Up in Willa’s Room
By Mellanee Kvasnicka

From her narrow upstairs window, she looked out across narrow streets and narrow people. Under bare rafters she read Latin and heard oceans roar in her seashell. She must have cried there too and nursed her pinched and broken heart and mourned the gauntness of her life. But somehow, from the slender upstairs window, she also saw the ceaseless prairie stretching to the sky, the river’s slow meandering to the sea. She heard the wind chant tunelessly and felt the sting of winter’s sleet against her good broad face. She knew the prairie people. And even then she must have guessed that her narrow window was a lookout on the world.
ABOUT THE COVER

Willa Cather’s room, the one she decorated as a teenager, is located in a wing of the attic in the house at Third and Cedar. The room has been recreated in the Cather house in Red Cloud and it, along with the house, is open to visitors. Inspired by a photograph of the room by Beverly J. Cooper, artist Brad Elliott, a senior art major at Northwest Missouri State University, captures its essence and centers on the window where Cather as a youth enjoyed the moon and its beams dancing across the floor. Elliott’s sketch provides an ideal accompaniment to Mellanee Kvasnicka’s poem, which expresses Cather’s feelings for the room.
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Predicting Willa Cather:

Using “Peter” and “The Opinions, Tastes, and Fancies of Wm. Cather, M.D.” as Introduction

BY EVELYN I. FUNDA AND SUSAN ANDERSEN

PREFACE BY EVELYN

Every few years I am assigned to teach a university course called American Authors, a course designed to give students the experience of focusing on a single author’s oeuvre. This year accompanying me as a teaching intern and co-teacher was graduate student Susan Andersen, who has written on Cather in her thesis and has taken a number of courses from me, both as graduate and undergraduate, including an earlier semester of this course itself.

Susan and I know the material of Cather’s life, her fiction, and the criticism about Cather well enough, but the question becomes how do we foster a classroom situation in which students can discover Cather and come to her as fresh and unimpeached as Cather had hoped they would when she said, “I didn’t want to be ‘assigned reading’ for university classes, a duty, a target for information vampires. . . . The sincerity of feeling that is possible between a writer and a reader is one of the finest things I know,” and “I think young people should be allowed to discover for themselves what they like. For young people, half the pleasure of reading new books is in finding them out for themselves. . . . If [a reader] finds a really good [book] out for himself, it counts with him for a great deal more than if he had been told he must read it” (In Person 111-12). While we cannot ignore the necessity of assigned readings in our university class, the challenge of such a course is how to set the tone that allows students to feel they are discovering Cather for themselves. So before I get out my numerous Cather slides, before I give a lecture outlining Cather’s biography, we hand out two of Cather’s earliest “writings”—her first short story published when she was eighteen and an even earlier survey, of sorts, dated 1888 in which Cather documented her “opinions, tastes, and fancies.” At this point, when students know little or nothing about Cather, we ask them to examine these documents and make predictions about what kind of a writer this young Willa Cather will become, make guesses, deduce, draw conclusions about how this writer will evolve from a teenager to a preeminent American writer. Using this inductive, Socratic method, we cooperatively model during our discussion how to closely and analytically read a text and draw conclusions about it. As an added advantage, it also means that students are expected to voice their opinions right from the start. They must become actively involved in interpreting valuable materials during day one.

The “survey,” as I always call it, and the short story together give early indication of Cather’s promise as a writer, demonstrate her emerging interests and concerns, offer an opportunity to discuss her methods, and show Cather experimenting with what will be key themes and stylistic approaches that characterize her entire career. Taken together, they are a miniature of Cather’s career as a whole, and thus serve as an effective introduction to her life and works.

What follows here is a narrative about how we used these materials during the first two class meetings, with Susan focusing on the survey and with me discussing “Peter.” While in this case these documents introduced a single author we were studying for an entire semester, this same technique—using one or both of these documents—could be used to introduce a smaller unit on Cather’s works or even a single work, such as often taught novels like My Ántonia or A Lost Lady, or the short story “Neighbour Rosicky.”

PART I: “THE OPINIONS, TASTES, AND FANCIES OF WM. CATHER, M.D.” BY SUSAN

“All my stories have been written,” said Willa Cather, “with material that was gathered—no, God save us! not gathered but absorbed—before I was fifteen years old” (In Person 43). Thus, it seems “The Opinions, Tastes and Fancies of Wm. Cather, M.D.,” a survey written in a friend’s album by a fifteen-year-old Cather, becomes especially insightful.

Friendship and autograph albums were extremely popular in the mid-nineteenth century as a way for girls and women to keep mementos of their own histories and those of their dear friends and loved ones. “Fancies” surveys were a variance on the extreme Victorian sentimentality and handwritten flourishes of these keepsake books, which show a shift to more formalized versions of ephemera in the late 1870s (Ockenga 44). This survey is particularly noteworthy not only as a fascinating cultural document of young women in 1888, but also because it anticipates recurring themes in Cather’s later writings and reveals her as a remarkable young woman with a strong sense of style, zest, and wit. Furthermore, it expands the notions of text—this is not the typical kind of text that students read in a literature course, but it is one that lends itself to the type of close readings we do in these classes. Using “The Opinions, Tastes and Fancies of Wm. Cather, M.D.” in the classroom is an excellent introduction to Cather, allowing students to participate in a highly student-centered activity as they discover the traits and interests of a young Cather that will further illuminate their reading as they progress throughout the semester. The survey serves as a thoughtful preface to many of Cather’s novels, particularly the autobiographical The Song of the Lark, My Ántonia, and A Lost Lady.

On the first day of class, we give our students a blank copy of “The Opinions, Tastes and Fancies of ________” and ask them to complete it. We encourage them to imagine themselves at age fifteen. What were they thinking about in their teen years? How
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The trait I most admire in woman:</th>
<th>Thinking</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>The trait I most admire in man:</td>
<td>An Original mind</td>
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<tr>
<td>The trait I most detest in each:</td>
<td>Dullishness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fault for which I have the most tolerance in another person:</td>
<td>Passion</td>
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<tr>
<td>That for which I have the least:</td>
<td>Lack of &quot;heart&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>The qualifications or accomplishments I most desire in a matrimonial partner:</td>
<td>Beautiful, kind &amp; constant in speech &amp; in action</td>
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<tr>
<td>My idea of perfect happiness:</td>
<td>Contemplating solitude</td>
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<tr>
<td>My idea of real misery:</td>
<td>Don't fancy work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is always some one person, or thing, for which we have an attachment exceeding all other entertainments in intensity. With me it is for:</td>
<td>Walking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Of the various modes of travelling, I prefer:</td>
<td>Rome</td>
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<tr>
<td>If privileged to make a journey, the single place or locality, I would prefer to visit, alone of all others, would be:</td>
<td>A cultivated Southman</td>
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<td>As a travelling companion, I would most highly appreciate:</td>
<td>Bafta &amp; boat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sheikhston, or as a solitary island, I would most desire:</td>
<td>A good looking woman</td>
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<tr>
<td>The greatest wonder of the world, according to my estimation, is:</td>
<td>Madame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As an inventor, I think the greatest service towards the world's progress has been rendered by:</td>
<td>Hugh Burtlee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of the many referents at present under consideration, I must sincerely and particularly advocate:</td>
<td>Drunk &amp; Skirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The greatest folly of the Nineteenth Century, in my opinion, is:</td>
<td>Enjoy, let others say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My motto:</td>
<td>Enjoy, let others say.</td>
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**The Opinions, Tastes and Fancies of—**

**Ella H. Red Cloud**

*Red Cloud* Oct 16 1915

Autographically expressed (1915)

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**My Favorite:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Eye Green</th>
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<tr>
<td>Flower</td>
<td>Cattleya</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book</td>
<td>Shakespeare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal</td>
<td>Cat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Season</td>
<td>Spring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scenery</td>
<td>The Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Sorrowful Baby</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amusement</td>
<td>Trips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation during a Summer's Vacation</td>
<td>Sleeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Pet Hobby</td>
<td>Smokes &amp; Shakespeare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Chief Ambition in Life</td>
<td>To learn in D.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Opinions, Tastes and Fancies of

Autobiographically expressed (date) ____________________________________________

My Favorite:

Color: ___________________________ Poet or Poetess: __________________________

Flower: __________________________ Prose Writer: __________________________

Book: ___________________________ Composer: __________________________

Animal: __________________________ Character in History: ___________________

Season: __________________________ Character in Romance: __________________

Scenery: _________________________________________________________________

Music: _________________________________________________________________

Amusement: ______________________________________________________________

Occupation during a Summer’s vacation: ______________________________________

My Pet Hobby: __________________________________________________________

My Chief Ambition in Life: ________________________________________________

The trait I most admire in woman: __________________________________________

The trait I most admire in man: ____________________________________________

The trait I most detest in each: _____________________________________________

The fault for which I have the most tolerance in another person: __________________

That for which I have the least: ____________________________________________

The qualifications or accomplishment I most desire in a matrimonial partner: ________

My idea of perfect happiness: ______________________________________________

There is always some one person, or thing, for which we have an attachment exceeding all
other endearments in intensity. With me, it is: __________________________________

Of the various modes of travelling, I prefer: __________________________________

If privileged to make the journey, the single place or locality I would prefer to visit, above all others, would be: ______________________________

As a travelling companion, I would most highly appreciate: ______________________

Shipwrecked on a desolate island, I would most desire: _________________________

The greatest wonder of the world, according to my estimation, is: ________________

As an inventor, I think the greatest service towards the world’s progress has been rendered by: ________________________________

Of the many reforms at present under consideration, I most sincerely and particularly advocate: ________________________________

The greatest folly of the Nineteenth Century, in my opinion, is: ____________________

My motto: __________________________________________________________________
would they respond to this survey as a fifteen-year old? When we ask for responses, the prompt “Occupation during a summer vacation” might be met with such answers as “working at Burger King” or “babysitting.” (Some of our students were very progressive at fifteen. When asked “Of the many reforms at present under consideration, I most sincerely and particularly admire,” a student answered “gay and lesbian rights.”) Then we give the students Cather’s completed survey. A buzz stirs through the room right away, as students begin working out Cather’s responses.

After deciphering Cather’s sometimes-illegible handwriting for our students, we ask them what this survey reveals about Cather’s character. What do they foresee from the author we will be studying? Can they identify any trends, themes, or preoccupations? What was Cather thinking about at age fifteen that led her to publish her first short story “Peter” at age eighteen? Initially, our students’ answers aren’t very focused.

They marvel at Cather’s precociousness, observing her interest in and knowledge of European culture from her answers of Rome as a favorite place to visit, Tennyson as a favorite poet, Beethoven as her favorite composer, “Bonapart” [sic] as a favorite character in history, “Sheakespeare” [sic] as a favorite book (Cather was a notoriously bad speller), and the obscure “Tricotrin” as a character in romance. (Tricotrin is the protagonist of a sentimental Victorian novel most likely unfamiliar to students and teachers alike—more on that, though, in a moment.) Students point out the lyrical quality of her prose: not just “green” but “Sea Green,” and the lovely phrases: “When the Roses come again,” and “The ‘green shores’ of Crooked Creek” (a reference to the nearby creek in Red Cloud); the creativity of her answers: “Vivisection,” “amputating limbs”; and the breadth of her knowledge at age fifteen: from Cadmus to Tennyson to Emerson.

Students observe Cather’s sense of humor, noting that her favorite amusement is “Vivisection” and her occupation during a summer’s vacation is “Slicing Toads.” They observe the unlikely pairing of “Snakes and Sheakespeare” as a hobby, and the incongruity of Cather’s claim that she has the least tolerance for “Lack of nerve,” but most desires “Lamb Like meekness” in a matrimonial partner.

Soon, we begin to see a shift as students begin piecing together the puzzle. Rather than seeing Cather’s responses to the survey as discrete details, they begin to view them as parts of a greater whole; they make connections in their predictions of Cather. Students note Cather’s passion and her desire to go against expectations and conventions. They note her creative sarcasm, her desire to make fun of the assignment and not take it too seriously, and her willingness and effort to answer with the unique, unexpected, or even shocking. Cather’s idea of the greatest wonder in the world, “a good looking woman,” at once mocks women’s vanity and avoids the predictable response like the Great Pyramids of Egypt or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Answers like “amputating limbs” as her idea of perfect happiness, “Cauliflower” as her favorite flower, and “A Squalling Baby” as her favorite music certainly avoid the prosaic clichés of most fifteen-year-olds.

The creativity of her answers anticipates Cather as an innovator, an original, a groundbreaking “pioneer” in literature with her novels set outside of the East Coast drawing rooms, “in Nebraska, of all places! As everyone knows,” Cather states later, “Nebraska is distinctly déclassé as a literary background” (“My First” 94). While her settings and characters are unconventional, she often raises the expectations of a conventional story with a fairy tale ending—and then subverts our expectations. My Antonia does not end with the marriage of Antonia and Jim, much to the surprise and disappointment of some of our students. The Song of the Lark ends with a marriage that seems more like an afterthought: Cather’s revised edition reads, “When Thea dined in her own room, her husband went down to dinner with Tillie”; the reader is forced to read back to the previous sentence to find out that “her husband” is Fred Ottenburg, ironically characterized earlier as “the beer prince” (402). This pattern continues in other works.

Cather’s literature works precisely against the kind of sentimental fiction Cather reportedly admired at age fifteen. Tricotrin (1869) is a novel written by Ouida (pen name of Maria Louisa De La Rama), an Englishwoman writing fanciful, idealized, and often ostentatious Victorian romances full of European flavor and conventional depictions of femininity. At fifteen, Cather seems to admire this sentimental fiction, but she later challenges its conventions. With its highly detailed descriptions and plot twists, an Ouida novel would be exactly what Cather complains about when she later likens novels that are “manufactured to entertain” to “a cheap soap or a cheap perfume, or cheap furniture” (“Novel” 44). What she would advocate in her 1923 essay, “The Novel Deméublé,” (that is, the novel defurnished or unfurnished) becomes a fundamental tenet of her writing and an approach to literature entirely different from the novels of Ouida. There, Cather calls for the presentation of “scene by suggestion rather than by enumeration [because] the higher processes of art are all processes of simplification” (408). She continues, “Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it ... that gives high quality to the novel” (50).

Typically, it is a few minutes into the activity before students even notice Cather’s signature at the top of the page, which opens a discussion of the Wm. Cather, M.D. period, when Cather cut her hair in a boyishly short style, wore boys’ clothing, and wanted to be a doctor. We show photographs of Cather during this stage, noting her supportive mother who, despite her own adherence to Southern gentility and conventions of femininity, willingly sent her daughter off to the photographers dressed as a boy.

The discussion of Cather posing as a boy is an opportune time to talk about society’s expectations of women during the late nineteenth century. What were women expected to look like at this time? Photographs of women dressed in corsets and bustles, conventional ways for women to express femininity, can help students understand why Cather...
advocated the reformation of “Huge Bustles” for women. This adolescent Cather who, if shipwrecked on a desert island would most desire “Pants and Coat” and claims the greatest folly of the nineteenth century is “Dresses and Skirts,” would certainly never wear huge bustles, which were larger than ever during this time period. Bustles had a resurgence in the 1870s and another in the 1880s; in the mid-1880s, bustles were more exaggerated than ever, creating a backend that extended several feet horizontally. Often the bustle was a straw- or down-filled cushion sewn into the skirt along with steel half hoops (Thomas). These were bizarre exaggerations of bosom and derrière—the hyperbolic hourglass figure that characterized a woman’s silhouette. Cather’s style of dress during her teenage years more closely anticipates the “New Woman” fashion of 1890-1920, which draws upon the tailored lines of men’s fashion. Of interest here as well is the trait Cather detests most in a man: “dudeishness,” a form of the slang word “dude,” which came into vogue in New York in 1883. The term denotes “a name given in ridicule to a man affecting an exaggerated fastidiousness in dress, speech, and deportment, and very particular about what is aesthetically ‘good form’; hence, extended to an exquisite, a dandy, a swell . . .” (“Dude”). Cather mocks the exaggerated hourglass figure provided by the huge bustles, and she “detests” the “exaggerated fastidiousness” of dudes and dandies, preferring the much simplified and practical “Pants and Coat” for herself and probably for men as well.

Again in these instances, we see the defiance of Cather at fifteen: the defiance in her dress, the lack of conventionality in her expression of gender, the rebellion against the standards for women, and the seeming comfort and case in her lack of conformity, all of which translate into many of her women characters who are comfortable in their own unconventional sexuality as they challenge female stereotypes: Marian Forrester in A Lost Lady, Eden Bower in “Coming Aphrodite,” Antonia in My Ántonia, and farmer Alexandra Bergson in O Pioneers!, whose real lover is the land, not a man.

The discussion of the Wm. Cather, M.D., period deepens as students observe her further fascination with science. Cather said in later years, “But I didn’t want to be an author. I wanted to be a surgeon!” (Bennett 109). Perhaps her interest in medicine started with her relationship with the doctors in her community of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Dr. G. E. McKeeby saved her mother from death-bed illness twice. (Cather models Dr. Archie in The Song of the Lark on Dr. McKeeby.) Cather worked with Dr. Cook in the Red Cloud pharmacy and made house calls with Dr. Damerell, once even giving chloroform when a boy’s leg had to be amputated (Bennett 114).

Cather claims that her favorite amusement is “Vivisection,” the performance of medical experiments and surgery on living animals for the furthering of scientific research. Indeed, Cather had many opportunities to perform medical experiments throughout her childhood and into college. According to Bennett, she sliced toads to explore their circulatory systems and dissected a cat with a college friend—could her choice to put “Cat” in quotes be a reference to a specimen for dissection? (118). Cather’s interest in dissecting creatures and learning about intricate details of anatomy is revealed in her work: her passion for medicine translates into a writer interested in “dissecting” characters, rather than bodies. In A Lost Lady, not only does she include a literal scene of Ivy Peters using dissecting tools to slit the woodpecker’s eye, Cather reveals fragments of Marian Forrester, as seen through the eyes of Niel Herbert, the Blum brothers, and Ed Eliot. Cather seems to do “Vivisection” on Marian, opening up certain areas of the character to show detail—disembodied fragments of the character—but as readers, we are “lost” to the character as a whole. We only see Marian in dissected bits and pieces. Much like a medical doctor, Cather is keenly observant of revealing details that suggest a diagnosis of her characters—but hers is a spiritual diagnosis rather than a physical one.

Cather was as perceptive of the environment and the natural world as she was of character. She most admired Emerson as a prose writer, and Emerson’s influence is seen in her literature. Think of this quote from “Nature”: “I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (24) and compare Jim Burden’s transcendence into a feeling of oneness with the earth in My Ántonia as he leans his back against a pumpkin and thinks about the world around him: “I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more...
At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great” (14). And hear the further echoes of Emerson during Thea Kronborg's time of renewal in the ancient cliff dwellings of the Southwest where “she could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a colour, like the bright lizards that darted about on the hot stones outside her door; or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas” (Song 259).

Cather's interest in the natural world continues with her claim that Cadmus rendered the “greatest service towards the world’s progress.” Cadmus is considered by some scholars to be an intellectual during the beginning of the literary glory period of Greek philosophers and historians (about 550 BC). Cadmus, whose name can mean order and civilization, is credited with being a founder of cities, the inventor of agriculture, and the Phoenician immigrant who invented the written alphabet. In Greek legend, Cadmus is instructed to build a city in a new frontier through planting a slain dragon's teeth in the soil. The race of fierce men who spring up from the ground assist him in building the citadel of Thebes.

Certainly, Cadmus is influential to Cather as an inventor of the written alphabet, but I find it particularly interesting that he is a scholar during the beginning of the literary glory period of Greek philosophers and historians. This also provides an opportunity to tell students that Cather is a woman who had said, in her dealings with immigrant homesteaders in Nebraska, “I always felt as if every word they said to me counted for twenty” (In Person 10). She also said, in an early interview, that “No one without a good ear can write good fiction…. It is an essential to good writing to be sensitive to the beauty of language and speech, and to be able to catch the tone, phrase, length of syllables, enunciation, etc., of persons of all types that cross a writer's path” (In Person 14). Emphasizing this point in a number of her early interviews, Cather felt it was important to record the unique language of a vernacular culture, a culture, unlike the high society of contemporary Edith Wharton, that was based in ordinary language of the working class.

As an extension of this, Cather expresses her sympathies for immigrant cultures that will hold true throughout her fiction, which often focuses on rural culture and immigrant homesteaders who had to work to transform—like Cather the Virginia transplant herself—a foreign land into a home.

Cather is best known for her prairie fiction, and when this class begins, if students know anything at all about Cather, it is likely to be that she wrote novels celebrating the early western experience, but students need to understand that her vision of the prairies and the West

Peter did not care what people said.
He did not like the country, nor the people, least of all he liked the plowing.

— “Peter”
as a whole was more complicated than we see at first blush. When she moved to Nebraska at age nine, she felt that the country was “as bare as a piece of sheet iron” and that going there had been “a kind of erasure of personality” (In Person 10) until “the country and I had it out together and by the end of the first autumn, that shaggy grass country had gripped me with a passion I have never been able to shake. It has been the happiness and the curse of my life” (In Person 32). In spite of her suggestion of a resolution, the feelings of ambivalence continued. In 1896, writing from Red Cloud, Nebraska, she headed a letter to a friend “Siberia” (Woodress 104) Cather told her friend Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant that in Pittsburgh she would get “wildly homesick for the West,” would return to Nebraska for a visit, and then “flee” back to Pittsburgh “for fear of dying in a cornfield” (49).

The story “Peter,” then, which portrays the “dreariest part of southwestern Nebraska” where the cold winter landscape is indifferent to human survival (541), demonstrates Cather’s earlier ambivalence about the West that characterizes several of Cather’s short stories, particularly those that appear in the 1905 collection The Troll Garden. In stories like “A Wagner Matinee” and “A Sculptor’s Funeral,” as well as in the later novel The Song of the Lark, Cather portrays small western communities as provincial, close-minded, materialistic and unsympathetic to artistic souls. As a whole, the West of Cather’s fiction, notably Death Comes for the Archbishop and The Professor’s House, is portrayed as contested space, raising issues of who belongs there, who has the right to cultivate the land, claim its relics, reshape it, and make it into a home.

Cather would not only use these thematic issues central to “Peter” in her later work, she also would directly reuse elements of the story’s plot in My Antonia, and the related story “Neighbour Rosicky.” This provides an opportunity in the classroom to discuss how Cather drew upon real lives to inspire her fiction. Peter and Mr. Shimerda of My Antonia are fictional portrayals of Frank Sadilek, a Bohemian immigrant who had committed suicide before Cather moved to Nebraska, and Anton Rosicky is based on John Pavelka, the man who married Frank Sadilek’s daughter, Annie. Using real people as prototypes—Lyra Garber as Marian Forrester and Archbishop Lamy for Father Jean Latour, for instance—was a method she would use throughout her career as she drew upon the lives of acquaintances as well as historical figures.

Even while “Peter” demonstrates Cather’s deep understanding of the Nebraska homesteader experience, the story also references a much broader world outside of Nebraska, one that inspired the young Cather to think about art and the wider world.

As Peter reminisces about his career in Prague, Cather demonstrates her knowledge of several of the most important performers of the nineteenth century; musicians Franz Liszt and Frédéric Chopin (both known for musical innovations and drilling upon the folk music and histories of their native lands) and actresses Rachel (the most eminent French tragedienne of the first half of the nineteenth century) and Sarah Bernhardt, who is the “French woman” Peter remembers but cannot name. Known for her significant stage innovations and called the “Divine Sarah,” Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) was often compared to Rachel. Just three months before Cather’s “Peter” would be published, the young writer traveled to Omaha to see Bernhardt play in Sardou’s La Tosca. According to the Omaha Daily Bee, two-thousand people attended, including the governor and Nebraska’s elite, and while most of the audience could not understand a line of Bernhardt’s French dialogue, they nevertheless, like Peter himself, were held under … the sway” of her “magnetic personality.” The Bee described Bernhardt as “a human tigress,” a “transcendent genius,” and “an artiste of incomparable powers playing[ing] the gamut of human emotions from tenderest love to fiercest revenge.” In describing the end of Act II of La Tosca in which Floria Tosca, an opera singer, murders the man who has tortured her lover and has vowed to possess her, Cather writes, in “Peter”: “The last night she played a play in which a man touched her arm, and she stabbed him. As Peter sat among the smoking gas jets down below the footlights with his fiddle on his knee, and looked up at her, he thought he would like to die too, if he could touch her arm once, and have her stab him so” (542).

When Cather first saw Bernhardt in La Tosca, the actress was in mid-career, at the height of her confidence and reputation. In La Tosca, the actress had found such huge and lasting success that it was often said that the amount of electricity generated in her portrayal would light up the streets of London (Emboden 79), and it is such passion—that “fault” for which Cather had the most tolerance—that Cather notes in the actress again and again in her early writings. The story’s reference to Bernhardt offers an opportunity to introduce Cather’s early role during her university years as a theatre critic who was well-respected regionally as a tough and uncompromising critic of performance art. Consistently associating Bernhardt’s art with fire, Cather’s writing referred to Bernhardt often throughout her career, characterizing her as a “fiery flame-like beauty” (KA 126). Her Tosca, Cather said, had “a face of flame that is now all love, now all jealousy,
now all hate" (WP 426). And her voice had “that subtle and seductive quality... with which a snake charmer might have soothed his serpents to sleep, or a Persian fire worshipper sung his chant to the sun” (WP 816). Cather’s descriptions of Bernhardt focused on the personal effects of her art, which “leaps up and strikes you between the eyes, makes you hold your breath and tremble” (WP 244). This direct emotional response was what Cather would strive to achieve in her own writing and what she had suggested when she had written that “The sincerity of feeling that is possible between a writer and a reader is one of the finest things I know.”

Indicated in this early story, then, is Cather’s fascination with performance art and with how the artist manages to create a meaningful and emotional experience for the audience, issues that would become central to several of the early short stories, to her most autobiographical novel, The Song of the Lark, and to her later stage novel, Lucy Gayheart.

For me, though, as a reader of Cather’s works, what is more striking about this story than anything else is Cather’s sophisticated experimentations with reader sympathy. She manages to shift reader sympathy dramatically within the short span of three pages, even within one paragraph—so that our reading of the characters, like Bernhardt’s own face, “changed so, it was never twice the same” (“Peter” 542). At the same time, she questions cultural notions of how we determine standards of success.

A conflict of sympathies is evident right from the start of “Peter” when Cather pits Antone’s heartless threat to sell Peter’s fiddle, his failure to observe the sanctity of the Sabbath, and his disregard for his father suffering in the cold, against Peter’s characterization as an unrealistic fool—“The very crows laugh at thee when thou art trying to play” (541)—and as a lazy, complaining dreamer who cannot command the respect of his own son. But Cather further complicates this clash of sympathies when she introduces the perspective of the townspeople who believe Antone “was a likely youth, and would do well,” even though “That he was mean and untrustworthy every one knew, but that made little difference. His corn was better tended than any in the country, and his wheat always yielded more than other men’s” (541). Peter, on the other hand, is seen by the public as an utter failure: no one, Cather writes, “had ... a good word to say for him. He drank whenever he could get out of Antone’s sight long enough to pawn his hat or coat for whisky.... He was a lazy, absent-mind old fellow, who liked to fiddle better than to plow.... [P]eople said that Peter was worthless, and was a great drag on Antone, his son, who never drank, and was a much better man than his father had ever been” (541-542).

With this addition of public opinion, Cather inserts key thematic elements of this story (and of much of her later fiction): how do we as individuals, as communities, as nations, define success, how do we judge who is the “better man” in a materialistic world where a healthy bank account or a bumper crop in the field are what draw public admiration. Is there, then, a way to honor artistic passion, loyalty, magnanimity, and compassion as forms of success. Certainly, Cather’s 1932 story, “Neighbour Rosicky,” one of her last published works of short fiction, returned to this very conflict directly when Cather wrote:

Sometimes the Doctor heard the gossipers in the drug-store wondering why Rosicky didn’t get on faster. He was industrious, and so were his boys, but they were rather free and easy, weren’t pushers, and they didn’t always show good judgment. They were comfortable, they were out of debt, but they didn’t get much ahead. Maybe, Doctor Burleigh reflected, people as generous and warm-hearted and affectionate as the Rosickys never got ahead much; maybe you couldn’t enjoy your life and put it into the bank, too. (236)

In “Peter,” though, Cather already begins to undercut public opinion of Peter as lazy, absent-minded, worthless, all within the span of a single paragraph. The sixth paragraph of the story, and the longest, begins with the assertion that no one “had ... a good word to say for him” and ends with a similar sentiment that he was a “foolish fellow.” However, what lies in between is a remarkable shift. Cather offers new information that Peter had once indeed been a “success,” of a different sort. He had been a young protégé in the great Prague theatre orchestra who was admired by the musical director for the subtle genius of his interpretation—“he had a touch indeed,” says Herr Mikilsdoff (542)—and who rubbed elbows with the musical and theatrical greats of his time. That, of course, was all before a “stroke of paralysis” made “his bowing ... uncertain” (542). It is details like these that cause us to challenge our first assumptions about Peter, about how we formed those assumptions, about success itself, and to begin to sympathize with a broken man.

And as if that weren’t dramatic shift enough, Cather continues in that same paragraph, giving us intimate glimpses into Peter’s very heart as he watches Sarah Bernhardt perform in the La Tosca murder scene and meditates on the nuances of her artistic passion: “[S]he must be talking the music of Chopin. And her voice, he thought he
should know that in the other world” (542). He is moved by the experience so profoundly that he would willingly “like to die too, if he could touch her arm once, and have her stab him so” (542). After reading the survey, students know that Cather is willing to make allowances for anyone with such deep fervor and intensity for art and life. When the paragraph concludes with the statement that “Even in those days he was a foolish fellow, who cared for nothing but music and pretty faces” (542), potential contempt for Peter has been effectively transformed into forbearance and compassion, so much so that when Peter thinks again how Antone “is a better man than I” (a line repeated yet again in the final line of the story), we as readers shudder, remembering rather Antone’s emotional, spiritual, and financial stinginess. We recall how Peter anticipates Antone’s anger for putting more corn cobs on a dying fire, or how he knows “Not one kreutzer will Antone pay them to pray for my soul” (543). In the last line Cather offers us the less pejorative term of “thrift” for Antone—a term suggesting thoughtful financial management—, yet she imbeds this word in the line that demonstrates one penultimate cruelty: “Before the funeral Antone carried to town the fiddle bow which Peter had forgotten to break. Antone was very thrifty, and a better man than his father had been” (543).

“Peter,” then, demonstrates a remarkable sophistication of prose style, especially for such a young writer. As students in our class throughout the course of the semester, these are precisely the kinds of experiments with reader sympathy Cather continues to carry out in later fiction: in “A Sculptor’s Funeral” Cather challenges cultural notions of success and asks who has the right to judge, who has the accurate appraisal of Harvey Merrick and his accomplishments; in The Song of the Lark Thea becomes an increasingly distanced character as she finds greater success on the other side of the footlights; and in A Lost Lady even as we begin to question Marian Forrester’s virtues we must acknowledge the biased sources of our information. With “Peter” and the survey as foundation, our students are prepared to consider these issues more fully.

NOTES
1 “Peter” is available in Willa Cather, Collected Short Fiction, edited by Mildred Bennett, 541-543, and the survey was originally published in The World of Willa Cather; also by Mildred Bennett.

2 One of the most cogent discussions of Cather’s adolescent clothing choices appears in Cynthia Griffin Wolff’s “Dressing for the Part: [What’s] the Matter with Clothes” in Willa Cather’s Southern Connections, New Essays on Cather and the South, edited by Ann Romines. Wolff deftly places Cather’s cross-dressing in a cultural context of post-bellum South and of famous actresses assuming male roles.

3 Franz Liszt (1811-1886) was a Hungarian composer, pianist and teacher. Dedicated to progress in music, he was an important leader in the Romantic movement in music. He was considered the greatest piano virtuoso of his time, a man who had a captivating concert presence, and the scene when Liszt throws lilies up to Countess Marie D’Agoult shows that Cather knew the countess was Liszt’s lover. Although she was married to a French cavalry officer, D’Agoult led a relatively independent life outside of Paris. D’Agoult was with Liszt for 12 years between 1832-1844, during which time she bore Liszt three children. Frédéric Chopin (1810-1848), Polish composer and pianist, wrote chiefly for the solo piano. Like Liszt, he was a Romantic and a skilled performer known for technical virtuosity. His compositions were especially known to have been inspired artistically by the struggles of his native Poland. Rachel, professional name of Elisa Félix (1820-1858), went from being a child begging on the streets of Paris to the most eminent French tragedienne of the first half of the nineteenth century. She was known for magnetic stage presence and the intensity of her characters.

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Action without Reaction:
Cather’s Use of Violence as a Device for Revealing Character

BY MARGARET DOANE

Violence, shocking and memorable, pervades Willa Cather’s novels. Readers are horrified when Ivy Peters slits the woodpecker’s eyes, the bride and groom are thrown to the wolves, the tramp drowns in Moonstone’s water tank, Emil and Marie are murdered, or James Mockford pulls Clement Sebastian to his death. These scenes, frequently gruesome as well as violent, jar readers. Main characters, however, rarely experience violence in ways readers do: Cather uses the dissonance between readers’ reactions and characters’ inaction as a major vehicle to reveal character. While children react appropriately to violence, adult main characters gain little or nothing from their experiences with violence in Cather’s novels. Either they think of it not at all, or it emphasizes previous personality traits, or a moment of insight is followed by a reinforcement of previous views. Merrill Skaggs comments on details that are “small and revelatory” (52); the scenes of violence are written large in the emotional fabric of the novels but rarely are revelatory to characters. Perhaps the costs of realizing the meanings of violence are simply too high: two characters who do follow insight with action are rewarded, if indirectly, with death. Only one character who is threatened with violence and reacts to it remains safe. Perhaps not surprisingly given the violence that permeates contemporary life, modern-day students are curious about the extent of Cather’s portrayals of violence and their meanings.

Psychologists identify a number of healthy ways people respond to violence, but—apart from children—only one character reacts in a healthy way. Psychologists say that empathy with the victim, anger at the act, and attempts to rectify the wrong are appropriate reactions to violence, as is a period of withdrawal or contemplation of the meaning of the act or of life itself. Violence, or even the threat of violence, is often a permanent determiner of outlook and attitude.1 While readers are not expected to have studied the psychology of violence in order to read Cather’s books, the statements of psychologists closely parallel common beliefs about reactions to violence: readers are shocked and horrified by the violent events in the novels and are left wondering why the characters are not shocked and horrified as well. Cather generally does not comment on their lack of reaction, but “lead[s] us, by her silences as well as by her words, to question” (Stout 70) the lack of an appropriate response, or frequently the lack of any response at all. The starkness and horror of the violence is “displayed against contextual vacancy” (71). Although most of Cather’s characters do not react to violence, Cather juxtaposes the violent act and the lack of reaction as a major way of revealing character.

Children in Cather react when confronted by violence. After Ivy Peters has slit the woodpecker’s eyes, Niel Herbert climbs a tree to rescue the bird. While he is ineffective in his rescue in that he falls out of the tree and breaks his arm, he does act. Jim Burden, to his credit, is strongly affected by the death of Mr. Shimerda and believes the dead man’s spirit spends the afternoon in the Burdens’ kitchen, a cozy place (66). Before he learned who had died, Jim greeted the commotion of the unknown tragedy by saying he “looked forward to any new crisis with delight.... Perhaps the barn had burned; perhaps the cattle had frozen to death; perhaps a neighbor was lost in the storm” (62). This childlike reaction is replaced by genuine sensitivity, and he knows that Mr. Shimerda “had only been so unhappy that he could not live any longer” (67). Jim grows in feeling from this violent tragedy. Claude Wheeler also has definite reactions to violence when he is a boy. When his father cruelly cuts down his mother’s beloved cherry tree, Claude goes into a rage and “with one scream ... became a little demon.” He threw away his tin pail, [and] jumped about howling and kicking, ... choking with rage and hate” for his father, proclaiming him a ... damn fool, damn fool” (26). Claude reacts to this senseless and cruel act, Niel attempts a rescue, and Jim gains sensitivity from a tragic situation. Reactions and actions as a response to violence seem possible when Cather’s characters are children.

As characters move towards adulthood, they are less likely to react directly to a violent situation. Claude Wheeler romanticizes Joan of Arc and views her as “a living figure in his mind,” appearing as a “luminous cloud, like dust, with soldiers in it ... the banner with lilies ... a great church ... cities with walls” (56). He writes a college thesis on Joan of Arc and is completely absorbed by her, yet never gives any thought to her death by fire. While her horrible demise occurs immediately to every reader, Claude considers it not at all, and instead “Joan of Arc ... hovers over the novel” (Woodress 331), romanticized. When Wick Cutter attacks Jim, believing him to be Antonia, Jim “runs home bleeding from the fight and [is] utterly repelled by his experience” (Woodress 299). Janis Stout notes that “the savagery of Jim’s rejection of Antonia for her role as unwitting victim of another’s depravity ... is shocking” (76). Readers, pleased with Jim’s response to Mr. Shimerda’s death, wish Jim more maturity than to blame Antonia so bitterly for Cutter’s advances. While characters experience violence directly as children and react in definite ways to it, they seem in adolescence either not to notice violence that conflicts with idealized views, or they react by deflecting their anger away from the perpetrator.
Alexandra Bergson initially reacts with great empathy and insight when she sees the murdered bodies of Emil and Marie, but she then moves, much like Jim, to transferring her anger and bitterness to a person who does not deserve it. The scene Alexandra views is one of great tragedy and violence, but it is also one of the most artistic and emotional scenes in Cather's canon. Emil has been shot in the heart, and although Marie eventually bled to death, she had dragged herself to Emil’s body, her cheek on his shoulder. Alexandra’s feelings upon seeing her brother’s and best friend's slain bodies are initially extraordinarily insightful and tender: “everything was clear to her. … She wondered then how they could have helped loving each other; how she could have helped knowing that they must. … Alexandra had felt awe of them, even in the first shock of her grief” (166). Alexandra has a clear epiphany about passion and about the beauty of the relationship between Emil and Marie. While not, Cather has directly told us, a person with much “imagination” about her personal life, having a “blind side” and a “life…not…of the kind to sharpen her vision” (118), Alexandra nonetheless grasps in an instant the extraordinary relationship between Emil and Marie. She feels “an aching tenderness” for Marie and “felt awe” of Emil and Marie “even in the first shock of her grief” (166). Emotional understanding and an enormous moment of growth are Alexandra’s.

This understanding is not sustained, and she instead slips back to some prior self, grasping at a more familiar lack of understanding. Of all possible interpretations of the situation, she develops the one with the least understanding, for “she blamed Marie bitterly” (173). The pattern of her interpretation is actually strikingly similar to Frank’s, who shortly after the murders has an initial insight (“[H]e knew he was to blame. For three years he had been trying to break her spirit.”) he later covers up with justification (“[D]at woman what made me do dat I hate her!”). Alexandra too has insight followed by a blaming of Marie that takes the pioneer back to a point unworthy of the epiphany she has had. Had she only tried to get Frank released, we would call her a saint, but she is trying to get Frank released because she blames Marie. Alexandra’s new knowledge slips into old patterns that cannot comprehend the clarity she initially had, and her blind side returns. An epiphany that might lead to great growth is covered up by old self-views and lost.

Like Alexandra, Thea Kronborg’s first reaction to violence is one of understanding and empathy, but this insight leads her towards the single-minded heartlessness that will mark her adulthood. We are initially touched by Thea’s reaction to the tramp’s death, for while she is first saddened and preoccupied by the conditions of his life, her eventual reaction serves to harden her against the weak. In this memorable episode, a miserable and extremely filthy tramp gets revenge on a Moonstone that has rejected him by drowning himself in the town water tank. He apparently is the source of a “fever, … and several adults and half a dozen children die of it” (173). Thea becomes preoccupied with the tramp, and he remains “unpleasantly clear in her memory”: “even when she was
practising, the drama of the tramp kept going on in the back of her head” (173). “Haunted by the figure of the tramp,” she goes to Dr. Archie and argues that we are our brother’s keeper, that she should have done something, her father should have done something, the people in Moonstone should have done something (174-5). “Ugly accidents happen,” Dr. Archie tells her, and urges her to a particularly ugly philosophy: forget the failures of the world, who will be “swept back into the pile and forgotten”; “forge ahead” and “forget the tramp” (176). Thea is energized by this statement and leaves Howard Archie’s office “happy, flattered, and stimulated” (176). While the tramp’s death initially brings out a tender and thoughtful Thea, her subsequent interview with Dr. Archie and her subsequent reaction can be seen as a major event in Thea’s hardening.

Perhaps most startling are the characters who have no reaction to violence at all. There are two such scenes in “Tom Outland’s Story,” one that Tom does not contemplate and one whose interpretation he does not challenge. Henry Atkins assists Roddy Blake and Tom on the mesa and apparently is greatly beloved; “the three of [them] made a happy family” (198), and Henry is a fine cook, expert pottery excavator, friend, and father figure. He is lost “in a terrible way” (216) when a rattlesnake “strikes him square in the forehead.” In ten minutes, his forehead is swollen and purple, and Henry has to be held down to keep him from “jumping down the chasm” presumably from pain, for the two hours before he dies (217). Although Henry had been dearly beloved, Tom seems to forget him immediately upon his death. No further mention is made of Henry, and Tom moves immediately to reflecting on the observations of Father Duchene. This omission seems to say a great deal about the heartlessness of Tom and might have helped him know that, although he believes himself to be a somewhat social man and a loyal one, he is—as he realizes later—a solitary one who has his “happiness unalloyed” only when he is alone (251).

The jarring violence of Henry’s death causes no psychic trauma to Tom and brings him no insight. Nor does he challenge Father Duchene’s sexist interpretation of the death of Mother Eve, a mummy Tom “thought … had been murdered,” for there “was a great wound in her side, the ribs stuck out through the dried flesh. Her mouth was open as if she were screaming, and her face, through all those years, had kept a look of terrible agony” (214). Father Duchene posits that she must have been an adulteress in a bizarre string of suppositions that should have strained Tom’s sense of credulity. The priest believes he “smell[s]… a personal tragedy. Perhaps her husband thought it worthwhile to return unannounced from the farms some night, and found her in improper company. The young man may have escaped. In primitive society, the husband is allowed to punish an unfaithful wife with death” (223). The scene undoubtedly says less about Mother Eve than it does about Father Duchene and his bias against women (Doane, “Defense” 300), a bias Tom apparently never questions and perhaps accepts, since he makes no comment whatsoever about Father Duchene’s judgment. Two startling scenes that might have shaken Tom’s self views cause no stated reaction and no stated trauma.

Bishop Latour is unchanged by his interactions with Magdalena, who saves him from a violent death at the hands of her degenerate husband, Buck Scales. Latour and Vaillant are uneasy about spending the night with Scales but understand immediately the danger they are in when Magdalena “pointed them away! away!—two quick thrusts into the air. Then, with a look of horror beyond anything language could convey, she threw back her head and drew the edge of her palm quickly across her distended throat” (68). The priests later find that Scales has murdered four travelers and his own three children, the babies “by ways so horrible that [Magda- lena] could not relate it” (72). She comes to work as a housekeeper for the priests and thrives in her new life. The priests reflect on the benefit they feel the Church has provided Magdalena; they believe they have saved her rather than that she saved them, that we “took her from a place where every vileness of cruelty and lust was practised” (209-210, emphases added) rather than that she escaped very much on her own. They do not contemplate the violent acts of Buck Scales, the saving acts of Magdalena, and the potential violence that would have been directed at them; Latour continues on unchanged in his “life of high intellectual and esthetic quality” (Doane, “Intelectuals” 70).

Perhaps the characters do not react to acts of violence because the price of realizing and interpreting what has happened simply is too high: two characters who do internalize violent acts—Mr. Shimerda and Lucy Gayheart—pay with death for the changes the act brings to their perceptions and sense of self. Certainly Mr. Shimerda’s insight into Pavel and Peter’s gruesome act is a factor in bringing about the gruesome act of his own violent death. Perhaps the single most memorable incident in My Ántonia is the inserted story of Pavel and Peter, two men driven years ago in Russia to throw their friend, a just married groom, and his new bride from a sledge to certain death by being devoured by hundreds of pursuing wolves (38). The tale is told by Pavel to Mr. Shimerda, and the horrifying cruelties of a Naturalistic nature clearly influence him deeply. The death of Pavel and departure of Peter is a “loss…[that] had a depressing effect on old Mr. Shimerda” and “when he was out hunting, he used to go into the empty log cabin and sit there, brooding” (41). The juxtaposition of the tale with Mr. Shimerda’s depression and death only months later strongly suggests that Pavel and Peter’s violent act plays a part in the gentle Bohemian’s decision.

“A black drove came up over the hill behind the weeding party. The wolves ran like streaks of shadow; they looked no bigger than dogs, but there were hundreds of them.”

— My Ántonia
to kill himself.

Lucy Gayheart is one of Cather’s few adult characters to grow from a violent death, yet her insight is at best short lived and at worst may be a contributing factor to her own death. Her dear Clement Sebastian has been pulled to his death by drowning as James Mockford apparently “must have fastened himself to his companion with a strangle-hold and dragged him down” (138). Lucy’s initial reaction to Clement Sebastian’s death is one of withdrawal: “her estrangement from the human world is such that she dreads to touch anything in her own house, lies tense even in her own bed, and sometimes is afraid of sleep” (Rosowski 226). Lucy’s heart is “frozen and [her] world destroyed in a moment” (156), but she has great insight after a musical performance by a world-weary singer. Lucy knows that there is knowledge, and that Sebastian is “the door and the way to that knowledge” (184). “Suddenly something flashed into her mind”: she instantly knows that “Life itself [is] the sweetheart,” that she “must have it,” that she “must go back into the world and get all she could of everything that had made him what he was” (184). Lucy writes to her teacher Paul Auerbach and makes plans to act on her insight by returning to Chicago. She has contemplated Sebastian’s death and life and believes he “had made the fugitive gleam an actual possession” (183). Her anger at Pauline sends her out to skate, and her anger at Harry Gordon sends her directly onto the ice; she “would get away from these people who were cruel and stupid” (198) and back with people for whom “Life itself were the sweetheart!” (184). Her response to violence is one of insight and action, and perhaps this action is a factor propelling her towards the ice. It is deeply ironic that this character, who has dealt with violence in a psychologically healthy way—withdrawal followed by contemplation and renewal—drowns for her efforts.

The bad luck that seems to pursue Lucy turns to good luck for Nancy in Sapphira and the Slave Girl in that Nancy acts against violence but remains alive. Her “attempted rape [is] the main action of the novel” (Rosowski 233). In this “malevolent” (Skaggs 167), “Gothic” (Rosowski 236) book, Nancy realizes the evil she is up against, knows that Martin is “after [her] night an’ day” (216) and lies awake very attentively so that he will not be able to assault her. Nancy looks on suicide as the only way out of her predicament but is rescued by Sapphira’s daughter Rachel and escapes to Canada. Nancy has not ignored the threat of violence and is the sole character in Cather to deal with violence appropriately and not be dead.

A violent act is a memorable scene in most of Cather’s novels. Characters rarely react to these events in healthy ways beyond childhood: only Nancy has a psychologically healthy response and survives. Lucy grows but, ironically, dies; Mr. Shimerda contemplates an act perhaps too deeply and sensitively and dies. For Alexandra and Jim, readers experience “psychic dissonance” (Shaw 3) when the characters react “bitterly” (O Pioneers! 173) or savagely (Stout 76) towards the innocent. Perhaps most disturbing are Cather’s intellectuals, Tom and Latour, who have no reaction at all to the violent deaths of others or to being saved from violent deaths themselves. Their worlds break in two, but they do not seem to notice. Cather jars readers with violent acts and then allows us, without authorial comment, to observe the reactions of characters.

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**NOTE**

1 I am indebted to University of Redlands Educational Counseling and Psychology professor Cheryl Jordan for her information on the psychology of violence.

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Bringing Students into the Critical Conversation

BY REGINALD DYCK

A mark of Willa Cather's status was the New Yorker publication of Joan Acocella's 1995 essay, which enlisted Cather in the cultural conflicts of the 1990s. Appealing to an educated but non-academic audience, “Cather and the Academy” caused considerable controversy with its condemnation of the treatment her fiction has received within the academy. The essay concludes that the general reading public has embraced her fiction on its own terms, without political agendas. Thus, they have been better, fairer readers. When it was expanded to book form, Acocella's analysis again created quite a stir; some reviewers and scholars reacted with “guffaws of glee,” others with “cries of outrage” (Thacker 877).

I use the essay when teaching “Willa Cather and the West” and find that it provokes considerable discussion. One of my goals for this upper division course is to facilitate students’ participation in the evolving debates over Cather’s works. Our students, particularly our English majors, need to see that they are part of a discipline with conflicting views of how we should read. I think it is also important for them to recognize that our reading is always mediated and thus needs to be contextualized and critically evaluated. Through this recognition students can become aware of the stakes involved when they make critical choices, particularly as they develop interpretative papers. Our discussion of Acocella’s essay becomes an important reference point for the rest of the course. A thorough consideration of the issues it raises could easily fill a semester. My presentation explains how we take a 75-minute class period to begin working through them.

We read “Catter and the Academy” about mid-semester, after finishing My Ántonia. To help insure careful reading and critical thought, I ask students to bring to class a short reaction paper, stating what they see as the essay’s thesis and then evaluating its strengths and weaknesses. To start the discussion, I ask students to summarize their responses. One student, Abigail Zemrock, was struck by the fact that “the American literary community has yet to uncover solid conclusions to any of the mysteries surrounding this elusive author.” Another, Marissa Cull, praised Acocella’s “unwillingness to draw unwarranted conclusions” while criticizing the essay’s “glorification of Cather as artist, unaffected by the politics of her time.” In general, reactions are mixed. Some strongly sympathize with Acocella’s desire to free Cather’s fiction from the burden of critical commentary. For them political criticism distracts from the pleasures of discussing character, theme and style. Others, though, are suspicious of the essay’s critique of feminism or question its way of arguing.

In analyzing how the essay’s argument is constructed, students need to first consider the significance of it being in the New Yorker. As they compare the readership of this magazine with, say, American Literature, they recognize why ways of arguing can be quite different. I then ask about the title. The “and” seems neutral, yet the essay clearly makes claims about the relationship between the two parts, Cather—biography and works—and Academy—the professional apparatus. This leads to a discussion of her overall thesis. Students agree that Acocella’s point is to condemn “tendentiously political” criticism (61), particularly that which focuses on gender and sexuality. With these general questions having provided an overview, we then look at the details and strategies of the essay.

Acocella’s opening, students agree, is a strong one. She engages us, maybe catches us off guard, with her bold claim that Thea Kronborg’s “Most unsentimental betrothal” is a turning point in literary history because, unlike previous female characters, Thea’s passion is for work, not love. Acocella uses this to assert a relationship between novel and novelist: Thea takes a man’s privilege, without making it “the boundary of her imagination.” Cather herself had done the same: “She just opened the door and walked through it” (56). Although our class does not read Song of the Lark, we have read O Pioneers! along with Warren Motley’s essay, “The Unfinished Self: Willa Cather’s O Pioneers! and the Psychic Cost of a Woman’s Success.” Cather’s protagonist Alexandria also walks through doors, but Motley argues that it was not so simple. In light of Acocella’s linking of author and character, I ask students to compare his claim that “patriarchal culture repays Alexandria’s trespasses” (149) with Acocella’s: “For this lordly action, Cather has been made to pay, mostly by women” (58).

This leads us to the essay’s next section, an account of Cather’s early years in Nebraska. Its main point is that, even during her “William Cather period,” Willa Cather “is not so remarkable” (60). Acocella supports her claim about Cather’s youth by stating, “Those were the days before such sentiments [a girl wishing she were a boy] placed one under suspicion of being a lesbian” (60), which I note is a debatable historical interpretation. Since Acocella uses Jo of Little Women as evidence, I ask students to compare the dates. Students need to see how this claim for normality (except of course for Cather’s genius) provides Acocella a standpoint from which to review the history of Cather criticism and thus construct her argument. This attention to both details and broader claims is part of an overall strategy.
I want this class period to be a reading lesson. Reading literary criticism is not a natural activity, I too often forget. Many students have learned how to be quite good quote pickers when doing research. They need guided practice doing the much harder work of reading critical essays for their thesis and argumentative strategy.

The lesson Acocella takes from the history of Cather criticism (the next three sections: 61-62, 62-64, 64-65) is clear: Cather was out of step with changing critical expectations and thus was under-appreciated because she was mis-read. The essay creates a narrative of Cather vs. the critics. I’m interested in having students think about this construction of literary history. Here are possible questions we consider:

- Why does a history of past criticism matter to Acocella? To us?
- According to Acocella, what caused critics to read Cather differently?
- What are the assumptions and implications of Cather's admirers' claim that “Cather fit no trend” (64)?
- Are we able to read outside of contemporary or past trends?

Because these are not immediately engaging questions for many students, at this point the class shifts from guided discussion to scintillating lecture for a few minutes. My goal here is to convince students of the need to contextualize literary history and criticism, particularly in their own papers. I make the following basic claims.

- Writers are participants in the world they observe and write about. Their works engage the world by creating a model of it. We need to evaluate these models.
- Our ideas, literary and otherwise, are shaped by the assumptions of our society, even if they seem intuitive to us.
- If we are aware of our own and others' assumptions, we can more easily choose to accept, reject, or modify them.

I explain to students why these statements make sense to me but, with as much openness as I can, state that they are not truths but claims that come out of a particular historical context. I discuss the break down of cultural consensus and thus the need to analyze assumptions. Acocella's essay, the debate it provoked, and our own discussions are all a response to this contemporary need. I contrast the present time with the previous era of consensus history with its relationship to the Cold War. This context provides a perspective for considering the heart of the essay, Acocella’s history and analysis of feminist/lesbian criticism of Cather’s fiction.

The essay identifies four historical stages in feminist criticism, beginning with the 1970s. For her this history records continual attempts to force a recalcitrant Cather into various critical pro-crustean beds. Each of the four stages provides an opportunity to consider an important interpretive problem or critical controversy.

- Assembling the female canon—the need for feminist authors and works
- The unreliable narrator school as attempt to rescue uncooperative women writers
- Cather as homosexual: Reconciliation model
- Cather as homosexual: Conflict reading

In regard to the first historical stage, most students have some understanding of the conflicts over the canon and the problem of evaluation. We enter the debate by asking why (many) feminists would be against “universals, transcendence” (65). This relates to the need to recover feminist authors and to questions of authorship, that is, why the novelist matters and not just the novels. Acocella's earlier statements like “She was simply writing about what she knew best” (61) and “Cather unwittingly walked into a fight . . .” (61) embody a conception of authorship that should be recognized. Through questions about universality and authorship, I want students to at least recognize the controversies involved and to consider their implications for canon formation.

The second historical stage focuses on the interpretive strategy of the unreliable narrator, a concept that has already come up in discussions of My Ántonia. Here I raise the question of evidence. How can we know what the author or the text intends? What standards do we use to recognize narrative reliability or unreliability? Acocella uses Schwind's essay on the Benda illustrations as an example of the tendentiousness of feminists' unreliable narrator strategy. Schwind presents a close reading of key parts of My Ántonia as well as biographical details, with her thesis shaping her interpretation. Acocella's evidence in arguing against this position is just a mention of "her other writings" (66). One assumes that if Acocella were able to develop this, she too would create interpretations of key passages based on her own assumptions. What fundamentally separates Acocella from Schwind are the assumptions they begin with. Evidence for Jim Burden's reliability or unreliability is not self explanatory. I would like students to see that the evidence we use in our interpretations depends on assumptions that need to be recognized and evaluated.

Acocella identifies a modified version of the unreliable narrator thesis, which claims that Cather was conflicted about the supposed "unfeminist" values expressed by male characters like Jim. She responds by asserting, "But Cather's prose didn't look torn" or conflicted. As with the discussion of unreliability and evidence, it is most important that students see the stakes in debate about style: conflicted vs. “plain and pure” (66). I bring up what has become something of a mantra in my teaching: style is a way of world watching. In our explanations of Cather's style, we are making claims about how her fiction models the world.

For my purposes, Acocella's explanation of the first two historical stages of feminist Cather criticism has raised key critical issues that I want students to begin considering. For her argument, though, they are preliminary to the next two, more central stages: part one and two of “Cather as homosexual.” In a previous class period we had a
student presentation on the question of Cather's lesbianism which
included a summary of Sharon O'Brien's essay “The Thing not
Named: Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer.” This is Acocella's main
target. And so students are prepared for the heart of the heart of
the essay. In giving her interpretation of Cather's life, Acocella notes
that most facts have been known, but that “no special conclusions
were drawn from them” until “gay liberation” (66). The consequence
of their becoming central is that “[t]he surface of Cather’s fiction could
no longer be taken literally; it had to be read through (68), the essay
asserts. I hate to play into Acocella's hands, but here is a binary cry-
ing out for deconstruction. Students don't need to have read Derrida
in order to question this opposition.

The opposition between reading literally versus reading through
gives students a starting point for summarizing the disagreements
between Acocella and O'Brien. I give students a few minutes to
make comparisons in their notes. I am looking for some of the fol-
lowing:

◆ Literal interpretation vs. reading through the surface to find a
  story about gender
◆ Interpretations of the Pound letter and Cather's understand-
ing of whether or not lesbianism was unnatural
◆ Source and significance of “the thing not named”
◆ Cather's adolescence: “normality” or mother-fusion anxiety
◆ The personal tendentiousness of O'Brien's scholarship and,
  again, the problem of evidence.
We discuss the implications of one or two.

Before moving to the conclusion of the essay, we note the fourth
stage, the feminist school that challenged O'Brien's reconciliation
model as “a coverup” (69). Acocella explains that “conflict” read-
ing, influenced by deconstruction, again claims that Cather and her
fiction are torn, now between deference to patriarchy and . . . her
deep-down loyalty to feminism and lesbianism—a psychic war that
propelled all her work. Therefore, whatever she appeared to be say-
ing, she was really saying the opposite, or both (69).

Whether finding reconciliation or conflict, these “political crftics
have “little interest in the writing,” according to Acocella. “What
Cather put down on the page is of almost no concern apart from
what it supposedly reveals about her unconscious. The subject is
not literature but biography, or inferred biography” (70). This is a
strong claim. To assess it, I ask students to consider essays they have
either read or had presented to them. 4 Cather's biography or her fic-
tion? Have they detracted from or enriched our reading of Cather's
work?

Building on students' assessments, we now consider Acocella's
essay as a whole. 5 As mentioned earlier, academic critics have
reacted strongly, both positively and negatively to the essay and its
expanded book form. Robert Thacker's review in American Literature
is an example of the former. “Every critic of American modernism
should read this book,” Thacker begins (876). He concludes by
calling it “a reminder to critics of the function of criticism . . . ” (877).
In between these comments, he reproaches a critic who represents
the opposite reaction, Marilee Lindemann. Her book, Willa Cather:
Queering America, calls Acocella’s work a “vicious attack . . . on fem-
ist and lesbian critics of Cather . . . ” (146, n6). In asking students to
situate themselves on a continuum between the two, I want students
to gain confidence in their ability to join in our discipline's critical
debates. To do that, they need to be more than submissive quote
pickers. Hopefully this class period has provided a mutually-devel-
oped example of the work required to carefully read a critical essay.

As appropriate, I quote other reviews and ask students for reac-
tions. Here are examples:
◆ anyone who has had it up to here with political correctness
  should buy a copy. — Terry Teachout, National Review
◆ Her achievement […] is in her use of the critical response to
  Cather’s work as a perspective from which to trace the chang-
  ing preoccupations of a nation rewriting its identity.
  — Christina Cho, New York Times Book Review

The following quote suggests useful advice for relatively new critics
like our students: “At the heart of Acocella’s enterprise . . . is the
satirist’s morbid intolerance for human error: the kind of error so
necessary, paradoxically, to intellectual exchange” (Castle).

To bring our discussion to a close, I refer to Acocella's final sen-
tence. She offers a plea for “professional critics to give up and leave
[Cather's] books to those who care about them—her readers” (71).
I ask students to reflect on their experiences of reading as English
majors. Does the academic work we do enhance our insight and
pleasure, or does it dampen the delight that caused us to become
English majors in the first place? For an alternative to Acocella's
perspective, I read the concluding sentence to the O'Brien essay
mentioned above: “In developing new interpretive strategies for
reading Cather’s fiction, we would thus do well to become the read-
ers she asked for in “The Novel Demeuble,” sensitive to the creative
interplay between the written and the unwritten, the named and the
unnamed, the tone and the overtone” (599). For me this quote
embodies Acocella’s own call for a more sophisticated and balanced
political criticism (71), a goal many of us can subscribe to both as
scholars and as teachers.

NOTES
1 My lesson plan here includes more than we can cover in one
class. I make selections based on student needs and interests as well
as the topics covered in previous classes.
2 Little Women was published in 1868. Cather was born in 1873.
Jo's dates would correspond with Sarah Orne Jewett, who was born
in 1849.
3 Janis Stout's summary of the relevant section of the 15 June
1892 letter is as follows: “Not fair that friendships between women
are regarded as not natural” (2).
4 During our discussion of My Ántonia, students read and explain
one of three essays by Miller, Gelfant, and Lambert. I refer to my
own review essay to make literary historical connections among
them. This question provides a test of the openness of my teaching.
Since I have assigned the essays, students know that I think they are
important. I want students to feel comfortable, however, criticizing
specific essays or the use of them in general.
5 We skip over Acocella's own bit of psychoanalyzing as she
condemns feminist critics' motives as well as her claim that hers is
a truer form of feminism. We also must forego discussing the con-
nection between feminism and multiculturalism, and what Acocella
means by “sophisticated criticism.”
APPENDIX

Throughout the semester, students make presentations on related topics that will enrich the class’s understanding of Cather’s work. Choices include Frederick Jackson Turner, the New Woman, Cather and the canon, Deborah Fink’s Agrarian Women, and others. Students prepare a handout, which helps them clearly present their findings. They have considerable latitude but must meet with me about their presentations and must make connections with Cather’s fiction. Abigail Zemrock’s handout effectively outlines her research and her conclusions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


CRITICAL DEFINITIONS OF LESBIANISM

Note: the term “lesbian” was not yet in common usage in the 1890s.
1. General definition of “lesbian”—a woman who has physical sexual experiences with other women (commonly accepted, though difficult to “prove”)
2. The “Lesbian Continuum”—a range of woman-identified experiences; does not require that a woman has or consciously desires physical sexuality with another woman (Adrienne Rich).
3. “Women who love women, who choose women to nurture and support and create a living environment in which to work creatively and independently” (Blanche Cook).
4. A lesbian is a “woman who has sexual and erotic-emotional ties primarily with women” or who “sees herself as centrally involved with a community” of such women and who is a “self-identified lesbian” (Ann Ferguson).
5. Lesbianism and the Concept of Deviance—historical view of homosexual relationships between women; does not perpetuate oppression, nor require that deviance be a component of lesbian identity.
6. Lesbianism as “Unnatural Friendship.”
7. “Passionlessness”—the Victorian idea that women are non-sensual beings. They could participate in sensual bonds without viewing love as sexual.

INDICATIONS OF WILLA CATHER AS A LESBIAN

◆ Cather often dressed in masculine attire during her youth, and formed a male alter-ego named William.
◆ Cather continued to reject her femininity during her years at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln (early 1890s). There she met Louise Pound, a fellow student who was three years ahead of Cather.

Louise Pound earned a master's and doctorate, and then returned to Nebraska as a professor of English, philologist, folklorist, and first female president of the Modern Language Association. Pound also became the first woman elected to the Nebraska Sports Hall of Fame. She exemplified the “New Woman” of the 1890s.

Cather and Pound collaborated in the fall of 1891 as associate editors of the college literary magazine The Lasso, and acted together in the drama society, with Cather starring in a prominent role in a satire written by Pound.

Cather was an ardent admirer of feminine beauty and highly praised a local art exhibit of women’s portraits—especially one that distinctly resembled Louise Pound’s delicate features and graceful style. This portrait exhibited the characteristics that Cather was attracted to in life, as do the women she thought most beautiful: her mother, Isabelle McClung, Louise Pound, and the fictional characters of her novels—Marian Forrester, Myra Henshawe, Sapphira Colbert.
In 1892, Cather began a series of letters to Louise Pound that would eventually reveal her deep infatuation as well as her insecurities. The two would become very close although Cather would later sink into despair and depression at the loss of Louise’s love and commitment for her.

◆ Cather’s sexuality was also shaped by French literature, particularly the poetry of Sappho, which helped form the bond between Cather and Pound.

◆ Cather also has a deep attraction for Isabelle McClung, a socially prominent young woman. They met while at a theater performance during Cather’s years in Pittsburgh. She later moved in with the McClung family. Their love would last nearly four decades, until Isabelle married. Her marriage announcement shattered Cather physically and mentally. She later destroyed all evidence of their contact.

◆ Cather also began a relationship with Edith Lewis in 1903, when the two worked together as editors at McClure’s, and eventually shared an apartment with her in New York.

◆ A third friendship was formed with Elizabeth Sergeant, a woman whom Cather allowed to proofread several of her novels in their early stages. Her correspondence with Cather has remained well documented since she outlived her by several years.

INDICATIONS OF LESBIANISM IN CATHER’S WRITING:

◆ While Cather’s characters are often androgynous, her descriptions of the land are full of passion and implicit sexual or erotic descriptions.

◆ Alexandra—Cather created a character with little or no hint of sexuality. This is an expression of scorn for “normalcy,” or heterosexual life. It also reflects the idea of passionlessness, as mentioned earlier. Also, Alexandra possibly embodies the idea of hopelessness—not the physical frustration that’s emphasized, but rather emotional deprivation.

◆ The predominance of male protagonists in Cather’s fiction suggests that gender reversal was her “cover” for displaying her identity as a lesbian without sacrificing her privacy or readership.

◆ Characters such as Lena and Marie display the characteristics that Cather sought in her friends/lovers—“New Woman” traits of emotional frankness, graceful, and delicate beauty. Also, they may represent the idea of sexual freedom and self exploration.

◆ The “separation” of Marie and Emil suggests the idea of deviance, and society’s tendency to try to separate lesbian lovers and to prove them “wrong” or shame them. In both cases, it is a deliberate attempt to isolate.

WORKS CITED


The “bleeding stump” and the Forced Finale: Plot in Willa Cather’s One of Ours

BY J. ARTHUR BOND

Literary critics have long remarked that the plots of Willa Cather’s novels are disjoint, asymmetrical, loosely episodic, and digressive. Traditional critics have found her plots particularly troublesome, because they do not conform to conventional narratives that may be readily described in structural or spatial terms. Commenting on O Pioneers!, for example, Dorothy Van Ghent asserts that Cather “scarcely knew what to do with the material, for the way it had put itself together, as a two-part pastoral, seemed to have no formal rationale, and the longer part—the story of Alexandra—had no backbone of structure at all, was as fluid and featureless as the high, oceanic grassland where Alexandra made her farm” (78). In the preface to Alexander’s Bridge, Cather herself asserted that the writer has very little choice in shaping material because he or she “comes to depend more and more on something else—the thing by which our feet find the road home on a dark night, accounting of themselves for roots and stones which we had never noticed by day” (viii-ix).

Cather’s inclination to discover and follow those “roots and stones”—to allow material to shape plot—can frustrate readers’ expectations for coherence, particularly if they cannot ascertain why Cather allowed her narrative to be pulled in a particular direction or if they do not find that new direction to be plausible. Willa Cather’s One of Ours has been especially susceptible to hasty dismissal because of its lopsided structure: well over half of the novel centers on Claude Wheeler’s young adulthood in Nebraska; the remainder focuses on his military service. For many readers and critics this unbalanced division has marked it as an aesthetic failure. Although groundbreaking work like Steven Trout’s Memorial Fictions has usefully assisted scholars and teachers in both reassessing the novel and exploring Cather’s complex treatment of the wartime experience, students frequently struggle to understand the plot, particularly when the focus shifts to the war in France. As Rebecca Faber has pointed out, Cather insisted that the novel was not a war narrative but rather “the story of a Nebraska boy presented in an entirely new way” (qtd. in Faber 8-9). Even if we brush aside Cather’s statement as a protective disclaimer, part of the challenge of teaching the novel centers on fostering students’ understanding of how the plot functions as a character study. Despite the ample evidence that Cather intended to write about the war from the very beginning, I have found that students approach the novel as a story about Claude; Cather’s representation of war is secondary to their interest in understanding the protagonist. We thus should not sidestep our obligation to help students discover Cather’s unique depiction of the unresolved tensions of the protagonist’s life.

Elizabeth Ammons has argued that much of the early-twentieth-century fiction written by Cather and other American women constitutes a “radical experimentation with narrative form” that attempts to “break out of and disrupt the existing, inherited long forms” (5). Whenever I teach my undergraduate seminar on Willa Cather, I address the question of plot directly, using One of Ours as a case study to help students better understand the distinctive way in which Cather’s narratives work. The traditional method of assessing plot by structural description fails to adequately describe what it is like to read through one of Cather’s novels, a temporal experience that is akin to listening to music. To understand One of Ours, it is more productive to use a non-structural model, one that better imitates the reading process by characterizing the textual dynamics of the plot. In Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative, Peter Brooks defines plot as a system of energy motivated by desire. Brooks fashions a model for analyzing plot based on Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle. He asserts that a fictional story becomes possible when it is “stimulated into the condition of narratability” (108). This stimulation usually occurs when a primal scene of tension or frustrated desire creates the need for narration; the plot then enters a state of deviance, detour, and excess—the middle portion of the narrative that postpones the resolution or the “terminal quiescence of the end” (103). Just as the sexual instincts “stand in dynamic opposition to the death instincts” in an organism, Brooks argues that the movement of a plot is made possible by two contradictory impulses, one that pushes it forward to the end and another that pulls it back toward the beginning (104). These opposing forces avoid an improper end so that the plot can reach a suitable and meaningful resolution. Instead of criticizing the sprawling shape of Cather’s novels, as some traditional critics have done, we may better understand the textual dynamics of her plots by drawing from Brooks’s model. Rather than mapping action toward a definitive goal, One of Ours organically unfolds, taking detours and changing plot lines midstream. The emphasis is thus on emotion, intuition, and the inner workings of mind and spirit.

The first three books of One of Ours contain a crescendo-like accumulation of tension that drives the plot of the novel. This tension centers on Claude Wheeler’s weak identity and his desire to escape “the Wheeler way”—the attitudes, customs, and tendencies of the Wheeler family (1254). When I teach the novel in my Cather seminar, my students and I spend considerable time discussing the Wheeler way. After briefly explaining Brooks’s definition of primal scene, I ask students to identify an event in the text that might fit the concept. Students usually point to the childhood event that is permanently branded in Claude’s memory—the cherry tree incident. A crucial source of Claude’s dissatisfaction, self-contempt, and ineffectual behavior, the cherry tree incident is the primal scene for the plot of the entire novel. In Claude’s recollection of the event, Mr. Wheeler, disgusted with his wife’s complaints about how physically difficult it is for her to pick cherries from the tree, secretly cuts it down. Telling his wife and Claude that he has solved the difficulty, he invites them to proceed to the orchard. They trustfully carry their pails to the tree:
Cather's novels typically have more than a single plot line operating in detail, I complicate their understanding of plot by suggesting that Once my students and I have discussed the cherry tree incident, the beautiful, round-topped cherry tree, full of green leaves and red fruit,—his father had sawed it through! It lay on the ground beside its bleeding stump. With one scream Claude became a little demon. He threw away his tin pail, jumped over howling and kicking the loose earth with his copper-toed shoes . . . (963-4).

Although many students remember this event for its brutality, most have not thought about how it initiates the plot and creates textual energy for later developments in Claude's story. A careful discussion of its significance is in order. As I explain to my students, the scene may be interpreted as a kind of double fairy tale in miniature. Little Claude expects the event to have a happy ending. He and his mother want to pick cherries, but her physical pain creates a complication that is apparently resolved. Claude thus runs to achieve fulfillment—the happy ending of picking the ripe red cherries from the beautiful green tree. Instead, Claude's expectations are smashed by a dark fairy tale. The cherry tree—representing unfulfilled life, fecundity, fulfillment, a symbol of human desire unencumbered by problems or limitations—has been destroyed by Claude's wasteful father. The wilting, severed cherry tree—the only tree left for Claude—represents the Wheeler way, the family's approach to life that includes their hardheaded literalness, mental and spiritual narrowness, and capricious wastefulness. At nineteen Claude feels just as frustrated as little Claude had felt in the orchard. Neither parent has the sensitivity or understanding to help him grow: Mr. Wheeler, with his careless attitude toward life and his refusal to see beyond his farm, cannot understand Claude's sensitivity and his desire for a meaningful, fulfilling future; Mrs. Wheeler, with her narrow-minded, conventional views and her spineless conformity to her husband's rules and whimsical notions, can only help him adjust his expectations to fit the Wheeler way. Fostered by parents who misunderstand and abuse him in subtle ways, Claude never develops a healthy sense of self-worth. Although Claude cannot accept his mother's narrow-minded views, emotionally he identifies with her, and he often imitates her submissive, conformist behavior. Unlike his mother, however, Claude frequently finds subtle ways to rebel and break out of the Wheeler way. His behavior in the first three books of the novel is thus characterized by simulated rebellion and conformity. Born into this painful identity—represented by the bitter image of a bleeding stump beside a quickly wilting, once-beautiful fruit tree—Claude struggles to find fulfillment, to find the original tree.

Once my students and I have discussed the cherry tree incident in detail, I complicate their understanding of plot by suggesting that at the same time. As is the case with many of her novels, in One of Ours these plot lines are all woven into the inner emotional experience of the protagonist. As Merrill Skaggs has argued, all of Claude's "impulses, motives, and acts are explained and rendered plausible by the text" (30). To help students analyze Cather's intricate rendering of inner experience, I draw from Brooks's interpretation of Charles Dickens's Great Expectations. Brooks identifies four lines of plot, each containing an "official, . . . repressive version" and an unofficial, "repressed" version (117-118). The same principle operates in One of Ours, but on a much smaller scale. Two plot lines develop from the initiatory scene: the first is Claude's struggle to do something with his life, to make a difference, to achieve some degree of greatness; the second is Claude's search for emotional and sexual fulfillment. Like the double fairy tale of the cherry tree, each plot has two versions—an official, repressive plot, corresponding to the Wheeler way, and an unofficial, repressed plot, corresponding to Claude's idealistic vision of fulfillment. These lines of plot repeatedly manifest Claude's problem of self-identity in various ways, and the entire narrative begins moving through a state of deviance and detour to reach a resolution.

The first three books of the novel represent only limited movement toward resolution; much of the plot consists of a return of the past. As the plot moves forward, it repeatedly manifests Claude's emotional discontent, which is irrevocably tied to his childhood experiences; yet with each repetition Claude appears to achieve some self-awareness. The entire Nebraska section of the novel demonstrates what Brooks describes as the "forward and backward movement" of plot (100). For example, my students often see this vacillation in Claude's desire to do something worthwhile with his life (the first plot line): they see it in his thwarted wishes to attend the state university instead of Temple College; in his excitement and discomfort toward his friendship with the unconventional Erlichs; and in his ultimate surrender to his father's plan to have him quit college so that he can manage the family farm. In every case, Claude fails to reach his aspirations.

Claude's desire for emotional and sexual fulfillment—the second plot line—generates and consumes much narrative energy. Like his quest for achievement, the search for emotionally satisfying relationships has both an official and an unofficial version: Claude both rebels from and conforms to the Wheeler way. My students often notice, for example, that Claude's conformity causes him to gravitate toward safe, docile, motherly women, an inclination that I suggest is rooted in his identification with his mother. As I explain to my students, in the official, repressive version of the plot, Claude chooses relationships that repeat or imitate the comfortable aspects of the mother-son kinship. At the University Library in Lincoln, for instance, he discovers a table where the female art students study.
Claude can “enjoy their company without having to talk to them.” In addition, he can assist them by performing small tasks, giving him the opportunity to enjoy their pleasant chatter (986). On his trips to and from Lincoln, Claude relishes the motherly attentions Mrs. Voigt pays to him, and at the farm he enjoys Mahaley’s solicitous behavior. These are women who are sanctioned by the official version of the plot: Claude’s relationships with them do not violate the Wheeler way, because they allow him to remain in the same comfortable, conformist role that he discovered early in life.

I next ask my students to think about other kinds of women in the text. Contrasting with the safe women, for instance, are “dangerous” ones—women whose sexuality or emotional characteristics are so attractive to Claude’s idealistic vision, that they threaten his ties with his family and thus arouse disturbing feelings of guilt and shame. Among the agreeable art students depicted by Cather, my students usually point to Miss Peachy Millmore, whose name tellingly evokes the image of ripe fruit. Aside from his usual awkwardness and embarrassment, Claude at first has few reservations about associating with her, because she has “more manner and more reserve than the Western girls” (986). Claude enjoys Peachy’s company until a moonlit skating date, when she betrays her “eager susceptibility” to physical contact. Although Claude has “strong impulses” toward women, he also has “a sharp disgust for sensual susceptibility” (988).

Instead of exploring relationships with women like Peachy or—more importantly—Gladys, Claude bonds with women who serve as a compromise between the official and unofficial versions of the plot. Mrs. Erlich, for example, is a compromise figure who allows Claude to balance his life temporarily between the Wheeler way and his ideal world. When I ask my students to explain why Claude finds Mrs. Erlich so appealing, they mention her motherly femininity. For instance, she helps him feel at ease when he visits the family, delights in his dutiful behavior as an escort, and encourages him to believe that “even he might turn out wonderfully well!” (976). It is this last quality—her optimistic idealism—that makes her a woman beyond the Wheeler mold, even beyond Mrs. Wheeler’s occasional romantic inclinations. Claude finds that Mrs. Erlich’s romantic, positive, expectant turn of mind puts him at ease, causing him to hope for a fulfilling future. Just before Claude leaves Lincoln for his Christmas break, he visits Mrs. Erlich as she makes German Christmas cakes, an activity that fills Claude with a sense of an enticingly passionate, soulful way of life that contrasts sharply with the stolidity of the Wheeler family. Her idealism feeds Claude’s romantic notions, which are part of the unofficial version of the plot.

The fairy-tale like atmosphere surrounding Mrs. Erlich and her family contrasts tellingly with the outcome of the cherry tree incident and especially with Claude’s marriage to Enid. Like Mrs. Erlich, Enid is also a compromise figure, but her and, Evangelical tendencies are quite different from Mrs. Erlich’s romantic way of life. Enid’s conventional religious views, her good standing in the Frankfort area, and her attention to doing what she considers her duty—all seem to mesh with the mores of the Wheeler family. Ironically, Claude’s romantic vision causes him to idealize Enid’s narrow views, in which he finds “something unusual and interesting” that prevents her from being “prosaic and commonplace, like a man” (1041). Despite his repetitive dreams in which Enid is “still and unconscious like a statue” as he makes love to her, and despite more obvious signs of their incompatibility, Claude refuses to consider the consequences of marrying a frigid, self-centered woman, choosing instead to do “the first natural, dutiful, expected thing he had ever done” by marrying her (1055-56). Yet once Claude marries Enid, he realizes his mistake, and he again enters another cycle of conformity and rebellion. Although he fulfills all of his responsibilities as a husband, he finds subtle ways to rebel: his solitary forays into the woods, the planting and care of the gourd vine,—a plant that does “so lustily what it was put there to do”—his enjoyment in milking the cow’s full udders, and his moonlit bath in the horse tank, when he thinks about people of the past and the present who have “unappeased longings and futile dreams”—all of these actions suggest Claude’s desire for an abundant, satisfying life and fulfilling relationships (1099-1100). But even when Claude is at his most relaxed,—when he is in the horse tank, contemplating the “children of the moon”—the next morning he is “ashamed of what had seemed so true and so entirely his own the night before,” and he resolves that it is “better not to think about such things” (1100-01).

By this point in the novel, my students often see the plot beginning to break down. I ask them to describe why they react this way, and I then connect their ideas to Peter Brooks’s theoretical explanation. Students often point out that Claude continues to both long for emotional fulfillment and aspire for achievement; yet ever since he has chosen to remain on the farm, his advances toward his goals have been entirely illusory. I point out that Enid may be seen as the wrong choice of a mate and that Claude’s choice directly affects the energy of the narrative. Peter Brooks cites this type of situation as a short-circuit of plot. In his analysis of Balzac’s La Peau de Chagrin, Brooks notes that since Foedora, the female Raphael has pursued, is unaffected by sexual desire and therefore inaccessible to his advances, “Foedora is death, . . . the death of the desire,” and Raphael and the plot are locked into a motionless state in which death is the only alternative (57-8). Like Foedora’s frigidity, Enid’s apathy toward sex and her distaste for liberal, open-ended thinking make her a dead end for Claude. Claude himself realizes that his “life is . . . choking him, and he [does not have . . . ] the courage to break with it” (1111). The plot threatens to subside into an endlessly monotonous state of conformity, with no hope of any change or movement. The accumulated tension must either force a confrontation with the past, or the plot will grind to a halt.

From the ashes of the original plot, a new one thus emerges: Claude decides to fight the Germans in France. In book 4, Claude emerges as a confident lieutenant, without his characteristic awkwardness, insecurity, and meptitude. Significantly, the new plot attempts to build a case for itself by continually asserting Claude’s separation from his past. He remembers, for example, that when he lived in Nebraska he would “sit dumb by the windmill wondering what to do with his life” (1160). The same narrative technique is used in book 5 as well. Ironically, the attempt to assert that Claude has successfully severed ties with his past undermines the purpose of plot: if he really has achieved fulfillment, then there is nothing more to narrate, and the plot can end immediately with a strong, triumphant celebration of his achievement in the war.

But Claude has not mastered the past at all. In fact, the energy that keeps the plot moving forward consists of tensions from his
Nebraska past that resurface during the events of the war: the “ugly hiatus” between childhood and Claude's fulfillment in military service has not been entirely “blotted out in the fog,” as the text asserts overtly (1175). Instead, some of the same questions about his identity and sexuality reemerge. For an informal written response, I ask students to keep track of places where they see tensions resurfacng and to consider how those tensions might work to reinvigorate the story of Claude's life. In our next class meeting, students work in groups, drawing from their written responses to figure out how the plot is revitalized in this section of the novel. When we reconvene as a whole class, each group reports on their findings.

In my seminar last fall, two groups argued that Claude's feelings about sexuality once again feed into an official and an unofficial plot. One group demonstrated that Claude's behavior overseas is quite similar to his behavior in Nebraska. As one student explained, Claude overtly imitates proper Wheeler behavior by avoiding any discussion of sexuality. For instance, whenever he finds a group of men talking about their wives and girlfriends, he walks away with the “happy feeling” that he is “the least married man on the boat” (1176). His “happy feeling” is a kind of self-deception—an avoidance of what has occurred in his past. Another group of students discussed the unofficial plot, pointing out that Claude is even more repressed than in the first three books, because he does not even entertain romantic daydreams about Enid or Gladys, as he did earlier in the novel.

At this point in the conversation, I typically discuss how Claude's sexuality is expressed indirectly through voyeurism, when he becomes the prurient protector of a wry-necked soldier and his girlfriend. The wry-necked, one-armed soldier—a new instance of the cherry tree stump from Claude's childhood—functions as Claude's double, in the sense that the soldier represents Claude's stunted emotional development. For Claude, the man and the woman invite protection: the man seems anxious and troubled, while the woman has innocent eyes and appears to be “new to emotion.” Claude protectively follows them, keeping “watch like a sentinel, ready to take their part if any alarm should startle them” (1198). He subsequently learns that the soldier is a psychopathic case who doesn't remember his past—especially the women from his past, including the one who was to become his wife. Claude feels that the young man is fortunate in forgetting, and he wants to help him “get away and be lost altogether in what he had been lucky enough to find” (1201). Unlike Claude, however, the soldier's past cannot haunt him; if the doctor leaves him alone, he will be free to enjoy this blissful state of love. As Claude's double, the wry-necked man represents the life Claude wishes he could live, free from the complications of his life back in Nebraska and free from the pain of memory. By revealing Claude's continuing, covert interest in emotional and sexual fulfillment, the unofficial plot contradicts the insistent, overt assertions that past problems no longer trouble him. While the soldier may be physically and mentally disabled, Claude's deep emotional scars from his childhood and youth are no more disabling: they have resulted in a profoundly maimed soul, one who cannot frankly admit his own emotional needs.

If we can say that Claude finds any fulfillment in the war at all, my students usually assert that he has found it partially in his camaraderie with the other men and in his leadership as an officer. The two strands of plot—the search for emotional fulfillment and the quest for achievement—come together in the depiction of Claude's relationships with his comrades and his commitment to providing leadership for the war effort. Steven Trout has pointed out that, following the 1922 publication of One of Ours, Cather received hundreds of letters of gratitude from former servicemen who had read the novel and found in it a sympathetic portrait of a competent but troubled officer (“Willa Cather's One of Ours,” 191). In her memoir about Cather, Edith Lewis quotes a letter from one of the appreciative servicemen, who remarked that Cather had “created me in Claude” (qtd. in Lewis 123). Clearly, in depicting a character whose life was acutely unfulfilled and who thus sought a sense of wholeness in serving his country, Cather had captured an important feature of the early-twentieth-century American experience.

It thus makes sense that although the plot in the last part of the novel partially comes together, it still conveys a sense of breakage, confusion, and spiritual isolation. When I discuss the ending of the novel, I stress that Cather's point is not to make a realistic ending in terms of the representation of war. Instead, it seems more plausible that Cather sought to represent Claude's contrasting feelings of fulfillment and isolation. A few moments before his death, for example, Claude's feelings still vacillate between painful inadequacy and euphoric fulfillment. At one moment he feels “bewildered and unfit to be in command of other men” and the next he believes he has “learned the mastery of men” (1289, 1292). By this point in the novel Claude must be killed, because the accumulated tension threatens irresolution.

Peter Brooks discusses a successful resolution as achieving “retrospective illumination” and “total metaphor.” That is, the textual energy generated during the course of the novel must be contained and bound (108). Cather attempts to resolve the plot by depicting Mrs. Wheeler reading Claude's last letters, which she has received after his death. Suddenly imbued with intellectual and moral reflection, and stripped of her characteristic narrow-mindedness, Mrs. Wheeler ascertains Claude's romantic idealism about the war, real-
izing that he died “believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be.” She decides that dying with such “beautiful beliefs” is better than discovering the truth (1296).

Students often find it difficult to believe that Mrs. Wheeler would suddenly acquire an ability to reflect so carefully on Claude’s idealism and the war. More importantly, this ending rings false because of its shift to an anti-romantic view of the war: it seems to insist that we reread the entire novel as anti-romantic, and Claude as a duped character. The resolution is very much like the problem David Gerhardt encounters when he and Mlle. Claire play Camille Saint-Saëns B minor violin concerto. To illustrate how Cather often ends her plots not like traditional ones, but more like the sometimes rough, dramatic shifts in the musical energy found in a concerto, I play excerpts from a recording of the Saint-Saëns concerto for the class, and we discuss how it evokes a particular mood and a sense of forced closure. I interpret Cather’s use of the concerto as her way of punctuating the forced conclusion of her novel. The first movement of the piece is, as Cather indicates, a “suppressed, bitter melody,” akin to Claude’s frustration with and bitterness toward his stifling Nebraska life (1264). The second movement, however, is more like the whole cherry tree, Mrs. Erlich’s fairy tale romance about the couple who met and fell in love in Lincoln, and Claude’s idealization of the war. The movement breathes of idealism, perfection, and a dreamy, gossamer quality, which may be heard in the bell-like tones of the harmonics in the last bars of the violin solo. The final movement is a synthesis: it echoes the bitterness of the first movement and the dreamy perfection of the second movement, ultimately transforming them into a triumphant finale. When Gerhardt plays the piece, however, he stops before the third movement, noting that he “can’t do anything” with it (1264). Mlle. Claire, playing the orchestral reduction on piano, admits that she too is unequal to the task. But since it is the last thing that her deceased brother René played, they finish the piece in remembrance of him.

For many modern readers—and for those contemporary critics who expected a different treatment of the war—Cather’s conclusion is a forced finale, an attempt to play out and resolve a plot whose very changes in direction and endless fluctuations in textual energy suggest interminability. But for contemporary readers who found themselves disturbed and confused by the war—and to scholars who are rehistoricizing the social history of the war experience—this ending is realistic. Just as Gerhardt and Mlle. Claire must force themselves to conclude the Saint-Saëns concerto, so must Mrs. Wheeler come to terms with the loss of her son and the bitter aftermath of the war. And like the first two movements of the concerto, Claude’s vacillation between bitter conformity and airy idealism represents the life of a person who has only partially understood how to live in a world torn asunder. Cather’s organic method of composition and her personal investment in this project thus culminated in a rich but flawed narrative, one that is paradoxically more realistic than conventional plots, because it closely matches the messy, contradictory nature of ordinary life during World War I. ◆
Contributors

SUSAN ANDERSEN graduates from Utah State University in May with a master’s degree in American Studies. Her thesis involves the reading of her century-old house as a cultural text through the lens of creative non-fiction, while using studies in vernacular architecture and the fiction and non-fiction of American authors who write about houses, particularly Willa Cather, to inform her own creative writing. She won the USC Scribendi Award for creative non-fiction, served as the Assistant Director of Advanced Writing, and was named Utah State University’s English Department Teaching Assistant of the Year.

J. ARTHUR BOND has been an assistant professor of English at Valparaiso University, but in September he will be an assistant professor of English at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, California. His teaching and scholarship focus on composition and literacy studies, secondary and post-secondary English education, late-19th and early 20th-century American literature, and American periodicals. He regularly teaches a seminar titled “Willa Cather, Gender, and the American Landscape.”

MARGARET DOANE has a Ph.D. from the University of Oregon and has taught at California State University-San Bernardino since 1976. She traces her interest in Cather to family roots in her great-grandfather, one of the founders of Hastings College and where her parents met. She has authored twenty-five articles and papers on Cather and currently is working on a book on Cather’s use of violence. In recognition for her classroom achievements, her university system honored her with the Outstanding Teacher Award for 2002. She bicycles and runs, both serious athletic endeavors. She cycled 600 miles from San Francisco to Los Angeles in a week (her longest ride) and ran the San Diego Marathon this past winter.

REGINALD DYCK first taught Willa Cather as a high school teacher in Nebraska. After completing graduate school, he began teaching at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. He has published frequently on Cather, and his most recent article appeared in Great Plains Quarterly.

EVELYN FUNDA, Associate Professor of American Literature at Utah State University, teaches American Literature and specializes in western American literature, Willa Cather, American periodicals, and agricultural fiction of the West. She has published numerous essays on Cather in Western American Literature, Narrative, and the recent book Willa Cather and the Culture of Belief. Her present research focuses on what she calls “agricultural humanities”—that is, the way in which art and literature portray the agricultural West; out of that comes her current work on a family memoir titled “Hardpan and Loosestrife” about farming in Idaho. Her most recent essay from that memoir appears in the collection Crazy Woman Creek, edited by Linda Hasselstrom. She also serves as the Book Review Editor for Western American Literature.

MELLANEE KVASNICKA retires this spring from Omaha South High School where she taught for 35 years and chaired the Department of English for the last 21 of those years. She has received many awards for outstanding teaching and was recently recognized as a distinguished graduate from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for her superb teaching and scholarship. A prolific Cather scholar and a long-time member of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Board of Governors, she currently serves as its president.

ABIGAIL ZEMROCK, a student in Reginald Dyck’s “Willa Cather and the West” course, graduates in May and will join the Peace Corps.
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