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Predicting Willa Cather: Using “Peter” and the 1888 Confession Album as Introduction

Evelyn I. Funda and Susan Andersen

Preface

by Evelyn

Every few years I teach a university course called American Authors, a course designed to give students the experience of focusing on a single author’s oeuvre. Accompanying me in 2003 as a teaching intern and co-teacher was then graduate student, now English Lecturer, Susan Andersen, who wrote on Cather in her thesis and had taken a number of courses from me, both as graduate and undergraduate, including an earlier semester of this course itself.

Susan and I know the material of Cather’s life, her fiction, and the criticism about Cather well enough; therefore, we wanted to consider how to foster a classroom situation in which students discover Cather and can come to her as fresh and unimpeded as Cather had hoped they would when she said, “I didn’t want to be ‘assigned reading’ for university classes, a duty, a target for information vampires. . . . The sincerity of feeling that is possible between a writer and a reader is one of the finest things I know,” and “I think young people should be allowed to discover for themselves what they like. For young people, half the pleasure of reading new books is in finding them out for themselves. . . . If [a reader] finds a really good [book] out for himself, it counts with him for a great deal more than if he had been told he must read it” (*Willa Cather* 111-12, 191). While we cannot ignore the necessity of assigned readings in our university class, the challenge of such a course is how to set the tone that allows students to feel they are discovering Cather for themselves. So before I get out my numerous Cather slides and give a lecture outlining Cather’s biography, we hand out two of Cather’s earliest “writings”—her first short story published when she was eighteen and an even earlier survey, of sorts, dated 1888 in which Cather documented her “opinions, tastes, and fancies” in a friend’s confession album.¹ At this point, when

students know little or nothing about Cather, we ask them to examine these documents and make predictions about what kind of a writer this young Willa Cather will become, make guesses, deduce, draw conclusions about how this writer will evolve from a teenager to a preeminent American writer. Using this inductive, Socratic method, we cooperatively model during our discussion how to closely and analytically read a text and draw conclusions about it. As an added advantage, it also means that students are expected to voice their opinions right from the start. They must become actively involved in interpreting valuable materials during day one.

The “survey,” as I have termed it in my classes, and the short story together give early indication of Cather’s promise as a writer, demonstrate her emerging interests and concerns, offer an opportunity to discuss her methods, and show Cather experimenting with what will be key themes and stylistic approaches that characterize her entire career. Taken together, “Peter” and the confession album are a miniature of Cather’s career as a whole, and thus serve as an effective introduction to her life and works.

What follows here is our narrative about how we used these materials during the first class meetings. Although we both have been involved in writing the entire essay, Susan focuses on the survey and I discuss “Peter.” While in this case these documents introduced a single author we were studying for an entire semester, this same technique—using one or both of these works—could be used to introduce a smaller unit on Cather’s works or even a single work, such as often-taught novels like *My Ántonia* or *A Lost Lady*, or the short story, “Neighbour Rosicky,” and the method could be easily translated to the high school classroom.

Part I: “The Opinions, Tastes, and Fancies of Wm. Cather, M.D.”

by Susan

“All my stories have been written,” said Willa Cather, “with material that was gathered—no, God save us! not gathered but absorbed—before I was fifteen years old” (*Willa Cather* 43). Thus, it seems “The Opinions, Tastes and Fancies of Wm. Cather M.D.,” a survey written in a friend’s album by a young fifteen-year-old Cather, becomes especially insightful.

Such albums—variously called “friendship albums,” “autograph albums,” or “confession albums”—were extremely popular in the mid-nineteenth century as a way for girls and women to keep mementos of their own histories and those of their dear friends and loved ones. “Fan-

cies” surveys were a variance on the extreme Victorian sentimentality and handwritten flourishes of these keepsake books, which show a shift to more formalized versions of ephemera in the late nineteenth century (Ockenga 44). According to Samantha Matthews’ significant essay, “Psychological Crystal Palace?: Late Victorian Confession Albums,” the genre, which was at its zenith during the 1870s and 1880s, was “consummately Victorian” (133) and “played upon the common reader’s aspiration also to be a common writer—even an autobiographer” (125) while functioning within Victorian courtship rituals as a way of “identifying possible partners through compatible attitudes, interests, and tastes” (129). In addition to probing for attitudes on contemporary sexual politics in order to “quickly identify the feminist sympathizer, anxious spinster, male supremacist, or family man” (137-138), the albums also revealed the “social anxiety associated with middle-class aspiration,” especially in the late nineteenth century versions as the prompts became “increasingly concerned with cultural objects, less as indications of compatibility than as functions of status” (145). Tracing the origins of the form to “a watered-down and secularized imitation of the [religious] confessional” (131), Matthews asserts that the prompts would “remind confession-writers of their childhood catechism, and also the classroom drills of school”; in other words, reminding them of “a pattern of question and response in which an original reply can never be correct” (136). Matthews notes that the questions offer both “an intimate form that invites self-revelation” (128) and create a tension where responses “may expose your comparatively plebeian origins to your friends” (136). She often finds that responders rely on “evasive (yet revealing) answering techniques” (143) and “self-censorship [that] takes several forms: copying answers given by other confession-writers, using quoted texts, affecting a tone of facetiousness, inscribing refusals, and making omissions” (140). Suggesting that we read the confession album “with the careful historiographic attention we are accustomed to give to literary texts,” Matthews’ analysis of the genre offers a compelling gloss for understanding Cather’s individual responses (125).

Cather’s replies in her friend’s album are particularly noteworthy not only because they add up to a fascinating cultural document of young women in 1888, but because they anticipate recurring themes in Cather’s later writings and reveal her as a remarkable young woman with a strong sense of style, zest, and wit. Furthermore, as Matthews suggests, the confession album expands the notions of text—this is not the typical kind of

The Opinions, Tastes and Fancies of—

Wm. Cather M.D.

Red Cloud

Oct 10 1885

Autographically expressed (date) _____

My Favorite:

<p>Color: <i>Sea Green</i></p> <p>Flower: <i>Cauliflower</i></p> <p>Book: <i>Shekspere</i></p> <p>Animal: <i>Cat</i></p> <p>Season: <i>When the Roses Come again</i></p> <p>Scenery: <i>The green shore & brackish creek</i></p> <p>Music: <i>A Squalling Baby</i></p> <p>Amusement: <i>Pivirection</i></p> <p>Occupation during a Summer's Vacation: <i>Slipping Toads</i></p> <p>My Pet Hobby: <i>Snakes & Shekspere</i></p> <p>My Chief Ambition in Life: <i>To be a M.D.</i></p>	<p>Poet or Poetess: <i>Thomson</i></p> <p>Prose Writer: <i>Emerson</i></p> <p>Composer: <i>Beethoven</i></p> <p>Character in History: <i>Benjamin Franklin</i></p> <p>Character in Romance: <i>Tristram</i></p>
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Figure 1. Willa Cather's responses in her friend's confession album (Bennett 112-113).

work that students read in a literature course, but it is one that lends itself to the type of close readings we do in these classes. Using "The Opinions, Tastes and Fancies of Wm. Cather M.D." in the classroom, then, is an excellent introduction to Cather, allowing students to participate in a highly student-centered activity as they discover the traits and interests of a young Cather that will further illuminate their reading as they progress throughout the semester. The document serves as a thoughtful preface to many of Cather's novels, particularly the autobiographical *The Song of the Lark*, *My Ántonia*, and *A Lost Lady*.

The trait I most admire in woman: *Flirting.*

The trait I most admire in man: *An Original friend.*

The trait I most detest in each: *Dudeishness*

The fault for which I have the most toleration in another person: } *Passion*

That for which I have the least: *Lack of "nerve"*

The qualifications or accomplishments I most desire in a matrimonial partner: } *Lamb like meekness*

My idea of perfect happiness: *Computating income*

My idea of real misery: *Doing Fancy work.*

There is always some one person, or thing, for which we have an attachment exceeding all other endearments in intensity. With me it is for: } *Books*

Of the various modes of travelling, I prefer: *Walking*

If privileged to make a journey, the single place or locality I would prefer to visit, above all others, would be: } *Rome.*

As a travelling companion, I would most highly appreciate: } *A cultured Gentleman*

Shipwrecked on a desolate island, I would most desire: } *Pants & coat*

The greatest wonder of the world, according to my estimation, is: } *a good looking woman*

As an inventor, I think the greatest service towards the world's progress has been rendered by: } *Admiral.*

Of the many reforms at present under consideration, I most sincerely and particularly advocate: } *Huge Bustles*

The greatest folly of the Nineteenth Century, in my opinion, is: } *Drawers & Skirts*

My motto: *Enjoy, let others weep.*

On the first day of class, we give our students a blank copy of "The Opinions, Tastes and Fancies of ____" and ask them to complete it (see fig. 2). We encourage them to imagine themselves at age fifteen. What were they thinking about in their teen years? How would they respond to this survey as a fifteen-year old? When we ask them for their responses, the prompt "Occupation during a summer vacation" might be met with such answers as "working at Burger King" or "babysitting." When asked "Of the many reforms at present under consideration, I most sincerely and particularly admire ____," one student answered "gay and lesbian rights."

The Opinions, Tastes and Fancies of



Autobiographically expressed (date) _____

My Favorite:

Color: _____ Poet or Poetess: _____

Flower: _____ Prose Writer: _____

Book: _____ Composer: _____

Animal: _____ Character in History: _____

Season: _____ Character in Romance: _____

Scenery: _____

Music: _____

Amusement: _____

Occupation during a Summer's vacation: _____

My Pet Hobby: _____

My Chief Ambition in Life: _____

The trait I most admire in woman: _____

The trait I most admire in man: _____

The trait I most detest in each: _____

The fault for which I have the most
toleration in another person: _____

That for which I have the least: _____

The qualifications or accomplishment
I most desire in a matrimonial partner: _____

My idea of perfect happiness: _____

There is always some one person, or thing, for which we have an attachment exceeding all
other endearments in intensity. With me, it is: _____

Of the various modes of travelling, I prefer: _____

If privileged to make the journey, the single place or
locality I would prefer to visit, above all others, would be: _____

As a travelling companion,
I would most highly appreciate: _____

Shipwrecked on a desolate
island, I would most desire: _____

The greatest wonder of the world,
according to my estimation, is: _____

As an inventor, I think the greatest service towards
the world's progress has been rendered by: _____

Of the many reforms at present under consideration,
I most sincerely and particularly advocate: _____

The greatest folly of the Nineteenth
Century, in my opinion, is: _____

My motto: _____

Figure 2. A confession album page for students to complete.

Note that at this point we are identifying this document by the neutral term “survey”—but at some point early in the conversation, it is important to give students the term Cather would have been familiar with: “confession album.” Drawing upon Matthews’ study of the function and cultural significance of these albums, we might ask the students, how might your responses have changed if you knew this was called a “*confession* album” during Cather’s own time? What additional pressures does such a term bring to bear on your responses? How might the cultural expectations implied by that term have changed your responses and shaped the responses of Cather?

With this as preface, we then give the students Cather’s completed survey. A buzz stirs through the room right away, as students begin working out Cather’s responses. After deciphering Cather’s sometimes-illegible handwriting for our students, we ask them what this album page reveals about Cather’s character. What do they foresee from the author we will be studying? Can they identify any trends, themes, or preoccupations? What was Cather thinking about at age fifteen that led her to write her first published short story, “Peter,” at age eighteen? Initially, our students’ answers aren’t very focused. They marvel at Cather’s precociousness, observing her interest in and knowledge of European culture from her answers of Rome as a favorite place to visit, Tennyson as a favorite poet, Beethoven as her favorite composer, “Bonapart” [sic] as a favorite character in history, “Sheakspear” [sic] as a favorite book (Cather was a notoriously bad speller), and the obscure “Tricotrin” as a character in romance (Tricotrin is the protagonist of a sentimental Victorian novel most likely unfamiliar to students and teachers alike—more on that, though, in a moment). Students point out the lyrical quality of her prose: not just “green” but “*Sea Green*,” and the lovely phrases: “When the Roses come again,” and “The ‘green shores’ of Crooked Creek” (which is a reference to the nearby creek just north of Red Cloud, Nebraska); the creativity of her answers: “Vivisection,” “amputating limbs”; and the broadness of her knowledge at age fifteen: from Cadmus to Tennyson to Emerson.

Students observe Cather’s sense of humor, noting that her favorite amusement is “Vivisection” and her occupation during a summer’s vacation is “Slicing Toads.” They observe the unlikely pairing of “Snakes and Sheakspear” as a hobby, and the incongruity of Cather’s claim that she has the least tolerance for “Lack of nerve,” but most desires “Lamb Like meekness” in a matrimonial partner.

Soon, we begin to see a shift as students begin piecing together the puzzle. Rather than seeing Cather’s responses to the survey as discrete details, they begin to view them as parts of a greater whole; they make connections in their predictions of Cather. Students note Cather’s passion and her desire to go against expectations and conventions. They note her creative sarcasm—what Matthews would identify as her evasion or self-censorship—her desire to make fun of the assignment and her efforts to answer with the unique, unexpected, or even shocking. Cather’s idea of the greatest wonder in the world, “a good looking woman,” at once mocks women’s vanity, suggests her attitudes within the sexual politics of the late nineteenth century, and avoids a predictable response like the Great Pyramids of Egypt or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Answers like “amputating limbs” as her idea of perfect happiness, “Cauliflower” as her favorite flower, and “A Squalling Baby” as her favorite music certainly avoid the prosaic clichés of most fifteen year olds who would have answered the prompts with more conventional and predictable responses.

The creativity of her answers anticipates Cather as an innovator, an original, a groundbreaking “pioneer” in literature with her novels set outside of the East Coast drawing rooms, “in Nebraska, of all places! As everyone knows,” Cather continues, “Nebraska is distinctly déclassé as a literary background” (“My First” 94). While her settings and characters are unconventional, she often raises the expectations of a conventional story with a fairy tale ending—and then subverts our expectations (something our students will see her do very shortly in “Peter” and will continue to see throughout the semester). *My Ántonia*, for instance, does not end with the marriage of Ántonia and Jim, much to the surprise and disappointment of some of our students. *The Song of the Lark* ends with a marriage that seems more like an afterthought: Cather’s revised edition reads, “When Thea dined in her own room, her husband went down to dinner with Tillie”; the reader is forced to read back to the previous sentence to find out that “her husband” is Fred Ottenburg, ironically characterized earlier as “the beer prince” (402). This pattern exists in other works.

Cather’s literature works precisely against the kind of sentimental fiction that the friendship album suggests she admired at age fifteen. *Tricootin: The Story of a Waif and a Stray* (1869) is a novel written by Ouida (pen name of Maria Louisa Dé La Rama), a prolific Englishwoman writing fanciful, idealized, and often ostentatious Victorian romances (the 1872

A Dog of Flanders is her best-known novel) full of European flavor and conventional depictions of femininity. At fifteen, Cather seems to admire this sentimental fiction, but she later challenges its conventions. With its highly detailed descriptions and plot twists, an Ouida novel would be exactly what Cather complains about when she later likens novels that are “manufactured to entertain” to “a cheap soap or a cheap perfume, or cheap furniture” (“Novel” 44). What she would advocate in her 1923 essay, “The Novel Deméublé,” (that is, the novel defurnished or unfurnished) becomes a fundamental tenet of her writing and an approach to literature entirely different from the novels of Ouida. There, Cather calls for the presentation of “scene by suggestion rather than by enumeration [because] the higher processes of art are all processes of simplification” (48). She continues, “Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it . . . that gives high quality to the novel” (50).

Typically, it is a few minutes into the activity before students even notice Cather’s signature at the top of the page, which opens a discussion of the “Wm. Cather M.D.” period, when Cather cut her hair in a boyishly short style, wore boy’s clothing, and accompanied the local doctor on visits to patients. We show photographs of Cather during this stage, noting her supportive mother who, despite her own adherence to Southern gentility and conventions of femininity, willingly sent her daughter off to the photographers dressed as a boy.

Inevitably this raises the question of whether or not Cather was a lesbian, and our short answer is “most likely,” but what we introduce at this moment, and what we follow through with during the semester, is the message that Cather’s sexual identity is a deeply complex issue. Although Cather posed as “William Cather” during her youth, dressed in mannish clothing even into her early years in college, and expressed profound attachments in her letters to Louise Pound and Isabelle McClung before she began a relationship with Edith Lewis that lasted forty years until her death, she never openly admitted to being lesbian. To have done so in that time period, we remind our students, would have been to open herself up to the same kind of ridicule and, worse, literary dismissal that she saw Oscar Wilde endure when he was brought up on charges of sodomy in a very nasty and very public scandal. Cather resisted the idea that people are wholly or even significantly defined by their sexuality; her characters who look to sexual passion for fulfillment often meet sad fates

(for instance, Marie and Emil in *O Pioneers!* or Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady*). Certainly, however, knowing that Cather was a lesbian would be significant when we consider her answers—sometimes evasive, sometimes openly derisive within her “confessions”—to a document functioning so prominently, as Matthews says, within Victorian courting rituals.

The discussion of Cather posing as a boy in her signature is also an opportune time to talk about society’s expectations of women during the late nineteenth century.² What were women expected to look like at this time? Photographs of women dressed in corsets and bustles, conventional ways for women to express femininity, can help students understand why Cather advocated the reformation of “Huge Bustles” for women. This adolescent Cather who, if shipwrecked on a desert island would most desire “Pants and Coat” and claims the greatest folly of the nineteenth century is “Dresses and Skirts,” would certainly never wear huge bustles, which were larger than ever during this time period. Among the most fashionable set, bustles had a resurgence in the 1870s and another in the 1880s; in the mid-1880s, bustles were more exaggerated than ever, creating a backend that extended several feet horizontally. Often the bustle was a straw- or down-filled cushion sewn into the skirt along with steel half hoops (Thomas). These were bizarre exaggerations of bosom and derrière—the hyperbolic hourglass figure that characterized a woman’s silhouette. Cather’s style of dress during her teenage years, however, more closely anticipates the “New Woman” fashion of 1890-1920, which draws upon the tailored lines of men’s fashion.

Of interest here as well is the trait Cather detests most in a man: “dude-ishness,” a form of the slang word “dude,” which came into vogue in New York in 1883. The term denotes “a name given in ridicule to a man affecting an exaggerated fastidiousness in dress, speech, and deportment, and very particular about what is aesthetically ‘good form’; hence, extended to an exquisite, a dandy, ‘a swell’” and certainly stands in direct contrast to her assertion that she would appreciate “a cultured Gentleman” as a traveling companion (“Dude”). Cather mocks the exaggerated hourglass figure provided by the huge bustles, and she likewise “detests” the “exaggerated fastidiousness” of dudes and dandies, preferring the much simplified and practical “Pants and Coat” for herself and, no doubt, for men as well. Again in these instances, we see the defiance of Cather at fifteen: the defiance in her dress, the lack of conventionality in her expression of gender, the rebellion against the standards for women, and the seeming comfort and ease in her lack of conformity, all of which translate into many of

her women characters who are comfortable in their own unconventional sexuality as they challenge female stereotypes: Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady*, Eden Bower in “Coming Aphrodite,” *Ántonia* in *My Ántonia*, and farmer Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!*, whose real lover is the land, not a man.

The discussion of the “Wm. Cather M.D.” period deepens as students observe her further fascination with science. Cather said in later years, “But I didn’t want to be an author. I wanted to be a surgeon!” (qtd. in Bennett 109). Perhaps her interest in medicine started with her relationship with the doctors in her community of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Dr. G. E. McKeeby saved her mother from deathbed illness twice (Cather models Dr. Archie in *The Song of the Lark* on Dr. McKeeby.) Additionally, Cather worked with Dr. Cook in the Red Cloud pharmacy and made house calls with Dr. Damerell, once even giving chloroform when a boy’s leg had to be amputated (Bennett 114).

Cather claims that her favorite amusement is “Vivisection,” the performance of medical experiments and surgery on living animals for the furthering of scientific research. Indeed, Cather had many opportunities to perform medical experiments throughout her childhood and into college. According to Bennett, she sliced toads to explore their circulatory systems and dissected a cat with a college friend, and this second detail may well explain her choice to put “Cat” in quotes (118). Cather’s interest in dissecting creatures and learning about intricate details of anatomy is revealed in her work: her passion for medicine translates into a writer interested in “dissecting” characters, rather than bodies. In *A Lost Lady*, not only does she include a literal scene of Ivy Peters using dissecting tools to slit the woodpecker’s eye, but Cather also reveals fragments of Marian Forrester, as seen through the eyes of Niel Herbert, the Blum brothers, and Ed Eliot. Cather seems to do “Vivisection” on Marian, opening up certain areas of the character to show detail—disembodied fragments of the character—but as readers, we are “lost” to the character as a whole. We only see Marian in dissected bits and pieces. Much like a medical doctor, Cather is keenly observant of revealing details that suggest a diagnosis of her characters—but hers is a *spiritual* diagnosis rather than a physical one. Certainly, this is the case in “Neighbour Rosicky,” a story which pits Dr. Burleigh’s medical diagnosis of a “bad heart” in the story’s first line (3) against Cather’s own suggestion that, as Susan Rosowski writes, “demonstrates how limited that diagnosis is, and how Ros-

icky does have a good heart in that which matters—the ability to love” (190-191).

Cather was as perceptive of the environment and the natural world as she was of character. She most admired Emerson as a prose writer, and Emerson’s influence is seen in her literature. Think of this quote from *Nature*: “I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (24) and compare Jim Burden’s transcendence into a feeling of oneness with the earth in *My Ántonia* as he leans his back against a pumpkin and thinks about the world around him: “I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. . . . At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great” (14). And hear the further echoes of Emerson during Thea Kronborg’s time of renewal in the ancient cliff dwellings of the Southwest where “she could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a colour, like the bright lizards that darted about on the hot stones outside her door; or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas” (*Song* 259).

Cather’s interest in the natural world continues with her claim that Cadmus rendered the “greatest service towards the world’s progress.” Some scholars consider Cadmus to have been an intellectual during the beginning of the glory period of Greek philosophers, writers, and historians (about 550 BC). Cadmus, whose name can mean order and civilization, is credited with being a founder of cities, as well as being an innovator in agriculture and written language. In Greek legend, Cadmus is instructed to build a city in a new frontier by planting a slain dragon’s teeth in the soil. The race of fierce men who spring up from the ground assist him in building the citadel of Thebes. By choosing as her great “inventor” the inventor of agriculture and also the written alphabet, Cather sidesteps the typical responses her peers would have given in the increasingly consumer-oriented culture of 1888 and the previous decades. (Popular inventions of the time include the wireless telegraph, telephone, typewriter, phonograph, Kodak camera, electric light bulb, safety razor, ballpoint pen, and innumerable inventions that would impact the development of the automobile.)³

Certainly, Cadmus is influential to Cather as an inventor of the written alphabet, but of particular interest here is that he is a builder of cities, who plows the soil, sows the seeds of the dragon’s teeth, and creates a

city. Cadmus, therefore, embodied for Cather what would become a central issue of urban versus rural, and his story can be seen as an influence on many of Cather's novels in which building a community and tilling the soil are central: *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*, for example, and *Shadows on the Rock*, replete with references to order and civilization as seventeenth century French Canadians struggle to create a home in Quebec.

As we discuss the confession album, students not only become acquainted with the young Cather in a very short time and predict foreseeable trends in her later literature, but they imagine themselves as the young writer, already having made an emotional commitment to the survey simply by taking it, already having glimpsed intimate nuances of Cather's character as they struggle to decipher her scrawling handwriting. They experience how the album resonates with Cather's creativity, flair, and sympathy for passion that translates into greater appreciation for much of her literature, particularly the short story, "Peter."

Part II: "Peter"⁴

by Evelyn

The only information we give students when we hand out Cather's first published short story is that "Peter" was sent to *The Mahogany Tree*, a literary magazine published at Harvard, by her professor Herbert Bates (who serves as the prototype for Gaston Cleric in her later novel *My Ántonia*.), and the story was published in May of 1892 when Cather was just eighteen. Cather, then managing editor of her own university's literary magazine, reprinted the story in *The Hesperian* in November of 1892. The story had been written in early 1892 when she was midway through her freshman year at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Eighteen is an age our undergraduate students do take note of and remark upon as an impressive achievement. Here is a writer writing at approximately their own age. What might they expect from such a young writer?

The story is relatively short, only three pages, and can easily be read aloud during class in less than five minutes as the students follow along. Following that, we go back through the story, line by line, to evaluate for meaning.

Encountering "thee" and "thou" in the first line, of course, alerts students that though she is a "modern" writer, Cather is really up to something quite different. The use of what, to many students, seems like archaic pronouns portrays Cather's effort to record accurately the sense of the voice and the vernacular speech of Bohemian immigrants. What

Cather is trying to capture in translation is the Bohemian use of two second-person pronouns, one formal (“vy,” pronounced with a long e sound in Czech) and one informal (“ty,” like the beverage “tea”), which was used only with family and intimate friends. Students may be familiar with “thee” only in terms of its religious use, but they may not realize that it is the informal, intimate usage, not, as many think, a highly formalized address. Cather’s usage in terms of the story proves ironic since Peter’s opening lines to his son and the story as a whole go to prove that while they are family, they do not and cannot comprehend the values of the other.

Teachers might also tell students that Cather had said of her dealings with immigrant homesteaders in Nebraska, “I always felt as if every word they said to me counted for twenty” (*Willa Cather* 10). She also said, in an early interview, that “No one without a good ear can write good fiction. . . . It is an essential to good writing to be sensitive to the beauty of language and speech, and to be able to catch the tone, phrase, length of syllables, enunciation, etc., of persons of all types that cross a writer’s path” (14). Emphasizing this point in a number of her early interviews, Cather felt it was important to record the unique language of a vernacular culture, a culture (unlike the high society of her contemporary Edith Wharton) that was based in ordinary language of the working class.

As an extension of these beliefs, Cather expresses her sympathies for immigrant cultures that will hold true throughout her fiction, which often focuses on rural culture and immigrant homesteaders who had to work to transform—like Cather the Virginia transplant herself—a foreign land into a home.

Cather is best known for her prairie fiction, and when this class begins, if students know anything at all about Cather, it is likely to be that she wrote novels celebrating the early western experience; but students need to understand, however, that her vision of the prairies and the West as a whole was more complicated than we see at first blush. When she moved to Nebraska at age nine, she felt that the country was “as bare as a piece of sheet iron” and that going there had been “a kind of erasure of personality” (*Willa Cather* 10) until “the country and I had it out together and by the end of the first autumn, that shaggy grass country had gripped me with a passion I have never been able to shake. It has been the happiness and the curse of my life” (32). In spite of her suggestion of a resolution, the feelings of ambivalence continued. In 1896, writing from Red Cloud, Nebraska, she headed a letter to a friend with the word “Sibe-

ria" (Woodress 104). Cather told her friend Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant that in Pittsburgh she would get "wildly homesick for the West," would return to Nebraska for a visit and then "flee" back to Pittsburgh "for fear of dying in a cornfield" (49).

The story, "Peter," then, which portrays the "dreariest part of southwestern Nebraska" where the cold winter landscape is indifferent to human survival (541), demonstrates Cather's earlier ambivalence about the West that characterizes several of Cather's short stories, particularly those that appear in the 1905 collection *The Troll Garden*. In stories like "A Wagner Matinee" and "The Sculptor's Funeral," as well as in the later novel *The Song of the Lark*, Cather portrays small western communities as provincial, close-minded, materialistic and unsympathetic to artistic souls. As a whole, the West of Cather's fiction, notably *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *The Professor's House*, is portrayed as contested space, raising issues of who belongs there, who has the right to cultivate the land, claim its relics, reshape it, and make it into a home.

Cather would not only use these thematic issues central to "Peter" in her later work, but she would also directly reuse elements of the story's plot in *My Ántonia*, and the related story "Neighbour Rosicky." These three works also provide an opportunity in the classroom to discuss how Cather drew upon real lives to inspire her fiction. Peter and Mr. Shimerda of *My Ántonia* are fictional portrayals of Frank Sadilek, a Bohemian immigrant who had committed suicide before Cather moved to Nebraska, and Anton Rosicky is based on John Pavelka, the man who married Frank Sadilek's daughter, Annie. Using real people as prototypes—Lyra Garber as Marian Forrester and Archbishop Lamy for Father Jean Latour, for instance—was a method she would use throughout her career as she drew upon the lives of acquaintances as well as historical figures.

Yet even while "Peter" demonstrates Cather's deep understanding of the Nebraska homesteader experience, the story also references a much broader world outside of Nebraska, one that inspired the young Cather to think about art and the wider world, and this might offer the perfect opportunity to refer students back to the Cadmus notation in the confession album where they had already recognized him as an intermediary figure between urban and rural life.

As Peter reminisces about his career in Prague, Cather demonstrates her knowledge of several of the most important performers of the nineteenth century, musicians Franz Listz and Frédéric Chopin (both known for musical innovations and drawing upon the folk music and histories

of their native lands), actresses Rachel (the most eminent French tragedienne of the first half of the nineteenth century), and Sarah Bernhardt, who is the “French woman” Peter remembers but cannot name.⁵ Known for her significant stage innovations and called the “Divine Sarah,” Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) was often compared to Rachel. Just three months before “Peter” would be published, the young Cather traveled to Omaha to see Bernhardt play in Sardou’s *La Tosca* (a play which later served as the basis for Giacomo Puccini’s 1900 opera *Tosca*). According to the *Omaha Daily Bee*, two thousand people attended, including the governor and Nebraska’s elite, and while most of the audience could not understand a line of Bernhardt’s French dialogue, they nevertheless, like Peter himself, were held “under . . . the sway” of her “magnetic personality.” The *Bee* described Bernhardt as “a human tigress,” a “transcendent genius,” and “an artiste of incomparable powers play[ing] the gamut of human emotions from tenderest love to fiercest revenge.” In describing the end of Act II of *La Tosca* in which Floria Tosca, an opera singer, murders the man who has tortured her lover and has vowed to possess her, Cather writes, in “Peter”: “The last night she played a play in which a man touched her arm, and she stabbed him. As Peter sat among the smoking gas jets down below the footlights with his fiddle on his knee, and looked up at her, he thought he would like to die too, if he could touch her arm once, and have her stab him so” (542).

When Cather first saw Bernhardt in *La Tosca*, the actress was in mid-career, at the height of her confidence and reputation. In *La Tosca*, the actress had found such huge and lasting success that it was often said that the amount of electricity generated in her portrayal would light up the streets of London (Emboden 79), and it is such passion—that “fault” for which Cather had said in the confession album that she had the most tolerance—that Cather notes in the actress again and again in her early writings. The story’s reference to Bernhardt offers an opportunity to introduce Cather’s early role during her university years as a theatre critic who was well respected regionally as a tough and uncompromising critic of performance art. Consistently associating Bernhardt’s art with fire, Cather’s writing referred to Bernhardt often throughout her career, characterizing her as a “fierce flame-like beauty” (*Kingdom* 126). Her *Tosca*, Cather said, had “a face of flame that is now all love, now all jealousy, now all hate” (*World* 426). And her voice had “that subtle and seductive quality . . . with which a snake charmer might have soothed his serpents to sleep, or a Persian fire worshipper sung his chant to the sun” (816).

Cather's descriptions of Bernhardt focused on the personal *effects* of her art, which "leaps up and strikes you between the eyes, makes you hold your breath and tremble" (*World* 244). This direct emotional response was what Cather would strive to achieve in her own writing and what she had suggested when she wrote that "The sincerity of feeling that is possible between a writer and a reader is one of the finest things I know" (*Willa Cather* 111-12).

Indicated in this early story, then, is Cather's fascination with performance art and with how the artist manages to create a meaningful and emotional experience for the audience, topics that would become central to several of the early short stories, to her most autobiographical novel, *The Song of the Lark*, and to her later stage novel, *Lucy Gayheart*. And although "Peter" does contain some of the melodramatic elements that had characterized the novels of Ouida discussed above, she tempers the drama of the story by focusing more on character than on plot—something she may well have learned from Bernhardt's portrayal of Tosca.

For me, though, as a reader and teacher of Cather's works, what is more striking about this story than anything else is Cather's sophisticated experimentations with reader sympathy. She manages to shift reader sympathy dramatically within the short span of three pages, even within one paragraph—so that our reading of the characters, like Bernhardt's own face, "changed so, it was never twice the same" (542). At the same time, she questions cultural notions of how we determine standards of success.

A conflict of sympathies is evident right from the start of "Peter" when Cather pits Antone's heartless threat to sell Peter's fiddle, his failure to observe the sanctity of the Sabbath, and his disregard for his father suffering in the cold, against Peter's characterization as an unrealistic fool—"The very crows laugh at thee when thou art trying to play" (541)—and as a lazy, complaining dreamer who cannot command the respect of his own son. But Cather further complicates this clash of sympathies when she introduces the perspective of the townspeople who believe Antone "was a likely youth, and would do well," even though "That he was mean and untrustworthy every one knew, but that made little difference. His corn was better tended than any in the country, and his wheat always yielded more than other men's" (541). Peter, on the other hand, is seen by the public as an utter failure: no one, Cather writes, "had . . . a good word to say for him. He drank whenever he could get out of Antone's sight long enough to pawn his hat or coat for whisky. . . . He was a lazy, absent-

mind old fellow, who liked to fiddle better than to plow. . . . [P]eople said that Peter was worthless, and was a great drag on Antone, his son, who never drank, and was a much better man than his father had ever been” (541-542).

With this addition of public opinion, Cather inserts key thematic elements of this story (and of much of her later fiction): how do we as individuals, as communities, as nations, define success; how do we judge who is the “better man” in a materialistic world like the one she would openly criticize in *The Professor’s House* or in Peter’s own world, where a healthy bank account or a bumper crop in the field is what draws public admiration. Is there, then, a way to honor artistic passion, loyalty, magnanimity, and compassion as forms of success? Certainly, Cather’s 1932 story, “Neighbour Rosicky,” one of her last published works of short fiction, returned to this very conflict directly when Cather wrote:

Sometimes the Doctor heard the gossipers in the drug-store wondering why Rosicky didn’t get on faster. He was industrious, and so were his boys, but they were rather free and easy, weren’t pushers, and they didn’t always show good judgment. They were comfortable, they were out of debt, but they didn’t get much ahead. Maybe, Doctor Burleigh reflected, people as generous and warm-hearted and affectionate as the Rosickys never got ahead much; maybe you couldn’t enjoy your life and put it into the bank, too. (236)

In “Peter,” though, Cather already begins to undercut public opinion of Peter as lazy, absent-minded, worthless, all within the span of a single paragraph. The sixth paragraph of the story, and the longest, begins with the assertion that no one “had . . . a good word to say for him” and ends with a similar sentiment that he was a “foolish fellow.” However, what lies in between is a remarkable shift. Cather offers new information that Peter had once indeed been a “success,” of a different sort. He had been a “cultured Gentleman” and a young protégé in the great Prague theatre orchestra who was admired by the musical director for the subtle genius of his interpretation—“he had a touch indeed,” says Herr Mikilsdoff (542)—and who rubbed elbows with the musical and theatrical greats of his time. That, of course, was all before a “stroke of paralysis” made “his bowing . . . uncertain” (542). It is details like these that cause us to challenge our first assumptions about Peter, about how we formed those

assumptions, about success itself, and to begin to sympathize with a broken man.

As if that weren't dramatic shift enough, Cather continues in that same paragraph, giving us intimate glimpses into Peter's very heart as he watches Sarah Bernhardt perform in the *La Tosca* murder scene and meditates on the nuances of her artistic passion: "[S]he must be talking the music of Chopin. And her voice, he thought he should know that in the other world" (542). He is so profoundly moved by the experience that he would willingly "like to die too, if he could touch her arm once, and have her stab him so" (542). After reading the survey, students know that Cather is willing to make allowances for anyone with such deep fervor and intensity for art and life. When the paragraph concludes with the statement that "Even in those days he was a foolish fellow, who cared for nothing but music and pretty faces" (542), potential contempt for Peter has been effectively transformed into our forbearance and compassion, so much so that when Peter thinks again how Antone "is a better man than I" (a line repeated yet again in the final line of the story), they shudder, remembering Antone's emotional, spiritual, and financial stinginess; the way Peter anticipates Antone's anger for putting more corn cobs on a dying fire; and how he knows "Not one kreutzer will Antone pay them to pray for my soul" (543). In the last line Cather offers us the less pejorative term of "thrifty" for Antone (a term suggesting thoughtful financial management), yet she imbeds this word in the line that demonstrates one penultimate cruelty: "Before the funeral Antone carried to town the fiddle bow which Peter had forgotten to break. Antone was very thrifty, and a better man than his father had been." (543).

"Peter," then, demonstrates a remarkable sophistication of prose style, especially for such a young writer, and, as students in our class found throughout the course of the semester, these are precisely the kinds of experiments with reader sympathy Cather continues to carry out in later fiction: in "The Sculptor's Funeral," where Cather challenges cultural notions of success and asks who has the right to judge, who has the accurate appraisal of Harvey Merrick and his accomplishments; in *The Song of the Lark*, where Thea becomes an increasingly distanced character as she finds greater success on the other side of the footlights; and in *A Lost Lady*, where even as we begin to question Marian Forrester's virtues we must acknowledge the biased sources of our information. With "Peter" and the confession album as foundation, our students are prepared to consider these issues more fully.

One final idea for the classroom (one that Susan and I did not use but have since wished we had) is to revisit the issue of the confession album as the course nears its conclusion. In a discussion near the end of the semester, we would have taken some time to look to Cather’s 1888 responses again and ask students which responses bear reconsideration; what, in that early document, remained resonant throughout the semester? Moreover, as a culminating writing project, we would have asked the students to fill out a blank confession album in the guise of one of Cather’s important characters—either one of their own choosing or by lottery drawing. What kind of responses, for instance, would Peter himself have made to such prompts? Would a young Godfrey St. Peter have made fun of the courtship goals of the album? How might Thea Kronborg have responded to such questions? Then, in an accompanying narrative essay, students would be required to discuss the choices they made and support them with evidence from the appropriate texts that would demonstrate their understanding of character. Essentially, this would transform the confession album into a kind of “final exam” exercise for the course and would neatly bookend the class.

Notes

This essay is an expansion of our essay “Predicting Willa Cather: Using ‘Peter’ and ‘The Opinions, Tastes, and Fancies of Wm. Cather, M.D.’ as Introduction,” which appeared in *Teaching Cather* 4.2 (Spring 2004): 4-12. We wish to thank Amanda Marinello for her work as our Utah State University Undergraduate Research Fellow during the revision of this essay; most notably, she helped us deepen our discussion of the cultural phenomenon of confession albums.

¹The confession album was first published in *The World of Willa Cather*, by Mildred Bennett. We were unable to locate the original copy of the confession album in which Cather’s responses appear, but our best guess is that it remains in the uncatalogued papers of Mildred Bennett, presently held in Red Cloud and not yet available to scholars, due to lack of funding.

²One of the most cogent discussions of Cather’s adolescent clothing choices appears in Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s “Dressing for the Part: [What’s] the Matter with Clothes.” While not minimizing the question of Cather’s lesbian identity, Wolff deftly places Cather’s cross-dressing in a cultural context of the post-bellum South and of famous actresses assuming male roles.

³Teachers may wish to refer their students to a timeline of inventions at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_invention.

⁴While we are among the first to seriously consider the confession album as a Cather text that does more than offer trivial details of young Cather, we are not the first to consider “Peter” seriously. Previous works on “Peter” include “Willa Cather’s ‘Peter’: From Anecdote to Narrative,” by Bruce P. Baker, in which

he outlines the source of Cather's story and discusses Cather's choices to alter the original story she had heard in her early days in Nebraska. Also see earlier essays by Bradford and Kraus. All these essays, to some degree, focus on the history of the story's origins or the details of its publication more than they offer a critical analysis of the work.

⁵Students might be assigned to research these historical figures. Franz Listz (1811-1886) was a Hungarian composer, pianist, and teacher. Dedicated to progress in music, he was an important leader in the romantic movement in music. He was considered the greatest piano virtuoso of his time, a man who had a captivating concert presence. The scene when Listz throws lilies up to Countess Marie D'Agoult suggests that Cather knew the countess was Listz's lover. Although she was married to a French cavalry officer, D'Agoult led a relatively independent life outside of Paris. D'Agoult was with Listz for twelve years between 1832-1844, during which time she bore Listz three children. Frédéric Chopin (1810-1848), Polish composer and pianist, wrote chiefly for the solo piano. Like Listz, he was a romantic and a skilled performer known for technical virtuosity. His compositions were especially known to have been inspired by political struggles in his native Poland. Rachel, the professional name of Élisabeth Félix (1820-1858), went from being a child begging on the streets of Paris to the most eminent French tragedienne of the first half of the nineteenth century. She was known for her magnetic stage presence and the intensity of her characters.

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