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“...back to the old sources of culture and wisdom...”
—Willa Cather
YOUR response to the inaugural issue of Teaching Cather has been gratifying. Our subscription list continues to grow, and your comments, thoughts, and ideas concerning the journal are enduring and worthwhile ones. Your cheering comments certainly make us believe that Teaching Cather will be a definite boon for those who are teaching and will teach Cather in their classrooms.

We include in this issue two commencement orations. One was given by Willa Cather in 1890. The other was given 110 years later by the noted Cather scholar Susan Rosowski. Each is interesting in its own right; juxtaposed together, they take on new meaning. Teachers may find ways to use these speeches in their classrooms: having students contrast the uses of language and literary allusion, for example, or asking students to write speeches for their own graduation.

Again, as the first issue demonstrated, the essays here represent the teaching of Cather from different perspectives and demonstrate how Cather can be taught with divergent approaches. We have gathered together a group of thoughtful, responsible, informed, and literate essays. As it should with a journal of this ilk, uniformity has been (and, hopefully, will continue to be) sacrificed to diversity as a variety of approaches have been honored. The sacrifice, to be sure, has not been made with regard to quality.

Steve Shively
Virgil Albertini

ABOUT THE COVER

The quotation on the cover is from Willa Cather’s essay, “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,” which first appeared in Nation magazine on September 5, 1923. Urging a return to the classics, Cather writes, “One may [ . . .] hope that the children, or the grandchildren [ . . .] will go back to the old sources of culture and wisdom—not as a duty, but with burning desire.” The photograph, by Rebecca K. Pinker, is of the front portico of Willow Shade, Cather’s childhood home and one of her “old sources of culture and wisdom.” The photograph also illustrates two metaphors appropriate to education: the stairs and the doors, both beckoning learners upward and inside the world of knowledge.

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Winchester’s Willa Cather: 
An Across-the-Curriculum Approach at Handley High School

BY REBECCA K. PINKER

I read my first Willa Cather short story as a high school student. I can recall the picture that Cather portrays of Hester sitting in a rocking chair and William sitting “on the other side of the table reading his farm paper” on a spring night while their sons’ laughter rises from the swimming pond and insects buzz in the night air (“Sentimentality” 354). Not only could I visualize this picture, but also I could hear the voices within it. Years later, when teaching, I wanted my students to experience Willa Cather’s picturesque fiction as I had and to sense the many subtexts within any one text. As my enthusiasm for teaching Cather’s work grew each year, and as I witnessed a variety of responses and understandings coming from my students, I began to wonder what other secondary teachers experienced when teaching Cather’s fiction. And so, my inquiry began at Handley High School in Winchester, Virginia, near where Willa Cather’s life began.

Winchester, Virginia, lies northwest of Washington, D.C., and provides a panoramic view of the Shenandoah Valley and the Blue Ridge Mountains. The surrounding area is rich in Civil War history, for it skirts an invisible boundary between Confederate and Union forces of the 1860s. Willa Cather was born near Winchester, Virginia, on December 7, 1873. Though she spent only the first nine years of her life in Virginia, this setting had a lasting impression on her. In an interview Cather stated: “When I sit down to write, turns of phrase I’ve forgotten for years come back like white ink before fire. I think that most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen. That’s the important period: when one’s not writing. Those years determine whether one’s work will be poor and thin or rich and fine” (Willa Cather in Person 20). Sapphira and the Slave Girl is the only Cather novel set in this Virginia area, and it was her last published novel. In a letter to Alexander Woollcott, Cather indicates in this novel her end was her beginning (Woodress 481). Although Cather refers to the novel’s epilogue with this statement, Merrill Skaggs acknowledges that Willa Cather “could have not known how apt a pun she had just gotten off” (166). Willa Cather also used Winchester as a setting for several short stories: “The Elopmeme of Allen Poole” (1893), “A Night at Greenway Court” (1896), and “The Sentimentality of William Tavener” (1900). In these works, Willa Cather vividly describes her early memories of this Virginia setting.

At Handley High School, in Winchester, the secondary teachers have an opportunity to juxtapose this writer, her fiction, and the setting. These teachers embrace the rich historical heritage, the vivid imagery, and various themes found in Cather’s fiction. Their educational programs reflect this interest in a variety of subject areas: English, social studies, and art.

In the English program at Handley High School, students have opportunities to study Cather’s Winchester fiction. Teachers indicate that since Willa Cather is considered a “local author” she is met with more enthusiasm than other writers and that “students can relate to places locally” that Cather mentions in her work. One teacher reports that since Willa Cather “spent [her early years] in nearby Gore, Virginia, students seem to connect with this author.”

The English teachers at Handley High School use Cather’s Sapphira and the Slave Girl in their program. Cather makes reference to this area in the novel’s epilogue when the former slave Nancy returns to Winchester from Canada: “In all that time [twenty-five years later] the country between Romney and Winchester had changed very little” (273); the narrator states that ambitious farmers of this time kept smart buggies and double carriages and “these were used for Sunday church-going and trips to Winchester and Capon Springs” (277). In this work Cather describes specific geographical landmarks that can still be seen today. To make this novel come alive for students, some teachers take field trips to areas identified in the novel. One teacher indicates that she takes her students “down Route 50 west into West Virginia” by way of the macadam road to Romney and the country road to Gore, renamed from the earlier name of Back Creek. The name Gore honors Willa Cather’s great aunt, Sidney Gore, who had lived a philanthropic life in this area. The field trip includes stopping at Cather’s early home, Willow Shade, which is about ten miles from Winchester, as well as the places of the mill house and mill described in the novel. Stu-
dents then visit a country cemetery near Gore where gravesites can be seen of the prototype characters from this novel.

In the short story “The Sentimentality of William Tavener,” Cather describes this same area. Hester reveals to her husband: “I remember I went up to Back Creek to see the circus wagons go by. They came down from Romney, you know” (“Sentimentality” 356). Since this story can be found in “an old anthology,” teachers use this story to connect Cather’s first settings: Virginia and Nebraska. Although teachers use “The Elopement of Allen Poole” less often, it, too, tells of this picturesque country: “Allen watched them [reapers and mowers] all until a passing cloud made the valley dark, then his eyes wandered to where the Blue Ridge lay against the sky [. . .].” (“Elopement” 574). In this locale, students have opportunity to picture Cather’s characters among the hills, ridges, and valleys just as she portrays them in her fiction.

Social studies teachers also present Willa Cather’s association with the Winchester setting. In this field of study, teachers correlate the movement of Union and Confederate forces that Cather mentions in Sapphira and the Slave Girl with the military history of the Civil War in this vicinity. “During the war years, [ . . .] Federal troops were marching up and down the valley [. . .]. Men admired young Turner Ashby of Fauquier County, who held the Confederate line from Berkeley Springs to Harpers Ferry,—so near home that word of his brilliant cavalry exploits came out to Back Creek [. . .]. After Lee’s surrender, the country boys from Back Creek and Timber Ridge came home to their farms [. . .]. In the movement of troops between Romney and Winchester, all the livestock had been carried away” (274-6). These statements highlight the geographical district of historical Winchester with the Winchester that students know today. Using a map of this time period, teachers pinpoint the specific spots that Cather describes. Students, then, see the paralleling of historical fiction with the present-day locale.

The art curriculum at Handley High School includes a focus on Cather’s connection to this area as well. The chairperson of the art department uses Sapphira and the Slave Girl in the Directed Individual Study Art Classes. She indicates that after students read this Cather novel, they “illustrate something from Willa Cather’s work or child study. Using a map of this time period, teachers pinpoint the specific spots that Cather describes. Students, then, see the paralleling of historical fiction with the present-day locale.

The artist captures the rigidity of Sapphira’s face, the gentleness of Nancy’s countenance, and the ambiguity of Henry’s demeanor. Although Sapphira’s white face shows clear definition, Henry’s face remains hidden to the viewer, and Nancy’s countenance is shaded. The artist’s presentation of all three characters corresponds to Cather’s description of these persons in the novel. Cather describes Sapphira as a dominating character, for she speaks to her slave and husband in like tones: “You may go, Washington,” and to Henry: “Major Grimwood stopped by yesterday, on his way to Romney. You should have come up to see him” (6). Cather shows Sapphira’s intensity in the character’s dialogue: “Of course we don’t sell our people,” she agreed mildly. ‘Certainly, we would never offer any for sale. But to oblige friends is a different matter. And you’ve often said you don’t want to stand in anybody’s way. To live in Winchester, in a mansion like the Grimwoods—any darky would jump at the chance” (7).

Even though Sapphira becomes immobile, she still holds the dominant place in the household: “The Mistress had dropsy and was unable to walk [. . .]. Her malady had taken away her colour; she was always pale now [. . .]. She [. . .] sat in her crude invalid’s chair as if it were a seat of privilege” (10,15). Sapphira’s daughter, Rachel, feels that Sapphira’s voice has “a kind of false pleasantness,” yet Rachel reflects “it was scarcely false—it was the only kind of pleasantness her mother had—not very warm” (15). Husband Henry is a character in shadow; Henry Colbert “was silent and uncommunicative” although he “was trusted in a community to which he had come a stranger” (5). He lives in the background of his wife. Nancy’s depiction rests in a balance between the husband and wife. The novel’s narrator states that Nancy “had a natural delicacy of feeling. [. . .] [She was] something warmer and more alive” (43). The artist captures the rigidity of Sapphira’s face, the gentleness of Nancy’s countenance, and the ambiguity of Henry’s demeanor. Although Sapphira did not live to see Nancy’s return, the artist places these two central characters in this picture’s foreground.

Not only by placement of characters but also by selection of colors, the artist captures the mood of this pre and post Civil War novel using somber pastels of mauve, pearl, violet, charcoal, russet, pale green in the background with white and black in the foreground, while various shades of brown color Willow Shade. In gray apparel Henry stands in the darkened doorway with the white porch surrounding him. Henry’s gray clothing illustrates his view of slavery that comes between Sapphira and Nancy; his gray appearance also portrays his place in the novel. The porch’s bold white Roman columns, white stairs, Nancy’s light dress and white dress-trim provide a stark contrast to Sapphira’s black dress and hat. The issue of slavery becomes an evident theme with the stark colors of white and black overlapping the muted pastels symbolizing the quietude of the Winchester setting. In this depiction, Nancy wears a white headband rather than a turban typical of enslaved Americans of the pre-Civil War period. Nancy’s dress shows not the slave dress of the time, but rather a garment associated with a class other than slavery, for, after all, Nancy returns home after twenty-five years of living “free” in Canada. She is an escaped slave returning “home” after the war. She no longer has fearful eyes and a look of hesitancy; rather, her countenance shows confidence and determination.
The artist symbolically pictures Sapphira in a black dress and dark hat; this attention to color hints of Sapphira’s own physical enslavement as well as her prejudicial enslavement. Sapphira sits at the bottom of the outside staircase that resembles a bridal train; yet, such bridal imagery of happiness serves as a contrast to Sapphira’s own unhappiness. Henry stands above Sapphira even as he works on her behalf.

In the background, dark window glass in the family home gives an austere feeling; white window frames divide the black windowpanes. Blackness, as well, exudes from the doorway of the home. In this print there are no shadows; the juxtaposition of color, literally and figuratively, is explicit. Such coloring presents the atmosphere of both this novel and the slavery issue that is a part of this novel and the setting of the 1860s. Yet, as a gesture of hope, the artist places a tall leafy tree in varied green tints in the upper corner of this piece; this placement provides a hint of rebirth and renewal that comes after the Civil War. In this dramatic art piece, the artist captures the mood, theme, setting, and symbols of the novel. The artist shows her understanding of this fiction as Willa Cather relates setting to story.

The English teachers incorporate other Cather novels in a variety of ways. They include the prairie novels along with the Winchester fiction. Teachers affirm that students working in literary analysis will often read My Ántonia or other novels by Cather. While working with My Ántonia in an analytical manner, students discover the multi-level aspect of Cather’s work. Additionally, students explore short story elements, literary terms, and writing style; they see these literary techniques juxtaposed with the pioneer story. The novel prompts classroom discussion, and students write on themes of friendship, relocation, maturity, and family relationships. A ninth grade teacher indicates that she places this novel on her book report list; students report on this novel when studying the westward movement. In her classes this teacher uses an excerpt of this novel found in the district mandated text.

Another teacher “introduces [Willa Cather] with filmstrip or video.” She indicates that in her presentation of Willa Cather, she discusses Cather’s autobiographical connection found in My Ántonia. In this teacher’s classes, students use 3x5 note cards to record similarities between Willa Cather’s life experiences and Jim Burden’s. These questions and pieces of information serve as the bases for discussion. This teacher shows the relationship among the various books within the novel. Some teachers use My Ántonia “in a Frontier theme that integrates with social studies.” Additionally, teachers report that My Ántonia is “added to our AP [Advanced Placement] requirements.” These statements show the versatility of Cather’s work. At this school students in grades nine through twelve read this work. With a first reading students can appreciate Willa Cather’s story for its historical representation of time and place as well as characterization. As older students read this work, they see beyond the story and treat the novel as a complex piece of work involving critical examination.

Although My Ántonia appears to be the favored Cather text that teachers use at Handley High School, some teachers indicate that they use other Cather novels: O Pioneers! and Death Comes for the Archbishop. The first novel relates to Cather’s view of Nebraska. The story depicts the development of the rich farmland through the lives of one family. Students can see in this work similar themes as found in My Ántonia. Woodress asserts about Cather’s O Pioneers!: “She succeeds brilliantly in creating in about fifty-two thousand words a saga of Nebraska extending from pioneering days to about 1900. Birth, growth, love, death—it is all there” (233). In O Pioneers!, Carl Linstrum remarks to Alexandra Bergson, “Isn’t it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before” (119). Cather claimed O Pioneers! to be her second first novel (Willa Cather on Writing 89), for with this novel Willa Cather believed that she found her writer’s voice. Several teachers use My Ántonia and O Pioneers! as companion pieces. Upon completion of the novels, through presentations and discussions, students share the stories and their experiences while studying the novels. Teachers affirm that their students can easily relate to these novels that present a variety of themes.

Death Comes for the Archbishop serves as an additional text for some students at Handley High School. The novel’s setting places the story in the Southwest in the 1850s, a time when French Catholic priests began to proselytize the area. This novel pictures the terrain and socioeconomic level of the Southwest at this period, which is far different for Winchester students in the East today; and the novel gives opportunity for students to see the development of another section of this country.

Some teachers indicate that they use several of Cather’s short stories: “A Wagner Matinee,” “Neighbour Rosicky,” “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” and “Paul’s Case.” The first three stories show some aspect of the Nebraska prairie. “A Wagner Matinee” combines two settings, the Nebraska prairie and a cultured metropolis. The settings provide the backdrop for this story of nostalgic lost opportunities. Aunt Georgiana leaves her position as piano teacher in Boston to become a Nebraska farmer’s wife. Years later, she returns to the city and attends a Wagner matinee. She, then, realizes opportunities that she has forfeited by choosing to live on the prairie. While a feeling of discontentment may surface in “A Wagner Matinee,” in “Neighbour Rosicky,” Rosicky finds peace and contentment in his prairie farm, family, and life. He leaves this world knowing the joy of raising a family and placing roots in a new country.
In the next prairie story that the teachers utilize, students experience the impact of intergenerational relationships. In “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” a train from the East returns an artist’s body to his prairie hometown from a large eastern city. One of Harvey Merrick’s students travels with his teacher’s body. The young student learns of the narrow mindedness of this small town as he witnesses Merrick’s friends and family in Sand City. Sometimes, when conflicts occur, setting has little bearing on the outcome; however, in this work, setting magnifies a desperate situation.

The last story that teachers draw on, “Paul’s Case,” takes place in Pittsburgh and New York City. Choices become the chief catalyst for Paul’s behavior. Teachers relay that students readily identify with Paul’s sources of anxiety and frustration as this high school student desperately tries to find his place in the world. He struggles with identity and familial support. He concludes that he has only one choice. Teachers express that this story provides opportunity for the discussion of suicide.

At this high school, social studies teachers use Willa Cather’s fiction that relates to the Nebraska plains. They incorporate Willa Cather’s My Ántonia when discussing early pioneer life on the prairie. In his discussion of America in the early 1920s, one teacher parallels the mandated text with parts of Cather’s prairie novels. Another teacher makes use of Cather’s work to “introduce the [study of the] closing of the frontier.” In My Ántonia Cather describes how the early immigrants struggle to tame the land. Using Cather’s explanation of the immigrant influence complements the historical study of immigrants during the 1800s. At the end of the novel, the narrator states that the once open fields now are fenced. And upon returning to the country, Jim Burden sees: “The rough pasture […] had been ploughed under when the highways were surveyed” (238). Teachers inform their students that wheel-ruts and buffalo wallows can be seen in the prairie terrain today.

Each of Willa Cather’s novels affords rich imagery, and the art students capture the remarkable settings in a variety of art forms. The chairperson of the art department encourages her students to use Cather’s picturesque writing as subject material for pieces in their art portfolios. Students read The Song of the Lark, and they illustrate setting scenes. In this novel, Willa Cather incorporates the solitude of the prairie, the excitement of musical performances in great cities, and the renewal of the soul in the Southwest’s Panther Canyon. Because this novel contains much imagery, students have many options for capturing the feeling of setting.

In this art program students use another Cather novel as subject in their work, The Professor’s House. While the first and third sections of this novel depict a college town along the shores of Lake Michigan, the middle section, “Tom Outland’s Story,” pictures another area, the Southwest. Students use this section to portray the sparse terrain and the awesome Blue Mesa that Tom Outland finds. Cather’s description of the ancient Indian village atop the Blue Mesa provides students with material for watercolor, charcoal, and oil prints of relics, rocks, and landscape. In these students’ endeavors, the viewer can experience the sacredness of the mesa, as well as feel the arid wind blowing across the plateau.

Willa Cather’s writing demonstrates versatility because teachers in all four secondary grade levels and several departments incorporate her works into their curricula. In the English program, ninth grade teachers make reference to Cather’s prairie writing that focuses on the influx of immigrants and the westward expansion. Although the sophomore curriculum dictates a generic literature program, teachers incorporate some of Cather’s short fiction into their curricula. In the eleventh and twelfth grade programs, teachers use several novels and short stories in their presentations. Cather’s work can be found in the AP curriculum, the Honors program, and in the regular level classes.

Other departments, too, incorporate Cather’s fiction into their curricula. In social studies classes, students have opportunity to observe the connection between American history and American literature. By reading Cather’s fiction, they experience the reality of the Civil War conflict and the pioneer spirit. The art students find deeper meaning in Cather’s work through various forms of expression. Regardless of their personal academic schedules, students become familiar with Willa Cather’s Virginia and Nebraska fiction. They see the contrasts that she provides in the picturesque settings that influence much of her writing whether she describes the hills and valleys of Virginia or the plains and prairie towns of Nebraska. Through the efforts of teachers at Handley High School, students receive the opportunity to experience the richness of Willa Cather’s writing.

WORKS CITED
Superstition vs. Investigation

BY WILLA CATHER

All human history is a record of an emigration, an exodus from barbarism to civilization; from the very outset of this pilgrimage of humanity, superstition and investigation have been contending for mastery. Since investigation first led man forth on that great search for truth which has prompted all his progress, superstition, the stern Pharoh of his former bondage, has followed him, retarding every step of advancement.

Then began a conquest which will end only with time, for it is only the warfare between radicalism and conservatism, truth and error, which underlies every man’s life and happiness. The Ancient Orientals were highly civilized people but were dreamers and theorists who delved into the mystical and metaphysical, leaving the more practical questions remain unanswered, and were subjected to the evils of tyranny and priestcraft. Those sacred books of the east we today regard as half divine. We are not apt to think as we read those magnificent flights of metaphor that the masses of people who read and believed them knew nothing of figures. It is the confounding of the literal and the figurative that has made atheists and fanatics throughout the ages.

All races have worshipped nature, the ruder as the cause, the more enlightened as the effect of one grand cause. Worship as defined by Carlyle is unmeasured wonder, but there are two kinds of wonder, that born of fear and that of admiration; slavish fear is never reverence.

The Greeks, lacking the intense religious fervor of the Orient, entertained broader views. Their standard of manhood was one of practical worth. They allowed no superstition, religious, political, or social, to stand between them and the truth and suffered exile, imprisonment, and death for the right of opinion and investigation.

Perhaps the strongest conflict ever known between the superstitious and investigative forces of the world raged on the dark ages. Earth seemed to return to its original chaotic state, and there was no one to cry, “Fiat lux.” The old classic creed fell crashing into the boundless path, and the new church was a scene of discord. All the great minds were crushed, for men were still ruled by the iron scepter of fear, and it was essential that they should remain ignorant.

Superstition has ever been the curse of the church, and until she can acknowledge that since her principles are true, no scientific truth can contradict them, she will never realize her full strength. There is another book of God than that of the scriptural revelation, a book written in chapters of creation upon the pages of the universe bound by mystery. When we are morbid enough to say that the world degenerates with its age we forget that the heroes and sages of history were the exceptions and not the rule; what age since the world’s foundation can leave such a record upon the pages of time as the nineteenth century? What is it that characterizes our age and gives the present its supremacy? Not skill in handcraft, for the great masses of art lie sleeping among the tombs of Hellas and Italy; not in clearness or depth of thought, for our literary and philosophical lights are gleams from the fires of the past. In the Elizabethan age, a book was written asserting that nature is the only teacher, that no man’s mind is broad enough to invent a theory to hold nature, for she is the universe. With the publication of the Novum Organum came a revolution in thought; scientists ceased theorizing and began experimenting. Thus we went painfully back to nature, weary and disgusted with our artificial knowledge, hungering for that which is meat, thirsting for that which is drink, longing for the things that are. She has given us the universe in answer.

It is the most sacred right of man to investigate; we paid dearly for it in Eden; we have been shedding our heart’s blood for it ever since. It is ours; we have bought it with a price.

Scientific investigation is the hope of our age, as it must precede all progress; and yet upon every hand we hear the objections to its pursuit. The boy who spends his time among the stones and flowers is a trifle, and if he tries with bungling attempt to pierce the mystery of animal life he is cruel. Of course if he becomes a great anatomist or a brilliant naturalist, his cruelties are forgotten or forgiven him; the world is very cautious, but it is generally safe to admire a man who has succeeded. We do not with-hold from a few great scientists the right of the hospital, the post mortem, or experimenting with animal life, but we are prone to think the right of experimenting with life too sacred a thing to be placed in the hands of inexperienced persons. Nevertheless, if we bar our novices from advancement, whence shall come our experts?

But to test the question by comparison, would all the life destroyed in experimenting from the beginning of the world until today be as an atom to the life saved by that one grand discovery for which Harvey sacrificed his practice and his reputation, the circulation of the blood? There is no selfishness in this. It came from a higher motive than the desire for personal gain, for it too often brings destitution instead. Of this we have the grand example in the broken-down care-worn old man who has just returned from the heart of the Dark Continent. But perhaps you still say that I evade the question, has any one a right to destroy life for scientific purposes? Ah, why does life live upon death throughout the universe?

Investigators have styled fanatics those who seek to probe into the mysteries of the unknowable. This is unreasonable. The most aspiring philosopher never hoped to do more than state the problem; he never dreamed of solving it. Newton did not say how or why every particle of matter in the universe attracted every other particle of matter in the universe. He simply said it was so. We can only judge these abstract forces by their effect. Our intellectual swords may cut away a thousand petty spiderwebs woven by superstition across the mind of man, but before the veil of the “Sanctum Santorum” we stand confounded, our blades glance and turn and shatter.
upon the eternal adamant. Microscopic eyes have followed matter to the molecule and fallen blinded. Imagination has gone a step farther and grasped the atom. There, with a towering height above and yawning death below even this grows sick at soul. For over six thousand years we have shaken fact and fancy in the dice box together and breathlessly awaited the result. But the dice of God are always loaded, and there are two sides which never fall upward, the alpha and omega. Perhaps when we make our final cast with dark old death we may shape them better.

I thought my oration very good. It stated with fervor a great many things I had lately discovered.
—Jim Burden in My Ántonia

Statistics tells us, that degree results in an increased earning power of almost 60 percent and a decreased risk of unemployment of 50 percent. These are reassuring statistics.

Yet graduation has another meaning, which is to change gradually, or by degrees. From enrolling for your first semester to today, you have changed in deeply significant ways that will emerge only over time. And understanding, comprehending these changes provides both a grounding for you and a point of orientation.

“It is by knowing where you stand that you grow able to judge where you are,” Eudora Welty once wrote. “Place absorbs our earliest notice and attention, it bestows upon us our original awareness; and our critical powers spring up from the study of it and the growth experiences inside it. One place comprehended can make us understand other places better. Sense of place gives us equilibrium; extended, it is sense of direction too.”

How does one comprehend a place? We might take this place as
our example, for it is the place that we have in common. History provides a starting point. When Congress passed the Morrill Act in 1862, it “provided endowment lands for public universities”; when the State of Nebraska accepted federal lands in 1869 and became part of this land-grant system, it “embraced the Morrill definition of education” as embodying “the democratic ideal of equal opportunity. As Robert Knoll writes in his history of the University, “the central assumption from the start was that the University was both a responsibility of its citizens and a service available to them all.”

History provides a starting point, but how does one make history come alive? To comprehend place, to know it in the manner that Welty means, we need stories. I recall another graduate, Willa Cather, who came to Lincoln from Red Cloud in 1890 and received her baccalaureate in 1895. Almost exactly 100 years later, the Encyclopedia Britannica would publish its latest “Great Books” list of the western world: 130 titles ranging from Homer and Plato to Einstein and Whitehead. For the first time women’s names appeared on that list—four women (yes, four—it’s shameful), only one of whom was an American. Willa Cather was that writer. And—what is relevant to our purposes today—in writing her best-loved novel My Ántonia about growing up in Nebraska, she devoted an entire section to being a student here.

What did Cather write about? Well, the most ordinary of activities. She had her narrator, Jim Burden, tell of furnishing his rooms, of talking with a professor, and of greeting a friend from his hometown and going with her to a Lincoln theater to see a performance of Dumas’s play Camille.

Yet Cather’s genius lay in understanding that these ordinary experiences contained the values by which she awoke to the possibilities of the world, and she makes those experiences live in Jim’s descriptions. Jim remembers his boarding rooms in detail (there were no dormitories then): how he arranged the furniture, and how he worked “at a commodious green-topped table placed directly in front of the west window which looked out over the prairie.” In the corner at my right were all my books,” he remembers; “in shelves I had made and painted myself. On the blank wall at my left the dark, old-fashioned wall-paper was covered by a large map of ancient Rome” (250-251).

Cather’s descriptions precisely recreate her experiences here, as we’ve come to appreciate from research on the Cather Scholarly Edition. We found a photograph of Cather at her desk, and it’s exactly as she describes it for Jim Burden. Her map of ancient Rome now resides in Love Library’s archives, complete with holes in its corners where Cather attached it to the wall. And in the back issues of the Lincoln Journal there is a review that the undergraduate Cather wrote of Camille, which she saw at the Lansing Theatre on “O” Street, just as she wrote in My Ántonia of Jim’s doing. The rooms she inhabited, the pictures she chose, the essay she wrote—all were stored in her memory to reappear twenty years later when she wrote her great novel of growing up in Nebraska.

Pictures, maps, and essays—they are the stuff of every student’s life today, as they were for Cather’s generation. My point concerns how, in recalling them, Cather comprehended their meaning: that in taking rooms and living away from her family for the first time, she experienced freedom; in hearing a teacher talk about a subject she loved, she witnessed passion; and in attending a play, she realized the power of a live performance to transport her to another time and place. “I shall always look back on that time of mental awakening as one of the happiest in my life,” Cather wrote of the years she was on this campus (249-50).

You—the graduates of 2000—are carrying within yourselves such experiences. You don’t know yet which are the important ones; it will take time for them to distill. But next year, and in ten years and twenty, they will be there for you. It may well be that, like Cather’s, your dorm room will remain so vivid that you can reenter it imaginatively, can recall the posters you put on the walls, and the cd’s by your stereo, and the books on your shelves. Certain conversations will remain with you, perhaps with your professors, perhaps as you were sitting up late at night with friends. And there will be a performance at the Lied, or perhaps a football game, or a play at Howell Theater when something extraordinary happened and you felt yourself part of something very large indeed. “[T]hat is happiness,” Cather wrote elsewhere in My Ántonia; “to be dissolved into something complete and great” (18).

“My Lincoln chapter closed abruptly,” Cather wrote in a brief final paragraph to her university years. You students as well as we faculty understand, for the university calendar is curiously schizophrenic. Last week—even yesterday—you were taking exams, completing papers, and doing last checks on theses or dissertations; today your university chapter is closing abruptly. An academic calendar is like that, with the sure and certain rituals of semesters’ openings and closings, and then, after four or more years, a commencement to mark the accumulation of semesters into the completion of a degree. It is an achievement for which you, as well as the families and friends who have supported you, should be extremely proud.

I congratulate you for your diploma. And I wish for you the grace of stories that are good and true to comprehend its meaning. That is not so easy as it may sound, for we live in a world so filled with stories that—like a fish oblivious to the water through which it moves—we may scarcely acknowledge their presence, much less distinguish among them. But they are there, shaping our lives by assigning us roles. The challenge is to seek out the authentic ones.
and to reject those that are false. Some risk being insidious and destructive: in “Y-2K,” our part was to stock up and hunker down (my husband and I, recently moved to the country, bought a generator that we’ve not yet used—not once); in “Bill and Monica” we were voyeurs; and in the recent weeks’ “Election 2000” we were passive onlookers to a looming constitutional crisis.

The danger is that this rain of media stories may deafen us to another kind of storytelling, the quiet kind that happens only when one clears space and time: lingering around a dinner table, perhaps, talking long after the meal is finished; or driving across country insulated by the car; or “hanging out.” These quiet stories enter our lives only when they are invited. We must listen carefully to cues to slow down and take notice: “you know, I was thinking. . . .” someone might say—an invitation to give attention; or “that reminds me of. . . .” or “the other day I. . . .”

As we scurry about the business of our daily lives, we too easily fail to note other, more public stories that reflect a place, present in the names of the buildings we occupy and the streets upon which we walk. Again, I use this place as my example. For many in this room today, the Devaney Sports Center brings to mind personal experiences of a great coach’s impact, including in the early ’70s two championships and a run for a third. Canfield Administration building—where your registration was entered each semester, your transcripts recorded, and your degrees certified—calls to mind James Canfield, our first great chancellor, who took the University to the state, as Angie Kruml and Heidi Loos (students taking their BA degrees today) can tell about, for they did archival research with Chancellor Canfield’s journals, letters, and other papers where he wrote of his dreams for the university, his work with students, his conversations with citizens throughout the state.

It is not which place that matters, of course; it is comprehending a place. For those of us who have come together to honor graduates of the University of Nebraska, we have this place in common. Again, I quote Eudora Welty: “One place comprehended can make us understand other places better. Sense of place gives us equi-

librium; extended, it is sense of direction too.” And I think of the awareness you have sharpened, the critical powers you have developed, and the growth experiences you have had as students in this place that prepare you for your commencement.

After today you will disperse. Some of you will leave Nebraska; some will stay here. Whatever path you choose, the University of Nebraska will accompany you. As you set out into the world, my advice to you is to get a map, find a history, and seek out the stories that will help you understand where you are.

Good luck, God speed, and congratulations!

NOTES

2 Antoinette M. Bailey, “Planning, Preparation and Determination.” University of Missouri Commencement, St. Louis, Missouri. May 18, 1996.


6 This map, which Willa Cather kept throughout her life, was donated to the University of Nebraska by Willa Cather’s niece, Helen Cather Southwick.
Sense of Place, *My Ántonia*, and Art

BY MELLANEE KVASNICKA

The artwork that appears in this edition of *Teaching Cather* was produced as a part of an inter-disciplinary project dealing with *My Ántonia* at Omaha South High. Generously funded by the Cooper Foundation, the project focused on the teaching of place using a literary text. Teachers from English, social studies, and fine arts worked together to infuse the teaching of place and Cather’s *My Ántonia* into their established curriculum.

Dr. Antoinette Turnquist, chair of the Fine Arts Department, worked with Art 7-8 students on the project, beginning with a history of landscape painting. In conjunction with Mrs. Marjorie Waterman from the English Department, those art students explored how Cather used language to create a sense of place and to develop the land itself as a character. Composition was an important part of this process. Art students worked on using language themselves to create a sense of place. At this point, Mr. Granville Welch, the social studies teacher, discussed the geography of the field site to be visited, including such issues as land, water, climate, vegetation, and human and animal inhabitants. Field experience included a trip to a nearby site (Mt. Vernon Gardens overlooking the Missouri River) where students wrote journal entries responding to the scene, then prepared sketches to be used in the studio for acrylic paintings.

The interdisciplinary aspect of the project enabled students to understand how bodies of knowledge are connected and how various media respond to a theme and text. It enabled art students to better understand not only their own creative response, but the response of another artist in a totally different venue. The teaching of place—that is, how various artistic impulses respond to environmental stimuli—served as a venue for students to explore the value in literature beyond the usual classroom activities, and to tap into creativity previously unexplored.

From “Winchester’s Willa Cather,” pp. 4-7:

“[. . .] one student, Teresa Henry, portrayed a watercolor scene of Willa Cather’s home, Willow Shade, and the main characters in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.”
A Reply to “Willa Cather as Postmodernist”

EDITORS’ NOTE: George F. Day presented a version of this essay as a response to Janis Stout’s address for “The Passing Show Panel” at the 2000 Cather Spring Conference in Red Cloud, Nebraska.

By GEORGE F. DAY

Many critical theories on how to approach Cather and her works in the classroom are prevalent today. Janis Stout’s paper on “Willa Cather as a Postmodernist,” presented at the 2000 Cather Spring Conference “Passing Show Panel” and later published in the Willa Cather Newsletter and Review (Fall 2000), proves to be a provocative one.

Her unique approach leads her to a startling conclusion and a new label for Cather. Especially interesting is Dean Stout’s close analysis of the ending of Sapphira and the Slave Girl. I have always been intrigued by this emergence of the “real” or “historical” in what amounts to an epilogue to the novel. However, this authorial intrusion has never really troubled me. As a matter of fact, I like it; I have always felt a little thrill to learn that the Nancy of the novel was based on a real individual, a slave, who had escaped to Canada. Apparently, she was a legendary figure in the Cather family and one who made a deep and lasting impression on the future author.

Cather’s sudden appearance in the text is actually useful because the Cather-Nancy connection reminds us that Cather was born just eight years after the end of the Civil War and had some, albeit slight, exposure to a former slave-holding culture.

The sudden shift from third to first person is described as an intrusion that changes the narrative from novel to memoir, according to Stout. She further states that such “collapsing of genre distinctions” is “one of the hallmarks of the postmodern” (Stout 33). She also cites one critic, Minrose Gwin, who has called Cather’s authorial intrusion one of the “most disconcerting” endings in American literature (134).

Even if these few lines do constitute a violation of “the fictive illusion” (Stout 33), does it follow that Willa Cather is a postmodernist?

The ending of Sapphira is similar to that of a short story by Hamlin Garland, who was decidedly not a postmodernist. The story is “The Return of the Private,” and it is found in Garland’s landmark work of Realism, Main-Travelled Roads. It’s a fine little story, giving a memorable, slightly sentimental, picture of a Civil War veteran returning to his farm home in Wisconsin after the war. He and his friends had gone off to war in a blaze of glory, bands playing and flags flying. Now they return home exhausted, and find no one to meet them at the station. They have to walk many miles before reaching home. This leads up to the climax, the reunion of the veteran with his wife and family, a scene that is pure Currier and Ives. Throughout most of the story, the point of view has been limited third person. But suddenly as the man approaches his house and family, the point of view switches to that of the oldest son:

The oldest boy ran a little ahead. He will never forget that face. It will always remain as something epic, that return of the private. He fixed his eyes on the pale face, covered with a ragged beard. (136)

Instantly, the reader is made aware that this is no ordinary story, but one with autobiographical significance. We learn that the writer was actually present at the climactic moment of the story. He, Garland, was the “oldest boy,” and “the private” was his father. And, surely, we can assume the story has been written as a way of memorializing the father’s return from the war.

Does this personal revelation make Garland a postmodernist? I think not. Writers frequently create a mixture of fact and fiction in shaping a narrative. For centuries authors and story tellers have used the discovered manuscript device to create verisimilitude. More often than not, the author will portray her own self as the one who has found the document. A classic and familiar example of this is to be found in “The Custom House” chapter, which introduces The Scarlet Letter. Here Hawthorne freely mixes autobiography and fiction, telling of his ancestral connection with Salem and his own employment in the Custom House. We know he was a customs official, and we know that certain in of his fellow employees (whom he satirizes) are based on persons with whom he actually worked.

The first-person narrator, clearly Hawthorne or a fictional version of him, roots around in the attic of the Custom House, and there he finds a manuscript tied up in a bundle along with a elaborately embroidered scarlet “A.” The manuscript relates the story of Hester Prynne, why she had to wear the letter and the impact her “sin” had upon herself and others (31-34). Why does Hawthorne employ this masquerade, part fact, mostly fiction? I think we would agree it is an attempt to gain the reader’s attention and to make a claim for the authenticity of the story. It is an ancient and honorable device in the art of story-telling.

Was Hawthorne a postmodern writer? Well, perhaps. He did, after all, demonstrate an impressive, thoroughly modern, understanding of the human psyche, not to mention his “modern” use of ambiguity and symbolism. But I don’t think his use of the discovered manuscript device makes him a postmodernist, at least not as the term is used in contemporary criticism.

That also brings us to a problem many of us have with labels like modernist and postmodernist. How difficult they are to define with precision, their meanings destined to shift with every passing decade. Crane and Hemingway, modern or postmodern? Monet and Picasso? Dickinson, Frost, Stevens?
Of course, when the terms are used in a general way to identify historical periods they are somewhat useful. All analysis and even education itself depend upon some type of classification, in teaching literature just as in science. We need some pigeon-holes just to keep our bearings when we study the great flow of history and innovation. But when they are used to identify individual artists and their works such terms quickly become fuzzy, narrow, and much too subjective. Too often they become ends in themselves and whatever appeal they have is to a very small group of cognescenti and of little use to the great mass of readers including students and instructors.

Willa Cather herself was wary of literary categories as she makes clear in several places. Her position is well-described by Stephen Tennant in his foreword to Willa Cather On Writing:

She employed none of the usual jargon. Her mind was a stranger to the deva vue and the partis pris, attitudes so common in literary criticism. She possessed the ability to read the work of others with a child’s crystalline vision. (ix)

Surely, Cather would be amused, if not appalled, by the flood of literary labels that have come and gone in the past century or so. Authors have been classified as dogmatists, preceptists, formalists, categorists, organicists, expressionists, relativists, historicists, moralists, and escapists, minimalists, and, of course, more recently, realists and naturalists.

Along with “Cather as Postmodernist,” the 2000 Spring Conference Panel was asked to consider the future of Cather’s work: will Cather continue to be read in this new century? Specifically, we were urged to evaluate James Woodress’s statement: “I know of no other American writer of this century who is more likely to go on being read than Cather” (xvi).

Woodress’s prophecy is sweeping, of course, and impossible to prove. Nevertheless, I believe it to be a valid claim. Cather has been popular for almost a hundred years and surely will continue to be throughout this new century and quite likely beyond.

Why is this so? Perhaps Cather will continue to attract appreciative readers because of the great wealth of scholarship that now surrounds her work. Surely she must be one of the most analyzed and discussed American writers of our time; every year her life and work are the subject of hundreds of essays and books. (A few years ago, I was told by an editor that almost a fourth of all the submissions to the journal Western American Literature were devoted to Cather!) However, I am convinced Cather will be read, studied, and taught not because of esoteric literary criticism, but in spite of it. For the fact of the matter is that Cather’s works are so luminous in style and so universal in theme that the one literary epithet that can be attached to her without dissent is “classic.” Her works easily meet the standard definition given in A Handbook to Literature: “literature which by common consent has achieved a recognized position in literary history for its superior qualities” (87).

In addition, Cather will continue to be attractive to readers because of her skillful dramatization of timeless and universal human conflicts.

Consider these situations:

1. A strong, intelligent woman is determined to devote herself to a formidable enterprise. She has a vision for the future. She encounters opposition, especially from her own family who doubt that she can succeed because she is a woman. She does succeed, however, and is vindicated, but only at great cost to her personal life.

2. A strong willed, attractive young woman, potential heir to a considerable fortune is in love with a man of small means and with an uncertain future. Her family opposes their union, but the young couple elopes. The marriage does not turn out to be a happy one. Though they remain together, what started out as “romantic love” ends in bitterness.

3. An adolescent male with a vivid imagination and a tendency to fantasize is attracted to the world of art and beauty, even though his knowledge of that world is quite superficial. Unfortunately, he is trapped in a narrow, puritanical environment. Neither his father nor anyone else will take him and his dreams seriously. To escape his pinched existence, the boy takes desperate measures, breaks the law and briefly enjoys the luxuries of freedom, comfort, and beauty. His enjoyment, however, is lonely and brief. The only option open to him is to return to his former miserable life. Resigned to his fate, he commits suicide.

As can be seen from these easily recognizable plot summaries—of two of her novels and one short story—Willa Cather writes about life. Life that, she makes clear, can be hard and beautiful at the same time and almost always complicated. Such timeless stories of life, both beautiful and tragic, transcend cultural politics and literary theory.

A further reason Cather will be taught and read long into the future is her highly regarded prose style. So much could be said about this, yet, as many have noted, it is an elusive style. Certainly, it is noteworthy for its lucidity, its precision and its resonance. Few American writers have ever had a better awareness of the musicality of the English language. Taken all together, Cather’s stylistic qualities may well be best captured in the word fragrant. So many passages in her work are engaging just because of the freshness and vibrancy of the language used.

Another feature of Cather’s style that will continue to draw us to her work—and another element of her literary greatness—is her use of imagery. Specific, concrete details that stay in our memory are used over and over again to help draw a scene or convey mood or atmosphere or to depict personality.
Such use of palpable images should not be surprising in the work of an author who very early in her life loved and was influenced by John Keats. Too, it is a logical feature of the writing of one who championed the unfurnished novel, who sought to reduce detail wherever possible. Some of Cather's images are part of our literary consciousness: the plow against the sky and Antonia's fruit cellar are obvious examples. There are many others, often very subtle images that are compelling. For instance, note the way, Cather describes a person's hand to reflect his character. In the short story “Neighbour Rosicky,” Polly holds the hand of Rosicky, her ill father-in-law.

After he dropped off to sleep, she sat holding his warm, broad, flexible brown hand. She had never seen another in the least like it. She wondered if it wasn’t a kind of gypsy hand, it was so alive and quick and light in its communications,—very strange in a farmer. Nearly all the farmers she knew had huge lumps of fists, like mauls, or they were knotty and bony and uncomfortable-looking with stiff fingers. But Rosicky’s was like quick-silver, flexible, muscular, about the colour of a pale cigar, with deep, deep creases across the palm. It wasn’t nervous, it wasn’t a stupid lump—it was a warm brown human hand, with some cleverness in it, a great deal of generosity, and something else which Polly could only call a “gypsy-like,”—something nimble and lively and sure, in the way animals are. (67)

This ability to vivify a personality or a situation through an image is one of Cather's greatest attributes and is another major reason she will continue to be read, taught, studied, and enjoyed. Through images she shows us certain realities that often have the power to evoke memories, memories which are a compelling force in a person's life. That kind of connection between image and memory is something we often seek in art, and thus imagery is yet another possibility. Some of Cather's images are part of our literary consciousness: the plow against the sky and Antonia's fruit cellar are obvious examples. There are many others, often very subtle images that are compelling. For instance, note the way, Cather describes a person's hand to reflect his character. In the short story “Neighbour Rosicky,” Polly holds the hand of Rosicky, her ill father-in-law.

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Her work will always attract and challenge the common reader, a term not meant in its pejorative sense. I mean simply that broad cross-section of the readers of the world that embraces persons of all educational and cultural levels. Of course Cather's works will always have a special appeal for English majors, graduate students, middle school, secondary, college, and university instructors. It should be pointed out, however, that these groups comprise only a segment of the reading public. One really needs no reminder to know that it is generally the instructor who introduces a Cather work in the classroom and invites the student to be a lifelong reader.

I do not want to dismiss as totally useless the application of literary theory to Cather's works. Theorists should be warned, however, that their efforts will have limited success in heightening the enjoyment, teaching, and general understanding of the works of any eloquent writer of Cather's stature.

Some may object to my response to Stout's paper as too simplistic, a hasty rejection of a new and viable approach to Cather. My answer to that would be to point to Cather's own frequent emphasis on the importance of simplicity in art. In several places she suggests that simplicity is the very cornerstone of art, as in her book Willa Cather on Writing when she states: “The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification” (40). She then goes on to suggest that we should throw all of the novel's excess furniture out the window (42). Perhaps, we should do the same with the superfluity of contemporary critical theory!

There is a tendency, I believe, in present day academic culture to consider well-told stories as just kid stuff, little illustrations or parables, whereas criticism and abstract theory represent Real Life, where the action is. This attitude is having a baleful effect in the classroom. I suggest that Willa Cather would be much better served, especially in the classroom, by placing greater emphasis on her essential genius, which expresses itself in universal themes, luminous style, and powerful imagery. That will be far more fruitful than viewing her through the narrow lens of recent critical fads.

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New Pioneers

EDITORS’ NOTE: Tuesday Metcalf and Lacey Worth were selected as winners of the prestigious Norma Ross Walter Scholarship in 2000 and 2001. The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation presents this scholarship each year to a young woman who intends to major in English in college. The award amounts to $2,000 per year, renewable for four years on the condition that the recipient maintains a grade point average of 3.50 and remains an English major. Metcalf’s and Worth’s essays, written on assigned Cather topics in partial fulfillment of their application process, follow.

BY TUESDAY METCALF

“And now the old story has begun to write itself over there,” said Carl softly. “Isn’t it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years.”

If a story is to be written, it must have a writer, and if the story’s message is to endure, it must be written by a competent one. Willa Cather’s stories have lasted nearly a century and are as effective today as they were when she first wrote them. She is a contributor to the “two or three human stories” that are told and re-told because they carry timeless human messages that influence us all. The issues of humans are always the same: birth, death, and finding love and satisfaction in between. Cather’s works will continue to have significance into the twenty-first century because she speaks eloquently of the human experience.

Cather’s main theme, one that remained consistent throughout her novels, is the struggle of a talented individual against an unfavorable environment. Cather herself never really “fit in” because of her unusual talents and interests. She was separated from other girls her age in high school because of her dress (boyish shirts and pants), and later her unmarried status kept her out of some social circles of Lincoln and New York. She found some companionship with the artists of her neighborhoods and made a few close friends, but she seemed to always feel as if she didn’t belong, much like the characters in her novels and short stories. Each young American woman goes through a time such as this, when she struggles for purity in an imperfect situation, with issues as simple as boys and homework, or as complicated as long-term relationships and careers.

Another issue that will endure throughout the next century is women’s rights. Cather was a curious and independent woman, and her female characters reflect this. In O Pioneers! Alexandra Bergson is forced to take over her father’s property after his death. During many years of working to get out of debt and helping her brothers find their footholds, she becomes a successful businesswoman in the affairs of her property. When she grows more prosperous than her brothers, she finally meets with opposition. Oscar says, “The property of a family really belongs to the men of the family, no matter about the title [ . . . ] because they are held responsible, and because they do the work” (152-3). When Alexandra protests, Lou says, “It makes women concealed to meddle in business” (154). Despite her brothers’ obvious jealousy, Alexandra does not back down and retains full rights to her land. Though she was not necessarily advocating women’s rights, Alexandra was a living example that independence could be won. Cather was the same way: an example, not an advocate. She showed that a woman could have a very successful career in a field dominated by men and that women were just as capable as their male counterparts.

Cather’s stories not only have relevance to the future, but they also tie us to our past, specifically the poignant pioneer period of American history. Cather shows us the individual’s struggle in the melting pot of attempts for a better life and provides an expectation for generations to come. In this passage from her essay “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,” published in Roundup, she speaks of what she would like to see in the future.

When I stop at one of the graveyards in my own country and see on the headstones the names of fine old men I used to know…. I have always the hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again, something that will come out not only in sturdy traits of character, but in elasticity of mind, in an honest attitude toward the realities of life, in certain qualities of feeling and imagination. It is in that great cosmopolitan country known as the Middle West that we may hope to see the hard molds of American provincialism broken up, that we may hope to find young talent which will challenge the pale proprieties, the insincere, conventional optimism of our art and thought. (6)

It is obvious that Cather loved the people of the prairies: “The population is as clean and full of vigor as the soil; there are no old grudges, no heritages of disease or hate” (8). But she also loved the land, and in her essay from Roundup, she speaks of her affection for the country: “There we have short, bitter winters; windy, flower-laden springs; long, hot summers; triumphant autumns that last until Christmas — a season of perpetual sunlight, blazing blue skies, and
frosty nights. [ . . . ] The country has no secrets; it is as open and honest as a human face” (1,7).

She also inspires wonder for this land in My Ántonia when Jim says:

I can remember exactly how the country looked to me as I walked beside my grandmother along the faint wagon-tracks on that early September morning. Perhaps the glide of long railway travel was still with me, for more than anything else I felt the motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping . . . (15)

She even adds another aspect to it: the person who has a connection with the land. In O Pioneers! she writes of Alexandra: “For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward [the land] with love and yearning. [ . . . ] The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or woman” (64).

Here also is her expectation of future generations. She inspires us to look beyond the hardships of the land that other people may see and love and become a part of it. She tells us that we belong to a unique region of the world that cannot be duplicated, neither in landscape nor culture, and we should be proud of it. We should also be proud of our forefathers' accomplishments. She says in Roundup: “The generation that subdued the wild land and broke up the virgin prairie is passing, but it is still there, a group of rugged figures in the background which inspire respect, compel admiration” (8).

And these are her messages. Women can do anything they set their minds to, and pioneers can come to love the land they struggle with. Her hope is that we carry on this tradition of laboring lovingly and accomplish whatever we dream, continuing the progress started for us by the first pioneer generations of the plains. Only then will we be satisfied. This is Cather’s enduring dream, written forever in My Ántonia: “Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep” (18).

So we must continue to make great accomplishments, for the story must be written by someone. As Alexandra says to Carl in O Pioneers!:

You remember what you once said about the graveyard, and the old story writing itself over? Only it is we who write it with the best we have. [ . . . ] The land belongs to the future. We come and go but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it — for a little while. (272-3)

WORKS CITED


Approaching Nature: The Song of the Lark and A Lost Lady

BY LACEY WORTH

In The Song of the Lark and A Lost Lady, Willa Cather presents two alternate ways of approaching nature. Thea Kronborg, in The Song of the Lark, lives in accordance with nature and is in tune to the undercurrents of existence. On the other side of the coin is Ivy Peters, a wealthy lawyer in A Lost Lady. While Thea demonstrates the beauty of humanity existing harmoniously with nature, Ivy demonstrates the repulsiveness of humanity using nature only for self-serving purposes.

Thea’s relationship with nature was made known to the reader when she went to the forests in northern Arizona to recuperate from her first winter in Chicago. She was ready for a healing experience. Cather wrote that Thea “needed to get away from herself.” In Arizona, Cather described, “The great pines stand at a considerable distance from each other. Each tree grows alone, murmurs alone, thinks alone. [ . . . ] Each tree has its exalted power to bear” (265).

Similarly, Thea retreated to Arizona to grow and murmur alone, to find the exalted power she would come to bear. Cather often uses nature to symbolize a character’s state of mind and being. Thea’s pre-retreat state of being was one of hesitancy. Cather used the swallows to symbolize her past existence: “The only sad thing about them was their timidity: the way in which they lived their lives between the two echoing cliffs and never dared to rise out of the shadow of the cañon walls. [ . . . ] Thea often felt how easy it would be to dream one’s life out in some cleft in the world” (271). Thus far, Thea had been confined in her own cleft; she had not advanced beyond the rim of either her hometown or Chicago. During her retreat, however, she gained the courage and strength to take flight.

Her awakening was gradual; the beginning stages can be seen on Thea’s first night at the Ottenburg camp. Cather wrote, “[T]he forest closed behind the wagon. [ . . . ] [and] the mountain disappeared as the forest closed thus.” Just as the literal mountain disappeared, Thea’s mountain (her past self) was swallowed up by the forest.

Cather wrote, “The personality of which she was so tired seemed to
let go of her. The high, sparkling air drank it up like blotting paper. The old fretted lines which marked one off, which defined her [. . .] were all erased. [. . .] She felt completely released from the enslaving desire to get on in the world” (266). Cather once wrote “[. . .] that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great” (My Ántonia 18). Thea learned to dissolve herself into nature, to loosen her iron clasp on fame and success. With the loss of identity came the loss of her sense of failure. Cather wrote, “All morning long the sun beat upon her cliff, while the ruins on the opposite side of the canon were in shadow” (268). Thea's past failures were in shadow; the sun obscured the ruins of her life.

Nature not only covered her past, it also gave her a sense of purpose for the future. Cather wrote of a patch of trees, “Their colours were so pale that the shadows of the little trees on the rock stood out sharper than the trees themselves” (268-9). The shadows, which in this example represented Thea's future self, stood out sharper than her current self. Nature showed her that much of artistic expression comes first from sensing, as the plants and animals sense. “She could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a colour, or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas” (270). Thea learned to become a vessel for nature; she realized that art is an effort to make a “sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself” (273). She learned that life is not about meaning, remembering, but about experiencing. Her pleasure came from the complete resignation to the present. During the thunderstorm, Cather wrote, “Only a strip of the [sky's] zenith was visible” (289). Similarly, only a strip of Thea's potential had been exposed to us, yet we knew that Thea's link with nature had given her the ability to act as a strong vessel.

Nature swallowed Thea's past and set the path for her future by simplifying the present. Cather wrote, “Here everything was simple and definite, as things had been in childhood. Her mind was like a ragbag into which she had been frantically thrusting whatever she could grab. And here she must throw this lumber away. The things that were really hers separated themselves from the rest. Her ideas were simplified, became sharper and clearer. She felt united and strong” (275). Cather wrote that Thea's life at the Ottenburg Ranch was “simple and full of light, like the days themselves” (267).

During her retreat, Thea formed a more harmonious relationship with nature. She now remembered the flowers over Mrs. Tellamantez's door as if they had once been a physical part of her. “It was as if she had been that vine and had opened up in white flowers every night. [. . .] These recollections were a part of her mind and personality” (270). She even learned to synchronize her own moods and emotions with the moods of nature. During the thunderstorm she looked “grim,” but as the sky cleared she was immediately “all right.” From her experience in Panther Canyon, Thea learned to live in accordance with nature; that is, she learned to live simply and sensuously.

Although Thea learned to live harmoniously with nature, A Lost Lady's Ivy Peters did not. The general tenor of Ivy's relationship with nature can be seen in the second chapter. Ivy entered the scene “kicking at the twigs” and carrying himself with “unnatural erectness, as if he had a steel rod down his back” (13). Indeed, Ivy seemed to be made of steel when he used a stone to knock the woodpecker off its branch, trapped the stunned bird under his hat, slit the bird's eyes with a small taxidermy instrument, and watched it thrash around blindly.

The passing of time does little to soften Ivy. As an adult, he “trampled” between the rows of trees with an “air of proprietorship” (100). He pawed at Mrs. Forrester, a revered lady whom Cather likened to a rose, and drained the Forrester's marsh. Cather wrote, “By draining the marsh Ivy had obliterated a few acres of something he hated, though he did not know why, and had asserted his power over the people who had loved those unproductive meadows” (89). Ivy Peters, then, was motivated by something sordid on which he could never quite place his finger. The reader senses that nature would have granted Ivy the understanding and compassion that he lacked.

Ivy did not value Mrs. Forrester (nature) for her own characteristics; rather, he valued the success that she embodied. Ivy desired not to give nature her due veneration, but to possess her. The reader begins to understand that although Ivy is successful by the world’s standards, his own eyes have been slashed to the beauty of nature and the beauty of life. Cather referred to him as a “stage-hand” (143). Mrs. Forrester told Niel to note how Ivy and the other local boys held their wineglasses: “What is it they do to a little glass to make it look so vulgar?” (137). Ivy's comrades spoke only with “monosyllables or exclamations,” and Cather referred to them as “stupid” and “heavy” (139). Although Ivy had money, he lost the ability to relate to nature and others, and he could never reach the deep level of existence that Mrs. Forrester and her husband experienced.

The deeper level of existence that the Forresters experienced, and the peace that Thea felt during her retreat, was the result of nature's calming hand. In The Song of the Lark, the reader realizes that sometimes the only way to move forward is to remain still for a moment. Thea learned to coincide her internal life with the external life around her. Unfortunately, A Lost Lady's Ivy Peters never learned the art of adaptation. Through these two characters, the reader begins to understand why the highest good comes when the line between nature and humanity has been erased.

WORKS CITED
By helping students understand film as more than just an illustrated version of a book or a visual Cliffs Notes, teachers recognize that film creates, in its own vocabulary, a reading of a work.

Review: PBS’s Production of The Song of the Lark

BY ANDREW JEWELL

Among the first scenes in PBS’s new film adaptation of The Song of the Lark is Thea Kronborg standing in a field, her face lifted up to the sky, her skirt billowing slightly in the breeze, and an oddly crayoned sun sneaking up in the background. The image, as is soon apparent, echoes Jules Breton’s painting “The Song of the Lark,” a reassuring sign that these filmmakers did their homework. Producers Dorthea and June Petrie, director Karen Arthur, and screenwriter Joseph Maurer, who created this film for the new “American Masterpieces” series, demonstrated a respect for the work that they were using.

And the rest of the film, too, working within budget and time limitations, remains respectful. Though the film does not get at the core of Thea’s internal struggle and inevitably robs the story of complexity, it does offer dimensions that add to the experience of Cather’s art, and it can usefully serve the classroom.

The music in the film, for example, gives students and teachers alike the experience of hearing what might have been only titles of obscure arias. Thankfully, in finding Lori Stinson, the filmmakers filled the tall order of creating Thea’s voice. Like Thea, Stinson has a voice with distinct beauty and impact. To hear Thea sing Gluck’s “Orfeo” for the Harsanyis is a true pleasure of the film, as it is to hear several other well-performed pieces throughout.

Yet even as the film deepens some of the novel’s musical force, it narrows the range of Thea’s artistic accomplishments and subsequently the complexity of her character. Wagner, whose music has such a strong place in Cather’s climax to Thea’s career, is replaced by Dvorák, and I missed seeing Thea give a full-throttle performance as Sieglinde. By concluding with her recital in Chicago, the film stops short of following Cather’s artist into the full possession of her powers as a Wagnerian soprano at the Metropolitan. Ironically, the budget restrictions that forced this decision worked to the film’s advantage, for despite the commanding presence of Stinson’s voice, Alison Elliott, as Thea, isn’t convincing as a singer. She neglects the physical exhaustion that comes from such intense vocal performance (which is unconvincing enough in a drawing room), so seeing her in the Metropolitan would have been comically inappropriate.

Overall, then, Alison Elliott’s performance works only if we grant the impossibility of her role. In Cather’s novel, Thea’s character revolves around her power and force, a gravitas that draws people to her. She is defined by her presence and singular gifts, an artist whose secret is, according to Harsanyi, “passion. That is all … Like heroism, it is inimitable in cheap materials.” How do you cast that role? How can you imitate that passion? Elliott manages determination and strength, but she misses the intensity of passion. Her Thea is friendlier than Cather’s, more comfortable and conducive to traditional expectations of a movie heroine. Cast within a screenplay that stops before the challenging diva emerges, Elliott’s Thea never becomes Cather’s Kronborg. Instead, Elliott’s character is circumscribed within the congenial script of a talented woman finding success.

Other characters work better, if only because there are fewer demands on them. Maximilian Schell, as Herr Wunsch, has a few terrifically dramatic moments. He plays Wunsch pretty close to the edge of melodrama, and he pulls it off. The scene where he introduces Thea to Gluck’s opera is perhaps the first part of the film that pulled me in on its own merits. In that episode, I was no longer watching as a Cather fan curious to see her novel illustrated, but was involved as filmgoer. I understood the “desire” of Wunsch’s proclamations, and I empathized with the characters as struggling human beings.

Doctor Archie, played by Arliss Howard, also has a credible presence. Howard, helped by his drooping facial hair, is especially effective in Archie’s more melancholy moments, as when he accompanies Thea to Chicago and laments the waste of his own life. And Tony Goldwyn, as Fred Ottenburg, wears his clothes like a figure in a men’s fashion advertisement. Fred may be reduced to a romantic plot device, but Goldwyn does the job with proper posture and earnestness.

Unfortunately, the character of Ray Kennedy remains disappointingly shallow. In the novel Kennedy, though a sentimental man, remains complex and powerful, a “freethinker” and self-created human being. In the film, his role is reduced to flat sentimentality, just a chiseled face and “garsh golly” tone that make him ridiculous. Happily, his death scene comes early, so most of the film remains unmarred by his presence.

Also unfortunate was the budget crunch that prevented the filmmakers from doing a location shoot. The novel is, of course,
Success is never so interesting as struggle — not even to the successful.

— The Song of the Lark

set in Colorado, though most readers regard Moonstone as a thinly veiled version of Red Cloud, Nebraska, so either place could have provided the visualization needed. However, the picturesque hills of Northern California had to stand in for the prairie and desert surrounding Moonstone, and a well-decorated studio backlot for Chicago. As a result, the adaptation’s “Moonstone” was largely confined to stuffy interiors and tight shots on facades; the expansive environment of Thea’s youth remains unseen, and therefore the loneliness and isolation that she so often feels is not communicated. In the film, she seems surrounded and comfortable.

It’s all too common that filmic adaptations of novels shave scenes and sacrifice complexity, and PBS’s The Song of the Lark is no exception. The film remains safe and faithful, insofar as its budget allows; but its “faithfulness” occasionally results in flat translations of the book. Thea’s solitary epiphany at Panther Canyon, for example, survives as an awkward conversation with Fred. This scene evokes questions of adaptation: What is the obligation of a film to the book upon which it is based? What constitutes a responsible treatment of the material? By what criteria should we evaluate a filmic version, once we acknowledge that an adaptation is fundamentally different from the original?

All of these questions might serve as interesting discussion points in a classroom using this film. By helping students understand film as more than just an illustrated version of a book or a visual Cliffs Notes, teachers recognize that film creates, in its own vocabulary, a reading of a work. This film's reading highlights the struggle of Thea to succeed, making that effort the “core” of the novel, and there is a good argument for that reading. Yet this film makes both her character and her struggle polite in the process. We never get to see the Thea who can’t recognize Spanish Johnny’s face on the streets of New York City. So, even as the film highlights the struggle, it also changes the character of it, resulting in an adaptation of The Song of the Lark that dodges one of the essential assertions of the novel: that art, in Cather's words, “requires a human sacrifice.”

Should viewers resist holding the film to such standards? After all, this film is ably constructed and produced, and it does introduce Cather to a wider audience. But I’m reminded of Tolstoy who claimed, late in his life, that film could accomplish in an instant what it took him pages and pages to accomplish in words, if only the right image is chosen. And I think about Martin Scorsese’s evocation of Edith Wharton’s work in his adaptation of The Age of Innocence, the way he was able to suggest entire social worlds with a lingering shot of a cummerbund or table setting. Scorsese and countless other filmmakers (Jane Campion’s Portrait of a Lady and Patricia Rozema’s Mansfield Park are good recent examples of thoughtful readings) demonstrate that film has a capable vocabulary to convey rich complexity, a capability not demonstrated in this adaptation of The Song of the Lark.

EDITORS’ NOTE

A different version of this review appears in the Spring 2001 issue of The Mower’s Tree, the publication of the University of Nebraska Cather Colloquium. Anyone interested in participating in the Colloquium’s activities or in being on its mailing list can contact:

Cather Colloquium
Department of English
University of Nebraska
Lincoln, NE 68588-0333.

The film of The Song of the Lark is available for purchase from PBS. Much useful information about the film and the novel is also available at two websites:

www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/americancollection/lark/index.html
and www.ncteamericancollection.org/song_resources.htm.
Willa Cather's works are best understood and appreciated if readers have some knowledge of the time in which she lived and worked. Charged to safeguard, interpret, and make accessible Nebraska's past, the Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS) provides access to that Nebraska in which she lived and about which she wrote.

The Library/Archives Division of the Historical Society holds a substantial collection of Cather materials, including letters, photographs, books, and ephemera which were given to the NSHS by the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation (WCPM) in 1978. Along with the major Cather properties in Red Cloud and Webster County, these collections are now managed by the WCPM and the archival material is available for research in Red Cloud.

In Lincoln, the Library/Archives Division holds several significant Cather-related collections; including the Willa Cather Manuscript Collection, with a variety of original and published Cather material; the Gere Family Manuscript Collection, with letters from Cather to various members of the Gere family; a Cather Family Manuscript Collection, with early letters between Cather family members in Virginia and Nebraska; and the Willa Cather Photograph Collection (available on microfiche only).

For researchers interested in learning more about Cather's Red Cloud, her Lincoln, and her Nebraska, the Historical Society holds a wide variety of collections related to Nebraska during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including newspapers for both Red Cloud and Lincoln, as well as maps, published histories, photographs, manuscripts, and public records.

Classes that are able to travel to Lincoln and the Historical Society may wish to schedule a tour of the Library/Archives Reference Room as an introduction to the collections and how to do research in the archives. These tours are available for small groups by appointment. Individuals wishing to do research in the collections may do so during the Reference Rooms hours of Tuesday through Friday, 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m., and Saturday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

For teachers and students unable to travel to Lincoln, many newspapers and some manuscript collections (including the Cather letters to the Gere family) are available on microfilm and can be borrowed through interlibrary loan for a minimal fee. The Willa Cather photograph collection is also available on microfiche for loan.

The newest outreach services of the Library/Archives are focused on making digitized collections accessible on the Internet. Currently available are the "Prairie Settlement" webpages, hosted by the Library of Congress's American Memory website at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/nbhhtml/pshome.html. Two important NSHS collections, the Solomon D. Butcher photographs and the Uriah W. Oblinger family letters combine to illustrate the story of settlement on the Great Plains. For teachers and students of Willa Cather's works, they offer firsthand accounts, both visual and written, of the place and time of her life and her fiction.

Two additional NSHS websites designed for teachers and students are under development. The first, tentatively titled "Nebraska Studies," is a collaborative project of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Nebraska Educational Television, and the Nebraska State Department of Education. This website will provide teachers with access to primary sources on Nebraska history topics, as well as teacher resources and tools for using these sources. The first section, which focuses on the settlement period in Nebraska, should be online this fall.

The second website, titled "American Bounty: The Story of Food," is in the research phase and will be online some time in 2003. This site, funded by a National Leadership Grant for Libraries from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, will tell the story of food production from the field to the table, and will make available hundreds of photographs, documents, and moving images from the NSHS collections. Not only will some of the topics and subject matter illustrate portions of Cather's fiction, but some of her descriptions of rural agricultural life will be included on the site.

Kindergarten through 12th-grade educators who would like to better incorporate these Nebraska materials and stories into their classrooms are invited to apply for acceptance to The Nebraska Institute, a two-week for credit workshop co-sponsored by the Nebraska State Historical Society, Nebraska Wesleyan University, and the Lincoln Public Schools. The Institute, now in its fourth year, explores Nebraska history and culture in hands-on sessions focusing on critical historical thinking and teaching with objects, photographs, historic places, and documents.

For more information on any of these services, collections, or projects, contact Ann Billesbach, Library/Archives Division, Nebraska State Historical Society, P.O. Box 82554, Lincoln, NE 68501, 402/471-4784, aeb@nebraskahistory.org.

C-SPAN American Writers Series

This summer C-SPAN's American Writers Series will include a show on Willa Cather. The website that supplements the series states its purpose: "C-SPAN will produce an American history series that looks at the lives and works of selected American writers who have chronicled, reflected upon, or influenced the course of our nation." For Cather, the site includes a featured work (O Pioneers!), a featured place (the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial in Red Cloud), and classroom resources.

The Cather show is scheduled to air on Monday, July 2, at 9 a.m. Eastern Time, and on Friday, July 6, at 8 p.m. Eastern Time. More information can be found at this website: www.americanwriters.org.
Ann Billesbach, Head of Reference Services for the Library/Archives Division of the Nebraska State Historical Society, is a native Nebraskan. She holds a B.A. in English from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and an M.A. in American Folk Culture and Museum Studies from the Cooperstown Graduate Programs, State University of New York at Oneonta. She was curator of the Willa Cather Historical Center from 1978 to 1988 and currently serves on the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Board of Governors.

George F. Day, Emeritus Professor of English, University of Northern Iowa, taught prep school in Honolulu plus almost thirty years at the University of Northern Iowa, specializing in Western American Literature and Willa Cather. He received a B.A. from Dartmouth College, an M.A. at Harvard, and the Ph.D. from the University of Colorado-Boulder. His work in Western American Literature is distinguished; he served as president of the Western American Literature Association and is currently a member of the Willa Cather Pioneer and Educational Foundation Board of Governors. A native of rural Nebraska, he believes “Cather expresses rural and small town life so well I revere her writings and try my best to protect her from Critical Overload.”

Chad Elsasser, Rob Krause, Phillip Melichar, Eddie Percy, Jr., Jae Sharearm, Jason Van Haitsma, and Andrea Yi are students at Omaha South High School.

Teresa Henry graduated from Handley High School, Winchester, Virginia, in 1997. She is currently a college senior majoring in graphic arts.

Andrew Jewell is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in American Literature at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, focusing on the work of Willa Cather. He is a teaching assistant and an active member of the University’s Cather Colloquium.

Mellanee Kvasnicka has been the department chair in English at Omaha South High School for 17 years, and she has taught at South for 31 years. A prolific Cather scholar, she has received many teaching awards and is a member of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Board of Governors.

Tuesday Metcalf graduated from Beatrice High School, Beatrice, Nebraska, in 2000. She is majoring in English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she is a member of the Honors College.

Rebecca K. Pinker spent many years teaching secondary school English, the last fourteen at Olathe North (Kansas), where she taught Advanced Placement classes. She currently teaches composition at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. She recently completed a doctoral degree from the University of Kansas. Her dissertation explores the teaching of Willa Cather in selected geographical areas that related to Cather’s life.

Susan J. Rosowski, Adele Hall Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has written Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity and the West in American Literature, The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather’s Romanticism, and numerous essays on Cather. She is general editor of the Cather Scholarly Edition and editor of Cather Studies and Approaches to Teaching Cather’s My Ántonia. She also directs the Cather International Seminars and has served for many years on the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Board of Governors.

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