

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

VOLUME XXX, No. 3

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RED CLOUD, NEBRASKA

The Dantean Journey in Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*

My Mortal Enemy presents readers with several difficulties, among which are extreme brevity — this is Cather's ultimate unfinished novel — and a puzzling protagonist — a woman whose cruelty to her husband seems inhuman and unforgivable. Also, this puzzling woman is viewed indirectly and incompletely (through a bird's eye) by a narrator who fails to understand her sufficiently. Louis Kronenberg complains about the first difficulty, that "All bones and no flesh is never a wise method. In this instance Miss Cather has done even worse — though she has used very little, she has not always used the bones. Significant things are left out, and the reader is left not only unsatisfied, but also puzzled." (See Note 1) Among critics who have tried to put flesh on the bones we can thank Harry B. Eichorn for overlaying the skeleton through Myra Henshawe's allusions to Shakespeare's *King Lear* (which expresses her thoughts on death), and to *Richard II* and *King John* (which contain reflections on her relationship with her uncle, on her youth, and on her decline), and through the implications (which I will indicate later) of the singing of the "Casta Diva" from Bellini's *Norma* near the end of Part I. (See Note 2) The other major difficulties, the puzzling protagonist and our indirect and incomplete view of her, are a bit more problematic. Narrator Nellie Birdseye's disillusionment (and that of most readers) with Myra's "emerging realism" Susan Rosowski interprets as a departure from the "simplistic romanticism of . . . youth." Rosowski's reading attempts to explain Myra positively, as "most fully herself in her last days." (See Note 3)

The key to this unpuzzling and self-realization of the protagonist is, I think, her religion, which, she exclaims to her priest confessor, as "different from everything else; because in religion seeking is finding." (See Note 4) *My Mortal Enemy* can be viewed as an allegory of the apostasy of a soul — its days of sin, its punishment, its journey back to God — as viewed by a romantic young woman only partially understanding it. The novel depicts a journey like the journey in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and like Dante's poem includes the confessional ritual, the crucifixion image, the ascent to the mountain top, and the vision of dawn.

I call Myra an apostate and excommunicated from the Church because of the significance she attaches to breaking with her great uncle, old John Driscoll. Oswald Henshawe's comment to Nellie on the day of Myra's death is a telling one: "It is one of her delusions that I separated her from the Church. I never meant to" (99). Certainly Myra could have been married with the blessing of the Church without too much difficulty, but instead she was married in a civil ceremony the Church would never recognize. Myra explains, "I went before a justice of the peace, and married without gloves, so to speak!" (85), adding immediately afterwards, "Yes, I broke with the Church when I broke with everything else and ran away with a German free-thinker; but I believe in holy words and holy rites all the same." What Myra believed she did for love was to cut herself off from the spiritual life of the sacraments. In her mind, and in the novel's iconography, old Driscoll, who withdrew his favor and made her poor, was like God.

"A poor man stinks, and God hates him" (15) the old man warned her, for coin is the material counterpart of grace, the favor of God. Myra had been cast out of Eden — the Driscoll home became forbidden to her, surrounded by a high iron fence behind which the Sisters of the Sacred Heart paced under apple trees. Nellie's recollection of Driscoll's funeral indicates that even in her mind there is an uncanny association between Driscoll and divinity: "Driscoll did not come to the church; the church went to him . . . I thought of John Driscoll as having . . . been translated . . . straight to the greater glory, through smoking censers and candles and stars" (18-19).

"[W]hen Love went out of the gates and gave the dare to fate" (17), as Nellie puts it, Myra's pagan life commenced, a life filtered to us through romantic sensibilities. She seems to Nellie a dispossessed goddess, larger than life, haughty, imperious, and extravagant; and her angry deriding laughter makes Nellie shiver: "Untoward circumstances, accidents, even disasters, provoked her mirth. And it was always mirth, not hysteria; there was a spark of zest and wild humor in it" (10). (Myra's name is suggestive of this pagan context; it is a variant of Moira, an Irish version of Mary but also the Greek personification of fate.) The New York section of the novel is sym-

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Jan. 25, 1917 - Aug. 5, 1986

Husband of Margaret Cather Shannon, daughter of Roscoe Cather. In memoriam for his generous support and interest.

bolized by Saint Gaudens' great, gilded Diana atop Madison Square Garden, seen first against a grey and then flashing "against a green-blue sky" (25, 32). As pagan moon goddess, Diana relates to Cather's persistent moon references — to moonlight, being moonstruck, having eyes like half moons, etc. These, in turn, relate to Nellie's idealized New York, a city like the one in "Paul's Case," a well-groomed and impressionistic castle ("[T]he snow blurred everything a little, and the buildings on the Battery all ran together — looked like an enormous fortress with a thousand windows. From the mass, the dull gold dome of the *World* building emerged like a ruddy autumn moon at twilight" [22-23]) — a setting of English violets protected in oiled paper. "Here," says Nellie, "I felt, winter brought no desolation; it was tamed, like a polar bear lead on a leash by a beautiful lady" (25). In this place Myra serves love: "Myra is so fond of helping young men along," says Oswald. "We nearly always have a love affair on hand" (29). However, in reality, Myra is not without guilt feelings in helping love along; in the case of Ewan Gray, the kind of boy women take into jungles, and the actress Esther Sinclair, the daughter of an old and proper New England family, she is encouraging a repetition of her own story and admits that "very likely hell will come of it!" (31). Oswald too feeds his romantic nature through the attentions of young women, and it is the gift of one of these that reveals to Nellie the reality behind the romantic facade of the Henshawes' life. (Whether or not he is unfaithful to his wife is never established by Cather.)

The high point of romance for Nellie is the New Year's party in the Henshawes' tastefully furnished apartment. The "Casta Diva" aria sung at the conclusion of this party focuses on Myra's conflict, and she listens to it while crouching low with her head in her hands. It is a prayer to the moon goddess expressing Norma's conflict of loyalties, as priestess, between religion and romantic love; her love for the Roman Pollione in-

volves giving up her religion and country, and as a result she is possessive of him and fiercely jealous when she discovers his unfaithfulness in an affair with a young virgin. The conflict between Myra and Oswald, the undercurrent of which has been felt in the affair of the topazes given Oswald by an admiring young woman, surfaces in the chapter immediately following. (The duality of Part I, the romantic surface and the hell beneath, can be encapsulated nicely by juxtaposing the scene in which Myra, "like a dove with its wings folded," stands with Oswald in the window (35) and the one where Nellie happens upon their passionate quarrel about a key ring.) The enchanted castle collapses for the young girl: "and now everything was in ruins . . . Everything about me seemed evil . . . When kindness has left a place where we have always found it, it is like shipwreck; we drop from security into something malevolent and bottomless" (51). Nellie further comments, "The air in that room had been like poison" (52); add to this the final image of Myra's scorn, when "her mouth . . . seemed to curl and twist about like a little snake" (54), and we have a clear indication of the hell that came of her marriage.

Part II begins as hell exposed; the Henshawes "had come on evil days" (60) and are reduced to a shabby apartment in a sprawling West-coast city. To Nellie, Oswald has the "tired face of one who has utterly lost hope" (61), and Myra looks broken but still the rebel, her angry laughter at the human condition seeming to say: "Ah-ha, I have one more piece of evidence, one more, against the hideous injustice God permits in this world!" (65) (I am reminded here of the similarly resentful inhabitants of *Inferno*, particularly Vanni Fucci, the thieving, bastard nobleman of Pistoia, who in his discontent makes an obscene gesture to God.) The hellish extreme of Myra's condition is evident in the heavy tramping of palavery Southerners in the apartment overhead. In Myra's mind, the woman of this family transforms into a tormenting serpent: "she has the wrinkled, white throat of an adder, . . . and the hard eyes

of one" (74). During her torment Myra widens the gulf between herself and Oswald by blaming him for her suffering: "If I were on my feet, and you laid low, I wouldn't let you be despised and trampled upon," she complains.

Myra's visit to the headland is the turning point in this section, for it is the beginning of insight, which is why it represents Gloucester's cliff to her. She begins to desire forgiveness, "to see this place at dawn . . . That is always such a forgiving time" (73). The first step on this journey to forgiveness is recognition of her sins, and in her consternation she laments to Oswald the very happening of their lives together, blames their condition on youthful passion when on hot nights she used to lie on the floor and listen to the express trains: "It's been the ruin of us both. We've destroyed each other. I should have stayed with my uncle. It was money I needed" (75). Money has great significance for Myra; as grace, it would have protected her from hellish torment: "Oh, that's the cruelty of being poor; it leaves you at the mercy of such pigs! Money is a protection, a cloak; it can buy one quiet, and some sort of dignity" (68). (This final emphasis on money was anticipated in the New York section when Myra became impatient with the rich Germans she was forced to flatter for the sake of Oswald's business, and when she resented a rich acquaintance for owning a carriage. Myra wished to play Lady Bountiful, and could have had she never crossed her great uncle.)

With Nellie, Myra repeatedly visits the headland with its solitary cedar, which definitely looks back to the tree of life at the top of Dante's Purgatory and forward in Cather's own work to Bishop Latour's cruciform tree in the opening of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. As her situation focuses, Myra draws closer in spirit to what she had abandoned along ago. She remembers with fondness and now relates to John Driscoll: "I can feel his savagery strengthen in me. We think we are so individual and so misunderstood when we are young; but the nature our strain of blood carries is inside there, waiting,

like our skeleton" (82). The Church she once abandoned and the significance of religion also occupy her. The process is one of purgation, which a recent Catholic catechism defines as the process of "final detachment from things of this world." (See Note 5) The headland itself, rising above the sea, recalls Dante's Mount Purgatory, rising in the southern seas, which sinners must climb to reach the Earthly Paradise (our lost Eden) before translation through the spheres of Heavenly Paradise.

In dying away from the things of this world Myra recognizes that she and Oswald were mortal enemies. "People can be lovers and enemies at the same time, you know," she tells Nellie. "We were A man and woman draw apart from that long embrace, and see what they have done to each other. Perhaps I can't forgive him for the harm I did him" (88). This last speculation is seldom quoted by critics, but it is one of the most important sentences in the novel. While we can guess the lady Myra would have become had she stayed in grace and inherited the Driscoll fortune, the heroic potential ruined in Oswald is less obvious, although it is suggested in Nellie's reflection on the day of the great Henshawe rupture in New York: "I felt that his life had not suited him; that he possessed some kind of courage and force which slept, which in another sort of world might have asserted themselves brilliantly. I thought he ought to have been a soldier or an explorer" (52).

Purgatory proper in the Dantean journey begins with the sacrament of Penance and ends with purification on the mountaintop, where Dante confesses to Beatrice his error, his straying from spiritual to worldly pursuits, and where Matilda dips him in and makes him sip the waters of Lethe, which dissolves his feelings of guilt. This same process is present in Cather's novel. The long visits of Father Fay are spiritual consultations culminating in confession of sins, and it is after one of these encounters that Myra's soul utters the chilling question: "Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal

enemy?" (95), an enemy variously identified as Oswald, the object of Myra's passion; as Myra's passionate nature; and, lately by Merrill Skaggs, as Nellie, the youthful reflection of Myra. In Dante's poem, the three steps through Purgatory Gate symbolize confession, contrition, and gratitude for God's mercy; and the Angel Guardian, who represents the priest confessor, carries two keys, one indicating his consideration of the sinner's worthiness and the other, the power of absolution, the power to restore the soul to grace. In receiving the Eucharist, which in the Catholic tradition is the receiving of the Body and Blood of Christ, Myra is fully restored to grace, if not fully purged for her sins, when she makes her final journey to the top of the headland to die at dawn while clutching the crucifix. Myra has equated this dawning with the kind of purification Dante experiences on the mountaintop:

[Dawn] is always such a forgiving time. When that first cold, bright streak comes over the water, it's as if all our sins were pardoned; as if the sky leaned over the earth and kissed it and gave it absolution. You know how the great sinners always came home to die in some religious house, and the abbot or the abbess went out and received them with a kiss? (73)

The end of Dante's journey is light, light within the soul as well as light striking the eye. The experience is one of calmness, which flows from harmony with God, and from such harmony comes understanding:

. . . as I grew worthier to see, the more I looked, the more unchanging semblance appeared to change with every change in me. (See Note 6)

The youthful priest's comment is a summary of Myra's story: "I wonder whether some of the saints of the early Church weren't a good deal like her. She's not at all modern in her make-up, is she?" (93) Put her accomplishment, her attempt to comprehend the sacrifice of Christ through her own suffering, next to Oswald's final words to

Nellie, and one can begin to fathom why Myra seemed so unfeeling when she grasped the crucifix from Nellie. Perhaps this action and her uttering the truth about her marriage were unfeeling. Willa Cather is asking us here to consider salvation as a drift away from the things of the world. Early in the book Nellie comments that Myra's "chief extravagance was in caring for so many people and in caring for them so much" (43). Myra's end is a drift away from humanity and toward God. The direction certainly opposes modern sociologically-based theologies, but it is, nonetheless, I think, positive within Cather's context. But Myra's accomplishment is undercut by her husband's blindness and, in a sense, indicates his unworthiness of her. He prefers his memory of her youth to the character, like the lines on aged faces, gained through experience: "These last years it's seemed to me that I was nursing the mother of the girl who ran away with me," he tells Nellie after his wife's cremation. "Nothing ever took that girl from me. She was a wild, lovely creature I wish you could have seen her then" (104).

I admit being puzzled by this novel's several ironies. I sense tension between what appears to be Christian service to Myra on Oswald's part and the socially cruel, vertical mysticism of her conversion. I am reminded in Myra of the bitter taste of herbs Godfrey St. Peter associates with the conventionally saintly Augusta in *The Professor's House*, but the bitterness in *My Mortal Enemy* lingers, an aftertaste of hostility and impatience for Myra. Nevertheless, Myra is a heroine, a difficult one, like Electra and Antigone.

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(Paper presented for "The Passing Show" Panel Discussion at the 31st Annual Spring Conference, May 3, 1986.)

Notes

1. Originally published in the *New York Times Book Review*, 24 October 1926, p. 2, Kronenberger's review is reprinted in *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*, ed. John J. Murphy (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 228-30.

2. The Eichorn essay, reprinted in *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*, pp. 230-43, appeared originally in *Colby Library Quarterly*, 10 (September 1973) 121-38. Richard Giannone, in *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), also explores the *Norma* and other musical references.

3. Susan J. Rosowski, "Narrative Techniques in Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*," *Journal of Narrative Techniques*, 8 (1978), 144, 145, 147.

4. *My Mortal Enemy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), p. 94. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.

5. Herbert McCabe, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church: A New Catechism of Christian Doctrine* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1985), p. 46.

6. *Paradise*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1970), XXXIII, 112-114.

Nellie Birdseye

In considering Willa Cather's most difficult and defurnished novel, *My Mortal Enemy*, a reader must begin by dealing with the central issue the title focuses. Who is the mortal enemy Myra names in her murmured protest at the end of her life? "I could bear to suffer . . . so many have suffered. But why must it be like this? I have not deserved it. I have been true in friendship; I have faithfully nursed others in sickness . . . Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?" (95). In answering Myra's question, readers normally divide between those who hear Myra accusing her husband Oswald of being her mortal enemy, and those who assume she more bitterly accuses herself. Some others have occasionally assumed Myra has in mind something more abstract — her diseased body, for example, her hatefulness, or the aging process. A third presence in the room, however, is the narrator Nellie Birdseye, who reports this speech to us, the readers. The argument of this paper will be that Nellie Birdseye is also a prime candidate for mortal enemy, when one ponders Myra's comment. Nellie functions, as so many central characters in Cather's fiction do, as an embodiment of opposite qualities. In this novel, she also serves as recorder of events, dictator of their apparent importance, and destructive force.

Susan Rosowski has already demonstrated that Nellie's point of view is an important consideration when untangling this intricate

tale. [1] To understand that intricacy, one must first consider her name. *Nellie* may remind some of Emily Bronte's narrator Nelly Dean [2], while others think of James' *The Bostonians* when they register *Miss Birdseye*. Still others may think merely of a little Nell, an everywoman, against whom to measure Myra's larger-than-life, mythic dimensions. But certainly *Birdseye* reminds us that Nellie, as narrator, passes us information distinctly tinted by her own vision. We also realize, in passing, that birds see from only one eye at a time — with less broad synthesis or coherence than humans are thought to achieve.

The first scene between Myra and Nellie is crucial. Before the two actually meet, Myra has been "the theme of the most interesting, indeed the only interesting, stories that were told in our family . . ." (1). As the only interesting subject in Nellie's constricted small-town world, Myra suggests all the glamor for which Nellie longs. Yet as soon as Myra is introduced on the first page, we spot our first interesting discrepancies. It is on such discrepancies that this interpretation must be built. And here Nellie's Aunt Lydia refers to our ostensibly central figure as Myra *Driscoll*, the princess; to Nellie, on the other hand, she is always Mrs. Myra or Myra Henshawe — the queen.

Nellie has grown up hearing hometown stories of how Myra, a fairytale princess, defied the

wicked king, her guardian, to marry a forbidden but handsome prince. [3] The old Driscoll estate in town seemed to childish Nellie "under a spell, like the Sleeping Beauty's palace; it had been in a trance, or lain in its flowers like a beautiful corpse, ever since that winter night when Love went out of the gates and gave the dare to Fate" (17). The last overwrought romantic phrase suggests Nellie's age when she, as an adolescent, first meets the Henshawes. What she wants at that moment is to find that they have lived "happily ever after." What she hears instead is that they were merely "As happy as most people" (17). She finds that more accurate account disheartening because "the very point of their story was that they should be much happier than other people" (17). For Nellie, the crucial part of their story is not their dramatic romance but their magic marriage. As a would-be member of their wedding, Nellie initially seems to be in love with the Henshawes as a *unit*, and with every aspect of the Henshawes' married life. It is to a happy Henshawe couple that Nellie hopes to relate.

Nellie's first account of Myra appears to emphasize the differences between the two of them. At their first encounter, Myra is 45, plump, attractive, peremptory, and cruel, while Nellie describes herself as 15, young, shy, vulnerable, and eager to make contact. Nellie wants Myra to like her, while Myra seems sporadically caustic and judgmental about Nellie. We naturally take Nellie's word for it, at least through the first couple of readings. But sooner or later we remember how much important information Cather compacts in the opening sentences of her works. In this novel's opening line, the first work is *I*, and the first person pronoun appears in the first sentence an extraordinary four times. This opening signal suggests that the actual — if disguised — concern of *My Mortal Enemy* is the speaker who shapes the tale; and a major concern of the Birdseye observer is herself, especially herself in relation to the Henshawes.

The second crucial fact is that Myra first glimpses Nellie in a

mirror, not face to face. Nellie tells us,

She must have heard me, and glancing up, she saw my reflection in a mirror; she put down the guitar, rose, and stood to await my approach. She stood markedly and pointedly still, with her shoulders back and her head lifted, as if to remind me that it was my business to get to her as quickly as possible and present myself as best I could. (5)

Several interpretations suggest themselves after this passage. For example, when *Myra* (or *mira*) glances in a mirror, what she sees is *Nellie*. Thus, *Nellie* is *Myra*'s mirror image — both her duplicate and her opposite. Either may be seen as a psychological projection of the other. Or one might say that in their defining scene, *Nellie* is seen obliquely, not directly. Or further, the first *Nellie* to be seen is not the real woman but rather an illusion; one must look elsewhere to find the real *Nell*. These possibilities suggest in turn that any conclusions about the two women must reflect both their similarities and their opposition.

Ten years later, *Nellie* arrives on the scene to hold *Myra*'s head between her hands, "making a frame for her face" (62). From the first scene, however, *Nellie*'s imperative business as both guest and narrator is to get her eyes off the mirror, where she is also looking, and to get to *Myra* as quickly as possible. We are invited to ask ourselves, from this point on, how well she goes about that framing business. Or rather, in how many ways does *Nellie* "frame" *Myra*?

It soon becomes a matter of interest that *Nellie*'s vision is called into question by *Nellie*'s own account. She says that she first sees *Myra* from a great distance, "at the far end of the parlour." She adds that her first reaction was bewilderment (5) and her first sensation: "I felt quite overpowered by her — and stupid, hopelessly clumsy and stupid" (7). She soon adds, "I felt I didn't have half a chance with her; her charming, fluent voice, her clear light enunciation bewildered me . . . I was fascinated, but very

ill at ease" (7). In other words, *Nellie* repeatedly stresses her bewilderment and therefore calls into question her own account of their first exposure to each other. She repeatedly reminds us that she is befuddled, vulnerable, defensive, and insecure. It is certainly no wonder that when *Oswald* appears she turns to him with relief, and soon thereafter seems "moonstruck". *Nellie*'s name, by the way, derives from such names as *Eleanor*, which are associated with the moon, the variable or inconstant feminine power.

When *Nellie* goes to visit the *Henshawes* in New York at Christmas, she is chaperoned by "the blurred, taken-for-granted image of my aunt that I saw every day" (43). But it is not merely the representative of the homefolks whose image is blurred. *Nellie* explains, "I was straining my eyes to catch, through the fine, reluctant snow, my first glimpse of the city . . . The snow blurred everything a little, and the buildings on the Battery all ran together . . ."

Nellie's vision is indeed blurred, for she is thoroughly moonstruck, as *Myra* observes. In fact, only the most dangerously distorted vision could experience winter in New York City as a thoroughly temperate condition that "brought no desolation; it was tamed, like a polar bear led on a leash by a beautiful lady" (25). But to euphoric young *Nellie*, New York's Madison Square "seemed to me so neat, after the raggedness of our Western cities; so protected by good manners and courtesy — like an open-air drawing room" (24). When the weather clears, however, *Nellie*'s vision does not. As they step out of their hotel the next morning, *Nellie* remembers that "the sun shone blindingly on the snow-covered park" (32).

Repeatedly in the first half of the book, then, *Nellie*'s perception of the basic facts are quietly undermined by our doubts about the clarity of her vision. Those doubts affect not only the moon-glow of the happy scenes but also the terror of the angry ones. *Nellie*, in short, not only exaggerates *Myra*'s magic but also her malice. So in a room where *Myra*, with justice, is thor-

oughly furious with her philandering husband, *Nellie* reports,

What I felt was fear; I was afraid to look or speak or move. Everything about me seemed evil. When kindness has left people, even for a few moments, we become afraid of them, as if their reason had left them. When it has left a place where we have always found it, it is like shipwreck; we drop from security into something malevolent and bottomless. (51)

This is, perhaps, a caution we should remember. In any case, this reaction of *Nellie*'s seems as excessive as any of *Myra*'s dramatics. *Nellie* herself seems to play the naive *Snow White*, helpless to digest the wicked queen's poisoned apple of knowledge.

Once we understand the pattern of visual distortion, we can also see that *Nellie*, in longing for the life she imagines *Myra* to live, begins to appropriate *Myra*'s experience (including her romance). Finally she tries to duplicate or supersede *Myra* herself. Even in her first fumbling encounter, she has noticed that *Myra* was "no taller than I" (6). Though thirty years separate them, *Nellie*, having recognized in herself a similar physical type, promptly falls in love with *Myra*'s glamorous friends such as *Madame Modjeska*. When she falls in love with *Myra*'s marriage, the emotion necessarily involves loving *Myra*'s husband as well. In fact, if *Nellie* is unconsciously presenting herself as an earnest duplicate of *Myra*, and therefore incidentally as an unreliable narrator, it is of some interest that she describes *Myra*, whom she duplicates, as one whose chief extravagance lay "in caring for so many people and in caring for them so much" (43).

Soon after *Nellie* arrives in the California boarding house the *Henshawes* already occupy, her life settles into a routine which includes pleasant nightly dinners alone with *Oswald*, *Myra*'s husband. In her California duplication of the routine the *Henshawes* once followed in New York, *Nellie* seems content until she too encounters a younger rival who

threatens to displace her. The rival is a young journalist who follows the profession Myra once recommended to Nellie. Nellie claims of the intrusion, "We enjoyed talking with her at lunch or dinner" (77) and then summarily dismisses the young woman as "perhaps eighteen, overgrown and awkward, with short hair and a rather heavy face" (78). Nellie admits that the girl has "clear, honest eyes that made one wonder," but prods the reader to wonder why Nellie would wonder about clear and honest eyes. A few pages later Nellie wonders how "That crude little girl [could have] made all the difference in the world to him" (91). Soon thereafter she notices that Oswald still wears the topaz sleeve-buttons an illicit New York love once gave him. She appears, in the moment, as observant and as jealous as Myra.

Nellie herself once witnessed a jealous explosion Myra set off, during which she declared to her amused husband, "I will go through any doors your keys open" (49). We register the Freudian image here and remember that Cather would have been aware of it. One door Oswald's key opened has apparently led to Nellie's heart. One key to the novel's ending is our answer to this question: does Myra, true to her word, in fact penetrate Nellie's heart to take a clear look around before she dies?

In their first New York holiday together, Myra has chilled us by asking, "Oh, Nellie . . . It's all very well to tell us to forgive our enemies; our enemies can never hurt us very much. But oh, what about forgiving our friends?" (43) This line, paraphrased slightly from Bacon's "On Revenge," [4] sets up the motif of withheld forgiveness or revenge as a factor in this novel's action. When we bring Myra's searing question to our consideration of the novel's ending, we reconsider the facts Nellie supplies us about Myra's last hours.

Myra's determination to die in her own way, on the cliff she and Nellie have often visited, is formulated after she has in fact asked Nellie provocatively, "Why didn't you leave me out there, Nellie, in the wind and the night?" In the last

day of Myra's life, that is exactly what Nellie does: "I sat down to think it over. It seemed to me that she ought to be allowed to meet the inevitable end in the way she chose" (99). What Nellie gets for her decision to leave Myra out to die in the wind and night is of course a life as full of disappointments as Myra's. Oswald promptly betrays Nellie by leaving for Alaska. Myra merely bequeathes Nellie her heart-chilling amethysts. But Myra, first the fairytale princess, then the powerful queen, finally the destructive crone, takes the last trick here. While Nellie is left with a life so empty there's nothing further about it worth recording, Myra achieves a kind of heroism at the last. In this tale of reversals and duplicity, Nellie assures us, as she assures Oswald, "There was every reason to believe . . . [Myra] had lived to see the dawn" (101).

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Work Cited

Willa Cather, *My Mortal Enemy*, Marcus Klein, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).

Footnotes

1. S. J. Rosowski, "Narrative Technique in Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*," *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 8 (Spring 1978).

2. The importance of Cather's fascination with Bronte's Nelly Dean was first mentioned in my presence by Bruce Baker at the Spring, 1984, NEMLA Cather session.

3. The many significances of Cather's uses of fairytales were first pointed out to me by Marilyn Berg Callander, who is now completing a dissertation on the subject at Drew University.

4. Professor Larry Berkove has called my attention to the fact that Bacon writes, "Cosmus, Duke of Florence, had a desperate saying against perfidious and neglecting friends, as if those wrongs were unpardonable. 'You shall read,' saith he, 'that we are commanded to forgive our enemies, but you never read that we are commanded to forgive our friends'" (52). In the same essay we also find this relevant passage: "Public revenges are for the most part fortunate; as that for the death of Caesar . . . and many more. But in private revenges it is not so; nay, rather vindictive persons live the lives of witches, who, as they are mischievous so end they unfortunate" (53). *Bacon's Essays with Whateley's Annotations (Student's Edition) and Notes and a Glossarial Index*, Franklin Fiske Heard (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1873).

Myra's Marriage

For the basis of my analysis — not judgment — of the marriage in *My Mortal Enemy*, I have selected Eric Fromm's *The Art of Loving*. He first cites the confusion between falling in love and standing in love. "If two people who have been strangers, as all of us are, suddenly let the wall between them break down, and feel close, feel one, this moment of oneness is the most exhilarating, most exciting experience in life. This miracle of sudden intimacy is often facilitated if it is combined with, or initiated by sexual attraction and consummation. However, this type of love is by its very nature *not lasting*." p. 3

Myra realizes this fact when she explains: "People can be lovers

and enemies at the same time, you know. We were . . . A man and woman draw apart from that long embrace, and see what they have done to each other." *MME*, p. 88

Myra and Oswald had the initial excitement of falling in love, but obviously, they had something more that kept them together. When Nellie sees them for the first time, twenty-five years after their elopement, she notes: "He [Oswald] came into the room without taking off his overcoat and went directly up to his wife, who rose and kissed him . . . she was clearly glad to see him — glad not merely that he was safe and had got round on time, but because his presence gave her lively personal pleasure.

I was not accustomed to that kind of feeling in people long married." *MME*, p. 78 My personal observation (admitting I have an evil mind) has been that husbands and wives who show public demonstrations of affection have enormous private marriage problems. The greater the effusions, the more estrangement concealed in the private life.

We have already had a glimpse of the snake in Eden in the way Myra has rebuffed Nellie who doesn't have courage to meet Myra's eyes and gazes at the amethyst necklace. But the volatile Myra (after she sees she has hurt Nellie — and who wouldn't know that a remark like hers would hurt anybody?) comforts her. But Nellie has observed, "Her sarcasm was so quick, so fine at the point — it was like being touched by a metal so cold that one doesn't know whether one is burned or chilled." *MME*, p. 7

Fromm says the capacity to love depends on productive activities in other areas. As Kahlil Gibran suggests we should "fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup." *The Prophet*, p. 17 Is either Myra or Oswald productive in any creative way? Oswald works for a railroad — probably a dull job. Myra did bake some cakes to send to Modjeska and otherwise spends her time buying extravagant gifts for her artistic friends, visiting them. She cultivates rich people, whom she hates, for Oswald's sake — his advancement. She makes matches between her friends but no longer believes in love.

Myra says, "Love itself draws on a woman nearly all the bad luck in the world." *MME*, p. 28 and "no playing with love" — in regard to her sending Ewan to Esther — "and very likely hell will come of it." Myra apparently thinks love means what you can get out of it, not what you can give. She hasn't gone beyond the "falling in love" ecstasy.

Love depends on communication. But these two do not communicate. Oswald has to sneak in his gift of the topaz cuff links knowing Myra will be jealous. Myra hoards gold coins against her death, still thinking money can buy anything.

Oswald has a key and Myra doesn't know what it opens. She goes to the bank and finds it is not a lock box key. Oswald fumes at her, "Then it was you who took my keys out of my pocket? I might have known it! I never forget to change them. And you went to the bank and made me and yourself ridiculous. I can imagine their amusement." *MME*, p. 50

Nellie's feelings after this quarrel are "everything was in ruins . . . everything about me seemed evil . . . something malevolent and bottomless, the air in that room [was] . . . like poison." *MME*, pp. 51-52

Myra thinks that if they had had children, things would have been different. Children have never propped up a failing marriage, and thank goodness Oswald and Myra had no children. If Nellie suffered so much at Myra's hands, what would Myra have done to her own offspring?

Oswald has bought six new shirts, but cannot find them. Myra has given them to the janitor's son. They are not elegant enough for her image of Oswald. Oswald must be on exhibition as her prize possession. Oswald's bitterness apparently arises not from being the beautiful dog on the leash, but from economic loss. But she has waited to reveal her perfidy until others are present so as to complete his humiliation.

Why does the marriage last? Fromm suggests three types of unity: orgiastic, conformity to the herd, creativity wherein one bonds with the material of creative work. The latter type does not involve another human being and lacks vital comfort. The unity of the herd lulls one into a false sense of belonging, and sex excitement fades, for the most part, with the honeymoon. The Henshawes have none of these three unities.

Fromm discusses the pathology of love in our Western World. Sexual satisfaction requires always a new partner — a tendency obvious at present. A certain appearance of unity comes from teamwork — the Mom and Pop industries, or the common practice now of both partners working to keep up a lifestyle wherein marriage becomes a busi-

ness partnership and children are superfluous. Some marriages substitute one mate for a parent. Some find idolatrous love in which one loses self in the loved one. Oswald may be guilty of idolatry.

Some critics see Oswald as the embodiment of sentimental love, unable to perceive Myra's terminal illness. According to Fromm sentimental love lives in fantasy — past love or future love — never in the present.

Rollo May in *Love and Will* says, "Sentimentality is thinking *about sentiment* rather than genuinely experiencing the object of it." p. 288 and "Care is always caring *about* something. We are caught up in our experience of the objective thing or event we care about. In care one must, by involvement with the objective fact, do something about the situation . . . This is where care brings love and will together." p. 288

Is Oswald doing something about the situation? He is, although he can do little — providing a roof (albeit noisy) over Myra's head and he cares for her as a nurse would. If he were to do something about the situation, he should have done it long before when he might have saved some money for security. But his chance has passed and he does the best he can now.

Myra accuses Oswald of remembering things as better than they were. But Myra remembers the hot summers when Oswald studied in the East and she remained suffering in Parthia, dependent on secret messages through Lydia. Does Myra choose to remember the worst while Oswald remembers the best? Then which of them does better? The apostle Paul in Philemon 4:8 says, "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report: if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

Dr. John Neihardt once told me this story. He had a student who was always complaining. One day Dr. Neihardt said to the young man, "Do you like to eat?"

The young man said, "Oh, yes!"

"Do you eat swill?" For non-farmers, swill is the garbage fed to pigs.

"Certainly not."

Then Dr. Neihardt said, "You could talk for twenty-four hours about how terrible the world is, how unjust, and you would be absolutely right. But, on the other hand, I could talk for twenty-four hours about how beautiful and good the world is, and I would be absolutely right."

Obviously one chooses his/her mental diet. As the old sun-dial inscription read: "I count only the hours that shine!"

Do you think Oswald, when he comes in the morning to bathe and dress his wife and administer medication, is so stupid that he does not realize that Myra is dying? Painfully and inevitably! Do you think Myra would be happier if Oswald chattered on: "We've certainly had a wretched marriage. What about those six shirts you gave away? They'd buy several meals now. Remember those topaz cuff links? Well, I still have them. See? And you went off to Pittsburgh to punish me. And those keys that you were so jealous about?" Would that be a better situation? Does Oswald bear the blame of not being able to discuss Myra's terminal illness? She won't let even Nellie talk in a kind way about Oswald. If Oswald's failure can be called sentimental, then I prefer him that way. Not that he's a person that I admire. He's too weak. But he has only the past. He has no present or future with Myra.

What game, then, are Myra and Oswald playing in their continued existence together and their continuous cruelty to each other? Fromm describes symbiotic love, best illustrated by the need of the fetus for the mother's body, and vice versa. In marriage one sometimes finds the symbiotic relationship wherein one partner dominates and the other submits. This, I think, is the classification for the Henshawe's marriage. Myra dictates, Oswald lets himself be used. Fromm says: "The active form of symbiotic fusion is domination or sadism . . . One inflates and en-

hances himself by incorporating another person, who worships him." p. 6 "The sadistic person commands, exploits, hurts, humiliates, and the masochistic person is commanded, exploited, hurt, humiliated. They have fusion without integrity." p. 16

Do Myra and Oswald fit this category? Myra gives away Oswald's shirts but waits to inform him in front of the little group of friends where he will be publicly humiliated. When she gets angry about the cuff links, Nellie feels that kindness has departed from the place. Everyone in the house hurts from the quarrel. Myra runs away to Pittsburgh to punish Oswald. Myra spends money with flagrant abandon, but when Oswald cannot support her in her style — and he never could — she berates her fate in not having a carriage of her own. She hates and blames Oswald for the final poverty which subjects her to the noises from the apartment above. (This does not mitigate the actual pain of noise for an ill person, let alone the agony of terminal cancer.) But Myra wants Oswald to suffer as much as she.

And Oswald seems to love to suffer. He admires her castigation: "I'd rather have been clawed by her, as she used to say, than petted by any other woman I've known." *MME*, p. 104 And he loves to remember her jealousy. Oswald says: ". . . 'when she was jealous . . . her suspicions were sometimes — almost fantastic.' He smiled and brushed his forehead with the tips of his fingers, as if the memory of her jealousy was pleasant still, and perplexing still." *MME*, p. 104

But jealousy is not love. Fromm says that envy, jealousy, ambition, any kind of greed are passions. Love practices human power in freedom and not as compulsion. But neither Myra nor Oswald has ever been free. They are entangled in passions — not love.

Fromm declares one must know a person objectively to know him in essence and in love. Does Myra know Oswald objectively, or vice versa? I think not. Each projects what he/she needs to love or hate upon the other. When Oswald

thinks of the wild, lovely girl he married, he does not also see her selfish greed, her love of money and class status. Nor can Myra admit Oswald's slavish devotion — his "indestructible constancy." She projects upon him infidelity to make him more desirable for her jealous passion.

Love implies care, responsibility, respect and knowledge. Oswald cares, but cannot take the responsibility inherent in his acquisition of the spendthrift Myra. Oswald respects Myra, but his knowledge depends on his projection of her. For her part, Myra has lost all four ingredients for love. She doesn't care, doesn't know, doesn't respect Oswald. And she has never felt responsible except that he should appear successful and attractive as her appendage.

Now, about forgiveness: The two times Myra has previously mentioned the idea: are first the friend who could have stood by and helped Oswald didn't, and she has never forgiven him. Then again, Myra speaks of Oswald, "Perhaps I can't forgive him for the harm I did him." *MME*, p. 88 And dawn "is always such a forgiving time." *Ibid.*, p. 73 But who is going to forgive whom and for what? 1st John 4:20, 21: "If a man say I love God and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also." Could we substitute husband or wife for brother? Myra admires her uncle's hatred and his unforgiving nature.

About Myra's final obsession of returning to the church, Fromm says: "The awareness of human separation, without reunion by love — is a source of shame. It is at the same time the source of guilt and anxiety." p. 8 Myra says: "Now I'm old and ill and a fright, but among my own kind I'd still have my circle; I'd have courtesy from people of gentle manners, and not have my brains beaten out by hoodlums. Go away, please, both of you, and leave me." *MME*, p. 75 Neither Nellie nor Oswald are of her class!

Because Myra has not been able, through her infatuation with Oswald, to grow into a love for herself, Oswald and thence all mankind, she finds herself anxious and alone. She could have kept the church and Oswald, had their love been a growing creative relationship.

Fromm states: "In contemporary Western society the union with the group is the prevalent way of overcoming separateness. It is a union in which the individual self disappears to a large extent and where the aim is to belong to the herd." p. 11 In her anguish at not having found unconditional love (which is God) through her relationship in marriage, Myra turns to the only group she has known: the church.

The failure of marriage in *My Mortal Enemy* is then, a failure of

Love to co-create a newer and again a newer concept of love which would have led both of them to the unconditional love that ecstasy demands.

— Mildred R. Bennett

(Paper presented for "The Passing Show" Panel Discussion at the 31st Annual Spring Conference, May 3, 1986.)

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Who Was Myra Henshawe?

(From John March's correspondence and unpublished Handbook to Cather)

In a letter to John March, May 10, 1960, Mrs. Walter Trent (granddaughter of the Lincoln Westermans, the Erlichs of *One of Ours*) writes: "Myra Henshawe in *My Mortal Enemy* may have been Myra Tyndale, Mrs. Westermann's sister-in-law and wife of Troilus Tyndale. They had a daughter Eleanor, who was an actress." (Myra died of cancer in Seattle, July 17, 1903. Her mother was a direct descendant of William Penn. Her father came from Ireland.)

Mrs. Trent also writes "Dr. Julius (sic) Tyndale was born in Philadelphia, November 1, 1843. He left New York early in 1893, 'for good' as my grandmother wrote, because of failing health and lung trouble 'to locate at Eddy, New Mexico, where he had been made a good offer, supposedly in reference to his specialty of lung diseases.' Whether or not he went to New Mexico is doubtful, for he was in Lincoln whenever we visited there. One thing I remember is that he was very much interested in the theatre, and was always able to get tickets for the members of the

family. He lived to be 86 years old (1929).

EDITOR'S NOTE: Willa Cather knew the Tyndales during the college years. In a letter to Mariel Gere from Pittsburgh, Cather speaks of a friend as devoted as Dr. Tyndale. She also says she has no Dr. Tyndale to queer her (letter, Pittsburgh, April 25, 1897) and she gets along well in her social life. This statement indicates that comment had been made about her and Dr. Tyndale. Elsie Cather told me that in his old age Dr. Tyndale had no money and Willa supported him.

James Woodress writes that a Cather letter written to Pendleton Hogan 5 February 1940 says Myra thought Oswald her mortal enemy.

— Mildred R. Bennett

Gems and Jewelry: Cather's Imagery in *My Mortal Enemy*

"No one can say just how or when the change comes, any more than they can say how the light fades from an opal. In some in-

discernible way the elusive quality of value goes and what was precious becomes common clay" (*Kingdom of the Art*, 152). Although Cather was referring to the decline of an actor's talent, she might also have been addressing larger issues such as the need for love and the desire for pleasure, power and material wealth: human needs central to the characters in such novels as *A Lost Lady*, *My Mortal Enemy*, and *The Professor's House*, in which Cather uses precious gems to explore traits in characters and to explicate relationships. Cather knew that "jewels symbolize hidden treasures of knowledge or truth, but [they] also profane love and transient riches" (Cooper, 89), and she uses the gems worn or mentioned by the characters in her books to reveal the transitory quality of love and worldly possessions. If we observe how Cather attributes particular items of jewelry and allusions to gems used by specific characters and then analyzes the love or marriage in which they are engaged, we can understand how she uses the gems as indicators of the power framework established between the partners. [1]

Two such partners are Myra and Oswald Henshawe in *My Mortal Enemy*, the story of a fairy tale romance and of Myra Henshawe's dramatic departure from the wealth and wisdom of her uncle who advises Myra that "it's better to be a stray dog in this world than a man without money" (15). Her decision leads to a life-long struggle to gain the power that both money and love wield. In her final, bitter agony, she realizes that both are transient riches not destined to be hers. In *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather creates a female character at odds with the accepted norms of human behavior and of her society. For all her "dramatics" (54) and impetuous actions. Myra Driscoll Henshawe cannot escape middle age, a double chin, and arguments with her husband. *My Mortal Enemy* presents alternate versions of love. Cather tells a story of mythical romantic love that, like the opal, brings a woman "nearly all the bad luck in the world" (28), and a story of the drunken passion of

love purportedly cured by the cool violet amethysts Myra wears. She relates a story of a husband who wishes his wife to know other women appreciate him by revealing the topaz sleeve buttons he connives to have. *My Mortal Enemy* tells a story of the sensual love for which a woman might, Myra intimates, perjure herself ". . . for pearls!" (54).

The gems Cather chooses for the characters in *My Mortal Enemy* give clues to the interpretations of the characters and their relationships. Theodore Adams believes that "*My Mortal Enemy* employs symbols, echoes from point, suggestive details and many allusions," and that "the reader must take hints and combine implications and strive to feel, as Willa Cather herself phrased it, 'all that has been cut away'" (Adams, 139). Another writer, for instance, might choose an obvious element such as a glaring red stone, a ruby or a garnet, to symbolize Myra's flamboyant character based on the strong love/passion/hate/anger emotions commonly associated with red. These strong emotions appear at work in Myra in her relationships with her uncle, her husband, and her friends. But Cather adorns Myra with cool, violet amethysts, the gem stone symbolic of royalty, signifying peace of mind, humility and resignation, and long reputed to be a cure for drunkenness including the drunken passion of those over-excited by love (Kunz, 58). Certainly a woman as passionately in love with love as Myra Henshawe, when she "gives the dare to Fate" (17) and throws away her claim to fortune, her uncle's money, could use a cure for the romantic passions working within her. Life and time teach Myra about passion, one of the transient riches of love, and it leaves Myra so embittered that her example permanently affects Nellie. According to Adams, "several years after Myra's death, Nellie cannot wear Myra's jewels given to her by Oswald as a remembrance. The amethysts, traditionally symbolic of love, bring a chill to her heart" (145). Nellie never goes beyond "the bright beginning of a love story" (104) without hear-

ing Myra's lament: "Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy!" (105).

In addition to its reputation for preventing intoxication, the amethyst is recognized as the most cherished of all precious stones by "Roman matrons who believed that it would preserve inviolate the affection of their husbands" (Brewer's, 31). Certainly Myra would like to believe she could preserve Oswald's affection, but she suspects that another of the transient riches of love that passes with time is fidelity. Oswald's affection outlasts the passion of young love better than hers, which turns to resentment, frustration, and finally outbursts against those who have loved her best, Oswald and Nellie Birdseye. After Myra's death, Oswald implores Nellie to remember Myra as he has for years, "as she was . . . when she was herself, and we were happy. Yes, happier that it falls to the lot of most mortals to be" (103).

His statement shows Oswald to be a romantic optimist who sees or remembers the sunny side of things, even when conditions and people are at their worst. He still cherishes the young Myra he loved, "would rather be clawed by her than petted by any other woman" (104), and tends to look at the bitter, dying old woman as the mother of the girl he married. For him Cather chooses the fickle yellow topaz, sometimes the symbol of divine goodness, faithfulness, friendship and love (Cooper, 89) believed to "dispell the vague terrors of the night and dissolve enchantments" (Kunz, 67). Seen in this way, the topaz undergirds the image of Oswald as Myra's good and faithful friend. Long after the passion of their young love has faded, he cares for her in her dying agonies and, following her death, speaks well of her.

On the other hand, "yellow worn by a man denote[s] secrecy, and was appropriate for the silent lover" (Kunz, 29). Oswald arranges to receive his topaz sleeve buttons from Myra's friend Lydia. The excuse he gives Lydia for having the topazes, a gift "from a young woman who means no harm but doesn't know the ways of the world

very well . . . from a breezy Western city where a rich girl can give a present whenever she wants to and nobody questions it" (33), [2] lends credence to the possibility that he, indeed, has a "young woman" for whom he harbors a special fondness, one on intimate enough terms to bestow a gift of personal jewelry upon a man in a day when such a gift was considered the domain of immediate family members only, one for whom Oswald has enough affection to go through the deceptions necessary to be able to keep and wear the jewels. At least he asks Lydia to believe his story and she, in turn, asks Myra to believe her fabrication that the jewels are leftovers from an old friend who couldn't keep them because of "unpleasant associations" (35). Lydia justifies her action to Nellie by suggesting that "I really think he ought to have them . . . Everything is always for Myra. He never gets anything for himself" (34).

Myra seems surprised when Lydia presents her gift. Indeed, she responds with "delight" (36) and exclaims that the topaz cuff buttons are "exactly right" (36) for Oswald, thus accepting Lydia's, and indirectly, Oswald's pretense. That evening at the opera Myra laughs and says: "Oh, Oswald, I love to see your jewels flash!" (37). On the surface her remark shows sincere admiration, but it insinuates also an ironic, bawdy, double entendre aimed at his sexual organs and at what she implies to be his sexual infidelities. Later, when Myra confronts Lydia with the knowledge that she has "perjured" (54) herself for the sleeve-buttons, Lydia defends her act by saying "a man never is justified, but if ever a man was . . ." (54), thus confirming that she, too, considers Oswald's unfaithfulness a possibility.

The color yellow has two faces: that of friendship and constancy, and that of jealousy, deceit and betrayal (Achen, 33). Whether Oswald betrays Myra and their marriage in a physical relationship or in an emotional way through lies and deceit, the fact remains that he betrays her and their love. Whatever his reason, Oswald be-

comes "disturbed and not over-pleased" (36) at Myra's enthusiastic reaction to the yellow jewels and, Nellie believes, genuinely ashamed at having tried to deceive his wife. The topazes signify Oswald's betrayal in one form or another, and, therefore, imply a weakening of the marriage and a strengthening of the battle for power between the partners.

The reappearance of the yellow cuff buttons in the last days of Oswald and Myra's life together reinforces Oswald's quiet assertion of his power to enjoy the admiration of other women. Nellie notices him at breakfast with a young woman reporter in the decrepit hotel in which he and Myra exist in their last years and observes that he is "talking with evident pleasure" (77) to her. She also notices that "he still wore his topaz sleeve-buttons" (78). Nellie sees Oswald as having other traits attributed to yellow, "indestructible constancy . . . almost indestructible youth" (103). He never outgrows his need for love, for attention, for people. He never forgets the passion he felt for the young Myra, even though he serves his fretful wife faithfully and with indestructible constancy to the bitter end of her days. Yellow, in the traditional seven ages of man, typifies adolescence (Kunz, 29). Oswald, the perpetual adolescent, becomes an old man who still loves love, the idea of the young girl he married, and women who respond to him. Myra knows this characteristic and tells Nellie "he was always a man to feel women, you know, in every way" (91). Myra has come to accept that trait in her mate with the bitterness of a lover whose ideal has been tarnished.

Myra and Oswald represent two widely separated perspectives on love. Oswald, the romantic, never fails to see the sunny side of things, to be the faithful friend, the continual seeker. In the friendship of other women, including Lydia and Nellie, he finds admiration and support which satisfy his ego and allow him to live on the memory of the passion of young love. For him that passion never dies. Myra, the cloudy side of love, holds grudges and resentments, turns scornful

and mocking, remains faithful only until love and friends disappoint her. Oswald is the sun, and Myra is the moon: she is cold royal purple to his warm friendly yellow.

Cather uses two other gems to talk about love in *My Mortal Enemy*: the opal and the pearl. Disappointed in love for herself, Myra advises Ewan Gray that he should not give opals to his beloved because "they have a bad history. Love itself draws on a woman nearly all the bad luck in the world; why . . . add opals?" (28). The opal, long revered because it combines the virtues of all the various colored gems united in its sparkling light, came into disfavor as a gemstone about 400 years ago. Apparently its bad reputation began with a tale by Sir Walter Scott, "Anne of Geierstein," in which the heroine, Hermione, who wears an opal in her hair, dies when a drop of water falls onto the opal. The opal "appealed to Shakespeare as a fit emblem of inconstancy for in *Twelfth Night* he makes the clown say to the Duke: Now the melancholy God protect thee, and the Tailor make thy garment changeable taffeta for thy mind is very opal" (Kunz, 151). Cather chooses to use the opal to undergird Myra's own feeling of bad luck in affairs of love. Like Aphrodite, who never tired of helping young lovers, Myra attempts to help Gray and other lovers make matches and thus vicariously lives out her dreams of everlasting passion, although her own fantasies of love have brought her little but bad luck.

Although Nellie perceives that Myra and Oswald have a strong physical bond (8), Myra's reference to the notion of a woman perjuring herself for pearls indicates that the sensual side of marriage is less than satisfying and that she would like to have more control. Myra tells Lydia "you needn't have perjured yourself for those yellow cuff-buttons. I was sure to find out, I always do . . . it's disgusting in a man to lie for personal decorations. A woman might do it now, . . . for pearls!" (54). Myra, heroine and princess of the myth created by her friends in Parthia, sees herself as a mythical recreation of

a woman like Queen Elizabeth I, powerful yet feminine proponent of pearls. Myra hints that to have power such as women like Queen Elizabeth and Aphrodite would be worth lying for. [3] While the pearl represents femininity, chastity and purity, it also symbolizes Aphrodite, who rose from the foam of the sea, or, in Greek legend, from the foam generated when the severed genitals of Uranus were thrown into the sea. Aphrodite symbolizes sensual love as opposed to the spiritual, and since she was an unfaithful wife, her name implies the pleasure of sexual love not only in but also outside of marriage.

Myra implies that Oswald has lied for more than personal decoration, a trait unforgivable in a man but perhaps justifiable in an otherwise powerless woman for the right reward. Whether Oswald desires to have the topazes to smuggle a gift from a lover past his wife, or to have something expensive without having to defend the purchase, or to assert his power in the marriage, he betrays because he lies. Cather twists society's double standard. What disgusts us in a man, we may justify in a woman, a reversal of the norm. Cather breaks the convention that men don't receive such personal gifts from women who are not close family to convey the idea that Oswald has broken the convention of the ideal marriage, the perfect, all-filling love one dreams of finding in one's partner, the fantasy Myra expects to possess and which others expect her to live out forever in her fairy tale romance.

Cather has selected amethysts, topazes, opals and pearls to speak for and about the characters and the manner in which each asserts his or her power in relationships in *My Mortal Enemy*. In the end, however, she talks not about the individuals but about their expectations. Myra, heroine of a myth perpetuated by the women in her hometown, cannot be less than happy, less than perfect, less than the goddess of supreme marital bliss and the idol of sexual fidelity and fulfillment. A royal purple princess, she is Aphrodite, goddess of love; she desires to be what society wants her to be: perfect love

personified. In other words, she can't be human. But human realities get in the way. She grows older, her hair turns gray, and her chin doubles. Economic conditions force her to a poverty level existence. Her husband is not a perpetual Prince Charming in a happily-ever-after fairy tale but a mortal man with faults and failures. Life catches Myra and Oswald in a conflict beyond their control, that between myth and reality. Instead of romantic heroes they are unwilling victims of the myth makers.

In sum, Cather uses gems and jewelry to underscore the personalities of Myra and Oswald Henshawe and add depth to our understanding of their relationship. The characters of Myra and Oswald would struggle for identity and individuality if it weren't for the cool amethysts and bright topazes, the pearls and opals that reveal the human frailties in the love story they live. The gems Cather uses not only "symbolize hidden treasures of knowledge or truth" (Cooper, 59), they add dimension to the individuals and to their struggles to resolve the conflicts within their relationship.

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Notes

1. For other discussions of Cather's use of jewelry symbolism see: Theodore S. Adams, "Willa Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*: The Concise Presentation of Scene, Character and Theme," *Colby Library Quarterly*, X (September 1973) #3: 138-156; Harry B. Eichorn, "A Falling Out with Love: *My Mortal Enemy*," *Colby Library Quarterly*, X (September 1973) #3: 121-138; James Schroeter, ed., "Willa Cather and *The Professor's House*," *Willa Cather and Her Critics*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

2. Slote, p. 157. Cather wrote of Mary Anderson that "she grew up in a breezy [emphasis mine], busy, confident, unartistic atmosphere; she never saw deeply and seriously into the awesome mystery of

creative art." Using "breezy" to describe the home of Oswald's "young woman who means no harm but doesn't know the ways of the world very well" is Cather's way of setting up the contrast between Oswald's supposed admirer and his wife who knows the ways of the world very well and has a deeply artistic, creative spirit.

3. Slote, p. 166. Myra would like to have the power to earn the respect of others that Cather alluded Lily Langtry to hold over the Italian tenor Italo Campanini: "We all reverence power and in a way those who possess it, whether it is power of wealth or beauty or genius or simple goodness."

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The Fascinating Complexity of *My Mortal Enemy*

On the surface, *My Mortal Enemy* is a story about the discrepancy between romance and reality — the way we imagine life to be and the way it actually is. Romance will have us believe that love can surmount all difficulties, that it will triumph over poverty, disease and even death. Yet in actual life, the desire for money and material comfort often clashes with love and destroys it.

Here then is the story of a woman who abandons wealth and comfort for love, only to realize at the end of her life that for her, wealth and comfort are more important. As Myra Henshawe lies dying in poverty, her hatred of her husband intensifies. Her marriage to him has deprived her of the means which would have brought her dignity and privacy in her last years of life.

It is also the story of the education, or rather disillusionment, of Nellie Birdseye, the young girl who witnesses Myra's tragedy and whose belief in romantic love is completely shattered. Many years before, Myra had disregarded her uncle's warning and relinquished

her fortune to marry for love. Yet what is the consequence of her sacrifice? She had happiness for a while, but no more so than other couples. And first there were petty quarrels and jealousies, then more bitter exchanges, and finally the penury of her last years shared with a partner she no longer loves but denounces as her "mortal enemy." This has a catastrophic effect on Nellie. She no longer believes in love. Whenever she watches the beginning of a romance in others, she recalls Myra's terrible words and envisages her tragic end.

Whether the story speaks for Myra or for Nellie, the message is: romantic love does not last; it is only an illusion. This thought does not please, and many writers prefer to evade it by ending before the problems begin. Not so Cather. She begins her story several decades after the wedding mercilessly to record the gradual change in Myra's feelings. As in her earlier novels of the twenties, Cather confronts facts refusing to paint a rosy picture.

The novella cannot only be seen as an indictment of romantic love;

it can also be read as an indictment of money and its corrupting power. In this work, perhaps, Cather intends to show how the lust for money taints human relations and destroys love — as she had done earlier in *The Professor's House*. We sense her disapproval of Myra's extravagance and love of show and grandeur, in her description of the casual manner in which Myra gives away six new dress shirts of her husband's to the janitor's son, of the lavish tips she showers on the drivers, porters and street musicians, and of her present of the most expensive holly bush in the flower shop to an actress she admires. She knows that she spends more than her husband, Oswald, can afford, but she has extravagant habits; because of her vanity, she wants to appear wealthy, and perhaps even because she wants to spite her husband, whom she probably considers tightfisted. We also see avarice in her attitude towards Oswald's wealthy German business friends. She despises them for not possessing the wit, learning or taste that she believes should accompany wealth. On the other hand, she envies them for she craves the social position and comfort which they have but, she feels, do not deserve.

Cather shows us not only Myra's ambitions but also where they come from and where they lead when thwarted. Myra inherited her extravagance and avarice for money and social station from John Driscoll, her wealthy great-uncle, with whom she grew up. He had enough money that when he signed his name on a Treasury note, he would burn it if he "spoiled the sig-nay-ture." The description of her early life with him, through brief, shows us that he spoiled her with his money, buying her everything she wanted: "dresses and jewels, parties, a fine riding horse, a Steinway piano." She had her portrait painted by "a famous painter." Even the town band would come to play for her whenever she held a party. Accustomed to getting what she wanted without thinking of its price she had difficulty adjusting to a different way of life. As Oswald

clerked and did not make much money, her spendthrift ways often led to bitter words. Myra remembers her great-uncle's views of poverty. He once warned her: "It's better to be a stray dog in this world than a man without money A poor man stinks, and God hates him." These views of wealth and poverty have now become ingrained in her, and form her criterion in judging Oswald.

Her bias toward wealth becomes manifest after they move to the West and their fortunes further decline. As Part Two begins, Myra is dying of cancer in a shabby boarding-house — a far cry from her great-uncle's estate — even from her former apartment in New York. The contrast fills Myra with self-pity, regret and resentment: pity for herself for dying in a wretched place when she could have been living in splendor, regret for renouncing her inheritance, and resentment against her husband whom she blames for all her misfortunes. Her deep-seated hatred for him as the cause of her poverty leads her to refer to him as her "mortal enemy." Now sick and poor, she dreams of how different her life would have been if she had not renounced her fortune. Though she blames herself for the harm she has done Oswald (she admits that he was not cut out for a business career and that he was forced into it to support her), and although she says that they have destroyed each other, one sees that her concern centers about how she has been destroyed and she blames Oswald for his inability to succeed. She regards him as her greatest enemy now because he separated her from her money.

The phrase rings with verbal irony, for what Myra does not realize herself, though Cather makes her readers aware of it, is that the expression could be equally, if not better applied, to Myra herself. She is her own mortal enemy. Myra's craving for wealth and grandeur has destroyed her. If she had not been used to reckless spending, she would not have desired so much. If she had been satisfied with less, she would have been happier and would not have been so envious of others. And if

she had spent less, they would have had some savings to fall back on. Furthermore, had Myra been less ambitious and more practical, she would have allowed Oswald to accept a lower position in New York after the reorganization of his business instead of forcing him to try elsewhere when he was neither young nor successful. In short, her poverty was to a large extent self-imposed. Though illness and poverty eventually force Myra into some kind of self-recognition, she cannot see how far her own responsibility lies. For that reason her bitter denunciation becomes an indictment against the corrosive power of money, which can destroy the closest of human relationships.

Her great-uncle's influence on Myra restricts not only her views on money, she resembles him in other ways. Tyrannical and overbearing not only to Oswald but to anyone who criticizes her or tries to help her husband, she reveals a passionate nature and a violent temper, sharp tongue, and deep-felt prejudices. When displeased, she can be extremely vicious. She seems to possess the worst of her uncle's traits. Cather has made it clear that "she was a good deal like him; the blood tie was very strong." And she herself admits, "as we grow old we become more the stuff our forebears put into us." One is not surprised, therefore, that many readers see Myra as one of Cather's most unattractive protagonists. In fact, Marcus Klein in his introduction to the Vintage edition of *My Mortal Enemy* (1961) cites a critic who regards the book as "the least likable" of Cather's works, and Myra herself as "thoroughly unpleasant."

While Myra can be repulsive at times, one should not overlook another side of her, a side which makes many readers hesitate before judging her avariciousness or materialism. This side appears more attractive and seems to soften, if it does not cancel out, the negative image Cather has painted of her. Myra is no ordinary materialist despite her love of money. She does not parallel Rosamond Marsellus, buying freely to show off her wealth. In Myra, Cather has

depicted a fully-rounded character with the subtle complexity of a real person. She avoids oversimplified divisions of character into "good" and "bad" because people in real life do not fit categories.

Thus we see Myra's nature balanced by conflicting traits. Her greed for money, for example, is offset by her reckless generosity to her friends as her passionate nature makes her form strong likes as well as dislikes. Her contempt and dislike of her husband and his friends contrasts with genuine feeling and concern for her own. And in New York, before poverty aggravates their difficult relations, sometimes she and Oswald feel close and loving. Confronted with disease and death, she displays an uncomplaining stoicism. With her friends she can be gay, witty, and charming, as in better days. She reserves self-pity for her reduced circumstances. She does not flinch when in pain, nor does she complain because she has been abandoned by the friends she helped.

Perhaps the most appealing trait we find in her is the poetic streak in her nature that may have something to do with her Irish ancestry and which responds passionately to music and literature and other forms of beauty. We sense the hidden richness in her in the way she sits crouching in the shadow drinking in the notes of "Casta Diva" that moonlit New Year's Eve in New York. We observe the same ardent response in her recitation of Shakespeare and her reaction to Heine's poetry — even in her response to religion. Much more than vanity, therefore, draws Myra to writers and artists; she feels a similarity of temperament and admires them.

So far as realization of character, Cather has made Myra's behavior consistent throughout. She is one of Cather's most convincing and fully-realized protagonists. Her actions, though not always praiseworthy, can always be justified by her own logic. Her quick jealousy when her husband shows interest in other women seems understandable when we realize how much her own sacrifice looms in her mind. When she has given up

so much to marry Oswald, surely he should be more devoted than other husbands and do all he can to satisfy her whims.

One understands her dissatisfaction with her surroundings in the West. For a person of her sensitivity, taste and background, living in shabby lodgings with grimy walls and harsh lighting and the smell of cheap kitchen odors and the inconsideration of noisy neighbors would be unbearable even had she been healthy. Squalor and complete lack of intellectual or aesthetic stimulation in her surroundings cause Myra's despair. She suffers like Paul in the short story "Paul's Case," or like Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours*. Though Cather intended at the start to make Myra's avarice the object of her criticism of the pursuit of money and material success, a subject Cather felt very strongly about in an age of mass production because of the destruction of beauty and traditional values, her attitude to wealth — and therefore to Myra herself — remains ambivalent. Was she critical of Myra's material ambitions? If so, why did she turn Myra into an object to be pitied and sympathized with in Part Two rather than despised and scorned?

Even where money is involved, Cather does not view with disfavor all Myra's actions. Her ambition for a carriage and stables seems insane, her giving the hansom driver an extra large fee out of wounded vanity one views as extravagance, and her dissatisfaction with her fairly comfortable position in New York ("it's very nasty, being poor") appears unreasonable. Yet Cather's attitude to her spending is not always clear. Her gift of the expensive holly bush and cakes stands out as only one of the many things she has done for her artist friends and while it may be regarded as vanity and extravagance it may also be seen as her generosity and concern for her friends. As Nellie remarks, "My aunt often said that Myra was incorrigibly extravagant; but I saw that her chief extravagance was in caring for them so much." And we are not made to feel that Myra has wasted money on the furnishing of her

apartment, despite its obvious elegance.

In short, it is not so much that Cather questions her spending of money as of how she spends. (Cather herself, neither puritanical nor parsimonious, believed in comfort and privacy. She had a spacious seven-room New York apartment and a good French cook. She often bought flowers and enjoyed wearing beautiful clothes to the concert or theatre. She did not consider those wasteful luxuries.) Privacy, beauty, taste and refinement were what she herself sought and one sees a lot of Cather, including her attitude to artists, portrayed in Myra Henshawe — more of her perhaps than in any other of her protagonists. Like Myra she hated the ugliness and squalor of cheap boarding houses. She had lived in them in both Pittsburgh and New York, before she could move into better lodgings, and had found them suffocating. "Paul's Case" tells the story of a boy's hunger for beauty and culture in an ugly suffocating environment and shows the wrong step he took to find fulfillment. The modern world, Cather thought, a world of mass production, where everything was the same and beauty had disappeared. Given this thinking, she could feel great sympathy for Myra's later sufferings and even while she shows how love disappears without money, and makes Myra her object lesson, she admits money as necessary to maintain a dignified existence. Cather certainly agrees with Myra when she says "Money is a protection, a cloak; it can buy one quiet, and some sort of dignity."

Hence while money creates a negative force in the story, it also becomes a positive one, because it provides the means for attaining spiritual fulfillment.

At the end of the story we wonder how we should judge Myra. Was she avaricious or was she generous? Should we hate or pity? Because of Cather's ambivalence towards her craving for money, the question cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." It seems

that Cather started with one purpose and then put in too much of her own feelings. However, this is not a fault. If we look at the novel as a study and development of character, how much more realis-

tic and complex Myra Henshawe has become!

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Cather's Published "Unpublished" Letters

Anyone who has worked with Cather materials is aware of the provision in her will that forbids the publication, in whole or in part, of her letters. This can be a frustration for scholars who have to travel from one end of the country to the other in order to read collections of her letters. We all understand her desire for privacy and her wish to keep out of print any of her writing that she had not carefully prepared for publication. Nevertheless, the letters of a writer — indeed, of anyone, but especially a writer — provide valuable insights into that person's mind, heart, and experience. Cather herself could scarcely deny the value to the present of this very personal sort of record from the past. She found in the letters of Father Joseph Machebeuf to his sister much of the inspiration for her own *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Without those letters, her novel would have been a very different book, and it might never have been written at all. Furthermore, she appears to have used (without his permission) the personal diary of a New Hampshire's doctor for her account of the flu epidemic aboard the *Anchises* in *One of Ours* — and then exulted over her find in a letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher.

A great many of Cather's letters to friends were apparently destroyed at her request, but several hundred remain nevertheless. Cather students await the day when these treasures will be collected and published. One notes, however, that a few of them have appeared in print, some during her lifetime and some after her death. Four well-known letters, now collected in *Willa Cather on Writing*, were printed with Cather's permission, two written to *Commonweal*, one to *Saturday Review of Litera-*

ture, and another to a friend that was printed in part in *News Letter*.

Two other letters, one addressed to the *Nebraska State Journal* and one to the *Omaha World-Herald*, apparently at the editors' requests, were published in full. No doubt Cather expected them to be published. The first, dated June 2, appeared in the *Journal* on July 24, 1927. It acknowledges the *Journal's* sixtieth anniversary and recalls Cather's experiences as a young woman writing for that newspaper. The second appeared in the *Omaha World-Herald* on October 27, 1929. Addressed to Cather's friend, editor-in-chief Harvey Newbranch, it laments the passing of the small-town opera house in Nebraska. Mildred R. Bennett edited and reprinted the letter in *Nebraska History* 49 (Winter 1968):373-78. In addition to these, there are at least nine more that have appeared in print, either complete or excerpted. They were obviously not intended for publication, and thus they enjoy a spontaneity and candor not typical of Cather's more "public" prose. In them, and in the letters tucked away in library archives, the reader finds a less guarded, more human writer.

While it would be a violation of the conditions of Cather's will, and of the policies of libraries that own Cather letters, to publish any of her previously unpublished letters, surely to reprint those that have already appeared in print is permissible. The earliest of these nine letters (two are undated) is probably one that was written to Mary Miner Creighton, dated September 17, 1927. It appeared in the *Webster County Argus* October 20, 1927, in an article titled "Miss Cather Writes Inscription for Stone." According to the article, the letter

was read during the exercises for the laying of the cornerstone for the new Brodstone Memorial Hospital in Superior, Nebraska. It is Cather's response to a request that she compose the inscription for the cornerstone. This is the letter the *Argus* printed:

My Dear Mary:

Why surely, I'll be glad to do it, for you, for Evelyn, and most of all for Mrs. Brodstone. But I wonder what kind of inscription is wanted? There are so many kinds! I should think it ought just to tell something true about Mrs. Brodstone, something that was like her — that we remember her by. Can't you give me some hints, tell me some of the things that, in talking it over, you and Carrie have said ought to be mentioned?

I got your letter only yesterday, and just at a first flash I put down some lines that seemed like the memory of Mrs. Brodstone that came by in my mind. An inscription really has to be a little stiff to have dignity — can't be flowery, or very wordy. I suppose the first part of the tablet, the first lines, will be a statement of gift, and the name of the hospital, will they not? I mean something like this:

The Brodstone Memorial Hospital given to the City of Superior by Evelyn, Lady Vesty, in loving memory of her mother, _____ Brodstone, who was born in (_____) 18____ and died in Superior, Nov. 19____

What I mean, Mary, is that this formal part would be arranged by Evelyn, or her secretary, or the Board, wouldn't it? And you want me to come in with a personal note, just after. Am I right?

Well, the lines that flash into my mind as being really like Mrs. Brodstone, as I knew her, are something like this:

She brought across the seas a high courage, a warm

heart, a rich relish of life, and a hand skilled and untiring in those domestic arts that give richness and beauty and reality to daily living. In later life she travelled far, but her heart was here, and all her journeys brought her home.

The second paragraph, "In later life, etc.," seems to hint of the later years of her life, which were so different from the earlier part of it and which never changed her in the least, except to make her sounder and more seasoned than ever. Of course Mrs. Brodstone was many things not mentioned above; she was, when I first knew her so eminently sound and seasoned; but an inscription ought to hint at the most characteristic qualities, and to me the fine thing about Mrs. Brodstone was the way she could make flowers grow and gardens grow, and the way she could cook gorgeous food and do things with her hands, and the hearty way in which she accepted life.

Now maybe some special sort of inscription is wanted, laying stress on certain things. If so, you'll have to give me some requisite information, and I'll do the best I can.

With love always, Willa

One likes to see Cather's genuine admiration for Mrs. Brodstone, and her conscientious desire to do the older woman justice in the inscription. The typical Cather verve resounds, too, in phrases like "just at first flash," "eminently sound and seasoned," and "gorgeous food." One also sees Cather's appreciation for people who were close to the earth and gifted in the homely arts of cooking and gardening, and who lived with a hearty acceptance of life. The letter tells us as much about Cather as about Mrs. Brodstone.

Another letter that was apparently published in Cather's lifetime appeared in Fanny Butcher's column, likely in the *Chicago Tribune*, where she regularly reviewed and praised Cather's work. The undated clipping resides in the Willa

Cather Historical Center archives in Red Cloud, Nebraska. The date may be the 1930s or 1940s because in her introduction Butcher speaks as though *My Antonia* had appeared many years ago. She also says that Cather is one of America's finest women, suggesting that Cather was alive at the time the column was written. The letter, printed in its entirety over a reproduction of Cather's signature, is the novelist's response to Butcher's inquiry as to what book Cather would rather have written than any other. This is the letter as Butcher publishes it:

Dear Fanny Butcher: You ask me what book I would rather have written than all others; I suppose you mean what novel. Well, since it's a wishing game, why be modest? I imagine you expect me to name some neat, obscure book, by some neat, obscure talent. To be really chic I ought to say that I'd love to be responsible for the high flying rhetoric of "Moby Dick" where one metaphor about the Musée de Cluny and the human soul runs to the length of a page and a half.

Thank you! If I can choose, I won't meekly say that the neck of the chicken is my favorite portion. I'd rather have written "War and Peace" than any other novel I know. I am not sure that I admire it more than any other, but I'd rather have written it; simply for the grand game of making it, you understand, quite regardless of the result. I would like to be strong enough to have, and to survive, so many gloriously vivid sensations about almost everything that goes to make up human society. I would like to have had that torrent of life and things pour through me; and yet to be well bred enough as an artist to unconsciously and unfailingly present it all in scale, with the proper perspective and composition and distribution of light; enough at least to hold the thing together. That much

form, it seems to me, any satisfying work must have.

From this you may infer that I wouldn't choose to be swept away in Dostoevsky's torrent, though it's as big and full as heart could desire. The richer the welter of life, the more it needs a restraining intelligence. I choose "War and Peace" because it has both — and in what a degree! You remember what an experience it is to read that book for the first time; can you imagine anything more exciting than writing it? The actual writing of it, of course, was a much more concentrated and unadulterated and smooth running form of excitement than all the many, the countless excitements, long forgotten, which enabled him to write it at all. But there, of course, I'm getting into a matter which isn't for general discussion. Every trade has its compensations; but it's wiser to keep quiet about them, or somebody turns up and tries to spoil them for you.

Sincerely yours,
Willa Cather

One notes that when Cather did not restrict herself to naming another's novel, she apparently gave a different response to the question Butcher asked. Charles Poore, in a review of *The Old Beauty and Others*, published in the *New York Times Book Review*, September 12, 1948, reports that when Cather was asked what work of another's she might wish to have written, she replied, Rudyard Kipling's "The Mary Gloster." Poore does not indicate where or when Cather supposedly made the statement.

As has been indicated, the two letters above appeared in print during Cather's lifetime; at least five others were printed or excerpted in the year of her death, 1947. Fragments from these letters were published in the *Colby Library Quarterly* for November 1947 under the title "Willa Cather's Call on Housman." The letters were written to the author of the article, Carl J. Weber, then professor of English

Literature at Colby College, in response to inquiries he made of her. The Cather letters from which Weber quotes, and which he has given to the Colby Library for their collection, are dated December 12, 1944; January 10, 1945; and January 31, 1945. A fourth letter from Cather to Weber, dated November 17, 1941, is in the Colby collection, but does not pertain to Cather's visit to British poet A. E. Housman, so it is not included in the *Quarterly* article. It is pertinent to the collecting and publishing of letters, however, because Weber had apparently asked Cather about the deposition of her letters from Sarah Orne Jewett. She claims to have no interest in letters as collectors' items — she will get her Flaubert from his books, not his letters. She values Jewett's letters, on the other hand, because they are personal letters from a friend.

According to Weber, he had written to Cather asking her to verify details of her by then legendary visit with Isabelle McClung and Dorothy Canfield [Fisher] to Housman. Ford Madox Ford and others had circulated a highly embroidered account of the episode, much to Cather's distress. Her reply to Weber's first inquiry, however, is cordial and informative. He quotes all but a few lines of that letter:

... about my very pleasant visit with Housman. Some day I intend to write a careful and accurate account of that visit for persons who are particularly interested. It all happened many years ago, when I was very young and foolish and thought that if one admired a writer very much one had a perfect right to ring his doorbell. On the occasion of that uninvited call — certainly abrupt enough — Housman was not in the least rude, but very courteous and very [Cather's word here is actually "even" rather than "very"; the article misquotes her] kind. I judged he was not accustomed to such intrusions, but he certainly made every effort to make one feel at ease.

Weber apparently wrote back, calling to Cather's attention a brief

mention of her visit in an article on Housman in *Forum*. Cather regarded the comment as erroneous, and wrote to Weber on January 10, 1945 (Cather's letter is dated 1944, but postmarked 1945). He quotes from her letter:

If you are able to find where the writer . . . got his information, I would be obliged if you would let me know. The statement you quote is absolutely untrue.

I went not alone, but with a friend from Pittsburgh, to call on Housman at his lodgings in Highgate, a suburb of London. I had been staying in London for some time. I asked Housman's publisher, Grant Richards, for Mr. Housman's address, which he readily gave me My friend and I were courteously treated At that time Housman . . . was [then] lecturing at the University of London I had not known that he was a professor there until he told me so.

Weber quotes only one sentence from Cather's final letter to him, and with good reason. Her letter shows that he had begun to annoy her with his insistent questions. She indicates that she had replied in the first place only to correct his impression that Housman had treated her rudely. She says, and Weber quotes, "He wasn't rude at all, but very courteous." In this letter, dated January 31, 1945, Cather regrets having told him as much as she did, for now he has sent her something of a questionnaire. She indicates curtly that this is not a matter for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and shuts off the possibility for further correspondence between them.

One notes that this visit attracted considerable attention and that Cather became so concerned over it that on April 17, just days before her death, she wrote to Dorothy Canfield Fisher asking Fisher to write her recollection of their visit to Housman so that if the need arose she could have a clear and accurate statement prepared on the matter. Fisher answered with a detailed account of the visit as she remembered it, but her let-

ter was returned by Sarah Bloom, Cather's secretary, on May 14, with a note attached from Bloom saying that Cather had received Fisher's letter and read it before her death. All three pieces of correspondence are in the Fisher collection at the Guy W. Bailey Library at the University of Vermont in Burlington.

The matter was not dropped with Cather's death, either. Housman scholar William White picked up on it and pursued it relentlessly through articles in *Notes and Queries* in June 1951 and July 1957, in the *Victorian Newsletter* in Spring 1958, and again in the Summer 1965 issue of *Prairie Schooner*.

Two other Cather letters were quoted from at some length in 1947. In a one-page article of tribute titled "Willa Cather's Spirit," published in *America*, May 10, 1947, Harold C. Gardiner quotes excerpts from two of the letters he received from Cather "over a period of some years." Gardiner does not include the dates of the letters, but he praises their writer as a woman of "sound and healthy spirituality." The one he cites first reads as follows:

Naturally I am pleased by your friendly reference to me, but I am much more pleased by the way in which you take up the question of the slender relation between the very modern authors and the English language Some bright boy on the *New Yorker* found that in *The Grapes of Wrath* the characters sit on their "hams" thirty-six times. Now there are so many other names for that part of the human body (some of them vulgar enough to suit Steinbeck's purpose, and less suggestive of the delicatessen shop), it is rather alarming to see the magnificent reach of the language silent except for one octave, on which little boys seem to be pounding the same keys over and over with one finger.

This kind of candid comment is typical of Cather, and it adds to our understanding of her views on the art of writing. In that same letter,

Gardiner tells us, she discusses Samuel Morison's *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* as a contrasting example of sensitive use of language. He quotes this passage from her letter:

Morison's book, I think, ought to be read by every scholarly Catholic. His treatment (indeed, his discovery) of the very important part religion played in Columbus' life is to me a revelation. I don't know what Mr. Morison's personal religion may be, but certainly he has a great understanding of what a source of power profound faith may be in another man.

In the second letter from which Gardiner quotes, he indicates that in "responding to a question what she thought might be the effect of the war on literature," Cather "would not venture a guess." She gave this reason:

... how can we have any opinion about a thing which has never happened before? Never before has war meant destruction and enslavement of whole civilian populations, as effort to destroy all religions — and with them the ideals of conduct which have for two thousand years influenced societies in their upward struggle.

This letter sounds a note that is echoed in many Cather letters.

At least two other letters have appeared in print since 1947, in spite of Cather's testamentary restrictions against such publication. One of them is undated and does not contain the name of the addressee. Presumably, however, it was written to Cyril Clemens, kinsman of Samuel L. Clemens and editor of the *Mark Twain Journal*, with whom Cather exchanged several letters until the exchange became distasteful to her. (Clemens, like Weber, began inquiring about Cather's visit to Housman, a subject that angered her because of public misrepresentation.) A photocopy of the letter appeared, in honor of the centenary of Cather's birth, on the back cover of the *Mark Twain Journal* 17 (Winter 1973-74) under the title "Willa Ca-

ther's Tribute to Mark Twain." It is typewritten, but handcorrected and signed in Cather's writing. This is the letter, or at least the part of it, reprinted in the *Journal*:

Some eight years ago I met, in Paris, a Russian violinist who had heard that I was "from the West". After a few moments of conversation, he eagerly asked me whether I was from "the Mississippi". I asked him whether he meant from the State of Mississippi. He looked perplexed and put his hand to his forehead and said eagerly — "But the river, the river?" Oh yes, I told him, I had crossed the Mississippi river many times. He said at once that this river was the thing in America that he most wished to see: he, himself, was born and grew up on another great river, in a little town on the Volga. When he was a little boy he had read a Russian translation of "Huckleberry Finn", and had always thought that the Mississippi must be much more wonderful and romantic than the Volga. I questioned him a little about the book — he seemed to remember it perfectly. But how in the world could the talk of Nigger Jim be translated into Russian? And what would become of the seven shadings of Southern dialect which the author in his preface tells the reader must not be confounded one with the other? It seemed to me that the most delightful things in "Huckleberry Finn" must disappear in a translation. One could translate Parkman or Emerson, certainly: but how translate Mark Twain? The only answer seems to be that if a book has vitality enough, it can live through even the brutalities of translators.

Willa Cather

One interesting aspect of this letter, or part of a letter, is that Cather apparently takes Twain seriously when he describes seven dialect shadings in a prefatory note to his book. Most of us today

assume that Twain speaks with tongue in cheek at such moments. Cather's assumption suggests that she regards an author's introductory apparatus as reliable and important, something worth noting as we read the epigraphs to her books and her introductions to *Alexander's Bridge* and *My Antonia*.

Cather's last known published letter was written to Katherine Foote [Raffy] in 1937. Evidently, Raffy read a tribute to Cather in Brooks Atkinson's column in the *New York Times* on November 24, 1961, and sent him a letter she had received from Cather. Atkinson published the letter in his *Times* column December 29, 1961, and later gave it to New York City's Pierpont Morgan Library. It also appears in a collection of his columns titled *Tuesdays and Fridays* (New York: Random House, 1963). A nostalgic letter, Cather expresses anguish as she sees the world rumbling toward a second world war:

Dear Katherine Foote:

What a joy to hear from you — and how I wish we might meet again in this world which is whirling to destruction so fast that we have not time to breathe, much less do any work.

How much better times were, how much more hopeful, that winter day when I dined with you and your dear father in Brooklyn on the day before you set off on your long voyage to the Golden Horn.

What wonder that one turns back to those times? Who would not like to remember a happy world, having once known it? I do want to see you and to talk with you of those dear people whom we used to know. Please send me your permanent address so that I can telegraph you when I go through Boston on my way to Canada. We might meet at Mrs. Gardner's house? How wonderful!

Affectionately always,
Willa Cather

We should perhaps also note that George Seibel, in "Miss Willa

Cather from Nebraska," *New Colophon* 2 (September 1949): 207-208, quotes briefly from two letters Cather wrote to him. He cites from them as proof that Cather intended Oswald Henshawe to be understood as Myra's "mortal enemy" in her 1926 novel. Even so small a sample of Cather's "unpublished" letters provided here gives us a valuable glimpse of the woman behind the books. If we cannot have all of the extant letters, we can at

least have reader access to those few that readers in the past have seen. One thing is eminently clear: Cather had an extraordinary command of the English language, and she exercised it whenever and wherever she took pen (or typewriter) in hand.

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The Language of Flowers in *O Pioneers!*

Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* has the confidence of a writer who has found her voice. Critics agree with Cather that *O Pioneers!* is the novel in which she "hit the home pasture" (1) as seen in its innovative subject (giving an immigrant farm woman heroic stature) and structure (interweaving two separate stories). But there agreement stops. Early critics faulted the book for breaking in two; more recent ones have recognized that Cather yoked the two parts together in subtle symbolic patterns. However, emphasis on the novel as a two part pastoral instead of a book in five parts, (2) or on the literary allusions (Pyramus and Thisbe,) (3) *Romeo and Juliet*, Canto V of *The Inferno* (4) does not account for Cather's use of over eighty specifically named flowers and plants. The Victorian's code of meaning for specific plants, commonly referred to as The Language of Flowers, when applied to the named plants, flowers and trees in *O Pioneers!* reveals a unified structure that works as an underground river of imagery and symbol that surfaces systematically to emphasize theme, then retreats to function as an underlying current that connects theme as it moves the novel to resolution. *O Pioneers!*, a structurally innovative novel, explores the necessity of creation of order from disorder through the juxtaposition of passionate youth with the permanence of age as revealed through the Victorian Language of Flowers.

That Cather was familiar with Victorian writers is clear. Slote explains in "The Kingdom of Art" the

significance of the epigraph from Kingsley that appears in *The Troll Garden* and lists various Victorian writers that serve as references for the allusions in Cather's work (Slote, p. 36). Many of these writers were included in the Cather library or in the library of her childhood neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Wiener (Woodress, p. 55). Helen Cather Southwick agrees that as a child, Cather would have been familiar with Victorian thought because her adored Grandmother Boak lived a Victorian lifestyle and may very well have used The Language of Flowers to communicate personal thoughts and feelings. (5) It was common practice during that time to select specific flowers or plants to send to someone to communicate an idea that would be inappropriate to state directly. The American authority on the various interpretations of the flowers and plants was Mrs. E. W. Wirt of Virginia, who published her *Flora's Dictionary* in 1837, (6) but the tradition of symbolic meaning for plants and flowers can be traced all the way back to classical times. Most of the slim volumes of floral interpretation that appeared in America from 1850 to 1870 included selections of poetry mostly from the Victorians and partly from the Romantics in England which were to be sent along with the appropriate plant or flower when communicating a secret message. The Victorians believed that the most gracious way to state elemental passions was through hidden meanings. In Cather's 1894 lambast of the reappearance of *Vanity Fair* she states that "it is too bad that

when there are so many clever ways to say wicked things, people will insist on using the most offensive." (7) Her attitude coincides with Victorian sensibility.

"Prairie Spring," which prefaces the novel, sets up the thematic contrast between the order and permanence of age versus the passion of youth and introduces the major plant imagery. The first nine lines explore the somber flat land, filled with riches of wheat, and contrast this in the last nine lines with "Youth, flaming like wild roses". (8) Wheat, which symbolizes prosperity, in the Victorian code, (9) Cather associates with Alexandra throughout the novel. Wild roses, which symbolize the coexistence of pleasure and pain, are associated with Marie and Emil once the reader realizes their passion for each other. Cather makes clear from the start that the stability of the wheat farmer opposes the wild passion of youth and that the fruits of the land symbolically echo this struggle.

One does not overstate to say that *O Pioneers!* abounds with flowers; Cather includes more than eighty references to specifically named plants. Because so much critical attention has been centered on Part IV, "The White Mulberry Tree," and its symbolic importance in the novel, one might expect the majority of the plant references to occur there; but one finds that Part I, "The Wild Land" has twenty-four and Part II, "Neighboring Fields," has thirty-nine, whereas Part IV has only twelve, eleven of which are introduced earlier in the novel. Cather uses the specific plants symbolically in the first two parts to establish clearly the youth/age, disorder/order themes. She then extends those images through the rest of the novel to emphasize the themes at key points in the plot and to move the novel to a resolution of these opposite themes. The last sentence of the book unites the orderly prosperity that the wheat symbolizes with the pleasure and pain of youth as symbolized by wild roses, thus bringing the novel to a successful resolution.

Perhaps when Cather prefaces the description of Alexandra in her

garden in Part I, "The Wild Land," by stating that the "pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves" (p. 48), she is directing the reader to the double meanings of the named plants and flowers that follow. The flowers in Alexandra's garden have survived the drought wholly due to Mrs. Bergson's diligent watering. The zinnias, indicating thoughts of absent friends, the marigolds, signifying grief, pain, and chagrin, and the scarlet sage, representing domestic virtue, make appropriate symbolic choices in that they reveal Mrs. Bergson's state of mind after her husband's death and the value she places on domestic duties.

When one applies the coded meanings to the plants in Alexandra's garden, one sees her personal feelings and position within the pioneer community. Confident Alexandra knows that her strength and deep well of energy will carry her through the difficult months that others find disheartening and that the land will respond to her efforts if she treats it with love and respect. The pumpkins and citrons, representing bulkiness and zest respectively, echo Alexandra's physical qualities. The seed potatoes and gooseberries, representing benevolence and anticipation, reflect her belief in the goodness of the land and her hope for its fruitfulness. Alexandra's belief in the land encourages her neighbors, when they need help, to ask her for advice which the rhubarb represents, and to criticize her when she attempts something new, which the seed-cucumbers signify. Alexandra, at this early stage of her life, would like to please everyone in her family, a sentiment represented by currants, but will not be able to do this as she strives to establish order in the wild land. Carl, who has been a source of strength for Alexandra because he understands her, knows that his absence will be a hardship for Alexandra, so he eases her pain by reminiscing about making plum wine together. Domesticated plums mean keep your promises, which idea echoes Carl's impetuous promise to "write as long as I

live" (p. 53), whereas wild plums signify independence, which will be the quality that will direct the majority of Alexandra's life from this point on. The remainder of Alexandra's youth disappears with Carl's exit.

The youthful power inherent in air that has a "tonic . . . quality" (p. 77) in Chapter I of "Neighboring Fields" prepares the reader for the introduction of the adult Marie and her role in the subplot. When she first appears as an adult, the red poppies that trim her wide hat shade her face, which "was rather like a poppy, round and brown, with rich color in her cheeks and lips" (p. 79), make her the picture of youth. For Victorians red poppies mean evanescent pleasure, which describes exactly not only Marie's state of mind, but her effect on those around her. However, a darker symbolic image immediately follows this picture — an image that will continue to be used as the Marie/Emil story unfolds.

The cherry tree in the Victorian interpretation has two conflicting meanings. The wild cherry tree symbolizes deception. The tamed, cultivated cherry tree that would occur in an orchard represents education, because one must be knowledgeable to turn the wild tree into a fruitbearing tree. The symbolic difference between the wild and the cultivated cherry tree became blurred during the later stages of the Victorian period so that the cherry tree came to mean more generally that knowledge will not always prevent deception. This interpretation points up the relation in the Marie/Emil story because it emphasizes the view of the lovers as victims of youthful passions that they know are destructive, but cannot control.

Youthful passion contrasts at the end of this chapter with "the order and fine arrangement manifest all over" (p. 84) Alexandra's prosperous farm. The scrub willows, signifying freedom, and the walnut tree, representing intellect and strategem reflect the qualities that have aided Alexandra in gaining a measure of affluence. The osage orange hedges, symbolizing luxury, line either side of the road leading to her house. Seemingly

nothing can threaten Alexandra or her farm. Order rests securely in prosperity. The juxtaposition of the poppy/cherry tree with the willow, walnut and osage orange tree emphasize the struggle between youth and age and function here as introduction to Part II.

In the next three chapters, Cather further develops Alexandra's role within her community and the personal consequences she must suffer due to that role. She compares Alexandra's head to "one of the big sunflowers that fringe her vegetable garden" (p. 88). The introduction of this new flower symbol shows that Alexandra's success has given her personal confidence, but has made her neighbors and brothers see her as haughty, a quality which the sunflower represents. Alexandra's haughtiness, which comes partly from her superior vision and partly from the perception of jealous neighbors, will make her unable to see Marie and Emil's plight and therefore will cause her anguish.

Cather develops well the references to the Victorian code in the opening scene of Chapter IX. The wild roses mentioned in "Prairie Spring" appear with no other plant so they signify the coexistence of pleasure and pain. To this point Marie has been nothing but a source of pleasure to Alexandra, so to associate wild roses with her as she, Carl, and Alexandra enjoy a lively conversation in Marie's orchard would be inaccurate. Instead Cather notes in this scene that the "wild roses were flaming in the tufts of bunch grass" (p. 135) thus changing the meaning from pleasure and pain to *there is everything to be gained by good company*, the message intended when the Victorians sent a rose in a tuft of grass. But as in Chapter I of "Neighboring Fields," Cather follows these pleasure-filled symbols with ones that foreshadow the tragic end of the Marie/Emil story. Cather names three trees, the apple tree, representing temptation, the apricot tree, indicating doubt, and the white mulberry tree, which means I will not survive you; and she connects Marie most closely with the mulberry tree. Obviously Marie will become a source of

temptation for Emil. Carl Lindstrum, who receives Marie's gift of a branch from an apricot tree, alone doubts Marie's innocence. But most significantly, the introduction of the white mulberry tree here indicates not only an early death for Marie, but alludes to the tragic death that will come from illicit love. The Victorian interpretation of the white mulberry tree comes from the Pyramus and Thisbee legend and from the legend that the person who plants a mulberry tree would never live to taste its fruit because the tree matures slowly. The Victorians always connected the white mulberry tree with secret love and early death.

When the river of flowers symbolism resurfaces in Chapter VIII, Cather introduces additional plants. Marie's orchard, which in Chapter VIII has become "a neglected wilderness" (p. 151) serves as an appropriate setting for Emil's admission of love. The cherry tree and the wild rose, the first plants named in this chapter, mean deception and pleasure/pain respectively in the *wild* state. The wild larkspur, signifying swiftness, and the hoarhound, representing fire, would not exist in a carefully tended orchard, their presence emphasizes the passion that drives Marie and Emil. The picture of Marie "sitting under her white mulberry tree, the pailful of cherries beside her, looking off at the gentle, tireless swelling of the wheat" (p. 152) reveals the deception that will be the basis of the lovers' death and the prosperity, represented by the distant wheat, that they will never enjoy.

Trees have more than just symbolic meaning in the chapter; Marie reveals her belief that trees have power and meaning and that her old world ancestors were tree worshippers. When Emil asks her which trees are the lucky ones, she relates a tale about the old world linden trees that folk planted to purify the forest by doing away with spells cast by other trees. Particularly interesting this choice because the linden, which represents matrimony and conjugal love, does not physically exist in Marie's orchard. If it did, her ancestors would have believed, it

could nullify the deception and death that the cherry tree and mulberry tree represent. But because Marie has no conjugal love in her marriage, the linden tree is legendary, not actual. The fire of the lover's passion will be all-consuming, and the spells cast by the cherry and mulberry trees will be inevitable.

Cather carries the application of these interpretations one step further by having Emil pick "the sweet, insipid fruit" (p. 153) of the mulberry tree (I will not survive you) and "drop a handful into her lap" (p. 153) thereby foreshadowing the order of the lovers' deaths. Because the actual gift of plants conveyed the intended message in the Victorian code, symbolically Emil is telling Marie that he will die first. Cather intensifies the importance of this action since it is the last reference in relation to Marie and Emil in Part II.

Not until Marie's reaction to Amédeé's death in Chapter V, of "The White Mulberry Tree", does Cather reintroduce the wild rose symbol and add one new plant symbol that serves to prepare the reader for the climax in Chapter VI. As she walks in the moonlit countryside amid wild roses, Marie ponders Amédeé's fate, then decides that once Emil has left "she could let everything else go and live a new life of perfect love" (p. 249). Emil's absence will be both painful and pleasurable to her as emphasized by the wild roses through which she walks. The ashes-of-rose plant, the common milkweed, represents thoughts of heaven in the Victorian code and appears along with the wild roses in this chapter to help make Marie seem other-worldly as she plans her future. As she considers Amédeé's fate alongside Emil's and her own, she concludes that she "wanted to love and dream . . . as long as this sweetness welled up in her heart, as long as her breast could hold this treasure of pain!" (p. 250). She does not feel tied to the earth, but like the ashes-of-rose, her thoughts are of the heavens.

Passion and death are just as intimately connected for Emil as they are for Marie, but to Emil "the heart, when it is too much alive,

aches for that brown earth" (p. 257). As he leaves Amédeé's funeral, he yields to his passion for Marie and goes to her for one last goodbye. At this point Cather includes plants with appropriate symbolic meanings to emphasize the youth/age, disorder/order theme. Emil storms through fields filled with ripe corn (riches), wheat (prosperity), and sweet clover (industry), but these things "passed him like pleasant things in a dream" (p. 258). The order and prosperity that Alexandra has established in the fields by sacrificing her youth to industry, means nothing to Emil. Only the apple trees (temptation), cherry trees (deception), and the mulberry tree (I will not survive you) of Marie's orchard reach his consciousness. When he awakens Marie under her mulberry tree and consummates their love, he can see only his own face, the orchard, and the sun as they are reflected in Marie's eyes.

When in the next chapter, Frank creeps through a mulberry hedge, discovers the lovers, and then shoots blindly, he fulfills the Victorian interpretation of the mulberry tree, I will not survive you. But Cather makes it clear that tragic death is not the whole story nor is the legend of Pyramus and Thisbee the sole allusion. "The stained, slippery grass, the darkened mulberries told only half the story" (p. 270). The pleasure and pain of the wild rose demonstrates that youthful passion and tragic death are connected, but Marie and Emil's illicit love destroys not only their lives, but threatens the order and prosperity of Alexandra's life. As set up thematically in "Prairie Spring" at the beginning of the novel, youthful passion, "in its insupportable sweetness," "flaming like wild roses" (preface) opposes the prosperity and strength of "the growing wheat" (preface), the center of Alexandra's life. Alexandra's response to the tragedy and the resolution of the opposing themes, remains for exploration.

In Part V, "Alexandra", Carl and Alexandra walk through Mrs. Hiller's garden as Carl explains Marie and Emil's love, but Cather does not yet refer to any specific plants.

Once Alexandra accepts their love, Cather unites the two themes, youthful passion/stable age, disorder/order, together in her by using the plant symbolism to emphasize Alexandra's rebirth. It is "fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the shining eyes of youth!" (p. 309). The country returns riches and prosperity and youthful enthusiasm to future generations because of hearts like Alexandra's. She is complete, now, as she was not before the tragedy. Where the passion of youth and the order of age were in opposition throughout the novel, now they are connected in Alexandra and can be given to future generations through the bounty of the land.

Willa Cather wanted the people of Nebraska to like *O Pioneers!*. (10) She may have assumed these plant references and their secret meanings would be apparent to the casual reader because *The Language of Flowers* was not a tool used just by aristocratic ladies and gentlemen, but was part of most households in Cather's grandmother's day. As Slote pointed out, "one need not have expected notes from the novelist" (11) to help the reader make these connections. Cather's early critics assumed *O Pioneers!* told the story of the pioneer woman in Nebraska predominately because the setting and major plot lines were unique in the literature of 1913. While recent critics have stressed the wealth of literary allusions in Cather's work, they may have overlooked the floral interpretations in *O Pioneers!*. This fact does not surprise us; we no longer use the Victorian code of meanings for floral gifts. But as Slote explains, "around 1908 Willa Cather seems to have made a deliberate effort to use primary experience in a mythical or allusive structure" (*Kingdom of Art*, p. 103). In a novel that has over eighty references to specifically named plants, it becomes apparent that these references are by design and that they function as allusive structural tools that organize and emphasize the thematic contrast of youth and age.

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(Paper given at Western Literature Association meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota, 1983.)

Notes

(1) Mildred Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), illustration.

(2) Bruce Baker, "O Pioneers!: The Problem of Structure", *Great Plains Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4, p. 222.

(3) Bernice Slote, "The Kingdom of Art" in *The Kingdom of Art Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896*, ed. Bernice Slote, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 100. Subsequent references to this essay will appear within the text.

(4) James Woodress, "Willa Cather: American and European Tradition", in *The Art of Willa Cather*, ed. Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), p. 55.

(5) Interview with Helen Cather Southwick, "Willa Cather Today: A National Conference" held in Hastings, Nebraska, June 19-25, 1983.

(6) Mrs. E. W. Wirt of Virginia, *Floras Dictionary*, (Baltimore: Fielding Lucas, Jr., 1873).

(7) Willa Cather, *The Kingdom of Art Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896*, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 58. Subsequent references to this collection will appear within the text.

(8) Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1941). Subsequent references to this edition will appear within the text.

(9) Floral interpretations used throughout the paper were determined by checking the American Victorian Dictionaries as listed in the bibliography, against the English authorities and applying the most commonly accepted interpretation. A recent publication by Claire Powell, *The Meaning of Flowers* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1979) presents an excellent history of plant interpretations, literary uses of the translated meanings and an accurate glossary of plants, many of which disappeared after the Victorian

period, with the most common Victorian interpretation for each plant. Some plants in *O Pioneers!*, named by a local common term, do not appear in the Victorian Floral Dictionaries by that name. The botanical name of those plants was determined by consulting John Madson, *Where the Sky Began: Land of the Tallgrass Prairie* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1982). Some plants in *O Pioneers!* were not commonly used in the Victorian code and many appear in only one of the works listed in the bibliography. All interpretations of plants that appear within this paper were determined in this fashion.

(10) This fact is common within most of the biographical work on Cather. It is most clearly stated in Elizabeth Shepley Sargeant's memoir.

(11) Bernice Slote, "An Exploration of Cather's Early Writing," *Great Plains Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4, p. 211.

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of great satisfaction, even elation. Edith Lewis says Cather was so affected by the reunion that when she returned to New York she already had the first few chapters of the novel written.(2)

Cather wrote *The Professor's House* (1925) and the revised introduction to *My Ántonia* (1926), under much different conditions. Miss Lewis calls *The Professor's House* "the most personal of Willa Cather's novels." (3) Nowhere else in her fiction does one sense loss and disillusionment so profoundly as in the character of Professor Godfrey St. Peter. Like him, Willa Cather had by 1926, become "one of the backward" — one of those persons whose affinities and associations cling to a past world, undermined and destroyed by time and "progress." Like St. Peter, "tremendously tired," Willa Cather found herself increasingly unable to accept or cope with the world around her.

The two versions of the introduction to *My Ántonia* clearly reflect the changes in Willa Cather's attitudes that took place between 1918 and 1926. Although Jim Burden's narrative remains virtually unchanged, various differences between the two introductions affect the picture we get of him. First, in the 1918 edition Cather gives a somewhat detailed description of his wife's background and personality, in the 1926 version one sees only a short description of her. Secondly, where in the original introduction one reads an agreement between Jim Burden and the author that they will both write about Ántonia, in the revised introduction one finds no such agreement. While the two are talking on the train, Jim remarks to the author that from time to time he has been writing down what he remembers about Ántonia, and several months later he brings the author his account to read.

As E. K. Brown states, this change improves the effect of the novel: "Jim's concern with Ántonia seems more profound when the decision to record his memories stems not from a meeting with a professional writer but from his own inward impulse." (4) But the conversation about this original

Jim Burden, Willa Cather and the Introductions to *My Ántonia*

Critics have often discussed the technical aspects of Jim Burden's role as narrator in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. Despite David Daiches' dismissal of the introduction to the novel as relatively unimportant (*Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction*, 1951), as various critics have asserted, a realization of what Willa Cather accomplishes in that section becomes essential to an understanding of the tone and structure of the novel as a whole. There seems, however, to have been little reference to the introduction as it describes and reflects the personality of Jim Burden. There were, in fact, several versions of the introduction, the most important being the original version of 1918 and the revised version of 1926. (1) When discussing the novel, it has been critical commonplace to refer to the 1926 introduction: but while an author is certainly entitled to have his work judged as it appears in its final form, a comparison of the two versions of the introduction reveals some interesting and significant changes.

The writing of *My Ántonia* had actually begun over thirty years before Cather put words down on

paper, when Willa Cather moved from Virginia to Nebraska. The stories of the poor immigrant farmers struggling to adjust to and to master the wild country and the accounts of their energy, will, and endurance in carving out a new life in a new land had "teased" Willa Cather for three decades. Some time in 1916, returning to New York from a trip to the Southwest, she stopped and stayed several weeks in her hometown, Red Cloud. One day she drove out onto the Divide to see Annie Sadilek Pavelka, the Bohemian immigrant woman who had been one of her closest childhood friends. In the worn face of the still energetic woman, now surrounded by her many children, Willa Cather saw reflected the whole history of the immigrant experience in the Midwest, the struggle and the triumph of the early Nebraska pioneer. She had wanted to tell the pioneer woman's story for years, and she decided at that moment that her next novel would recreate the life of this stalwart old friend. The sight of Annie Pavelka and all her children was a profoundly moving experience for Willa Cather and seems to have left her with a sense

agreement, which Cather omits in the 1926 version, gives a significant picture of Jim Burden:

"I can't see," he said *impetuously*, "why you have never written anything about Antonia."

I told him I had always felt that other people — he himself, for one — knew her much better than I. I was ready, however, to make an agreement with him; I would set down on paper all that I remembered of Antonia if he would do the same. We might, in this way, get a picture of her.

He *rumped* his hair with a *quick, excited* gesture, which with him often announces a new *determination*, and I could see that my suggestion took hold of him. "Maybe I will, maybe I will!" he declared. He stared out of the window for a few moments, and when he turned to me again *his eyes had the sudden clearness* that comes from something the mind itself sees [*italics mine*]. (5)

A further comparison of the introductions reveals two additional changes made in the 1926 edition: in the first the omission of three words, in the second the deletion of a long description of Jim:

1918: As for Jim, no disappointments have been severe enough to chill his *naturally* romantic and *ardent* disposition. This disposition, though it often made him seem very funny when he was a boy, has been one of the strongest elements in his success [*italics mine*] (p. xi).

1926: As for Jim, disappointments have not changed him. The romantic disposition which often made him seem very funny as a boy, has been one of the strongest elements in his success. (6)

1918: He loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches. His faith in it and his knowledge of it have played an important part in its development. He is

always able to raise capital for new enterprises in Wyoming or Montana, and has helped young men out there to do remarkable things in mines and timber and oil. If a young man with an idea can once get Jim Burden's attention, can manage to accompany him when he goes off into the wilds hunting for lost parks or exploring new canyons, then the money which means action is usually forthcoming. Jim is *still able* to lose himself in those big Western dreams. Though he is over forty now, he meets new people and new enterprises with the *impulsiveness* by which his boyhood friends remember him. *He never seems to me to grow older*. His fresh color and sandy hair and *quick-changing blue eyes* are those of a young man, and his sympathetic, solicitous interest in women is as *youthful* as it is Western and American [*italics mine*] (pp. xi-xii).

1926: He loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches. His faith in it and his knowledge of it have played an important part in its development (p. x).

In the 1918 introduction, then, Jim Burden, though forty years old, is still a very youthful, energetic, and impulsive man. In the 1926 introduction he seems much less youthful and energetic, more reflective and wistfully nostalgic. While in the 1918 introduction he lives as a character who still possesses a vitality comparable to that of Antonia, in Willa Cather's final version he appears as a man who has regretfully taken on Wordsworth's "inevitable yoke," who is, as opposed to Antonia, rather battered and diminished.

While Willa Cather, an author who prided herself on what she could leave out (see, for example, her essay, "The Novel D meubl "), the revisions, mainly in the form of deletions, made from the 1918 to the 1926 introduction seem more than merely stylistic. Significant emotional and psychological

changes that had occurred in Willa Cather herself between 1918 and 1926 seem to manifest themselves in the two descriptions of Jim Burden. By 1926 Willa Cather's original elation at her reunion with Annie Pavelka had died, the glorious days of the nineteenth-century Midwest had ended, the world for her had broken apart, and she felt herself both battered and diminished. The two introductions to *My Antonia* provide interesting evidence of the changes she had undergone in eight years and perhaps suggest that her sense of Jim Burden's relationship to Antonia and the past had also changed.

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Notes

(1) The important substantive changes occur in these two editions. The other versions generally contain mechanical variations, e.g., in punctuation.

(2) *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*, Edith Lewis (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 102.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 137.

(4) *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, completed by Brown & Edel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 200-201.

(5) *My Antonia*, with illustrations by W. T. Benda (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), pp. xii-xiii. Subsequent references to this edition are placed in the text.

(6) *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926), p. x. Subsequent references to this edition are placed in the text.

Willa Cather and the Nebraska Frontier

In a lecture delivered in 1920 at Omaha, Sinclair Lewis said of Willa Cather that she was Nebraska's foremost citizen and that the United States knew Nebraska because of her books. Nebraska indeed is present as material or background not only in many of her short stories, but also in several of her novels such as *O Pioneers!*, *One of Ours*, *A Lost Lady* and *Lucy Gayheart*. Even in the novels she situates in other regions, such as *The Song of the Lark* or *The Professor's House*, one feels she is still referring to the land where she spent the greater part of her childhood.

Yet it took her a long time before she fully realized how much she depended upon Nebraska for the core of her inspiration. Her first novel to deal in an affirmative way with the Prairie was *O Pioneers!*, in 1913, and by then she was already forty. For several years she had been living in New York where she had secured a position as editor of the famous muckraking *McClure's* magazine. At that time she was a devotee of Henry James and cosmopolitan values. In fact, her first full-length novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, published in 1912, reflected Willa Cather's ambition to conform to the Jamesian standards in subject if not in treatment. Later, she was to compare that Eastern novel with *O Pioneers!*, the Western novel, in an attempt to explain the reasons for her evolution:

My first novel *Alexander's Bridge* was very like what painters call a studio picture . . . I still find people who like that book because it follows the most conventional pattern and because it is more or less laid in London. London is supposed to be more engaging than, let us say, Gopher Prairie . . . Soon after the book was published, I went for six months to Arizona and New Mexico. The longer I stayed in a country, . . . the more unnecessary and superficial a book like *Alexan-*

der's Bridge seemed to me . . . I recovered from the conventional editorial point of view (1).

It undoubtedly took courage on the part of that literary woman who was pursuing a brilliant career in a leading New York magazine to dare return for her inspiration to the bare land of her youth, not this time to deride it, as she had done in some earlier stories of hatred and frustration, but to celebrate it with fervor and love. About *O Pioneers!* she said afterwards that "she did not at all expect that other people would see anything in a slow moving story . . . concerned solely with heavy farming people, with cornfields and pasture lands and pigyards, — set in Nebraska, of all places!" "As everyone knows," she went on, "Nebraska is distinctly 'déclassé' as a literary background . . . A New York critic voiced a very general opinion when he said: 'I simply don't give a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes about it.'" (2)

Sarah O. Jewett had once told Willa Cather: "Of course, one day, you will write about your own country. In the meantime get all you can. One must know the world so well before one can know the parish." (3) After years of varied and exciting experiences, travels in the States and abroad, especially in France, encounters with famous authors, musicians, artists, after considerable literary experiments and journalistic activities, Willa Cather felt she could at last follow the advice of the New England novelist. She had acquired enough detachment, she was mature enough to write about that "shaggy country" which, she said, had "gripped" her "with a passion" she "had never been able to shake." (4) The latter statement contains the implicit admission that she tried to resist Nebraska's hold on her, but that in the end she had been defeated. After graduating from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, she fled from Red Cloud, the small prairie town where she grew up, in an attempt

to escape its drabness and fulfill her dreams of literary achievement. After she left for Pittsburgh in June, 1896, to work for some obscure ladies' magazine, she wrote to a friend in Nebraska that when her train got East of Chicago, she felt so elated that the conductor, seeing her look of glee, asked her if she was getting back home. However, after having settled in the City of Dreadful Dirt, as she called Pittsburgh, she had fits of nostalgia, and in a moment of despondency she wrote to her friend Mariel Gere that she could not be happy so far away from home. Though she never settled again in Nebraska, she often returned there for prolonged stays. About the way she felt on such occasions she wrote: "Whenever I crossed the Missouri River, coming into Nebraska, the very smell of the soil tore me to pieces."

The impressions she had gathered as a child uprooted from her native Virginia and taken to the Western Frontier when she was nine, were intense and were never to be forgotten. They came to life, fresh and vivid, particularly in novels like *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia* and *The Song of the Lark*. About the genesis of *O Pioneers!* she declared:

I knew every farm, every tree, every field in the region around my home and they called out to me. My deepest feelings were rooted in this country because one's strongest emotions and one's most vivid mental pictures are acquired before one is fifteen. I had searched for books about the beauty of the country I loved: its romance, the heroism and strength and courage of its people . . . and I did not find them. And so I wrote *O Pioneers!* (5).

Willa Cather indeed thought that the subject-matter she used in that novel was original to a great extent because, among other reasons, "no American writer had used Swedish immigrants for any but comic purpose." Of course, ever since James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers*, published in 1823, the conquest of a new country had been the subject of many stories.

Hamlin Garland had described the plight of German and Norwegian immigrants in Iowa or Wisconsin. Nevertheless, if Willa Cather was not the first to write about pioneers, it was in her novels that the pioneers' struggle to settle the land was first raised to the level of high art as R. Meyer observes in *The Middle-West Farm Novel*. When one considers how conventional most of the Western romances had been before Willa Cather, Meyer's judgment is perfectly valid. The same critic very aptly notes that Willa Cather was above all interested in individual personalities and subordinated the external story of pioneering to the study of their development. For example, in *O Pioneers!* Alexandra's relation to the land is not that of a mere pioneer woman. She becomes an earth goddess making the whole Prairie tame and fruitful. Similarly, the heroine in *My Antonia* is the new Eve of America, "a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races," as Willa Cather writes towards the end of the novel. Antonia, the mother of eleven beautiful children and the founder of a fertile homestead, represents a symbol of fecundity, as suggested in this evocation:

She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crabtree and look up at the apples to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last.

In her books about the pioneers, Willa Cather expounded her views of human nature, a philosophy of life and a criticism of American civilization which invest the pioneer venture with implications reaching far beyond the narrow frame of the farm novel and even the more ample chronicle of the Nebraska Frontier. In *O Pioneers!* and in *My Antonia* she made it quite clear that it was not in the material achievements of the pioneers that she was interested, but in their outstanding moral traits, in the way they endured hardships and eventually triumphed over the soil. Quoting Michelet "le but n'est rien, le chemin est tout," she declared that success did not matter so much as struggle. In an article

on Nebraska which she wrote in 1923, she praised "the sturdy traits of character of the pioneers" but also "their elasticity of mind" and "qualities of feeling and imagination" which to her were basically the same as those the artist ought to possess in order to be truly creative. Of Annie Sadilek, the Bohemian girl who served as model for Antonia, she said: "she was one of the truest artists I ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains." (6)

At the same time, while telling "the splendid story of the pioneers," to use her own words, she implied that the children of those "giants who subdued the land" were not worthy of them. According to her, the America of her time was heading towards what she called "machine-made materialism" which was rapidly destroying the values of the Frontier. In the same article, she declared that for the pioneers "material prosperity was a moral victory," but that for their sons, it meant merely material comfort and the desire to live easily. She talked about "the ugly crest of materialism setting its seal all over the country." (7)

As she grew older, she increasingly looked towards the past for the values she cherished. Critics were prompt to denounce her escapism, accusing her of retreating into the past in order to flee from the realities of the present. They, of course, failed to realize that Willa Cather was essentially a "novelist of memory", as E. Wagenknecht remarked in *Cavalcade of the American Novel*. The epigraph from Virgil on the title page of *My Antonia* illustrates the novelist's nostalgia: "Optima dies . . . prima fugit." Echoing the melancholy of the Latin poet, Jim Burden, the narrator, says at the end of the novel: "For Antonia and for me this had been the road of Destiny . . . whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past." In 1918, shortly after the publication of the book, Randolph Bourne in the "Dial" had perceived the elegiac charm of the story:

Here at last is an American novel, redolent of the Western Prairie . . . *My Antonia* has the indestructible fragrance of youth, the prairie girls and the dances . . . the rich flowered prairie, with its drowsy heats and stinging colds . . . This story lives with the hopefulness of the West. It is poignant and beautiful, but it is not sad. It is richly interpreting the spirit of youth.

Willa Cather herself pointed out, as she had already done with *O Pioneers!* the role of memory in her second Nebraska novel. She had treasured up recollections that lay hidden in her mind and had been slowly maturing until they were ready to expand and take the shape of fiction: "*My Antonia* came along, quite of itself and with no direction from me . . . the book had all been lived many times before it was written, and the happy mood in which I began it never paled." The critic Joseph Krutch once remarked that one of the weaknesses of the novels of the 1920's was that they could easily be summarized in abstract intellectual terms. However he made an exception in the case of Willa Cather, saying that she never started a novel with an intellectual conviction but with an emotional reaction which she tried to recapture in her books. She could not write convincingly about what she did not feel strongly. That statement defines at once the nature of her art and its limits. With her Nebraska novels, Willa Cather gave the best of herself. Although some of her later novels showed greater skill, they had less vitality. They lost color, movement and warmth in a manner reminiscent of the pale and delicate frescoes of Puvis de Chavannes whom she admired, conveying a sense of insubstantiality rather than life itself. It was as if the free genius of the Prairie which she had formerly extolled had deserted her. However, she recaptured it in *Obscure Destinies* (1932) when in three perfect short stories she dealt again with her Red Cloud memories.

To her the Nebraska of her youth represented heroism and imagination. She told the story of a

land once barren and then subdued by the first generation pioneers, most of them immigrants from Europe in whom she saw "men of faith and vision."

In her novels set in the high plains of Nebraska, she displayed her greatest gift, the gift of sympathy. "The artist," she wrote, "fades away into the land and people of his heart, he dies of love only to be born again." (8)

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Université de Provence
(Aix)

Footnotes

(1) Willa Cather, "My First Novels (There Were Two)," *The Colophon*, 1931.

(2) *Ibid.*

(3) Cited by Willa Cather in 1922 preface to *Alexander's Bridge*.

(4) Quoted from an interview by Eva Mahoney, *Omaha Sunday World-Herald*, November 27, 1921.

(5) *Ibid.*

(6) Latrobe Carroll, "Willa Sibert Cather," *The Bookman*, May 1921.

(7) Willa Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," *The Nation*, September 1923.

(8) Willa Cather's preface to "The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett," collected in *On Writing* (New York, 1968), p. 51.

Cather Inspires Poet

Willa Cather wrote the young author a letter (second stanza of poem taken from the letter). He took her advice and achieved what she inspired. His lines

"How shall you act the natural man in this invented city, neither Rome nor home?"

are chiseled into the new Western Plaza in Washington, D.C. Although the management had a "no living author's rule" Ernest Kroll learned his poetry had been used when he attended a party in D.C.

At the Grave of Willa Cather

(Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire)

Ernest Kroll

After half
a life's odd
shifts arrived
before your
footboard, Mount
Monadnock,
I thank you
for the shock
of candor

("Nobody
can teach you
anything
about it.
You have to
learn it all
by yourself")

shattering
the postmarked
dream of one
"Eureka!"
formula

("How does one
learn to write?")

I thank you
and invoke
Monadnock
for witness:

"This dust once
shook my youth
up out of
stuffing and
stiffened it
with the truth."

(Used by permission of *Kansas Quarterly* winter '84-'85 and by permission of Ernest Kroll.)

Special Edition Authors

John Murphy, professor of English at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

Marilyn Arnold, Dean of Graduate Studies, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

Cynthia Briggs, English teacher, Wyoming High School, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Merrill Skaggs, professor of English, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey.

Kathryn T. Stofer, English teacher, Northwest High School, Grand Island, Nebraska.

John March, former Research Consultant for *Collier's Encyclopedia*, New York, New York.

Dr. Richard C. Harris, Department of Humanities, State University of New York Maritime College, Fort Schuyler, Bronx, New York.

Jean Tsien, Department of English, Foreign Languages Institute, Beijing, The Peoples' Republic of China.

Gervaud, Michel, Professor of English, Université de Provence (Aix), France.

First Scholarly Cather Volumes to Be Produced

A major grant to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln will result in the first scholarly editions ever published of Willa Cather's novels.

The Woods Charitable Fund will provide \$36,000 for the first year of a 10-year project, which the Department of English and the Center for Great Plains Studies co-sponsor.

The UNL Chancellor's Office and UNL Research Council also have provided grants for the project, which has been endorsed by the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation.

Until now, copyright restrictions have prevented publication of scholarly editions of Cather's works, said project director Sue Rosowski, associate professor of English who teaches Cather studies at UNL. The restrictions were lifted because of the outstanding research on Cather completed at UNL and the reputation of the University of Nebraska Press for Great Plains literature, Rosowski said.

Rosowski will be general editor for the project together with James
(Continued on Page 38)

Woodress, professor of English at the University of California-Davis. UNL English Professor Charles Mignon will oversee the textual editing with Rosowski.

The project has major significance for Nebraska, Rosowski said.

"Willa Cather was the first to write in serious literature about the beauty of the Midwest, and her writing remains the primary means by which the world knows the region and the state. For persons living in Nebraska, and especially Lincoln," she said, "Willa Cather provides a window to the world."

The grant will establish an editorial center for the project and has

provided a two-day workshop for textual and volume editors.

The scholarly editions will present the first comprehensive information about revisions Cather made and the first comprehensive explanatory information to accompany the texts, including identification of locations, literary references, persons, historical events, flora, and ethnic customs.

The first editions will consist of work produced in and about Nebraska.

Available from Cather Foundation Book Store

The University of Nebraska Press will publish Dr. Susan J. Rosowski's book: *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* in December, 1986.

The University of Nebraska Press has reissued *Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir*, photographs by Lucia Woods and others. Text by Bernice Slote. \$27.95 plus \$2.50 postage and handling.

Uncle Valentine and Other Stories, Willa Cather's uncollected fiction, 1915-1929 is now available in paperback. \$6.95 plus \$1.50 postage and handling.

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- To promote and assist in the development and preservation of the art, literary, and historical collection relating to the life, time, and work of Willa Cather, in association with the Nebraska State Historical Society.
- To cooperate with the Nebraska State Historical Society in continuing to identify, restore to their original condition, and preserve places made famous by the writing of Willa Cather.
- To provide for Willa Cather a living memorial, through the Foundation, by encouraging and assisting scholarship in the field of the humanities.
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