Catherland

“This land was an enigma. It was like a horse that no one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces.”

— O Pioneers
Once again we are pleased to offer articles from teachers representing the full range of educational settings: Michael Hobbs and John Jacobs teach at universities, Jessica G. Rabin and Jerrine McCaffrey teach at community colleges, and Betty Kort is an award-winning high school teacher.

Michael Hobbs’s examination of American commercialism in The Professor’s House, along with his observations about this novel’s link to Henry James, makes this article useful to teachers of a wide range of courses on American literature and American culture. By focusing on the acquisitive nature of Tom Outland and Professor St. Peter, student and instructor alike can find another level of richness in this novel. John Jacobs offers an insightful and useful study of the influence of Henry David Thoreau on Cather’s literary treatment of the wilderness. This essay, which highlights a multitude of connections between Walden and The Song of the Lark, My Ántonia, and Death Comes for the Archbishop, will also prove helpful to those engaged in eco-critical approaches to literature. Jessica G. Rabin’s delightful essay on A Lost Lady reminds us that teaching literature—and writing about teaching—must ultimately be both fun and meaningful. Complete with three appendices with topics for critical papers, this essay is eminently practical. Jerrine McCaffrey’s essay, “Contrasting Views of the West: Willa Cather and Mari Sandoz,” offers a close look at two writers, both strongly associated with Nebraska, whose lives and writing took divergent paths. This essay, with its focus on Cather’s “Two Friends” and Sandoz’s Old Jules, presents rich ideas for courses in women’s studies, literature of the American West, Romanticism and Realism, and, more broadly, American literature.

Betty Kort, who will retire from active teaching at the end of the current term, is a mainstay of the Cather community—as a teacher, a scholar, and an organizer. We are proud to present her responses to our questions on the teaching life, and we are pleased that from her home base in Hastings, Nebraska, near Cather Country, she will continue to enrich the work of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. Read her words carefully, for they are full of much wisdom and inspiration.

Steve Shively
Virgil Albertini

ABOUT THE COVER

The photos on the cover, provided by Beverly J. Cooper, portray the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie in the four seasons. The large image portrays spring; the three smaller images represent, from left to right, summer, fall and winter. Located eight miles south of Red Cloud, the 600-acre Prairie has never been cultivated and looks as much now with its colorful moods as it would have in Cather’s day.

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Correction
Underneath the picture of the Austermann family on p. 18 of the fall 2002 issue (vol. 3) of Teaching Cather, we stated that Cather attended the burial of George, who died at the age of four. In fact, George’s twin brother, Edmund, died after a brief illness, and not George. George, who lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire, recently sent this picture of the Shattuck Inn (see also cover of above issue) in what he called “a better picture of Shattuck Inn as it was when Willa Cather was there.”
Near the end of Book One in *The Professor’s House*, Willa Cather makes an intriguing reference to Henry James. She has Professor St. Peter, in a rather ironic attempt to console his son-in-law, compare Louise Marcellus with Christopher Newman, the protagonist of *The American*. Cather’s allusion is incisively effective in characterizing the professor’s son-in-law, who represents the quintessence of American commercialism; indeed, Louise’s “commercial imagination”—a phrase James uses to characterize Newman—matches Newman’s in both his skill at making money and his utter naiveté in failing to understand how his commercialism shapes people’s perspectives toward him. This is significant, certainly, but I would like to argue that the reference to Newman can be applied not only to Louise but to Professor St. Peter and Tom Outland as well. While it would never occur to the professor (and probably didn’t occur to Cather either) to associate either himself or Tom with commercial enterprise, they each possess a mind informed by a Newman-like commercial imagination. Additionally, this aspect of each man’s mind entangles him in a kind of cultural colonialism, which intellectually mirrors the past colonization of America, especially insofar as that colonization manifested itself in the “settling of the frontier.” Cather’s reference to *The American* resonates with devastating irony throughout *The Professor’s House*, shedding light on acquisitive and colonial values that frame the novel’s ethical understanding of the world. During the course of the novel, Cather harshly criticizes the overt manifestations of commercialism in America, but in the process of satirizing consumerism, she inadvertently entangles her “innocent” characters (that is, Tom and the professor) in the novel’s covert discourse of colonialism. This discourse underpins not only the idyllic midsection of the book, *Tom Outland’s Story*, which enforces an ethos of intellectual ownership within its pages, but also the professor’s scholarly project, tainted by the very commercialism that he abhors.

In “Bringing Outland Inland in *The Professor’s House*: Willa Cather’s Domestication of Empire,” Deborah Karush deftly draws attention to the manner in which Cather disguises foreign empire building by shifting “the expansionist gaze inward, toward an imaginatively reopened, mythologically innocent continental frontier” (145). Karush is mainly concerned with showing how Cather evades the issue of United States expansionist tendencies during the early part of the century by writing a novel that looks instead toward the terrain of Blue Mesa, that “open territory,” once inhabited by a “primitive people” now “extinct.” Any exploration or appropriation of the mesa is innocent of imperialist leanings and lends a veneer of harmlessness to the earlier “settling” of the frontier. As Karush points out, most Americans shy away from the idea that the United States is a colonized land: “Since the late eighteenth century Americans have maintained a careful distinction between their ‘settlement’
of the frontier and the invasiveness of European imperialism” (147). Both Tom and Professor St. Peter exemplify that uniquely American capacity for self-delusion that claims we are without stain when it comes to appropriating other cultures’ land and resources.

Such self-delusion about imperialism is interestingly connected to Tom’s and the professor’s views on commerce and ownership in the novel. As the title of the novel (as well as the title of the second book—“Tom Outland’s Story”) reveals, Cather is writing about ownership, but there are varieties of ownership here, some of which seem more acceptable than others. On the one hand, the novel exhibits great contempt for consumerism of the sort indulged in by Louie and the rest of the professor’s family. At one point, for example, the professor accompanies Rosamond to Chicago “to help her buy things for her country house” since his expertise regarding Spanish culture will help her decide on “old Spanish furniture” (132). Ultimately, he becomes so disgusted by his daughter’s shopping spree that he labels it “an orgy of acquisition.” His final ironic comment is that “[Rosamond] was like Napoleon looting the Italian palaces” (133). On the other hand, the novel valorizes characters such as Professor St. Peter and Tom Outland, who are apparently uncomfortable with America’s burgeoning commercialism, but who also partake of a more acceptable intellectual ownership (Tom’s story and Blue Mesa; the professor’s scholarship, which he produces in his study and in his house). The professor’s insistence upon maintaining intellectual ownership of his old house (especially his old study) and Tom’s taking imaginative possession of Blue Mesa ironically entangle them in the very process that they insist on labeling vulgar. Interestingly, this form of ownership is exempt from criticism, even though it is a close neighbor to the “vulgar” success of Louie’s unabashed moneymaking. It is as if Cather and her two characters have been infected by the same Newman-like naivete that afflicts Louie, though theirs derives from their ideas of intellectual ownership and scholarly endeavor.

Like St. Peter, Tom is an idealist who seems to hold values antithetical to commercialism, but in truth at the center of his idealism is ownership. Cather establishes the “unexplored” Blue Mesa as a place beyond ownership and commercialism, as in fact antipathetic to them. Rapp, the foreman of the Sitwell Cattle Company, warns Tom that he must keep the cattle away from the mesa because they run away to the place and become wild instead of remaining the cattle company’s property. While this suggests a kind of freedom associated with the mesa, it also reveals Tom’s alignment with the business of making money. When Tom loses several cattle to the mesa, he decides to go look for them, so it is Tom’s desire to recover the private property he is responsible for that drives his initial exploration of the mesa and his “discovery” of the cliff dwellings. From the start, then, Tom is enmeshed in the discourse of ownership that he later professes to find vulgar and unethical.

When Tom first stumbles onto the cliff dwellings, he is stunned, and he afterwards confesses to St. Peter his inability to express in words his experience. He tries to convey the moment by comparing the city to sculpture; in other words, he becomes the audience for an ancient piece of artwork. Indeed, Cather’s prose seems to echo Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Tom rhapsodizes the moment by saying “Such silence and stillness and repose—immortal repose. That village sat looking down into the canyon with the calmness of eternity” (180). Tom’s recollection of the moment, if not the moment itself, has already settled the cliff dwellings in a figurative museum to be viewed as an ancient relic, an artifact of an “extinct” civilization. For the moment Tom stands as does the speaker in Keats’s “Ode” and Tom could have uttered the speaker’s own words to express the sense of that moment: “Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity.” Tom romanticizes his “discovery,” but after that initial contact and the idealization of it into a mysterious work of art, Tom’s thoughts inevitably return to worldly considerations: “As I stood looking up at it, I wondered whether I ought to tell even Blake about it; whether I ought not to go back across the river and keep that secret as the mesa had kept it” (180).

Tom’s ambivalence about revealing the discovery derives from his already awakening disdain for vulgar commercialism. But the hesitation is shortlived; he has already staked his cultural claim. Perhaps Tom would have attempted to keep the mesa a secret had he known ahead of time what would come of his sharing the discovery with the outside world. But the “discovery” is his. Tom has already taken mental possession of the place; he has, in effect, claimed the cliff dwellings for his country, has performed without the least bit of hesitation or doubt an act of colonial appropriation, all of course, deriving from his Western European sense of its value as a cultural and historical artifact. In fact, he must make the discovery known because it is a part of his past, and it will serve to further enlighten his country’s culture. Eventually, Tom reveals the discovery to Blake, and they make plans for further exploration of the “Cliff City,” as they have now named it, another subtle act of colonial appropriation. Tom naively believes that Blake’s motives are the same as his, and to a far greater extent than Tom is willing or able to see, their motives do match, though Blake’s manifest themselves in what Tom would call vulgar ways. Tom is careful from the start, and thinks Blake understands why he is careful: “We [Tom and Blake] didn’t want to make our discovery any more public than necessary. We were reluctant to expose those silent and beautiful places to vulgar curiosity” (183).

Ostensibly, Tom desires to study the “extinct civilization,” to more fully understand its culture: “A people who had the hardihood to build there, and who lived day after day looking down upon such grandeur, who came and went by those hazardous trails, must have been, as we often told each other, a fine people” (191). The novel urges its readers toward the view that this is worthy and benevolent; such beauty and truth is worth contemplating in and of itself. But undergirding this apparent intellectual focus on a culture is again the hope for ownership as Tom’s reaction to Roddy’s vulgarization of their enterprise indicates. When Tom returns from Washington, where he has tried to interest the Smithsonian Institution in a study

Like St. Peter, Tom is an idealist who seems to hold values antithetical to commercialism, but in truth at the center of his idealism is ownership.
of “Cliff City,” he discovers that Roddy has sold some of the cultural artifacts that they’ve excavated. Tom’s objects of intellectual study have become “curios,” as Bill Hooks refers to them when he reveals to Tom that Roddy has sold the excavated artifacts. This is the very vulgarization that Tom has taken such care to avoid. Blake has all along planned to make money on the curios, and his sole fear is that he hasn’t made a good enough deal, hasn’t gotten the true monetary worth for the items. When Tom grows irate at his scheme, Blake misunderstands and defends himself by saying “Who else would have bought it, I want to know? We’d had to pack it around at Harvey Houses, selling it at a dollar a bowl, like the poor Indians do. I took the best chance going, for both of us, Tom” (219). This is, of course, when Tom truly understands Blake’s commercial motivations, but he never recognizes his own acquisitive impulses.

Significantly, what seems to upset Tom most is the fact that a German has bought the objects and shipped them back to Germany. In fact, we discover the true concern of ownership that underpins even Tom’s intellectual idealization of “Cliff City” when he tries to explain to Blake that he never intended to sell the artifacts: “I never thought of selling them, because they weren’t mine to sell—nor yours!” (219). Here, Tom places himself in direct opposition to the “vulgar curiosity” that would motivate such a commercialization of “Cliff City.” Indeed, he seems to dismiss altogether ownership and the idea of possession in connection with the excavation of the cliff dwellings. But the sentences that directly follow this apparent disclaimer contradict Tom’s denial of ownership and powerfully underscore his reliance on the idea of possession, albeit on an intellectualized, elevated plane: “They [the artifacts] belonged to this country, to the State, and to all the people. They belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from. You’ve gone and sold them to a country that’s got plenty of relics of its own” (219). As Karush has noted, “The apparent purity of Tom’s motives, implied by his self-righteous claim that he ‘never thought of selling’ the artifacts of the cliff dwellings [. . .] is undermined by his insistence on keeping ‘an account’ of the artifacts in a ‘merchant’s ledger’” (155). Intriguingly, Tom simultaneously denies ownership and claims ownership, and in what is a supremely ironic moment Cather has Roddy classify Tom’s thinking as “this Fourth of July talk” (221). Roddy, of course, means simply that Tom’s thinking as “this transcendent posture and he claims that “It was the first time I’d ever seen it as a whole” (226). Tom goes on to compare the experience to a science project that finally makes sense. In other words, Tom has finally been able intellectually to possess the mesa: “Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession” (226). In his mind Tom finally possesses the place in what is to him (and probably to Cather) the most proper sense of possession. For Tom, this kind of ownership has nothing to do with commercialism (and certainly not colonialism); it is a higher order of possession, ownership through intellectual acquisition, thinking one’s way into the value of a thing. Its transcendent worth derives from claiming it for one’s own cultural and artistic elevation. The place has been assigned a position in the museum of Tom’s mind, and indeed it becomes a refuge from the “vulgar” commercialism of the world, a place much like the professor’s refuge for him: “that was the first night that all of me was there. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole” (226). Tom’s reading during this summer includes the Aeneid. As Karush suggests, this “foundational myth of empire-building” reveals his colonial frame of reference for the mesa itself since he always afterwards thinks of Blue Mesa when he reads the Aeneid (150). Tom’s intellectual, artistic, edenic refuge is itself a part of that world of consumption and empire. It is Tom’s intellectual appropriation of the mesa, his mind’s ownership of Cliff City, that opens this brief refuge, a refuge against which Tom measures all the remaining possessions of his life. Without his ethic of ownership, his refuge disappears.

Tom’s ethic of ownership applies to Professor St. Peter as well. It is significant that St. Peter’s greatest intellectual project is a multivol-
Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession.

— Tom Outland in The Professor’s House
From “French Toast” to “Happy Days”: A Lost Lady as an Introduction to the Novel

JESSICA G. RABIN

Q: “What toast does Captain Forrester always make at his dinner parties?”
A: “French toast.”

Step number one in teaching A Lost Lady as an introduction to the novel genre: get the students to read the book. More on that later.

Outside a certain geographic area, it is difficult to offer undergraduate courses entirely on Willa Cather. This is even more the case at the community college level, where nearly all courses are introductions or surveys. Here the challenge becomes integrating Cather’s texts into pre-existing courses, rather than proposing to teach Cather seminars. This is a particularly worthwhile pursuit because introductory level courses (and especially composition courses) offer the opportunity to expose all students—not just English majors—to Cather’s work. I teach at a community college near Annapolis, Maryland, and our introduction to composition/literature courses must adhere to fairly strict guidelines: two novels and (from an assigned anthology) one Greek play, one Shakespeare play, and one modern play. Few of my students can identify with the prairie landscape or with the pioneer experience. However, since Cather is now undisputedly canonical (“Ninth” 18), I decided I didn’t need to rationalize my choice of novels. Enough of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein—Willa Cather’s A Lost Lady could be the Novel Personified, too. Knowing that time constraints would prevent me from doing a large scale Cather unit complete with multiple Cather texts, biographical background, and secondary essays, I set out to see if A Lost Lady could engage a mix of east-coast students (traditional, older returning, and co-curricular high school) and also serve as a model novel for teaching the basics of literary analysis in the genre. The answer is a resounding “yes”: A Lost Lady works as a self-contained two-week unit, the subject of a short expository or analytical paper, and the basis for a longer research paper.

I wanted to teach a Cather novel, but why A Lost Lady? Scouring my bookshelves for a candidate for the novel section of my introductory Composition and Literature sections, I found my eyes almost immediately resting on A Lost Lady for one simple reason: it is short. I was starting a new job, and assigning short novels struck me as a way to get off on the right foot. On a more serious note, length is an important consideration for composition/literature courses that take on the dual goal of teaching basic composition skills along with providing an introduction to the major literary genres and to literary analysis. On a two-day a week schedule, students can read half of the novel for each class period, and the two-part division of Cather’s novel certainly lends itself to this format. Even more importantly (at least to me), because of its formalism, A Lost Lady serves as an excellent model of how literary techniques convey an author’s theme. In A Lost Lady these techniques include point of view, structure (especially doubling), setting, allusion, characterization and contrasting character types, symbolism, structural irony, significant names and repetition. The apparent simplicity of A Lost Lady, coupled with its underlying richness, makes the novel both inviting to beginning literature students and fertile for in-depth discussions.

I begin teaching A Lost Lady by providing only rudimentary background material—just enough to impress upon my students that Cather is neither Marian Forrester nor Niel. We talk about Lyra Garber Anderson and about Cather’s conception of Niel as a “peephole” into the world of Mrs. Forrester, “something for Marian Forrester’s charm to work on” (qtd. in Rosowski 115). To give students a better understanding of what Cather was trying to do, I also ask them to free-write about someone they admired when they were children and how that person made them feel, for example, an elementary school teacher or a favorite aunt or uncle. Further background or context seems unnecessary for the purpose of showing how this novel means. We launch right into the novel itself, letting the text tell its own story.

We begin our discussion by breaking the novel down in terms of literary components such as point of view, narrator, characterization, setting, and structure. We note that the story gives emphasis to Niel’s experience but is nevertheless told from a third-person omniscient point of view by an unnamed narrator who resides outside the story. Most students don’t think much about point of view as an actual technique and a choice with ramifications, so I point out that Cather originally wrote the novel in first person and then changed her mind because she did not want Niel to be the focus of the story, but rather “only a point of view” (qtd. in Rosowski 115). Students also tend to think of characterization and point of view as discrete entities, so the concept of a character as a point of view is a new one for most. To further provide a sense of how characterization operates, I ask my students to work in groups to generate information about each of the main characters in the text—what we know and how we know it: Niel, Judge Pommeroy, Captain Forrest er, Marian, Ivy, and Frank Ellinger. The fact that Niel “is not highly individualized” (Rosowski 117) comes up, as does Marian’s centrality in a world of men. We also play with the “meaning-full names” (Skaggs 14), guided by Merrill Skaggs’s insightful analysis (50–1). Just as the flat male characters provide a venue for the rounded Mar-
ian to distinguish herself, the nondescript Sweet Water (with its own meaningful name) further contributes to the novel’s key concerns and themes, simultaneously giving rise to one of the major structuring devices, that of the fairy tale. Further, the two-part structure of the novel along with doubling of crucial scenes (such as the saving-the-bird sequence at the beginning of each of the two parts [15-18, 92-93]) calls attention to structure as a literary device, the potential for which is less obvious in short-duration chronological novels.9

Once we establish the importance of structure in A Lost Lady, we can move to the concept of structural irony. While some students might be familiar with verbal or dramatic irony, few have previously encountered structural irony. M.H. Abrams defines structural irony as when “the author [. . .] introduces a structural feature which serves to sustain a duality of meaning and evaluation throughout the work” (98). Abrams continues by noting that this feature is often a character of limited insight, a “naïve hero [who] persists[s] in putting an interpretation on affairs which the knowing reader—who penetrates to, and shares, the implied point of view of the authorial presence behind the naïve persona—just as persistently is called on to alter and correct [italics in original]” (98). I introduce the idea of structural irony at the same time that I remind students of Skaggs’s insight about Niel’s “carefully misspelled name” (50). While Skaggs sees “nil, nihil, or kneel” (51) in this purposeful spelling, the mixing up of “i” and “e” also invites us to view Niel himself as somewhat mixed up, a character of limited insight, even. At the same time, the structural doubling throughout the novel clearly suggests the second half of structural irony, the “duplicity of meaning.” The fact that Niel is male and insignificant as an individual further suggests that the view he represents—that of male society—is meant to be subverted, as well.

The clearest illustration of how this structural irony functions comes in the sections of the novel that present the triangular relationship between the Forresters and Frank Ellinger. The three adults have worked out a viable compromise that basically allows everyone’s needs to be met. Most of my students correctly observe that Captain Forrester is aware of the relationship between Marian and Frank, based on the conversation that occurs when the Captain asks Niel to post a letter from Marian to Frank Ellinger:

[. . .] Niel felt embarrassed and tried to slip the letter quickly into his pocket. The Captain, his two canes in one hand, prevented him. He took the pale blue envelope again, and held it out at arm’s length, regarding it.

“Mrs. Forrester is a fine penman; have you ever noticed? Always was. [. . .] That’s exceptional in a woman, Niel.” (98)

The Captain has accepted the situation, Marian has her needs met for both security and excite-
and its less-desirable underside, at least for women (property status, control, restriction). These symbols are also clearly connected to the novel’s themes, so my students and I can talk about symbolism as a literary technique, avoiding the pitfalls of what a colleague calls the “Old MacDonald Approach”: here a symbol, there a symbol, everywhere a symbol symbol. Among other things, water suggests the tension between stability and change, roses bring out idealism versus realism, and rings suggest a chafing against society’s expectations for women.

Because of the clear relationship between literary techniques and the themes of *A Lost Lady*, the novel lends itself to introductory analysis papers (*Appendix A*). My students had some interesting things to say about the novel, suggesting that they both understood and connected with the text. For example, in a comparison/contrast paper on Ivy and Niel, one student writes: “[M]ost movies have a good and bad character. The good character usually prevails over the bad. [. . .] Willa Cather’s novel *A Lost Lady* portrays two characters, Niel Herbert and Ivy Peters, who are similar to Batman and Joker. However, the bad character, Ivy Peters, prevails, as well. Although Niel Herbert and Ivy Peters have different values and inclinations, they both have similar accomplishments.” Another student shows how contrasting character types convey other themes, as well: “Cather uses contrasting character types to show the shift in values from an older, honor-based generation to a younger, more materialistic one. In particular, Cather contrasts Forrester’s appreciation of his environment with Ivy’s view of the environment exclusively in terms of its money-making potential.”

Other students effectively argue that the characterization of Niel and Ivy shows the tension between idealism and realism. This theme also ties in with the novel’s title, according to one student: “The title *A Lost Lady* illustrates Niels’ constant attempts to shape Marian Forrester into his ideal lady, yet he could never succeed because this was an unrealistic goal to begin with.” Also looking at the subject of goals and dreams, one student investigates what the novel says about the American Dream: “Cather’s novel, *A Lost Lady*, offers three different versions of the American Dream and how the pursuit of this dream affects those who try to achieve it. In particular, Cather shows how Captain Forrester loses his money, but keeps his soul; Ivy Peters obtains wealth at the expense of his integrity, and Marian Forrester manages to achieve both money and happiness.” All of these papers were written without secondary research or biographical criticism.

As a subject for literary research papers (*Appendix B*), *A Lost Lady* is easily researchable through the plentiful books, anthologies, journals, published interviews and reliable web sites. Both male and female students in my classes were interested in investigating how Cather challenges society’s expectations for women. Such students gained valuable insight from exploring how Cather deploys the transition between the 19th century Cult of True Womanhood and the 20th century New Woman in her characterization of Marian. They also answered the question of why a female writer who wanted to capture the effect a woman had on her as a child creates a male peephole: by having Niel speak for male society and then using structural irony to subvert Niel’s judgments, Cather creates a critical subtext.

Along similar lines, students came to see how by having Marian remove her symbolic rings at will, Cather interjects a certain flexibility into an otherwise static category (married or not married) and thereby challenges social norms and expectations. Other students preferred to look at Arthurian echoes in the novel, no surprise considering our society’s continued fascination with the legend. Recent popular
movies such as First Knight show that the Arthur story still performs significant cultural work, and it is just this question that I pose to students interested in this research topic: why did Cather choose to echo 10th century England in her 1920s novel about 1880s Colorado? In finding both close correspondences and noticeable divergences, students raised any number of interesting answers to this question. Additionally, some students researched a short paper topic, expanding and enhancing their analysis with the benefit of secondary criticism.

I have also used A Lost Lady as a bouncing off point for non-literary research papers, an assignment I call “Life Imitates Art,” as the novel's themes and concerns clearly resonate with a range of contemporary issues (Appendix C). Our own time is no less uncertain and in search of ideals as the time that Cather wrote about. Indeed, we might say that post-9/11 and Enron, we can share Cather's sense of the world broken in two (NUF v). Tensions, transitions, and rebuilding are still very real to us.

Returning to the all-important task raised at the beginning of this essay, moving from “French toast” to “Happy Days” by getting students to read the text; I use pop quizzes. Once the students start reading, the power of the novel takes care of the rest. Cather’s subject, “bold deeds and fair women” (qtd. in Skaggs 49), holds an audience's attention just as effectively today as it did eighty years ago. Furthermore, because A Lost Lady is short, easy to read, and engaging, it is also empowering, opening up the world of literary analysis to students who previously felt themselves shut out.

### NOTES

1. The other texts I teach in this course are Goodbye, Columbus (Philip Roth), Antigone (Sophocles), A Midsummer Night’s Dream (Shakespeare), and Death of a Salesman (Arthur Miller).

2. Knowing that I could not join the ranks of professors who successfully integrate “stories and novels by Cather, essays on Cather, and criticisms of her fiction” (Pinker 11), I set out to see if I could teach A Lost Lady essentially in isolation as a tool for teaching students the basics of literary analysis.

3. In his 1997 syllabus study, Virgil Albertini notes that the three respondents teaching Cather in composition classes used My Antonia. He also points out that My Antonia was the text that appeared more often than any of the others on all syllabi.

4. Merrill Skaggs alludes to this when she begins her discussion of the novel with the admonition that “nothing Willa Cather ever wrote is as simple as it looks” (45).

5. Skaggs suggests that Niel might represent a younger, more rigidly idealistic Cather (51). Since my unit includes a minimum of biographical material, I simply caution my students against identifying Niel the character with Cather the author.

6. We start the course by reading Roth’s Goodbye, Columbus, a novel that takes place during a summer and is told chronologically. Structure is not as clearly deployed as a literary technique in Roth’s novel.

7. In her discussion of teaching A Lost Lady to Advanced Placement students, Mollanee Kvasnicka observes that “it is very difficult for students to accept Marian without making tough judgments about her” (22).

8. I am indebted to Professor Mark Matthews for this wonderful way of explaining to students that their papers must go beyond observation to performing actual literary analysis by stating significance.

### WORKS CITED


Willa Cather has long been admired for her depictions of natural landscapes, and in modern criticism, her literary antecedents in landscape depiction and thematic uses of landscape have received a great deal of attention (from Randall, Fryer and Rosowski, for example). But among these and other studies there is little attention paid to two related topics: the possible influences of Henry David Thoreau upon Cather and Cather's literary treatment of the wilderness. Both Thoreau and Cather are revered as “nature writers,” but neither is enamored of wilderness as wilderness. Though both find occasions in wilderness settings for artistic development and spiritual revelation, both also are at times confused—indeed, terrified—by confrontations with raw wilderness. Thoreau's interactions with wilderness range from the empathetic to the antithetical; Cather's are similar, though they tend to be less well pronounced in the context of her fiction which uses nature as background, rather than as foreground of discourse.

For students reading Cather in American literary survey courses, examining her work in light of Thoreau's wilderness theme provides a unifying perspective for such a course. Advanced students may also benefit from examining the specific echoes of Thoreau in Cather, and in discussing how she transforms Thoreau's self-conscious symbols of the wilderness into metaphors that are integrated narratively and thematically in her novels. Students might also be led to consider the literary effects of Thoreau's limited experience of the wilderness in Maine in contrast to Cather's broader and deeper experiences, especially in the Southwest.

As William Cronon argues, to define “wilderness” is an epistemological impossibility: the very act of defining the indefinable Other incorporates it and limits it in our understanding. “Wilderness,” at least for the sake of this essay, might be defined as a landscape absent of familiar human associations. Most elementally, wilderness exists when a solitary individual confronts nature without easy access to the material and psychological securities of the civilized world. Since wilderness, ultimately, is a metaphor, what is essentially confronted in the wilderness is the self and/or the ineluctable power that transcends the wilderness condition. This other power, as opposed to the conscious, ordered self may be construed as the individual unconscious or the powerful, chaotic root of creation itself. When stripped of material and psychological props, the wilderness explorer may discover or reawaken a regenerative force, one that may renew the self spiritually. To those prepared by predisposition and discipline to wrest meaning from the wilderness, the wilderness experience yields great creative power. To those ill prepared, it yields deepening isolation from the human community, spiritual despair, and frequently destruction. But even those best prepared to benefit from the wilderness experience must frequently confront despair before gaining a new composure.

The essential wilderness explorer in American culture is, of course, Thoreau. Even in claiming so, however, one is reminded that Thoreau's wilderness cabin at Walden Pond was only “a mile from any neighbor” (3). This reminder emphasizes the metaphoric dimensions of wilderness and may help us to understand Cather's uses of wild landscapes bereft of familiar human associations. In Cather's work, there is both continuity and change in her use of the wilderness as testing ground for the artistic temperament. In each case that I will cite below, the wilderness, the Other, is imaged by a relatively remote landscape that becomes a testing ground for the individual. In earlier works, like The Song of the Lark (1915) and My Antonia (1918), major characters mature through their experiences in the wilderness. At the same time, lesser characters are obliterated by their confrontations. In Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927), Bishop Latour proves a Thoreauvian success in creating an earthly and spiritual masterpiece from the wilderness—his cathedral—and he experiences the terrible, destructive power of the Other that transcends the wilderness.

Thoreau begins Walden (1854) with an analysis of the world of mid-nineteenth century New England. This first chapter, “Economy,” is often lamented by contemporary students as a lengthy and unnecessary obstacle to the substance of Walden. Thoreau's autobiographic experiences as a solitary visionary at the Pond. But, of course, this first chapter is a necessary preliminary for defining the artistic and spiritual visionary, for identifying what is to be left behind as well as what is to be gained in solitary contemplation of the wilderness, of the possibilities of the unspoken Other within. In Cather's works, the contemporary, mundane world of her protagonists no less forms a point of departure for their wilderness adventures. As Thea Kronborg travels toward the Ottenburg ranch and Panther Canyon through the Arizona forests, she begins to leave her routine world and sensibilities behind:

the forest closed behind the wagon. More than the mountain disappeared as the forest closed thus. Thea seemed to be taking very little through the wood with her. The personality of which she was so tired seemed to let go of her. The high, sparkling air drank it up like blotting-paper. It was lost in the thrilling blue of the new sky and the song of the thin wind in the pines. The old, fretted lines which marked one off, which defined her—made her Thea Kronborg, Bowers's accompanist, a soprano with a faulty middle voice—were all erased. (368)

Thoreau's trip to Walden Pond reawakens his earliest childhood memories (155-56); Thea's to the ranch reawakens hers:

She was getting back to the earliest sources of gladness that she could remember. She had loved the sun, and the brilliant solitudes of sand and sun, long before these other things had come along to fasten themselves upon her and torment her. That night, when she clambered into that big German feather bed, she felt completely released from the enslaving desire to get on in the world. Darkness had once again the sweet wonder that it had in childhood. (369)
Like Thoreau, Thea crosses many borders of time and cultural sensibility to return to the sources of ancient myth. From the rock outcropping above Panther Canyon, Thea recapitulates not only her own childhood love of “sand and sun,” but the childhood of humankind in her immersion into her natural surroundings and contemplation of the long vanished Cliff Dwellers’ culture. Thoreau muses in *Walden* that “Every child begins the world again.” And he wonders in the same passage: “Who does not remember the interest with which when young he looked at shelving rocks, or any approach to a cave? It was the natural yearning of that portion of our most primitive ancestor that still survived in us” (28). Reminiscent of Thoreau’s bathing at Walden and the symbolic significance he attaches to it is Thea’s bathing at Panther Canyon.

When Thea took her bath at the bottom of the cañon, in the sunny pool behind the screen of cottonwoods, she sometimes felt as if the water must have sovereign qualities, from having been the object of so much service and desire [in the Indians’ crafting of graceful jars to contain it]. That stream was the only living thing left of the drama that had been played out in the cañon centuries ago. In the rapid, restless heart of it, flowing swifter that the rest, there was a continuity of life that reached back into the old time. The glittering thread of current had a kind of lightly worn, loosely knit personality, graceful and laughing. Thea’s bath came to have a ceremonial gravity. The atmosphere of the cañon was ritualistic. (378)

Similarly, Thoreau found the waters of Walden Pond sacred and their effects spiritual as well as physical (297-98). Both of them as well discover tropes through which to relay their epiphanies. In *Walden*, the interaction of sun and sand on the railroad bank creates “sand foliage” from which Thoreau extrapolates this law of Nature: “The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf” (307, 308). In a similar epiphany, Thea ponders:

The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women had held it in their jars. In the sculpture she had seen in the Art Institute, it had been caught in a flash of arrested motion. In singing, one made a vessel of one’s throat and nostrils and held it on one’s breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals. (379)

The wilderness challenge to make oneself over becomes complex in *My Ántonia*, not only because there are dual protagonists but because the transformations that occur are not all efficacious, although on the whole Cather is optimistic about the possibilities of positive transformations. Adding to the complications, transformations of Jim Burden and Ántonia are extended throughout the text, rather than restricted to a single episode. Nevertheless, the metaphor of wilderness as testing ground remains.

The most profound losses of the old world that Jim suffers are the deaths of his parents, which thrust him from the comfortable, womb-like environment of Back Creek onto the Nebraska prairies.
Narrator Jim recalls his youthful first impressions of Nebraska in terms that emphasize its otherness, its wilderness:

> There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land—slightly undulating, I knew, because often our wheels ground against the brake as we went down into a hollow and lurched up again on the other side. I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction (italics added). (7)

As Jim had been thrust from his old, familiar world, so had his alter ego, Antonia. Initially, for her, that displacement was to hold only tragedy. Inflexibly attuned to the Old World, her father soon despairs at the isolation imposed upon him by the desolate Nebraska prairie and takes his own life. She, on the other hand, ultimately thrives, despite many hardships.

At first, Jim seems destined to triumph over the wilderness and thoroughly renew himself. In the comfort and support of his grandparents’ home, he makes a relatively easy transition into the life of the prairie. Soon after he arrives, Jim visits his grandmother’s garden, where he is warned about the snakes in the neighborhood. In a scene that foreshadows both the explosion of Cuzak children from the cellar at the end of My Ántonia and, paradoxically, Bishop Latour’s descent into the snake cave, Jim creates a womb-like retreat in the garden:

> The earth was warm under me, and warm as I crumbled it through my fingers. I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. 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. (17-18)

Jim’s sense of security is reminiscent of Thoreau’s in his warm Walden cabin during the winter (“House Warming” 238-55). Both womb-like retreats from the world and descents into the unconscious suggest an absorption into a larger entity. But there is a difference between Jim’s and Thoreau’s experiences. Thoreau emerges from his winter womb to find reborn his individual self, marked by action, not stasis. When he leaves the warmth of his cabin, it is with an exuberant “Forward! […] to my morning work” (282). Jim’s memory of that womb-like security abruptly concludes at the end of section II of chapter one; no rebirth occurs for Jim, only a lingering desire—accentuated by the discontents of his later life, especially his fruitless marriage—for the warmth and security of the past. In sharp contrast is the triumph of Antonia. Before he leaves for Harvard, Jim visits with Antonia. As they reminisce about their shared childhood, Jim tells her: “The idea of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don’t realize it. You really are a part of me” (312). As they walk about in the evening, Jim recalls: “I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there” (313). But the security Jim longs for amounts to death, a retreat to the womb become tomb. Antonia, on the other hand, is already committed to the future, to her illegitimate daughter. But her personal adversity, which thrusts her outside the conventions of society into a kind of wilderness, serves to strengthen her character. Many years later, when Jim sees her, Antonia, now married, is not so much transformed as she is fulfilled. Her role as mother is imaged in her numerous children rushing from the storage cellar, “a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight” (328). Finally, it is Antonia who assumes the epic role of Walden’s Thoreau: “She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races” (342). The “vessel” of life discovered by Thea has become more literally re-envisioned by Cather as womb.

The movement and theme of Walden are reflected in My Ántonia. The wilderness, literal and metaphorical, challenges the individual to new awareness and rebirth. Thoreau’s recognition that fronting the facts of life might result in triumph or tragedy is evidenced in the parallel stories of Antonia and Jim. Death Comes for the Archbishop marks Cather’s fullest exploration of the wilderness theme as stipulated here. Not only is the wilderness landscape more daunting in this work than in her previous work, the challenges are more deeply spiritual and the triumph of Bishop Latour is more multifaceted—personal, spiritual, esthetic, and communal.

Jim Burden’s desire to be a part of something larger is shared by Latour. But it is clear that Latour’s desire does not include a negation of self, as Jim’s longing for absorption does. In fact, Latour’s quest is much like Thoreau’s: to realize in himself and through his actions the Divine of which he is a part. Latour, like Thoreau, comes...
The movement and theme of Walden are reflected in My Ántonia. The wilderness, literal and metaphoric, challenges the individual to new awareness and rebirth.

closest to that potential the farther he travels from his civilized self toward the overarching Other, the wilderness which precedes order. A touchstone for Cather’s divergent responses to the wilderness can be found in Death Comes for the Archbishop. When confident in his mission, Latour exults the power of his vision to see the hand of Divine Benevolence in nature. As he says to Vaillant at the end of Book I: “The Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always” (54). Latour’s belief in such “miracles” had been dramatized earlier in “The Cruciform Tree.” When less sanguine, Latour’s harmonizing vision is defied by the chaos of the environment and the spiritual recalcitrance of the Indians. In “The Mass at Acoma,” his sense of order is confounded by the mesa environment: “This mesa plain had an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with all the material for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together, on the eve of being arranged into mountain, plain, plateau. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape” (99-100).1 After Mass on the mesa, “When he blessed [the Indians] and sent them away, it was with a sense of inadequacy and spiritual defeat” (106).

In Thoreau, there are similar poles of optimism and despair. Early in Walden, as he is about to realize his spiritual vision in nature, Thoreau foreshadows Latour’s faith in the miraculous presence of the Divine in the commonplace: “In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surrounds us” (97). But Thoreau, too, sometimes doubts his spiritual coherence in the face of chaotic, wilderness nature. Taking brief leave from his Walden experiment in 1846, he traveled to the backwoods of Maine. As he ascended Ktaadn, he noticed, “a vast aggregation of loose rocks, as if sometime it had rained rocks [. . .]. They were the raw materials of a planet dropped from an unseen quarry [. . .]. This was an undone extremity of the world” (63). Like Latour, Thoreau felt spiritually energized “and more alone than you can imagine,” in these passages that Cather seems to echo.

Latour’s discomfort on the mesa is only a preliminary to the more chilling spiritual discomfort he later faces in the Snake Cave. Clearly drawn as a tomb-womb by Cather, the snake cave is where Latour confronts the Other most fully. As in Song of the Lark and My Ántonia, a wilderness outpost is the locus of his confrontation. While he is accompanied by the Indian Jacinto, Latour finds an impassable gulf between himself and his guide; and, thus, he is isolated from civilization. In this tomb-like cave, Latour’s spiritual self-confidence is severely tested, as he confronts not only the physical chill, but also the spiritual chill of a powerful Other beyond his understanding. Thoreau challenges his readers of Walden “to drive life into a comer, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it [. . .]” (90-91). He goes on a bit later: “Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business” (98). Latour seems to confront Death in the cave, but at the same time as the section title “Snake Root” suggests, the source of life. Not only is Latour far from civilization during the Snake Root episode, but his very sense of place is confounded by the swiftly driven snow: “Trail and landmarks, the mountain itself were obliterated” (133). Even though a small fire takes away the “deathly chill” of the cave, “the dizzy noise in Father Latour’s head persisted,” so that he finally draws near to the crack where it originates.

Father Latour lay with his ear to this crack for a long while, despite the cold that arose from it. He told himself he was listening to one of the oldest voices of the earth. What he heard was the sound of a great underground river, flowing through a resounding cavern. The water was far, far below, perhaps as deep as the foot of the mountain, a flood moving in utter blackness under the ribs of antediluvian rock. It was not a rushing noise, but the sound of a great flood moving with majesty and power. “It is terrible,” he said at last, as he rose.” (137-38)

But for all the sublime terror that the sound of the powerful, hidden river holds, it also holds the essence of life in the desert. At the very beginning of the book, Latour is also lost and faces death from thirst and exposure. But his mare and mule sense water at a great distance, an hour away. They soon come upon a serpentine swath of green in the desert: “winding between two hills that were like all . . . together, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it [. . .]” (90-91). He goes on a bit later: “Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business” (98). Latour seems to confront Death in the cave, but at the same time as the section title “Snake Root” suggests, the source of life. Not only is Latour far from civilization during the Snake Root episode, but his very sense of place is confounded by the swiftly driven snow: “Trail and landmarks, the mountain itself were obliterated” (133). Even though a small fire takes away the “deathly chill” of the cave, “the dizzy noise in Father Latour’s head persisted,” so that he finally draws near to the crack where it originates.

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[. . .] yellow rocks baking in sunlight, the swallows, the cedar smell, and that peculiar sadness—a voice out of the past, not very loud, that went on saying a few simple things to the solitude eternally.

— The Song of the Lark

had planted a cross” (32-33). What “Snake Root” signifies, then, is neither life nor death, but the unnameable transcendent source of both, the Timelessness that is the Other of Time. At the end of his life, this illumination becomes clear to Latour. “More and more life seemed to him an experience of the Ego, in so sense the Ego itself. This conviction, he believed, was something apart from his religious life; it was an enlightenment that came to him as a man, a human creature.” Having surrendered Ego, Latour reawakens a deeper consciousness. This new consciousness is outside of “calendared time,” beyond thoughts of death; and it is a consciousness in which “none of his former states of mind were lost or outgrown” (305). This new consciousness, like much else in Cather, seems foreshadowed by Thoreau. At the end of Walden, he writes:

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old law be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. (323-24)

This new consciousness, able to be experienced but not named, is wrested from the Other imaged by the wilderness in Thoreau and Cather. In Walden, the sand foliage reveals Thoreau’s new consciousness; in Death, the cathedral, envisioned by Latour in the inert golden mountain side, reveals his new consciousness. The cathedral is his “sheath,” which captures that “shining elusive element which is life itself.” As Latour contemplates the “strong golden ochre” rock (251) from which his cathedral would be shaped, he might well agree with Thoreau as he considered the quickening spring sand bank: “This earth is not a mere fragment of dead history [. . .],--not a fossil earth, but a living earth; [. . .]. And not only it, but the institutions upon it, are plastic like clay in the hands of the potter” (309). ♦

NOTE

’Compare these two passages, the first by Thoreau, on the top of Ktaadn: “This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man’s garden, but the unhandselled globe. [. . .]. There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites,—to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we” (Maine Woods, 70-71). And by Cather, reflecting Latour’s thoughts on the top of Acoma: “He was on a naked rock in the desert, in the stone age, a prey to homesickness for his own kind, his own epoch, for European man and his glorious history of desire and dreams. Through all the centuries that his own part of the world had been changing like the sky at daybreak, this people had been fixed, increasing neither in numbers nor desires, rock-turtles on their rock. Something reptilian he felt there, something that endured by immobility, a kind of life out of reach, like the crustaceans in their armour” (109).

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Contrasting Views of the West: Willa Cather and Mari Sandoz

JERRINE McCAFFREY

When I use literature to illustrate the concepts of Romanticism and Realism, Willa Cather and Mari Sandoz not only offer my students and me diverse ways of understanding literary concepts but also help us gain human awareness and insight.

Willa Cather and Mari Sandoz, both from Nebraska, both writing about the frontier, view the Western Plains from diverse literary, psychological, historical, and sociological approaches. Although Cather and Sandoz wrote during the same time period, Cather's "Two Friends," written in 1931, and Sandoz's Old Jules, written in 1935, portray the Plains from varied outlooks. Cather's Romanticism flows throughout her work, showing her search for the Ideal, illustrating that the individual matters, emotions matter, and nature heals. Sandoz depicts another view of the West. Through her realistic style, she pragmatically searches, without idealization, for the literal truth to represent a time and place. Through memory, both Cather and Sandoz return home to tell their poignant, distinct remembrances of a place and time period.

Cather's "Two Friends" describes idealistic remembrances of youth:

Even in early youth, when the mind is so eager for the new and untried, while it is still a stranger to faltering and fear, we yet like to think that there are certain unalterable realities, somewhere at the bottom of things. These anchors may be ideas; but more often they are merely pictures, vivid memories, which in some unaccountable and very personal way give us courage. The sea-gulls, that seem so much creatures of the free wind and waves, that are as homeless as the sea (able to rest upon the tides and ride the storm, needing nothing but water and sky), at certain seasons even they go back to something they have known before; to remote islands and lonely ledges that are their breeding-grounds. The restlessness of youth has such retreats, even though it may be ashamed of them. (193-94)

Through poetic language combined with natural, soothing images, Cather reveals her romantic idealism and its necessity by showing Youth as a time when the mind eagerly reaches out to learn—a time when fear does not replace hope—a time when idealism strongly guides the restless inner self. In Willa Cather's story "Two Friends," memories take the first person narrator back to a time when convictions prevail solidly, when heroes guide idealistic views, when she believes an anchor remains in sight and trusted truths stay to guide her. The narrator looks back to a past time with a sad awareness because even though she acknowledges the cold realities of life, she continues to search for the Ideal. Through this literary and personal journey, Cather shows the need to maintain hope in the human spirit. Her characters show authentic, emotional, layered dimensions. Cather often writes of days that seem touched by gold, as she represents the end of an era, one of the last of the great Romantic writers.

Cather would always hold the vast open spaces of the plains dear to her heart, but she would always feel somewhat uprooted and in need of an anchor, much like the "creatures of the free wind and waves, that are as homeless as the sea" (193). This story must surely be biographical for Cather, who places herself back in time as the young girl living in a small Kansas town who watches and admires the friendship of two men. She says, "Wonderful things do happen even in the dullest places—in the cornfields and the wheat-fields" (212). This story represents the Romantic Ideal of a memory, connection, and friendship while also portraying a stirring historical and political time.

In 1896, William Jennings Bryan delivered his famous talk,
generally known as the Cross of Gold speech. He received the presidential nomination but was defeated by the Republican governor of Ohio, William McKinley. In Cather's story, R. E. Dillon, a Democrat and enthusiastic supporter of Bryan, and J. H. Trueman, a Republican, end their friendship over a mere political disagreement.

On a historical and literary level, the two friends, Dillon and Trueman, represent a dying time: a time when business was yet personal, a time when the American Dream doctrine flourished, a time of heroes, and a time in literature when Realism and Modernism were replacing Romanticism. Dillon and Trueman's friendship represents the Romantic Ideal. The "brick wall" of Dillon's store symbolizes consistency (197). Cather paints Dillon and Trueman as real individuals and who are not "flimsy" (197). The two friends give the narrator courage, connection, and a Romantic Ideal, representing Cather's emotional sympathy for authentic remembrances.

Looking back at her youthful anchor, the narrator refers to the friendship as "strong" and "fine." Therefore, the distortion of truth does not lie in disillusionment over the character of her two friends, for even after the political break-up, she views the friendship with admiration.

Loss of innocence and initiation arrive for the young narrator when the friendship of the two men is broken over a political opposition:

Dillon declared that young Mr. Bryan had looked like the patriots of old when he faced and challenged high finance with: "You shall not press this crown of thorns upon the brow of labour; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." [...] 

R.E. Dillon had never taken an aggressive part in politics. But from that night on, the Democratic candidate and the free-silver plank were the subject of his talks with his customers and depositors. He drove about the country convincing the farmers, [...] organized the Bryan Club and the Bryan Ladies' Quartette in our county, contributed largely to the campaign fund.

While all these things were going on, Trueman kept to his own office. He came to Dillon's bank on business, but he did not "come back to the sidewalk," as I put it to myself. He waited and said nothing, but he looked grim. (222-23)

The narrator watches from afar; she misses the connection that she formed in her youth, but, as an adult, she recognizes that "this was a quarrel of principle" (226). This useless quarrel that could have easily been mended cost her innocence.

As an adult looking back, the narrator also realizes that the two friends represent the end of a time period:

It lost me my special pleasure of summer nights: the old stories of the early West that sometimes came to the surface; the minute biographies of the farming people, the clear, detailed, illuminating accounts of all that went on in the great crop-growing, cattle-feeding world; and the silence,—the strong, rich, out-flowing silence between two friends, that was as full and satisfying as the moonlight. I was never to know its like again. (226)

When Trueman eventually leaves town, he gives the narrator a "keepsake" of friendship: "[...]he took from his watch-chain a red seal I had always admired. [...] 'For a keepsake,' he said evasively" (228). That keepsake represents a reminder that connections matter, and, just as important, memories of ideals and heroes guide us to important realizations, idealistic realizations that spark genuine emotions:

More than once, in Southern countries where there is a smell of dust and dryness in the air and the nights are intense, I have come upon a stretch of dusty white road drinking up the moonlight beside a blind wall, and have felt a sudden sadness. Perhaps it was not until the next morning that I knew why—and then only because I had dreamed of Mr. Dillon or Mr. Trueman in my sleep. When that old scar is occasionally touched by chance, it rouses the old uneasiness; the feeling of something broken that could so easily have been mended; of something delightful that was senselessly wasted, of a truth that was accidentally distorted—one of the truths we want to keep. (229-30)

Cather's story "Two Friends" portrays her idealism. Even though truths and ideals may seem somewhat distorted, Cather shows that humans should carry these truths through life. There must be something "at the bottom of things." These "things," these Romantic ideals offer courage. They are the waves that carry us home, at least in memory and soul.

Cather and Sandoz took much of their material from their plains environment; however, their home environments differed greatly. Both writers incorporated historical and sociological influences, and both writers gained a certain sense of strength and awareness from their plains surroundings, transforming events into stories.

Cather's Romanticism flows throughout her poetic prose. Sandoz's passions differ from Cather's idealism. Sandoz shows an almost Modernist disorder. Sandoz says:

"Old Jules" is the biography of my father, Jules Ami Sandoz: I have also tried in a larger sense to make it the biography of a community [...] The book grew out of a childhood and adolescence spent among the storytellers of the frontier [...]. a land of story-tellers, and in this respect remains frontier in nature until the last original settler is gone. It grew, then, out of the long hours in the smoky old kitchen on the Running Water, the silent hours of listening behind the stove or in the wood box. So I—the Marie of the story—heard all the accounts of the hunts, the well accident, the fights with the cattleman and the sheeple [...].

But the most impressive stories were those told me by Old Jules himself [...]. Perhaps I drove the team on long trips while he smoked and talked of his own dreams and his joys and his disappointments. And always was I too frightened of him to voice either approval or surprise.

Although there was apparently no affection between us, my father somehow talked more sincerely to me, particularly when we went hunting, than was his custom. During these stories he never looked at me—[...]. (Foreword vii-viii)

Marie begins her life in fear. She hides behind the stove, under the table; and behind her desk at school. For short periods of time, Marie finds comfort at the river. Her perceptions of the landscape reveal two sides of nature: beauty and destruction: "One Sunday afternoon Marie sneaked away from the baby-tending to sit with her feet dangling over the river, looking down upon its dark green spring flow until the bridge began to fly upstream, carrying her far
away” (287). Early in life, Marie discovers solace through nature, but she also learns of nature's dual forces. After a hail storm, she and her brothers and sisters find a dead mocking bird, his “feathers stripped from his back” (251). They bury the bird in a cigar box and sprinkle holy water on the bird.

At home, Marie experiences a cold environment. She relishes the connection that she discovers when she reads the fatalistic works of Victorian writer Thomas Hardy: “Here, in Hardy, she found life as she saw it about her. So it was like that everywhere. Well, it was best to know” (340). In her early life, she hides and conforms to avoid being whipped by her father, but once Marie realizes that her struggle transcends time, she gains something of importance. Hardy's characters live in an unjust world, and Hardy shows the injustice of Victorian society that abuses those who cannot defend themselves. Hardy's fatalistic view aimed to shake up and awaken a society. Marie gains connection and strength from reading Hardy, and she remembers her father's stories.

One particular sentence in Old Jules appears as a dominant, fatalistic theme for Sandoz: “Why must people kill the thing they love in you—if you let them?” (304). Through memory, Mari Sandoz searches to form connections that lead to possible answers to her question. Historians observe Old Jules with intrigue. Sandoz covers much history, from the Homestead Act up through the ending of World War I. One of her most emotional scenes reveals the devastating annihilation that occurred at Wounded Knee:

Then came the news of the shocking annihilation of Big Foot's band at Wounded Knee: men, women, and children mowed down by Hotchkiss guns while they and their sick chief were surrendering their pitifully inadequate arms and asking for the peace they had not broken. Jules heard the news the same day at Rushville and rode up in the face of a coming storm. From a hill to the north he looked down over the desolate battlefield, upon the dark piles of men, women, and children sprawled among their goods. Dry snow trailed little ridges of white over them, making them look like strange-limbed animals left for the night and the wolves. Here, in ten minutes, an entire community was as the buffalo that bleached on the plains. (131)

Rarely, Sandoz reveals Jules in a compassionate state. When he looks out over the battlefield, he feels sick. Usually insensitive to others’ pain, Jules hates with a vengeance, but he survives with a passion of a dream. He lives during a violent time of clashes between cattle and sheep farmers, battles between Anglo and Ameri-

can Indian, and struggles for political rights for settlers. All of these incidents leave their influence on him.

The disorder of the time somewhat corresponds with Jules' abuse and cruelty. His dreams fail, and he sees that there is no Promised Land (406). A progressive horticulturist, Jules fights for political rights for settlers. Resolutely, he writes letters to Washington, D.C. and Lincoln, Nebraska, the state capital, but his wife and children do his work at home. In The Legacy of Conquest, Patricia Nelson Limerick notes that white men were not the only found-
ers of the new frontier; however, Jules, armed with old-country patriarchal views, celebrates the conquests of white men.

Mari Sandoz begins her life hiding. As a young child, she is victimized by her father's frustration, depression, and egotism. She endures. She remembers. She recreates a time and a place. Sandoz tells an honest story, her story about a love-hate relationship, and, curiously, her father, Old Jules, also carries a similar type of love-hate relationship with his daughter. An environment of drought, cattle wars, isolation, insanity, hatred, violence, and murder influen-
ces Sandoz's writing. Perhaps from both parents, Mari Sandoz gains passion, determination, and the strength to write of a land and a place—a place where a young girl finds little love, little hope, but something stays within her, sparks of insight and courage to tell realistic stories of anguish that must not be forgotten.

Cather writes about the golden fields of the plains, and, through her poetic images, she takes her stand against injustices. She shows the sadness that occurs when idealism is stripped away, and she writes to enforce the need that society understand the importance of each individual. Cather's Romanticism intensifies the need to sustain hope. Sandoz's memories differ from Cather's. Sandoz finds no romance through her impoverished childhood; she does not venerate, for example, the fact that her mother lost her teeth after her child was born. Sandoz, too, refuses to give in to injustice, but realizes that she does not suffer alone.

Willa Cather's and Mari Sandoz's remembrances are not easily forgotten. Cather's Romanticism and Sandoz's Realism offer historical and literary value to their readers, but, perhaps even more importantly, both writers offer the need to go home again to discover insight and meaning. ◆

WORKS CITED
An Interview with a Master Teacher: Betty Kort

Betty Kort has taught English 11 for more than twenty years at Hastings (Nebraska) Senior High School. She was chair of the art department for several years before moving to the English Department, where she now teaches English 11 and creative writing. In 1993, she was named Nebraska Teacher of the Year and also became a Disney Award teacher. She was later highlighted for her creative teaching in a video produced by Project Zero at Harvard University in conjunction with the Disney Learning Partnership. The video has been released nationally. She is a past recipient of the NEH Reader's Digest Teacher Scholar Award and a participant in an NEH Summer Seminar for Secondary Teachers, concentrating on William Faulkner. Her English classes have been named to the list of National English Classrooms of Excellence by the National Council of Teachers of English, and she is a recipient of a Cooper Foundation Award for Excellence in Teaching. A Distinguished Alumna of the University of Nebraska–Kearney, Betty is also a member of the Gold Torch Society, a mentoring organization for senior college women who show exceptional promise. Betty has been a member of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Board of Governors since 1990, having served as president of the organization and as a longtime member of the Executive Board. She currently serves as interim director of the WCPM. Her publications include “A Reading of the Nebraska State Capitol: The Cather/Alexander Connection,” published in the Nebraska English Journal, Special Edition: “Cather in the Classroom,” Fall 1991.

Language and literature are deeply embedded in Betty's family. Her husband, Ron, is a high school English teacher, and their two daughters both have degrees in English. Nicholas, their two-year-old grandson, has not decided on a major at this time.

1. What influenced you to become a teacher and why did you decide to teach Cather?

Teaching seems to have been a perfect occupation for me. It allows for flexibility and wide-ranging creativity. My greatest joy has been working with young people. I learn from them every day; I love to watch them grow and mature, and they keep me excited and energetic. Because of them, I walk through the doors of Hastings High School every morning and feel a surge of energy and delight—and I mean every morning of the school year, no matter what the circumstances or the weather. But when I was young and searching within myself to determine what I wanted to do with my life, I never thought about being a teacher—it just happened, though it seems to have turned out to be a fine course of action for me.

When I graduated from high school, I had a Regents Scholarship to the University of Nebraska in my pocket. I knew that if I went to a large university, I would have the opportunity to do anything I chose. However, I was a very sheltered daughter of a very loving and protective father who thought first that the University was too big for a small-town girl and second that girls need not be particularly well educated. Most of the women he knew back then, including his wife and five sisters, were wives and mothers who stayed home after they married. Thus, I went to a nearby small teachers college. I loved science and though I had never met a female physician, I secretly wanted to be one. I majored in science my freshman year and loved it. But a kind and caring English professor by the name of Ernest Grundy changed my life forever when he convinced me to change my major to English because he liked my writing. As a college freshman I was overwhelmed by his compliments. I never considered what I would do with an English major. The answer, of course, was that I became a teacher.

I started teaching Cather regularly in about 1984 when I moved to a position as an English 11 teacher at Hastings Senior High School. Teaching Cather comes quite naturally to me. Cather's childhood experiences parallel my own in many ways. I grew up in Webster County, Nebraska, in a community predominantly settled by people of German descent; like Cather, I could ride my horse in any direction for miles over the countryside, but I lived on the north side of the Great Divide rather than the south side where Cather grew up.

We knew all of our neighbors. If we picked up the phone, there would be the hum of German-speaking neighbors on the party line. But my German father had married a Czech girl from a Bohemian community to the east. When we visited my grandmother near Oak...
Creek, we were always in the company of relatives and friends who constantly switched back and forth between Czech and English. My best friend in grade school was of Swedish descent, and I spent much of my spare time at her house. When I read Cather, I can move with her so readily among the various ethnic groups in the area in and around Webster County.

To complete the picture, I studied Latin in high school and was valedictorian of my class. I graduated from a small high school in Webster County just a few miles up the road from Red Cloud. The world that Cather writes about in her Plains novels is indeed a part of me. I sometimes think that I am reading Cather’s work from the inside out, if that makes any sense.

Of course, the parallels to Cather’s life gradually grow to be fewer with time. Cather would become a teacher briefly and then go on to a career as an accomplished author who would touch the lives of thousands here and around the world. I would become a teacher—not briefly, but for a lifetime—and I have tried to use Cather’s literature to touch the lives of a small number of high school junior English students who have come my way.

2. You have taken many of your classes on field trips to Red Cloud. How has the proximity of Red Cloud helped you in your teaching of Cather’s work?

I have been incredibly fortunate to teach at Hastings High School, only forty miles from Red Cloud. When I found myself teaching junior English, a course emphasizing American Literature, I decided to do a unit that involved Plains writers. I included Willa Cather’s work from the outset. My plan was to use a multidisciplinary approach in the unit. Since I have a natural affinity for music and my background includes teaching experience in art, history, and social studies, I decided to write a series of grants through the Nebraska Humanities Council that would involve bringing into my classroom scholars who would emphasize history, art, music, historical architecture, and, of course, literature. From then on for several years running, scholars often visited my classes, and sometimes they joined my classes for the Red Cloud field trips. The students were learning in fantastic ways, but I was learning even more with each scholar’s visit. I still teach a variety of materials that I gleaned from that period of time; and, of course, we still make the trip to Red Cloud every year. Even now I will occasionally invite scholars to come along to add spice to the experience.

3. Which Cather writings work best for you and why?

Although the projects that result from the Plains literature unit vary from year to year, the basic plan has remained the same. We always study Cather in depth. Naturally, the novels with Red Cloud as a setting work best. I now teach *My Ántonia*, *Old Mrs. Harris*, and the short story “*Optima dies ... prima fugit.*” from *Obscure Destinies*.

I think that *My Ántonia* is Cather’s best novel. But I also think that it has a degree of sophistication that is initially difficult for my students. On the other hand, they seem to be fairly comfortable with *O Pioneers!*, the love stories and the abundance of action are especially appealing. The young men and women in my classes read it with enthusiasm. I start with this book to whet their appetites for Cather and to introduce the concept of archetypes.

Then we read *My Ántonia* with a three-layer approach to the text. We start with Cather’s introduction; among other things, I emphasize that the countryside Cather is describing should be quite familiar to my students, who are residents themselves of a “small prairie town”—Hastings, Nebraska. I also underscore Cather’s use of the word “freemasonry.” I then ask students to see the book as a prairie landscape that is like a blank canvas. Cather’s farmers carve up the prairie, making a “freemasonry” of fields and pastures that resembles a patchwork quilt—a crazy quilt if you will—that reveals the physical development of the prairie. But I also think that Cather covers this same blank landscape with a series of stories that forms another “freemasonry” of sorts. These stories, from old world tales to contemporary events within the plot of the book, stem from ancient archetypes and are a means of creating the beginnings of a history and culture for the Plains. Like Virgil, who brought the same kind of cultural history to his “little country,” Cather becomes the “first to bring the Muse into [her] country.” Thus there are three layers: first, the obvious the plot line; second, the farming landscape; and, finally, the “story-scape,” all working together for Cather’s purposes. Finding the stories becomes a quest for my students. Some are obvious, some are hidden—as in the pumpkin patch “Garden of Eden” and the “fairytales” embedded in the introduction of the Shimerda characters. The students, through this process, come to see the “art” in Cather’s writing. They also become aware of the rich cultural heritage embedded in the text.

We conclude our reading with “Old Mrs. Harris,” a wonderful story to teach. When we visit Red Cloud, the students are amazed to see what an exact prototype the Cather childhood home is for the setting of “Old Mrs. Harris.”

4. How do you use the Cather texts to advantage during the Red Cloud Field Trips?

When we go to Red Cloud, my students carry 35mm cameras, notebooks, and bug spray (for the visit to the prairie). We take the town tour in the morning, and the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation guides become the teachers. I am definitely on the sidelines, watching the guides work their wonders. They know what my students have read and they focus on those texts so expertly! Along the way, my students find time to take “Marxhausen-style” photographs. Reinhold Marxhausen is a well-known artist in Nebraska who sees “art” in simple things like cracks in sidewalks, old bricks with “Humboldt, Nebraska” written on them, broken windows, textured woodwork, and the like. Marxhausen, of course, has been a visiting scholar for the Red Cloud field trip several times over the years.

During the noon hour, my students eat lunch at the local park in Red Cloud and then scrape elbows and bump their heads on the playground equipment, always trying ever so hard to have one more childhood experience before they have to grow up and be seniors—“*Optima dies ... prima fugit.*”

Once on the prairie in the afternoon, they are instructed to sit alone and make use of the drawing instruction they have received prior to coming to Red Cloud. They do contour line drawings of plants (concentrating up close) and contour line drawings of the horizon (concentrating in the distance). The goal is not the drawings, but rather the concentration. Because drawing requires silence, the prairie, which may be playing host to as many as a hundred or more students, becomes deathly still. The students, crouched down in their lonely spots in the grass, begin to hear the crickets and sundry other creatures restless moving over the land. The sun beats down (or the rain occasionally—it really does not matter), and the gentle (or not so gentle) breezes sway through the grass. I tell the students...
that if they follow directions, the prairie “will come to them.” They finish their experience with free-write journals, which indicate to me that the prairie indeed does come to many of them in a personal way. Having taught for a long time, I know that this experience stays with them; and for some, I am told, it is a highlight of their high school scholarly experiences.

By the time we go to Red Cloud, the literature has informed my students as to how writers like Cather have experienced the land and its inhabitants to create their own art. Now it is time for my students to respond to their personal experiences with the land in creative ways. Although not to be forgotten, we put Cather’s writings aside at this point.

My students are assigned to write poetry inspired by the abstract photographs they have taken. The photographs are now wed to their personal life experiences. Second, they must write short stories that have as their settings locations in and around the 1880s buildings they have visited, but the students must now invent their own characters to walk within those settings. The 1897 Burlington Train Depot becomes a welcoming center for characters they create. The 1879 childhood home and the 1883 St. Juliana Falconieri Catholic Church are visited by those same newly created characters. Imagination is all. Sometimes, as a result of this field trip, there are paintings, family histories, films, musical performances and/or compositions, and a myriad of other forms of artistic expression. Cather’s childhood landscape becomes an inspiration for new and creative art! Several students have won prestigious writing awards as a result of this endeavor, including the NCTE Writing Awards. Some have taken the experience as a topic for college essays to gain acceptance to Yale or Harvard or Stanford and many colleges and universities in between.

5. What do you consider a hallmark of your work as a teacher?

I have won several teaching awards, but the hallmark of my teaching, in my opinion, is that I touch the future through my students. I know that sounds trite—but it is very representative of my feelings and those of my colleagues. And literature, I believe, is one of the most profound vehicles a teacher can use to inspire new and creative ideas and responses. Recently a student, after reading Cather’s work in one of my English 11 classes, spent his senior year in my creative writing class trying to emulate the writing style of Willa Cather! And it is rewarding to know that twenty years from now a student may write to me to report on an accomplishment or come to see me and remember my classroom as if it were yesterday. Literature comes to life when students respond to their readings immediately and in astounding ways; sometimes it is years later that I learn of their epiphanies. Sometimes teachers never know about the response of a particular student, but we trust that we have made a difference and appreciate that the world could well be a different place as a result. This makes teaching a hallowed responsibility.

6. Is there any Cather character with whom your students seem to have a connection?

The story of Emil and Marie grips my students. The youth and vitality of these characters is synonymous with that of my students. They also identify with Alexandra and her trials as a woman trying to succeed in a man’s world. I think also that Lena and Jim connect to my students more than the epic character of Antonia. My students may live on the prairie, but they see themselves as city dwellers. They have difficulty seeing themselves in the roles of hardworking farmwomen like Antonia, even though they come to appreciate Antonia for what she has accomplished.

7. Your husband Ron, a fellow English instructor at Hastings High School, often attends Cather events with you. How does your shared interest in Cather enhance your work?

I am pleased that you ask about Ron. He has supported everything I have done as a teacher. When I first tried the interdisciplinary concept in the English classroom, it was not a popular notion. We also went on several field trips during those years. The absence of my students from the school for all-day outings was not always popular with other teachers—athletics, yes; academics, no! Ron never faltered in his support—even when I hesitated.

Ron has taught every course of English offered at our high school. American literature is among his favorites. He has made use of several Cather novels in his classes in past years. He knows the literature well—he can extensively recite passages from the books he teaches, and Cather’s work is no exception. When I am teaching and need inspiration, he is likely to provide it. I think he is a fantastic teacher. He specializes in working with students who have a hard time in school. They end up loving their most detested subject: English! It happens over and over again. I will be walking down the hall and some student whom I have never met will come up behind me and say, “Mrs. Kort, are you Mr. Kort’s wife?” I’ll nod in the affirmative even though the answer is obvious. What comes next is predictable: “He’s a great teacher” or “I like him” or “I used to hate English, and this year it is my favorite subject.” When we are out in the community, or anywhere for that matter, and we come upon his former students of all ages (he has taught at Hastings High School for nearly forty years), they trip over themselves to greet him. What a legacy!

When we go to International Seminars or other Cather gatherings, we have much in common to discuss. Cather events, be they in Red Cloud or Hastings or Quebec City or Virginia or Vermont, are great fun for us—we treasure the intellectual stimulation and the cultural enrichment. Ron is a great conversationalist—more so than I—and he has an infectious sense of humor. He has become so much a part of the larger Cather family—I cannot imagine his not being a part of all that takes place.

8. How do you see your role as a teacher of Cather’s work continuing to expand?

Actually, this is my last year of teaching. I have taken advantage of some early retirement incentives provided by our school and our state. I think it is the right decision for me. I have some projects I would like to attend to for which I have had little or no time while working as a full-time teacher. I say this is the right decision, but I have to admit that this decision has brought up some deep emotions within me. Teaching has been so much a part of my life—I have difficulty imagining that I will not be starting school next fall. Of course, I will continue my association with the Cather Foundation, but I suspect that it will not be the same. Ask me in a couple of years if this has been a good decision. In the meantime, I plan to work hard to make the newly restored Red Cloud Opera House a success financially—and right now that is an important consideration—and I want to insure that it becomes an important venue for quality cultural programming in the Midwest. What else? I really do not know. I “stumbled” into teaching; my hope is that I will now “stumble” into some other outlets for my interests—but nothing, I suspect, will ever match my teaching experiences.  

INTERVIEW WITH A MASTER TEACHER: BETTY KORT

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Contributors

MICHAEL HOBBS holds the rank of Associate Professor of English at Northwest Missouri State University where he teaches composition and world literature and specializes in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature. He also serves as the Coordinator of English Graduate Studies. He earned an M.A. from the University of Texas-Austin and a Ph.D. from the University of North Texas. He has authored numerous articles on Henry James, Sarah Orne Jewett, Leslie Marmon Silko, Mark Twain, Wallace Stevens, and the contemporary Texas poet Walt McDonald. He regularly attends and participates in the annual meetings of the Western Literature Association where he has presented several papers on Cather.

JOHN JACOBS, Shenandoah University Professor of English and American Studies, earned his Ph.D. at the University of Notre Dame. He served as the site director at the Seventh International Willa Cather Seminar: Willa Cather's Southern Connections held at Shenandoah University. He also directs the recently founded Willa Cather Institute at Shenandoah. Most recently he published "Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres and Death Comes for the Archbishop: The Design of Willa Cather's Cathedral."

JERRINE McCAFFREY received a B.S.E. degree in English form Northeast Missouri State University (Truman State), an M.A. in English from the University of Nebraska-Omaha, and a Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She has taught for twenty-two years, the last thirteen for the Des Moines Area Community College in Boone, Iowa. She concentrated on Plains literature while working on her doctorate, and she continues to teach and write in that area. She has written several book reviews, especially focusing on Cather and Wright Morris (her dissertation topic), and has published an article on teaching Morris. She has also given several papers at the annual meetings of the Western Literature Association.

JESSICA G. RABIN began studying Cather as an undergraduate at Drew University, where Merrill Skaggs was her mentor in Cather studies. She received her Ph.D. from Emory University and wrote her dissertation on Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Nella Larsen. Currently an Assistant Professor of English at Anne Arundel Community College, Arnold, Maryland, she teaches writing, composition, and literature courses. She has written several articles on Cather and presented papers at the last two International Cather Seminars.

Announcing an essay contest on

RUTH SUCKOW

A $200 cash prize will be offered for the best essay on the life or writings of Iowa writer Ruth Suckow, sponsored by the Ruth Suckow Memorial Association.

H.L. Mencken hailed Suckow as one of America’s greatest writers, and she has been called Iowa’s Willa Cather. This contest is designed to encourage new appreciation of Suckow’s work.

Essays, no more than 15 typed and double-spaced pages, must be postmarked by Aug. 1 and send to

Dr. Barbara Lounsberry
2120 Tremont Street
Cedar Falls, IA 50613

Include a $3 contest submission fee, made out to the Ruth Suckow Memorial Association.
“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.”

from Willa Cather’s High School Commencement Address, 1890, in the Red Cloud Opera House

Taking Care Campaign

The 1885 Red Cloud Opera House, which had such an influence on the young Willa Cather, is again a thriving center of culture! A major restoration and preservation effort has been completed, and this historic structure now serves as the headquarters of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. The art gallery and auditorium provide educational and entertainment opportunities for the people of Red Cloud as well as the thousands who visit Red Cloud each year to learn more about Willa Cather.

But the work is not done. The WCPM has launched the Taking Care Campaign to raise $1.1 million endowment to:

- preserve and expand the Cather Archives
- provide new programming opportunities
- ensure professional management of the facility

Currently, the WCPM seeks to raise funds to apply toward a three-to-one matching grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. These funds must be raised soon!

To lend your support, send your contribution today. Checks are payable to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. Please mark your donation for the “NEH challenge grant.”

Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation
413 North Webster Street
Red Cloud, NE 68970
(402) 746-2653

As in the original layout of the Opera House, a wide stairway leads to the second floor auditorium.

E-mail wcpm@gpcom.org or visit www.willacather.org