Help restore the 1885 Red Cloud Opera

The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation is pleased to announce that renovations to the historic 1885 Red Cloud Opera House have begun! When completed, the Opera House will be restored as a center for culture and education and preserved as an important site of Willa Cather’s life in Red Cloud. The restored Opera House will include an auditorium, Visitors’ Center, gift store and art gallery, and the headquarters of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation.

Contributions are still needed to complete the renovation and to create a new home for the Cather Archives. Send your contribution for the Opera House renovation to:
326 North Webster Street
Red Cloud, NE 68970
or call Steve Ryan at (402) 746-2653 for more information.

The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation
"... an atmosphere of endeavor, of expectancy and bright hopefulness ..."

— Willa Cather
We enter our second year with a strong sense of gratitude for our contributors and subscribers. We promise to continue to be a source of information and inspiration for teachers and readers of the works of Willa Cather. Your submissions and comments will guide us in our efforts to make Teaching Cather interesting and useful.

This issue includes articles on some of Cather's most frequently taught short stories: Marilyn Arnold on “The Sentimentality of William Tavener,” Virgil Albertini on “Paul’s Case,” and Don Connors on “The Sculptor’s Funeral.” Teachers who want additional information about these and other short stories will enjoy two fine books about Cather's short fiction: Willa Cather's Short Fiction, by Marilyn Arnold (Ohio University Press, 1984) and Willa Cather: A Study of the Short Fiction, by Loretta Wasserman (Twayne Publishers, 1991).

We continue in this issue our practice of featuring student writing, this time an award-winning story by Diane Hastings, a recent graduate of Hastings High School in Nebraska. Diane’s story is a tribute to her own talent and hard work; to her teacher Betty Kort, herself a prize-winning scholar and teacher; and to the continuing potential of Cather’s writing to inspire new generations of readers and writers.

We are especially pleased to showcase Cather’s hometown of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Last summer’s visit to Red Cloud by C-SPAN provided the impetus for the cover photo of the current crop of young scholars as well as for Ardis Yost’s warm account of her experiences teaching Cather’s writing in the author’s hometown. Ardis reassures us that young people continue to enjoy studying Willa Cather. Her article reminds us of the potential for bringing the classroom into the community and for motivating students through the simple pleasures of country picnics and one-room schoolhouses.

This issue of Teaching Cather allows readers to travel, like Thea Kronborg, from Red Cloud to Chicago to New York. Anthony Millspaugh’s article on Cather’s Chicago showcases the connections between literature, history and geography. We are pleased to bring you the syllabus developed by Merrill Maguire Skaggs for teaching about Cather’s New York and a lively account of the intrepid traveler Betty Jean Steinshouer, who has brought Willa Cather to countless schools and communities around the country.

Steve Shively
Virgil Albertini

ABOUT THE COVER

The photograph by Charlene Hoschouer of The Red Cloud Chief shows a group of Red Cloud students presenting a dramatic account of the life of Willa Cather for the crew from C-SPAN, which was in town to film a special show on Cather. Family and friends also enjoyed the local production, which was directed by Ardis Yost and occurred at the Yost Farm School. The students, from left to right, are Benjamin Hobbs, James Danehey, Shelby Bostock, Katie Danehey, Cody Oates, Anna Eberly, and Paige Beezley. The quotation from My Antonia was written by Cather to describe Jim Burden’s enthusiasm about the University of Nebraska. We believe it still applies to students everywhere.

Teaching Cather is supported by a grant from the Culture of Quality, by the Department of English at Northwest Missouri State University, and by your subscriptions.
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The interior of the Yost Farm School.
Willa Cather: Sentence by Sentence

BY MARILYN ARNOLD

For several years now, I have taught a Brigham Young University adult education literature class in St. George, Utah, a pleasant town anchored deep in the spectacular red rock canyon country of southwestern Utah. Because of its desert setting and mild winters, St. George is a popular retirement community and haven for “snowbirds.” The people who attend my class range in age from the twenties to the eighties; but, one and all, they love the fiction of Willa Cather.

They would be disappointed if we did not read something by Cather every term, and they would be happy if Cather had written a hundred novels so we could read and discuss her work forever. Three or four years ago, some of the older class members approached me and begged that, sometime, we spend one whole term on Cather alone. “We must do that before we die!” they urged, only half-jokingly. I agreed and we did it. The word got out, and the class filled up quickly. We had to cut enrollment off at fifty because the classroom wouldn’t hold more than that.

And that term was the high point of this rewarding venture into adult education. I suspect that most of the readers of this journal are secondary or college teachers, but I’m here to tell you that teaching adults—and especially teaching Cather to adults—is some of the most enjoyable teaching I have ever done. I simply love it. (My only complaint is that the preparation time has a way of interfering with my skiing.) In addition to this more structured teaching, for many years I have led Cather discussions for adults through the Utah Humanities Council Speakers Bureau.

While I invariably present Cather’s fiction in the generally prescribed ways—theme, character, structure, setting, and so on—I also like to focus particularly on her use of language. I have always been an advocate of close reading of the primary text. Cather’s writing flows so smoothly and so engagingly that it is easy to overlook the presence of the consummate artist carefully selecting words and phrases. I have found that subjecting a few passages to close scrutiny opens the eyes of students to the ways by which a true artist achieves effects that may register only unconsciously in the casual reader. Once students become aware of the operations of language, however, they begin to watch for such as they read. Their enjoyment increases along with their understanding.

Additionally, and equally as important, students learn something about the writing process that they can apply in their own writing. Cather is a splendid model for writing classes. To illustrate how a teacher might use Cather as a model for writing as well as for enhanced comprehension and appreciation, let’s briefly examine one Cather passage from an early story.

The story, “The Sentimentality of William Tavener,” the more remarkable for its early date (The Library, June 16, 1900), has now been widely anthologized, perhaps because of its accessibility to the young reader. After all, Cather, then age twenty-six, was not much older than many college students when she published the story. “Tavener” is not only available, but it is short enough to explore in detail. Moreover, “Tavener” is vintage Willa Cather in both style and subject. It concerns people who moved from Virginia to the prairie of the Middle West, it favors character over plot, it is strong in style and consistent in tone, and it treats the past as a redemptive influence in the present.

One of the most remarkable and teachable aspects of the story is the way in which Cather employs language in the opening paragraphs to reveal character and human relationship. This is how she begins the story:

It takes a strong woman to make any sort of success of living in the West, and Hester undoubtedly was that. When people spoke of William Tavener as the most prosperous farmer in McPherson County, they usually added that his wife was a “good manager.” She was an executive woman, quick of tongue and something of an imperatrix. The only reason her husband did not consult her about his business was that she did not wait to be consulted.

It would have been quite impossible for one man, within the limited sphere of human action, to follow all Hester’s advice, but in the end William usually acted upon some of her suggestions. [. . .]

William set his boys a wholesome example to respect their mother. People who knew him very well suspected that he even admired her. (353)

The first two paragraphs of the story are concerned mainly with the introduction of William’s wife, Hester, but they also offer important hints about William as well. The first sentence is masterfully crafted: “It takes a strong woman to make any sort of success of living in the West, and Hester undoubtedly was that.” In attempting to demonstrate the achievement of that opening sentence, we might ask a number of questions:

Why does the story introduce Hester first, and not its title character?

What is achieved by making this a compound sentence and delaying mention of Hester’s name until the second clause? Why didn’t Cather begin by saying, “Hester was a strong woman, and she needed to be in order to make a success of living in the West”? What is lost if we change the compound sentence to a simple sentence? Why didn’t Cather begin by saying, “Hester was a strong woman, and she needed to be in order to make a success of living in the West?”
Is anything accomplished by using Hester's first name only? What tone is established by the phrase “undoubtedly was that”?

What would have been lost if the second clause had read: “and Hester was strong”? What does the demonstrative pronoun “that” accomplish in our introduction to Hester that repetition of the phrase “a strong woman” could not have accomplished? How important is the word “undoubtedly”? This is not the language Cather would have used to describe Ántonia, is it? Why not? How do we know from reading the first sentence that Hester is not an Ántonia? Ántonia was a strong woman, wasn’t she?

What does the first sentence reveal about the narrator or narrative voice of the story? Instead of plunging directly into the matter by saying, “A woman had to be strong in order to be successful in the West,” or “Hester was a strong woman” and so on, the narrator approaches the statement from an oblique angle—he uses indirection. Cather opens with an expletive (“It takes . . .”) that delays her subject, and she purposely uses a less economical expression where a more economical one would have served. Instead of saying, “Only a strong woman can live successfully in the West,” she says, “It takes a strong woman to make any sort of success of living in the West.” What purpose does this indirection serve?

I won’t look at other sentences in quite that detail here, but perhaps this little exercise reveals some of the possibilities.

The succeeding sentences in the first paragraph are also important, the second sentence providing indirect statements about both Hester and William. It tells us what their neighbors think of them: “When people spoke of William Tavener as the most prosperous farmer in McPherson County, they usually added that his wife was a ‘good manager.’”

Why does the narrator use the neighbors to characterize the Tavener’s? That sentence introduces William and tells us that Hester is his wife. It also tells us that his creditable success is due in part to his wife’s abilities. What is withheld from us to this point is information or authorial opinion about William’s nature, his personality. Hester is in the spotlight, though its light is still discursive.

Then abruptly the narrator shifts to direct statement—no more expletive or subordinate clause openings: “She was an executive woman, quick of tongue and something of an imperatrix.” The truth is out; the narrator says what he knows without further delay. Modification in that sentence is attached to the end where it cannot interfere with the blunt presentation of the plain truth about Hester. In fact, the delayed modification reinforces the plain truth with concrete detail. Nonetheless, the blow is softened by her being only “something of an imperatrix” rather than an out and out imperatrix. “Imperatrix” is not a word in current usage, but it is a good one. Here is an opportunity for the students both to learn a new “old” word and to discover why it is the right word, the best word for this sentence.

The final sentence of the paragraph is a gem. Its delightful humor reinforces the tone that was established in the first sentence with the observation that “Hester undoubtedly” was a strong woman. The paragraph concludes with a brilliant bit of understatement: “The only reason her husband did not consult her about his business was that she did not wait to be consulted.”

That one sentence captures the essence of Hester’s character and reveals the narrator’s indulgent attitude toward her. We later learn that William’s attitude is similarly indulgent. Note that all the preceding sentences are broken up in one way or another. They all contain commas which either divide independent clauses or set off subordinate elements. (Note, too, that each sentence has a different basic structure. The first, as I mentioned, is a compound sentence comprised of two independent clauses, the second is a complex sentence beginning with a subordinate clause, and the third is a simple sentence with a nonrestrictive modifier attached to it.)

But the final sentence of the opening paragraph has no internal punctuation, no pauses. It is what the preceding sentences have been leading up to, it is the most revealing sentence of all, and it allows no delays, no forethoughts, no afterthoughts. Just as Hester does not wait to be consulted, Cather does not wait to tell us so. The narrative manner replicates Hester’s manner.

A SUGGESTION:

In assigning papers in which students are to describe or characterize someone in their own experience, begin with an exacting analysis of a character introduction in one of Cather’s stories, an analysis that includes meticulous study of language—especially syntax and diction. Then the students might consider what they wish to achieve in their own introductory paragraphs. One could even ask them to do an exercise in which they imitate Cather’s method exactly—copying sentence structure, punctuation, number of words, and parts of speech—but using their own materials. This might encourage them to experiment with language in creative ways.

In the next paragraph, Cather illustrates what she has told us about Hester by citing examples of Hester in action, all the while
maintaining and enhancing the good-humored, slightly mocking tone introduced in the first paragraph. The first sentence of the second paragraph shows Cather’s scrupulous control of the narrative voice and at the same time verifies that Hester indeed “did not wait to be consulted”: “It would have been quite impossible for one man, within the limited sphere of human action, to follow all Hester’s advice, but in the end William usually acted upon some of her suggestions.”

That sentence is Cather’s longest so far, and as a compound sentence with internal free (nonrestrictive) modification, it suggests in form what it says in content: Hester’s advice is sometimes lengthy and difficult to follow. We learn at the end of the paragraph that William protects himself from Hester’s barrage of suggestions by erecting a wall of silence. The words “usually” and “some” are vital to this sentence and vital to understanding the relationship between William and Hester. They also present a bit of covert humor, humor very characteristic of Cather and too often missed.

After these two paragraphs, we are left wondering what kind of man William is and how he regards Hester. We know from the narrative tone that this is not going to be a story that details anybody’s anger or grief. As if Cather anticipates our questions, she addresses them in the very next paragraph, but in a sly, indirect way. Instead of saying outright, “William respected Hester,” Cather’s narrator chooses phrasing that additionally informs the reader that the pair has sons: “William set his boys a wholesome example to respect their mother. People who knew him very well suspected that he even admired her.” We might pause momentarily on Cather’s choice of the word “whole- some.” Why that particular word? What is a “wholesome example” in this context? Cather teaches us something about how context gives words their connotative meanings.

Note, too, that Cather again employs the device of viewing her character through the eyes of others, this time “people who knew him very well” rather than mere casual observers. And she maintains the narrator’s wry, humorous tone by employing words like “suspected” and even admired.” The fact that William was “suspected” of “even admir[ing]” his wife adds a whole new dimension to our understanding of their relationship, laying the groundwork for the couple’s pleasing, though perhaps unexpected, convergence at the story’s end.

We learn subsequently that although William might fuss about the bills he had to pay, “he never objected to items relating to his wife’s gowns or bonnets” (353-354). Furthermore, he “was rather proud of his wife’s ‘gift of speech,’ and of the fact that she could talk in prayer meeting as fluently as a man” (355). Cather intersperses these observations with comments about William’s hardness and his imperviousness, with the effect of subtly emphasizing his regard for Hester. If such a man as he does not complain about his wife’s expenditures or her public speaking, and in fact appears to esteem the woman, then we must look beneath the surface in understanding her. And if William has genuine regard for an opinionated woman like Hester, then we must look beneath the surface in understanding him.

I could go on endlessly with this one story, or with any of Cather’s stories. I have scarcely touched the choicest lines that reveal William Tavener’s nature, for example. But perhaps this brief exploration of one tiny piece of text can serve to remind us that there are many rich avenues for teaching Willa Cather in the classroom. I am convinced that our students, young and old, can learn from an extraordinary artist something about how literature is made and how they themselves might write more effectively.

WORK CITED

Foreshadowing: A Classroom Approach to “Paul’s Case”

BY VIRGIL ALBERTINI

“Paul’s Case” presents a sensitive young man’s life as an aesthete. Unable to cope with his perceived sordidness of life on Cordelia Street in Pittsburgh and lured by the trappings of wealth, Paul steals nearly a thousand dollars from his employer, flees on a train bound to New York, and spends eight marvelous days there leading the life of a wealthy boy. When Paul learns that his father has repaid the stolen money and is enroute to bring him home to the dull respectability of his neighborhood on Cordelia Street, he realizes he belongs nowhere and can never belong. Paul then commits suicide by leaping into the path of a train.

The strength of this story, however, is not so much in its bold structure as in Cather’s use of imagery, symbolic statement, and especially—at least for the purposes of this paper—foreshadowing, to portray Paul’s adolescent perception of the artist’s world and his warped perception of almost everything. Studies, to be sure, have focused on Cather’s use of color, flowers, sexual imagery, and symbolism in “Paul’s Case,” yet none has been paid to her technique of foreshadowing Paul’s death in the story. It is a matter that warrants invitation in the classroom since none has been paid to her technique of foreshadowing Paul’s death in the story it clearly symbolizes death. With the color red suggesting blood, the flower carnation symbolizing life. It is, however, also funeral, and by the end of the story, but the most obvious one is the red carnation, a red carnation in his button-hole. Of course, flower imagery runs throughout the story, but the most obvious one is the red carnation, symbolizing life. It is, however, also funeral, and by the end of the story it clearly symbolizes death. With the color red suggesting blood and passion, and the name itself carnality, Cather uses this flower as image of doom to him through her choice of an image with a double meaning. Cather again foreshadows Paul’s death.

Paul’s “abnormally large” pupils with their “glassy glitter” suggest a transcendence of reality, but his body expresses the decay that is inevitable in a natural world. Paul has “high cramped shoulders and a narrow chest” causing him to be overly sensitive. These physical details enable us to see Paul as cold, frightened and withdrawn, a foreshadowing image that continues almost to the end of the story, where Cather says, “the meshes of the lies he had told” work as surely as natural decay, “pulling the muscles of his body tighter and tighter” until he “drew his shoulders together in a spasm of realization.” Significantly, as Paul jumps into the train’s path, “He felt something strike his chest” and for the first and only time in the story “his limbs,” Cather writes, “gently relaxed.”

When Paul is called before the Pittsburgh High School faculty under the ban of suspension, his drawing teacher provides the next occurrence of foreshadowing when he hints that Paul is weak and feels that something is wrong with him, made possible perhaps because Paul’s mother died of a long illness shortly after his birth. Foreshadowing is also present when the teacher is aware that Paul falls asleep in class. As Paul sleeps, the teacher noticed “what a beautiful lady,” comes from the ancient use of the steeped leaves of the deadly nightshade to bathe the eyes and dilate the pupils—such dilation being thought at the time to enhance a woman’s beauty.

Legend also has it that if one falls asleep under the lovely blossoms of the belladonna with its purplish, red, bell-shaped flowers and black berries and it happens to rain, one does not awaken.

The belladonna does have a medicinal value since the tincture derived from the leaves and roots is used to treat asthma, colic, and hyperacidity, and medical doctors today have found extractions from this plant helpful in reducing the tremors of Parkinson’s disease (Kingsbury 277). However, the belladonna is as widely known for its poison, as it is for the beauty aid to which Cather alludes. By connecting this flowery
Paul’s own symbol of the vitality lacking in himself. The faculty feels this is “not properly significant of a contrite spirit,” and “they fell upon him without mercy, his English teacher leading the pack.” This image suggests wolves attacking a wounded member of the pack, and even some of Paul’s teachers are reminded of “a miserable street cat set at bay by a ring of tormentors.”

This scene, marking the beginning of Paul’s decline toward death, prepares for the final appearance of the flower just before Paul’s suicide. Before leaving New York, he purchased several carnations which now “were drooping with the cold; [. . .] their red glory all over.” It occurs to Paul that all the flowers he had seen on his first night in the city must have gone the same way. Paul then takes one of the blossoms and scoops a little hole in the snow and covers it up.

This scene, involving the charges against him by the faculty, sharply contrasts with the following one where Paul victoriously runs down the hill and looks to see if some of his teachers are still around to witness wretchedly his happiness. His decision of going immediately to the concert hall for his duties as an usher instead of returning to Cordelia Street for supper liberates him, excites him, and, as Cather relates, offers him a sudden zest for life. As he happily runs down the hill, he whistles, as exuberant people sometimes do. What Cather selects for him to whistle is “The Soldiers’ Song” from Faust, and, consequently, we can see the contrast between Paul’s conceived world of death at Cordelia Street and his own role of life at Carnegie Hall.

According to James Kelly in his work The Faust Legend in Music, twelve operas on the Faust theme are available (84). (Forty-two titles of the opera exist, however.) They vary in length and style with variations on Faust either selling his soul to Mephistopheles in return for renewed youth and the love of Marguerite or making a compact to surrender his soul for limited power and wealth.

Loretta Wasserman interprets “Paul’s Case” as a story primarily about loss of soul (124). Faustian like, Paul exchanges his soul for nearly $1,000 of his father’s company money for those days of fantasy life in the city of his dreams. And, like Faust, his day of reckoning will come, not in the form of Satan and a team of devils, but in the form of suicide. Cather’s poignant depiction of Paul’s anguish immediately before his death reminds of Faust as the hour of his surrender draws near. Quite clearly, at this point in the story, Cather could have chosen any chorus from any opera for Paul to whistle, but she cleverly selected “The Soldiers’ Song” and again provides foreshadowing for the weary reader to see into Paul’s future and his very Faust-like doom.

Emil in O Pioneers!, we recall, whistles as he is standing at the gate to the Norwegian cemetery and sharpening his scythe. Whistling for both Paul and Emil seems to be a natural exercise, and when Emil, known at college for his whistling, cuts the grass he whistles from the “Jewell” song, which, as Richard Giannone points out, expresses destruction, and, in turn, ironically prefigures Emil’s death (78).

Here Cather specifies Charles Gounod’s “Jewell” song where Emil and Marie are destined to be destroyed then like the operatic lovers—Marguerite and Faust. Cather also specifies Gounod’s “The Soldiers’ Song,” where the victorious soldiers repeatedly emphasize in their song that they are home again. (Of the many musical treatments of the Faust story, music critics agree that the most important and enduring one is Gounod’s Faust—1859.) Paul at Carnegie Hall feels he is at home but only sustains his fantasy by denying reality. The soldiers do not try to deny reality, for they also repeatedly sing that, although they have laid down their arms, they are ready to fight again and ready to die. Paul at this point will not stay at home and will not yet die since several days of splendor await him, but Cather, it seems, sends us another subtle reminder of Paul’s future. The soldiers happily return home, but, if necessary, are ready to die.

Paul, like Emil, and also the lovers from Faust, cannot escape; although differing in degree, their passion and the consequence of that passion becomes predictable to the reader. Romance for Paul is close but yet unattainable, and his fight, unlike the soldiers’ endeavors, for escape and artificial destroys them. Cather, in choosing to use Gounod’s “The Soldiers’ Song,” ironically prefigures Paul’s death. Paul is finally ready to die when he puts aside his fantasy and lays to rest the perils of his imagination with his suicide.

Cather, on occasion, foreshadows Paul’s death simply through word choice. For example, when Paul teases his fellow ushers at Carnegie Hall, he “plagues” them, which quickly calls to mind the various plagues throughout history and an image of death and sickness. His smile at school is a “haunted” one, causing us to think of ghosts and possibly death. In addition, Cather makes frequent use of the word “death” or variations of it, like “two deadening days,” “His senses were deadened,” or “His mother died out there.” Cather also depicts Paul as cold, frightened and withdrawn. Cather, thus, has stocked her story with word images that foreshadow death.

The black of threatening death remains constant. Black represents cold, fear, and annihilation. When the lights of the concert hall go out, he shivers “in the black night outside”; at home. “There had always been the shadowed corner, the dark place which he dared not look.” On both his approach and departure to and from New York, he noticed the “singularly black weed stalks in the snow,” and in the final scene, “The disturbing visions flashed into black.”

Because of Paul’s knowledge of inevitable decay, the out-of-season fresh flowers foreshadow his outcome. Cather reveals this knowledge when Paul enters New York and again when he leaves, not this time with the flowery imagery but with dried weeds and dead grass. When
he wakes up on the train bound for New York, he sees winter in full bloom. Like him, the season is barren. Although Paul consumes himself with the illusion that he is finally going to get to really live among his people in New York, he is destined to end up like the blades of “long dead grass” or “dried weedstalks” protruding “black above” the snow. As Paul hastens toward the Pennsylvania tracks, he again sees from his carriage window the same scene of dead grass, weeds, and drifted snow in the fields. Seeing this for the second time, Paul thinks of the death of all flowers and buries that red carnation in the snow.

Other flowers, to be sure, contribute to foreshadowing and the overall tension throughout the story, illustrating the aesthete’s yearning for ideal beauty that will be forever disproved by reality. Paul appreciates the artificiality of out-of-season flowers and “shimmering textures” which perfumes and softens the world’s ugliness, yet he is constantly reminded of stark reality. Cather extends her imagery to suggest the paradox inherent in the aesthete’s devotion to ideal beauty. Because of his knowledge of inevitable decay, the flowers foreshadow his death. The flower imagery extends to Paul himself, and, like the flowers he loves, he exhibits a brilliance that flashes forth, then withers. On his first carriage ride up Fifth Avenue, Paul notices “whole flower gardens blooming under glass cases, against which the snow flakes stuck and melted; violets, roses, carnations, lilies of the valley—somehow vastly more lovely and alluring that they blossomed thus unnaturally in the snow.” Thus, Paul consistently defies the natural, which for him “nearly always wore the guise of ugliness,” and “a certain element of artificiality seemed to him necessary in beauty.” Ironically, he is also one of these flowers; he feels that he is “blooming” or really living, but he is living unnaturally. He is as out of place among the high society of the Waldorf Astoria as a flower is blooming and flourishing in the winter cold. The stolen money represents the glass case that is keeping him alive, and when it runs out he will be left uncovered to shrivel, as a flower naturally would in the snow. With the one word, “unnaturally,” Cather leaves a clue to Paul’s doom.

After Paul has stood for some time in rain reveling at the sight of the glorious Schenley Hotel, a part of his Carnegie Hall dreamland, he realizes it is time to return home to what he considers the wasteland of Cordelia Street. Distinctive foreshadowing follows. Paul’s fantasy is nourished by Carnegie Hall with its lights that “blazed into unimaginable splendor” and the Schenley Hotel, with its windows that “glowed like those of a lighted card-board house under a Christmas tree.” Standing in “the slush of the gravel driveway,” Paul longs to enter the Schenley, and what he wants is there, tangibly before him. Paul wonders if fate has decreed that he will always stand outside, always to dream only of an Aladdin life. His longing ends when he turns and walks “reluctantly toward the car tracks.” “The end,” Cather writes, “had to come sometime.” It seems here that we are seeing a picture of Paul just before his suicide, after he has reveled in his New York dreamland and heads toward the tracks where his end will certainly come.

Cather also uses the images of flood waters and drowning to foreshadow Paul’s demise: “The moment he turned into Cordelia Street he felt the waters close above his head.” It is only when he returns to Carnegie Hall, his life buoy, when he can breathe again. Thus, when Paul’s father and his teachers decide to take away his job at Carnegie Hall, he is for the most part drowned—already metaphorically dead.

Similarly, Lucy Gayheart has also drowned (in her sorrow) long before she dies in the Platte River while skating because she refuses to listen to Auerbach’s advice “to live” (Murphy 27). But Paul, like Lucy who flees to Haverford, although for a different reason from Paul’s, runs off for his fantasy fling before he finally meets his fate. On his last day, he discovers that people in Pittsburgh know of his adventure, and he recalls all those past dreaded Sunday afternoons, spent on the lowest step on his father’s front stoop. Cather tells us that he lets the “tide of things wash over him,” and those Sunday afternoon memories engulf him and fall upon him like the “weight of black water.” He finally submits to the fact that “the tepid waters of Cordelia Street are to close over him finally and forever.” His life now, we know, will close out and end rather quickly.

Images of murder also foreshadow the end of Paul. The first night that Paul returns physically depressed from his orgy of living at Carnegie Hall, he slips into the basement to avoid his father’s reprimands, and he contemplates the possibility of his father mistaking him for a burglar and shooting him. Interestingly, Paul’s musings here about his own murder and death not only foreshadow his actual death at the end of the story, but they also foreshadow the scene near the end of the story when Paul sits in his room for a half hour staring at the revolver he purchased on his first day in New York as a way, as Cather relates, “to snap the thread” from his past life. He, however, does not like the looks of it and does not care to die by this method.

Paul cannot go home again. He has burned his bridges behind him and has no desire to rebuild them. Cather does not indicate that the approaching train signals with its whistle, but she certainly offers enough signals to take us finally to the spot from which he jumps to his death, “a little hillside, where the tracks ran through a cut some twenty feet below him.” And, of course again, when Paul conducts that little funeral for himself by placing the drooping carnation, now a symbol of himself, in a tiny snow grave, we know that his suicide is imminent. His death, then, does not carry a strong shock value, for deep-down we had a strange feeling that he would do something drastic. Yes, Cather prompted us with her foreshadowing, in her “immense design of things.”

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A Peek Behind the Scenes of “The Sculptor’s Funeral”

BY DON E. CONNORS

It has always seemed to me that for those of us who teach in English Departments, certain things must serve as givens for us to have genuine professionalism. One of these involves reading every piece of writing anew before presenting the work to our students, a bit of a Herculean task in itself. Another includes finding what background we can which pertains to the piece. I’d like to share some observations which I feel have importance concerning the reading, teaching, and discussion of Willa Cather’s “The Sculptor’s Funeral.”

Cather scholar and biographer Mildred R. Bennett in her book The World of Willa Cather tells the story of a young resident of Red Cloud, Nebraska.

Cather took the liberty of placing the setting in Kansas; those who know Cather and her works readily sense that the actual location represents her own town of Red Cloud, Nebraska. A Peek Behind the Scenes of “The Sculptor’s Funeral”

Once during a summer vacation a Red Cloud boy was killed in a railroad accident east of town, and Willa went to the depot to meet the train which brought his body home. She heard comments to the effect that the boy ‘didn’t amount to much anyway’ and that ‘he was a cigarette fiend.’ Willa went to her room and wrote ‘The Night Express,’ a poem published in 1903 April Twilights but left out of the later editions. More important, she used the same setting ten years later for ‘The Sculptors’s Funeral,’ a short-story masterpiece and one of the most scathing denunciations of small-town smugness ever written in the English language. (198)

Another background story proves to have great relevance to “The Sculptor’s Funeral.” The plot is based on the return home of the body of sculptor Charles Stanley Reinhart for burial in Pittsburgh. Cather wrote in her “The Passing Show” column at the time that Reinhart’s family, like Harvey Merrick’s, did not appreciate him, nor did anyone in Pittsburgh know or care about him. She wondered how Reinhart could have succeeded coming from such a commercial environment. She writes,

I went out yesterday to the cemetery on the Allegheny river to see the stone erected by his family to Charles Stanley Reinhart lifted into place. It was just a little over a year ago that I went to his funeral. Since I have come to know the town, that man’s life and work seem as wonderful as a fairy tale. [ . . . ] Anyone who has not lived here can not realize how incongruous, how little short of miserable it is for an artist to come out of Pittsburgh. Why, we only see the sun, who is the father of art, about sixty days out of the year. [ . . . ] But Charles Stanley Reinhart was born in a purely commercial town [ . . . ] then came the long weary struggle of his young manhood, his apprenticeship in a railroad office and a shipping office, the indignation of his family and his friends when he threw up an excellent position to go to Munich to study art. For art was considered as something frivolous, entirely beneath a brilliant young man of good family; a trivial thing, like play-acting, possibly immoral, certainly not remunerative. But the ‘madness of art’ had bitten the boy deeply. If art does not often claim a man, when she does, she claims him irrevocably for life and death. (8)

After mentioning Reinhart’s famous picture, Washed Ashore, Cather writes that he was loyal to Pittsburgh, that he painted his own people, the laboring people whom he knew:

Well, last summer they brought him home again, this man who had pursued Art’s fleeting shadow unto the ends of the earth, brought him home to artless Pittsburgh to keep his long watch beside the Allegheny.

‘Reinhart dead? Oh yes; his brother is a fellow of some means I guess. Stanley never amounted to much.’ I heard that a hundred times.

There were not a hundred people at his funeral. Scarcely anyone here knows that he is dead or that he even lived. Yet he was the one man from all those thousands who went out and made a world name, who left great works behind him and a tangible memory in the minds of men. Now even from his grave one can see the red light of the furnaces, those innumerable, never resting furnaces that melt down the very lives and souls of men into iron. I never knew the emptiness of fame until I went to that great man’s funeral. I never knew how entirely one must live and die alone until that day when they brought Stanley Reinhart home. (9)

Years would elapse before Willa Cather would view the people of Pittsburgh in a more mellow light.

In the past in small towns, insufficient deaths occurred to warrant having a funeral home; instead the bodies lay in state at their homes. Another factor which surrounds the story includes the behavior of exhibiting grief. It seems as though something of huge import revolves around the notion of displaying the “proper” behaviors of grieving; the penalty for not showcasing the “proper” amount of grief would have led to full fledged reprimanding, mostly behind the back, negative criticism directed to the folks who did not show the “proper” behaviors. Today, our society does not seem to indulge in the “performance” or the criticisms.

DON E. CONNORS — “THE SCULPTOR’S FUNERAL”
Contrast contemporary behavior with the unforgettable performance of Harvey Merrick's mother:

The grating sound made by the casket, as it was drawn from the hearse, was answered by a scream from the house; the front door was wrenched open, and a tall, corpulent woman rushed out bareheaded into the snow and flung herself upon the coffin, shrieking: 'My boy, my boy! And this is how you've come home to me!' [. . .]

'Take the lid off, Mr. Thompson; let me see my boy's face,' wailed the elder woman between her sobs. [. . .] [Stevens felt] that grief seemed never to have laid a gentle finger [on her face]. [. . .] (175-76)

To heighten further the ferocious nature of Mrs. Merrick's performance, Cather later shows her reviling her maid:

From the kitchen an uproar was sounding; when the dining-room door opened, the import of it was clear. The mother was abusing the maid for having forgotten to make the dressing for the chicken salad which had been prepared for the watchers. Steavens had never heard anything in the least like it; it was injured, emotional, dramatic abuse, unique and masterly in its excruciating cruelty, as violent and unrestrained as had been her grief of twenty minutes before. With a shudder of disgust, the lawyer went into the dining room and closed the door into the kitchen. (178)

It becomes clear that Willa Cather felt strongly about and railed against the insularity, materialism, and provincialism of small town life. She creates Jim Laird, Harvey's boyhood friend and an attorney who came home to practice law, to deliver a diatribe to his fellow mourners, a diatribe laced with his own self-disgust in which he excoriates the materialism and provincialism of which they remain victims.

In view of the foregoing information, one can see why Willa Cather chose not to have her remains returned to Red Cloud for burial. Although her will makes no provisions regarding her burial, her friends and family must have known of her desire not to go back to Red Cloud.

After reviewing and thinking over these pieces of background information which seem to me pertinent to Willa Cather's short story "The Sculptor's Funeral," I hope that you agree with me that this peek behind the scenes will prove of value to you when you and your students read the story.

WORKS CITED


An Introduction to “Coming Home”

BY BETTY KORT

As a matter of course, teachers of literature love to provide students the opportunity to explore and appreciate good literature. When that literature further inspires a student to write a fresh piece of quality fiction, the gratification for all involved is multiplied many times over. This year at Hastings Senior High School in Hastings, Nebraska, we are celebrating the success of two students who won the 2000 National Council of Teachers of English Writing Awards competition. The students are Stephanie Madison and Diane Hastings. Diane won with a creative entry that was inspired by two Cather novels and a short story we had read, along with a trip to Cather's childhood home at Red Cloud, Nebraska. Several students from Hastings over the years have had similar successes.

That Willa Cather was influenced by her environment is no news to anyone who reads her novels. As a high school teacher living and teaching at Hastings, Nebraska, only forty miles from Red Cloud, the childhood home of Cather and setting for six of her novels, I have distinct advantages when teaching Cather. My new junior-level students are always aware when teaching Cather. My new junior-level students are always aware when school starts in the fall that one of the highlights of the year will be our annual trek to Red Cloud.

Because my students and I have had such easy accessibility to Red Cloud and Webster County, I have tried to develop a substantial program to allow my students the broadest possible experience. From between sixty to one-hundred students travel to Red Cloud each year. Their morning is informational. Students spend the early hours visiting the main sites connected to Cather's writing, hosted by Cather Foundation guides who add a wealth of information to what the students already know from having read My Ántonia, O Pioneers! and “Old Mrs. Harris.” As the students descend from the school busses, they find the Red Cloud settings familiar because Cather has described them so completely in her writings. Students take notes to prepare for a barrage of writing assignments that will require details from their observations and the information given by the guides. They also take photographs which become the inspiration for poetry writing, but that is another story for another time. In the afternoon the students are asked to sit alone on the prairie, do some prescribed drawing assignments, and write a reflective journal.

When the students return from the field trip, they have two to three weeks to prepare around ten to fifteen pages of writings. My goal for the field trip is to encourage creativity. Over time students have written poetry, composed music, completed paintings, and produced a variety of other projects to reflect their experiences in a creative way. But by far the most common experience is that of prose writing. By the time we take the field trip, my students know a great deal about Cather and her plains writing through class work. I see no need to “test” their knowledge bank; rather, my hope is to help them learn to tap into their experiences and find ways to use the material to write creatively in a variety of formats just as Cather did. In fact, when students leave Red Cloud, they often comment about knowing now why Cather was inspired to write about the Nebraska pioneer experience. I simply let them know that it is now their turn to be “inspired.”

The assignments ask students to put themselves into other time periods and create characters who move and interact in the Red Cloud setting—in other words, duplicate the creative experience Cather must have encountered. I put few limitations on the students, but I demand that they incorporate details from their Red Cloud experience. Although the stacks of assignments are piled high, I always enjoy reading their work and am, in fact, inspired by what they have written. It is a testimony to the students' native creativity and the need for teachers of writing to give students solid experiences from which to write. The writings also speak volumes about the influence of Cather's writing upon the students.

Below is the piece which Diane Hastings wrote as one of her assignments for this project. This piece qualified Diane to become one of six students in Nebraska to win the prized NCTE Writing Award for 2000.

“Coming Home”
An NCTE Writing Award Story

BY DIANE HASTINGS

All I could see from the window of the train when we pulled into the station in Red Cloud, Nebraska, was the black wall of the train next to us. As it pulled away, it revealed a little green depot, and beyond that, the town. It was dusk, so all I could see were the angles of the rooftops silhouetted against the gray sky, dotted here and there with a sparkle of light. The trees I was used to seeing in Illinois were pretty much nonexistent, and the land seemed to fall away at the edge of the rolling hills.

After we got off the train, I helped the porter load our luggage onto the cart that would take us to the house my father had built.

There were tall, flat buildings lining both sides of the street that funneled us into the small town. The businesses were all shutting down for the day, and there were few people on the streets. Shop owners locking up for the night were the only ones about. The wheels of the wagon made a soft clatter against the bricks on the main street, and that was the only noise we heard. Even the footsteps on the wooden sidewalk were silent.

As we turned out of the business district, the storefronts began to be replaced with stately houses. Most of the houses had two stories, with roofs that came to a peak in front. They all had a porch across the front with a railing. The windows were lighted up, and, unlike
the main street, this part of the town seemed alive. The wheels still made noise on the street, but now it was drowned out by music drifting from one house. As we passed on, laughing children were being called in by their mother. I hoped our house would be like one of these.

Soon, we came to a point where the brick street met a dirt one. Right before the wagon would have dropped off the bricks, the driver stopped the horses. We were in front of a lit up house similar to all the other ones lining the road. My smiling father came out of it to help the porter and me carry in our belongings.

I set our things down right inside the door and went upstairs. The rooms were all empty, and walking on the wooden floors made a hollow noise that echoed throughout the room. I looked out a window in one room, on the side where there were no houses. The tall prairie grass was bending back and forth in the soft wind, and it kept this pattern as far as I could see. A lone tree stripped of its leaves stuck up against the horizon. Each of its branches was distinct, very dark against the quickly blackening sky.

Downstairs, the few pieces of furniture that had been moved in took away the emptiness. My mother had begun to lay out her rugs from one trunk, and that seemed to brighten up the whole room. I continued outside to our little porch, and sat down on a box. I could hear the crickets my father had written to us about, and the wind rustling through the grass. The fall air was cool, but when the wind blew across my face I felt chilled to the bone. I went back in to get a sweater, then walked down our sidewalk to the road.

As I came to the point where the dirt began, I looked down the road as far as I could see. The grass hid the road well, just as the buildings had in town. I started to follow it, staying close to the edge so I would not trip in the deep ruts made by the wagons. The grass brushed against my chest, which made me sneeze.

I walked along this road as far as the lone tree. I turned and looked back toward my new home. I could see nothing of it but the lighted windows on the first floor. I looked in the other direction and saw that the tree was on top of a hill. The valley below proved the same as the other land, except at the bottom where the two hills met. Here, the grass was shorter and matted down from the rain that ran down the hills and settled here.

By the time I started back, it was pitch black. The sky was speckled with thousands of stars, but none of them gave enough light to see by. I soon found that if I walked along the road’s edge, I often turned away from the path and had to spend time trying to find it again. I resorted to stumbling along the wagon ruts to be sure I stayed on the road.

Back in the house, my parents had almost completely unpacked. Even though we had the same things as we did in Illinois, it seemed different somehow. The rooms seemed larger and more airy, and the windows were bigger. The white lace curtains that were now hung on them stood out against the blackness beyond. They blew into the room and were quickly sucked up against the wall with every gust of wind. I went to what was to be my new room and lay down on the bare mattress that rested on the wooden frame. The open window let in the wind. Even though I was cold, I left it as it was. It seemed like a part of the country here, and it now seemed like a part of me.

* * *

Over the next few months, I became even more attached to this new country. Even the bright white snow which stood in drifts several feet high, and the cold, still nights seemed amazing and magical to me. We soon found out what this winter could do. One of our neighbors was returning from a trip to Hastings and froze to death. Today we went to his funeral. It was in a small, white church on the edge of town. I had never been in this church before, as I am not Catholic, but I instantly felt accepted there.

The building itself was white, inside and out, and seemed to blend in perfectly with the surrounding snow. The bell tower, even though it held no bell, made it obvious that it was, in fact, a church.

Upon entering, I sat with my family on one of the wooden pews. There were very few of them, but they filled the whole church. At the front, a decoratively carved confession box was off to the left, while a beautiful altar was the focal point in the center. A wood-burning stove had been lit some time before we had arrived and had warmed the entire building. The side walls were lined with tall windows. They were not made of stained glass like other churches, but, instead, they were frosted with what looked like some kind of white paint, and a circular design was rubbed out of the center of each one. These windows let in more sun than stained glass and the sun, reflecting off the snow, made everything seem even whiter.

Presently, we heard the train whistle indicating a train had arrived. Within ten minutes, the double doors at the back of the church opened and a priest, still wearing his black traveling coat, entered the church. He dipped his fingers in the Holy Water which had been held in a white marble bowl attached to a white marble pedestal and was led to the pulpit by another of our neighbors. After a brief, whispered conversation, the man took a seat and the priest proceeded with the funeral, reading about Mr. Pearson from a paper in front of him. I later asked my father about this and he told me that they couldn’t afford a full-time priest, so whenever one was passing through, he was asked to come and preach.

I sat through the rest of the service, and, when it was finished, we went back out to our wagon and watched as the casket was carried out. It was loaded onto another wagon to be taken to a cemetery. As we drove off, I watched the church disappear until all I could see were the black shingles on the roof of the empty bell tower. Presently, we reached the edge of town and the little church was completely out of sight. The funeral seemed like a strange memory. I looked around at the white snow with a new wonder. It seemed amazing that something so beautiful could take a life. It occurred to me then that this beautiful prairie, which I had so openly embraced, could also be deadly. I would henceforth step more carefully.
A Glimpse of Catherland Past Builds the Future for Kids

BY ARDIS G. YOST

On a beautiful August morning in 1970, I found myself driving to a two-room country school where I was contracted to teach for its final year of existence. That school, Pleasant Prairie District No. 41, was approximately 11 miles northwest of Red Cloud, Webster County, Nebraska, which, of course, is in the heart of Catherland.

As the car made its way over the rolling dirt roads climbing up to the Divide, I was reminded of Cather’s short story “The Best Years.” That story’s County Superintendent of Schools, Miss Knightly, traversed these same miles by horse and buggy to visit this same school, which Cather re-christened “The Wild Rose School.”

The school year was an exciting one—teaching a kindergarten-to-sixth-grade variety of subjects, and seeing how each child’s newly discovered knowledge filtered into his or her mind. I would usually read to the assembled group after their noontime sack lunch and recess and soon took the opportunity to share “The Best Years” with them. As we were sitting in that same 17’ x 19’ room built in 1875 (with a later addition for the 10th and 11th grades), the adjoining cemetery that Cather described was still there, as were the rose vines climbing on the fallen fence that surrounded it. The students listened intently to the story’s description of the land where they now lived, of their forebears and others who had once lived there, and of the sorrows and joys experienced by them in a now-bygone era. They pondered how much harder life was then, but felt safe in the arms of that small country school that had already taken in 95 years of stories.

The school closed that next spring. I moved onto other schools, and into a career in special education. By 1983 when I was in the vicinity of the school, I sadly saw what I had heard. The schoolhouse had been torn down, the rose-vine fence had been replaced, and nature was slowly reclaiming a site once taken from it by a group of pioneering farmers and farm families. Only the lifeforce of the tall, dark cedar trees that had been planted in the cemetery continued to bear witness to the human lifeforce that had once been in abundance there.

By the early 1990s, my sentimentality for rural schools had finally overtaken my husband, John. In a stroke of true originality, perhaps inspired by frequent hints, he gave me the perfect Christmas present—a one-room schoolhouse. We had it moved 14 miles to our farm just north of Red Cloud, and restored it back to what it must have been, from the grain storage structure it had become. “Yost Farm School,” as we call it, now hosts a variety of school groups whose young students get the opportunity to experience a day of rural-school education: from the three “Rs” and square dancing, to hauling water and cranking homemade ice cream. And, of course, former students stop by to visit a part of their childhood, and try to see if they can still make out the signatures that they long ago affixed to the school’s tin siding. In the summers, the tranquil setting of the school is put into service as a place to teach children of many ages. In covering our academic subjects, we incorporate various works by and about Cather. Depending upon the learning levels of the children, these range from Cobblestone, a history magazine for young people that devoted an entire issue to Cather, and The Divide, a children’s biography of Cather written by Michael Bedard with wonderful illustrations by Emily Arnold McCully, to Cather’s short story “The Best Years” or her novel My Ántonia or other selections from Cather’s Stories, Poems and Other Writings (Library of America).

The unique opportunity of teaching Cather in Red Cloud is that we can hop on our bikes (or jump into the pick-up) or take a walk down into town and visit the sites that she describes in her works: her own childhood home, the downtown buildings she visited, the now-being-restored Opera House where she experienced the outside world of art and entertainment, the Burlington Depot, the old Catholic Church, and a multitude of other evocative structures and settings. We can also reach back into the history of the town itself by taking a picnic lunch north of the city limits along Crooked Creek. Here we can see the clay banks and where the old brickyards were, which produced the hand-formed bricks used to build some of the Victorian storefronts that still line the main street.

From these encounters, students can then go on to relate how they experience this confluence of literature, history and place, by creating artworks, penning their own stories, composing and giving oral presentations, and writing skits and plays, all of which can be presented and performed for their parents, grandparents and the local community.

On June 29 of this year, C-SPAN’s Big Yellow School Bus lum-

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On a bright September morning in the year 1899, Miss Evangeline Knightly was driving through the beautiful Nebraska land which lies between the Platte River and the Kansas line. She drove slowly, for she loved the country [. . .].

— Willa Cather, “The Best Years”
“There was a yard, but no fence—though on one side of the playground was a woven-wire fence covered with the vines of sturdy rambler roses—very pretty in the spring. It enclosed a cemetery—very few graves, very much sun and waving yellow grass, open to the singing from the schoolroom and the shouts of the boys playing ball at noon. The cemetery never depressed the children, and surely the school cast no gloom over the cemetery.”

—Willa Cather, “The Best Years”
The Song of the Lark Through Geography, History and Literature

A Classroom Interdisciplinary Approach

BY ANTHONY M. MILSPAUGH

In an analysis of her canon, Joseph Urgo notes that “attempts to assign a home region to Willa Cather [. . .] fail. Through Cather’s novels we can see the way migratory consciousness directly influences the formulation of American ideology, especially concerning the significance of history, the burden of the future, and the development of the American global empire” (21).

When one explores Cather’s canon, the number of references made to Chicago tempts readers to label Cather a “Chicago writer.” Sometimes Chicagoans are apt to classify in this same way. Arthur Meeker, Jr. says in an explanation of authors associated with the city’s “literary renaissance” at the turn of the 20th century: “There were others who lived in Chicago briefly [. . .] or simply came on periodic culture-hunts like the youthful Willa Cather, but who seemed none the less to belong to us” (288). Further, in her writings up to and including her 1915 novel, The Song of the Lark, the city plays a distinct role for the “malcontent, optimist, and failures” named by Urgo as those most likely to migrate to different locales. Chicago, to be sure, plays a major role in The Song of the Lark. Thus, teachers need to emphasize that if Thea is to fulfill her destiny she must break free from Moonstone and familial ties. Students then should grasp why Cather gives such a full and complex portrayal of Chicago; for Thea the city and what it has to offer is necessary for her growth from a young girl to an opera singer of international renown.

Cather builds and develops a theme that she presented in “The Count of Crow’s Nest,” her earliest Chicago fiction. In early stories that mention Chicago as a setting, such as “The Joy of Nelly Deane,” and “The Bohemian Girl,” Cather depicts Western youths with artistic ambitions, namely musicians, who attempt to leave their small town homes to arrive in the city. If they arrive at all, it is with little, but they have planted in their souls the seeds of artistic creativity that may bear fruition, or, as is sometimes the case, are withered and destroyed.

Cather’s fascination with musical Scandinavians, beginning with her characterization of Nils Erickson in “The Bohemian Girl,” continued with Thea Kronborg in The Song of the Lark. The Swedish-American leaves her Moonstone, Colorado, home to study music in Chicago and meets Fred Ottenburg, son of a wealthy St. Louis brewer and himself an arts patron. While she exhausts herself trying to find her voice in the city, it is Fred who recommends that Thea accompany him to his family’s ranch in Arizona to recover her health. As the two explore the ruins of the ancient Cliff Dwellers, love develops between them. Fred is unhappily married when he meets the aspiring diva and is temporarily unable to divorce his wife. While relations between Cather’s lovers remain amicable, despite their inability to wed until late in the novel, Thea learns a powerful lesson in her time in the Southwest. She finds her voice and soon becomes a first-rate Wagnerian soprano. She realizes that her work, her music, has become her personal life. “You are not much good until it does. It’s like being woven into a big web. You can’t pull away, because all your little tendrils are woven into the picture. It takes you up, and uses you, and spins you out, and that is your life. Not much else can happen to you” (678).

Cather’s primary inspiration for Thea came from information she learned about the Swedish-born and American-reared Wagnerian soprano, Olive Fremstad, whom she profiled extensively in an article she published in the December 1913 McClure’s. The Wagnerian bore striking resemblance to heroine Alexandra Bergson of O Pioneers! “Cather always believed that the pioneer women on the Divide possessed many of the traits of the artist—the drive, the perception, the energy, the creative force. [. . .] [The Song of the Lark] would be the story of an artist’s struggle for recognition and would fuse the careers of both Fremstad and herself” (Woodress 254-55).

When Fremstad left her Western home, however, she did not travel to Chicago to seek her vocal training but went directly to New York City. The Chicago portion of The Song of the Lark parallels Cather’s own introduction to grand opera and concerns the Swedish-American community that she briefly mentions in O Pioneers! From 1880 to 1920, a mass exodus of Swedes arrived in Chicago and its neighboring suburbs making it “the largest Swedish-American city in the United States, with nearly twice as many inhabitants of Swedish stock as the second largest city, Minneapolis” (Olson

It is also on Michigan Avenue where Thea takes in a Chicago symphony Orchestra concert, in the same venue where Cather heard her first grand opera performance, the Auditorium Theatre.
Mr. Kronborg believed that big cities were places where people went to lose their identity and to be wicked.

— The Song of the Lark

119). Much of the migration was attributed to the city’s reputation as a boomtown, but economic difficulties in Sweden also contributed to the influx of new arrivals. One such area that received a large number of immigrants was the city of Lakeview that “abutted the northern limits of the city of Chicago. The boundaries of this area were Devon Avenue to the north, Lake Michigan to the east, Western Avenue on the west, and Diversey Avenue to the south” (Edgewater Scrapbook 6). It is to this area that Dr. Archie and Thea arrive “in a streetcar, riding through the depressing unkempt wastes of North Chicago” (434). Cather may mention the locale in this fashion because the neighborhoods of Lakeview did not become part of the city proper until annexation, which had been properly approved by voters and went into effect on July 15, 1889. This former suburb was “previously referred to as North Chicago as contemporary maps demonstrate” (Reithmaier).

An examination of Swedish immigration patterns to the city shows: Swedes settled in suburban regions throughout the greater Chicago area. Better economic conditions and the changing ethnic composition of the city encouraged Swedes to move to these new regions, where they could build their new homes. And movement to suburban regions was accompanied by a proliferation of Swedish churches and clubs, institutions that provided the means for them to transfer their ethnic affiliations to new, scattered areas of Chicago, adding continuity to their lives and reaffirming their nationality. (Olson 111)

Peter Kronborg’s seminary friend, Reverend Lars Larsen, operates such a church. “The Swedish Reform Church was in a sloughy, weedy district, near a group of factories” (435).

According to Carl Issacson, Educational Director of the Swedish-American Museum Center, located in Chicago, it would be difficult to “specifically identify the church [Cather cites], given the information provided [in the novel]. There were nearly eighty Swedish-speaking churches in the city by 1915, and while most reflected the predominant sect of the immigrants, Lutheran, there were numerous Swedish Reform churches of Methodist denomination.”

The reference that Cather makes to industrial structures co-mingling with the church, as well as the North Chicago citation, suggests the neighboring Ravenswood/Andersonville/Edgewater communities. One of the most prominent of the Swedish Reform churches was the Bethany Methodist Church located at the corner of Ashland Boulevard and Winnemac Street. The congregation’s sanctuary was founded in 1909, many years after the hypothetical date when Thea and Doctor Archie were said to arrive, but a few years before Cather wrote the novel. It could account for the proximity of the Lorch-Andersen home, Thea’s first city residence, as many German immigrants lived in these North side enclaves. It may also explain the relative decay of the Lorch home in comparison to the new houses built in the area to accommodate the swelling numbers arriving to the newly annexed portion of the city. Cather explains that “Mrs. Lorch and her daughter lived half a mile from the Swedish Reform Church, in an old square frame house, with a porch supported by frail pillars, set in a damp yard full of big lilac bushes. The house, which had been left over from country times, needed paint badly, and looked gloomy among its smart Queen Anne neighbors” (441).

Another mystery that Cather constructs is the location of Andor Harsanyi’s “Middleton Street” studio. An examination of city street directories from this period is futile, as no street ever appears to have existed in Chicago by that name. Hungarians did arrive in the city in small numbers throughout the latter part of the 19th century, and if they settled on the North Side, “lived around the edge of the older German community from North and Wells to Lakeview and up Lincoln Avenue” (Becsei 88). Hungarian Jews had such a presence in this area that they moved their orthodox synagogue, Agudas Achim Congregation, from the West Side in 1922 to its current home at 5029 N. Kenmore. As Doctor Archie helps Thea make her arrange-
By the first of February, Thea had been in Chicago almost four months, and during this first winter Thea got no city consciousness, Chicago was simply a wilderness through which one had to find one's way.

— The Song of the Lark

ments in the city, it seems logical that both would want the young woman's church—her place of primary employment—lodgings, and studio to be within proximity to one another, further suggesting ties to the North Side neighborhoods.

Almost immediately, the piano teacher notices Thea's uniqueness. It is he who tells the young woman that if she is to become an artist, then she must be responsible for creating her own artistic identity. Initially, he believes that her future rests with the piano. It is when Thea asks permission to change the time of a piano lesson so that she can attend a choir rehearsal that the Hungarian music teacher learns that his pupil sings professionally. Harsanyi immediately insists that Thea sing for him and his wife. The one-eyed musical visionary who represents Wotan, the ruler of the gods in Norse mythology and a major character in Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen, a series of works which will have great meaning in Thea's future, is aware that she will have to set this prized pupil free to explore her true talent—as a classically trained vocalist.

When the brutal Chicago winter gives rise to spring, Harsanyi arrange a meeting between Thea and Madison Bowers, the city's premiere voice teacher. At first, the young woman is angry and hurt by her perceived abandonment by the Hungarian, but Harsanyi explains his motives:

I believe that your voice is worth all that you can put into it. [. . .] I cannot make a singer of you, so it was my business to find a man who could. [. . .] My girl, you are very talented. You could be a pianist, a good one. [. . .] You know very well that your technique is good, but it is not remarkable. [. . .] You are not by nature, I think, a pianist. [. . .] He threw back his head and looked at his pupil intently with that one eye which sometimes seemed to see deeper than any two eyes, as if singleness gave its privileges. [. . .] Now, I think you have the vocation, but for the voice, not for the piano. (475-77)

Soon, the Chicago portion of the novel shifts from the North Side neighborhoods to the central Downtown district, specifically cultural sites along Michigan Avenue. Thea visits the Art Institute of Chicago upon the insistence of Mrs. Lorch and Mrs. Andersen and it makes a great impact on her. Upon her maiden visit, the Art Institute transforms her: “She told herself that she missed a great vision for ‘stupid’ singers Jessie Darcey and Mrs. Katherine Priest.
while learning all that she possibly can about the musical world from Madison Bowers.

Despite this area’s growth as a refined cultural hub during the 1890s, the Downtown district was in the heart of the city’s notorious First Ward, operated largely by legendary “boodlers,” Aldermen “Bathhouse John” Coughlin and Michael “Hinky Dink” Kenna. Thea briefly experiences the seaminess of the neighborhood during her first year in the city and sees that the “streets were full of cold, hurrying, angry people, running for street-cars and barking at each other” (469). She experiences a drunken advance, and the stalking of a street person. Yet, at the end of the day, she could return to the relative security of her North Side abode. In her second season, her living arrangements are volatile as she moves from one detestable boardinghouse to another. Here, there seems no escape from the harshness of urban life.

All is not misery in Thea’s second and final year in Chicago. She meets Fred Ottenburg in Bowers’ studio, and immediately he begins to exert a growing influence upon her. He introduces her to the German-Jewish Nathanmeyers who share Thea’s discriminating tastes in art. Although not patterned on a specific couple, Mrs. Nathanmeyer’s “great pompadour of white hair” (531) and appreciation of impressionism suggest the convent-educated Bertha Honore Palmer, wife of businessman Potter Palmer. Considered the Grande Dame of Chicago society, Mrs. Palmer served as the city’s hostess during the 1893 world’s fair in her capacity as President of the Board of Lady Managers. She owned a private art collection consisting of “the most extensive collection of Impressionists in the New World, along with works from the Barbizon school” (Miller 415).

The Nathanmeyers represent the total assimilation of the German Jew into the fabric of city life, for “unlike Europe, Jews were accepted into the social milieu, as well as in civic affairs, with a few of the German-Jewish immigrants holding political office, including those of alderman and city clerk” (Cutler 125). The relationship that the Christian Ottenburg shares with the family reflected reality. When Fred takes Thea to the Nathanmeyer home in a South side neighborhood referred to as the “Golden Ghetto,” the philanthropic works of German Jewish groups were well known. The couple immediately takes to Thea and agrees to hire her for one of their Saturday musical evenings and Thea’s apprenticeship as a recognized singer has begun.

The Chicago portion of The Song of the Lark shows keen insight into the passion of Thea Kronborg and offers both the instructor and students a basic understanding of the importance of the city to hone the artistic creativity of a talent like Thea’s. Although her musical career in the city ends with the would-be diva suffering from illness, her apprenticeship in the city is significant. Instead of breaking her, she becomes aware of a larger world, and, consequently, Thea’s experiences along the Lake Michigan shore serve to reinforce her commitment to her creation as a first-rate artist. ✪

WORKS CITED


Syllabus: Cather’s New York

EDITORS’ NOTE:
Those who teach Cather sometimes wonder what others are doing in our classrooms. We know that whole classes on Cather are offered, and many others include her in various courses and may assign only one novel or maybe one, two, or three short stories. Syllabi sharing shows us what instructors are doing in their classes, and, for the most part, the syllabi can be useful, interesting, challenging, thoughtful, carefully planned, and certainly diversified. Diversification ranges from gender, author combinations, the hero, landscapes, ethnicity, the American experience, and locating Cather’s life and her works in specific parts of the country. Professor Merrill Skaggs graciously accepted our request to share her course syllabus, which can be easily adapted to either undergraduate or graduate studies, on “Cather around New York.” Her syllabus focuses on nine short stories and nine novels with emphasis on critics like James Woodress.

The following year (1998) participants in “Willa Cather’s New York: The Drew University Colloquium,” some of those from Merrill’s course, explored the history and culture of Cather’s New York. The Colloquium centered on New York City as an important stimulus to Cather and her writing and proved to be a scintillating follow-up for Merrill’s course.

Syllabi are a valuable pedagogical tool for teachers of Cather, and we hope to include more of them in future issues.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE
This seminar has three distinct goals, beyond the always pleasurable study of Willa Cather’s great fiction:

1. To uncover new facts and interpretations by concentrating on Cather’s activities in the New York, environs (a hitherto un-highlighted part of Cather’s life and work).
2. To foster research appropriate for presentation at the 1998 International Cather Seminar to be held in Madison and sponsored by Drew.
3. To participate in a transcontinental e-mail conversation about Cather studies with undergraduate seniors at Bryant College in Rhode Island, and graduate students at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. Some Southern scholars [such as Noel Polk] may join us.

I. SCHEDULE OF READINGS
Feb. 4: Introduction

Feb. 11: “Flavia and Her Artists,” “The Garden Lodge,” “Paul’s Case,” [from The Troll Garden (1905)], Alexander’s Bridge (1912)
REPORT: Woodress, 164-230

Feb. 18: The Song of the Lark (1915)
REPORT: Woodress, 231-275

Feb. 25: My Ántonia (1918)
REPORT: Woodress, 276-302 + Murphy introduction to Penguin edition

REPORT: Compare all biographies for biographical information about Cather’s producing this collection as well as about its presumed prototypes for her characters. Why do you think this book is so understudied?

Mar. 11: One of Ours (1922) [Willa Cather said that the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabout.]
REPORT: Woodress, 303-334 plus discussion of G. P. Cather, its hero’s prototype

Mar. 18: SPRING BREAK. This week is designed to allow you to work on your first paper. It will be due after the next class.

Mar. 25: A Lost Lady (1923)
REPORT: Compare Woodress, 353-377 to David Harrell’s From Mesa Verde to The Professor’s House (1992).

Apr. 1: The Professor’s House (1925)
REPORT: Compare Woodress, 353-377 to David Harrell’s From Mesa Verde to The Professor’s House (1992).

Apr. 8: My Mortal Enemy (1926) and Not Under Forty (1936)
REPORT: Present My Mortal Enemy as a “novel demeuble.”

Apr. 15: Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927)
REPORT: After covering the facts in Woodress 391-411, cover the recent controversies about Cather’s historical distortions, especially of the character of Father Martinez.
Apr. 22: Obscure Destinies (1932)
REPORT: Compare the man portrayed as “Neighbour Rosicky” with Antonia Cuzak’s husband, since both are based on the same prototype. Why might Cather have sketched the same man twice?

Apr. 29: Lucy Gayheart (1935)
REPORT: Cover the biographical facts in Cather’s life between publication of The Archbishop and Lucy Gayheart: Woodress, 412-465.

May 6: “The Old Beauty” (1948)
REPORT: Cover the facts of Cather’s remaining years, Woodress 466-506. Primarily, however, this report should outline all conclusions sustained by a comparison of “The Old Beauty” and the essay “A Chance Meeting”; such comparisons could include theme, tone, mood, as well as factual or data changes.

May 9: Final papers due on time

II. COURSE REQUIREMENTS
A. Every participant is expected to be present and prepared for every session of this course.

B. Two papers, 10-15 pages each, written in meticulous conformity to the MLA Handbook standards of documentation and format. Acknowledge expeditiously the research already published on your topic. Consult MLA bibliographies, ALS yearly bibliographical essays (written in the last five years by Jo Ann Middleton of Drew, with whom you might wish to consult about difficult questions), or computer-searches. As you write remember Benjamin Franklin’s superior standards: good writing is smooth, clear, and short.

NOTE: If you wish to expand the subject of your first paper by adding material from other works, or arguing the subject differently or oppositely, you may do so. That will require compressing your first presentation, of course, before moving to a substantially new resting place. What we are focusing on here is learning “demeuble” compression of Cather’s kind. Hold your work to 15 pages or less, and always get it in ON TIME.

C. Moving out into the electronic scholarly world:
Take a deep breath.
This seminar will be supplemented by an e-mail discussion which will carry on a dialogue about Willa Cather throughout the week. Try to post a paragraph by noon on Sunday, stating your questions or opinions in a way we can use as a warm-up for class discussions. Also check and register afterthoughts after the seminar sessions.

He was twenty when he landed at Castle Garden in New York [. . .]. He thought New York the finest, richest, friendliest city in the world.
— “Neighbour Rosicky”
Since 1988, Betty Jean Steinshouer has been on the road with “Willa Cather Speaks,” a dramatization of the author that required seven years of initial research before Steinshouer felt ready to assume the role. She recalls that it was that tall woman in Red Cloud, Mildred Bennett, who encouraged her after listening to the first rough audio tape of “Miss Cather of Red Cloud,” the three-act play Steinshouer had written and performed in a staged reading for the first time at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, during the summer of 1987. Steinshouer recalls, now, that it was Hal Holbrook who first tried to prepare her for a career in Chautauqua, he realized, when they met backstage after one of his legion performances in “Mark Twain Tonight,” that Steinshouer had done almost as much research on Cather as he had done on Twain over the years. He told the upstart young actress and scholar, “Throw your script away. If you stick with this character your whole life, you’ll be adding hours and hours of soliloquies anyway. You know this material. The only way not to bore your audience to tears is to let the character take over.”

Betty Jean Steinshouer listened to the sage advice of this actor who pretends not to be a scholar, but soon realized that she would have to be a scholar who pretends not to be an actor. She’s never applied for an Equity card. Gradually, over the years, her repertoire has grown to include other authors she admires: Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Flannery O’Connor, Gertrude Stein, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and, of course, Willa Cather’s mentor, Sarah Orne Jewett. She has done a variety of other programs in the humanities. We caught up with Betty Jean during a 5-day residency at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. We asked her how Cather has affected her research over the years, and how “Willa Cather Speaks” has changed since she first performed it for Mildred in Red Cloud and all around Nebraska and 36 other states during her first decade on the road.

She answered, “My answer to the first question is that my perspective on literature as a creative and spiritual force in the world has been completely and continually formed and focused by Willa Cather. From her first poems and stories to the few pages that survive of the book she was working on when she died, she elevates humanity. She takes us to a higher plane of living, of seeing, and of being.”

To answer the second question, I don’t think Cather has changed at all, but I know I’ve changed. At first, I was concerned primarily with her personality, because some biographers had made her into an often humorless, limited and very unhappy woman. I knew that wasn’t a true picture, but, because she forbade her letters to be published, there was little that her readers could know about how funny and warm and loving and essentially happy she was. Since her will didn’t forbid a scholar to quote her letters orally, for educational purposes, I could do a great deal toward showing people the Cather known by Yehudi Menuhin and Sigrid Undset and Isabelle McClung and Edith Lewis, all her “Best Beloveds.” People reacted with great surprise, even alarm, sometimes, because they were comfortable believing she was somehow unfulfilled in her life, like Alexandra Bergson in O Pioneers!, because she had never found a man to marry. What shows so clearly in her letters is that she was satisfied. She had made her choices, and she found deep contentment in her life. I wanted my performances to reflect that. As Willa Cather often said, there was no sag in her. I wanted, first of all, to get that person across.”

Steinshouer says that over the years, as she has added hours and hours of Cather’s words, ideas, and values to her memory banks, she has become much more concerned with texts than personality. To explain, she says, “It had to happen, in the deepening of my experience with the character. I was asked constantly to ‘do Cather’ on a particular theme, such as the Oregon Trail or William Jennings Bryan, or Nebraska or Virginia or France. I was also asked by various professors to focus on the short story or the novel they were teaching that semester. In addition, many high school teachers are using Cather in very specific ways. It’s wonderful to find that Cather’s place in the curriculum has been broadening, more and more over the years so that some of her lesser known works are being studied and appreciated.”

When Betty Jean Steinshouer performs Willa Cather, she takes questions from the audience both in and out of character. This requires her, often, to explain the difference between Cather’s portrayal of certain works and factual information and a scholar’s accumulated knowledge. Steinshouer doesn’t mind one bit that Cather sometimes misled reporters and the early biographers who asked too many prying questions. Even the date of Cather’s birth was obfuscated and still it remains, three years off, carved in marble on her tombstone in the burial ground at Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire. Betty Jean simply states that it makes her work more interesting to try to find the elusive Cather who still plays jokes on biographers and reporters.

Steinshouer still tours about six months a year, spending the rest of her time in research libraries and at home in St. Petersburg, Florida. She is this winter putting finishing touches on her first book about some of her favorite authors, called Yankee Ladies in Florida: Triumphs & Losses in the Land of Flowers, (for University Press of Florida) with chapters on Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Orne Jewett, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Rose Wilder Lane, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Elizabeth Bishop, and Marjory Stoneman Douglas. Of course there’s a book about Willa Cather underway, Cather & Friends, which may be another decade in the making, since Steinshouer never skimps on research. In the meantime, her tour schedule and contact information, as well as tidbits about her research and travels and reactions from her audiences, can be found on her website, at bettyjeansteinshouer.com.
VIRGIL ALBERTINI, Emeritus Professor of English, Northwest Missouri State University, taught many courses on Cather on both the undergraduate and graduate levels and has written essays on Cather. He has presented papers at conferences and co-authored Willa Cather: A Reference Guide, 1984-1992. He also has served for many years on the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Educational Foundation Board of Governors.

Marilyn Arnold, Emeritus Professor of English, Brigham Young University, is the author of Willa Cather's Short Fiction and editor of Willa Cather: A Reference Guide and A Reader's Companion to Willa Cather's Fiction. Her scholarly work on Cather is extensive. In addition, to being a nationally recognized scholar and author, she has published three novels and has recently finished her fourth, a mystery novel.

Don E. Connors spent many years teaching secondary school English, and at various community colleges in Arizona and California, the University of California-Los Angeles, and the University of California-Irvine. He contributed an essay for the first issue of Teaching Cather and also gives presentations on Cather. He continues to serve on the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Educational Foundation Board of Governors.

Diane Hastings, a graduate of Hastings High School, attends the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she is part of the Honors Program. She received the UNL Distinguished Scholar Award, was named a World Herald All-State Academic Scholar, and received commendation by the National Merit Scholarship program.

Betty Kort teaches English at Hastings High School, Hastings, Nebraska, where she has been honored with several state and national teaching awards. She has served for many years on the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Board of Governors and also as its president.

Anthony Millspaugh, Humanities/Fine Arts Division Head at Gordon Tech High School in Chicago, Illinois, teaches, in addition to his administrative duties, creative writing at William Rainey Harper College, in Palatine, Illinois, and at Columbia College in Chicago. He presented Cather papers at the International Cather Seminar held at Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia, and at Arbor Day Lodge in Nebraska City, Nebraska. His Chicago essay is based on a paper he delivered at the 2001 Cather Spring Festival in Red Cloud, Nebraska.

Merrill Maguire Skagg, Baldwin Professor of Humanities at Drew University, authored After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather and numerous essays on Cather and Southern writers. She also wrote The Folk of Southern Fiction and co-authored The Mother Person. She is a member of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Board of Governors.

Betty Jean Steinshouer has made it her life's work to introduce readers young and old to Willa Cather, to let them know her as she was, not as many biographers have distorted her. She continues to share her years of research and study with "Willa Cather Speaks," a vivid dramatization and portrayal of the author. Many other authors are in her repertoire, but Cather has been part of her for over 20 years and is the closest in kinship to her own sensibilities.

Ardis Grace (Mullen) Yost is a native of rural Lebanon, Kansas, 20 miles south of Red Cloud, Nebraska. After high school, she taught in a rural school southeast of Red Cloud for a year and a half before taking a break for her young and growing family. She eventually returned to teaching, finished her undergraduate degree, and obtained a master's degree in 1978. The last teacher in the last rural school in Webster County, Ardis was a finalist for Nebraska Teacher of the Year in 1986. She retired in 1977, continues her work with Yost Farm School, and organizes community performances.

Willa Cather—Her World of Music

Tuesday, March 19, 2002
Northwest Missouri State University, Charles Johnson Theatre, 7:30 p.m.

The Department of English is pleased to announce a special interdisciplinary event of special interest to teachers, students, and readers of the works of Willa Cather. Dr. Jane Dressler, lyric soprano from Kent State University, will perform “Willa Cather — Her World of Music,” featuring music from the 19th century mentioned by Cather in her writing.

Prior to the recital, join us for a panel discussion with high school and college teachers, who will discuss methods of teaching Cather's books, especially My Antonia.

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS
3:30 p.m. Display of teaching resources on Willa Cather, Student Union
4:30 p.m. Panel discussion on teaching Cather's works, Student Union
6:00 p.m. Dinner, Student Union. (Cost estimate: $10; advance reservations required)
7:30 p.m. “Willa Cather — Her World of Music,” Charles Johnson Theatre

All events are open to the public. For more information, call Steve Shively at (660) 562-1566 or e-mail shively@mail.nwmissouri.edu