about the contents of the volume after May 1, only correspondence about design and production beginning in July. Thus all decisions about the contents and all editing of existing material and writing of new material to add to it had evidently occurred by the end of June. In what form, then, did Cather send material to the Knopf offices?

I will take the easiest examples first. For “The Novel Demeuble,” Cather pasted clippings from *The New Republic* (a) on larger sheets of paper (b).² *The New Republic* set the text in double columns on a large format page. The first two-and-a-half paragraphs appeared as part of one page, and the rest of the essay occupied a full double-column page. The extant pasted clippings encompass mid-essay and the two closing paragraphs. The larger sheets on which two clippings are pasted were numbered 2 and 4 in pencil, and the clippings themselves were marked lightly by



Cather's “Joseph and His Brothers” was published in the June 6, 1936, issue of *The Saturday Review* as “The Birth of Personality: An Appreciation of Thomas Mann’s Biblical Trilogy.”

Cather and a Knopf copy editor. Logically speaking, there must have been two other pasted-up pages numbered 1 and 3, which have not been located. Although “Joseph and His Brothers” (the Thomas Mann essay) was a much more recent publication, the documentary record is similarly straightforward yet distinct. Cather retained a carbon copy of the essay (a), presumably after submitting the ribbon copy to *The Saturday Review*, and she and Lewis made some small changes that distinguish the periodical from the book publication. For example, in *The Saturday Review*, where the essay was titled “The Birth of Personality: An Appreciation of Thomas Mann’s Biblical Trilogy,” Cather observed, “After the tremendous preparation of the Prologue” of Mann’s novel *Joseph and His Brothers*, “(a marvel of imaginative power), he rises out of the bottomless depths to the period of his story; only some three thousand years ago, he says, when men were very much like ourselves,

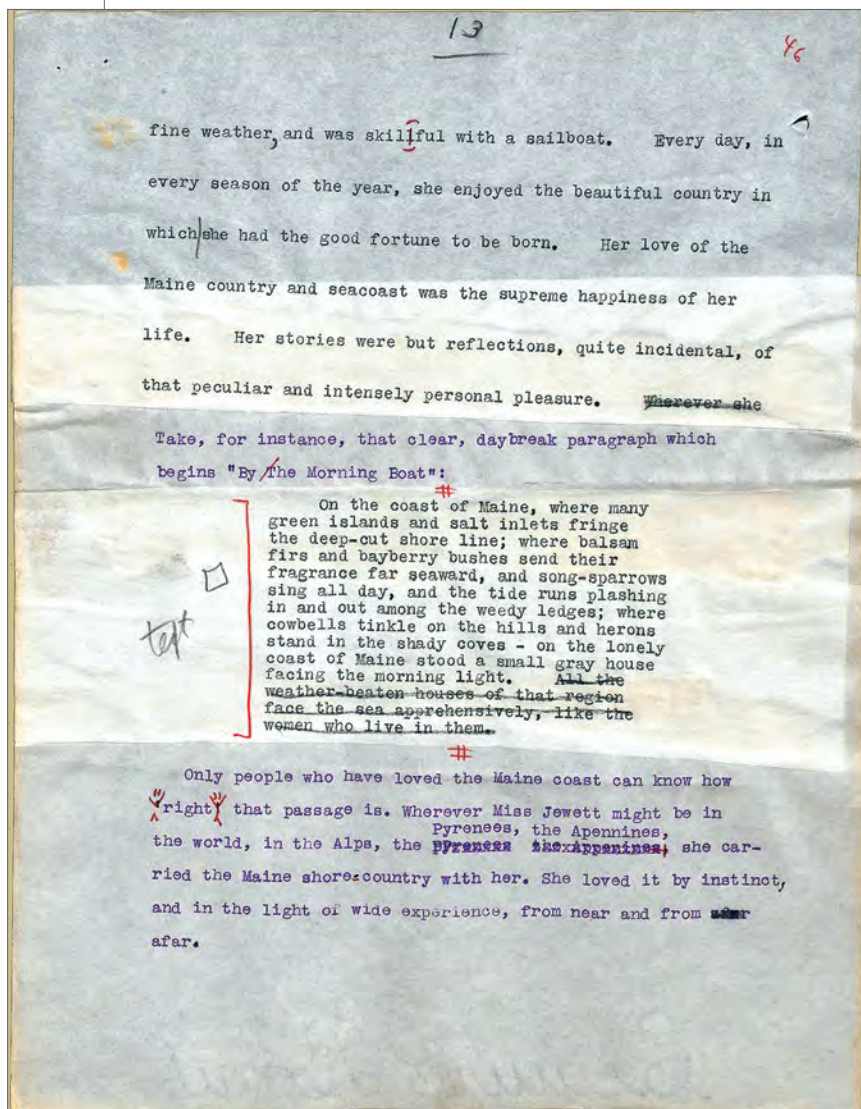
‘aside from a measure of dreamy indefiniteness in their habits of thought’” (3). On the retained carbon, Cather changed “only some three thousand years ago” to “not much more than.” In *The Saturday Review* Cather had written, “The Book of Genesis lies like a faded tapestry deep in the memory of almost every individual who is more than forty years of age” (4). On the retained carbon, Lewis changed “memory” to “consciousness.” This edited carbon typescript also features red pen markings by a copy editor and pencil markings by the printers who typeset it for its publication in *Not Under Forty* (b).

The other cases are more complicated, and I will take them in chronological order of original publication. Cather’s 1922 review-cum-essay “The House on Charles Street” was incorporated in revised form into “148 Charles Street” (b), with a new opening and conclusion added. The evidence of this in relation to *Not Under Forty* is a very late stage edited carbon copy typescript, nearly complete, of “148 Charles Street” (a), missing only the last page. This document was edited mostly by Lewis, who made some key changes. For example, in the original essay and in a portion of that essay as retyped, Cather had named among the guests Annie Fields entertained at 148 Charles Street “Salvini and Modjeska and Lady Henry Somerset, Edwin Booth and Christine Nilsson and Jefferson and Ole Bull.” Lewis crossed out “Lady Henry Somerset” and added “Winslow Homer and Sargent.” This document also bears red pen markings by a copy editor and penciled notations by a printer that identify it as setting copy for *Not Under Forty*. The process through which Cather revised and expanded to this stage is not documented, however. Did she begin by marking up a copy of “The House on Charles Street” clipped from *The Literary Review*? Or did she retype the original print document or have her secretary, Sarah Bloom, retype it as part of her process? The extant document cannot answer these questions.

The twenty typed pages of “Miss Jewett” (a), consisting in part of the transformed “Preface” to the *Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*, reveal more of Cather’s process. The document is quite messy, unlike the relatively clean and continuous “148 Charles Street” setting copy. Indeed, “Miss Jewett” is the most complicated of all the documents described in this essay, making it somewhat difficult to tease out precisely the process through which it was created. Despite its character as a messy process document, the copy editor’s red pen and pencil markings by the

printers nevertheless identify it as the setting copy for “Miss Jewett” in *Not Under Forty* (b).

A substantial part of “Miss Jewett,” roughly the first half, is derived from the “Preface”; in both this typescript and in *Not Under Forty*, this derivative portion is headed “I,” while the new portion in the typescript is designated “II” (although the document is complete, Cather had not yet inserted a “III” to divide this newly inserted portion into two parts). It is tempting to believe that the typed pages Cather and Lewis edited in 1936 to produce section I are survivals from 1924, when Cather wrote the “Preface”: the edited pages are carbons, and a ribbon copy from the same typing could have been used to typeset the 1925 publication. However, the typed pages (also carbons) representing section II of “Miss Jewett” appear to have been typed at the same time as the section I—they were typed on the same brand of bond paper and appear to have been typed on the same typewriter. It thus seems that Cather had the published



Edited typed draft of “Miss Jewett.” Phillip and Helen Cather Southwick Collection (MS 0077), Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries.

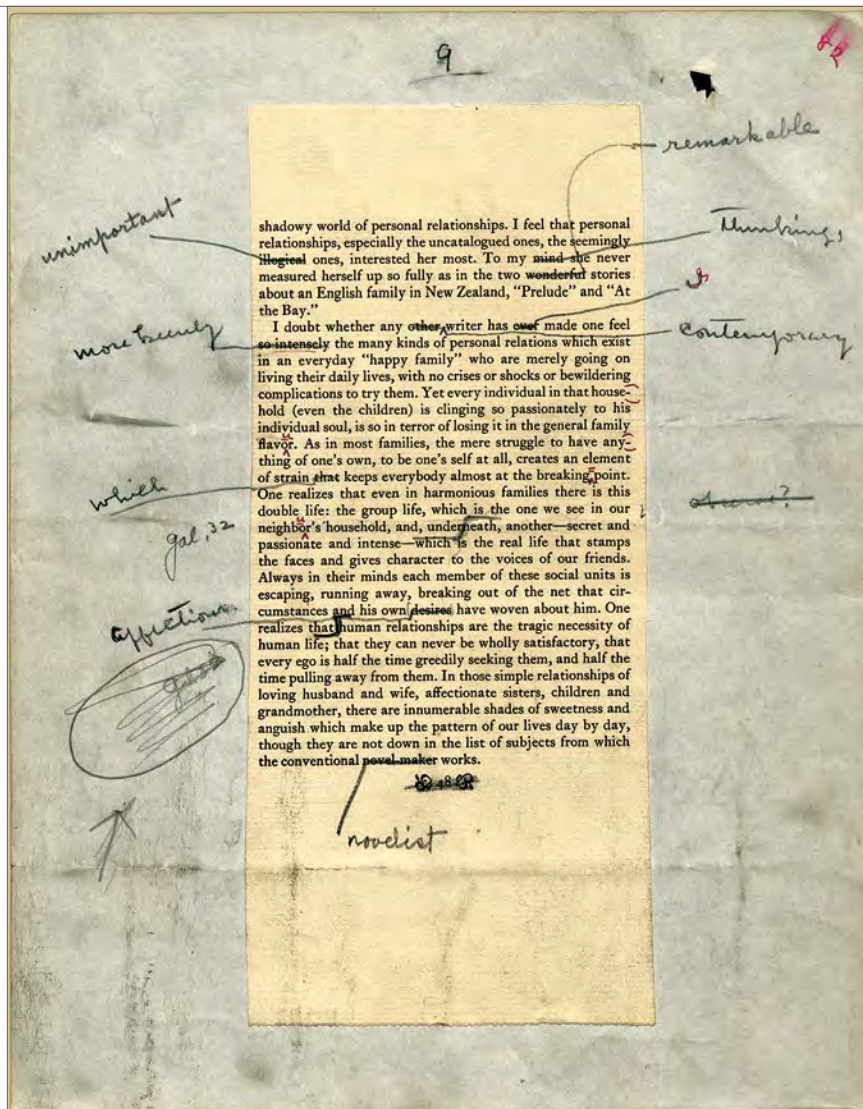


"Preface" professionally retyped at the same time she had an earlier edited draft of section II retyped (this hypothetical earlier draft of section II has not been located). Because they were using a retyped version of the "Preface," Cather and Lewis crossed out two-thirds of the fifth page of the typescript of "Miss Jewett" as no longer relevant in this new context: no need to explain the principles by which Cather "tried to gather into these two volumes the very best of Miss Jewett's beautiful work" ("Preface" xii–xiii).

"Miss Jewett" notably darkens Cather's claims in the "Preface" about the quality of Jewett's work and its persistence into the modern world, especially in section II. However, even in section I, the retyped portion derived from the "Preface," praise of Jewett's work was tempered through line editing of the typed text. For example, when Cather distinguished Jewett's work from the work of her contemporaries, she had described the "inherent, individual beauty" of superior work like Jewett's as having "the kind of beauty we feel when a beautiful song is sung by a beautiful voice that is exactly suited to the song" (xi)—the lyrical song analogy was crossed out in pencil.

There are also interesting bits of what I call arts and crafts throughout the document. In the published "Preface," Cather had praised Jewett's story "Marsh Rosemary," writing "consider the closing paragraph of 'Marsh Rosemary,' which might stand as a tender apology for the art of all new countries, which must grow out of a thin new soil and bear its fate" (xiii–xiv). If the retyped pages of the "Preface" continued beyond the fifth page, these remarks would have appeared on the sixth page. Instead, however, Cather's comment on "Marsh Rosemary" became part of Part II of the document (Part III as published) and the shift to damning Jewett with faint praise: "She was content to be slight, if she could be true. The closing sentences of 'Marsh Rosemary' might stand as an unconscious piece of self-criticism,—or perhaps as a gentle apology for the art of all new countries. . . ." ("Miss Jewett" 89–90). Cather herself typed the new version of her revised remarks about the story and pasted the ribbon copy of them onto the twelfth page of the "Miss Jewett" setting copy (which Cather confusingly numbered "13") (a). Also pasted onto that page is the long quotation from "Marsh Rosemary," evidently cut from the discarded sixth page of the professional retyping of the "Preface."

"Katherine Mansfield" appeared in *The Borzoi* 1925 (a), which consisted largely of very brief pieces in which Knopf



Page from the setting copy of "Katherine Mansfield." Charles E. Cather Collection (MS 0350), Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries.

authors wrote about other Knopf authors.³ Indeed, Cather's contribution was only three pages in *The Borzoi*, while in *Not Under Forty* her essay on Mansfield published under the same title is more than twenty pages (c). Nevertheless, Cather chose to paste the second and third pages of *The Borzoi* essay on larger sheets of paper in yet another arts and crafts project, with these two pages becoming part of section II in what became a three-part essay ("Katherine Mansfield" b). Cather and Lewis both heavily revised these two printed pages. For example, while in *The Borzoi* Cather had written, "I doubt whether any other writer has ever made one feel so intensely the many kinds of personal relations which exist in any everyday 'happy family'" (48), she revised the opening of this sentence in the *Not Under Forty* text to "I doubt whether any contemporary writer has made one feel more keenly" (135). The sixteen pages of the document also encompass professionally typed carbon portions edited by Lewis, pasted in segments typed by Cather herself,

and portions of Mansfield's published journals pasted onto the pages (this is typical of Cather's practice generally when she was incorporating text from published sources: she often pasted on clippings rather than retyping the source material).

This brings me finally to "A Chance Meeting," the essay that seems to have been the impetus for *Not Under Forty* and which opens the volume. It exists in no fewer than four pre-*Not Under Forty* publication forms, three of them preceding the publication in *The Atlantic Monthly* (d). That Cather's work on "A Chance Meeting" before its periodical appearance is so well-documented makes it exceptional—other essays in *Not Under Forty* are not documented in this way. That *this* essay is documented by pre-periodical publication versions does make sense, however, considering broader patterns of the survival of prepublication forms of Cather's work: "A Chance Meeting" was published in the *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1933, and most of the drafts of her fiction that Cather retained are from 1925 forward, with works published in the 1930s and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* particularly well documented.

There are three edited typed drafts of "A Chance Meeting" preceding its publication in *The Atlantic*. The earliest (a) is a twenty-three-page document, ribbon-copy typed and edited by Cather herself and featuring lots of arts and crafts, including, like "Katherine Mansfield," clippings from published works pasted in (in this case, excerpts from Flaubert's letters in French). The account of Grout's death that concludes the essay in both published forms is not present, whether missing or not yet written is unclear. The next document in sequence is sixteen pages of professionally typed ribbon copy edited by Lewis (b). The first fifteen pages are continuous and encompass the first three sections of the essay and the beginning of the fourth section; after a gap of several typed pages, there is a single page from the essay's conclusion. After that comes a carbon copy from a professional typing, which Cather lightly edited (c); one small segment of a carbon copy she herself typed is pasted on to a page (her remarks on the variability of Mme. Grout's accent when she spoke English). Although this document corresponds to the essay's publication in *The Atlantic*, it bears no markings identifying it as setting copy. It thus seems likely that the ribbon copy from the same typing was sent to *The Atlantic* and this carbon was retained, with the edits that had been made on the ribbon copy transferred onto this carbon copy as a backup in case the ribbon copy was lost.⁴ The last prepublication form of "A Chance Meeting" (d) resembles the surviving form of "The Novel Demeublé," in that it consists of eight of the twelve pages of the printed *The Atlantic* publication, pasted on larger sheets of paper, numbered by Cather, and lightly corrected

in red pen by the Knopf copy editor and annotated in pencil by the printers. While several pages are missing, the complete pasted-up version was certainly used as setting copy for *Not Under Forty*.

But what about the famous "Prefatory Note"? When Cather sent a draft to Alfred Knopf on May 1, 1936, she told him, "In this one every word counts, and I tried to use as few as possible" (*Complete Letters* no. 2741). This draft—a professionally typed ribbon copy (a)—features some small, but significant, differences from the published version:

The title of this book is meant to be "arresting" only in the practical sense served by the guide signs put up for motorists: "ROAD INCOMPLETE" or "DANGEROUS CURVES". It means that the book will have little meaning and less interest for people under forty years of age. The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts, and the persons and prejudices recalled in these sketches slid back into yesterday's seven thousand years. Thomas Mann, to be sure, belongs immensely to the forward-goers, and they are interested only in his forwardness. But he also goes a long way back, and his backwardness is more satisfying to the backward. It is for the backward, and by one of their number, that these sketches were written.

There are no extant letters from Knopf responding to this draft of the prefatory note, but, again, they could have met in person or spoken on the phone.

Notably at this time—May 1, when two more months remained for Cather to submit the completed manuscript before departing for Grand Manan—her letters had called out five essays as her intended contents: "A Chance Meeting," "The Novel Demeublé," "148 Charles Street," "Miss Jewett," and "Joseph and His Brothers." It would seem, then, that the Katherine Mansfield essay, dramatically expanded from its original form, was brought in late, an inference supported by the fact that it is the last essay in *Not Under Forty*—the rest of the essays could have already been in production while Cather and Lewis continued working on "Katherine Mansfield."

Ultimately, the setting copy typescript for the "Prefatory Note," a ribbon copy that Cather herself typed (b), is tonally distinct from the draft she sent to Alfred Knopf, even though the changes are quite small:

The title of this book is meant to be "arresting" only in the literal sense, like the signs put up for motorists: "ROAD INCOMPLETE" etc. It means



that the book will have little interest for people under forty years of age. The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts, and the persons and prejudices recalled in these sketches slid back into yesterday's seven thousand years. Thomas Mann, to be sure, belongs immensely to the forward-goers, and they are concerned only with his forwardness. But he also goes back a long way, and his backwardness is more gratifying to the backward. It is for the backward, and by one of their number, that these sketches were written.

The “practical” sense of Cather’s title has become “literal,” moving from helpful guidance, an invitation to readers under forty, to something perhaps more challenging (pay attention to the signs). “Little meaning” and “less interest” were combined into “little interest”—young readers may turn away, not even looking for a modicum of meaning. Thomas Mann’s “satisfying” backwardness becomes “gratifying,” shifting from fulfilling a need to pleasure and enjoyment. Interestingly, the Knopf copy editor did something on this setting copy that is quite rare—they made a significant verbal change to Cather’s prose, changing her “ROAD INCOMPLETE” to “ROAD UNDER REPAIR,” a change reflected in the published version (“Prefatory Note” c). Cather never learned to drive—perhaps the copy editor recognized that “ROAD INCOMPLETE” was not plausible as a road sign (Cather herself had removed the plausible “DANGEROUS CURVES”).

When Cather wrote to Knopf on May 1, she was apologetic about the title. Under time pressure from her publisher and still juggling the table of contents, she had come up with a conceit to hold the essays together. She offered that, if Knopf thought the title “really too outrageous,” she would “listen to reason” and come up with something else (*Complete Letters* no. 2683). He allowed her to keep the title, and she moved on, but it was never an essential part of the enterprise. In this context, it becomes clear that her “Prefatory Note” was, in a real sense, an apology to readers for the eccentric title and the loose connections between the essays. Ironically, the primary connection the essays had to one another was that they had all been first published in 1922 or later, after the world had ostensibly broken in two.

An exchange from later correspondence about the design of the title page of the volume reinforces my point about Cather’s tone in her famous preface and its subtle humor and self-deprecation, so often missed. Knopf hired W. A. Dwiggins as designer,⁵ and when Cather saw the title page, she wrote from Grand Manan in July asking him to make a change. Evidently his original design looked something like this:

WILLA CATHER
Not Under Forty
1936
New York
ALFRED A. KNOPF

As she explained to Dwiggins:

You see it looks as if the second line were descriptive of the first: “not under forty” descriptive of the author. The description is, alas, all too true, and the newspaper men could never resist having fun with it. I had much rather change my age than ask you to change a page which is perfectly satisfying to the eye. But since I can’t, I must appeal to your chivalry.

Not Under Forty
by
Willa Cather.

Couldn’t you arrange it like that, with the “by” in perceptible [sic] type? When a woman is drawing perilously near to sixty she becomes very discreet about her age! Anyone can look up the facts, of course, no escaping the facts: but I shouldn’t like the fun the newspaper men would have at my expense. This does sound rather like a headline statement “Willa Cather: not under forty.” It’s a beautiful page—the type, spacing, everything about it. I hate to ask you to make any change, but with this book I think the author’s name, introduced by a preposition, must come after the title. (*Complete Letters* no. 2843)

Dwiggins complied, and the book appeared with the title page elements rearranged exactly as she had requested:

Not Under Forty
BY
WILLA CATHER
1936
New York
ALFRED A. KNOPF

Of course, Cather was approaching sixty-three, not sixty—she was more than “discreet” about her age. Nevertheless, this correspondence and the rest of the record of the creation of the book suggest that we need to recognize Cather’s sense of humor about herself and her “backwardness” at this moment in her late career, including her title and in her famous preface.



NOTES

1. See especially Deborah Carlin, and my “Willa Cather Editing Sarah Orne Jewett.”
2. I have used lowercase letters in textual citations and in the Works Cited to distinguish between different versions of individual texts.
3. This early short version of “Katherine Mansfield” was missed by Joan Crane in her bibliography of Cather.
4. I describe the evidence of this practice in relation to “Two Friends.” See Homestead, “Willa Cather and Collaboration,” 424–25.
5. Lavin and Ronning treat Cather’s interactions with Dwiggins as a designer, but not in relation to *Not Under Forty*.

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Wish You Were Here: Willa Cather's Picture Postcards

Katherine Hamilton-Smith

During a recent rereading of Willa Cather's *Lucy Gayheart*, I was struck anew by the scene in which the singer Clement Sebastian and his piano accompanist James Mockford die by drowning. The scene takes place on Italy's Lake Como, then as now a tourist destination and the subject of countless picture postcards. What struck me as I read was a realization that the span of Willa Cather's adult life perfectly overlays the heyday years of picture postcard use. If Cather wrote postcards, I wondered, do any still exist in archival collections? If so, could examining them as a specific type of communication and subset of her copious correspondence illuminate her personality and her writing?

A brief sketch of the innovation of picture postcards and how their popularity grew during Cather's lifetime will set the stage. In his essential *Pictures in the Post: The Story of the Picture Postcard*, Richard Carline begins the story with the "Correspondenze-Karte," which was introduced in Austria in 1869. These were made of stiff card stock and did not require an envelope. The verso featured preprinted postage and lines for the address of the recipient. The recto was blank; no pictures or images of any kind. The following year in 1870 a similar item, called a "post card," was introduced in England (37). The world's first postcards in their modern form, featuring images and without preprinted postage, were published for the international exposition in Paris in 1889. Four years later, in 1893, the first American picture postcards were published in Chicago for the World's Columbian Exposition, also known as the Chicago World's Fair (63).

Picture postcards were a revolutionary innovation at the time of their introduction, in significant part because they made it possible for people to see and share depictions of places and events in full color at a time when these opportunities were exceedingly rare. Their popularity was immediate and once the craze caught on, their use grew exponentially. By 1900 postcards were a cultural phenomenon and ubiquitous visual powerhouse. It is estimated that during what is today referred to as the golden age of picture postcards, from approximately 1900 to the end of the First World War, the number of postcards handled annually numbered well in the billions (63). While this is impressive by any account, it is even more so considering the world population in 1900 was approximately 1.6 billion. This fever of use broke in relatively short order. By the end of World War II, sending postcards had waned and stabilized to levels in the millions instead of billions each year.

On the uncountable numbers that were printed worldwide, all aspects of life were depicted: train stations, bandstands, street views, cartoons, transportation, beauties and everyday people, images reflecting social history, ads for products and services, holidays, and everything in between. From their inception and still today, postcards function as a form of tangible memory. They are sent, or saved, as markers of experience and place. No less for Willa Cather.

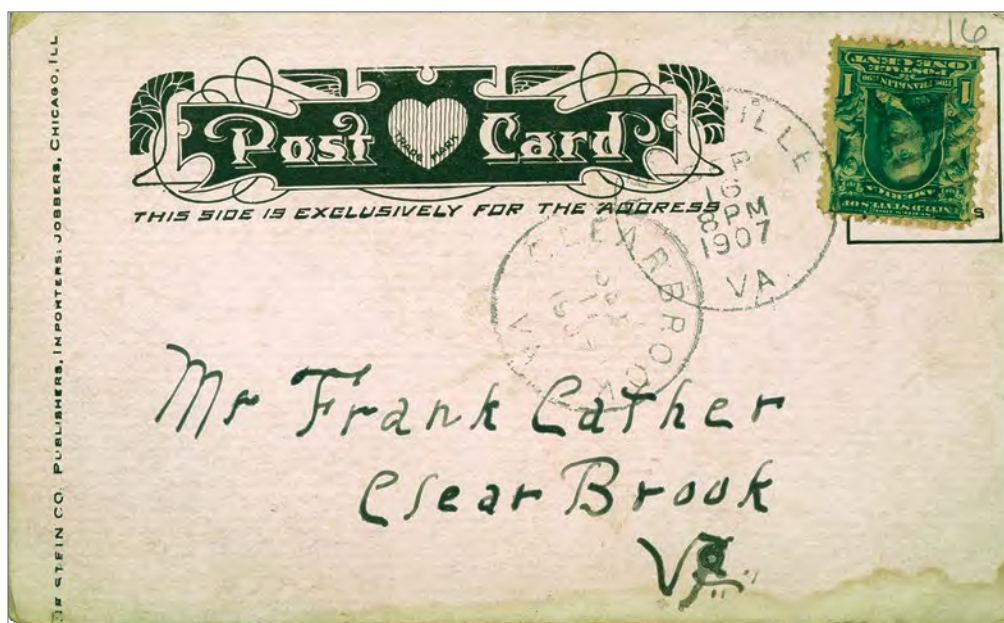
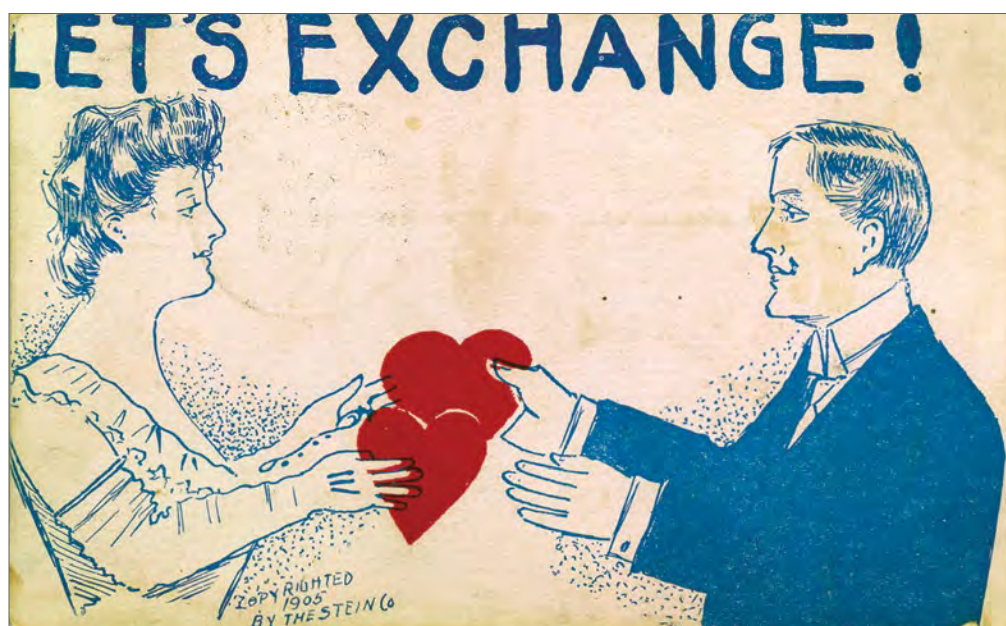
Cather's adult life might reasonably be calculated to begin with her graduation from high school in 1890, and end with her death in 1947, exactly overlaying the heyday of picture postcard use, and especially so the zenith of that use from 1890 to World War I. Cather was an enthusiastic and prolific correspondent, and we are lucky that much of her correspondence exists today in archival collections at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, the Willa Cather Foundation archives in Red Cloud, and in repositories across the country such as the Newberry Library in Chicago. Within these collections are a number of picture postcards that Cather sent or received, or that touched her life in some way.



Cather sent postcards to people she loved—her mother and father, her brother Roscoe, her nieces, her childhood friends. The cards commemorate experiences she was having or trace her travels: the earliest extant cards I have seen were sent from her first trip to Europe with Isabelle McClung in 1902, some from her second European trip in 1908, and some from her visits in the American Southwest in 1912 and later. Others trace more mundane changes in her location rather than travel for pleasure, such as postcards she sent from Grand Manan later in her life. She did not send postcards frivolously, and she almost always added messages.

When postcards were a fad at the turn of the twentieth century, people sent them on the least provocation, in large part because collecting postcards was a form of entertainment. On American front porches, in living rooms and parlors, postcard albums were regularly shared with visitors. The infinite variety of what was printed on picture postcards was part of the fun. Consequently, people purchased and sent postcards in droves, often without adding any message at all.

Two examples sent by unknown individuals to Cather's cousin Frank Cather (G. P. Cather's brother, one of the twin sons of her aunt "Franc" Cather and George P. Cather), illustrate typical postcard communication. The first is a charming card, sent in September 1907 with no added message.



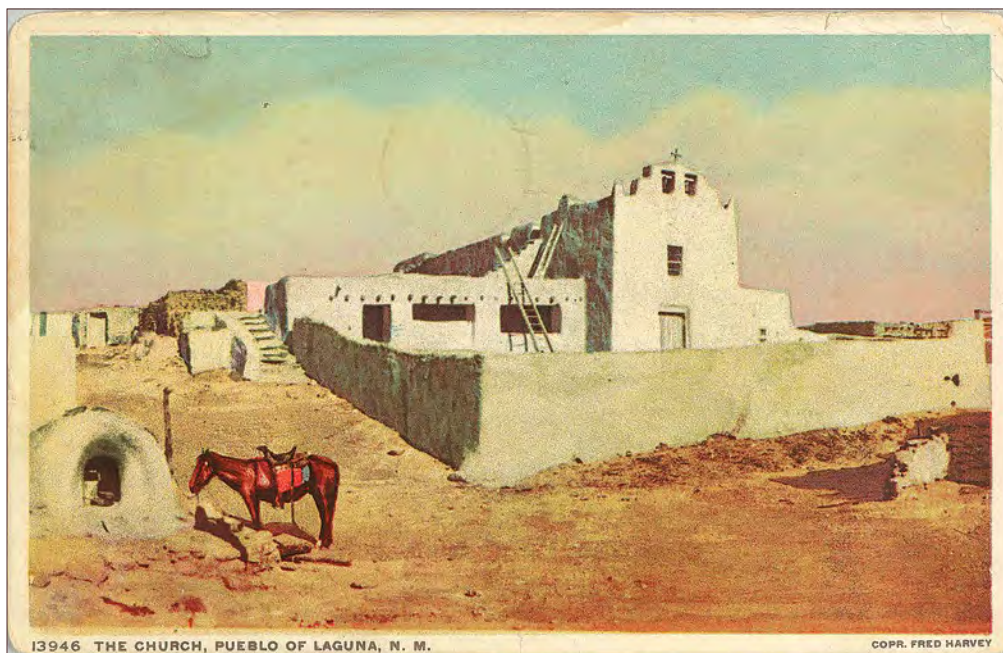
The second, sent in October 1907 and shown below, has an image of the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago and a message typical of bland postcard communication.

Willa Cather herself never used postcards in such insubstantial ways. Occasionally, her messages are not far out of the ordinary, simply stating her location or where she is going next. But on others she conjures vivid images using only a few lines, her observations of people and her particular way with words unhampered by the tiny allotment of space. She told stories, she explained, she educated.



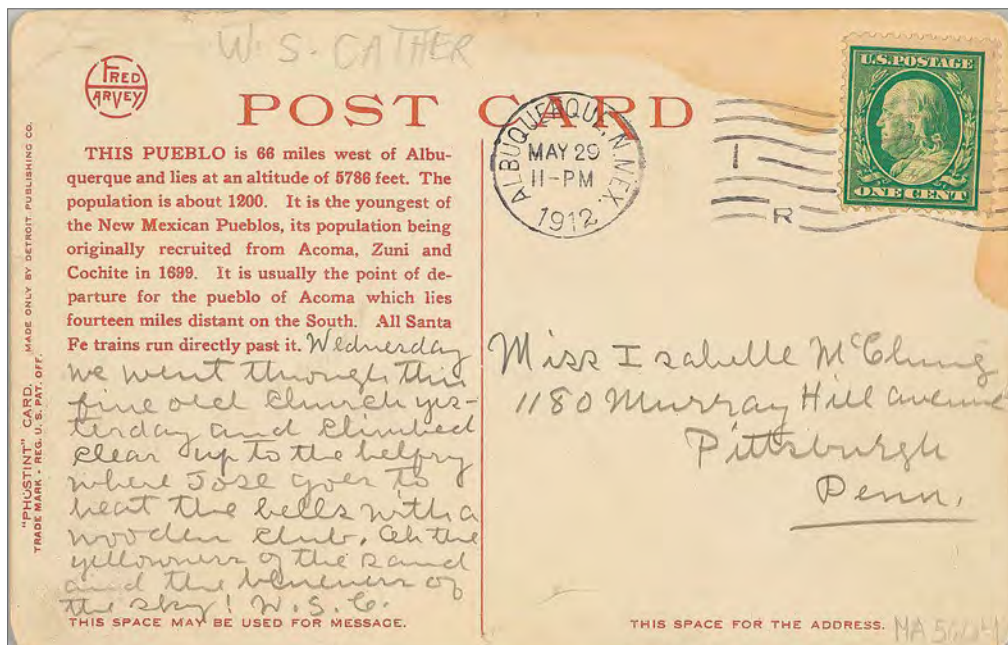
“Many thanks for the Washington postal. Think it very pretty and quite an addition to my book. Here's one view of the Palmer House, the only one I could get and not quite as good as the one I have, which you spoke about.”

From Albuquerque, New Mexico to Isabelle McClung, 1912:



13946 THE CHURCH, PUEBLO OF LAGUNA, N. M.

COPR. FRED HARVEY



Wednesday

“ We went through this fine old church yesterday and climbed clear up to the belfry where Jose goes to beat the bells with a wooden club. Ah the yellowness of the sand and the blueness of the sky! W.S.C ”

(Complete Letters no. 2937)



From Venice to her friend Margie Miner Gund, 1908:

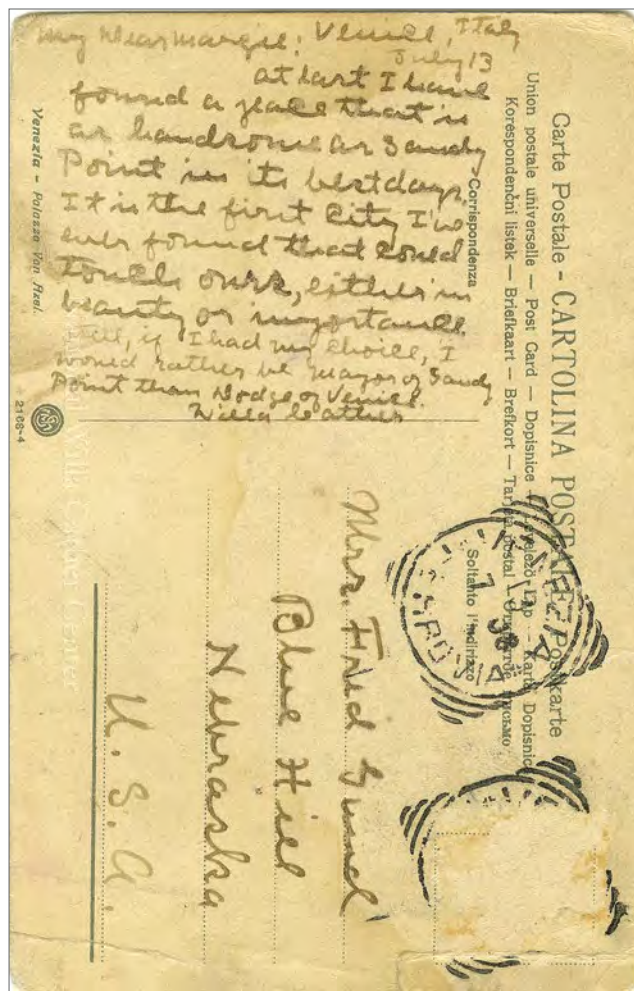


Venice, Italy

July 13

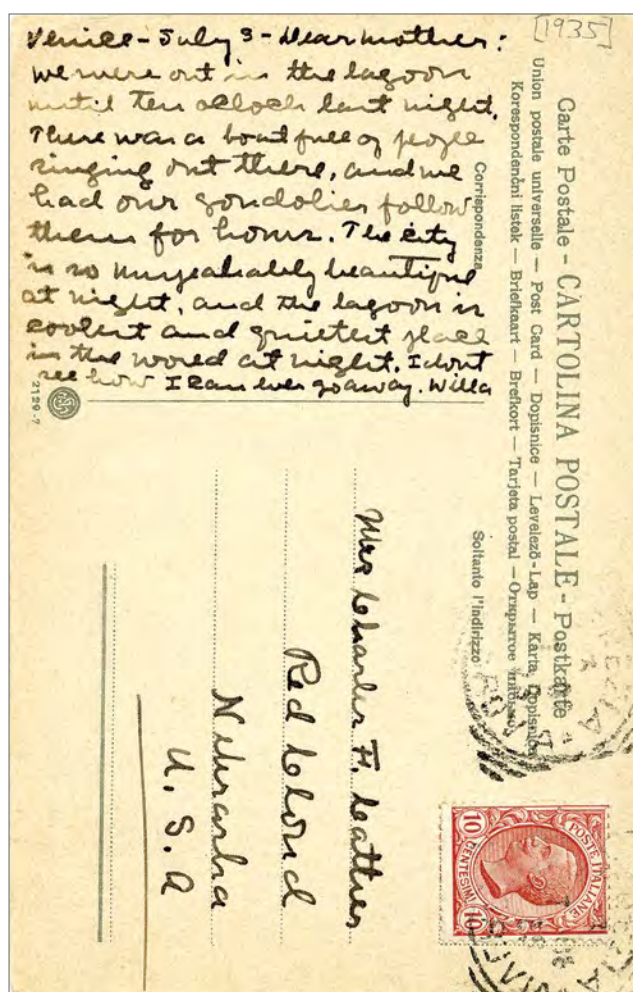
“ My dear Margie: At last I have found a place that is as handsome as Sandy Point in its best days. It is the first city I've ever found that could touch ours, either in beauty or importance. Still, if I had my choice, I would rather be mayor of Sandy Point than Dodge of Venice. Willa Cather ”

(Complete Letters no. 3049)



(Here, Sandy Point refers to the make-believe town she and her childhood friends built in her backyard in Red Cloud, of which Willa was mayor.)

To her mother, from Venice, 1908:



“ Venice-July 3-Dear Mother: We were out in the lagoon until ten o'clock last night. There was a boat full of people singing out there, and we had our gondolier follow them for hours. The city is so unspeakably beautiful at night, and the lagoon is coolest and quietest place in the world at night. I don't see how I can ever go away. Willa ”

(Complete Letters no. 1874)



From Rome to her brother Roscoe, 1908:



My Dear Roscoe! This is the dome of St. Peter's from where I first saw it—one of the wonderful Roman gardens. It looms up from the east wherever one turns, and after you stay about the church and the Vatican and the Catacombs for a time it is borne in upon one that there is where the modern world was born. From the day Charlemagne was crowned there and before, the Vatican was fashioning modern Europe. Next in wonder to the Rome of the Empire is the Catholic Rome of the middle ages. Willa. Rome June 10.

Mr. Roscoe Lothrop

Boulder

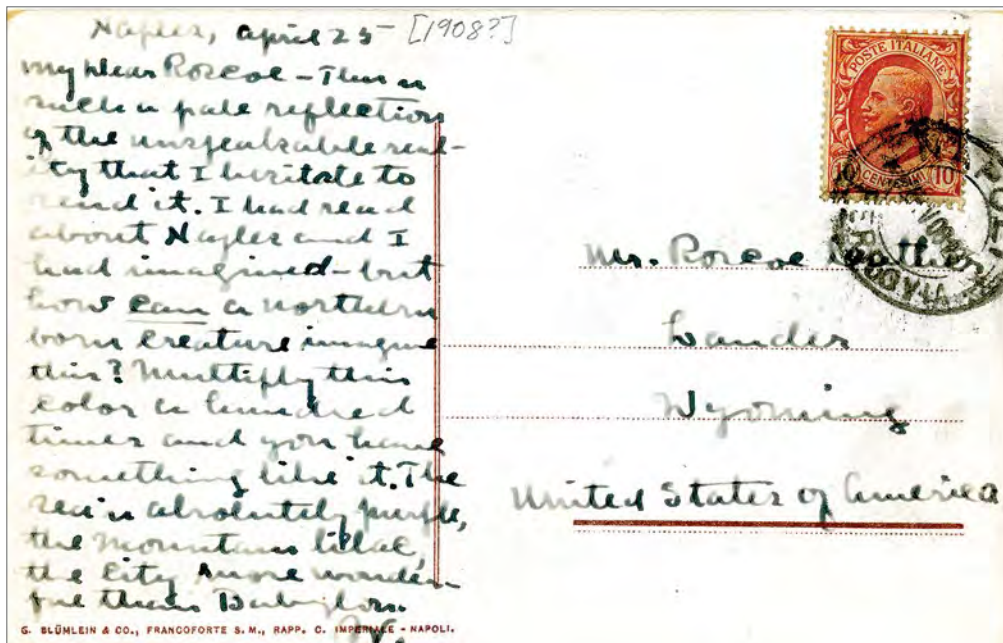
Wynning
State, Minn.



“ My Dear Roscoe: This is the dome of St. Peter's from where I first saw it—one of the wonderful Roman gardens. It looms up from the east wherever one turns, and after you stay about the church and the Vatican and the Catacombs for a time it is borne in upon one that there is where the modern world was born. From the day Charlemagne was crowned there and before the Vatican was fashioning modern Europe. Next in wonder to the Rome of the Empire is the Catholic Rome of the Middle Ages. Willa. Rome. June 10. ”

(Complete Letters no. 2062)

And again to Roscoe, from Naples, 1908:



Naples, April 25

“My Dear Roscoe – This is such a pale reflection of the unspeakable reality that I hesitate to send it. I had read about Naples and I had imagined, but how can a northern born creature imagine this? Multiply this color a hundred times and you have something like it. The sea is absolutely purple, the mountains lilac, the city more wonderful than Babylon. W.”

(Complete Letters no. 2059)

Cather's characterization here of picture postcards as “pale reflections” of actual experience shows up in her fiction, when on the rare occasion she references postcards. One example is in *Lucy Gayheart*:

One thing she watched for, every afternoon. Long before sunset an unaccountable pink glow appeared in the eastern sky, about half-way between the zenith and the horizon. It was not a cloud, it had not the depth of a reflection: it was thin and bright like the colour on a postcard. (198–99)



And in *One of Ours*, the following passage describing Claude Wheeler and his comrades seeing the Statue of Liberty—in real life, for the first time—as they leave New York Harbor for France:

“There she is!” “Hello old girl!” “Good-bye, sweetheart!”

The swarm surged to starboard. They shouted and gesticulated to the image they were all looking for,—so much nearer than they had expected to see her, clad in green folds, with the mist streaming up like smoke behind. For nearly every one of those twenty-five hundred boys, as for Claude, it was their first glimpse of the Bartholdi statue. Though she was such a definite image in their minds, they had not imagined her in her setting of sea and sky, with the shipping of the world coming and going at her feet, and the moving cloud-masses behind her. Post-card pictures had given them no idea of the energy of her large gesture, or how her heaviness becomes light among the vaporish elements. (362–63)

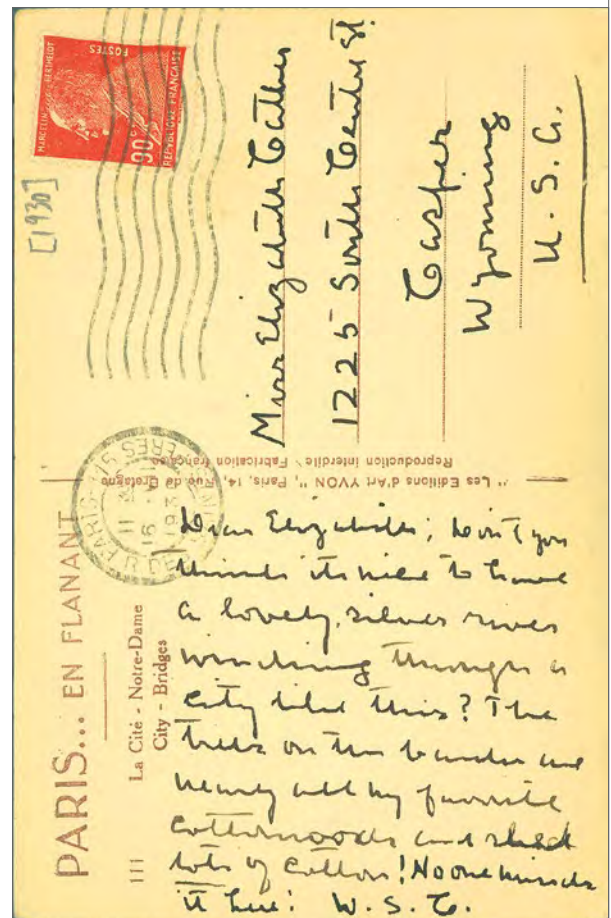
Numerous surviving postcards date from Cather’s time in Paris in 1930. In these messages we can relive her experience of the city—what she so loved about it—and how her appreciation of Paris is woven through with her deep reverence for history and literature.

To her niece, Elizabeth Cather, in 1930:



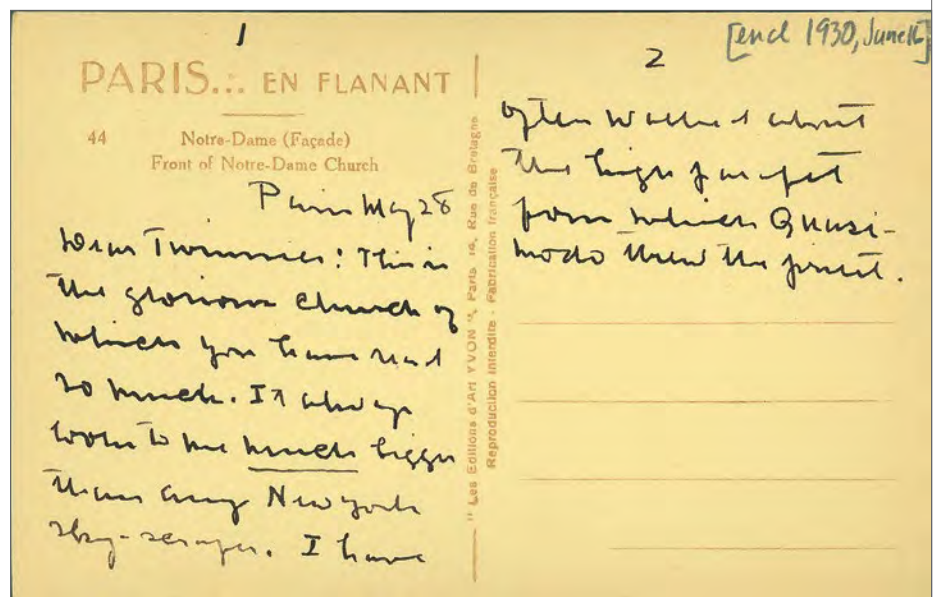
“ Dear Elizabeth: Don't you think it nice to have a lovely, silver river winding through a city like this? The trees on the banks are nearly all my favorite cottonwoods and shed lots of cotton! No one minds it here! W.S.C. ”

(*Complete Letters* no. 2311)



To her twin nieces, Elizabeth and Margaret Cather, in 1930: On the left side of this front view of Notre Dame, which Cather enclosed as part of a letter rather than posting directly, she added a note indicating that the bells are rung from that tower. The note on the right-hand side of the card is more dramatic:

This is the parapet from which Quasimodo threw the wicked priest!



Paris May 28

“ Dear Twinnies: This is the glorious church of which you have read so much. It always looks to me much bigger than any New York sky-scraper. I have often walked about the high parapet from which Quasimodo threw the priest. ”

(Complete Letters no. 2308)



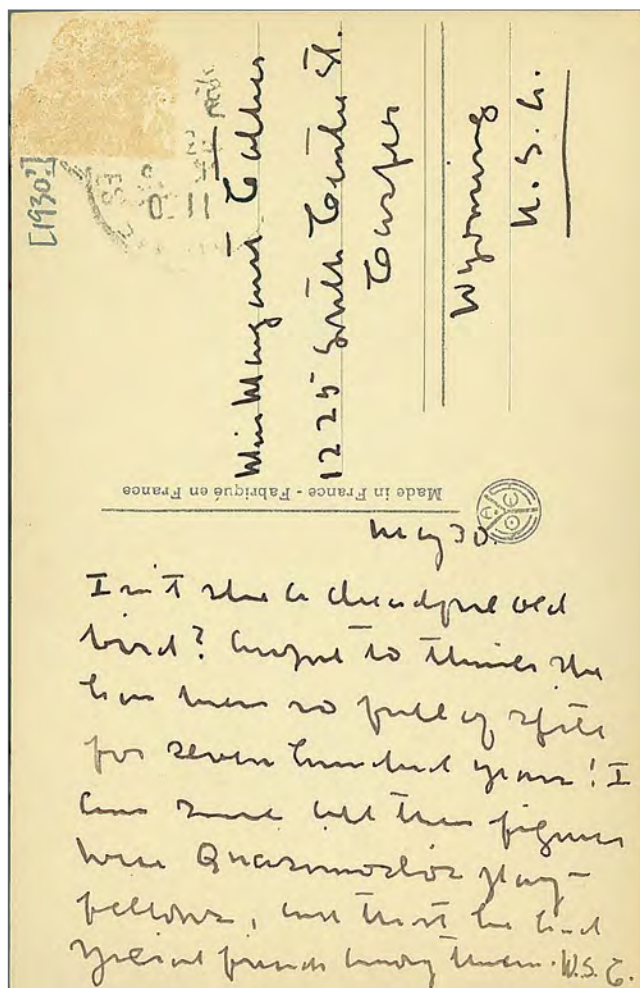
And then there is what we might call the gargoyle series, which she sent over the course of time to Elizabeth and Margaret:



“ May 30 [1930]

Isn't she a dreadful old bird? Awful to think that she has been so full of spite for seven hundred years! I am sure all the figures were Quasimodo's play-fellows, and that he had great friends among them. W.S.C. ”

(*Complete Letters* no. 2300)



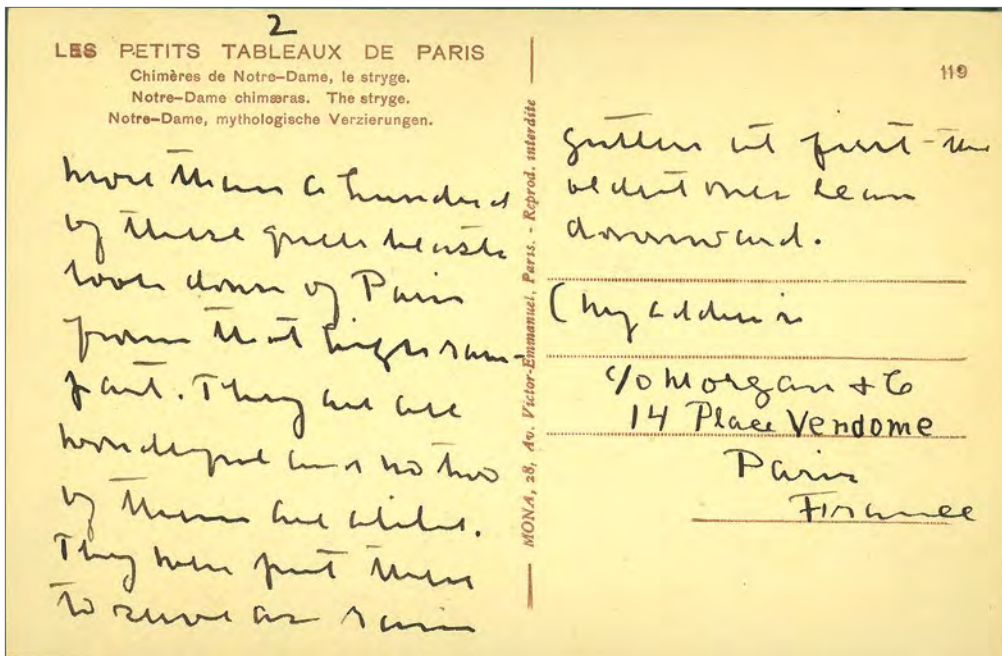


June 20th [1930]

“ Dear Twinnies: Here is another
animal friend! I spend a good deal
of time inside and outside of Notre
Dame. There is a dear little park
behind it where one can sit for hours
and look up at the strange beasts.
I am recovered from my cold now
and enjoying everything. W.S.C. ”

(Complete Letters no. 2309)





“ More than a hundred of these queer beasts look down of Paris from that high rampart. They are all wonderful and no two of them are alike. They were put there to serve as rain gutters at first—the oldest ones lean downward.

(My address is

c/o Morgan & C,
14 Place Vendome,
Paris France ”

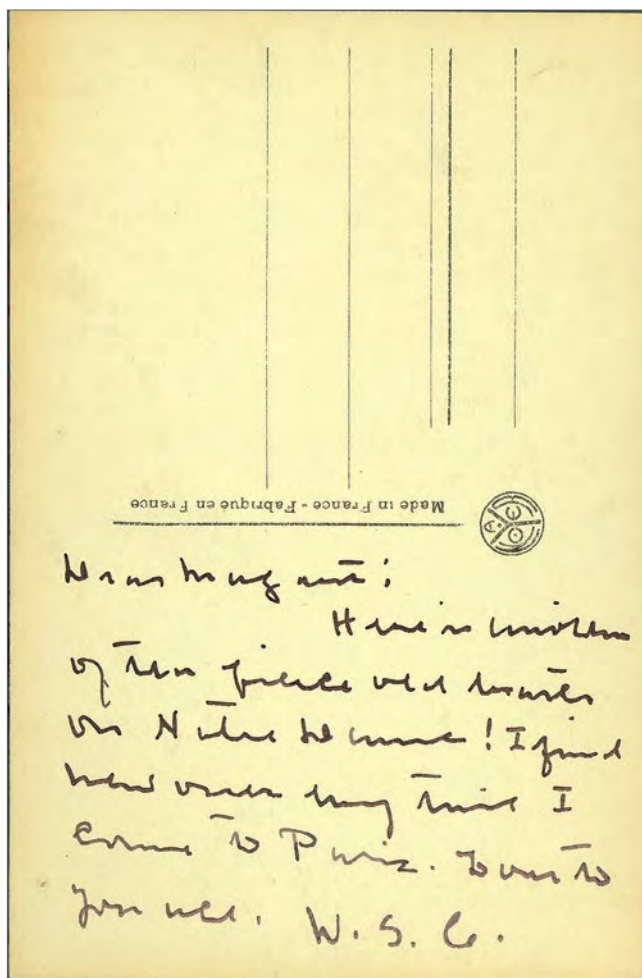
(Complete Letters no. 2303)

It bears noting that not all of these “queer beasts” that Cather shared with her nieces, and that we are sharing here, are gargoyles in that term’s strict sense. They do not serve a functional role in water drainage. They are commonly referred to as “grotesques” or “chimæras.”

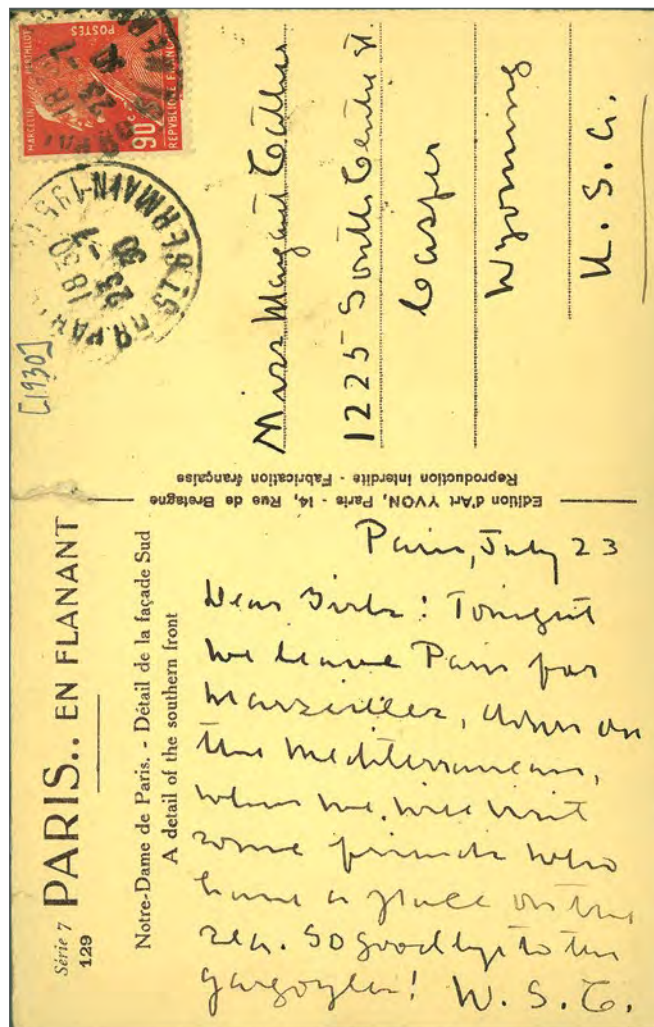


“ Here is another[?] of the fierce old beasts on Notre Dame! I find new ones every time I come to Paris. Love to you all. W. S. C. ”

(Complete Letters no. 2303)



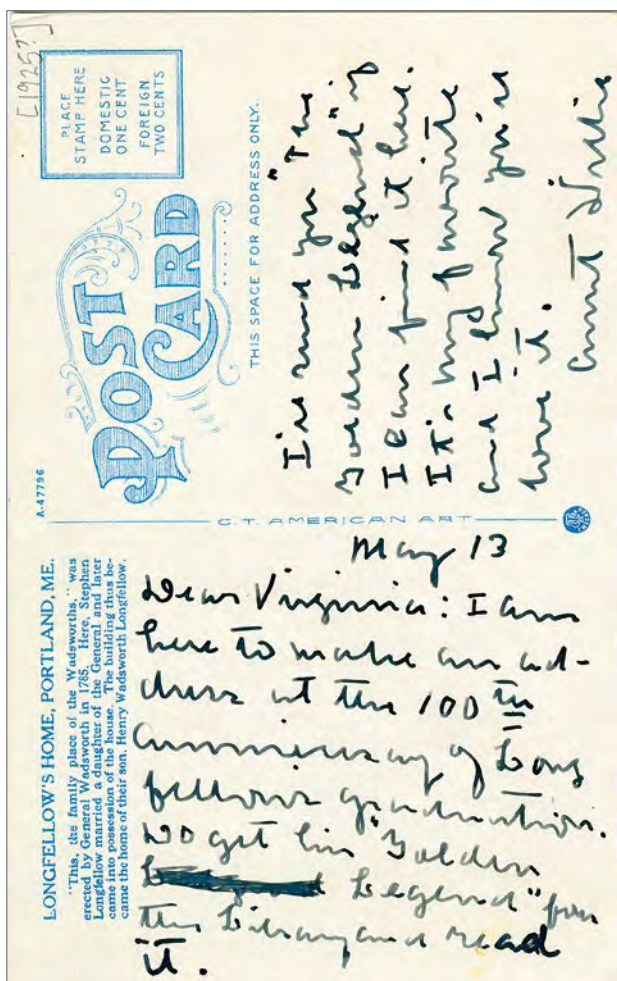
Then a last gargoyle card, on which she simply reports leaving Paris for Marseilles, but adds a last sweet line to close out her ongoing narrative about them:



“ Paris, July 23
Dear Girls:
Tonight we leave Paris for Marseilles,
down on the Mediterranean, where
we will visit some friends who have a
place on the sea. So goodbye to the
gargoyles! W.S.C. ”

(Complete Letters no. 2312)

As she ages, Willa Cather's use of postcards for communication becomes increasingly pragmatic. When she sends postcards at all, she uses them to list her movements from one place to another or to give brief details about current activities, such as her 1925 visit to Bowdoin College in Portland, Maine, where she gave an address commemorating a graduating class that included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Nathaniel Hawthorne:



“ May 13

Dear Virginia: I am here to make an address at the 100th anniversary of Longfellow's graduation. Do get his "Golden Legend" from the library and read it.

I'll send you "The Golden Legend" if I can find it here. It's my favorite and I know you will love it.

Aunt Willie ”

(Complete Letters no. 2289)



There are likely two reasons for the decline in her use of postcards and for the change in what she writes on them. Later in her life, she was simply busier—with writing itself, with the never-ending business minutia of publication, and with the demands of celebrity. And writing by hand was increasingly difficult, if not impossible, after the onset of her hand troubles in the 1930s. But also, by the 1940s, the general public's use of postcards to communicate had changed and lessened, as new modes of communication emerged in the marketplace.

As to collecting postcards, much the rage at the time, it seems Cather did not. She didn't see herself as a collector. In her essay "A Chance Meeting"—a reminiscence of meeting Gustave Flaubert's niece—the niece offered to give Cather a letter written by Flaubert as a souvenir of the great writer whom Cather so admired. But Cather declined:

I told her that I was not a collector; that manuscripts and autographed letters meant very little to me. The things of her uncle that were valuable to me I already had, and had had for years. It rather hurt me that she should think I wanted any material reminder of her or of Flaubert. It was the Flaubert in her mind and heart that was to give me a beautiful memory. (33)

Evidently, she did not need souvenirs, postcards or otherwise.

An album of the 1902 and 1908 trips to Europe is in the archives at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. This includes postcards, but it is not clear whether Cather assembled this scrapbook or whether it was Isabelle McClung. The captions and notes are in McClung's handwriting, so very likely the book was not Cather's inclination or doing.

There is a beautiful botanical book in the Cather Foundation collections, in which postcards are glued to the pages. This inclusion was certainly Cather's, as the book belonged to her, but the use of postcards in it hardly comprises a collection.



In a postcard written to Cather's father from Paris in August 1902 (not a picture postcard, and sadly damaged when its stamp was cut away), she describes Napoleon's tomb, and then at the end, builds a quick sketch of the French people in a way that reminds us of her observational skills, of how she misses nothing, and of her reverence for what she finds in the everyday:

My Dear Father: I have been in Paris for two weeks [. . .] shall remain two weeks [. . .] The city is certainly the most beautiful that men have ever [. . .] and genius to create. I find new pleasure and wonder in it everyday. The tomb of Napoleon is the only thing I have ever found in the world which did not at all disappoint. I think it must be quite the most impressive and awe-inspiring spot on earth. The people here are the most industrious, neat, and painstaking people I have ever seen, and yet they take life comfortably. They do not wear themselves out, but whatever they do, they do thoroughly and well. Much love to Mamma and the children. Willa

(*Complete Letters* no. 1916)

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DOCUMENT REPOSITORIES

Except as follows, all postcards featured in this story are from the Roscoe and Meta Cather Collection (MS316), University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries, Archives & Special Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Pages 15 and 16

Frank Cather Postcard Collection (MS0060), University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries, Archives & Special Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Page 17

Literary and Historical Manuscripts (MA 5664), Morgan Library and Museum, New York, New York.

Page 18

Kathe Murphy Collection, OBJ-227-001. Willa Cather Foundation Collections & Archives at the National Willa Cather Center, Red Cloud, Nebraska.

Page 19

Susan J. and James Rosowski Cather Collection (MS228), University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries, Archives & Special Collections, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Page 30

BK-250-430-002. Willa Cather Foundation Collections & Archives at the National Willa Cather Center, Red Cloud, Nebraska.

Editorial note: We have chosen to retain Cather's spelling errors in our transcriptions of her messages, in large part because how often does one have the chance to get "the Dodge of Venice" into print.



“You Feel Again”: Willa Cather, Direct Address, and the Second-Person Perspective

Gabi Kirilloff

For many readers, the direct address of the reader in fiction evokes two familiar touchstones: the “dear reader” convention popular in nineteenth-century novels, epitomized by Charlotte Brontë’s iconic “Reader, I married him,” and the postmodern penchant for breaking the fourth wall, embodied by Italo Calvino’s opening line, as translated by William Weaver, “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*” (489; 3). As the feminist narratologist Robyn Warhol notes in her study of the rhetorical affordances of direct address, nineteenth-century forms of address are often associated with cloying sentimentality, while more modern uses of the second-person perspective tend to be linked with playful irony (xiv). Both rhetorical modes seem at odds with Willa Cather’s writing style. As narratologists including Robyn Warhol, Irene Kacandes, and Sandrine Sorlin have argued, direct address is a complex device that exists along a rhetorical spectrum. Accounts of Cather’s writing have long emphasized her restraint and minimalism—her, as Jo Ann Middleton puts it in *Willa Cather’s Modernism*, “clarity, beauty, and simplicity” (22). Even as Cather’s formal experimentation has received renewed scholarly attention in recent years, her prose style continues to carry connotations of “seeming simplicity” that appear incompatible with direct address and the second-person perspective (Stout, *Cather Among the Moderns* 191).

This essay examines how, within her novels, Cather uses the second-person perspective to encourage readers to imagine themselves within her fictional worlds. I am not the first scholar to notice this feature of her writing. As Middleton notes, there are moments in *O Pioneers!* when “the narrator appears to address the reader directly” (74). Such moments have not received sustained critical attention, in part because they are infrequent and also because they do not stand out from surrounding narration in the same way as more overt forms of address, such as Brontë’s or Calvino’s. This essay builds on Middleton’s observation by analyzing specific instances of the second-person perspective in two of Cather’s novels. I demonstrate how Cather makes strategic use of the second person in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). I argue that the ways in which Cather employs the second person illuminate her relationship to broader turn-of-the-century trends in direct address and the second person. Similar to many early twentieth-century novelists, Cather

uses short bursts of second-person narration to foster empathy. In *O Pioneers!* the second-person pronoun positions readers within fictional landscapes, while in *Sapphira* the second person positions readers within landscapes, thoughts, and bodies.

This essay develops findings from a larger project on direct address and the second-person perspective in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel. As narratologists including Robyn Warhol and Monika Fludernik have repeatedly noted, direct address and the second person are difficult to identify systematically through close reading alone because they may appear fleetingly, merge with narrative description, or resist clear formal classification. In previous research I used computational methods to detect direct address and the second-person perspective, tracing broad historical patterns in the rise, decline, and transformation of these devices across 2,000 nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels (Kirilloff 11; Kirilloff and Carroll 12). One unexpected finding from this research was the presence of these devices in Cather’s fiction. I had initially included Cather in my study as a “control,” assuming her novels would contain little or no direct address or second-person perspective. Instead, the computational analysis revealed recurring moments in which Cather slips into a second-person perspective, particularly in descriptions of place. This essay begins to flesh out that unexpected finding through close reading. I argue that Cather’s subtle use of the second-person perspective constitutes a sustained, if understated, engagement with early twentieth-century narrative experimentation.

Address Among Cather’s Contemporaries

Irene Kacandes defines direct address as “vocative formulations that identify the reader directly.” Within the context of Anglophone fiction, specifically the novel, direct address experienced a widely acknowledged heyday in the nineteenth century, which is now associated with the “dear reader” phenomenon. During this time, direct address was put toward a variety of rhetorical purposes, including directing the reader’s gaze (“Does the reader wish to hear of the pest-houses”) and conscripting the reader’s sympathy (“I beseech you, pity the mother who has all your affections, and not one legal right to protect, guide, or educate, the child of her bosom”) (Shelley 224; Stowe 494). The use of direct address as a form of narrative interjection was overt and frequently didactic. Conventional wisdom implies that direct address faced a sharp



decline at the end of the nineteenth century, which, as literary scholar Bronwen Thomas argues, coincided with the modernists' rejection of the sentimental tradition and the eradication of overt signs of the narrator. Numerous historical studies of direct address, including Garrett Stewart's *Dear Reader*, support the idea that direct address declines at the beginning of the twentieth century while the second-person perspective presumably gains popularity in the late twentieth century.

Despite this perceived historical trajectory, computational methods reveal a wealth of address and second-person narration in novels from the early twentieth century, including in works by authors such as Henry James, Edna Ferber, Upton Sinclair, Frank Norris, and, surprisingly, Willa Cather (Kirilloff 13). Over the last twenty years, computational methods have become increasingly common in literary scholarship, particularly within the digital humanities. These approaches allow scholars to identify and compare patterns of language use on a scale that would be difficult or impossible to achieve through close reading alone. In my research on direct address, I developed a computational method for identifying moments in which a narrator speaks directly to the reader outside of dialogue. The method consisted of a series of automated steps. First, it removed all dialogue from a novel, leaving only narration. It then searched the remaining text for a targeted set of words and phrases—such as “you,” “your,” “reader,” “our story,” and “my tale”—that narratologists have identified as markers of direct address. To evaluate the method, I applied it to a thirty-novel test corpus and manually assessed the results, finding that more than eighty percent of the extracted passages were correctly identified. I then applied the same procedure to a corpus of two thousand Anglophone novels from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The method identified more than sixty thousand instances of direct address, revealing that this narrative technique persisted well into the early twentieth century, even in the work of authors not typically associated with direct address (Kirilloff 11). Many of these moments blur the distinction between direct address (in which the figure addressed is clearly the reader) and second-person narration (in which the figure addressed is the protagonist), frequently employing “you” in a way that includes the reader in the fictional world. In moments of address in the nineteenth-century novel, the “dear reader” is often positioned as performing verbs that connote spectatorship (such as “imagine,” “understand,” “know,” and “see”). Conversely, in moments of address at the beginning of the twentieth century, “you,” is positioned as performing action verbs in the present continuous tense, such as “going,” “telling,” “giving,” and “doing.” Such shifts contribute to an increase in an embodied, second-person perspective in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Anglophone fiction (Kirilloff 14).

Consider the following example from Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, which helps to illustrate this transitional period: Sinclair begins his novel with an explicit evocation of “the reader” in line with nineteenth-century trends in direct address (“the reader, who perhaps has never held much converse in the language of far-off Lithuania, will be glad of the explanation”) (2). Similar to many nineteenth-century authors, Sinclair names the reader directly in order to “guide” the reader through what is happening in the novel. He then switches to include the reader through an immersive second-person perspective, as in the following example:

He [Mikolas] is a beef-boner, and that is a dangerous trade, especially when you are on piece-work and trying to earn a bride. Your hands are slippery, and your knife is slippery, and you are toiling like mad, when somebody happens to speak to you, or you strike a bone. Then your hand slips up on the blade, and there is a fearful gash. (12)

Sinclair collapses the distance between Mikolas and the reader through the use of the second-person perspective—the misfortune described does not happen *to* a distant other. The kinesthetic language, or language pertaining to the physical senses, creates an embodied perspective, as does the present tense of the action.

Sinclair's embodied perspective is characteristic of thousands of examples of turn-of-the-century address I uncovered in my computational research; it encourages readers to imagine themselves into a character's body and to feel empathy for that character. Frank Norris, for example, makes a similar move when he invites readers to imagine themselves within the character Trina's battered and abused body in his novel *McTeague*: “Surely not a great brute of a husband who bit you like a dog, and kicked and pounded you as though you were made of iron. . . . Hump your back, and it was soonest over” (336). While many nineteenth-century authors, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley *ask* readers to imagine the feelings of characters, authors at the turn of the century frequently position the reader within the bodies of fictional characters by using the second-person pronoun, “you.” By the early twentieth century the second-person pronoun increasingly functions not as a conversational aside to the reader, but as a mechanism for embodied immersion.

This turn toward an embodied second-person perspective is tied to a broader aesthetic shift in the novel as a form. The growing prevalence of the second-person perspective parallels the early twentieth-century movement toward “showing” and away from telling, a move associated with Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* and anticipated by writers such as Henry James. In *The Art*



of the *Novel*, James observes that while narrative elements can be “named” or “stated,” “it remains the very deuce to *represent* them” (emphasis in the original)—a view echoed by Chekhov, Ford Madox Ford, Hemingway, and others who regarded showing as aesthetically superior to explication (94). This tension between “representing” and “naming” culminates in Lubbock’s influential claim that “the art of fiction does not begin until the novelist thinks of his story as a matter to be *shown*” (62, emphasis in the original). For Lubbock and many early twentieth-century authors, “showing” promises a more direct relation between readers and fictional worlds: rather than listening to a storyteller, the reader “turns towards the story and watches it. . . . The motion of life is before us” (111). This notion of showing presumes a diminished conversational register between narrator and reader, reinforcing the idea of unmediated access to the fictional world. Placing the reader in the scene through the use of the second person, rather than explicating to the “dear reader,” fits within this shift.

This aesthetic shift provides important context for understanding how Cather adapts the second-person perspective in her own work in ways that both adhere to and depart from her contemporaries. Like many turn-of-the-century authors, Cather uses the second-person perspective in a way that *shows* the reader, rather than *tells* the reader. This aesthetic commitment is reflected in Cather’s own commentary on the ideal novel. In “The Novel Demeublé,” she writes: “Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, it seems to me, is created” (6). Her argument that writers should build, through “suggestion,” a world of feeling for the reader echoes the aesthetic distinction between showing and telling, in that “the reserved, fastidious hand of an artist” should not be visible (6). However, the way in which Cather uses the second-person perspective does not always function to fully collapse the distance between readers and characters, as it does for Sinclair, Norris, and others. Cather frequently maintains a degree of distance between the reader and her fictional characters. This reluctance reflects an engagement with the ethical dimensions of empathy and second-person narration.

Techniques that “show” rather than “tell” are often understood to cultivate empathy—encouraging readers to feel *with* characters rather than merely *for* them. In her work on sentimentalism in the early twentieth-century novel, Lisa Mendelman argues that a broader cultural turn toward empathy shaped novelistic form at the turn of the twentieth century. Changing conceptions of emotional experience, including the emerging notion of empathy as a form of shared feeling, resulted in a stylistic turn toward stream of consciousness narration and other formal innovations associated with modernism (17). The increased use of second-person narration aligns with this shift.

Sinclair, Norris, and many of their contemporaries use the second person to humanize marginalized figures by positioning readers within their embodied experience. At face value, Cather’s concern with generating empathy for disenfranchised characters would seem to align with these aesthetic politics. Yet her resistance to fully embodied second-person narration suggests an awareness of the limits of embodied fictional empathy. In *O Pioneers!* Cather frequently uses the second person to situate readers within places rather than within the bodies of characters.

Cather, Place, and the Second-Person Perspective

Similar to her contemporaries, Cather uses short bursts of the second-person perspective sporadically throughout her writing. Rather than positioning the reader within a fictional character’s body, most of these moments encourage readers to actively imagine the landscapes and places that structure her fiction. For example, when Cather introduces Ivar’s homestead in *O Pioneers!*, she repeatedly uses the second-person pronoun “you”: “At one



Solomon D. Butcher, detail of *The Crisman sisters near Goheen settlement on Lieban Creek, Custer County, Nebraska*, 1887. Nebraska State Historical Society.

end of the pond was an earthen dam . . . above it a door and a single window were set into the hillside. You would not have seen them at all but for the reflection of the sunlight . . . you could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation" (39). It is tempting to interpret this instance of "you" as equivalent to a generalizing "one;" however, "you" more directly signals a conversational register between narrator and reader. Research has also shown that the use of "you," even when generalizing, encourages readers to feel immersed in fictional worlds (Fludernik 107). This point becomes clearer in more extended uses of the second-person perspective, such as Cather's description of Alexandra's homestead:

If you go up the hill and enter Alexandra's big house, you will find that it is curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort. One room is papered, carpeted, over-furnished; the next is almost bare. The pleasantest rooms in the house are the kitchen—where Alexandra's three young Swedish girls chatter and cook and pickle and preserve all summer long—and the sitting room, in which Alexandra has brought together the old homely furniture that the Bergsons used in their first log house, the family portraits, and the few things her mother brought from Sweden.

When you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds, planted with scrub willows to give shade to the cattle in fly-time. There is even a white row of beehives in the orchard, under the walnut trees. You feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best. (80–81)

The use of the second-person perspective here aligns the reader's perspective with Alexandra's. Cather uses the second-person perspective fifteen times throughout *O Pioneers!*, particularly in descriptions of place. The passage above represents by far the most extended use of the second person in the novel. It grounds the reader in a physical space and encourages the reader to imagine navigating that space in real time. It creates an almost cinematic perspective, both in that it occurs within the present tense and in that it directs the readers roving gaze through a landscape, bringing to mind Middleton's observation that Cather's writing style is "cinemagraphic," or employs techniques that "make the reader see" (80). This form of "seeing," however, is highly experiential; rather than positioning the reader as a passive observer, Cather invites the

reader to actively move through the environment. The reader is situated within Alexandra Bergson's house before being described as moving outward into the surrounding landscape—the movement through the place makes it clear that the place is itself alive and the fluid movement from interior to exterior portrays the homestead as enmeshed with "the big out-of-doors."

Within *O Pioneers!* Alexandra and the land mutually invent one another—their relationship is the central relationship of the novel. It follows that Cather would take particular rhetorical care in crafting the description of Alexandra's home and in establishing the reader's relationship to this place. The reader's understanding of the importance of place to Alexandra—and, in a sense, the reader's inhabitation of her landscape—is key to the novel's emotional impact. As many scholars have noted, Cather was deeply concerned with the relationship between people and places: "Space—and particularly the way in which secular space is transformed into sacred places—is Willa Cather's subject" (Winters 15, emphasis in the original). In Cather's writing, place itself becomes a character, capable of nuance, change, and emotion. By describing the activities, emotions, and bodies that inhabit Alexandra's home ("Alexandra's three young Swedish girls chatter"), Cather transforms the homestead into an emotionally charged place. Through her use of the second-person perspective, she invites the reader into that place and encourages the reader to feel its emotional resonance. Cather uses the second-person perspective to *show* the reader Alexandra's homestead, rather than *tell* the reader about Alexandra's homestead.

The way in which Cather employs the second-person pronoun anticipates insights from psychologists and cognitive narratologists regarding the affordances of "you." Such research can help us better understand what the second-person perspective "does" for readers and consequently, why authors, including Cather, employ this device. Cognitive scientists have repeatedly found that second-person narration causes the brain to respond to narrative in distinctive ways. In a series of experiments on perspective and cognition, Tad Brunyé and his collaborators presented readers with short passages written in the first-, second-, and third-person perspectives. Participants were then asked questions designed to gauge memory, comprehension, and emotional response. These studies concluded that the second-person perspective leads readers to simulate actions from the character's perspective, whereas first- and third-person perspectives tend to promote an observer's stance.

Brunyé's study indicates a fundamental property of the second-person pronoun in relatively short passages, not in long-form narratives that are written entirely from the second-person perspective. His work indicates that the use of "you" in short



passages should not be dismissed as simply “generalizing.” Short moments of the second-person perspective may encourage many of the reading responses we associate with long-form second-person narration (engagement, identification, etc.). Brunyé’s research further suggests that second-person perspectives promote stronger memory formation, finding that “readers’ mental representations of space and emotion are relatively vivid and internalised” when reading second-person text (663). Readers also demonstrate greater awareness of the spatial organization of the fictional world and are more likely to “internalise described emotions and develop congruent emotional states” (663). Brunyé’s research further supports recent arguments in linguistics and narratology that posit that the use of “you” outside of dialogue has specific rhetorical effects regardless of whether it explicitly or exclusively refers to the reader. These findings from cognitive studies underscore the importance narratologists have long placed on an author’s decision to use “you” at all, or to choose it over the more generalizing “one.”

Cather’s use of the second person mirrors what Brunyé describes as an egocentric spatial perspective—one that provides the reader with a memorable “mental tour” (660). By positioning “you” directly within Alexandra’s environment, Cather encourages the reader not only to perceive the land from an immersive stance, but also to perceive Alexandra’s connection to the land. In navigating Alexandra’s homestead, the reader is encouraged to develop empathetic feelings aligned with Alexandra’s own: “You feel that, properly, Alexandra’s house is the big out-of-doors.” Over the course of the passage, the reader becomes increasingly embedded in the fictional world. The opening hypothetical—“if you go up the hill”—gradually gives way to the more assertive “when you go out of the house” (80–81). The language is concrete and present-tense: the addressee is not told what they *would* feel, but is positioned as feeling, going, and finding in the moment.

Cather and Empathy

If the second person can intensify immersion, it can also raise ethical questions about how—and how far—readers are invited to inhabit the experiences of others. While Cather’s use of an egocentric spatial perspective clearly fosters empathy for Alexandra, the empathetic relationship she establishes between reader and character differs in important ways from the embodied second-person perspective in the passages from Sinclair and Norris. Positioning “you” within a landscape and positioning “you” within a character’s body both rely on kinesthetic language to immerse readers in fictional worlds. Yet they carry distinct ethical and rhetorical implications. In *O Pioneers!*, Cather resists fully collapsing the distance between reader and character. The

addressee is invited to move through Alexandra’s house and land, but the space remains explicitly hers—“Alexandra’s house,” not “your house.” The rhetorical way in which Cather employs the second-person perspective facilitates proximity, but the reader is never positioned within Alexandra’s body.

This calibrated distance raises a broader question: why, given Cather’s well-documented investment in cultivating sympathy for women, immigrants, and other marginalized figures, does she stop short within *O Pioneers!* of Sinclair and Norris’s style of fully embodied identification? One answer emerges when we turn to one of her most complex and ethically fraught novels, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, where Cather’s experiments with second-person narration become more frequent and more variable. Scholars have observed that *Sapphira* is formally experimental. Ann Romines notes that “this novel strains the conventions of the form perhaps more than any of Cather’s others, especially as it blurs boundaries between fiction and nonfiction” (282), while Janis Stout similarly argues that in *Sapphira*, “Cather is in fact writing metafiction” (*The Writer and Her World* 294). Both critics focus on the novel’s unusual turn to an autobiographical first-person point of view in the final chapter—a move that has prompted both speculation and critique. This autobiographical impulse results in what Merrill Skaggs, Stout, and others have characterized as authorial intrusions (*The Writer and Her World* 294). The presence of the first person is closely tied to moments of direct address, since explicit references to the act of narrating or telling also imply, directly or indirectly, the presence of a narratee—the person to whom the story is told. The autobiographical impulse, then, may help explain not only these explicit addresses to the reader, but also the emergence of second-person perspective.

The majority of examples of the second-person perspective in *Sapphira* still use the second person to embed the reader within a landscape. However, Cather uses the second person to orient readers within characters’ thoughts and bodies more frequently in *Sapphira* than in *O Pioneers!* Consider Cather’s introduction of Back Creek Valley, Virginia:

Up yonder, at the end of a long road winding through the woods, the level line of Timber Ridge rose like a blue wall. When you had crossed the ridge and gone on a ways, you came to the Capon River. . . . When you got as far as Hayfield church, the woods began to open up, and the country looked more human.

But it wasn’t until she caught sight of the red brick springhouse over the Town Spring, a little this way out of Winchester, that Till felt she was back in the world again.

How she loved the first glimpse of cobble-paved streets, with no mud on them! You drove into town by Water Street, lined on either side with neat mansard houses built of pale grey limestone; grey, but almost blue, and not dressed so smooth as to take all the life out of the rugged stone. Such genteel houses they were, opening directly on the street, with green window shutters, and brass knockers; a little walled garden and a hydrant behind each house. Water Street seemed to welcome you to town.

After you drove on and passed Christ Church, then you came to where the quality lived [...] (75–76)

As in *O Pioneers!*, the second person initially offers the reader a mental tour of an emotionally charged place. However, in this description of place, Cather moves more fluidly between Till's perspective and the reader's perspective. This passage meets Brunyé's conception of egocentric spatial perspective-taking, yet the narration slides between Till's perspective and the second-person perspective without clearly demarcating whose perception governs the scene. The pronoun "you" may refer to a generalized traveler, to Till reflecting on her own movement, or to the reader momentarily aligned with her. This ambiguity blurs the boundary between narrator, character, and reader in ways that are absent from Cather's use of the second person in *O Pioneers!*

The same slipperiness appears elsewhere in the novel, particularly when Cather uses the second person to render bodily

sensation. Describing Nancy running through the flower garden, Cather writes that the vines are so wet that "by running into them you could take a shower bath. It made your skin pretty, washing your face and arms in the dew" (195). Here, the second person does not guide the reader through navigating place, but instead focuses on embodied sensations. The reader is encouraged to feel wet skin, cool dew, and tactile pleasure—precisely the sort of bodily alignment frequently used among Cather's contemporaries, including Sinclair and Norris. These moments illuminate the risks inherent in embodied second-person empathy, especially in a novel concerned with racialized power. To invite readers to imagine themselves into Nancy's body is not simply an aesthetic choice; it carries ethical consequences. The bodily pleasures and sensations described risk universalizing experience and obscuring the historical and material constraints that define Nancy's life.

Cather occasionally appears to signal an awareness of this problem by reasserting distance between readers and characters at crucial moments. In one striking instance, she writes: "a cricket was chirping sharply inside, and outside was the perpetual, agitating rush of the river,—a beautiful sound when you are not frightened, but Nancy was" (232). The second-person clause explicitly distinguishes the reader's likely lived experience from Nancy's fear, interrupting any easy identification. Rather than encourage the reader to imagine themselves within the fictional world, this moment forces the reader to consider how their own experiences are, likely, different from Nancy's. Unlike Cather's immersive uses of "you" elsewhere in *Sapphira*, this use of "you" is corrective and didactic. It reminds the reader that aesthetic pleasure and embodied empathy have limits—limits imposed by social position, vulnerability, and historical context.

This gesture recalls earlier traditions of direct address in nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, particularly Harriet Beecher Stowe's moments of narratorial intervention in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When Stowe writes, "Shelby could not help laughing in company. Perhaps you laugh too, dear reader; but you know humanity comes out in a variety of strange forms now-a-days," she similarly exposes a gap between readerly interpretation and the lived realities of enslaved characters (7). Likewise, when Harriet Jacobs addresses the reader in her largely autobiographical *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—"O reader, can you imagine my joy? No, you cannot, unless you have been a slave mother"—she encourages readers to consider the limits of fictional empathy (261). In these cases, direct address functions less as an immersive device than as an ethical check, calling attention to misreading rather than facilitating identification. The fact that Cather employs both immersive forms of the second-person perspective that encourage the



Cather in Virginia, ca. 1900. Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection, Willa Cather Foundation Collections and Archives at the National Willa Cather Center, PHO-4-W689-798.



reader to uncritically imagine themselves into the bodies and thoughts of characters, alongside a corrective, distancing use of “you,” signals the novel’s broader struggles with how best to foster empathy between readers and characters.

Conclusions

At first glance, direct address and the second-person perspective may appear at odds with Willa Cather’s writing style. Yet the rhetorical effects of these devices—effects that narratologists have repeatedly linked to heightened imaginative participation and emotional involvement—align closely with Cather’s aesthetic aims. As Irene Kacandes argues, address and the second person “get the reader more involved” while Monika Fludernik associates the form with intensified experientiality. Both claims resonate with Eudora Welty’s observation that in Cather’s fiction “her own living world is around us as we read, present to us through our eyes and ears and touch” (41). The second-person perspective is one of many rhetorical devices that Cather uses to *show* her readers her “living world.” In using the second person, Cather places the reader directly within the environments she describes, encouraging us to create mental maps of the places that populate her fiction.

Cather’s use of the second person accomplishes more than conveying the concrete geographic details of the places she describes; these moments also convey feelings and emotions. As Charles Johanningsmeier has demonstrated, this desire was often successfully fulfilled; Cather’s contemporaneous readers expressed “a profound *emotional* response to her works” (47–48, emphasis in the original). In many cases, her readers described their reading experience as an emotional act of transportation or escape into a fictional world. Cather herself argues in “The Novel Demeublé” that a work of fiction succeeds when it has conveyed emotion and feeling, rather than fact. Writing in praise of *The Scarlet Letter*, Cather comments that “in the twilight melancholy of that book, in its consistent mood, one can scarcely ever see the actual surroundings of the people; one feels them, rather, in the dusk” (6). Drawing on Cather’s writing as well as on works by Cather scholars including Bernice Slote and Edward and Lillian Bloom, Middleton argues that for Cather, “the writer and reader are joined in a mutual experience that depends on a shared emotional response” (66). The second-person perspective provides one mechanism for this sharing. In Cather’s fiction, places and the experiences that unfold within them shape, reveal, and transform her characters, and the reader’s imaginative participation in these spaces fosters a form of empathetic engagement—an invitation not merely to

feel *for* characters, but to feel *with* them. Yet, the way in which Cather uses the second person varies between *O Pioneers!* and *Sapphira*: her stylistic choices demonstrate not only the rhetorical breadth of the second-person perspective, but also the complex ways authors from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries wrestled with regulating proximity and distance between readers and characters. In *O Pioneers!* Cather maintains a degree of distance between readers and characters in her use of the second person; she invites the reader into the landscape but does not position the reader within a character’s body. In *Sapphira*, Cather fosters an embodied perspective, but also uses the second person to remind the reader that fictional empathy has its limits. Taken together, Cather’s experiments with the second person show her engaging a central problem of early twentieth-century fiction—how to cultivate empathy without erasing difference—and suggest that her “seemingly simple” style masks a sophisticated narrative technique.

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READING WILLA CATHER—BUILDING COMMUNITY

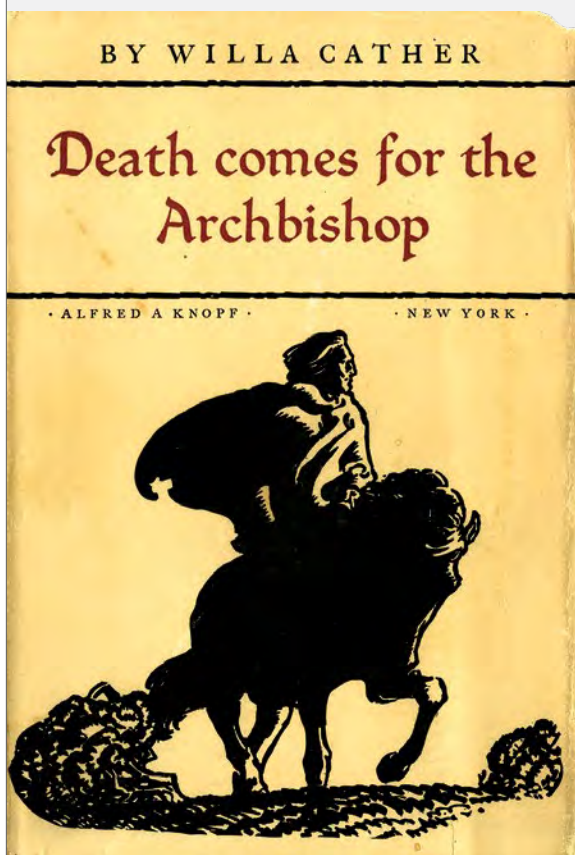
The novels of Willa Cather do more than tell stories—like all good literature, they bring people together, provoke discussion, encourage reflection, and create communities of readers. Through the generous support of a private foundation, we are excited to launch a new

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Thanks to grant funding, participating institutions can request:

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Contributors to this Issue

Song (Joseph) Cho is an associate professor of interdisciplinary studies and program director of TESL at Liberty University. His recent articles have appeared in *The Dickensian*, *Steinbeck Review*, and *TESOL Journal*. In addition to biblical allusions in literature, his research interests include using Japanese anime/manga (particularly Studio Ghibli) to teach English as a second language (ESL).

Katherine Hamilton-Smith is an art historian, museum professional and archivist, and the founding curator of the Curt Teich Postcard Archives Collection, the nation's largest public collection of picture postcards and related materials, now at the Newberry Library in Chicago.

Melissa J. Homestead is professor of English and program faculty in Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where she directs the Cather Project and serves as coeditor of *The Complete Letters of Willa Cather* and codirector of *A Digital Library of Willa Cather's Literary*

Manuscripts (forthcoming). She is the author of *The Only Wonderful Things: The Creative Partnership of Willa Cather and Edith Lewis* (Oxford University Press 2021) and more than a dozen articles on Cather. Homestead has also published widely on American women's writing from the late 1700s through the early 1900s, with a focus on authorship and publishing history.

Gabi Kirilloff is an assistant professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where she specializes in the intersection of the humanities and digital technology. Much of her work applies computational tools to study patterns and outliers in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American fiction. She has worked on several digital projects, including the William Blake Archive, the Walt Whitman Archive and the Willa Cather Archive. Her work has been published in journals including the *Harvard Data Science Review*, the *Journal of Cultural Analytics*, *The Programming Historian*, *College Literature*, and *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*.

Cather Different

WILLA CATHER INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR

NOVEMBER 17–20, 2027

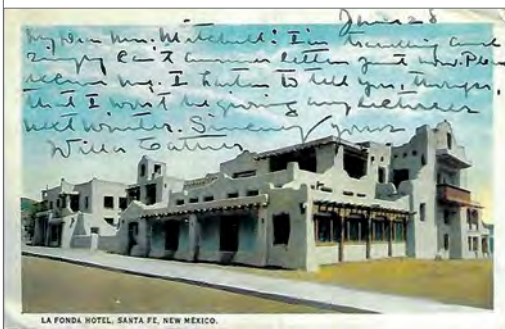
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Seminar codirectors: **Jesse Alemán**, University of New Mexico
Melissa J. Homestead, University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Heather McClure, Chávez Library at the New Mexico History Museum



The Willa Cather International Seminar is returning to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where the conference was last held in 1990. “The City Different,” as it has come to be known, has a long history as a hub of contact, commerce, conflict, creativity, and survival, spanning Spanish colonial rule, Mexican independence, and U.S. annexation. Before, during, and after these settler colonial movements and in the present day, Indigenous people lived in and moved through the region’s deep history of place and its complex cultural legacy.

Our return to the City Different seeks to provoke broader conversations



about what it means to read and write about Willa Cather at the current moment. Does reading Cather make a difference in our present moment, and how does our present moment challenge us to read Cather differently? How does

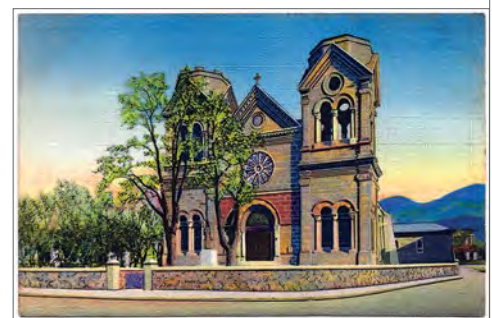
returning to Santa Fe invoke and invite different readings of Cather’s works, including their relation to time, place, people, and history? The centennial of the publication of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* especially invites us to examine how to read and teach the novel—its representation of people, place, and cultural practices—in the context of a city, state, and region marked by difference. Our return to Santa Fe also asks us to return to Cather’s writings and consider them anew.

We seek submissions for papers on a variety of topics. We welcome interdisciplinary approaches that bring history, anthropology, archeology, or art history to bear on Cather’s works and invite methodologies such as settler colonial studies, queer theory, ecocriticism, or critical pedagogies that move Cather studies in new directions. Topics for papers related to the seminar theme might include:

- Layers of time, place, and history in the writing, publication history, or plot of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

- Cather’s southwest: representation, ruins, regionalism, landscape, and the environment.
- Cather in relation to Anglo-American artists and writers who migrated to and visited New Mexico in the early and mid-twentieth century (e.g., Mabel Dodge Luhan, Mary Austin, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, D. H. Lawrence).
- How do Mexican American or Indigenous writers, artists, thinkers, or teachers offer a different sense of place than the one Cather imagined in her work? How do they engage with Cather or offer alternatives to her writings?
- Cather as queer, different, or nonconforming in her life, letters, fiction, or poetry.
- Teaching Cather differently in classrooms and communities weathering different political climates.
- Cather, conservatism, and the conservative turn, then and now.
- Race and racialization in Cather’s writings in their historical context and in ours.
- Mapping Cather scholarship since the 1990 seminar: How is it different now, and where might Cather studies go in the future? What approaches might drive Cather scholarship in different directions?

Graduate students and scholars new to Cather’s work are encouraged to make proposals. Scholarships will be available from the National Willa Cather Center and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln for select student presenters.



Proposals of no more than 500 words are due by March 1, 2027. Proposals can be submitted by clicking “Submit Your Proposal” below and completing the provided form. Decisions about acceptance will be communicated in Spring 2027. Please send questions about proposals and the submission process to internationalseminar@willacather.org.

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