FROM THE EDITORS

This issue marks our fifth year of publication. Our subscription list continues to grow, and your viable comments and encouragement, valid suggestions, and informative ideas and thoughts, along with the growing membership, give us both pleasure and instruction. We deeply appreciate our subscribers, contributors, teachers, and students of Cather, and those who just simply appreciate what the articles offer. Thank you for helping us make Teaching Cather a worthwhile and useful product.

Once again, we introduce quality articles that represent the teaching of Cather from different perspectives and show how Cather can be taught from various approaches. Joshua Dolezal’s useful article highlights the rich potential Cather’s fiction and her critical studies of writing offer for teaching the art of the writing process for composition classes, as well as the art of insightful reading. Catherine Kunce in her discussion on “Paul’s Case,” one of Cather’s most frequently taught short stories, reviews her own difficulty in teaching about Paul’s homosexuality, and she encounters not only the evolving treatment of homosexuality in “Paul’s Case” but also discerns patterns of protectionism and resistance to safeguarding Cather’s privacy. In examining her responses to a few critical appraisals of “Paul’s Case,” Kunce seeks to discover the course of her own critical inhibition and attempts to determine if other teachers exhibit a similar resistance. James Barloon’s essay gives an excellent opportunity to consider Cather alongside two other notable American writers–Fitzgerald and Faulkner. In this comparative study, Barloon explains how Marian Forrester, Daisy Buchanan, and Caddy Compson represent the destiny of America in the 1920s, a beautiful, bounteous land parcelled and sold to the highest bidder. Rebecca Faber continues her analysis of One of Ours and war and feels that Cather could not have resolved the issues surrounding World War I in only one novel. Here she shows how Cather uses the concept of involvement in World War I in The Professor’s House and Lucy Gayheart. Sarah Beringer, recipient of the prestigious Norma Ross Walter Scholarship in 2004, presented her essay at the Cather Festival in Red Cloud. It gladdens us to print her essay, written on an assigned Cather topic from Obscure Destinies in partial fulfillment of her application process.

Steve Shively
Virgil Albertini

ABOUT THE COVER

The new Central Library at 1410 W. 10th St. on the corner of 10th and Baltimore Avenue in downtown Kansas City, Missouri, opened in April of this year. The library moved inside the historic First National Bank building after it had undergone a $50 million renovation, expansion, and modernization with public and private money. The addition of the Community Bookshelf enhances the library’s public parking garage. Looking like a giant bookshelf, the 22 book spines, painted on the outside of the 485-space parking deck, run along the south wall of the five-level garage and east to west along 12th Street, and each measures 25 feet tall and 9 feet wide. With digital photography and large-format printing, the designers manipulated images of ornate book spines, removed the original titles from the images, and replaced them with facsimiles of the titles of the books written by authors like Mark Twain, John Neihardt, Langston Hughes, Rachel Carson, David McCullough, Harper Lee, Zora Neale Hurston, and, of course, Willa Cather. These giant mock books reflect a wide variety of literary interests suggested by the Kansas City community. The Kansas City Public Library Board of Trustees selected the titles, and they chose many of the authors with a connection to the Kansas City area and Cather with her link to the Plains.
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Catherine scholars and teachers are familiar with her identification of “the thing not named” as an active principle in her oeuvre, and the political significance of this statement has been rigorously explored in literary criticism. Cather’s original context for “the thing not named,” however, is the craft of writing, and in the following discussion I will outline the ways in which I have used Cather’s statement to illustrate the principle of nuance in composition classes at the University of Nebraska. Whether one is writing a novel, a creative nonfiction essay, or a short story, Cather’s guiding principle that “it is the . . . presence of the thing not named . . . that gives high quality to the novel” offers a succinct definition of effectively nuanced prose (41-2). Many composition students have heard the “show, don’t tell” imperative so many times it has become necessary to restate the same principle in different ways. I believe Cather’s principle of an unnamed presence upon the page is a useful tool for teaching composition students to allow concrete details to speak for themselves.

Stating the ideal of an unnamed presence and achieving that ideal are two different things. How can one be sure that the thing not named is discernible to a reader? How does one avoid creating too ambiguous a presence upon the page? These questions are commonly asked by astute writers, and they can be answered by distinguishing between functional and dysfunctional ambiguity, as well as by considering the audience of a prose composition.

Functional ambiguity, as I will define it, allows for creative response from a reader while still narrowing the possibilities of interpretation. As I will demonstrate later, the parameters determining the functionality of nuances depend largely on one’s audience. For now, the first stanza of Theodore Roethke’s poem “My Papa’s Waltz” will suffice to illustrate, in a general sense, how a writer might create functional ambiguity:

The whiskey on your breath  
Could make a small boy dizzy;  
But I hung on like death:  
Such waltzing was not easy.

The irony of the title is evident in these four lines, setting up the tension a reader will carry through the rest of the poem between the intimacy of a waltz and the violent behavior of a drunken father. Some readers will conclude that Roethke offers a portrait of abuse in this poem, other readers will defend the good intentions of the father, and still others will arrive at a more complex synthesis of the two viewpoints, arguing that while the boy’s fear of physical harm is evident, his love for his father remains undaunted, revealing the tenuous balance of their relationship. These differing views spark animated debate in classroom discussions because the father and the boy are rendered vividly enough for readers to identify with them, and Roethke’s use of strong concrete details like the whiskey on the father’s breath and the physical image of waltzing provide readers with specific evidence to support their views. The nature of the father’s presence is what remains elusive. It is the thing not named, and it is keenly felt upon the page of this poem. A reader does not doubt this presence; he/she must make sense of the concrete details Roethke has provided, and these details are specific enough to remain roughly within the parameters of the three interpretations described above.

Dysfunctional ambiguity, on the other hand, allows such a diversity of response from readers that the actual presence of the unnamed thing becomes dubious. Within the context of a college composition class, Terry Tempest Williams’s title essay from her collection An Unspoken Hunger illustrates this principle:

It is an unspoken hunger we deflect with knives—one avocado between us, cut neatly in half, twisted then separated from the large wooden pit. With the green fleshy boats in hand, we slice vertical strips from one end to the other. Vegetable planks. We smother the avocado with salsa, hot chilies at noon in the desert. We look at each other and smile, eating avocados with sharp silver blades, risking the blood of our tongues repeatedly. (79)

Nearly all beginning writers have difficulty making sense of this selection even after reading it within the context of Williams’s otherwise accessible book, which interweaves family history, female sexuality, spirituality, and political activism with the landscape of the southwestern United States. Some readers will insist on reading the selection literally: the avocados are nothing more than food, and the characters comprising the “we” are doing nothing more than lunching. Other readers will identify the avocados as sexual in nature (“fleshy boats” eaten with “hot chilies”). Close readers might say that Williams represents the complexity of an intimate relationship (of which food and sex are a part), in which communication (“risking the blood of our tongues”) is fraught with imperfection and even shared meals are tenuous moments of intimacy. These three responses are so vastly different that they do not foster conversation in a composition classroom as well as Roethke’s poem does, and many students do not arrive at an interpretation at all, which discourages them from contributing anything to discussion. Williams’s word choices are specific (“twisted,” “planks,” “smother”), but they are not clearly related because the guiding idea is so broad. Some students enjoy the freedom of arriving at vastly different interpretations, but many want concrete examples of how to become better writers, and in their minds “An Unspoken Hunger” represents a hidden meaning which cannot be conclusively discovered and is therefore meaningless to them.

My purpose in distinguishing between functional and dysfunctional ambiguity in this fashion is to give beginning writers a few rudimentary categories which they may well abandon as they move on to more complex forms of writing. Many students assume that nuanced writing represents a hidden meaning which a reader either understands or does not. While subtle nuances often do require imaginative analysis in literature, my aim for composition courses...
is to demystify the means by which writers create these nuances. Using Cather's principle of “the thing not named,” I believe it is possible to encourage writers to create a vivid and specific presence upon the page as Roethke does in his poem by using concrete details which provide discernable parameters for interpretation.

The reality that Williams's selection may be more accessible to advanced readers highlights the importance of a writer's awareness of his or her audience in creating effective nuances, as some audiences will need less concrete details to imagine the unnamed presence upon the page than other audiences will. The following excerpts model effectively nuanced prose, with entry-level writers as my imagined audience.

Few writers use nuance as effectively as Tobias Wolff in his award-winning memoir This Boy's Life. In many ways, this book is ideal for the composition classroom because the narrative of a young boy wrestling with issues of power and responsibility while living with a single mother resonates with many college students, whether they have experienced a divorce firsthand or not. Wolff's use of concrete details allows him to reach the audience of a composition classroom, providing useful examples for students to consider in their own writing. An especially powerful scene in This Boy's Life occurs after Wolff's mother, Rosemary, returns from a date:

I slept badly that night. I always did when my mother went out, which wasn't often these days. She came back late. I listened to her walk up the stairs and down the hall to our room. The door opened and closed. She stood just inside for a moment, then crossed the room and sat down on her bed. She was crying softly. “Mom?” I said. When she didn't answer I got up and went over to her. “What's wrong, Mom?” She looked at me, tried to say something, shook her head. I sat beside her and put my arms around her. She was gasping as if someone had held her underwater.

I rocked her and murmured to her. I was practiced at this and happy doing it, not because she was unhappy but because she needed me, and to be needed made me feel capable. Soothing her soothed me.

She exhausted herself, and I helped her into bed. She became giddily then, laughing and making fun of herself, but she didn't let go of my hand until she fell asleep. (55)

Some composition students respond impatiently to this scene, because they want to be told what happened, but many readers immediately recognize the sinister implications of Rosemary “gasp-ing as if someone had held her underwater.” Wolff avoids explicitly stating the details of the date, perhaps because he does not know them, but more specifically because nuance is more powerful than spelling out the scene for a reader. Different readers might construct different imaginative scenarios detailing what happened on the date, just as readers might reconstruct Roethke's image of a drunken father dancing with his son in varying ways, but in each case a vivid unnamed presence is created. In Wolff's scene, the mixture of physical details like “gasp-ing” with the psychological connota-

tions of self-mockery as Rosemary turns giddy implies that she has been severely traumatized. The unnamed reality of violation leaps from the page.

Pam Houston offers a similar example in Cowboys Are My Weakness, her bestselling collection of short stories. The story “Highwater” follows two women, Millie and Casey, through their respective separations from deadbeat lovers. As tensions escalate in the relationships between the characters, the level of a nearby lake steadily rises, threatening to flood the highway that borders it. At a pivotal moment in the story, when Millie's partner Richard has decided to leave her for another woman, Millie, Houston's first-person narrator, seeks solace at the lake:

I got in my car and drove straight to the lake.... I put my front tires in the water. I wondered how deep the water got between me and the island, and I wondered if my car would float, and I wondered what people thought about right before they decided not to live anymore. . . . The wind rose out of the west and I could hear tiny waves lapping around my tires. I backed the car up a few feet, crawled into the backseat, and went to sleep.

I woke up in the middle of a lightning storm. By the look of the light it was midafternoon. There were two-foot waves all across the lake, and I could feel them splash against the underside of the car. I started it up and got back on the highway. (55-56)

While the significance of highwater to Millie's emotional state will seem obvious to close readers, and some experienced writers will eschew using a transparent objective correlative like a lightning storm to intensify a character's inner turmoil, Millie's implied contemplation of suicide is accessible to entry-level writers. The moment at which Millie decides not to take her own life remains ambiguous enough to engender spirited discussion, but Millie's suicidal thoughts—though not explicated as such—are forcefully nuanced in this passage.

In like manner, a student might begin a prose composition with a specific concept in mind, allowing the landscape or a character's behavior to communicate such a concept to the reader through strategic concrete details, as the following excerpt from one of my own workshop drafts demonstrates:

When she boards the bus, he sees her surface above the railing, first her hair glistening against her cheeks, then the hard edges of her shirt smoothing where the sleeve rolls back, finally the cascade of her dress above leather sandals. He finds her eyes as she follows the aisle toward the back, trailing her hand along the ceiling rail. She looks down at him once while sliding into the seat just ahead of his, the corners of her mouth twitching as she turns.

He leans against the window, searching for words. Wafts of skin lotion drift over the seat. Her hair hides her face as she bends over a book. His mind is a whirl of startled birds. Suddenly, she sneezes. The echoes ricochet through his mind,
slowly fading, until a wave of cold realization freezes him against the window as she waits, silhouetted against the open sky of her book. Trees tick by outside. He breathes deeply and leans forward.

The bus lurches to a stop, brakes hissing. He falls back against his seat. She stands without turning. Words bob in his throat. She finds the ceiling rail, trailing her hand along it toward the front of the bus, where she sinks down the stairs to her waist, to her neck, the doors finally closing over her.

(“Migration”)

In this case, physical attraction is nuanced effectively and the sneeze is a well-placed detail which suggests an occasion for one person to speak to another, although the opportunity is interrupted by the next bus stop.

Cather offers an excellent example of nuance in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, when Latour and Vaillant first meet Buck Scales and Magdalena. Her description of Scales is chilling, emphasizing his “small, bony head,” with its bizarre “ridges, as if the skull joinings were overgrown by layers of superfluous bone”; these characteristics, she writes, have a “positively malignant look” (67). The following scene shows Magdalena’s use of nuance in her wordless warning to Latour and Vaillant, which comes as a surprise to them because she has been pretending to be a half-wit in the presence of Scales:

She took her black shawl from a peg and followed him. Just at the door she turned and caught the eyes of the visitors, who were looking after her in compassion and perplexity. Instantly that stupid face became intense, prophetic, full of awful meaning. With her finger she pointed them away, away!—two quick thrusts into the air. Then, with a look of horror beyond anything language could convey, she threw back her head and drew the edge of her palm quickly across her distended throat—and vanished. The doorway was empty; the two priests stood staring at it, speechless. That flash of electric passion had been so swift, the warning it communicated so vivid and definite, that they were struck dumb. (68)

The dramatic transformation of Magdalena’s character from a half-wit to a messenger is a powerful model of effective nuance for beginning writers, with its emphasis on concrete details (the two quick thrusts into the air, her palm sliding across her distended throat). Cather’s final two sentences emphasize the effect of Magdalena’s message on the priests in much the same way that a writer might wish a nuance to affect a reader: as a rapid “flash of electric passion . . . so vivid and definite” that it renders a reader speechless. Composition students cannot fail to be impressed by Cather’s deft practice of her own principle that an unnamed presence (in this case, danger to the priests) intensifies prose.

After class discussion of textual examples like those I have provided, a small group exercise allows students to duplicate the idea of effective nuance by creating their own versions of an unnamed presence upon the page. In much the same way that the game Pictionary™ requires players to sketch a visual representation of a physical thing which they are not allowed to name, students might cooperatively construct textual representations of physical occurrences without explicitly stating them. Afterward, groups might read their descriptions to the class, judging the effectiveness of their nuances by the rapidity with which others recognize the nuanced event. Consider the following scenarios for distribution to groups:

- A girl breaks her leg while skateboarding.
- A man is robbed at night.
- A woman wins the lottery.
- A man wakes from a bad dream.
- A doctor tells a patient that his cancer tests are negative.
- An elderly woman recovers from pneumonia.

Nuancing these events effectively requires close attention to concrete details. As an example, I might choose the sentence “A woman wins the lottery” and explain how each part of the sentence requires physical development. A simple pronoun may be enough to nuance gender, but the emotion of winning requires close description of body language, and physical details are essential to establishing the context of the lottery. The following passage demonstrates these principles:

It was late afternoon when she pulled up to the gas station. Heat rose from the asphalt. She walked quickly toward the door, dabbing at her brow with a handkerchief. Inside, she beckoned for the clerk to tear two green stubs from the roll above the counter. She began to scrape away the silver glaze,
hesitating as she saw two identical numbers emerge. When the third number appeared beneath her thumb, she gasped and pressed both hands to her mouth. The clerk looked on in disbelief as her shoulders began to shake with laughter, tears glistening on her cheeks.

In this passage, establishing the setting provides a context for the concrete development that follows: the green stubs, the roll above the counter, the silver glaze. These details nuance gambling, and the woman's physical reaction to what she sees suggests that the third number matches the other two.

Once the small groups have been able to reconstruct physical events without explicitly naming them, they will be ready for the challenge of nuancing more abstract attitudes or emotions. The following scenarios might also be distributed to groups:

- A man is overcome with love for his son.
- A woman feels compassion for her sister.
- A child is lonesome.
- A spouse fears divorce.
- A mother suspects a child of lying to escape punishment.
- A man senses that he is unwelcome in a restaurant.

In each of these cases, the challenge is to make more abstract ideas like affection, compassion, suspicion, etc. come alive through concrete details. Rather than stating that a man is overcome with love for his son, a writer might describe his physical response to the emotion, perhaps interspersing facial expressions. As students imagine his son, a writer might describe his physical response to the emotion

Rupert frowns. The stool below him creaks as he leans back, hands on his knees. His narrow shoulders are still straight after seventy-two years. Knuckles stand out in his fingers like knots in pine branches.

“You’re on your day off?” His voice cracks.

I nod from a wooden rocking chair in the opposite corner. “We only get fourteen days now. Last summer, someone on the Bitterroot fire had a seizure on Day Eighteen. They thought it was fatigue. This year, we get one paid day off after fourteen.” He moves only his eyes in silence. Few fractions last long in his mind. His judgments are clean cuts of logic. Simplifications. My foot rocks the chair on the shag carpet.

“You’re paid today.” He makes a mental note of it. Days off were days without pay when he was my age. “I read in the paper that the fire camp out at Seventeen Mile already spent four million dollars.” Sarcasm creeps into his voice. “Amazing.”

I listen, panning between his pressed wool collar and wisp of a hairline, catching eye contact somewhere in the middle. My voice grows strident. “The crews are on twelve-hour shifts, and I’ve had to work at least fifteen a day as squad leader.” For a moment I am a Forest Service man. (“Smoke Dollars”) The frown in the first sentence is an obvious signal to the reader that this is a strained conversation, but many of the other nuances are subtle. My grandfather’s lines are terse, and the dialogue is consistently interrupted by descriptive information, some of which is analytical in nature (such as the assessment of his judgments as clean cuts of logic); this is designed to suggest that grandfather and I are studying each other, choosing our words carefully. My second response is defensive, and the stridency of my voice is another signal of tension.

The passage is useful because it seeks to make an abstract feeling concrete and because the references to firefighting segue smoothly into a discussion of audience. To a reader from the western United States, where wildland firefighting is a common summer job for college students, my explanation of work shifts and days off would be sufficient. Most students at the University of Nebraska, however, need more explanation of a firefighter’s duties. The tension between my grandfather and me may be evident in this passage, but many readers would need help understanding the conflict between the Forest Service, a federal land management agency, and loggers such as my grandfather, who believe that forest fires destroy trees that could otherwise have been harvested to the benefit of the local economy. This is important information, and the essay goes on to explain how I negotiate these complexities as the only government employee in a family of loggers. The purpose of the excerpt included here is to ask students which details they might add in order to more effectively nuance political tension, in addition to the general awkwardness that a young man might feel while in the presence of a disapproving elder relative.

These vignettes demonstrate how Cather’s original conception of the “thing not named” as a guiding principle for aesthetics might enrich the composition classroom by demystifying the process of creating accessible nuances in prose. As writers gain a more complex understanding of their voices and their artistic goals, they will likely encounter exceptions to the guidelines outlined here, but many beginning writers will benefit from distinctions between functional and dysfunctional ambiguity and will carry an awareness of audience throughout their writing careers. As Cather’s own nuances continue to intrigue literary critics, her artistic principles might also empower beginning writers in the composition classroom.

WORKS CITED


A Triptych of American Dreamers: “Lost Ladies” in Three Novels of the 1920s

JAMES BARLOON

The literature of the 1920s, say many critics, reflects the profound and irrevocable disillusionment that set in—especially among English writers—following the debacle of the First World War. A belief in progress, in the evolution of the human spirit, and in the ascendancy of reason—it was in this decade that many writers, to appropriate the title from Robert Graves’s 1929 novel, said “goodbye to all that.” Although American involvement in the Great War was much less costly and traumatic than what the major European powers endured, American writers also registered the troubling sea change; the shell-shock was transatlantic.

Yet the unique history and literary traditions of the United States—for example, the Romantic emphasis of so much American literature—meant that our literary assessment of the post-war years would reflect the singularities of our culture. However one accounts for the phenomenon, most critics agree that the decade witnessed the publication of some of the greatest novels of the century. Malcolm Cowley referred to this period as a “second flowering,” comparable in achievement to the first great flowering of American literature in the 1840s and 1850s.

A distinguishing feature of many of the best novels of this “literary decade” can be attributed to what Lawrence Levine refers to as “the central paradox of American history”:

The central paradox of American history, then, has been a belief in progress coupled with a dread of change; an urge towards the inevitable future combined with a longing for an isolated, provincial towns, Niel looks to the aristocracy, or what passes for it, to show him how to live; Mrs. Forrester, then, is both a source of excitement and an exemplar to the aspiring, discontented young man. And much like an aristocratic English family, the Forresters spend only part of the year at their house set amongst the “common people.”

While for Quentin Compson, his sister Caddy embodies genteel, chaste Southern womanhood. Thus, for these young men, the battle for the soul of America is played out in the destiny of a single woman.

Much like Jim Burden, the narrator of Cather’s My Ántonia, Niel Herbert grows up in a small Nebraska town idolizing an older woman from a different sphere of life. But while Jim glorifies an immigrant girl only four years older than himself, Ántonia Shimerda, Niel Herbert worships a woman, Marian Forrester, more than ten years older than himself, a woman who belongs to the social elite of Sweet Water; her age, marital status, and social superiority render her virtually unattainable to the young, ingenuous Niel, thus satisfying a core prerequisite of the “dream girl.”

Although her experiences and aspirations differ dramatically from Antonia’s, Marian Forrester comes to represent something very close to what Antonia symbolizes to Jim Burden: namely, the hardy, heroic pioneer spirit. More generally, both Antonia Shimerda and Marian Forrester dwell—to the chivalric young men who idealize them—in a higher, more rarefied realm of existence. In fact, to Niel, Mrs. Forrester defines what it means to be a “lady”: “In [Niel’s] eyes, and in the eyes of the admiring middle-aged men who visited there, whatever Mrs. Forrester chose to do was ‘lady-like’ because she did it. They could not imagine her in any dress or situation in which she would not be charming” (6).

Just as Daisy Buchanan is the first “nice” girl that Gatsby ever knew (148), so Marian Forrester is the first real “lady” that Niel Herbert has ever met. When Niel, still a boy, breaks his arm while chivalrously attempting to rescue a wounded bird, Mrs. Forrester has him moved into their house and gently nurses him. It is not only the beautifully tender lady but also her elegant house that impresses young Niel: “The little boy was thinking that he would probably never be in so nice a place again” (20-21). To a young romantic roughing it in “a frail egg-shell house, set off on the edge of the prairie” (21), the genteel Forrester house and the angelic woman of the home epitomize the grand beau monde.

Like romantics before and after him, especially those who grow up in isolated, provincial towns, Niel looks to the aristocracy, or what passes for it, to show him how to live; Mrs. Forrester, then, is both a source of excitement and an exemplar to the aspiring, discontented young man. And much like an aristocratic English family, the Forresters spend only part of the year at their house set amongst the “common people.” Until an injury prevents the Captain from traveling, the Forresters had always wintered in Denver and Colorado Springs, dining and dancing in Gatsbyesque extravagance. The wonder of it all is that “she should be [in Sweet Water] at all, a woman like her among common people!” (32).

Notwithstanding her beauty and charm, Mrs. Forrester represents, to Niel, an epoch that connotes very different qualities: the
pioneer era. Because she married Captain Forrester, who, twenty-five years older, was a genuine pioneer, a man who fought Indians and helped to build the railroads, Marian Forrester enjoys, through association, the stature of a pioneer herself—or at least one who stands for, and by, the rare if moribund values called upon by pioneer life. As Philip L. Gerber asserts, “Marian Forrester . . . is an emblem for the Old West” (112). And the narrator herself remarks that to Niel the real proof of Mrs. Forrester’s authenticity is “her comprehension of a man like the railroad-builder, her loyalty to him, stamped her more than anything else” (63). Niel eventually discovers (as do Jay Gatsby and Quentin Compson after him) when times change a choice has to be made: one must either change with the times, exchanging new loyalties for old, or become, like Captain Forrester’s sundial, a quaint relic of bygone times.

Marian Forrester passionately refuses, however, to accept a merely symbolic, nominal existence: she refuses to be gathered, in Yeats’s phrase, “into the artwork of eternity”—a role, moreover, delegated to her by a mere romantic schoolboy. This defiance is what Niel most resents: “It was what he most held against Mrs. Forrester, that she was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged; that she preferred life on any terms” (145). In his desire to rescue Mrs. Forrester from time’s abrading tide, Niel Herbert closely resembles Quentin Compson and Jay Gatsby, all of whom swim against the ceaseless stream of time. All three would likely concur with Mr. Compson’s somber observation on the human condition: that “time is [our] misfortune” (104).

Although Marian Forrester might agree with this sentiment herself, she is not willing, as Niel would prefer, and as Quentin Compson chooses, to “immolate” herself rather than adapt to new, if coarser times. Her adaptation, which involves financial and sexual finagling, renders her, to Niel anyway, a “lost lady.”

Marian Forrester’s sexual fall from grace occurs even before her legendary husband has died. Niel, in fact, is virtually the last person to discover that Mrs. Forrester has been conducting an adulterous relationship with an attractive, cavalier adventurer, Frank Ellinger. When he learns the truth, Niel, along with his illusions, suffers a devastating loss: “In that instant between stooping to the window-sill and rising, he had lost one of the most beautiful things in his life. . . . It was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal” (71-72). This is an important distinction if we are to understand what Marian Forrester means to Niel.

Much like Captain Forrester, Niel tends to view and value Marian Forrester primarily as an aesthetic phenomenon, a woman whose beauty exists as an end in itself, and not as a commodity with a certain market value: her beauty is aristocratic rather than capitalistic. Adorned with jewels bestowed by her old-fashioned husband, who has “archaic ideas about jewels” (41), Mrs. Forrester lends a civilized, feminine grace to the homestead, which, as Captain Forrester relates, has been his dream since he was a young man: “I planned to build a house that my friends could come to, with a wife like Mrs. Forrester to make it attractive to them” (43). Whereas Gatsby purchases a mansion and decks it with rare treasures to attract the woman of his dreams, Daisy Buchanan, Daniel Forrester attains a rare woman to adorn the estate of his dreams.

When Niel discovers Mrs. Forrester’s affair, he is forced to reassess his estimation not so much of her character as her worth. It’s as if he learns that an admired museum piece is actually only a second-rate reproduction, a sham. Her association with a man like Ellinger, whom Niel considers a “coarse worldling,” raises doubts about her own quality, and leads Niel to an overwhelming question: “What did she do with all her exquisiteness when she was with a man like Ellinger?” (84). Before long he even begins to wonder whether her “exquisiteness” was ever the real thing or simply “fine play-acting” (147).

What decides Niel in favor of the latter view, at least until his reassessment of her years later, is her involvement—financial and sexual—with Ivy Peters, a vicious, boorish lawyer who represents not only the values of the emerging generation but the antithesis of the qualities that distinguish Captain Forrester. Mrs. Forrester’s entanglement with Peters begins when she and her husband suffer crimping financial setbacks and she, in a panic, struggles to reestablish their old, privileged existence. Rather than sacrificing herself, as Niel would prefer, she sacrifices the integrity that had defined her, if only because she was Captain Forrester’s wife. When Niel inadvertently sees Ivy Peters wrap his arms around a complaisant Marian Forrester, he knows that it marks not only the end of a lady, but of an era in America, “the road-making West”; he goes away, back to
the East, “with weary contempt for her” (145).

Whereas Niel Herbert eventually comes to view his lost lady in a lucid, objective light, Jay Gatsby never lives that long. However, whether he ever would have lived long enough to see Daisy Buchanan for what she really is—a gross material girl—is doubtful, for of the three romantics under consideration Gatsby is the most incorrigible, the most impervious to mere actuality. He is, as Malcolm Bradbury states, “a course Platonist” (65). As in Niel’s case, a prime reason for this is the difference between Gatsby’s modest background and the posh, shimmery world in which his dream girl lives. It is, in both cases, the desire of the moth for a star.2

When Gatsby first meets Daisy Buchanan, he is “a penniless young man without a past” while she is a beautiful socialite, “the most popular of all the young girls in Louisville” (75). Like Fitzgerald, Gatsby fervently believes that the rich are different from everybody else, and he invests Daisy with all the dazzling glamour of his garish dream. Her very house emanates this allure:

But what gave [the house] an air of breathless intensity was that Daisy lived there—it was as casual a thing to her as his tent out at camp was to him. There was a ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors, and of romances that were not yet musty and laid away already in lavender. (148)

Daisy’s appeal is a compound of her beauty and her wealth, a combination that heightens her attractiveness because it places her, as Nick puts it, above “the hot struggles of the poor” (150). Daisy is not only a flower, but a gilded one.

Indeed, she proves her mettle when she accepts, while Gatsby is immediately—and the decision must be made by some force—of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality—that was close at hand” (151). Whether Daisy ever loves Torn or not, an impossibility as far as Gatsby is concerned, she does share the same kind of patriarchal background and narcissistic value system. Whatever else it may be, then, the marriage is unquestionably one of practicality.

Both Gatsby and Nick disapprove of Tom Buchanan—for much the same reasons that Niel distrusts Frank Ellinger and Ivy Peters and, as we’ll see, Quentin Compson disapproves of Dalton Ames and Herbert Head, both of whom pursue his sister, Caddy. All of these men, though conquerors of a kind, are seen by the romantic leads as despisers, not only of a virginal beloved woman, but of America herself. They represent the new breed—cruel, grasping materialists—men who ravage and plunder, who chase not dreams but lucre and corrupt what was once fresh and pristine.

Buchanan, however, simply enjoys the spoils of what his forebears had amassed, for, as Nick informs us, “his family were enormously wealthy . . . [and] even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach” (6). Because he knows the value of nothing—not of his wife, moral principles, or even money—Tom Buchanan is faithful to nothing. This constitutes perhaps the most pivotal difference between him and his rival Gatsby, a knight errant who “had committed himself to the following of a grail” (149). Gatsby remains quixotically faithful, if not to a woman then at least to a dream, whereas Buchanan flits from one woman to the next with the same rapidity and nonchalance that he smashes cars. Buchanan epitomizes the corruption of the American dream, the American dream as conceived by a spoiled brat.

Although Gatsby accomplishes a version of the American Dream, his sympathies and his imagination are not inspired by democratic ideals, but rather by visions of a privileged, leisureed existence. Upon his return from the War, Gatsby turned his back on the boundless opportunities of the West and ventured instead to the older, more aristocratic East. Symbolically, it constituted a rejection of the future in preference for the past. Indeed, even before he returned to the States after the War, Gatsby studied at Oxford, acquiring a pedigree (if not a degree) that perhaps even residents of East Egg could envy.

But no matter how elaborately Gatsby refashions himself and his past, he cannot accomplish the only thing that his heart really desires: to repeat the past. When Nick tells him that this is impossible, Gatsby protests: “Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’ " He then tells Nick, “I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before” (111). But, as it turns out, too much has been broken in the five years that Gatsby hopes to erase to ever fix; not only have Gatsby and Daisy changed—grown more cynical, less credulous—but America herself has undergone a similar change, due in part to the Great War and its aftershocks. In the 1920s, many Americans, romantic or not, yearned to turn back to a less hurried, more hopeful time, before the war had shattered the peace.

Although Nick claims that he “disapproved of [Gatsby] from beginning to end” (154), his view of Gatsby closely resembles Niel Herbert’s view of Captain Forrester: both Niel and Nick witness the passing of a man who symbolizes a superannuated ideology, and both decry the sorts of men and principles that succeed. When Gatsby is killed, Nick discovers that he alone stands willing to honor or, at the very least, to pay his respects to the dead man. As the refusals and testimonials of indifference mount, Nick confesses that he “began to have a feeling of defiance, of scornful solidarity between Gatsby and [himself] against them all” (166). When forced

The charm of her conversation was not so much in what she said, though she was often witty, but in the quick recognition of her eyes, in the living quality of her voice itself.

— A Lost Lady
to choose between Gatsby and the alternative—forced to choose, that is, between a dreamer and the desecraters of a dream—Nick unhesitatingly takes Gatsby's side; just as Niel was faithful to the Captain, so Nick proves his fidelity, to Gatsby if not to Gatsby's dream.

Quentin Compson resembles Niel Herbert and Jay Gatsby in many respects, including his nostalgic longing for the old order, or at least in his urgent need to believe in the spotlessness of its chosen representative. Just as Marian Forrester bears, in Niel's eyes, the symbolic weight of a particular class and epoch, so Caddy Compson, Quentin's sister, is charged with the responsibility of upholding the family honor and preserving the ante-bellum code of behavior. His sister Caddy's virginity is a stronghold, a besieged citadel, of the values he cherishes; Faulkner himself said this about Quentin: "[He] loved not his sister's body but some concept of Compson honor precariously and (he knew well) only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead as a miniature replica of all the whole vast gliby earth may be poised on the nose of a trained seal."3

Quentin's problem, however, is not only his sister's promiscuity—which has a quality of vindictiveness to it—but the irrevocable social and moral changes that her behavior merely reflects; when he mourns the loss of his sister's innocence, Quentin is really grieving over the death of the Old South and the values that defined it. Nobless Oblige no longer obtains—unless Caddy interprets it to mean bestowing her favors upon the masses. As Olga Vickery maintains, "The greatest enemy of Quentin's ethical system is time, the whole long diminishing parade of moments whose beginning and ending we cannot conceive" (39). Much like other Faulkner characters—notably Emily Grierson in "A Rose for Emily" and the Rev. Hightower in Light in August—Quentin clings to the highflown past and only grudgingly acknowledges the arrival of the twentieth century. Nor is it difficult to see why. Whereas in the glorious past the Compsons had distinguished themselves as governors and generals, the present crop features an idiot, a drunk, and an acerbic s.o.b. The Compsons, especially Quentin, are a bit like the Griersons, who also "held themselves a little too high for what they really were."

Indeed, the theme "how are the mighty fallen" plays an important role in all three novels and goes a long way to account for the disillusionment of the romantic male protagonists. Of the three, however, Quentin is the only one who must partake in, almost as his patrimony, this decline himself. Niel Herbert and Jay Gatsby witness the corruption of their dream girls from a more or less safe distance, but Quentin, who is of a piece with the corruption he laments, cannot choose to walk away. He knows, as does Caddy, that there is "a curse on [them]"—one of the few points upon which Quentin and his mother agree.

Like Marian Forrester, Caddy Compson's corruption begins with her sexual involvement with a virile, handsome man. Caddy loses her virginity to Dalton Ames, a man similar in many respects to both Frank Ellinger and Tom Buchanan. Wanting to honor the rules of engagement, which ordain that in such cases the affronted male defends the honor of his female kin—or, if need be, avenges her loss of honor—Quentin confronts Ames and gives him "until sundown to leave town" (159). Ames treats Quentin gently under the circumstances and dispenses essentially the same advice, though in very different and fewer words, that Mr. Compson, Quentin's father, offers. Whereas the latter tells his son that virginity doesn't matter, that it is an invention of men, Ames says, referring to women, that "they're all bitches" (160). Quentin's attempt to avenge this slur fails abysmally. Nobody except him, it seems, places any value on his sister's virginity, which, to him, is a bastion of the Compson family honor. With apologies to Will Barret, the protagonist in Walker Percy's 1966 novel The Last Gentleman, Quentin Compson may well be "the last gentleman." Lost gentlemen are undoubtedly a dying breed.

When Caddy becomes pregnant, most probably from Ames, she decides that she must marry somebody, and before long she and Herbert Head, a banker and former Harvard student she met while "vacationing," are engaged. Just as Ivy Peters and Tom Buchanan represent the crass materialism of the new generation, so Herbert Head represents a similar type; a prototypically modern, twentieth-century man, he, too, worships the almighty dollar. He is also, again like Ivy Peters, thoroughly unscrupulous. In fact, Head never graduated from Harvard because he was expelled for cheating. When Quentin expresses outrage, Head tries to offer his future brother-in-law a little worldly advice: "I've been out in the world now for ten years," he tells Quentin, "things don't matter so much then" (109). Tragically, what Quentin slowly comes to learn, or to believe, more from his cynical father actually than from Herbert Head, is that not much of anything that he holds dear matters much out in the world. Words such as honor, chivalry, and chastity—signifiers, to Quentin, of an idealized world—are mere sounds, signifying nothing.

What does signify to the world, a sad truth that all three romantics must confront, is money. Gatsby himself plays that game, and expertly, though for him the stakes are something much greater than money, which to him has no intrinsic value. Quentin, however, refuses to play the game at all. When Head offers him fifty dollars, a bribe to keep quiet about his dishonorable past, Quentin retorts, "To hell with your money" (110). Quentin's indignation stems not only from the shamelessness of Head's behavior but also from the realization that his sister is in a sense being bought. Certainly this is something that Quentin's brother Jason could comprehend, and approve, but Quentin, for whom the time is "out of joint," belongs to a different generation. In a world where everyone has his price, Quentin stands alone, "born too late."

Of the three—Niel Herbert, Jay Gatsby, and Quentin Compson—Quentin is the least able, or willing, to adapt, to flow with rather than to drown in the inexorable storm of time, choosing instead to immolate himself upon the smoldering remains of a decimated civilization. Quentin, as he himself seems to recognize, is just a
“walking shadow,” a “dead man walking,” for he has somehow survived beyond the existence of the conditions that cultivated men, gentlemen, such as himself. Just as Benjy’s beloved pasture, sold so that Quentin could be sent to Harvard, is made into a golf course, something Benjy can neither enjoy nor use, so Quentin’s habitat—the Old South and its ethos—has been transformed into something alien and inhospitable. Ironically, the only place he can imagine where he and Caddy might be together, safe from the world and its corrupting ways, is hell. He thinks, wistfully, “If things just finished themselves. Nobody else there but her and me. If we could just have done something so dreadful that they would have fled hell expect us” (79). Even his conception of hell—as a fiery, sulphurous place where the sinful suffer endless, limitless pain—brands Quentin as an outmoded, ante-bellum man; Quentin dies before his time because he was born after it.

In his seminal study Love in the Western World, Denis de Rougemont notes that, “Happy love has no history. Romance only comes into existence where love is fatal, drowned upon and doomed by life itself” (15). In the cases of these romantic young men, the love they have for their ladies is not so much fatal as it is doomed by cultural changes that leave them—who are like fixed stars in a fluctuating sky—largely unchanged while transforming their ladies. Among these changes is the emergence of the new, more liberated woman: i.e., the New Woman. It was perhaps an ominous beginning to the decade—at least for those who looked to the past and yearned to maintain all the old distinctions between the sexes—that the 1920s began with the passage of the 19th Amendment, giving women the right to vote. Although Marian Forrester, Daisy Buchanan, and Caddy Compson hardly qualify as radicals, all three exemplify the more permissive, modern sexual mores of the 1920s. It is this “sign of the times” more than any other that most disillusion their errant, sad young men.

Not only do these women fail to uphold the highest standards of sexual probity, but they also display, when forced to make hard choices, the rather unapologetic materialism associated with the period. Marian Forrester’s worldly advice to Niel—“Money is a very important thing. Realize that in the beginning, face it, and don’t be ridiculous in the end, like so many of us” (96)—represents the attitude adopted, sooner or later, by all three ladies, much to the disappointment of their less worldly lovers. These women who had seemed so tantalizingly out of reach, so exalted, were really just tarts for sale. That, at least, is how Niel views Marian’s relationship with Peters, how Gatsby rationalizes Daisy’s marriage to Buchanan, and also how Quentin sees Caddy’s marriage to Herbert Head. In this respect, these women might be said to resemble the destiny of America herself, a beautiful, bounteous land parceled and sold off to the highest bidder, generally a profiteer who knew only the price and not the value of what he acquired. What happens to these ladies, the logic of these novels implies, has also happened to America.

Indeed, the last few paragraphs of The Great Gatsby could serve as the epilogue to all three novels, at least in capturing the sense of nostalgia for a glorious yet irretrievable time in America’s past. The narrator, Nick Carraway, considers what the feelings of the first explorers of America must have been, coming to “a fresh, green breast of the new world.” Nick imagines that “for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with somethingcommensurate to his capacity for wonder” (182). Niel Herbert, Jay Gatsby, and Quentin Compson once felt that way about a woman, but that American dream seems to fail, too. Just as the numberless trees that breached the fresh continent “had made way for Gatsby’s house,” so these women have had their beauty purchased and appropriated for more utilitarian, if less magnificent, purposes. Forsaken, their admiring men are left to wonder, much like the poet of that desideratum of disappointed romantics, Wordsworth’s “Intimations Ode,”

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?
Niel Herbert, Jay Gatsby, and Quentin Compson know the answer to this question as well as Wordsworth did. “Where is it now, the glory and the dream?” It is in the receding past.

NOTES

1 Allen Churchill wrote a book about the 1920s entitled The Literary Decade.

2 When Nick Carraway finally learns why Gatsby buys the mansion across from Daisy, he remarks, “Then it had not been merely the stars to which he had aspired on that June night” (79).

3 See Faulkner, “Appendix” 229.

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Re-Writing the Ending: 
Willa Cather and World War I

REBECCA FABER

About a dozen years ago I read Bobbie Ann Mason's In Country for the first time. I was incredibly moved by it. Published in 1985, the novel covers various aspects of life for Viet Nam veterans in Hopkinsville, Kentucky—from why they enlisted, to the conditions “in country,” to the physical after-effects of Agent Orange, to the fragmented lives many of them came back to. While the action all takes place after the war and as readers we never see any characters involved in combat, the story of war develops through the friends and family members of those who served. The novel makes the point that war has been a 20th century tradition for American men. One young man in the novel who was too young to serve in the Viet Nam War remarks, “My daddy and his daddy both fought, and I felt like I missed out on something important” (86).

In pondering that line, we realize that in a fifty-five year span—between 1917 and 1972—American soldiers fought in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Viet Nam War. Mason’s main character, a young woman named Sam whose father was killed in Viet Nam, asks herself, “What would make people want to kill? Why was there war?” (208). Of course, we don’t have answers to those questions. In my mind they actually prompt more questions. If, in 1985, after more than a half century of war—some of it even brought into our homes via television—Bobbie Ann Mason was still asking these questions, then perhaps similar questions must have followed World War I at the time Willa Cather was writing: Why did men go to war? How did they handle it? What effect did it have on survivors of those killed in the war or on those who returned?

In teaching One of Ours, I have watched these questions emerge in class discussions as we have examined Cather’s approach to portraying one young man’s experience with our first world war, an international conflict beyond the scope of all previous wars. My students, generally in their late teens and early twenties, seem to find it easier to answer questions relating to why one would go to war, and more difficult to comprehend what types of long-term results might be involved with post-war life.

Understanding post-World War I questions is a monumental task. Certainly Cather could not have resolved all of these issues in just one novel. I believe that, using different angles, Willa Cather attempted that task in three of her novels.

People often think that Cather wrote one “war” novel—One of Ours. That’s a logical conclusion. However, Cather again used the concept of involvement in World War I in two subsequent novels—The Professor’s House (1925) and Lucy Gayheart (1935). Why did she keep coming back to the idea of the war? We may never know for sure, but certainly she was strongly moved by the death of her cousin G. P. Cather in Cantigny, France, in May of 1918. Such loss would involve a deep scar. But what we also must realize is that the entire country—including its economy, culture, and politics—was changed by the war. No one’s life could have remained unchanged by American involvement in an international conflict. Such changes were not only far-reaching, but also long-lasting. Cather’s returning reference to the war is consistent with a national response to a war that was believed to be the one that would end all wars.

Willa Cather does not approach her treatment of World War I in the same way in the three novels. As a matter of fact, she may have been so adept at it that we had forgotten that the war was a part of Tom Outland’s and Harry Gordon’s stories. If we look at how Cather approaches World War I in each of the three novels, we will see that Cather develops it as a contemporary issue in One of Ours, treats it as history in The Professor’s House, and uses it as an element of redemption in Lucy Gayheart.

In One of Ours, readers go to war with Claude. As a matter of fact, the war itself is a major character in the novel. We see Claude’s motivation, the context of war in his daily life, and the step-by-step process that leads to his death. We are involved with Claude; as readers there is no escape. We can’t choose to know Claude’s story without knowing him as a soldier.

About a third of the way though the novel, news of the war in Europe begins to seep into the story. Mr. Wheeler brings home newspapers that show that the war in Europe has increased wheat prices. Thus, while fighting is taking place a continent away, its impact is felt in rural Nebraska. From this point, Cather expands the concept of war in importance to the Wheeler’s lives. They use a map to trace the conflict as German troops move across Europe. Cather tells us that Claude and his neighbors are aware that England declared war in August of 1914, that Germany invaded Belgium, that France moved the government to Bordeaux, and of the Battle of the Marne. An awareness of the war infiltrates Claude’s community until we see Claude and his neighbors enlisting, joining a war that has finally made its way completely into American lives, at which point Claude explains that he is “going over to help fight the Germans,” (233) a fairly straight-forward plan of action.

Over and over Cather builds the context for Claude’s involvement in the war, citing specific historical events, economic impacts, and the ways in which opinions about the war separated communities. She brings the reader into all aspects of the period immediately preceding America entering what had been Europe’s war.
Once Claude enlists, Cather escalates the involvement of the reader. From the first announcement of his intention to enlist until the scene where he actually leaves home, Cather concentrates on the heartbreaking separation between Claude and his mother. Claude’s idealism is intact as he finishes training, with Cather noting that Claude “believed that he was going abroad with an expedi- tionary force that would make war without rage, with uncompromising generosity and chivalry” (248). He must have been so typical of our American doughboys!

Slowly, the realism of war sets in for both Claude and the reader as Cather describes his trip across the ocean. Disease, death, and fraud surround Claude. His bunkmate Victor Morse advises him that “nobody who had seen service talked about the war, or thought about it; it was merely a condition under which they lived” (289). Morse is attempting to warn Claude about the unspeakable. As readers we are beginning to prepare for the worst.

Once Claude arrives in France, Cather builds his full experience for us, letting us see him awkwardly speaking French, learning that the Germans raped French women, and observing the wounded. We see, as well, the positive experiences of his friendship with David Gerhardt, his experience in the Joubert household, and his enchantment with the French countryside. Just as Cather has brought us into each of Claude’s previous experiences, so does she bring us into battle with Claude. In the midst of guns, heat, dead bodies, flies, and stench, Claude climbs the parapet where “bullets began popping about him; two rattled on his tin hat, one caught him in the shoulder” (453).

To be true to the full story of a fallen soldier, Cather allows us the context of Claude’s death and its aftermath. She gives us the scene of Mrs. Wheeler receiving the phone call from the War Department. Her grief is intensely portrayed, an after-effect we share. We learn that Bert Hicks, upon returning from the War, has opened a garage and repair shop, but now his “face has taken on a slightly cynical expression—a look quite out of place” (456). Cather tells us that Mrs. Wheeler can live with Claude’s death when she thinks of the men who returned and “one by one . . . quietly die by their own hand” (458). Cather has not only taken us from the initial impact of the war through Claude’s death, but she has also forced us to see how the war has impacted survivors, a glimpse of life post-Claude.

Quite unlike One of Ours is the way in which Cather deals with the war in The Professor’s House, published in 1925, three years after One of Ours. The Professor’s House is full of wars—those within the family, those at the university, and those relating to money. The references to World War I are handled differently. Cather develops
the novel around the petty fights of everyday life involving all of the characters except Tom Outland, who is dead at the beginning of the novel. Unlike the story of Claude Wheeler that was given to us in a contemporary context, the story of Tom Outland and World War I is handled as history, an appropriate approach given that Professor Godfrey St. Peter is a highly regarded historian. Tom’s story is told out of the context of the rest of the story. While Cather ended One of Ours shortly after Claude’s death with a limited insight into what happened to survivors, The Professor’s House follows the period after Tom’s death in the war and focuses on those who knew and worked with him. Tom seems to have died in the smallest war of the novel, and the issues that the St. Peter family struggles with are primarily economic, not political.

Cather has set a structure of detachment—approaching Tom’s story in a way that is opposite to how Claude’s story was developed. We know little about why Tom went to war or how he died. In One of Ours, Claude’s death does not signal the end of the war, only the end of the novel. In The Professor’s House, Tom’s death is actually a beginning point for the conflicts over Outland’s money and for the Professor’s mid-life crisis.

Tom, unlike Claude, is never a real character for us. He is based in history as interpreted by Godfrey St. Peter.

What do we know about Tom and the War? We know that in August of 1914 Tom encountered his former teacher, Father Duchene, who had been in Belgium helping with war relief efforts. Within four days’ time Tom decided to join the Foreign Legion, had a will drawn, packed, and left. He was killed in Flanders while fighting with the Foreign Legion; he was only thirty years old. We have no scenes of soldiers or war or devastation. All we have are historical facts.

If we were building a time line to measure the historical events of the novel, we would see that Louie Marsellus arrived when “the city was stirred up about Outland’s being killed at the front. Everybody was wanting to do something in recognition of the young man” (133). Interestingly enough, Louie and Rosamond Marsellus are the ones who do something to recognize Tom—they name their new country home “Outland.” In essence it is a memorial to the war dead. Unlike the magnificent markers in French cathedrals and government buildings, it is instead a sign of post-war American prosperity, specifically that of a young inventor who left his fortune to his fiancée, now Rosamond Marsellus. Tom’s death is a fact of history, not a personal tragedy. Tom seems not even to be remembered as a real person, but as Scott McGregor suggests, “he was just a—a glittering idea” (110).

If Tom could so quickly be forgotten as a person who gave the highest sacrifice, then one wonders about the thousands of other young men who died fighting in World War I. Had they also become just “glittering ideas?” Could a country have so quickly forgotten the sacrifice of the men who gave their lives? Could they become mere historical facts or statistics? Could a country that gave so much to stop the atrocities in France and Belgium turn its values so quickly to fast money and what that money could buy? Was this the true legacy of Tom Outland? Cather has given us the fact of his death and then developed the irony of exploring what he died for.

Before I examine Lucy Gayheart, let me confess that I had completely forgotten that the war was even mentioned in this novel. It was only when I re-read the book that I realized that Cather specifically makes reference to Harry Gordon’s war efforts. The reference does not come until late in the book, well after the death of Lucy Gayheart, her sister Pauline, and in the context of Harry executing the estate of Mr. Gayheart. While Cather’s comments about Harry’s war experience are quite minimal and do not impact in any way the major action of the novel, they are significant in explaining Harry’s character, especially if the reader is to have any forgiveness or sympathy for Harry.

In Lucy Gayheart, Harry Gordon’s experience with World War I is an epiphany. We see that two events have changed his life: Lucy’s death and his service during World War I. Cather notes that Harry “threw himself,” as the phrase went, enthusiastically into war work: Red Cross, Food Conservation. Finally, he went over himself with an ambulance unit which he had helped to finance” (210). He set aside the personal, professional, and financial aspects of his life for humanitarian reasons, and, according to Cather, “ever since he came back the townspeople had felt a change in him” (210). This is the epiphany that we can never have with Claude Wheeler or Tom Outland. However, with Harry Gordon, Cather moves from giving us the view of the survivors to the view of the man himself.

By 1935 when this novel was published, the war had been over for 17 years. War veterans who returned had had sufficient time to integrate back into their previous lives as much as possible.

The Professor

They were to stay until they were carried out to be buried.
They were mortal, but they were unconquerable.

— One of Ours
Claude sat down again, almost lost to himself in the feeling of being completely understood, of being no longer a stranger.

— One of Ours

What Cather is showing us through Harry Gordon is that a person could return to his home, his wife, and his business, but not be the same person as before he left. “The War to End All Wars” may have left some men uninjured, but it did not leave them unscarred. Too much had happened, as Cather expresses by stating “Kingdoms had gone down and the old beliefs of men had been shattered,” adding that “The World in which [Harry] had been cruel to [Lucy] no longer existed” (220). Harry’s story, then, is the one that Claude and Tom could not tell. They were a part of the Kingdom that had “gone down.” Harry survived and moved into the new world of Post-War America. While outwardly one would not see that the war had shaped his profession or success in any way, Harry and the people of Haverford believe that it changed him permanently.

We know even less about Harry’s involvement in the war than about Tom Outland’s. Cather is showing that by 1935 our national memory was fading, that the War’s impact had diminished. Ironically, the story of the year for 1935 was the Nuremberg Laws signed by Hitler to rescind the civil rights of Germany’s 600,000 Jews. The Treaty of Versailles had been broken as Germany began to rebuild its military power. If we were seeing World War I as only an historical fact or a distant memory, we were soon to get a sudden jolt of its worldwide misery again—and again—and again.

Bobbie Ann Mason’s major male character in In Country is Sam’s uncle, Emmett, who suffers from physical and emotional after-effects of his stint in Viet Nam. As he is helping Sam come to terms with the mysteries of the war that had not only altered him but also killed her young father, he states, “You can’t learn from the past. The main thing you learn from history is that you can’t learn from history. That’s what history is” (226). Maybe that’s true. Maybe that’s why we depend on literature—to help explain what we can’t learn from history.

NOTE

1 See Memorial Fictions: Willa Cather and the First World War, by Steven Trout, for a detailed study of the war in One of Ours and The Professor’s House. Trout, however, does not examine the World War I implications of Lucy Gayheart.

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Resistance to Teaching about Homosexuality in “Paul’s Case”:
A Study in Pedagogical Temperament

CATHERINE KUNCE

Catherine devotees applaud Cather’s nascent status as literary icon. Indeed, many of us legitimately question why obtaining this status took so long. Yet with this victory of well-merited recognition comes what Cather would have considered a devastating defeat. Her contemporary stature invalidates, it would seem, her entitlement to privacy. Perhaps like many who study specific authors, scholars and teachers of Cather have become protective of their object of reverence. In reviewing my difficulty in comparing Paul’s homosexuality to Cather’s presumed lesbianism and in examining my responses to a few critical appraisals of “Paul’s Case,” I seek to discover in this paper the cause of my critical inhibition and to determine if other scholars exhibit a similar recalcitrance.

My own protectiveness of Cather was driven home to me when I included “Paul’s Case” as required reading for a composition course at the University of Colorado–Boulder. Following class one day, an English major demanded to know why I failed to tell students of Cather’s lesbianism. After presenting the writing program’s party line concerning the value of initially focusing exclusively on a text rather than on extra-textual details, I added, quite defensively, “You don’t have to know about that in order to appreciate Cather’s work.” But an inner voice objected that I might be upholding Cather’s wishes at the expense of my pedagogical integrity. Later in the semester, I showed a film of “Paul’s Case,” introduced by Henry Fonda, who also didn’t mention Cather’s lesbianism. While rather skillfully representing many of the story’s elements, the film added a detail not contained in the original. It showed that both Paul and Charley Edwards really liked girls. I was outraged. When I later pondered the reason for the filmmaker’s peculiar addition and for my own anger at the inclusion of the scene, I speculated that the director, perhaps like myself earlier in the semester, unconsciously hoped to protect Cather or her work. By fabricating Paul and Charley’s liking of girls, the film corrupts one of the story’s likely designs: simultaneously to encode homosexuality and to indict society’s repudiation of it. I had encouraged students to write about theatricality in “Paul’s Case” as Phillip Page insightfully has, or about flower imagery as Sherry Crabtree engagingly has, or about the significance of the Faust reference as Edward W Pitcher convincingly has. Although I did not discourage students from writing of Paul’s homosexuality if they detected evidence of it, I all but forbade them to link that discovery to Cather’s lesbianism. Yet Paul’s “case” is somehow linked to Cather’s own situation, and the strategy in disguising that linkage, it seems to me, warrants celebration of its artistry, not the steadfast ignoring of its presence.

At first glance, it would appear that resistance to conjecturing upon Cather’s “well-guarded but scarcely well-kept secret” of homosexuality via analysis of “Paul’s Case” is indeed peculiar to myself, for a number of scholars have written on the subject and doubtless taught about it (Summers 103). Almost thirty years ago Larry Rubin identified Paul’s homosexuality by pointing to his appearance: “narrow chest”; “high cramped shoulders”; “hysterical brilliancy in his eyes,” which “he continually used . . . in a conscious, theatrical sort of way, particularly offensive in a boy” (qtd. in Rubin 129). Terming “the clues” of Paul’s homosexuality “lavish,” Rubin notes Paul’s effeminacy, his hidden bottle of violet water, his encounter with the young man from San Francisco, and the dreaded something that Paul feared “[e]ven when he was a little boy” (qtd. in Rubin 130). Rubin credits “the virtual lifting of social taboos in the discussion of sex in recent years”—the article was written in 1975—for his ability to write freely of “the homosexual motif” in “Paul’s Case.” Furthermore, Rubin laments that “critics . . . have overlooked (or ignored)” Paul’s “sexual nature” though he acknowledges some “broad hints,” most notably John Randall, who, in 1960, “daring[ly]” deemed “Paul’s Case” “a decadent story” even as he failed to develop “the psychological implications of that sinister epithet” (127-28). Rubin’s unmasking of Paul’s homosexuality indicates that for over a generation scholars have noted Cather’s encoding homosexuality.

Yet Rubin, like me, resists connecting Paul’s homosexuality to Cather. Of course this can be explained by the fact that knowledge of Cather’s lesbianism, as Summers notes, was not widely acknowledged until the late eighties, at least ten years after publication of Rubin’s article (Summers 103). Be that as it may, Rubin stills feels compelled to defend Cather’s writing on such a “delicate” subject by reminding us that other scholars have now uncovered homosexual motifs in Twain and in Melville. Furthermore, Rubin praises Cather to the sky:

It is a measure of the author’s art that she has absorbed the clinical level into the literary, so that the story may be read and enjoyed on the humanistic level . . . rather than simply as a Freudian case study. (Freud . . . was only beginning to publish his theories [in 1905 when “Paul’s Case” was published], so that Cather, like Sophocles and Shakespeare . . . is working through intuitive apprehension and perspicacious observation, rather than along the lines of any codified or systematized “scientific” approach. This, too, is all to her credit. (129)

As if likening Cather to Sophocles and to Shakespeare were not enough, Rubin ends his essay with a commendation oddly matching
the spirit (while far exceeding the eloquence) of my own sentiments. “It is, I believe,” Rubin writes, “a measure of Willa Cather’s superb craftsmanship that she was able to convey a sense of this previously unmentionable dimension of her protagonist’s inner being without violating any of the literary taboos of her time” (131). Even if we share Rubin’s appreciation, we cannot overlook his failure to speculate about the deeper significance of his discovery. Twenty years prior to Rubin’s penning his article, some critics, in viewing literature through the lens of Freudian theory—which, as previously noted, Rubin himself mentions—observed the connections between writers and their works. A professor of mine, for example, once spoke of his mentor’s psychoanalytical approach to the work of Hemingway, who was living at the time the mentor composed his analysis. In the conclusion of his dissertation, the former doctoral candidate declared Hemingway likely to commit suicide. Although I use this story merely to indicate that Rubin might have entertained the notion of a connection between Paul’s homosexuality and Cather’s lesbianism, as I write these lines, an unsettling sense of the mentor’s violation of Hemingway assails me—a sense kindred to the one I would feel were I to proclaim that scrutinizing Cather’s work in relation to her sexual preference is not only valid, but desirable. Although hijacking my intended train of thought, this renegade rumination perhaps nudges me closer to the trail of truth. Cather obviously cannot now sustain injury from our speculating about her lesbianism, but it seems to me that our determining the boundaries of scholarly inquiry might at least pay a glancing nod to ethics. Rubin’s understated and brief article—five pages long—with only half its length devoted to hard-core evidence of Paul’s homosexuality, and entirely bereft of linking that realization to Cather—seems somehow honorable. Non-invasive. Respectful. This is, after all, how we would repay someone who has offered much to us, and therein lies part of the difficulty. I consider Cather a friend rather than merely a subject of investigation.

“A Losing Game in the End”: Aestheticism and Homosexuality in Cather’s ‘Paul’s Case’” discloses how Claude J. Summers would react to my suggestion that Rubin’s essay seems “somehow honorable,” and “respectful.” Summers complains that Rubin’s “discussion . . . tend[s] to sentimentalize the protagonist’s gayness and to reduce the story to a simple conflict between the individual and society” (104). (I have never deemed stories dealing with the “conflict between the individual and society” as patently “simple.”) So there it is. Summers, then, would judge me embarrassingly “sentimental.” Perhaps my reluctance to discuss Cather’s sexuality in relation to her work is, after all, idiosyncratic.

But there is reason to believe that Summers too evades an extended examination of what Cather sought to keep private. Even if inadvertently impugning my ilk’s misguided protectionism of Cather, Summers ascertains, with admirable acuity, that “Paul’s Case” relates to Cather’s “response to the aesthetic movement in general [and] to the [Oscar] Wilde scandal in particular” (104). In doing so, Summers points to Cather’s animosity of Wilde, “expressed so vehemently—indeed so excessively—as to make one suspect that he represented for her not merely an artistic creed with which she lacked sympathy but a personal psychological threat” (104). Noting Cather’s earlier castigation of Wilde’s “drivel[ing] effeminacy” (104) and the “sins of [his] body, which pale ‘when compared to [his] sins of the spirit’” (106), Summers concludes that “Paul’s Case” “represents [a] modification in [Cather’s] thinking about Wilde and his circle” (107). Summers’s argument is complex, yet cleanly expressed and completely persuasive. But I contend that his mild antagonism of “sentimentalists” such as Rubin (and myself) matches the irony of Cather’s condemnation of Wilde. First of all, although touching irony of Cather’s expressed disgust of Wilde’s homosexuality, Summers locates his discussion on Cather’s “evolving [emphasis added] response to the Wilde scandal to Wilde’s role as a symbolic figure, particularly as a discredited aesthete and as a persecuted victim” (107). In refusing to belabor the fact that given her own sexual preference, Cather’s castigation of Wilde’s homosexuality might be viewed as surprising at the least and troubling at the most, Summers shifts the discussion from the personal to the intellectual. By emphasizing Cather’s “evolving” and ultimately radically ameliorated indictment of Wilde, Summers invites forgiveness for Cather’s attack. Furthermore, Summers praises Cather in a way reminiscent of Rubin’s eulogizing. According to Summers,

“Paul’s Case” is complex and resonant. By means of its masterful narration, it achieves an unusual balance of perspective. . . . [By questioning the inevitability of its own plot, [it] not only . . . enact[s] an imaginative response but demands that its readers do so as well, both in the process of interpretation and in relating others beyond the boundaries of fiction . . . [‘Paul’s Case’] is a work of unusual power that evokes genuine pathos. . . . [It] is both a moving tale and a significant contribution to the debate about homosexuality. . . . (118)

Whereas Rubin’s “sentimentalizing” Cather involves merely her discussing homosexuality without naming it, Summers praises Cather’s capacity to impact the reader and society’s consciousness. In doing so, ironically, Summers in some ways surpasses Rubin in explaining and praising Cather. I believe such extended praise, an understandable defense against early critics who dismissed Cather as
“simple,” now functions at times as protectively as my shying away from what I sometimes consider literary voyeurism.

In any event, the palpable relief some of us might feel in Summers’s focusing on Cather’s impact on social issues rather than the details of her life might be akin to the gratitude we feel when reading the preface to The Voyage Perilous. Susan Rosowski claims that the purpose in writing the work is not “biographical”; rather, the focus “remain[s] upon the works themselves” (xiii). Certainly the biographical has its important place in the study and teaching of a literary figure. But I must confess to a vested interest in touting the Rosowskian model. As a fiction writer, I would balk at the smug assertions of those who would read me into my characters. But would any of us want our secrets, which are to some as delectable as truffles, sniffed out by bristly snouts, uprooted, and served to those who would grunt in satisfaction of superior knowledge? Cannot we afford Cather protection from such crude ferreting?

But Cather critics hardly seek to become literary paparazzi, and forthcoming scholarship dealing with Cather’s lesbianism no doubt will yield important insights about her work. Indeed scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have already situated “Paul’s Case” not only in queer theory discourse but specifically in Cather’s relationship with the “sumptuously beautiful young woman, Isabelle McClung, who . . . defied her parents to the extent of bringing her imposing lover, Willa Cather, into the family home to live” in 1905 (62). Alluding to the Wilde trials, Sedgwick asserts that Cather, not unlike Paul’s teachers, “had some history of being an effeminophbic bully” (62). Remarks like Sedgwick’s encourage me to believe that my reluctance to associate Cather’s personal life with her work a preposterous aberration, one to be worked out in fear and trembling, within the privacy of a room of my own. Sedgwick betrays not a hint of unease about storming Cather’s boudoir. After clearly (indeed, almost graphically) associating Cather as an English teacher in Pittsburgh with the bullying English teacher in “Paul’s Case,” Sedgwick hastens to add that English teacher Cather “doesn’t require to be identified with . . . [the] English teacher in ‘Paul’s Case’” in order to understand that both “English teachers” harshly judge Paul (62). Sedgwick integrates the facts of Cather’s lesbianism with “Paul’s Case” without one bit of sentimentalizing and without one shred of praise. The result? An insightful and important essay. But one I would not have written because it lacks the compassion that Cather extends to so many of her characters, including, I contend, to Paul.

I cannot help but contrast Cather’s situation to Shakespeare’s. While knowing so little of the Bard’s personal life, Shakespearean scholars have managed to keep busy, gaining tenure and filling whole libraries with criticism. This argument, though, smacks of rationalization. The truth is, I fear losing Cather by appropriation to critics of specific theoretical camps. While my hope to uphold the Golden Rule constitutes part of my resistance to linking Paul’s homosexuality to Cather’s, perhaps a greater part of resistance is born of fear—the fear that my voice of appreciation of Cather will be silenced by critics who might claim Cather exclusively.

In “What Really Happens in Cather’s ‘Paul’s Case,’” Michael N. Salda offers the intriguing position that most of what happens in the story, right down to Paul’s supposed suicide, is only imagined by Paul. So it is with this essay. I might be a bit closer to understanding my own protectionism of Cather, but I still question the integrity of my considering Cather’s life in relation to her work, and simultaneously doubt the integrity in excluding consideration of the biographical from my analysis. Although I believe this protectionism is not entirely peculiar to myself, it seems now quixotic to have sought that determination, for critics, thank the muses, will do what they want. And it seems to me ultimately that Cather’s installation as icon will not be affected one jot by our presenting her in one light or another. I feel a bit as Cather describes Paul as feeling when he throws himself in front of the train: “As he fell, the folly of his haste occurred to him with merciless clearness, the vastness of what he had left undone” (131). When I do get to all the Cather scholarship I have left undone, my hope is that my approach will satisfy the dictates both of gratitude and of unflinching acumen.

Cather deserves no less. Students, too, deserve no less. Knowledge of Cather’s lesbianism might lead students to discoveries that expand not only their appreciation of Cather’s texts but also to discussions concerning the cultural dictates that prevented the open expression of her sexual preference. And that discussion, it seems to me, distinguishes one important claim for the continued relevance of teaching Cather today.
NOTES

1. Of course, there is not universal agreement that Cather was a lesbian. Critics do not agree on a definition of lesbianism, nor do they agree on how to apply the various definitions to Cather's life. See O'Brien for an extended discussion of definitions and their applicability to Cather.

2. Summers maintains that Cather's "hostility" (104) towards Wilde relates in part to her disgust with his "effeminate" esthetic, which collides with her own "masculine" ideal. Avoiding an extended discussion about the implications of the writers' mirror-imaged esthetics matching their respective same-sex preferences, Summers hastens to declare that "Paul's Case" is also "intended as a comment on Wilde and the aesthetic movement, particularly on the movement's celebration of the artificial and mockery of the natural, its privileging of the precious at the expense of the ordinary, and its elevation of art above nature" (117).

3. Sedgwick's remarks regarding the nature of Cather and McClung's relationship, are, of course, speculative. Lacking substantive evidence, Sedgwick's assertions might be challenged readily by numerous Cather scholars.

WORKS CITED


Lives Unfolded

SARAH BERINGER

Willa Cather’s collection *Obscure Destinies* arouses many questions about life and death. The characters in her three stories all lived very different lives, but each one eventually met the end. As if each of these characters were a precious petal on a flower, Cather unfolds their lives, revealing the beauty and frailty of the human experience. Through the actions and opinions of Dr. Ed, Mandy, and the young narrator of “Two Friends” concerning the death of their friends, Cather eloquently reveals some life-long truths.

In the first story, “Neighbour Rosicky,” Dr. Ed must face the eventual death of his friend. After Rosicky leaves his office, Dr. Ed picks up the stethoscope with which he listened to the old man’s heart and ponders regretfully: “He wished it had been telling tales about some other man’s heart, some old man who didn’t look the Doctor in the eye so knowingly, or hold out such a warm brown hand when he said good-bye” (8). Clearly, this close relationship with Rosicky must have made the diagnosis especially difficult for Dr. Ed. Knowing how generous, warm-hearted, and affectionate the Rosickys were upset the doctor even more, for he knew Rosicky would soon die and the family would be without a father.

Dr. Ed had dealt with many deaths in his career before; Rosicky’s death, however, seemed to affect him greatly. He had observed how much Rosicky had enjoyed life and had helped others. He knew this kindheartedness had never gotten Rosicky very far in life in terms of financial status, and it was very difficult to think such a person who sacrificed so much for others would soon die. When Dr. Ed formally received news of the death, he knew he must get out to see the family.

On the way to Rosicky’s house, Dr. Ed stops at the graveyard where Rosicky is buried. While looking over the land and reflecting on the death, Dr. Ed has an epiphany: He realizes that his friend’s life was not the end. Rosicky did not die and be buried in what Dr. Ed calls the “cities of the dead . . . cities of the forgotten, of the ‘put away’” (71). He would live on in the land he loved—the land that was so open and free. Rosicky’s life, the memories, would stay forever. They would serve as a lasting tribute to a man who lived such a fulfilled and privileged life. This realization served as a closure for Dr. Ed.

Through Rosicky’s death, Dr. Ed now saw life and death from a different perspective. He no longer viewed death as something that would ultimately erase everything in a person’s life. The hard work, generosity, and kindness a person exhibited would live on in a different form. These life lessons would undoubtedly aid the doctor as he dealt with more deaths in his profession.

In the second story, “Old Mrs. Harris,” the servant girl Mandy shares a special bond with the aging woman. This close relationship is shown when Mandy performs her ritual of rubbing the old woman’s feet: “She never asked for this greatest solace of the day; it was something that Mandy gave, who had nothing else to give” (93). Mandy did not have a real family of her own nor any great possessions. Her life was lived serving others. This was quite similar to Grandma Harris as she too had few possessions and lived her life serving others. Because of their similar lifestyles, Mandy feels a special connection with Grandma Harris.

Mandy continues to feel that close connection even as Grandma Harris lay dying. She helps the old woman by bringing her food and comfort. When Grandma is too sick to run the household, Mandy takes her position as leader of the household with pride. One particular line of the story clearly shows the way Mandy feels about having such a responsibility: “Mandy had to manage the house herself that day, and she was not at all sorry . . . she felt very important taking Mrs. Harris’s place . . .” (180).

One can see that Mandy’s view of the old woman’s lifestyle was quite different from the townspeople’s view. They simply saw Grandma Harris as an old woman that was put to work like a slave. Mandy’s close observation of the women through old age gave her a different insight to the matter. She learned many things about life that these townspeople failed to realize. She saw the true significance of Grandma’s role as a caretaker and knew Grandma’s life was better than the townspeople’s view of a proper life for an old woman. Mandy had a similar view concerning Grandma Harris’s life as Dr. Ed had on Rosicky’s life. Mandy knew that the woman’s kind actions and service had led her to a complete life. Therefore, when Grandma Harris died, Mandy was content with her passing, knowing the old woman had died happily and peacefully.

The lessons Mandy learned by observing Grandma Harris were extremely valuable. They most likely helped her to deal with her own life as a caretaker and allowed her to see the true value of herself.

In Cather’s last story, “Two Friends,” the narrator shares a rather poignant past experience with the reader. As a girl, the narrator had viewed a strong friendship between two men in her community. This friendship was very important to her as she had admired these men. She viewed the relationship they shared as something pure
and magnificent. When it ended, she was heartbroken and sadly watched as Mr. Dillon died years later. The men were never able to mend their friendship. Perhaps the saddest part to the narrator was the way Mr. Trueman surrendered his life after the death of his friend. He sold everything he had owned, left the city, and retreated to a quieter life, dying nine years later.

As the narrator matures, she looks back on this experience: “The breaking-up of that friendship between two men who scarcely noticed my existence was a real loss to me, and has ever since been a regret” (229). The loss the narrator is referring to was the loss of something she had believed in, something she had admired, cherished, and yearned for. It was the ending of a friendship that was once so complete.

As the narrator received news about the last years of Mr. Trueman’s life, she must have felt the regret over the failing friendship even more. For it was evident, through Trueman’s actions, that the friendship was still there. That truth caused the narrator to reflect on the lives of the two men and that wonderful friendship they had once shared. As she reflected, she realized how precious but fragile friendship was. She learned how important it was to preserve that special bond. She knew that one shouldn’t let pride, as Mr. Dillon and Mr. Trueman did, get in the way of something valuable.

In the closing line of the story, the narrator sums up the impact the experience had on her: “When that old scar is occasionally touched by chance, it rouses the old uneasiness; the feeling of something broken that could so easily have been mended; of something delightful that was senselessly wasted, of a truth that was accidentally distorted—one of the truths we want to keep” (230). The lessons the narrator learned through this experience would most likely help her to preserve that sacred bond that had once so sadly been broken.

Out of the three stories, the death of Mr. Trueman had the greatest impact on me personally. The way in which Mr. Trueman lived the last years of his life was very disquieting. I can sense the agony he felt over the death of Mr. Dillon. I can also sense his feelings of regret over the words he would never be able to speak to his friend—the “I’m sorry” that he had wanted to speak for so long. I saw the escape from his busy prosperous life as a form of punishment for the friendship he let waste away under his pride.

Perhaps the story impacted me so much because of its close relation to real life. Many times people become angry and let their pride and dignity overpower their true feelings. They are not humble enough to make the first move to reconciliation. They go throughout life slowly suffering at the same time knowing that just a small action could repair the bond. Unfortunately, Mr. Trueman and Mr. Dillon never took that small step, and the damaged bond was never repaired.

To be sure, the characters in Cather’s stories learned valuable lessons by observing the old age and death of their friends. These characters may be fictional, but the truths revealed are not. They are ones Cather gathered from her observation of real life. These truths can give us insight into the human experience and help us cope with our own lives.

WORK CITED
Contributes

JAMES BARLOON, an assistant professor of English at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, received the PhD from the University of Kansas. He has published articles on Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, and William Faulkner. An article on the portrayal of war in *In Our Time* will be published in the Spring 2005 issue of *The Hemingway Review*. This past summer he participated in the NEH seminar on "The Remaking of Charles Dickens" in Santa Cruz, California.

SARAH BERINGER, an English major in the English honors program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, graduated in May from David City High School, David City, Nebraska. She ranked first in her graduating class, and, as the 2004 Norma Ross Walter Scholarship recipient, presented her paper at the Cather Festival on April 30.

JOSHUA DOLEZAL, a PhD candidate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, specializes in American literature, Cather, and the medical humanities. He also co-edits *The Mowers' Tree*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cather Studies*, *Quarterly West*, *The Seattle Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter and Review*.

REBECCA FABER, a PhD recipient from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has varied literary interests—from the works of Willa Cather to the literature of World War I to American women writers of the Modernist Period to contemporary Plains writers. An Assistant Director in the Office of Career Services at UNL, she, on occasion, teaches junior-level seminars in literature for its Honors Program. She also serves on the Board of Governors for the Center for Great Plains Studies and the board of the Nebraska Center for the Book.

CATHERINE KUNCE, currently Vice President of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, received her PhD in English literature from the University of Denver. Now teaching at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric, she has published, presented conference papers, taught, and researched diverse subjects such as Linda Hogan, Nabokov, Cervantes, Poe, Australian film, slave narratives, Buffalo Bill, and Fitzgerald. Her first novel, *Stations of the Crossed Heart*, has received two literary awards and will be published in December.

Harvest Hymn and Harvest Dance: Homage to Willa Cather

Rick Sowash, a composer, author, and artist-in-the-schools performer from Cincinnati, has recorded a compact disc with his composition “Harvest Hymn and Harvest Dance: Homage to Willa Cather,” which was inspired by his long-time admiration for Cather’s work. Rick was present at last spring’s Cather Spring Festival, when he provided commentary for a delightful performance of several of his compositions. Rick and his music were very well-received. Teachers should welcome this opportunity to connect music with Cather’s literature or to have enjoyable music to accompany student reading.

“Harvest Hymn and Harvest Dance: Homage to Willa Cather” appears on Rick’s CD titled “A Portrait at 50.” You can learn more by visiting Rick’s website at www.sowash.com. The CD can be ordered from the website ($14.95) or by contacting Rick in any of these ways:

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- Art exhibit and gallery talk by Mary Vaughan, WCPM Artist in Residence
- Kolaches, luncheon, and banquet

For more information contact the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation
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