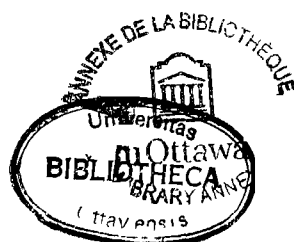


THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ARTIST  
IN THE WRITINGS OF WILLA CATHER

by Rev. Killian Speckner, OFMConv.

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of the University of Ottawa through the  
Department of English as partial fulfill-  
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## INTRODUCTION

Willa Seibert Cather (1873-1947) was recognized during her lifetime as one of the outstanding figures in American literature.<sup>1</sup> Since her death her reputation has grown and a better understanding of her importance has been promoted with the publication of several biographical studies and critical works. These have suggested further investigation into her contributions to literature and have stimulated renewed interest in the underlying theme of her work. This thesis pursues that theme through her literary career with the purpose of demonstrating the consistency of Cather's choice of character and theme.

It has been said of Willa Cather that her "passion for artists, especially musical artists, has been second only to her passion for pioneers."<sup>2</sup> This statement provides a starting point for a study of her fictional world, a study which intends to show that her passion for artists was second to none.

Cather, it is true, had a passion for artists and pioneers; however, the fact which is to be demonstrated in this thesis is that this passion was a single emotion. The world which the reader finds in her short stories and novels extends from the prairies of Nebraska to the concert halls of Boston and New York, from the desert towns to the exciting and crowded capitals of Europe. It is peopled with men and women of many

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<sup>1</sup> J. Donald Adams, "Speaking of Books," The New York Times Book Review, May 11, 1947, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth S. Sergeant, Fire Under the Andes, N.Y., Knopf, 1927, p. 272.

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professions, with characters of great and small talent, with the rich and the poor, the famous and the infamous. Underlying this world which she has created is burning one steady flame, one passion. Into the souls of the artists and pioneers, the professors and the priests this flame has found its way. It has brought a sense of unity to the people of the prairie and the celebrated artists in public life. They are cut from the same cloth however much may be the differences in their speech, costume, or manners.

Cather, in an essay titled: "The Novel Demeuble," repeated a formula for writing which she followed in her own literary career as a story teller. "The elder Dumas enunciated a great principle when he said that to make a drama, a man needed one passion and four walls."<sup>3</sup> Whether or not this was the guide which Willa Cather took to direct her in the writing of her novels and short stories, it is certain that all of her work can be studied in the light of this one principle.

She had one passion which she transmitted to her characters. There was one noble ideal which became part of the make-up of her major creations. Her early writing which was so much influenced by her associations with creative people began by instilling this passion into her "artists." As the direction of her gaze changed, as her experience grew, other types of characters inherited this passion. However, it remained from the beginning to the end of her career something naturally part of the personality of her creative characters.

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<sup>3</sup> Willa Cather, On Writing, New York, Knopf, 1949, p. 43.

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This one passion, however, has varying degrees. Oftentimes it can be misdirected or misused. It can be thwarted or destroyed. It can be increased to lead the character to the greatest achievements, or diminished to such an extent that its possessor will follow only the shadow of a dream. The thesis is intended to make a survey of that passion with the people and the world in which it exists, to show that Cather made a great drama and a great world of one passion and four walls.

## CHAPTER ONE

## EXPOSITION OF THE OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the fact that Willa Cather used the creative artist and his world, 1) as background material for a major portion of her work, 2) as an expression of what is best in life in contrast with the world represented by the Philistine, and 3) as a fundamental element in the creation of her pioneer characters.

The reason for the thesis is to give a better understanding of Willa Cather's work by organizing it in the light of the principles given above. The majority of critics who have written about Cather's literary contributions have not attempted to find any coordinating theme in her novels and short stories. On the other hand, they have treated each work individually or have seen the divergencies between the earlier and later work as a reflection of her loss of faith in the materialistic age in which she lived.<sup>1-5</sup> Other critics have recognized the vital theme which gives organization to her work but have not shown how that theme was developed

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds, An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature, N.Y., Reynol and Hitchcock, 1942, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup> David Daiches, Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, Oxford, Cornell Univ., 1951, p. 187.

<sup>3</sup> Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials: The American Novel, 1915-1925, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1947, p. 155.

<sup>4</sup> Regis Michaud, The American Novel Today, A Social and Psychological Study, Boston, Little, 1928, p. 180.

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Lewisohn, Expression in America, N.Y., Harpers, 1932, p. 539.

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nor have they attempted to indicate its implications.<sup>6-9</sup> This thesis, then, intends to complete the work of this latter group in particular by showing Cather's world of the artists as a whole and by demonstrating that the spirit which moved the characters in her early works is the same as that which drives ahead those creations of her later novels and short stories.

## Definition of Terms

In discussing the "artists" in Cather's short stories and novels it will be necessary to make distinctions and to give definitions. In the first place the word "artist" will apply to all of those characters who are directly and intimately connected with the world of creative art: painters, singers, musicians, actors. Furthermore, this term will include those characters who have what is called the "souls of artists." These are the people on the fringe of the world of art. They possess a sensitivity which necessarily relates them in some way to the inner circle. Often this relationship is only a frustrated desire to become one with the artist, to create in some manner what they see coming alive before their eyes in the life of the real artist. Sometimes, as in One of Ours, it is restless and

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<sup>6</sup>Percy Boynton, America in Contemporary Fiction, Chicago, Univ. Press, 1940, p. 157 ff.

<sup>7</sup>Van Wyck Brooks, Sketches in Criticism, N. Y., Dutton, 1932, p. 94 ff.

<sup>8</sup>Harold Gardiner, Fifty Years of the American Novel: A Christian Appraisal, N. Y., Scribner's, 1952, p. 84 ff.

<sup>9</sup>Robert E. Spiller et al, Literary History of the United States, Vol. II, N. Y., Macmillan, 1948, p. 1214 ff.

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indefinable desire to perform any great act in life which could be considered "creative". The term, artist, therefore, will include both the individual acting creatively and the sensitive subject on the fringe of the world of art.

The term "Philistine" is one which appears frequently in connection with Cather's artists. This is the individual who poses as the enemy of the artist. He it is who stands in the way of the artist, who tries to use the creative genius for his own small ends, who looks upon the artist as foolish, impractical, unproductive. Often the Philistine appears as representing the materialistic world which Cather despised. By his contrasting spirit and personality he helps Cather present a more complete study of the artist world. A variation of the Philistine is found in those characters who oppose any of the men and women who are more interested in ideas than in things. He does not trust imagination or original thinking. This type is often present in those stories in which Cather writes of the pioneer.

## Division of Material

The writings of Willa Cather which are involved in this study are all of those in which she wrote of the artist and of the pioneer either exclusively or only incidentally.

The substance of this thesis must begin with Willa Cather herself. In her life and background are the elements which inspired her for the writing career that was to win her a place of outstanding importance in American literature. The second chapter, therefore, will present a brief account of her life in the West and of the later years spent in the publishing

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world of the East. In this section also will be included a summary of her personal relationship with the world of the real artists from which she drew much of the material for the fictional world she was creating.

Chapters Three and Four contain the major portion of the thesis. These will discuss the world of the artist in Cather's novels and short stories. This world first came to light with The Troll Garden published in 1905. Although Cather had written stories concerning the world of art in her years at the University, these have not been included in this study because of their obvious connection with her years of apprenticeship.<sup>10</sup> In addition to these Cather published many stories in magazines such as McClure's, Forum, and Century. Only one of these did she allow to be re-published.<sup>11</sup> Six others were done with the help of collaborators and cannot be discussed as her own work. Of the remaining fifteen stories, seven are studied here separately from her collected work.

The Troll Garden, her first collection, contains seven short stories.<sup>12</sup> Four of these were later republished with four new stories in

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<sup>10</sup> James R. Shively, ed., Writings from Willa Cather's Campus Years, Lincoln, Univ. of Nebraska, 1950.

<sup>11</sup> Dale Warren, ed., A Modern Galaxy, N.Y., Houghton, 1930.

<sup>12</sup> E.K. Brown in his Willa Cather, A Critical Biography, N.Y., Knopf, 1953, p.113 ff., offers an interesting interpretation of this collection: Willa Cather was under the spell of Henry James at this time and quite possibly was struck by the manner in which he always arranged his short-story collections thematically. If one were to seek a parallel to The Troll Garden in James, it is to be found in his volume The Two Magics, published while Willa Cather was in published while Willa Cather was in Pittsburg, in which he juxtaposed a tale of black magic (The Turn of the Screw) with what might be considered a tale of white magic (Covering End)-the one fateful, filled with suggestions of nightmare and evil, the other bright, sunny, cheerful, fairy-tale-like in substance and denouement. So Willa Cather's two strands in The Troll Garden are baleful and the sunny, the evil-working goblins and the industrious trolls.

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Youth and the Bright Medusa (1920). The stories of both these collections are concerned with the artist. They treat of his world from all viewpoints. The artists appear amid all of their temptations and struggles. Success brings them problems they had never dreamed of. They are surrounded with persons who oppose them or merely ignore them. One thing is certain; artists are people apart, prophets sent with a mission strange to the ears of the Philistines. Cather puts into these stories all that she believes about artists and their work, all that she has witnessed, all that she has been able to put together from her own experience and imagination. The spirit of these stories is summed up in a statement she made in a letter to the State Journal of Nebraska:

The further the world advances the more it becomes evident that an author's only safe course is to cling to the skirts of his art, forsaking all others, and keep unto her as long as they two shall live. An artist should not be vexed by human hobbies or human follies; he should be able to lift himself into the clear firmament of creation where the world is not. He should be among men but not of them, in the world but not of the world. Other men may think and believe and argue, but he must create.<sup>13</sup>

Even here the pioneer is not forgotten. Some of the atmosphere and spirit of the western man and woman are put into such stories as "The Diamond Mine," "A Wagner Matinee," and "A Death in the Desert." However, these are not the characters moved by the creative and suffering instincts of Cather's real pioneers and missionaries. For the true heroes we must wait for the novels where the relationship between the artist and the pioneer is more clearly drawn and the study made in greater detail.

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted by E. K. Brown, Willa Cather, p. 66.

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Two other collections of short stories, Obscure Destinies (1932) and Old Beauty and Others (1948) make little contribution to the world of the artist. However, the first volume contains portraits of the pioneer which are typical of Cather's characters. This is especially true of "Neighbor Rosicky" and "Two Friends."

The novels which Willa Cather wrote about artists may be divided into two groups: those in which the artist is only a minor character and those in which he has the major role. In the majority of the stories the artist is only a secondary figure but even this portrayal can be considered as making a contribution to the world of the artist. Sometimes the contribution is itself of minor importance as illustrated by the actress in Cather's first published novel, Alexander's Bridge (1912). There is only a glimpse of her as a performer but from this brief glance it is clear that she has that element of force and drive and imagination which belongs to all of Cather's real artists. In the same novel, however, the architect can be classed among those who are given the spark of creative inspiration.

These minor characters who help make up the world of the artist appear again and again in the novels. They may be actors, painters, writers, or any type of sharer in the creative impulse; they may be only in the background, but the reader knows that these are inhabitants of the real world where Cather worked, lived, and from which she drew so much material for the creation of her characters.

Those novels which deal with the artist exclusively are few. The first of these is The Song of the Lark which was published in 1915. This is

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the story of Thea Kronberg. It is undoubtedly into this character that Cather poured all that she had learned of the artist, and even all that she had learned of human nature. It is as though all of the other characters of this esoteric group which Cather created took their being from this singer. At the same time it is in Thea Kronberg that Cather put most of her own personal experiences of both the West and that glittering world of the artist that she had come to know so intimately. One biographer has this to say of Cather and the heroine of this novel:

In the Song of the Lark it was not difficult to combine what she felt about Fremstad (an internationally known singer of Cather's acquaintance) with what she felt about herself: in Thea Kronberg both are projected.<sup>14</sup>

Something of the same thing can be said for the second of the novels in which Cather deals exclusively with the artist: this is Lucy Gayheart published in 1935. It seems that in this work Cather was trying to say again much of the same thing that she had expressed so successfully in The Song of the Lark. Perhaps she felt that she had not completed the picture of the artist or had not made herself clear enough to her audience in the many portraits she had drawn thus far. Perhaps she thought that the principles which moved such people as Kitty Carlisle, Thea Kronberg, and Cressida Garnet needed re-affirming in the world that Cather saw being run over by the Philistines. Whatever her reason, she again depicted in this later novel one of those artists who had reached the top through a talent and a perseverance that belongs only to the elected ones. This time it is not the heroine who has all of those necessary qualities, but the hero,

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

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Clement Sebastian.

These are the only two novels in which the artist is given the entire stage to himself. But as a character of Cather's novels he has a responsibility greater than that of representing his art. He is to represent all of those other characters who have caught a spark of the fire with which he burns. He is to be the inspiration for all of those on the fringe of the artist's world, for all of those who have attempted the life of creation but have failed because the spark is not light enough, of all those who represent the Western pioneer in another type of creation.

The two major novels about artists, The Song of the Lark and Lucy Gayheart, the early short stories and the two collected volumes, The Troll Garden and Youth and the Bright Medusa, the many minor characters in the other novels and short stories, all have helped form a microcosm in which the artist is king. However there is one other novel which forms, as it were, a link between the characters moving under the influence of artistic creation and those who have been placed in the category of "pioneer." That novel is The Professor's House.

The Professor's House gives more meaning to the world of the artist and it helps to bind the creative personality with the world of the pioneer. That binding force is in the person of Tom Outland whose life and habits of thought are so intimately linked with those of the professor. It is in this novel too, that Cather shows a new turn in the evolution of her early artist and her early pioneer and draws a step nearer the hero as artist, pioneer, and priest as he was to be portrayed in a later novel,

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Death Comes for the Archbishop. In the words of Professor St. Peter, Cather shows the beginning of a new understanding of the artist:

I don't think you help people by making their conduct of no importance—you impoverish them. As long as every man and woman who crowded into the cathedrals on Easter Sunday was a principal in a gorgeous drama with God, glittering angels on one side and the shadows of evil coming and going on the other, life was a rich thing .... It makes us happy to surround our creature needs and bodily instincts with as much pomp and circumstance as possible. Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had.<sup>15</sup>

In The Professor's House the story of the artist and his world is more complete. In looking back at the minor characters who have sacrificed themselves for their art, at the sculptor who is buried among his unappreciative countrymen in the desert, at the painter in "Coming, Aphrodite !" who fights for his principles, at Thea Kronberg's development of her talent, her triumphs and success, at the overwhelming personality of Clement Sebastian, at all the great and gaudy world that Cather has created in her work it is evident that there is new meaning in that work, in those artists, in the suffering and struggles, and triumphs. In this novel with its delicate shift of emphasis, there is not a denial of the place of art, but Cather places religion side by side with it.<sup>16</sup> These are the two things, she says, which have given man his only happiness in life. The Professor's House is a story of the artist purified, one freed from the false ambitions that deceive him and all the illusions of life dissolved, but it is not a religious

<sup>15</sup> Willa Cather, The Professor's House, N.Y., Knopf, 1925, p. 68-9.

<sup>16</sup> E.K. Brown, Op.Cit., p. 246

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novel; it is not a triumph of religion over art.

By the time that Cather had written The Professor's House she had completed most of her study of the pioneer characters. Her second novel, O Pioneers! and her third, My Antonia, are devoted almost exclusively to this portrayal. Similarly, further examples of these characters are found in the short stories she had written previous to her publication days and those which were to be collectively published later in the two volumes: Obscure Destinies, Old Beauty and Others.

It is the purpose of the fifth chapter of this thesis to demonstrate that the pioneer characters are not far removed from those in the stories of the artists. They are filled with the same spirit, driven by the same desire to overcome the obstacles restraining them from the goals they have set themselves; they fall into the same periods of despondency, are halted by the same types of failures at the hands of fate, and all in all create for themselves a world that is at basis the same as that of the artist. To these immigrant people and to the missionaries who worked in the Southwest she has given many of the characteristics of the artist:

They are idealized, interpreted as creative personalities, vested with the characteristics of the artists whom Miss Cather knew by nature as well as by observation.<sup>17</sup>

As The Professor's House is something of a bridge between the old artist and the new, Death Comes for the Archbishop provides the entrance into the climax of Cather's creative work. It is the masterpiece

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<sup>17</sup> Percy Boynton, Op. Cit., p. 157.

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of that world. It is this story which presents the artist complete, the pioneer complete, the saint complete.

Cather has said in an essay regarding this novel something which gives a keynote to this triumph of her writing. She writes:

I did not sit down to write the book until the feeling of it had so teased me that I could not get on with other things. The writing of it took only a few months, because the book had been lived many times before it was written, and the happy mood in which I began it never paled.<sup>18</sup>

This statement, of course, has reference to the many hours of research she spent in the Southwest, but it can be applied in another sense to the many things which she had written before which formed, as it were, the foundations for this novel. The research and the background material she used for this novel was more than that which she found in the history of Father Lamy and Father Machebeuf; it was more than the details of the Southwest landscape with which she became so familiar; it was more, even, than her thorough knowledge of human nature. It was all of the effort, all of the searching, all of the striving and idealism she had put into the characters of the artists she had already portrayed, of the minor characters of the earlier novels and short stories, of the pioneers who fought and died for their ideals. Here she has done more than bracketed religion and art. She has made the religion of her missionary characters the art of living. These men are as sensitive, as inspired, as rebuffed, as idealistic, as persevering as the greatest of her artistic characters. On all sides they are met by another

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<sup>18</sup> Willa Cather, On Writing, p. 10.

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brand of Philistinism, ignorance. They are called upon again and again to renew their faith in the ideals which brought them to this new country. They must, like the pioneers, often sow without reaping, nourish the tender shoots against a hundred enemies. They have come to build a spiritual civilization on the old ruins. They are not in the glittering, scrambling world of the artist, but apart on a brilliantly designed landscape with the only audience to admire them: the souls to whom they have come to minister. These characters are the epitome of all that Cather attempted to create in the souls of her artistic characters. They have an ideal that will not fade and an inspiration that is Divine.

If any of the characters who lead the parade of her great artists and great pioneers were placed in these circumstances there would be the same results for they all possess that determination and dedication which makes for as complete a success as there can be in this life.

Although Cather returned to the artistic world in a later novel, Lucy Gayheart, she never again achieved or came so near achieving so perfectly designed a portrait. Even in Shadows on the Rock the characters lack that exuberant dedication to their ideal. It is rather a grim determination to keep one's head above water and out of the mysterious flood of depression that sweeps the world. There is no more of that struggle and final success, no more of the great emotions satisfied. Cather has written in a fragmentary essay:

No art can do anything at all with great natural forces or great elemental emotions. No poet can write of love, hate,

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jealousy. He can only touch these things as they affect the people in his drama and his story .....<sup>19</sup>

Although Willa Cather seems to have been striving in all of her work to depict just these forces and these emotions that are elemental she obviously succeeded, at the least, in showing how these things affected her characters whether they are artists, pioneers, or priests. The attempt to deal with these great forces with the heroic ideal is at the basis of all of her work. She has tried to get at the essence of things, at the final meaning of life:

Her stories present the old case of the artist versus the people, the heart versus what the public calls success, the life of the spirit versus materialism, a case under trial for a century in prosperous America. But she offered an interesting variant in organizing her stories about the life of a good man or woman - that is, a human being intensely, often rapturously, devoted to the experience of deep living itself.<sup>20</sup>

The short stories and novels surveyed in this thesis are summarized individually with the intention of providing sufficient evidence to illustrate the continuity of Cather's theme. They have been condensed as much as it was thought possible without damaging the author's underlying idea. With each story there is a commentary pointing out the principles which go to make up this world of the artist.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>20</sup> Spiller, Op. Cit., p. 1214

## CHAPTER TWO

## THE WORLD OF WILLA CATHER

## Red Cloud, Nebraska

Willa Cather was born December 7, 1873 in Frederick County, Virginia.<sup>1</sup> She did not attend school while living in Virginia but was taught at home by her well-educated Grandmother Boak. There was plenty of time during her nine year stay in this Southern state to gather material for future writings but the fact is that very few of the impressions and experiences which must have been hers during the tender years appear in her fiction. It was only with her very last novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl, that she took either theme or subject from Virginia for her story telling. There are portraits of her father, her mother, and herself in the short story "Old Mrs. Harris" but the scene is far removed from her early homestead. One of the family retainers, Margie, appears often in Cather's writings: "Mahailey" in One of Ours, "Marty" in the poem, "Poor Marty," and "Mandy" in "Old Mrs. Harris," but again this is a personage who belongs to the Red Cloud days as well as to the more youthful years.

In 1883, when Willa Cather was nine years old, her parents decided to leave Virginia, and join the grandparents, William and Caroline Cather, on their ranch near what is now Catherton, in Webster County, Nebraska, about twenty miles from Red Cloud.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E.K. Brown, Willa Cather. A Critical Biography, p. 17. Leon Edel's footnote clarifies the most disputed problem of Willa Cather's birthdate.

<sup>2</sup> Edith Lewis, Willa Cather, Living: A Personal Record, N.Y., Knopf, 1953, p. 13.

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This land to which Willa now moved was pioneer territory. It was the frontier, halfway across the state of Nebraska where the first settlement had been made as recently as 1870. It was a wild land, yet untamed, that had drawn its settlers from half of the countries of Europe. This was the land and these were the people that Cather was to re-create in her stories of pioneers and artists.

Although the Cather family stayed on the land only for a year before moving into the prairie town of Red Cloud, Willa had sufficient opportunities to learn to love the land and its people. She used to go for long walks and horseback rides about the country sides visiting all who came within her reach and beneath her gaze. She found particular delight in spending hours with the immigrants from the Scandinavian countries, studying their customs, listening to their complaints, asking them questions about the culture from which they had come. These people became a part of her life; the personalities, customs, conventions, she came to know now were enough to fill many books. She became intimate with their habits, and friends to most of them. In a recent publication Mildred Bennett<sup>3</sup> has gone to great length to identify numerous individuals as they appear in Cather's novels and short stories. Antonia Schimerda of My Antonia, Mrs. Forrester of A Lost Lady, Wunsch of The Song of the Lark and many others were personal friends of Willa Cather's on the Divide and in Red Cloud.

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<sup>3</sup> Mildred Bennett, The World of Willa Cather, N.Y., Dodd, Mead & Co., 1951,

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Cather's appreciation of these people went beyond a simple attraction; it was more than an unconscious collecting of material for future stories. From them she also learned the values, the understanding of life, the struggles, the triumphs, the ambitions that were to fill the hearts of her fictional characters. These peoples were real and Willa Cather believed in them. When they took their places in her novels they retained their reality and Cather was just as interested in their success or failure. She knew her friends so well that the pictures she draws of them in her fiction take on depth and substance. In the short story "The Bohemian Girl" Nils Ericson who has come back to the West after an absence of twelve years contemplates a group of these immigrant grandmothers as they sit around in a circle at one of the local social functions. He notices particularly their dark veined hands:

In reality he fell into amazement when he thought of the Herculean labors those fifteen pairs of hands had performed; of the cows they had milked, the butter they made, the gardens they had planted, the children and grandchildren they had tended . . . .<sup>4</sup>

The land itself became part of Cather's work. She knew what it was like at every season of the year. That great prairie swept with blinding snow isolating the settlers in their lonely world, or golden with the blossoming wheat undulating in the soft breeze, or flooded with rain washing a thousand gullies across the fields, or blowing away in great clouds of dust during the season of drought, was part of Cather's world and finds its way into her

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<sup>4</sup> Willa Cather, "The Bohemian Girl", McClure's Magazine, Vol. 39, No. 4, August, 1912, p. 438.

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novels. The spirit of the land is there too. The greatness of the challenge it presents to the pioneers gives epic proportions to her stories of pioneers and artists. The vastness of the prairie itself seems to fill her characters with an open-hearted optimism in the face of life's trials and a deep humility when they must bear defeat.

Willa Cather's early days in Nebraska were not entirely taken up with visiting and riding on the prairie. She spent a lot of time reading and eventually she began to go to school in Red Cloud. From Virginia she had brought a box of books and in these she managed to find an old copy of Ben Jonson's plays, Shakespeare, and Byron's poems. During one of the long winters in Red Cloud she is said to have read through The Pilgrim's Progress eight times.<sup>5</sup>

When Willa began her formal schooling in Red Cloud she had the advantage of several teachers of exceptional ability for a town of that size. Mrs. Eva J. Case, a teacher of literature and foreign languages, with whom Cather read "Paradise Lost," provided her with "one of her first literary experiences."<sup>6</sup> This fine teacher and later one of the county superintendents appears in Cather's short story "The Best Years" as Miss Knightly.

Mr. and Mrs. A. K. Goudy were state superintendent and high school principal respectively when Willa graduated in 1890. This couple

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, Op. Cit., p. 32.

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became Cather's close confidants, and when she was attending the University in Lincoln she continued to enjoy their company and encouragement in that city to which they had also moved.

Mr. William Ducker, an Englishman of about sixty, helped stimulate Willa's interest in Latin and Greek. He was one of the dreamers among the more rugged pioneers and while he ran a store in Red Cloud he could be found most of the time pouring over the meters of the "Iliad," "Aeneid" or the "Odes of Anacreon" in a corner of his shop. For Willa he helped bring the classical authors to life during her rather dry classroom associations with them.

A Mrs. Charles Wiener and her husband likewise played an important part in the development of Willa Cather's mind. In the home of these friends who spoke both French and German, Willa was given free use of an extensive library. Here she spent many afternoons pouring over the accumulated volumes, informing herself about French and German culture, and here, too, she first began to speak French. This learned couple recognized Cather's abilities and encouraged her to hard study. In return she gave them a place in her world by depicting them as the "Rosens" in the story of "Old Mrs. Harris."

Willa's old music teacher, Shindelmeisser, who became Dr. Wunsch in The Song of the Lark, had a difficult time teaching her. She seemed not interested in learning to become a pianist but wanted to spend the time with her teacher listening to him play the piano and sing. She

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never became an even passable pianist or singer but she had an ear for music and loved it as is quite evident in the many pages of her stories and criticism which she devotes to a professional analysis of various compositions. From this teacher, too, she heard stories of great European music and musicians which fired her imagination for the artistic world.

When Willa went to the University she had a difficult time deciding whether to enroll in the scientific or the classical course of studies. Finally she chose both. But the reason for her interest in the subject of science goes back to her life at Red Cloud. There, through the influence of Mr. Ducker, Dr. Damerell and Dr. McKeeby (Dr. Archie in The Song of the Lark), she developed an intense interest in biology and medicine.<sup>7</sup> She used to make house calls with the two doctors and learned from them to administer anaesthetics. This particular realm of interest does not play a major part in her stories but it is at least indicative of the hungry acquisitiveness of her mind which aided in her understanding and portrayal of human nature.

Perhaps Willa Cather's early ideas of artists were enlarged by the presence of Peorianna Bogardus Sill in the town of Red Cloud. This cultured woman had studied art in Europe for fifteen years and was well known and highly appreciated by many of the outstanding personalities of the continent.<sup>8</sup> While the writings of Willa Cather give no indication of her relationship with Mrs. Sill there is no doubt that her inquisitive nature did not disregard entirely this character who seemed so out of place in the small prairie town.

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<sup>7</sup> Bennett, Op. Cit., p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 158.

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For the most part these were the persons who influenced Willa Cather and helped form her mind during her years in Red Cloud. She owed much to all of these and she knew that they were important for her. Her great sensitivity to all people and things around her, her undying curiosity, the vitality of her receptiveness, her responsiveness to any and all encouragement, won her these lifetime friends and stimulated her in the development of her art.

One other important contribution to the making of Willa Cather was the cultural life of Red Cloud. The chief source of this institution was the Opera House. To this town of some five thousand inhabitants come travelling stock companies, not usually first rate performers, who would display their repertory for a week or so. Half a dozen times during the winter months the citizens of Red Cloud were thus entertained. Everything surrounding the company and the performances had the air of carnival. These were creatures from the fairy tale world of the imagination. And how their pompous performances must have thrilled such adolescents as Willa Cather. She has written that these operas and plays formed one of the great imaginative elements in her development as an artist. They stimulated simultaneously her interest in stories, music, and the fascinating individuals behind the productions. In My Antonia she gives a detailed description of one of these melodramatic operas as it was performed in the presence of Lena Lingard in Lincoln. Some of the plays which found their way to Red Cloud were: "The Corsican Brothers," "Damon and Pythias," "The Count of Monte Cristo," and the operas: "The Mikado," "The Chimes of Normandy," and "The Bohemian Girl."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Brown, Op. Cit., p. 38.

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University Days<sup>10</sup>

Willia Cather went to Lincoln in 1890 where she began taking courses in preparation for entering the University. There were several professors at this institution who had an affect upon her future career in one way or another. Perhaps the most stimulating of these men was Professor Ebenezer Hunt, her instructor in English. It was he who assigned her a theme on Carlyle which he later managed to have published in the Nebraska State Journal. "The editor of the Journal wrote an editorial about it; and the talk, the praise, the sudden elevation to fame among her classmates that followed had a marked effect on Willa Cather."<sup>11</sup> Although the thought of this theme and other writings of her University days often embarrassed the accomplished authoress, there is no doubt that such unexpected encouragement directed her in the choice of a writing career.

When she was a sophomore Willa Cather became editor of the school paper, "The Hesperian," which she helped to establish. To this she contributed many themes on any number of subjects. She wrote stories and plays, editorials and criticisms. Some of these were republished in other magazines by her English teacher after he had corrected them and touched them up. These writings are certainly of her apprentice years and only in part reflect the talent she was to display in later stories. Six of these stories of the 1890's have been recently republished in the book by Shively. Other

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<sup>10</sup> Shively, Op. Cit., contains a series of letters written by Cather's classmates about her university days. p. 119 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 31

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of her articles which appeared in the Nebraska State Journal during these years are more indicative of both her talent and the principles which guided her.

Cather's course of studies was both linguistic and literary.

Although she became a proficient student of Greek, most of her efforts were given to the study of English Literature and writing. Dr. Lucius A. Sherman, head of the English Department, was undoubtedly responsible for Cather's methods of informal criticism as a result of his formalized methods of studying literature. She rebelled against his systematic analysis of texts, of phrases, of vowels and there were many clashes between the professor and the student. As a result Cather's literary criticism was usually heavy with expression of her personal reactions rather than a clear cut analysis based on objective judgements.

In the autumn of 1893 Willa was given a chance to express her views to the public when she was offered a position on the staff of the State Journal by Will Owen Jones. The managing editor who gave special instructions in Journalism at the University invited her to write for the Sunday editions. During the next two years she turned out a great number of articles, some good and some bad, but with the principal effect of increasing her interest in the theatre and clearing up many of the defects of her over-emotional style.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bennett, Op. Cit., p. 182.

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The position on the Journal was further significant in crystalizing Cather's ideas about art and the artist. Many of the expressions of opinions and displays of principle which are found in her reviews of plays and operas appear later in her short stories and novels. For example, the belief that the artist is one set apart, one who has a vocation that should not be restrained by the common follies which weigh down the ordinary mortals, is expressed in one of her early columns and is often repeated in various forms in her later fictional work.<sup>13</sup>

During the 1890's Lincoln, Nebraska was one of the highlights of the tours of many excellent stock companies. Most of the famous plays and players of the day made appearances in the local Funk Opera House. Bernhardt in Sardou's "La Corciere," Modjecka in "Anthony and Cleopatra," Julia Marlowe in "The Love Chase," Mary Shaw in "Ghosts," Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Richard Mansfield, Lillian Lewis, Clara Morris, all played in Lincoln during Cather's career as drama critic. Her reviews were often harsh, always high spirited, and usually full of pointed criticism.<sup>14</sup>

Cather was quick to judge the good and the bad among the performers appearing in the Opera House. She was searching for the artist who believed in his art enough to live for it constantly. When she thought she saw such talent in any of these men and women she said as much in her Sunday column, but when she saw that the spark was missing she was just as quick to comment on the lack of it. Many of these articles are preserved in the Benjamin D. Hitz Collection of Cather items at the Newberry Library in Chicago. Also appearing

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<sup>13</sup> Shively, Op. Cit., p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, Op. Cit., p. 68.

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there are her contributions to "The Hesperian," the University annual, "The Sombrero," and The Lincoln Courier, a weekly for which she began writing in 1895 and to which she continued to send contributions when she was working in Pittsburg.<sup>15</sup>

During her five years in Lincoln Willa Cather had made many friends who had an influence in one way or another upon her later work. The Westermann family who appear in One of Ours as the Erlichs were close friends of Cather's. A brother of Mrs. Westermann, Dr. Julius Tyndale, took a special interest in Willa, and his stories, beliefs, and opinions had an important effect upon her intellectual development. He was well informed about the literary and musical world and did not hesitate to influence Cather's tastes in these matters. His acquaintance with the world of artists in the East stirred Cather's imagination and gave her basic material for her writings.<sup>16</sup>

Dorothy Canfield and her family were close friends of Cather's. Although Dorothy was several years younger than Willa they collaborated on a short story for the University annual which won a prize but is dismissed as being a poor criterion of the future of either of these writers. Mrs. Canfield, an artist and student of literature, was more of an influence and inspiration for Cather at this time. She was well versed in French literature and had a personal association with French artists. This was perhaps the beginning of the influence of French writers upon the craftsmanship of Cather. The very atmosphere in which she lived was enough to excite Cather's growing love and knowledge of the artist and his world.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather, A Memoir, N.Y., Lippincott, 1953, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Brown, Op. Cit., p. 63.

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Willa Cather graduated from the University in June, 1895. She spent the year at home where financial troubles in her family weighed heavily upon her. Her application for a teaching position at the University was turned down but while visiting Lincoln she met Mr. Axtell who offered her an editor's job on his new magazine, The Home Monthly, which was published in Pittsburg.

## Pittsburg

Her work on The Home Monthly provided much experience for the position she was to have later with McClure's, however, she found little time during these years for the writing of fiction. The stories she did write and publish under her own or an assumed name were for the most part stereotyped exercises. She was not developing her talents as an artist to any great extent but only continuing with the style and material she had learned at Lincoln. Most of her time was taken up with the drudgery of performing all of the tasks of a managing editor; however, she stored up material for her later writings through her many friends and associations with the world of art.

At Carnegie Hall she could forget the monotony of her daily labors in listening to the symphony orchestra under the direction of Victor Herbert. Here she increased her knowledge and appreciation of the musical world and began to meet many of the outstanding singers and composers of the day. Among the latter group was Ethelbert Nevin, the author of "The Rosary", who also dedicated a song to Willa Cather.

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In this musical world she had the opportunity of listening to all of the great voices of the day: Melba, Nordica, Sembrich, Calvé, and her interest in them as it is reflected in her dramatic writings is more concerned with the struggle which made them great, the undeviating devotion to their art, their heroic stature which set them apart from the rest of the world. It is the same type of interest which she has in her own heroine-artists: Thea Kronborg, Cressida Garnet, and the rest. In her writings for "The Passing Show" she dwells upon the trappings of the artist's world; the costumes, the intermissions, the curtain calls, the applause and all of the brilliant minutiae of the opera which were a delight to her and her readers.

Among her many influential friends was George Seibel who has written of her many visits to his home.<sup>17</sup> Here she found opportunities to read the French classics and to spend long hours in discussing the arts with her learned friend.

In 1897 Willa Cather resigned her position with The Home Monthly and spent the next four years on the staff of the largest evening paper in Pennsylvania, The Daily Leader. Her task with the Leader was essentially that of copy reading, headline writing, and general re-writing. However, she was given the opportunity of writing dramatic criticism which was a form of journalism more to her liking and enlarged her background. Her weekly article, "The Passing Show," was also published in The Lincoln Courier. Her criticism had not changed much from that of her Lincoln days. It was

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<sup>17</sup> George Seibel, "Miss Willa Cather from Nebraska," New Colophon, Vol. 2, part 7, 1949, p. 195-208.

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emotional, dramatic and more concerned with the players as individuals than with their work upon the stage.<sup>18</sup>

These articles, however, are a reflection of her growth as an artist. They reveal her widening interest in all forms of art, in the new realism in the American novel, in new actors and singers, in her deepening concern with the French writers. Perhaps one of the most important effects of this column and of her position as dramatic critic was that it brought her into personal contact with these artists. She could study them during her interviews, in the dressing room, at lunches, and in moments of relaxation. The fame which she gained with this newspaper was not great but it provided her with the opportunity of travelling in the East to attend plays and operas and permitted her one summer to act as guest drama critic for the New York Sun.

In 1901 Willa Cather retired from The Leader and took a position in the Central High School as teacher of Latin and English. From 1903-1906 she taught at the Allegheny High School. When she began this work she realized how much her energy had been sapped by her labor with The Leader. She now had time to devote serious effort to the writing of fiction and it was during these years that she published her first two books: one of poetry, April Twilights (1903), and one of short stories, The Troll Garden (1905).

During these years as teacher Cather continued to increase her interest in the world of art and to make friends associated with her development as an artist. Isabelle McClung whose family was an important one in Pittsburg

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<sup>18</sup> Brown, Op. Cit., p. 86.

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persuaded Willa Cather to live in their house on Murray Hill during her teaching career. Isabelle was something unique in her family of Scotch Presbyterians. She had a great interest in artists of all kinds and gave much encouragement to Willa in her budding writing career. Through this acquaintanceship, too, Willa met the Dr. Litchfield family. Mrs. Litchfield was an accomplished pianist and took part in many of the stylish Pittsburg concerts. The very atmosphere of the house where famous musicians often visited, where new compositions were first played, and where the arts were held in the highest respect became part of Cather's background material for her novels.

It was at the end of her first year of teaching that Cather made her first visit to Europe in company with Isabelle McClung. This experience was of great importance to Willa. Her itinerary was directed by her knowledge of literature. Through England and France she discovered the landmarks of her literary heroes. It was more than a tour or pilgrimage; this visit provided something of an intensification of all her interests in the writers and the peoples of Europe. It brought her into contact with the roots of her pioneer people of the West. It brought her closer to the source of the great musical compositions which by now had become part of her daily life.

After her return to teaching and during the next few years Willa Cather approached the end of her apprenticeship. She began to produce short stories, to create characters in her fiction which were to have a permanent place in her contribution to literature. By 1905 with the publication of her first book of short stories she had arrived at the beginning of her

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career as an artist. She had faced many difficult struggles, overcome serious obstacles, discovered her world of artists and the memories of her pioneers. She had gained the leisure she needed to let her ideas work through her and find expression in tranquility. She had achieved a certain success in the literary world which would demand from her more work and greater perfection. And it was with this knowledge of her position that she accepted the offer to work for McClure's Magazine in 1906.

## McClure's 1906-1912

Willa Cather began working for McClure's Magazine soon after a grave turnover in the staff. She was given an editor's position involving the responsibilities of manuscript reading and often of checking on the sources of the startling feature articles which were the mainstay of McClure's popularity. Her efficiency was such that in two years she was made managing editor. The history of McClure's is not important to this thesis but the activities of Willa Cather during this time are important to her development as an artist.

It was during one of her assignments-that of investigating the facts of a series of articles on Mary Baker Eddy-that she came into contact with the people in Boston who were to be of great influence on her career. It was here she met Ferris Greenslet who had reviewed her book of poems and through whose influence she was to find an important publisher for her first novels. Among her other friends was Louis Brandeis, the distinguished American jurist, whose insight into literature had a profound affect upon the

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young artist. With Mr. and Mrs. Brandeis Willa Cather shared many of her enthusiasms in music and literature and it was Mrs. Brandeis who introduced Cather to Mrs. James T. Fields and Miss Jewett.

At 148 Charles Street, the home of Mrs. Fields, Cather came into an atmosphere that was to have lifelong memories for her. She has recorded some of those memories of this house in an essay in Not Under Forty. Mrs. Fields' house existed as a salon for all of the important English and American writers of the day. Charles Dickens stayed there when in the States; Thackeray had written part of Henry Esmond there. Holmes, Longfellow, Lowell, Emerson, Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry James and other great lights of literature and the stage had found this a place of rest and seclusion. And Mrs. Fields could make the memories of these people come alive. She could repeat their conversations, reveal their dreams and aspirations, review what they had thought, said and done there. It is no wonder that Willa Cather was impressed and influenced. It was as though her own world of artists and pioneers had come alive in this house. These were the types of people she was to write about, the elite of the world of art. In the hours that she spent with Mrs. Fields in this sacred old house she could let her imagination soar to the heights of the ideals that had been expressed here and in viewing the collections of manuscripts and books which had belonged to great writers she could contemplate more readily the labor that went into them and the value they possessed. The atmosphere which she found here was important in solidifying the ideas she had about this world of letters and music and drama. Her biographer insists that this was the place she always wanted and needed:

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All her life Willa Cather had wished for the atmosphere she found in Charles Street, an atmosphere where the arts and manners of a past time lingered with none of the desiccation of the classroom but with the fragrant natural life that can be maintained only by discriminating affection.<sup>19</sup>

During the seven years in which she visited this house at intervals she absorbed much of the atmosphere that was to be expressed delicately and almost inconspicuously in her short stories and novels.

The influence of Mrs. Fields and her company is not as obvious as the effect of her friendship with Sarah Orne Jewett. It was the profitable task of Miss Jewett to turn Willa Cather's attention away from the type of story she was to attempt in Alexander's Bridge and direct it to her own region of Nebraska and the frontier West. These two women writers had much in common including their backgrounds. Both were from small towns in areas where there befell an economic and social decline. Both had taken Flaubert for a master and had read much in other French writers. Both looked upon literature with the same dedication. In an essay which Cather wrote as an introduction to The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett and later re-wrote for separate publication,<sup>20</sup> every observation concerning Miss Jewett's writing can be applied to her own.

On December 13, 1908 Miss Jewett wrote Willa Cather a letter from Charles Street which undoubtedly had a profound effect upon the younger author's future career. It is filled with sympathy, encouragement

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>20</sup> Cather, On Writing, p. 47.

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and advice. Over and above its importance as inspiration it reads like a prophecy of Cather's later attitudes. Miss Jewett warns Willa first of the danger of overwork:

I cannot help saying what I think about your writing and its being hindered by such incessant, important, responsible work as you have in your hands now. I do think that it is impossible for you to work so hard and yet have your gifts mature as they should.<sup>21</sup>

In the same letter she reminds Willa Cather that her stories now are not much better than they were five years ago. She points out that she has gathered much experience during her life in Nebraska, Pittsburg, and New York and that she must learn to stand on the outside of these memories to write about them. At this point of the letter she gives Cather a principle which was to be applied and repeated in the great novels still to come from Cather's pen. Thus Miss Jewett writes:

....and you need to dream your dreams and go on to new and more shining ideals, to be aware of 'the gleam' and to follow it; your vivid, exciting companionship in the office must not be your audience, you must find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that to the world....<sup>22</sup>

These words of direction never left the mind of Willa Cather. In the essay she wrote for the book of Miss Jewett's short stories she quotes from another letter she had received from her friend. "The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper-whether little or great, it belongs to literature."<sup>23</sup> It is this same

<sup>21</sup> Annie Fields, ed., Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett, N. Y., Houghton Mifflin, 1911, p. 247.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>23</sup> Cather, On Writing, p. 47.

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thought which Cather expresses about her own writing of Death Comes for the Archbishop. She writes: "I did not sit down to write the book until the feeling of it had so teased me that I could not get on with other things."<sup>24</sup> There could be no more certain indication of the likeness of these two writers as a result of Miss Jewett's influence on Cather. E.K. Brown refers to the letter of December, 1908 as the most important Cather ever received.

It is an instance of something very rare in the arts, advice of a fundamental kind, arriving at the right time, and exercising a strong if not an immediate influence.<sup>25</sup>

Miss Jewett's dissatisfaction with the stories that Willa Cather was writing at this time is indication of the elder woman's insight into the latent talents of her friend. The stories lacked force and imagination. They seemed more like pattern pieces cut to design for McClure's and The Century Magazine. Willa Cather never permitted them to be re-published for she felt that they were not of the work that was written from her own "quiet center of life." The first story which she published that shows the beginning of her discovery of her memories appeared unfortunately after the death of Sarah Orne Jewett who would have taken great pleasure in knowing that Willa Cather was heeding her advice. The story is "The Enchanted Bluff" which appeared in Harper's Monthly in April 1909. It differs from her other work in that it does not follow formulas but evokes a mood drawn from memories of a sandbar in the Republican River where she played as a child. The incident later appears in My Antonia where it finds a perfect setting in this novel of the dreamers of the West.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, Op. Cit., p. 140.

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During 1908 Willa Cather made a tour of France and Italy in the company of her friend Isabelle McClung. This trip was not of literary importance but in 1909 she again crossed the ocean, this time to gather material for McClure's in London. There she met William Archer who was to become her good friend and through whom she met most of the London literary circle: Edmund Gosse, Ford Madox Hueffer, Yeats, Lady Gregory, Wells, and others. But it was Archer who provided her with a principle which she was not to forget and which was to have an influence in getting rid of the attachment to formula so apparent in her early stories. Cather had made the comment that Synge's The Playboy of the Western World was interesting but lacking in the dramatic. To this Archer replied that anything interesting had its dramatic quality and its place in the theatre.<sup>26</sup> This became one of the demonstrable beliefs in her creed of fiction writing.

While Willa Cather was managing editor of McClure's the magazine prospered more than it ever had. But the strain was too much for her. She could not find the time nor the quiet to devote to her own creative impulses. In 1912, therefore, she resigned from the magazine and from then until 1941 she was to devote herself almost exclusively to her literary career. But her training at McClure's had been profitable for her. She was better prepared now for the task ahead. H.S. Canby speaks of her at this point of her career.

Either then or later, Miss Cather's creative mind ranged widely through literature, and she chose her tradition in craftsmanship, which was French, and her subject matter,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

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which was the heroic but neglected virtue of the last pioneers of the unconquered West.<sup>27</sup>

And Miss Cather was to take into the years of her writing career all that she had learned of the artist and the pioneer and all that she was to learn. Her stories with few exceptions were to involve creative personalities.

Literary Career  
1913-1947

It was shortly after her resignation from McClure's that Willa Cather paid a visit to her brother in the West. Douglass Cather was quite familiar with the Southwest and Mexico. For years he had worked for the Sante Fe Railroad. Willa learned much from his guided tours and the knowledge that he had picked up in his work and travels. It was during this visit that she explored some of the cliff-dwellings which appear so completely and sympathetically described in The Song of the Lark, The Professor's House and even briefly, in Death Comes for the Archbishop.

During the remainder of her literary career Willa Cather made many trips to the West and Southwest. In 1915 she paid a visit to the Mesa Verde in Colorado with her friend Edith Lewis. The two women spent a week on the Mesa and this was Cather's only visit to the place that was to have such a major role in "Tom Outland's Story" of The Professor's House. The highlight of this trip was the several hours these two women were stranded in one of the canyons and had to await rescuers. Miss Lewis writes of this experience and its effect upon Willa Cather:

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<sup>27</sup> Henry Seidel Canby, "Willa Cather, 1876-1947", an editorial in The Saturday Review of Literature, May 10, 1947, p. 22.

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The four or five hours that we spent waiting there were, I think, for Willa Cather the most rewarding of our whole trip to the Mesa Verde.... We were tired and rather thirsty, but not worried, for we knew we should eventually be found. We did not talk, but watched the long summer twilight come one, and the full moon rise up over the rim of the canyon. The place was very beautiful.<sup>28</sup>

It was on such trips that Willa Cather gained much experience for the writing of her novels about the West and Southwest. She had a facility for absorbing the moods of her surroundings and for bringing away with her an understanding of the personalities of the railroaders, missionaries, and Mexicans she met.

In 1913 Willa Cather was asked by McClure's Magazine to write an article on the opera. The result was "Three American Singers" which appeared in the December issue of 1913. The article was a result of interviews with Louise Home, Geraldine Farrar, and Olive Fremstad. The last of this group had the most profound influence upon Willa Cather and was the inspiration for the mature heroine in her novel, The Song of the Lark. Fremstad appealed to Willa Cather as the pioneer women had done. The force of her personality, the unlimited ambitions, the enthusiasm of her individuality were all attractive features that Cather sought in living and in fictional heroes. She saw in this singer the artist who places the idea before everything else. She saw one who "felt always that her vision was greater than any human power could encompass or satisfy."<sup>29</sup> As Brown writes,

The qualities that Willa Cather found in Fremstad are qualities one might hope to find in a great artist who came from the

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, Op. Cit., 97.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

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frontier; in her singing were the force and originality of the pioneers, translated into terms of disciplined art.<sup>30</sup>

Fremstad represents, perhaps more than any other of Cather's friends, the type of individual she desired to know in this life and the type of character she tried to create in her best novels. From such people she drew her experiences for her novels and she felt that such friends were particularly necessary to artists. They are ideals from whom the rest of mankind can draw inspiration even as Cather's great creations-Knoborg, Alexandra Bergson, Fr. Valliant-are ideals in whom the force of life has found magnificent expression.

Another influential event in the career of Willa Cather was her change of publishers. Up until 1920 her novels had been published by Houghton Mifflin. At the time of My Antonia Cather began to feel that she could never write the type of book that her publishers most liked. Their reception of this novel, which she thought was the best thing she had done until now, was not encouraging. The sale of it was small even though the best of critics acclaimed it enthusiastically. Therefore, Willa Cather went to Alfred Knopf whose Borzoi books listed under its imprint many of the great writers of the day. Thomas Mann, Sigrid Undset, Knut Hamsun, Katherine Mansfield were all being published in this country by Knopf.

Cather's confidence in her new publisher was not misplaced. Her novels from this day forward were better received in all respects. Miss Lewis evaluates the change in this fashion:

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<sup>30</sup> Brown, Op. Cit., p. 187.

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Next to writing her novels, Willa Cather's choice of Alfred Knopf as a publisher influenced her career, I think, more than any action she ever took. It was not so much that with him she was able in a few years to achieve financial security... as that he gave her great encouragement and absolute liberty to write exactly as she chose - protected her in every way he could from outside pressures and interruptions-and made evident, not only to her but to the world in general, his great admiration and belief in her.<sup>31</sup>

The effect of this change is more evident in the light of the fact that at this time Willa Cather was becoming more and more dissatisfied with the materialism and mechanism of modern life. She needed the encouragement, the seclusion, and the financial security to help her continue with her literary career and not to become totally bitter and unresponsive. In Not Under Forty she has written that "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabout." She was beginning to feel that American life was representative of all of those ideals and creeds which were directly contrary to her own beliefs. People were not living for the idea. There was little interest in the need for personal accomplishment as expressed in the great pioneers and artists. Art had gone out of life and machines of all kinds had taken its place. In some of her novels after this period there is more noticeable her consciousness of this decline. In One of Ours, The Professor's House and A Lost Lady there are portraits of the triumph of the Philistine, particularly in small towns.

---Miss Cather's stories return again and again to her themes; youth lost and fortitude maintained, daring and art and valor. The old values she frequently likes to suggest, are better than the new. The giants lived yesterday; pygmies rule today.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Lewis, Op. Cit., p. 115-6.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Poore, "The Last Stories of Willa Cather," New York Times Book Review Section, Sept. 12, 1948, p. 3.

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But in spite of these lapses into despondency she was still able to depict the characters who gave themselves without stint to their vocations as artists and pioneers. She herself continued to fulfil the role of artist-pioneer by never giving up the fight to inspire others to cling to the highest ideals.

The major portion of Willa Cather's writing was to be done after 1922, but this year marks perhaps the end of the great influences upon her writing career. She would try new experiments; she would incorporate new scenes like the old city of Quebec and the old missionary territory of the Southwest; she would add perfections to her style with each new work. But the chief pattern had been set by 1922. She knew what belonged to her world and whenever she created an atmosphere or a character there was always some memory of the artist and pioneer. This was the pattern of her work until about 1936 when she wrote "The Old Beauty" a conservative "nouvelle" Which has little of her old adventurous spirit. Her last novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl, written from 1937 to 1940 under the most adverse circumstances, seems to be something left over, the fulfilment of a promise to write about Virginia, the place of her birth. E.K. Brown gives 1936 as the time of the greatest change in Cather's writing.

Up to 1936 she had been drawn chiefly, almost entirely, to what was creative and heroic in the past, to the breaking of "the wild land," to the preservation of what was fine in old ways by a bold adaptation to new circumstances, to the survival against huge odds of a great idea or feeling.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Brown, Op. Cit., p. 305.

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In short she had been concerned with the creation of the world of the artist and the pioneer. And this is the theme which is most characteristic of Willa Cather. Through all of her life she searched in the living and the fictional characters for those to represent what she felt about the artists and pioneers. Without these there would be no character in all of her writing worthy of mention in literary history. As it is, however, each of the short stories and novels analyzed in the following chapters reveals how completely Willa Cather absorbed the world of the artist and the pioneer.

## CHAPTER THREE

## ARTISTS IN THE SHORT STORIES

## Sources

It is in the short stories of Willa Cather that the world of the artist is first introduced. With the publication of "A Death in the Desert" by Scribner's in 1903 Cather began the formation of this world which was to embody most of her personal experiences with artists and the principles which she indicated should be the rules for any artist in his pursuit of art.

The stories which are surveyed in this chapter are taken from three general sources: The Troll Garden, Youth and the Bright Medusa, and five uncollected stories concerning art and artists. The Troll Garden was published in 1905 as the first book of Cather's prose. It contains seven stories interwoven thematically in obvious imitation of Henry James.<sup>1</sup> That order is not followed in this study since the order itself contributes nothing to the understanding of the artist.

In 1920 Cather replaced her first collection of short stories with Youth and the Bright Medusa. In this collection three of The Troll Garden stories are discarded and four new ones added. Of these eight stories half of them are concerned with the relationship of the artist to the Philistine. The remainder follow the artist in his paths of success and failure. In writing of this collection E.K. Brown has remarked:

In these stories the center of interest is not where it had been in most of the earlier treatments of artist-in the greatness, growth, or decline of a talent or in the destructive force of Philistinism. Such grave matters usually do come in, but they

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Op. Cit., p. 114.

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receive only a secondary emphasis. What now has most interest for Willa Cather is the kind of relationships artists have with those who are not artists but are brought into contact with them.<sup>2</sup>

The final source for this chapter is the group of uncollected stories which Cather had published in various magazines between 1907 and 1929. Five of these have been selected for study by reason of their availability and representativeness. They vary greatly in theme as will be seen and often come close in expressing with a single stroke all that Cather thought and felt about the Artist-Pioneer hero.

The stories have been arranged in this chapter in as near to a chronological order as could be determined. The summary at the end of the chapter indicates to what extent Cather has succeeded in creating a world of artists involving their struggles, triumphs, defeats, and their relationships with others in their world and out of it.

"A Death in the Desert"<sup>3</sup>

Cather has portrayed two artists in this story. One, Adriance Hilgarde, is a composer of some talent; Katherine Gaylord is a once-renowned singer who has been forced to retire to a small desert home as a result of a lung infection. The emphasis of the story is not upon the artists as such but upon the tragic love story, the devotion of Katherine to Gaylord, and her tragic death in the desert.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210-11.

<sup>3</sup> Willa Cather, Youth and the Bright Medusa, N.Y., Knopf, 1951.

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Adriance does not appear upon the scene in person. His brother, Everett, whose physical features much resemble Adriance's, meets Katherine in a small desert town where she has retired. There he spends the last few weeks of her life. Adriance enters the story through the reminiscing of these two. Everett pictures him as rather a fickle, shallow, self-centered individual. The judgement is not as harsh as it seems for these characteristics are not his outstanding traits. However, they are prominent enough to mar the picture of a successful artist with all of the best personality traits. Katherine had been in love with Adriance but she kept her love a secret. The impression is given that the composer was always too much taken up with his own affairs to respond to her love for he was used to seeing the light of love in the eyes of the women around him.

The complete representation of the composer is contained in the letter he writes to Katherine during her last days. Everett has informed him of her illness and the resulting letter is all that it should be, "wonderfully tactful and tender, even for Adriance, who was tender with his valet and his stable-boy, with his old gondolier and the beggar-women who prayed to the saints for him".<sup>4</sup>

The letter is "consistently egotistical" but it is written with a passion and intensity which is characteristic of all that Adriance does. Katherine is pleased with it and knows that it is just like the man she knew. However, she gives a clue to his personality and to her own when she says

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

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to Everett: "I want him to grow wholly into his best and greatest self, even at the cost of what is half of his charm to you and me."<sup>5</sup> It is clear then, that the self-centeredness of Adriance is really his "art-centeredness." His attention has been devoted exclusively to his art even at the loss of Katherine's love. This is more clearly shown in the new sonata he has just written. It is in a deeper and nobler style than he had ever written. Katherine remarks: "He used to write only the tragedies of passion; but this is the tragedy of effort and failure, the thing Keats called hell."<sup>6</sup>

In this scene then, there is a better understanding of Katherine given. Obviously she had refused to pursue her love for Adriance in the open knowing that she would take something from him, that she would distract him from the passion for art that directed and consumed his life. And this sacrifice almost moves her to accept the consciousness of defeat in her own life. For she has lost twice: to love and to health.

Her brother spoke of her in an early part of the story:

She was a great woman, as you say, and she didn't come of a great family. She had to fight her own way from the first. She got to Chicago, and then to New York, and then to Europe, and got a taste for it all; and now she's dying here like a rat in a hole, out of her own world, and she can't fall back into ours.<sup>7</sup>

This summary is characteristic of the heroines of Cather's stories on art: She had to fight her own way from the first. It did not come easy to her to reach the top in her profession. And that brief career thus came to an end...

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

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in the desert. The inference is that there was some causality involved in the renouncing of her love for Adriance and the ill health to which she is now resigned. When Everett sees her he notices how life has changed this beautiful woman. "It was the face of a woman already old in her first youth, a trifle hard, and it told of what her brother had called her fight."<sup>8</sup> And he feels that he is sent on a mission from his brother to help Katherine to die. Since his brother had been involved in this life he is present by proxy at the death bed. And she looks upon Everett for gestures and expressions to remind her of Adriance:

He knew that she lived upon this, and that in the exhaustion which followed this turmoil of her dying senses, she slept deep and sweet, and dreamed of youth and art and days in a certain old Florentine garden, and not of bitterness and death.<sup>9</sup>

Katherine dies with the name of Adriance on her lips. "Everett went to call her brother, but when they came back the madness of art was over for Katherine." Cather ends the life of her heroine with these words: "the madness of art." It is the madness in which there is method. The madness of art which consumes all things in its path, which demands a devotion greater than all other loves, a madness which cannot be denied, a way of life that must be followed. This is the madness of art which leads the artist to all triumphs even to conquering his environment as is illustrated in the following story.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 269-70.

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"The Sculptor's Funeral" <sup>10</sup>

A small western town is the scene of this story which presents the artist among the Philistines. An indiscriminate group of citizens of the town are assembled at the train station awaiting the body of the hometown sculptor. The hero comes home but in the eyes of his townsmen he is not considered a hero. In the general silence and the clipped remarks there is felt the animosity towards the dead man. Only one figure in the waiting crowd is set apart: Jim Laird, a huge, red-bearded lawyer. He is the one man of the town who understood and approved the sculptor's life. Accompanying the body is Stevens through whose eyes the reader is shown into the souls of the friends and relatives of the artist.

When the body is placed in the parlor of the sculptor's home, the other individuals of the story are revealed with all of their small town faults. The mother is a harsh, self-pitying, selfish woman, who has made life difficult for all around her and especially for her artistic son, Harvey. The father is browbeaten and could never have been a force to stand between the mother and son. As he bends over the coffin his words and expression are full of understanding and sympathy. As Stevens begins to realize what life had been for Harvey at home, the lawyer expresses the thought: "That is the eternal wonder of it, anyway; that it can come even from such a dung heap as this...", "that an artist could be born here and still become an artist, that he could live here and still desire to express the eternal spirit within him."

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<sup>10</sup> Cather, Youth and the Bright Medusa.

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But this is not the worse. The men of the town begin to gather for the wake. Stevens reflects:

All this raw, biting ugliness had been the portion of the man whose mind was to become an exhaustless gallery of beautiful impressions—so sensitive that the mere shadow of a poplar leaf flickering against a sunny wall would be etched and held there forever.<sup>11</sup>

The townspeople, who are more symbols than characters, seat themselves for the meal. The minister, banker, retired army man, cattle dealer, real estate agent form the core of this town which stands for all that is most Philistine in the world. They stand for what the world usually recognizes as success whether it comes by honest methods or not. They are their own ideals for they are on top even though their backgrounds would not stand the scrutiny of a serious judgement.

They gather around the coffin and begin their work of heaping abuse upon the dead sculptor. They are sympathetic that Harvey and his brothers amounted to so little. They hold the sculptor in contempt for being nothing of a business man and less of a farmer. He amounted to nothing in their eyes in spite of all the money wasted on his education. But deep within their hearts there is an envy for Harvey. They did not succeed in getting their hands on him and dirtying his life as they had done for the rest of the young men of the town.

The lawyer comes to Harvey's defence and exposes in a bitter and elegant speech the sham and cowardice that is buried in the life of these men of the town. He had ideals like Harvey once, but when he returned to the town he had won the respect of its outstanding citizens, not for his virtue,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

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but for the knowledge he could use so well in arranging illegal business transactions. He has since become something of an alcoholic to cover up his shame in his own eyes.

His speech tears the veil from the lives of the townspeople:

Now that we've fought and lied and sweated and stolen, and hated as only the disappointed strugglers in a bitter, dead little Western town know how to do, what have we got to show for it? <sup>12</sup>

The words are bitter and reflect Willa Cather's oft-repeated theme of the artist succeeding in spite of the lowliness of his background. The lawyer continues his judgement:

It is not for me to say why, in the inscrutable wisdom of God, a genius should ever have been called from this place of hatred and bitter waters; but I want this Boston man to know that the drivel he's been hearing here tonight is the only tribute any truly great man could have from such a lot of sick, side-tracked, burnt-dog, land-poor sharks as the here-present financiers of Sand City-upon which town may God have mercy. <sup>13</sup>

Here the artist is shown among the Philistines and against the background of his environment. The few details, so carefully selected, make the background explicit enough. No explanation is given of why or how an artist could survive such an environment and succeed. There is no philosophical explanation of how he could have a soul so full of beauty with so many ugly memories surrounding his youth. It happens that way in the world of Cather's artists. The explanation of Harvey's success is found in that inexplicable drive, the will to succeed which must be at the root of the life of any artist who achieves greatness.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

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However, that desire is sometimes misdirected. The drive towards the world of art is often led astray by a mirage; and often the environment refuses to let go of its victim. Such is the case of Paul in the story that follows.

"Paul's Case"<sup>14</sup>

This story has been considered among Cather's best. Into it Cather put much of her experience as a teacher. It is full of sympathy for the sensitive adolescent and when his frustrated ambitions cross the boundary of the world of art the confusion and defeat become understandable and believable.

The first sketch of the boy pictures him as the thorn in the side of his teachers. He is flippant, insulting and remote. His attitude of apparent indifference to their reprimands and offers of confidence leave them confused. On the surface he is incorrigible, but there seems to be something within him, something hidden from his teachers which, if it could be brought into the open and developed, would prove him worth all of their worry and trouble. One of his teachers expresses this understanding: "His teachers were in despair, and his drawing master voiced the feeling of them all when he declared there was something about the boy which none of them understood."<sup>15</sup>

That "something" is involved with his love for the theatre and all that it stands for. After his trial before the board of teachers Paul goes to the concert where he becomes alive in his task of ushering. But when the

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<sup>14</sup> Cather, Youth and the Bright Medusa.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

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concert begins he becomes another person. His teachers would hardly recognize now the flippant stubborn youth they are familiar with. He is relaxed; he has lost himself in the drama of the music:

It was not that symphonies, as such, meant anything in particular to Paul, but the first sign of the instruments seemed to free some hilarious spirit within him; something that struggled there like the Genius in the bottle found by the Arab fisherman. He felt a sudden zest of life....<sup>16</sup>

Another view of his frustration is given after the concert. Paul stands in the windy and rainy night looking at the hotel where the singers and actors reside. He feels himself drawn into that world and becoming part of it:

There it was, what he wanted-tangibly before him, like the fairy world of a Christmas pantomime; as the rain beat in his face, Paul wondered whether he were destined always to shiver in the black night outside, looking up at it.<sup>17</sup>

Paul's naturally sensitive instincts, his artistic desires, are refused a normal development on every side. His environment is ugly and oppressive. The lack of beauty in his home is a sad contrast with the world of actors and artists he longs for:

The nearer he approached the house, the more absolutely unequal Paul felt to the sight of it all; his ugly sleeping chamber; the cold bath-room with the grimy zinc tub, the cracked mirror, the dripping spigots; his father, at the top of the stairs, his hairy legs sticking out from his night-shirt, his feet thrust into carpet slippers.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1. 189.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

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The frustration that is brought on by the conflict between Paul's real, ugly world and the life he dreams of confuses the instinct that exists within him. He is led to misunderstand the life of the artist; he begins to believe that its artificiality is the essence of its beauty. All that is only the trappings of this world becomes for him the real thing. The smart clothes, the gay living, the relaxing conventions blind him to the essential attractions of those devoted to their art. His imagination is perverted and all of life that is not within the boundaries of the theatre is repugnant to him: his home, school, teachers, Sunday-school. These things stand for repression and slavery.

Finally, Paul's father has him excluded from the concert hall and the theatre. He is put to work and grasps the first means of escape at hand. He steals the bank deposit of the company for which he works and takes a train for the world of his dreams, the brilliant and busy and entertaining New York.

His days are numbered but he makes use of his time and the company's money. There is no pleasure that he can't have; there is no dream that he can't make come true. But towards the end he knows that he can't face going to jail and much less going back to the ugly life he has known:

Yet somehow he was not afraid of anything, was absolutely calm; perhaps because he had looked into the dark corner at last, and knew. It was bad enough, what he saw there; but somehow not so bad as his long fear of it had been. He saw everything clearly now. He had a feeling that he had made the best of it, that he had lived the sort of life he was meant to live.....<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 210-11.

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The end comes to Paul's life as he jumps in front of a train and then it is that "the folly of his haste occurred to him with merciless clearness, the vastness of what he had left undone."<sup>20</sup> In that moment he has realized how he has misunderstood the life of the artist, how he has seen only the externals and has never known the impulse to create that is at the heart of the artist's life.

In emphasizing the part that environment played in Paul's life one critic writes:

"Paul's Case" explores the strange shapes the desire for beauty can take where an atmosphere of genteel ugliness removes all normal opportunities for aesthetic growth and stifles and distorts all natural sensitivities.<sup>21</sup>

In "Paul's Case" the world of the artist is not that of brilliant lights and gay living. It is more than that. It is everything that Paul knows subconsciously but which never reaches his understanding. His desire for this "fairy world" is not just an adolescent craving for something different. There is within him a talent for appreciation of the music and acting that he listens to and sees. There is even a talent for acting buried there as can be seen from his antics in the classroom and on the campus. But he never has the chance. There is no miracle man to open the door to the development of these talents and desires. He isn't given the opportunity that Cather gives to later creations who could have had the same tragic end were it not for the "lucky breaks" which made their dreams, for the most part, come true.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>21</sup> Daiches, David, Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, Oxford, Cornell Univ., 1951, p. 146.

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With this story Cather has added to the world of the artist in something of a negative way. The artist is better understood by knowing what he is when repressed, when his environment works against him, when his character is not great enough to rise above the obstacles that oppress him. This is the promising artist gone astray. And in that flash of understanding just before his death it is made perfectly clear that Paul has made an error in judgement: he has revolted against the wrong thing for the wrong reason.

Some of the interior of that artist's world for which Paul was striving is portrayed in the following story. However, it shows the shallowness and futility of those who "collect" artists.

"Flavia and Her Artists"<sup>22</sup>

This is a story of a collector of artists. Flavia Hamilton has accomplished her ambition to have around her those who have been inspired by the gods. She imagines her home the center of interest for all of the best artists of her day:

The 'House of Song' as Miss Broadwood had called it, was the outcome of Flavia's more exalted strategies. A woman who made less a point of sympathizing with their delicate organisms, might have sought to plunge these phorescent pieces into the tepid bath of domestic life; but Flavia's discernment was deeper. This must be a refuge where the shrinking soul, the sensitive brain, should be unconstrained; where the caprice of fancy should outweigh the civil code, if necessary.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Willa Cather, The Troll Garden, N.Y., McClure, Phillips, 1905.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

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The story is concerned with a house party at Flavia's where her usual group of artists are collected. Her husband is the long-suffering hero whom she considers crude and insensitive to the greatness of these eccentric guests. However, he merely protects her from learning the truth that the artists whom she adores actually look upon her with some contempt. When her guests are leaving abortively, her husband has made her believe that it is his boorishness which has insulted them and not, as actually is the fact, the unveiling of her shallowness by one of their number.

Willa Cather has not concentrated so much on the depiction of the personality of the artist but rather directed her delineation of character upon Flavia, the collector. However, the sketches which make up the background contribute to the general picture of the artist and his world.

Imogen Willard through whose eyes the story is put in order, is an artist of the intellectual type. She is a student who is devoted to a life of research. Jemina Broadwood is an actress of recognized ability who is fresh, open-hearted, and refuses to consider herself as one of the "artists" of Flavia's collection. And in her disclaiming of this epithet there is expressed a characteristic of that group: those who take themselves seriously. Miss Broadwood answers Imogen's question with:

'One of the artists? My offence may be rank, my dear, but I really don't deserve that. Come, now, whatever badges of my tribe I may bear upon me, just let me divest you of any notion that I take myself seriously.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

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It is again this actress who is assigned the part of making the group of guests appear in the worst light. In answering the question of what Flavia's husband thinks of this group she says:

'Why, my dear, what would any man think of having his house turned into an hotel, habited by freaks who discharge his servants, borrow his money, and insult his neighbours? This place is shunned like a lazaretto! 25

Another of the guests, M. Roux, has left the party in advance but has printed an article in one of the daily journals, "Roux on Tuft Hunters; The Advanced American Woman as He sees Her: Aggressive, Superficial, and Insincere." The interview is only a satiric characterization of Flariva. It is from this blast that her husband protects Flavia and he does it by making a blast of his own before all of the house guests at the dinner table:

As for M. Roux, his very profession places him in that class of man whom society has never been able to accept unconditionally because it has never been able to assume that they have any ordered notion of taste. He and his ilk remain, with the mountebanks and snake charmers, people indispensable to our civilization, but wholly unreclaimed by it; people whom we receive, but whose invitations we do not accept. 26

The guests depart in haste after this outburst and Flavia is left in tears of wrath for the inconsiderateness of her husband. Imogen makes a crowning condemnation of this microcosm of artists in her defense of the husband. She sees him as the only figure of sanity and order in a household of shams and conceited farces.

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25 Ibid., p. 35.

26 Ibid., p. 45.

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This characterization of artists is one which seldom appears in Cather's later work. It is something which the reader might expect to find in the mouth of one of her Philistine characters. However, Broadwood and Imogen are two who fit more comfortably into Cather's general world of artists. The others are something of parasites, expert in their own fields but taking advantage of the hostess who wants more than anything in life to be surrounded for her own glory with the "best".

Since the story is built around Flavia, she can be taken as the chief contribution to Cather's world of artists. She is something of the Philistine, a collector of these strange geniuses for her own honor and glory. She has not the talent to match these people; she picks up the scraps of their conversations and repeats them as her own original contributions in later gatherings. She imagines herself sought after for the inspiration she provides. She is deluded into believing that she is part of this world, but actually, she is the parasite who feeds upon the art of others.

Cather turns in the next story to the study of a woman involved in the world of art with all of the possibilities of making that her whole life but hindered therefrom by noble reasons.

"The Garden Lodge"<sup>27</sup>

"The Garden Lodge" is a story in the Jamesian fashion of delicate emotions, complex and mysterious. Caroline Noble is something of an artist.

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<sup>27</sup> Cather, The Troll Garden, 1905.

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She has been a music teacher and has become an accomplished pianist. Attracted by her coolness as an accompanist and her control, Raymond d'Esquerre, a renowned tenor has chosen her lodge as the center of his moments of study while he is in this country. Caroline is married to a wealthy and elderly man. At the moment of the story she finds her control slipping in favor of the attractive qualities of the tenor and of the world he represents. She conquers this weakness, however, and permits the garden lodge, the scene of many happy hours with the artist and a symbol of her desire to be an artist, to be torn down in favor of a summer cottage.

Scattered throughout the story are other portraits of those claiming the role of artist. Caroline's father who has devoted his life to writing inglorious orchestral compositions and condemning all other artists has inspired her with contempt for this undirected existence. Her brother was a painter, contemptuous of all the world, lazy, and finally, a suicide. These two portraits of artists and their artistic friends are presented quite without sympathy but with profit for his study. This is the world of the bohemian artist who has not the courage or stamina to be completely devoted to his art, but instead consumes the talent and energy in destructive criticism of others and in building castles in the air.

D'Esquerre is the real artist. He is devoted to his work, studies hard and gives himself entirely in the practice of his art which wins for him the continued admiration of all the feminine world of theatre-goers:

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Sometimes when the house was crowded from the orchestra to the last row of the gallery, when the air was charged with this ecstasy of fancy, he himself was the victim of the burning reflection of his power. They acted upon him in turn; he felt their fervent and despairing appeal to him; it stirred him as the spring drives the sap up into an old tree; he, too, burst into bloom. For the moment he, too, believed again, desired again, he knew not what, but something.<sup>28</sup>

Caroline feels this attraction and fights against the desire for the life of an artist. At one point of her reflection as she sits in the garden lodge, she considers her own life to be something false:

It was not enough; this happy, useful, well-ordered life was not enough. It did not satisfy, it was not even real. No, the other things, the shadows-they were the realities. Her father, poor Heinrich, even her mother, who had been able to sustain her poor romance and keep her little illusions amid the tasks of a scullion, were nearer happiness than she.<sup>29</sup>

For the moment, the night, she permits her imagination to be swept away with this desire for the life of an artist. The crisis is passed. Her duty to remain as she is becomes clear and with her decision to destroy the garden lodge she knows also that she will not again lose control.

As a contribution to the world of the artist this story gives two portraits: d'Esquerre, who is dedicated and successful; Caroline's father and brother who are among the defeated and useless artists. Caroline is something apart from this world. She is one on the fringe who has been destined to live for a non-artistic goal contrary to her strongest desires.

While this story is one of both victory and defeat the one following shows the tremendous influence for good that an artist can have upon his fellow creators.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

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"The Marriage of Phaëdra"<sup>30</sup>

This is a story of a painting. A young American artist, MacMaster, goes to London to the studio of Hugh Treffinger three years after his death. There he finds the greatest of the artist's works, "The Marriage of Phaëdra," which has been the cause of contention between the painter and his wife. In spite of MacMaster's efforts to keep the painting in England the wife sells it to a Jewish dealer from Australia who appreciates only its monetary value.

MacMaster learns what kind of man Treffinger was from friends and particularly from his valet who was with the great artist almost constantly. Others say of him that he was "a man who could storm his way through anything to get what he wanted." His marriage apparently was an unfortunate move both for him and his wife. His sister-in-law says:

After his marriage he relapsed into his old habits of incessant work, broken by violent and often brutal relaxations. He insulted her friends and foisted his own upon her-many of them well calculated to arouse aversion in any well-bred girl.... He had probably overrated the girl's possibilities and he let her see that he was disappointed in her.<sup>31</sup>

Treffinger was from a poor family and had grown up as a sign painter's apprentice. He came under the influence of an Italian painter who took him entirely in hand. Treffinger was taught all he knew by this friend and guide. He was steeped in Medieval tradition and these things became part of that which made his art great. "There was in him alike the freshness and spontaneity, the frank brutality and the religious mysticism which lay

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<sup>30</sup> Cather, The Troll Garden, 1905.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

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well back of the fifteenth century. "<sup>32</sup> The famous painting "The Marriage of Phaedra" was the ultimate expression of this spirit.

There were few who could appreciate the man and his work. The chief of these few was James, his valet. From him MacMaster learns all there is to know of Treffinger. He was a skilled craftsman who worked hard with his painting. He made countless sketches, water colors, and oils before he permitted himself to do the final canvas. He was often out of temper, swore at this work, was so thoroughly involved in it that nothing else could stand in the way. The very coldness and aloofness of his wife towards his works made him more dedicated, more conscious of his need for his studio and its instruments.

Treffinger was having an influence on other painters in England; he was leading them down new avenues of adventure and discovery, into new experiments; however, with his death the new painters were gradually drawn back into the narrow stream of convention. MacMaster sees how their techniques are losing the Treffinger manner; the powerful force which could cause others to create was disappearing.

But the power of art will always have its effect upon those who love it. That love is never forgotten. Such is the theme of the following story.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

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## "A Wagner Matinee" 33

Clark's Aunt Georgiana is an artist in a domestic way. She is one of those who have buried within them a love and talent for music that is carried as a burden through life. She had been a music teacher at the Boston Conservatory in her youth, but she went with the man she loved to Nebraska where a life of cooking, sewing, ironing, mending, scrubbing and other chores of pioneer women replaced the comforts and pleasures of her home in Boston. In the West she became a part of that life of struggle and creation. Her music was not forgotten; that love was with her always, but the energy she had directed toward the development of her talent was now expended at the side of her husband in making a new life on the prairie. She had not forgotten her music there in the West, and she indicates how deeply the memory of it lies within her as she speaks to Clark as a boy when he is learning to play the organ in the parlor: "Don't love it so well, Clark, or it may be taken from you." 34

It is on that note of renunciation that the story begins. Aunt Georgiana is coming to Boston to settle an estate. Clark is meeting her and has arranged to take her to a Wagner matinee. She is shown entering the concert hall in her "queer, country clothes." This old woman who is the picture of the typical pioneer with her worn red hands, her aloofness, her worries about the weakling calf back home, seems out of place in this audience

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33 Cather, Youth and the Bright Medusa, 1951.

34 Ibid., p. 218.

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of elegantly dressed concert-goers. But the soul of the artist within her and her life on the prairie combine to make her a more able attendant than any of the others present.

Her first reaction to the music, clutching at Clark's sleeve, reminds her nephew that this has broken a silence of thirty years. Clark's reflections are a mirror of Aunt Georgiana's mind. During the first selection, the Tannhauser overture "the sense of the waste and wear we are so powerless to combat" and all of the scenes of drabness and loneliness of the great prairie come back to her. With the other numbers there comes the same reminder of all that which was lost to this woman who chose to make the life of the pioneers hers. Her soul drinks in the music with a thirst that has lasted too long. She cannot repress her emotion when the tenor begins the "Prize Song." She begins to cry and Clark knows how deeply she has been moved:

It never really died, then-the soul which can suffer so excruciatingly and so interminably; it withers to the outward only, like that strange moss which can lie on a dusty shelf half a century and yet, if placed in water, grows green again. She wept so throughout the development and elaboration of the melody.<sup>35</sup>

At the end of the concert Clark's aunt does not want to leave and Clark realizes that just outside the hall is the old bleakness of the pioneer life. This interlude in her life has brought her great pleasure even with the pain of its memory. But it has done more than that. It has brought back the greatness of her renunciation of so many years ago. The decision was a

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

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great one. This world of music was almost her entire world before she turned her back upon it. Now it was her's again. She must once more make the choice of going back, but now she knows what is there: the struggles, the sorrows, the pains. The soul of the artist has not died but has been hidden, buried, covered over during these years in the West. It is as strong and eager, as young and hopeful as it ever was. As the story closes it gives no clue to her decision, but there is little doubt in the reader's mind that Aunt Georgiana returned to her pioneer life, for those same qualities which would have made her entire life devoted to music a success have also made her life as a pioneer successful. She will return, for that is the choice she has made, that is what is to be expected of the artist and the pioneer.

The spirit of the pioneer is again portrayed in the person of an artist in the following story. In this episode the artist expresses his "roots" in his works which are full of the pioneer spirit.

"The Namesake"<sup>36</sup>

In the Paris studio of a great American sculptor, Lyon Hartwell, a group of young artists gather to say farewell to one of their number who is returning home. The students ask the master where he got the "feeling" for the statue of the "Color Sergeant" which is considered his best work. Hartwell shows them a portrait of a boy in uniform, his uncle for whom he was named: "... in every line of his young body there was an energy, a

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<sup>36</sup> Willa Cather, "The Namesake," McClure's Magazine, Vol. 28., No. 5, March, 1907, p. 492-7.

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gallantry, a joy of life, that arrested and challenged one."<sup>37</sup> The sculptor relates to his pupils how he had returned to Pennsylvania after twenty years of study in Europe when he heard the story of his uncle from an old soldier. His uncle was a color sergeant and once when he was carrying the flag in a battle his right arm was shot away. He shifted the flag to the other arm and went on. That arm too was lost and the color sergeant fell with the flag covering his body. In an old trunk in the attic of the Pennsylvania home he discovered some boyish souvenirs of his uncle's among which was an old Latin book with the first two lines of the "Star Spangled Banner" scrawled in a boyish hand. In that moment of discovery he knew his uncle better, felt the ties binding him to his race, and understood his own spirit so well that he was able to achieve the "Color Sergeant." In that moment he became the artist who was to capture so successfully in his work the force of life;

For the first time I felt the pull of race and blood and kindred, and felt beating within me things that had not begun with me. It was as if the earth under my feet had grasped and rooted me, and were pouring its essence into me, I sat there until the drawn of morning, and all night long my life seemed to be pouring out of me and running into the ground.<sup>38</sup>

That understanding was to be translated into the works of art which brought him fame. That spirit is present in the works which surrounded him in his Paris studio and was glimpsed in his character by the visiting young artists. He embodies the characteristics of Cather's great artists and pioneers. He is made for greatness and the rest of the studio indicated that his destiny

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 493.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 497.

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has come to him from the heroes of the past. In him the students found an ideal but one that was difficult to attain:

... There was as much to dishearten one as to inflame, in the case of a man who had done so much in a field so amazingly difficult; who had thrown up in bronze all the restless, teeming force of that adventurous wave still climbing westward in our land across the waters.<sup>39</sup>

This was the same spirit which was moving the pioneers in the West, the desire to find a challenge in life and meet it with all of one's strength, the desire to transplant a tradition and an ideal deep within the soul of a new land. This spirit is captured in the statues placed around the apartment. The titles of them are characteristic of types of Cather's heroes and reflect upon their author as well as upon the land which has created them. "Scout," "Pioneer," "Gold-Seekers" might well be titles of Cather's stories as they are names of the bronze works of Hartwell.

This short story is quite characteristic of Willa Cather's writing but it contains some of the technical faults of her early work. It is uneven in the presentation and often crude in lacking the sense of having "teased" the mind of the writer for years as Cather insisted an artist should write. It is too full of conventual poses. But, in spite of the many faults which Cather was to overcome so successfully in her later work, "The Namesake" fits into the pattern of Cather's world. Her dissatisfaction with the world of the Philistine is evident even here. When Hartwell returns to the States he finds that the once beautiful scenery of the Pennsylvania country side has been

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 493.

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corrupted by the ugliness of the mining industry and other industries. He is almost completely overcome by the polluted atmosphere:

I was plunged into the very incandescence of human energy... everywhere the glare of that relentless energy which followed me like a searchlight and seemed to scorch and consume me.<sup>40</sup>

It was this atmosphere of industrialism which led him to seek some identification of himself with this land in his namesake. He is driven to reestablish his roots in this country from which he has been separated for most of his life. The result is the experience quoted above where he realizes his "race, and blood and kindred," and gives expression in the statue of the "Color Sergeant" and the heroes of the West.

Influences of one artist upon another is the subject of the next story. It demonstrates that the artist cannot share his talent but must guard it jealously or he will lose it.

"The Willing Muse"<sup>41</sup>

In her first story for Century Magazine Cather tells the story of a literary artist who fails to achieve the heights of glory predicted for him by his friends. His reason for this failure is his wife who is also a writer.

Kenneth Gray has come from a teaching post in a small college town in Ohio to the big city on the advice of his friends. He is not fully aware of his own talents or even of his own ambitions. He is a scholar whose whole

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 494.

<sup>41</sup> Willa Cather, "The Willing Muse," The Century Magazine, Vol. 74, No. 4, August, 1907, p. 550-557.

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energy is consumed by his interest in literature. All of his closest friends are conscious of his great mind and whenever his name is mentioned they predict that he will produce important contributions to his field.

At the time Kenneth Gray meets his future wife, Bertha, his career is still hanging in the balance. He has not yet begun to write his masterpiece. His first work is disappointing but his second shows signs of the promise of great things to come. Besides his devotion to his work the one principle which is most prominent in his life is the refusal to cheapen his talent by writing according to the current vogue. He is an artist and sincerely convinced of the sacredness of his calling.

Kenneth's marriage to Bertha brought a change in her writing activities if not in his own. She began to turn out popular works of fiction according to the public fancy. Her productiveness amazed both her publishers and her public. Work after work came from her pen with amazing rapidity and she seemed to sense that now was the time to make the most of the wave of popularity upon which she was being carried. But Kenneth's prospects for great work seemed to grow dimmer. Those who know both of them put the blame on Bertha:

There was every evidence that she had absorbed from Kenneth like a water plant, but none that she had used him more violently than a clever woman may properly use her husband.<sup>42</sup>

His time was taken up with his wife's activities. He was given the responsibility of answering her abundant mail and of reading the ma-

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 553-4.

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nuscripts which came to her desk for criticism. His talent and love for literature was taken up with the comments and corrections with which he annotated page after page of the dull material. His seriousness would not permit him to take it lightly and his love for his wife would not permit him to see that he was playing into the hands of the popular vein which he despised.

But he has not given up his dreams entirely. In the little spare time which his wife's activities permit him he is working on a scholarly study of the French Renaissance. That, perhaps, is the tie with his former ambitions which eventually causes him to break with the unreal life he is living. He disappears suddenly and no one ever knows what happened to him. No one, that is, except the narrator of the story who identified him on a street in Canton after his mysterious disappearance.

In this story Willa Cather presents the artist as one deluded by the attractions which separate him from his art. His background was too limited in experience to permit him to know of the pitfalls which could face him when he went away from his narrow cell at the university. His ideal of making a great contribution to the world of letters was always before him though the attraction of it was dimmed with his meeting of Bertha. Such an artist could not permit himself to share even the smallest part of his talent with anything else. His dedication must be complete or he will never succeed in fulfilling the ideals he has. This is an evident portrayal of Cather's belief, at this time at least, that art is an all-consuming passion; it is a jealous spouse that will permit no divergence from the narrow path along which it calls its pursuer. This principle appears again and again in her short stories.

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Often it appears to be a passion which can cut across any conventions, standards and morals. The pursuit of art by the artist is a religion to which the devotee must be bound with his entire being. And whatever stands in the way of accomplishing the beautiful end must be cut down and removed.

In "The Willing Muse" Cather also makes her customary attack upon the Philistine attitude of the general public. This is the group which demands such books as Bertha's, which will give a fervent ear to one of little talent but is slow to recognize the serious artist. Bertha herself represents this attitude in her lack of understanding for the genius of her husband.

Philistines thrive everywhere but the small town is the favorite hunting ground for Cather's portrayal of this type of character. In the following story is demonstrated the Philistine's unfortunate influence upon budding genius.

"The Joy of Nelly Deane"<sup>43</sup>

Nelly Deane is one of those characters of Cather's creation who have all the personal qualities for achieving greatness and happiness in life, but, through some quirk of fate and environment, are crushed to the earth. The whole town of Riverbend was in love with Nelly Deane. She was the prettiest girl in town, the liveliest and the happiest. All of the old ladies of this small Western town are particularly fond of Nelly. They see in her gaiety, her "unquenchable joy," all of the romanticized dreams of their youth and all of them strive to have her about.

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<sup>43</sup> Willa Cather, "The Joy of Nelly Deane," The Century Magazine, Vol. 82, No. 6, Oct., 1911, p. 859-66.

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Her artistic talents are of the undeveloped, amateur variety. But there is some hint that with the proper training she could make a name for herself in the world with her singing voice. The Baptist church choir is one of the few places where she finds some expression for the fire, the exuberance of living, which burns within her. She has one particular night of triumph when she sings the lead in the "Queen Ester Cantata" at the church on Christmas Eve. She is praised and loved by all not only for her fine voice but also for the spirit with which she played her part.

But Nelly is not to have the bright future that her talents seem to indicate. She secretly becomes engaged to a travelling salesman from Chicago who has promised to take her to the big city where she can begin taking singing lessons to develop the possibilities of her voice. In the stories he tells her she sees the glorious future open before her eyes. But it is not to be. The salesman turns his affections towards the rich girl of the town and finally marries her.

At about the same time Nelly's father loses the little money and property he has and Nelly begins to teach the sixth grade. This is the first step down from that cloud where her spirits had exalted. Her marriage to Scott Spring, a silent, close-fisted, boorish, wealthy man marks another grade of descent from the realms of her joy.

Ten years pass before the narrator again takes up the story. Nelly is dead. Her husband had become harder and crueler. It seems that his lack of care has hastened the end of her life. But that is not the important

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part of the story. Nelly had begun to die when she lost her chance of leaving her home town and pursuing the ambitions which burned within her. She had died gradually as she became more and more involved in the world around her, in the school, in the Baptist church, in her marriage. These are the things that killed Nelly Deane for they gradually strangled her joy of living.

Nelly is another of those sensitive individuals who are not quite great enough to overcome the obstacles of their environment. She failed because she could not break loose. But the things that killed her are those enemies of the artist who are ever seeking ways of ambushing creative genius. However, Nelly left behind her two children who seem to have the same spirit of their mother which was once the talk of the town. Perhaps, they will live out her dream; perhaps they will have the strength to break free from the limits of this Philistine world.

When the artist does reach the heights of greatness the Philistines are waiting for all that he can give them. They often expect the artist's source of wealth to be inexhaustable as a mine as is shown in the next story.

"The Diamond Mine"<sup>44</sup>

The world of the artist grows in depth, color and life with "The Diamond Mine." But Cather makes a difference in her usual portraits with this story:

....here for the first time in a story about the life of art she goes beyond making a point about the relation of the

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<sup>44</sup> Willa Cather, Youth and the Bright Medusa, 1951.

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artist's way to other ways of life to project with considerable richness of texture a pattern of attitudes, hopes, achievements, and frustrations.<sup>45</sup>

Here there is no discussion of artistic principles, no dwelling upon the struggle for the sake of art, no richly colored portraits of the applauded singer or painter. Rather it is the story of the woman whose talents are used as a "diamond mine" to be exploited by her relatives and friends. Cressida Garnet is a cleverly drawn character. She pervades the story. She overshadows all whose lives depend upon her. She moves with dignity through her career, pulled at, weighed down by the many puppets who would sink into oblivion except for her existence. And yet these very exploiters are her weakness. She needs someone to depend upon her, someone to help.

Cressida is sailing for London to give concerts and operas. She has long ago reached the climax of her career and is still enjoying her solid position in the musical world. With her on the liner are some of her puppets: Horace, her son, Julia, her sister, and Poppas, her devoted accompanist and instructor. The story is told in the first person by the life-long friend and confidant of the singer who is the only person apparently not after her money.

With the progress of the voyage the story points the details which Cather can use so professionally to set a mood and shape a character. The three members of Cressida's party: Horace, Julia and Poppas are arranged together on the deck of the ship:

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<sup>45</sup> David Daiches, Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, p. 157.

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These three were sitting there in a row because they were all woven into the pattern of one large and rather splendid life. Each had a bond, and each had a grievance. If they could have their will, what would they do with the generous, credulous creature who nourished them, I wondered? How deep a humiliation would each egotism exact. <sup>46</sup>

But these are not the only Philistines who prey on the artist. There are others at home and other who have come and gone but are yet remembered by the wounds they left. The family which Cressida left when she was quite young always held the strings attached to her. Even during the twenty years when she struggled to survive and finally reached the top of her goal, during the death at an early age of her husband, they had watched and waited. And when at last she had become successful and wealthy they envied her that all of the success, all of the wealth was not theirs. They wrote letters for money; they travelled with her; they held their social positions in the small town under the glory of her name.

The string of husbands in Cressida's life had been more of a strain than a comfort. Her first one, whom she married at the age of nineteen and the father of Horace, had been a victim of tuberculosis. She had nursed him for three years and made a living besides. Her second husband, a business man, forced her to make a decision between him and Poppas, the indispensable instructor. Cressida chose Poppas for,

He was like a book in which she had written down more about herself than she could possibly remember-and it was information that she might need at any moment. He was the one person who knew her absolutely and who saw into the bottom of her grief. An artist's saddest secrets are those that have to do with his artistry. <sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Cather, Youth and the Bright Medusa, p.75.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

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And in order not to give the idea that Poppas was the guardian angel in disguise, it is shown that Cressida in turn had made him; he became a rich man only as a result of her career.

The story of the third husband takes up the greater part of the story. This<sup>48</sup> Blasius Bouchalka, a Bohemian musician whom Cressida lifted from a small cafe violinist to her own society and finally to the rank of her husband. And though he did wonderful things for her, inspired her to greater devotion and work in her art, he too, deceived her, fell in love with her wealth and the rich things she could provide for him. Her discovery of his complete deceit led to a hasty divorce and Bouchalka's return to his native land.

The fourth husband who is on the scene as the story opens has proved to be the worst of the lot. Jerome Brown is a financier who can do nothing but spend money, and lose it. His schemes were many and all were failures. He cared little for Cressida's art or career but looked upon her only as the "mine" from which he could draw the capital for his next investment. In return he gave her nothing. He added only to her misery and unhappiness. She sums up her own misfortune: "Why is it? I have never cared about money, except to make people happy with it, and it has been the curse of my life. It has spoiled all my relations with people."<sup>48</sup>

The last that is seen of this generous artist is a tragic picture. She is sailing on the maiden voyage of the "Titanic" in a cabin below deck. The world her relatives had built around her will now dissolve—but after a bitter battle to share the final spoils. All of them try desperately to get "their share" of what has been left behind:

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

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It seemed never to occur to them that this golden stream, whether it rushed or whether it trickled, came out of the industry, out of the mortal body of a woman. They regarded her as a natural source of wealth; a copper vein, a diamond mine.<sup>49</sup>

In this story Cather has added to the world she is creating. Here is the artist with sensitiveness, with an indomitable spirit, with the will to succeed. But another world is encroaching on the rich texture of this canvas. There is no isolation for the artist. He must meet the grosser forces of the Philistines, but his greatness is only the more profound with the new relationships which kill a part of him and give greater life to other parts.

The Philistine often has his own reasons for his expressed opinions. In the following story he is drawn as a boor who thinks all artists "fakes." On the other hand, Cather gives the artist an opportunity to defend his way of life.

"A Gold Slipper"<sup>50</sup>

"A Gold Slipper" portrays a Philistine and an artist. In the slightness of the plot it seems that Cather has quite unconsciously drawn a most intimate picture of the artist. Kitty Ayrshire, who is also the heroine of the following story, is pictured in her natural surroundings of the Carnegie Music Hall, in the midst of inconveniences in catching a train for future concerts, and particularly, in conversation with a lump of a man who is forever bored with "highbrow" music and artists in general.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>50</sup> Cather, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, 1951.

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In the first scene of the story Marshall McKann is proceeding to the stage of the Music Hall where temporary seats have been arranged for the evening performance. The attitude of a whole class of people is reflected in the thoughts which run through his mind. "A man went to concerts when he was courting, while he was a junior partner. When he became a person of substance he stopped that sort of nonsense." <sup>51</sup>

In very brief flashbacks McKann's displeasure with this event is emphasized and the life of Kitty Ayrshire in Paris is touched upon. The artist comes onto the stage in a gown with is "outrageous." As she contemplates the displeasure she has caused by her dress she expresses inwardly one of the principles which makes her the artist and the success she is. "She had every reason to believe, from experience and from example, that to shock the great crowd was the surest way to get its money and to make her name a household word." <sup>52</sup>

Like the audience McKann is thawed a bit when Kitty begins to sing. But unlike the audience it is her appearance which charms him rather than her voice. He is more moved when Kitty brushes his arm as she passes. Her glance makes him quite self-conscious of his appearance.

On his way to the station after the performance McKann rescues the singer from a stalled taxi. In their conversation later that night on the train there is clearly drawn the obstinate, unsympathetic man of industry and the clever and devoted artist. McKann gives his opinion of artists in general:

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

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There is so much fake about your profession. It's an affectation on both sides. I know a great many of the people who went to hear you tonight, and I know that most of them neither know nor care anything about music.<sup>53</sup>

And later he adds about artists: "You're brilliant, some of you, but you've no depth... You are pampered. You don't help to carry the burdens of the world."<sup>54</sup> And that presumably sums up the attitude of the people of McKann's world. These are the outsiders, the men and women who have come up rapidly and crudely in a world devoted to material progress. These are the solid citizens who have never discovered the beauty of the world of art. These are the Philistines who helped "break the world in two" as Cather was to characterize them later.

On the other hand is Kitty Aryshire who gives the position of the artist in the world. He exists to help others to exist better. He lives to give pleasure and in giving this he gives much of himself, much more than is given by that other world which is pictured here as so repugnant. Kitty speaks of the meaning of Count Tolstoy's What is Art? She gives his meaning and the meaning of the artist's life in a few words:

Happiness lies in ceasing to be and to cause being, because the thing revealed to us is dearer than any existence our appetites can ever get for us. I can understand that. It's something one often feels in art.<sup>55</sup>

The argument goes on between the non-believer and the prophet of art. Kitty, of course, is clever and successful in the argument while McKann can only mouth clichés and make obvious conjectures that have been repeated

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

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many times. But Kitty's words disturb him. He has a difficult time sleeping that night and when he wakes he finds in his berth one of the gold slippers Kitty had worn the night before. The slipper becomes something of a souvenir and a thorn in his side. In the last paragraphs of the story McKann is approaching death and fearing it greatly. During these final days he often puts the slipper before him as an object of meditation.

With this story the world of the artist takes on more depth. The exposition presented by Kitty on the train contains new elements and a new understanding which were not found in the earlier stories. Her appreciation of her own place in this world becomes almost a philosophy of life. The reference to Tolstoy's What is Art(1896), which developed the thesis that good art is moral art, shows us that Cather's understanding of the artist was not all based upon an emotional appreciation without solid principle. The inference at this height of the story is that McKann's supposedly moral world which is concerned only with that which comes up to social expectations, and like his church-going has nothing to do with the moral law, is much worse than Kitty Ayrshire's world which often gives the appearance of immorality but is basically sound.

Though this is the underlying theme of the story there seems to be a bit of hesitancy in Cather's presentation of her thesis. Apparently her striving for subtlety has led her to become just a bit obscure in her argument. The dialogue is often heavy without being clear. More emphasis upon Kitty's principles and less concentration on the boorishness of McKann's type would have been more convincing.

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In the following story the artist is portrayed as a pioneer in the publishing world. This story is characteristic of Cather's habit of finding her heroes in real life.

## "Ardessa" 56

Marcus O'Malley is Willa Cather's impression of S.S. McClure and the office of "The Outcry" in this story is reminiscent of the affairs of the staff of McClure's Magazine. The story itself is slight and chiefly a study of the trial and failure of Ardessa, the secretary of the Outcry's editor. In the early days of the magazine she was of invaluable help to the editor. She could advise him in many affairs, and he came to depend upon her in many of his business and social obligations. She even took it upon herself to give advice and direction to writers for whose articles O'Malley no longer cared. As the editor's absences from the office grow more frequent and Ardessa finds more leisure time she neglects her work entirely. The odd jobs which come her way are handed over to another girl. Eventually O'Malley discovers how useless she has become and moves her into another department where she will begin to learn again.

The story itself is not important to this study of Willa Cather's writing but the portrait of O'Malley which is drawn from real life is also typical of the great characters of Cather's fiction. In McClure himself Willa had found the characteristics of her future heroes and heroines. E.K. Brown reports the importance of this relationship:

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<sup>56</sup> Willa Cather, "Ardessa," The Century, Vol. 96, No. 1, May, 1918, p. 105-116.

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She at once perceived that in McClure there was an element of wild genius: he was a great creator, and she thought of him much as she thought of the large-scale men who had opened the West.<sup>57</sup>

The O' Malley of "Ardessa" is a faithful picture of the great editor.

O' Malley comes from the West where he once owned a silver mine. In six years after buying the Outcry he had made it a magazine of protest and the one that everyone wanted to read. He knew the value of publicity but he was sincere in uncovering the corruption he found existing in the political and business worlds. O' Malley had all of the energy for reform which actually brought upon McClure the opprobrious title of "muckraker" from the President of the United States. In "Ardessa" Cather pictures the staff of the Outcry, or McClure's, at work upon the serious articles which were to bring fame and circulation jumps to the magazine:

The great men of the staff were all about her, as contemplative as Buddhas, in their private offices, each meditating on the particular trust or form of vice confided to his care.<sup>58</sup>

The most obvious omission in the picture of McClure's as drawn in "Ardessa" is the picture of Cather herself. Miss Sergeant who submitted articles to the magazine while Cather was managing editor reports in detail the impressions that Willa made upon her. Her devotion to McClure, which at times took on the aspect of hero-worship, was most evident:

Her chief, she remarked, was the first, the very first editor to insist on and part for solid research. He had made a new tradition by starting with the premise that

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<sup>57</sup> E.K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, p. 133.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

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many of those who wrote well were hazy about facts, and many of those who "knew" unable to express themselves clearly.<sup>59</sup>

Cather's interest in this type of hero who was both a creative artist and a pioneer in his field was seldom so remarkably stimulated by a character in real life. The singer, Fremstad, who appears as Thea Kronborg in The Song of the Lark, found it difficult to distinguish her own life from the fiction in that novel.

In the following story Cather returns to an analysis of the relationship between the artist and the Philistine. Here she reports that even the private life of the artist is not safe from his designs.

Scandal"<sup>60</sup>

In Kitty Ayrshire of "A Gold Slipper" Willa Cather had created a character who fitted perfectly in her world of artists. In "Scandal" this world is again presented. However, the background, the moving spirit of Kitty has been given in the previous story while here is only another struggle with the world of the Philistine. There is no dwelling on principle; there is little of the sense of struggle and accomplishment here. This is a story of one of the defeats that life forces on the artist, an attack over which the artist has no control and one to which he is constantly exposed.

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<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth S. Sergeant, Willa Cather: A Memoir, N.Y., Lippincott, 1953, p. 35.

<sup>60</sup> Willa Cather, Youth and the Bright Medusa, 1951.

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The Philistine of this story is Siegmund Stein, a department store millionaire.

He is one of the most heidous men in New York, but it's not at all the common sort of ugliness that comes from overeating and automobiles.... He has one of those rigid, horse-life faces that never tell anything....<sup>61</sup>

The description of his frightful exterior continues, but the inside of Stein is worse. He has no moral code. In the present episode his only desire is to be thought the intimate companion of Kitty Ayrshire. He buys a model whose features are easily mistaken for those of Kitty. He is seen with her in public and when Kitty is singing, Stein is present at the theatre looking possessively at the singer. His master stroke comes when he persuades Kitty to sing at his home on the pretext of promoting the career of her protege, an Italian boy called, Peppo. She consents to appear, is handled as one might treat a delicate piece of furniture which has been paid for. The promised publicity for Peppo is not provided and Stein is the only one to benefit as he has planned it. All of his friends are firmly convinced that Kitty is and has been his intimate friend.

The story is well-wrought and again an addition to the world of the artist. There is much to say of the many legends which surround the artist. They are colorful stories, mysterious, often immoral and vulgar, always giving the artist credit for an adventurous spirit and for loose living.

In the beginning of this story there is a discussion of the problem of legends. It is rumored that Kitty is the mother of the son of the Grand Duke

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

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of Russia. There are some of her acquaintances who swear to having seen the child. The scheming of Stein then fits into this pattern and shows in what strange manners legends originate.

A theme running through the story is that the public has its own idea of the life of the artist. And that idea must be considered if not actually cultivated by the artist. A friend of Kitty's tells her:

Whatever you do, don't try to change your legend. You have now the one that gives the greatest satisfaction to the greatest number of people. Don't disappoint your public... Your public gives you what is best for you. Let well enough alone.<sup>62</sup>

The title of the story sums up an entire chapter in the life of the artist. These creatures have an attraction for scandal. Whatever is in any way a departure from the commonplace, from the routine of the common man, is considered newsworthy when it concerns the artist. This was true since the beginning of art.

With this story the reader knows more of the struggle with which the artist is daily faced and how that struggle differs from the role of the man not in the artistic world. These people who depend upon the public for their careers are consequently open to the attacks of all the world. The relationship with the public becomes so intimate that it often dictates the private actions of the artist. This is evident in the reproach Kitty received from her friend when she suggests that she may get married. Her public would not approve; therefore, it is out of the question for her. This, of course, seems an extreme example, but the basic truth of the illustration is evident.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

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Artists and the principles guiding their lives provide the theme for the following story. Their contrasting characters are well drawn and provide a singular study involving many emotions.

"Coming, Aphrodite!"<sup>63</sup>

Cather offers portraits of two artists in this story. She has contrasted the high principled, struggling painter with the talented, ambitious singer. And at the end of the story it is evident that there are several meanings for "success" but only one type that is worth striving for, worth living for: the pursuit of ideals regardless of the consequences.

This lengthy story is simply organized. In the first two parts there is a clear and detailed description of Don Hedger, the artist, ~~the~~ the artist. In the third part comes his meeting with the singer, Eden Bowers, and the following section presents her background and a portrayal of her ambitions. The climax of the story and crystalization of character is brought about when the orbits of these two artists come together. And, finally, at the end of the tale, the moral is underlined, as light is thrown upon these two many years later when they have gained the rewards of their respective talents.

The picture of Hedger is drawn clearly in much detail. At the opening of the story he is in his cheerless room with his pet dog. These two have something in common: prize-winners, faithful and surly. Hedger was an orphan who, after a period in a school for homeless boys, came into contact with a Catholic priest. In the new environment much that had been

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<sup>63</sup> Willa Cather, Youth and the Bright Medusa, 1951.

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denied him of the world of literature and art was provided him. The priest helped him get to New York for the purpose of studying art and from then until the present time, at the age of twenty-six, Hedger had taken care of himself. He had done well; at least, he had been on the verge of popular success when his painting had interested the chief principals in the world of art. But here is displayed the testament of the real artist as Cather wrote it again and again:

But on both occasions Hedger decided that this was something he didn't wish to carry further, - simply the old thing over again and get nowhere, - so he took enquiring dealers experiments in a "later manner," that made them put him out of the shop.<sup>64</sup>

With this biographical information the portrait of Don Hedger is almost complete. Later his ambitions and discoveries are reported but in those scenes it is for the purpose of contrast with the ideas of the less idealistic singer. The time is approaching to test Hedger's principles with the strongest test of all, love.

Before the full picture of Eden Bower is drawn there is a fragmentary indication given of her personality during her first sympathetic meeting with Hedger. He is telling of the time he spent in France studying and working with a famous artist there. He is poetic in his description of those months of hard and fruitful labor. But the girl is not impressed in the right way:

Eden Bower laughed. "You're a funny fellow. Didn't you do anything but work? Are the women very beautiful? Did you have awfully good things to eat and drink?"<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

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She is much the same when he shows her some of his sketches. She told him that the "landscapes were not at all beautiful, and they gave her no idea of any country whatsoever."<sup>66</sup> But Cather puts her character alone in the studio in order to give her full story. Eden is relaxed and thinking. One thing is definite: she is ambitious:

Eden Bower was, at twenty, very much the same person that we all know her to be at forty, except that she knew a great deal less. But one thing she knew: that she was to be Eden Bower. She was like someone standing before a great show window full of beautiful and costly things, deciding which she will order.<sup>67</sup>

Her ambitions and triumphs as a child, her influence with the Chicago capitalist, her well-dressed friends in New York, her fantastic ride in the balloon on Coney Island, give her portrait completeness. No doubt is left that Eden Bower can be almost unscrupulous in getting what she wants. Her innate cleverness in using others for her ends is her greatest weapon combined, of course, with her beauty.

But it is her beauty rather than an shrewdness which leads the artist to fall in love with her. Over an evening meal together he woos her with a story of ancient Mexico, the story of an unfaithful queen who was finally punished for her crimes. The story is a familiar technique to Cather's readers. It has its place in the sequence of events since the author needs some means to show Hedger's influence on the girl. However, such a long episode seems out of place both in its tone and its length. Perhaps it is possible to find a symbol of Eden Bower's own characteristics in this story of the unscrupulous queen. At least the girl is impressed:

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 27.  
<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

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Eden Bower sat shivering a little as she listened. Hedger was not trying to please her, she thought, but to antagonize and frighten her by this brutal story.... Now she was looking at the man he really was. Nobody's eyes had ever defied her like this.<sup>68</sup>

Eden falls in love with Hedger and in the ensuing weeks the artist loses touch with his work. He talked to Eden often about his ideas of "an unborn art the world was waiting for." Her presence acted as a stimulus to his thinking out the idealistic conceptions of his art which had been buried in his mind. Her silence and lack of understanding are challenges to him. However, a rude awakening comes quickly when Eden believes that she knows what is best for the young artist and arranges for him an interview with Burton Ives whom Hedger considers "almost the worst painter in the world."

It is not the world of Burton Ives that interests Hedger. He is not attracted to the successful, public-pleasing, fashionable painters. Hedger's art is not for the public; he is painting for painters who haven't been born. And his dream world with Eden Bower comes to an end when she thus brings him up against the world that has been his enemy since his soul was first filled with the creative impulse.

He leaves her, afraid of what she might do to him. And when he gives into the weakness Eden has discovered in him, deciding that she is "older than art," he cannot find her again. She has gone away. Fate had come for her to lift her to the heights of the world that she dreamed of, the world of bright lights and applause, of wealth and admiration.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

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It is on this note of success for Eden that the story takes up many years later. Eden has succeeded in the way she wanted to. There are many triumphs behind her. And now the opera house in New York announces another of her victories: "Coming, Aphrodite!" She drives past the place where she has lived with Hedger and the old memories come back to her now. At the French Galleries she discovers that Hedger is known among the moderns but when she insists upon his success being evaluated in terms of dollars and cents she receives this answer: "But, Madam, there are many kinds of success." And in the following remark of the Galleries' attendant a final view of Hedger's success is given:

He is a great name with all the young men, and he is decidedly an influence in art. But one can't definitely place a man who is original erratic, and who is changing all the time.<sup>69</sup>

And the last sketch of Eden Bower as the street lamp flashes on her face shows that it has become "hard and settled like a plaster cast."

In these two characters are many of the elements which are repeated when Cather writes of artists: the toll that the pursuit of artistic ideals has taken on them, the hard, almost unscrupulous, individualism that seems to be demanded of the artist, the characteristic that is perhaps better described as "selfish" devotion to art. And at the conclusion of the story the reader feels little cause to blame Eden for she has succeeded in the way she dreamed of; Hedger, too, has succeeded for he is already an influence

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

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on young artists and there are other generations to be who will feel the effect of his art.

It isn't often that the artist discusses his art in these short stories. Here, however, Hedger is often seen reflecting on his ideals, his art and the greatness of it. Cather did not often show the artist either discussing or practicing his art except in the background of the story, or from remarks of friends and critics. It must be noted, too, that this treatment of Eden Bower is not as gentle and as sympathetic as Cather's usual attitude. There is more than a note of harshness in the early part of the story and certainly it is the older, mature artist, the artist who has become a success in spite of her faults that is shown at the conclusion of the tale.

The fruitfulness of art is described in the final story of this series. Cather's theme is that the love of the beautiful can more than substitute for the more material things of this life.

"Double Birthday"<sup>70</sup>

Young Albert Englehardt is fifty-five and his uncle is eighty. They celebrate their birthdays on December 1st. In the lives of both there has been enough of the artist to classify them with Cather's world.

The young Albert is poor but happy. He has nothing to show for his life although his family once had money enough to provide the children with the best of everything. The fortune was wasted by the boys of the family. But it is not in money that one finds happiness as Albert has discovered. He is

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<sup>70</sup> Willa Cather, "Double Birthday," Forum, Vol. 81, No. 2, February, 1929, p. 78-82, 124-28.

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content with the relics of his former life. The piano is still his and there he sits for hours playing beautifully and reliving the best years of his life:

He believed he had had a more interesting life than most of his friends who owned real estates. He could still amuse himself, and he had lived to the full all of the revolutions in art and music his period covered.<sup>71</sup>

He is pitied by others who knew him when he was rich but he does not pity himself for he believes that he has captured the more beautiful things in life. He has been involved in art and music and these have stayed with him as old friends. In the evening he plays at the piano for his aged uncle and then spends a few hours in the pleasure of reading.

The older Albert belongs even more completely in the world of Cather's artists. He had once been a throat doctor who specialized with the singing voice. In his work he discovered a German girl, Marguerite Thiesinger, who had, he believed, one of the most beautiful voices he had ever heard. He offered her training and tried to arouse in her some ambition like that which burned within himself. She evaded him and eloped with a young friend of hers. In three years, however, she returned and began practice for what appeared to be a brilliant career. Upon the completion of her studies she became a tremendous success. Her career was ended in two years by cancer of the throat. Albert suffered every moment with her and his brief glory ended with her death.

At the approach of their respective birthdays an old friend of young Albert's, a Judge's daughter, renews his acquaintance. She comes

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

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from her world of wealth to share the day with them. As she observes the happiness of these two men who have, in one way or another, given their lives to art, she feels sorry for the young people with nothing sacred in life to cherish.

In "Double Birthday" Cather again stresses the importance of the life lived for an ideal and emphasizes the fact that wealth and fame are not ends in themselves. The important thing is to live and to live beautifully and fully. The two Alberts need not regret their poverty nor fear their old age. Their lives are full of beautiful things to cherish and each pleasure is made more elegant by their knowledge, their ability to appreciate the beautiful. The excellent wine they procured for the party, the hours at the piano bring to their spirits a happiness that all of the money and fame of the world could not bring. It is the work of art in the life of the artist.

## Summary

It has been necessary in this chapter to dwell at length on the summaries of these short stories in order to present them from the "artist" point-of-view. The material was carefully selected to show that each of these stories portrays the artist in a different background, overcoming or failing to overcome different obstacles, stressing different principles in relation to his art and life. It is felt that any further limiting of the material would not do justice to the world of the artist as Cather created it in her short stories.

The world of the artist as it is presented here portrays, first of all, the ideal artist. The most convincing picture has been given in "Ardessa"

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for which study Cather used her friend, S. S. McClure. The artist will deny himself all things in order to attain to the goal he has set himself. He will give up love for the sake of art as both Adriance and Katherine do in "A Death in the Desert." This is a form of "madness" which drives him to make such a sacrifice. A similar denial is made by Kitty in "A Gold Slipper" when she is told that she cannot get married because her public would be too disappointed. In one way or another art brings such pain into the lives of these sensitive individuals. The aunt in "A Wagner Matinee" tells her nephew not to love it "too well" for she knows what a sacrifice it is to be taken away from this world. Caroline in "The Garden Lodge" is also made acquainted with this form of suffering when she realizes that she is kept from giving herself entirely to the demands of that world. The story of the unfortunate Paul in "Paul's Case" again presents the artist who loved unwisely and too well. A sacrifice must also be made of fame and fortune by the ideal artist to pursue his inspiration. This theme has been developed in "Coming, Aphrodite!" where Hedger could have been popular and wealthy if he wanted to lower his standards to fit the current demands of the critics. These sacrifices are expected of the artist in Cather's world.

Another factor in the making or breaking of the artist is that of environment. In most of these stories Cather has her artists originate in environments where a great strength of character is necessary for survival. In "A Sculptor's Funeral" Harvey has come from a "place of hatred," a "dung-heap," to succeed at his craft. It is only "in the inscrutable wisdom of God" that this can be understood. Treffinger of "The Marriage of Phaedra"

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was from a poor family and had grown up as a sign painter's assistant. Cressida of "A Diamond Mine" had to overcome poverty and physical hardships in her early life. Hedger in "Coming, Aphrodite!" was an orphan who was handed around to various schools for homeless boys before he found the charity to start him on his career. And even then there were years of poverty and suffering before he became known to the world of art. Katherine in "A Death in the Desert" had to "fight her own way from the first." All of these are artists who came from the depths of human society but managed to follow their ideals to the top.

Environment, however, has a disastrous effect upon some of the artists in Cather's world. In "Paul's Case" it is too much. Paul's own mean existence attracts him to the golden glitter of the artists' life rather than to the higher ideals found there. The real love he has for the stage is not enough to lift him above the pettiness and squalor of his adolescent years. The heroine of "The Joy of Nellie Deane" is another victim of environment. The misfortune of not marrying the man who could have taken her away from the small town crushed her back into its existence and left her talent undeveloped.

In these stories Cather often gives a glimpse of the artist being inspired by others and of his influence upon those who follow him. Caroline in "The Garden Lodge" is led to her intense desire for the artist life by the tenor for whom she is the accompanist. The painter of "The Marriage of Phaedra" is inspired by the Italian painter for whom he works. He is also given direction toward his own unusual techniques through his acquaintanceship

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with this person. In "The Namesake" Lyon Hartwell has received his inspiration from his own "race and blood and kindred" and, as a result, his work is representative of the heroes and pioneers of his homeland. In "Double Birthday" the elder Albert, although a doctor rather than an artist, has been the inspiration for Marguerite Thiesinger. Under his direction and guidance she developed into a successful singer.

In the matter of influencing others Cather's artists have their share. Treffinger of "Marriage of Phaedra" becomes the model for a whole school of painters during his lifetime, although after his death the influence begins to fade. Hedger of "Coming, Aphrodite!" reaches the pinnacle of his success when he is considered an inspiration, and the best critics realize that "he is decidedly an influence on art."

Of the more important themes on art existing in these short stories and developed at length in "A Gold Slipper" is the meaning of the life of the artist. He exists to help others exist better. His art becomes an impersonal thing so that he does not try to gain happiness, wealth, or fame for himself. Rather, he wants to give himself entirely to his art for the sake of art and the world. His idea chiefly is to make life more beautiful.

In these stories the Philistine, the natural enemy of the artist, has a major role to play. He is often jealous of the artist and thinks such a life is a wasted one. This is the thought in "A Sculptor's Funeral" where the townspeople heap abuse upon the memory of the impractical artist. McKann in "A Gold Slipper" is of the same opinion and considers the artist as one avoiding the burdens of life in order to live in a world of unreality. Such

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Philistines, of course, are those people who are more interested in material progress and financial results than they are in the pleasures of the spirit.

The characteristic Philistine is a great "user" of the artist. This theme is most clear in "A Diamond Mine" in the life of Cressida Garnet. Her family looks to her for financial help and social prestige. Her husbands have all been parasites fattening their purses upon her career. In "Scandal," Stein succeeds in using his fictitious friendship with the singer, Kitty, to elevate himself in the opinion of his associates. The wife of the painter in "The Marriage of Phaedra" thinks no more of art than the monetary value of her husband's paintings. Flavia in "Flavia and Her Artists" makes use of the artists for social prestige and to inflate her own ego into believing that she is as talented as the rest. It is characteristic of the Philistine, too, to create fanciful legends about the private lives of the artists. In both "Scandal" and "A Gold Slipper" Kitty is the object of immoral stories about her private affairs.

Among the Philistines portrayed in these short stories there may be classified the artists who do not make the grade or who cheapen their art in one way or another. In "The Garden Lodge" there are descriptions of Caroline's father and brother who fail to rise to the ideal. They condemn other artists in the knowledge of their own failure and lack the courage to make something great of their own talents in "The Willing Muse" Kenneth Gray's wife leads him astray by her constant demands that he help with her work, and she herself turns out a popular type of fiction not worthy of the true artist.

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The short stories, then, give this picture of the artist. He is dedicated to his work and lives in a world where his existence is always precarious. Sometimes he fails to achieve success because of his own weakness or because of the pressure from the outside which becomes too great for him to bear. He is a creator who must not let the desire for money, love, or fame interfere with his work. He exists to help others live better. He gives himself entirely to his work which means more to him than life. The Philistine is only a stimulant to the real artist but to those sensitive individuals on the fringe of the world of art he is anathema.

In the novels of Willa Cather it will be found that the artist meets with new associations in his life. Most of the principles illustrated in the short stories are taken for granted as being part of the life of the artist. He now becomes associated with the pioneers and with the world of religion.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ARTISTS IN THE NOVELS

That artists are those set apart from the rest of humanity, that the love they have for their art will lead them into great triumphs and great sorrows is much more clearly portrayed in the novels of Willa Cather than in the short stories. Cather's world of the artist becomes more complete with these stories. The background material in which is depicted the years of study and struggle and the colorful machinery of the stage is here given a unity and depth which was not possible in the shorter stories.

The Song of the Lark is the climax of this particular background. Here Cather concentrates on the talent, ambitions and success of the singer. This is the portrait of the passionate artist, the typical Cather heroine. She re-appears in Lucy Gayheart but without the earlier emphasis and enthusiasms.

In the other novels studied in this chapter the minor artist appears frequently. In Alexander's Bridge, My Mortal Enemy, and Shadows on the Rock there appear the usual sensitive individuals, creative geniuses, and Philistines of Cather's repertory. With The Professor's House, however, there is a difference. Here is presented what amounts to a full retreat from the world of the Philistine into a world that is ruled by the principles of the artistic and pioneer world, principles that bring the hero nearer religious beliefs. The significance of this development will be seen fully in the later novel, Death Comes for the Archbishop.

In each of the novels surveyed in this chapter, with the exception of My Mortal Enemy, Cather turns again and again to the spirit of the West. Her chief characters have either come from there bringing much of the vitality

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of the pioneer spirit or they return there to recapture that spirit which is not to be found in the rest of the world. While the purpose of this chapter is to complete the concept of the artistic character it, at the same time, serves as a bridge between the world of the artist and the world of the pioneer.

Alexander's Bridge

The first published novel by Willa Cather, Alexander's Bridge (1912), contains many elements which are characteristic of her later writing, but it lacks much of the vitality and skill for which she became noted. In 1922 she republished Alexander's Bridge prefaced with an essay which acts as something of an apology for this initial adventure into novel writing. By this time she had come to realize better the material and the techniques which were part of her talent. In this preface she wrote that the writer "at the beginning of his career is often more interested in his discoveries about his art than in the homely truths which have been about him from his cradle."<sup>1</sup> She was always critical of this novel and even believed it to be "shallow."<sup>2</sup> However, in spite of the fact that it seems as tailored as a literary exercise, a study of the character of Bartley Alexander will reveal much that was to go into the making of future creative heroes and heroines.

Alexander is a creative genius. He is a builder of bridges and has left a magnificent record of himself across the rivers throughout the world. The work that he has done and the physique of the man himself give a suggestion

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<sup>1</sup> Willa Cather, Alexander's Bridge, N.Y., Houghton, 1922, p. vi-vii.

<sup>2</sup> Edith Lewis, Willa Cather, Living: A Personal Record, Knopf, 1953, p. 77.

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of the power of his personality. Cather says of him that "he looked as a tamer of rivers ought to look."<sup>3</sup> And there is vigor and vehemence in him.

Although the architect is from the West he has left it far behind. Certainly there is about him something mindful of the hardy pioneers but there is also a weakness which is quite discernible. An old teacher of his who comes to pay him a visit reminds him of the great promise he once showed, but his old friend thought that there was a weak spot in Alexander's character. "The more dazzling the front you presented, the higher your facade rose, the more I expected to see a big crack zigzagging from top to bottom. . . ."<sup>4</sup> It is a rather exact prediction of Alexander's moral decline and the failure of his last construction.

Alexander looks back to his youthful days in England as the happiest time of his life. He had been in love with Hilda Burgoyne; and his struggles as a poor student made his life adventurous. The ideas which attracted him then were great and stirring things. But now all of that is lost. He finds himself living the kind of life which is against all of his principles. He has compromised his ideals and fears the approach of middle age which is "like being buried alive." There is a strong desire within him to return to the days of his youth. "The one thing he had really wanted all his life was to be free; and there was still something unconquered in him, something besides the strong work-horse that his profession had made of him."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cather, Alexander's Bridge, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

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During a business trip to London Alexander renews his relationship with Hilda. She has become a popular actress with all of the vitality and devotion to her craft that is common with Cather's creations. "I'm growing older, and you've got my young self here with you. It's through him that I've come to wish for you all and all the time."<sup>6</sup> He has attempted to return to some of those dreams of his youth but he cannot re-make himself into the man he might have been. In the beginning of the affair with Hilda he thinks that he has found what he has been searching for, that he is free. However, the second self, makes of him more of a prisoner than he had been. It begins to grow stronger within him.

Alexander realizes, as he writes to Hilda, that when a man tries to live a second life he develops another nature, and that nature grows strong and sullen, tries to kill the other. That is what has happened to him in seeking his lost youth, in trying to live a life that was never meant for him. He is being ruined; he is becoming hateful to himself and knows that he will become hateful to all who know him.

But Alexander does not live long enough for this creature within him to take full control. His first failure in his profession, the collapse of the bridge he is building across the St. Lawrence, takes his life. He has permitted the contractors to use lighter structural material than he thought prudent. The warning telegram which is sent to him when he is with Hilda fails to reach him. When he does arrive on the scene and realizes that the bridge is in danger of collapsing he gives the order to cease work. But it is too late. He goes down with the bridge and is drowned by the workers who

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

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clutch him in their fright. Before he dies he has a few moments when he thinks he will be saved and in that time he seems to find himself again. He felt that he could recover all of the things that he had lost.

The difficulty which this novel presents to the present study is that Alexander's character is not drawn with the emphasis and minuteness that is usually characteristic of Cather's writing. This objection has been often raised in regards to all of the characters of this novel. Mrs. Alexander and Bartley's mistress, Hilda, are mere outlines. In these characters there is lacking any depth and quality. There is no attempt by Cather to fill in the qualities which she ascribes to Alexander. That he is a creative genius is understood by his great moral stamina is known also from his success in business and the reminiscence of his old teacher. However, as E.K. Brown suggests, Cather was more interested in the process of moral decline through which the hero was passing than in Alexander himself.<sup>7</sup> If her subject had been Alexander then she would have pictured the background, development, and operation of his creative ability and would have given examples of his forceful personality at work. He would then have fitted more securely into the pattern of Cather's creative artists, but that would have been another novel. As it stands, Alexander's Bridge contains only an indication of the line of characters which include Alexandra Bergson, Antonia Schmerdia, and Thea Kronborg.

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<sup>7</sup> E.K. Brown, Willa Cather, A Critical Biography, N.Y., Knopf, 1953, p. 160.

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Although Hilda Burgoyne is not a full-rounded character she possesses qualities which include her in Cather's world of artists. When Alexander returns to London he sees her in a poetic Irish play where the whole plot and feeling depend upon her lightness of touch. "upon the shrewdness and deft fancifulness that played alternately, and sometimes together, in her mirthful brown eyes."<sup>8</sup> She has a delicate charm and self-possession which make her admired by her fans and friends. She is by no means a great actress but she has "gotten ahead" in her profession on the strength of the gentle vitality which animates her singing and dancing. The reader is not brought into the atmosphere of her struggles and her theatrical life. She is seen only as representative of Alexander's lost youth which he tries to reclaim through her. And, though her portrait is only a sketch, there is about it enough of the artist to include it in Cather's world.

Into the following novel Cather plunged her complete knowledge of the artistic world. All of the vigor and determination of Cather's heroes find their starting point in Thea Kronborg.

The Song of the Lark

The Song of the Lark was published in October, 1915. However, Cather was always dissatisfied with it, with the length of it, at least. In 1932 she made many revisions and wrote a preface for the new edition in which she pointed out that the story "set out to tell of an artist's awakening and struggle; her floundering escape from a smug, domestic, self-satisfied provincial world of utter ignorance."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 31-2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. vi.

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Formerly, the story went on from there with so many details, so many ideas expressed at length, that Cather in her revision deleted at least one-tenth of the text. She was not satisfied completely with the new edition, but The Song of the Lark, presents more of her ideas on art than any of her more artistic works.

Thea Kronborg of Moonstone, Colorado is the heroine whose life is described from her earliest days in the Western town to her triumphant career as a Metropolitan Opera star. Thea is a child of Swedish descent with all of the bright beauty of that race. She is one of several children and she is the exceptional one. Her mother, particularly, but others of the hometown, recognize her exceptional talents. One of the first to show his appreciation for Thea is her music instructor, Wunch. He sees her great power of concentration and the ruggedness of her will. He is at the end of his own career as a music teacher but Thea brings a spark of hope into his life. He had been so used to people trying to "get something for nothing" that he is moved to his best efforts in behalf of this child whose love of the best is so complete. Besides the interest in music which Wunch fosters in Thea he gives her direction and advice which will guide her in her chosen career:

Nothing is far and nothing is near, if one desires. The world is little, people are little, human life is little. There is only one big thing-desire. And before it, when it is big, all is little.<sup>10</sup>

Here Wunch's last reflections about the personality of Thea are made as he leaves forever the small town where he has disgraced himself in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

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the narrow minds of its citizens. Thea has been his major accomplishment in Moonstone. She has tempted his curiosity with that unawakened spirit living within her. "She hated difficult things, and yet she could never pass one by. They seemed to challenge her; she had no peace until she had mastered them."<sup>11</sup>

Wunch is not the only understanding personality through whose mind the reader comes to know Thea. Doctor Archie is another of her friends. He knows that she is an exceptional child and uses every effort to see that she gets the opportunities she deserves. He knows that her father is indifferent to his daughter's abilities and will be just as happy if she settles down gracefully as the local music teacher. It is the Doctor's rather naive appreciation of Thea's talents that makes him her most important champion when she has the chance to go to Chicago to study. The death of Ray Kennedy, a rather insignificant young railroader, has provided the money and the doctor provides the interest to see that she uses it to her full advantage.

As Thea begins her career in Chicago there are many helping hands given her along the way. Some contribute financial aid; some furnish the lessons and the advice she needs; some give only the experience which leads her to take the good and leave the bad on her way to the top. Some are artists; some are Philistines. But Thea remains independent with all of the qualifications within her for becoming the artist she is meant to be.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

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Andor Harsanyi is the piano teacher who discovers that Thea's greatest talent is her voice rather than her ability at the piano. She comes to him rough-hewn and inexperienced, with only a smattering of knowledge and a love of music that Wunch has helped give her. Her new teacher notices all of those characteristics which will go to make her great. She charges at difficulties as though they were special challenges. She takes it for granted when she does well, but strives until she is completely exhausted when there is any difficulty or defect in her work. He, too, gives her advice about the work which is required of an artist:

Every artist makes himself born. It is very much harder than the other time, and longer. Your mother did not bring anything into the world to play the piano. That you must bring into the world yourself.<sup>12</sup>

Finally Harsanyi discovers that the reason Thea is not completely happy in her study is that she is destined to be a singer. She has the voice and the personality to become great. He sends her to Madison Bowers, a cynical, mercenary, frustrated artist, but a teacher of great powers. Harsanyi tells his wife after the departure of Thea that he believes in her. He knows that whatever she does it will be great. "She is uncommon, in a common, common world."<sup>13</sup>

When Thea goes to work with Bowers she comes into more intimate contact with the Philistines who plague all true artists. However, this is not her first meeting with them. They had surrounded her in Moostone. The

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

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small town gossips led by Mrs. Livery Johnson, who always thought Thea was too conceited, the principal of the high school who belonged to "the camp of Thea's natural enemies," and even the members of her own family, with the exception of her mother, are of the Philistine camp. Thea realizes the animosity of her brothers and sisters on her first return from Chicago:

Thea had always taken it for granted that her sister and brothers recognized that she had special abilities, and that they were proud of it. She had done them the honour, she told herself bitterly, to believe that though they had no particular endowments, they were of her kind, and not of the Moonstone kind.<sup>14</sup>

Thea finds that now even her brothers and sisters have joined league with "her natural enemies." And these enemies appear to be on all sides. She feels the spirit of indifference, the animosity towards anyone striving for the best, the jealous contempt for those who get ahead, in people on the street, on the train. As she waits on a windy street corner in Chicago and feels the irritation of her clothes blowing round her, she looks upon the crowds as though they are alined against her, as though they are trying to take something from her. And she swears they will never ha~~t~~fit even though they trample her to death. As she rides the train back to Moonstone the sight of the "feckless bodies" sprawled about the coach gives her the same sensation. She feels they want to stop her, but they will not. "Along with the yearning that came from some deep part of her, that was selfless and exalted, Thea had a hard kind of cockiness, a determination to get ahead."<sup>15</sup> These

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

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Philistines are not of the world of the artists; they look on from the outside with an innate fear of those who have aspirations and strong wills and great talents. They are the "natural enemies" of Thea and her world.

But there are other Philistines. These Thea begins to meet in her association with Bowers. They are depicted in Part III of The Song of the Lark, the title of which section is "Stupid Faces." The chapter begins: "So many grinning, stupid faces." These are the Philistines in the musical world, the world of the artist. That particular group of them displayed for the reader are found in Bowers' studio where they come for as much encouragement and deception as their money will buy. There are several of them<sup>who</sup> have reputations in their fields. They are liked by the masses and applauded by critics who, perhaps, are more impressed by their wealth than by their talent. Mrs. Priest, Jessie Darcey are two of Boswers' pupils and, instead of pointing out to them the flaws which they can never overcome, he takes their money and lets them continue the farce. It is not the attitude of Bowers which disgusts Thea or even the faults of the singers; it is rather the lowering of her ideal, the shabby tribute which these singers give to Art, the indifference which they have towards the best. And her disgust is redoubled when she realizes that this is what people want, this is what they pay to hear and applaud:

She saw that people liked in Miss Darcey every quality a singer ought not to have, and especially the nervous complacency that stamped her as a commonplace young woman. . . . Chicago was not so very different from Moonstone after all. . . .<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 328.

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The Philistines continue to cross Thea's path after she has come into her own glory as a singer. In talking to her old friend, Doctor Archie, she tells him that voices are accidental, that there are good voices in many common people, people with common minds and common hearts. She refers, particularly, to one woman singer of the Metropolitan who is "stupid as an owl and as coarse as a pig." She resents the people who applaud the stupid performer and the real artist with the same enthusiasm. "You can't try to do things right and not despise the people who do them wrong."<sup>17</sup> Even among the greater singers of Thea's acquaintance she meets those who are small in their natures and jealous of the success of anyone else. Even the world of the artist has its Philistines, who, in the final analysis, are not completely devoted to the ideal.

One of Thea's friends who is far from being in the class of Philistines is Fred Ottenburg, a young scion of a great brewery family. From their first meeting they are interested in each other. Fred does what he can to aid Thea's career and even is willing to sacrifice his own love for her to her art. In the "Epilogue" it is discovered that they have married, but in the important part of the story Fred acts as Thea's saviour. At the crucial moment of her career when she is nearly breaking under the strain of her work, he sends her to "Panther Canyon," an Ottenburg ranch in the Southwest. This is one of those cliff-dwellers' cities where Thea renews her strength of body and spirit,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 551.

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where she crystalizes some of her ideas on art, and where she finds a moral union with the very early pioneers.

Thea's description of the meaning of art fits closely with the ideals of all of Cather's artists. As she contemplates the broken pottery of the Indian women she wonders:

....what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself--life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? <sup>18</sup>

This is the role of the artist, to make a sheath of his talent, and it is worth the sacrifice of all other things, of family, of friends, of love. Thea feels that she is fulfilling the dreams of these Indian people in the pursuit of her art. She, too, belongs to that race who strive to capture life for one brief moment in a work of art. Thea's sheath is her voice which is supported by all of her strong will, exuberant desire, and complete dedication.

When Thea leaves Panther Canyon she feels that she is re-made, that she has captured some of the simplicity of her childhood and found her dedication strengthened by her silent communication with the ancient people of the Southwest.

Thea now travels through Mexico with Fred Ottenburg, but when she finally decides not to marry him, she turns to Doctor Archie for the necessary funds to take her to Germany to study. While she is abroad, and on the eve of her first opportunity to win herself a place in the musical world, her mother

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 378.

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dies in Moonstone. The crisis is another illustration of her dedication to her art. If she had returned home before her mother died she would have lost a chance that would not come again for many years and maybe not at all. She decides to stay, and, while Fred understands perfectly her position, Doctor Archie is a little disappointed in her decision.

The story of Thea after her return to New York seems too long and repetitious. The highlight in her triumph comes when she is called upon to finish singing the part of Sieglinde when the star is suddenly taken ill. This is the turning point in her career and from now on she has no rival on the operatic stage. Although this is the section of The Song of the Lark that Cather chiefly revised and from which she cut many of the discussions concerning the work of an artist, there yet remain many enlightening delineations of the artistic character. Fred, who is an expert on music, tells Doctor Archie why Thea is a great singer:

It's the idea, the basic idea, pulsing behind every bar she sings. She simplifies a character down to the musical idea it's built on, and makes everything conform to that.<sup>19</sup>

Her singing role is always a challenge to her and she is always ready with the courage and the energy to fulfill it. It seems to renew her spirit to let herself go in a part, to become absorbed, to work with every part of her being to express the idea. She is one who must give her best and that is given when the effort is most vigorous. She is proud of her work and her talents. It gives her great pleasure to hear herself praised and to hear

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 511.

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competent critics, like Fred, appreciate the idea that she has expressed in her interpretation of a part.

In one of the last scenes of the story she appears at the height of her career singing again the role of Sieglinde. In the audience is her old piano teacher, Harsanyi, who replies to Fred's question, "What's her secret?" with an answer that is another description of the role the artist must perform:

'Her secret It is every artist's secret- he waved his hand-'  
passion. That is all. It is an open secret, and perfectly safe.  
Like heroism, it is inimitable in cheap materials.'<sup>20</sup>

The Song of the Lark is based, in part, upon the story of Olive Fremstad whose influences upon Willa Cather have been discussed in Chapter Two. But the story of Thea Kronborg is not that alone; it is the story of Willa Cather, her beliefs in art and artists, and her development as an artist in her own field. While there is much autobiography in this novel, the important contribution is the revealing, in more detail, the principles upon which the world of the artist is based in Cather's novels.

She believed that the artist is entirely concerned with his art; there is no room for anything else. He must deny himself anything that stands in the way of his career. He is surrounded by enemies and must not let their indifference to life's demands, their antagonism, hinder him in his own devotion to his ideals. He is not bound by the conventions that determine the lives of the "common" people, but is above all of these in the dedication to his art. An intimate friend of Cather's collaborates the ideas expressed in The Song of the Lark as embodying the author's own philosophy of life:

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 570-1.

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The story, as I read it, bore out much of what Willa had said to me about the desire, the passion which takes a woman of exceptional gifts away from the usual instinctive woman's lot of marriage and children to fulfil a directive that is altogether impersonal.<sup>21</sup>

Cather's conception of the artist was such that she considered him as of a race apart even from his own more natural inclinations. He has an obligation to a dream that is ever alive within the world, the dream that was in the hearts of the Indian women of the cliff city as they shaped the pottery to hold the waters which they considered sacred. And that is why he will ever be haunted by the Philistines. This lower race of men who lack that artistic passion cannot understand that it is something impersonal, not for the artist's own satisfaction but for the human race at large. As Thea expressed in the novel, the artist's work becomes his personal life. It controls his thoughts and his habits; it spins him in a web and he is forced to accept his destiny.

Cather believed, too, that the artist is so much set apart that he can be excused from the conventional attitudes that are demanded of others. He can be rude, cold, friendless, but none of this matters. She thought that the vocation of an artist calls for such a great sacrifice that he can be exempted from these conventions. Art demands a constant giving of the strength of the artist, and others must be satisfied to admire him from afar with a deep compassion for the life that he is forced to follow in the demands of his art.

In Thea Kronborg Cather put the physical and moral strength which is found in her more magnificent pioneer characters and all of the unqualified

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<sup>21</sup> Elisabeth S. Sergeant, Willa Cather; A Memoir, N. Y., Lippincott, 1953., p. 134.

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devotion which is part of her artists. In Thea are found some of the best characteristics which the European immigrants brought to this country, a strengthening of these talents by taking root in the Southwest where the culture goes back to ages unknown, and a final blossoming of this combination under the inspiration of the great European masters of the opera.

The world of the artist as it surrounds Thea is not drawn in great detail. There is given a glimpse of the teachers, the self-deceiving artists, the humble, talented second-rater, like Landry, absorbed into the orb of the artist. But Thea is the real world. It is only in her wake that the reader moves through this world and in her reflections, likes and dislikes. The world of the artist takes on depth and meaning. This is the life of a complete artist and all others, even the enemies, eventually fade into the background.

In the following novel the principles existing in the life of the artist become involved in another world. The sensitiveness of the artist, the passion for the creative ideal, the lack of sympathy for Philistine ideas are put into the person of a university professor. There is no struggle for great success but only the need to defend this small world from the decaying surroundings.

The Professor's House

The Professor's House is one of the most complicated and symbolic novels in the Cather collection. The characters and images could be twisted and interpreted to mean almost anything the reader desired; however, it is not impossible to adhere to the literal interpretation and to understand Professor

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Godfrey St. Peter as representing a refined and polished creation in Cather's world of artists.

Both the story and its structure are simple. St. Peter is professor of history at a small university. A former student of his, Tom Outland, who became his son-in-law before being killed in the war, left behind him a discovery which has proved commercially successful. It has enriched the professor's daughter and her new husband together with the rest of the St. Peter family. A new house has been built but the professor's wife finds him adamant to the suggestion of giving up his room in the old house where so much of his work has been done, where he has met so many of his victories and defeats. The story is divided into a study of the family, of Tom Outland, and finally, of the professor himself.

Godfrey St. Peter is put into the category of artist for many reasons. His talents, first of all, elevate him above the normal run of mankind. He is an historian but does not limit himself to the mechanics of research. In his work he finds beauty and a mode of creation. The great work which has come from his hands has won him recognition throughout the scholastic world. It is his Spanish Adventurers in North America to which he has devoted fifteen years of study and writing. There is evident in his attitude as he first faces this magnificent labor, the spirit which is found so repeatedly in Cather's other artists. He says to himself: "I will do this dazzling, this beautiful, this utterly impossible thing."<sup>22</sup> It is to be a work of art. It is to be a

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<sup>22</sup> Willa Cather, The Professor's House, N.Y., Knopf, 1925, p. 25.

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creation to which he will give of his best self. But the passion that drove him toward his goal had to be shared with the work that he was doing for the university. He would not cheat on his work there; he still gave of his time and energy to the rooms full of boys and girls in the lecture halls. These meant creation to him also. Their doubts and questions stimulated him and kept him young.

There are other characteristics which show St. Peter as the artist. His little garden behind the old house where he spent many hours in making it match the ideal he had in mind, the necessity he felt to be alone with his work during the hours when he was creating the volumes of his great success, his repugnance in face of the grasping and greedy attitude of those around him, all of these place him side by side with the great creative artists of Cather's novels.

The most significant realization about this novel and in particular about this character, Godfrey St. Peter, is that art has been his life and his religion. His work seems to have been everything. Even the long episode involving the discoveries of Tom Outland becomes part of this work of creation with which he has separated himself from the prosaic absurdities of the daily life around him. This is the artist nearly succeeding at living in a vacuum, and that abstraction in the life of St. Peter is represented by the quarters he has in the old house. Only after that part of him has died, and he had a premonition of death, does he feel that he will be able to face the family, to face the new house. He knows he will not be the same man. He is the artist purified, the artist free from degrading emotions, independent of material things which for some people become necessities.

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The professor helps make this idea clear in part of a lecture when he points out that science has taken our attention away from the things that really matter in life. But he speaks as the real artist, as the spokesman of Cather's mind when he announces:

I don't think you help people by making their conduct of no importance--you impoverish them. As long as every man and woman who crowded into the cathedrals on Easter Sunday was a principal in a gorgeous drama with God, glittering angels on one side and the shadows of evil coming and going on the other, life was a rich thing... And that is what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives... Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had.<sup>23</sup>

The proper interpretation of this passage, judging from the other comments the professor has to make on the subject, is that art and religion both put man in his proper place in this world. He is meant for greater things than to be searching after wealth and luxury. Science has treated him as an animal who seeks only the comforts of the world. Art and religion consider him as an individual with dignity and high purpose. His importance rests in the fact that he is an individual, "a principal in a gorgeous drama with God." And thus it is that these two worlds, art and religion, have contributed to man's happiness. They are the same in this one respect.

The professor's dealings with religion are erratic. His father was a fallen away Catholic, but he himself seems to have no particular faith. Even towards the close of the novel when he must make a decision to save

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 68-9.

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his life in the gas-filled room or be overcome, his only consideration is whether it is ethical to refuse to lift a hand in one's defense. There is no thought of God or a future life expressed. His closest contact with religion in any form is in his associations with Augusta, the sewing lady who for many years has been designing and repairing the dresses of his daughters and wife. She is a devout Catholic, and St. Peter realizes after she has saved him from suffocation that she "had always been a corrective, a remedial influence."<sup>24</sup> However, she does not lead him any nearer religion. The reason is that since art and religion supply the same need, he finds religion unnecessary. But it is the sense of obligation to Augusta who represents the "bloomless side of life he had always run away from"<sup>25</sup> which makes him decide that he can go on living. He feels no obligation to anyone else, not his wife nor his daughters. "There was still Augusta, however; a world full of Augustas, with whom one was outward bound."<sup>26</sup> He will continue to live for these people who depend upon him and to whom he has a sense of obligation, but the artist in him is dead; he has completed all that he felt dedicated to do.

Godfrey St. Peter, like Cather's other artists, has his contentions with the Philistines. There is, first of all, his daughter, Rosamond, and her husband, Louie. Although he likes them, their constant striving for prestige, wealth, notice, rebuffs his affections on many occasions. He refuses

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

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to become indebted to them in any way. His other daughter, Kitty, who is the most likeable of the lot, shows her own lack of understanding of the important things of life in her jealousy of her sister. His wife has become hardened and lets her life become the center of the attentions of her son-in-law. She begins to think it of the greatest importance to take her place in the social world as the wife of a learned professor.

Outside of the family circle there are other Philistines. In his early years at the university the professor fought the State Legislature which insisted on making a cheap production of the building of the Physics Lab. It was a matter of striving for a good idea against a group whose only thought was of the cost. He lost this battle. However, he fought on against a growing type of Philistinism at the university. Since he represents the artist he stands for the highest ideals in every profession including that of scholarship. He had entered the fight many times "to prevent the younger professors, who had a sharp eye to their own interests, from farming the whole institution out to athletics, and to the agricultural and commercial schools favoured and fostered by the State Legislature."<sup>27</sup>

This control of the university curriculum by the State Legislature is represented in the novel by Professor Horace Langtry. "His uncle was president of the board of regents, and very influential in State politics; the institution had to look to him, indeed, to get its financial appropriations passed by the Legislature."<sup>28</sup> Langtry was kept on in the university for this reason

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

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alone in spite of the fact that he was a very poor teacher. However, since he was in the History Department, he became a rival to Professor St. Peter, and, with the influence of his uncle, tried to take control of the Department. Ludicrous concessions contrary to the spirit of scholarship were made to the students to induce them to take his courses. A further indication of the growing spirit of Philistinism in the university is seen in the fact that latter day students began to consider him an "influence." "To the football-playing farmer boy who had a good allowance but didn't know how to dress or what to say, Langtry looked like a short cut."<sup>29</sup>

The Philistine appears again in the form of the scholarly Professor Crane. This man had worked with Tom Outland on the formula that had paid off commercially, but he becomes actively acquisitive when he sees a chance of getting what he considers his share of the spoils. The littleness of this man of science for whom St. Peter has a natural aversion, is other evidence of the Philistines who help complicate the world of the artist. "A scholar and artist himself, he is repelled by the patronizing babbits with their glossy substitutes for the abundant, precious realities."<sup>30</sup>

Tom Outland's story comprises at least one third of the novel. It is the history of one student, who, Professor St. Peter felt, deserved all of his attention and interest. He had shown up at the professor's house to begin

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>30</sup> Francis X. Connolly, "Willa Cather; Memory as Muse" in Fifty Years of the American Novel: A Christian Appraisal, ed. Harold C. Gardiner, N.Y., Scribner's, 1952, p. 81.

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freshman year at the university. From their first meeting these two became the closest friends. Tom, during his graduate work, designed a formula in the laboratory that was to amount to millions in profit when it was brought to the commercial market. He married the professor's youngest daughter and went off to war where he was to meet his death. The long chapter, however, dealing with Tom is concerned chiefly with one incident in his life. He and a friend discover an entrance to the "Blue Mesa" in New Mexico, "a naked blue rock set down alone in the plain, almost square, except that the top was higher at one end."<sup>31</sup> Within the canyons of this mesa are the remains of an ancient Indian people. There is much evidence that their particular civilization was much advanced and that there was nothing comparable to this particular tribe in the whole of the Southwest.

The discovery stirs Tom's imagination. He classifies the pottery and instruments he finds there; keeps a diary of all his amateur archeological activities, and sets off for Washington to interest the Smithsonian or other scientists in his find. His trip is a failure due to the interest of the authorities in more immediate and personal problems. While he is away his friend, unconscious of the significance of his project, betrays Tom by selling all of the pottery and relics.

The link between Tom and St. Peter is quite obvious. Tom, too, is an artist. He is one who is completely taken up with his work, who appreciates the things that really matter in this life and not the riches and

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<sup>31</sup> Cather, The Professor's House, p. 186.

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conventions that are often mistaken for the real thing. He is, indeed, a younger Godfrey St. Peter. He, too, has been afflicted by the Philistines, has been rebuffed, and though he was beaten in one thing, he succeeds in another. His early death keeps him from falling into the current of human relationships which could possibly have destroyed all that he meant to himself. The professor reflects on the personality of Tom and expresses again Cather's view of the impersonal element in the work of the artist:

St. Peter sometimes wondered what would have happened to him, once the trap of worldly success had been sprung on him. He couldn't see Tom building "Outland," or becoming a public-spirited citizen of Hamilton... His fellow scientists, his wife, the town and State, would have required many duties... He had escaped all that. He had made something new in the world-and the rewards, the meaningless conventional gestures, he had left to others.<sup>32</sup>

If Tom represents the young St. Peter, the man Godfrey nearly was, then after the chapter on the life of Tom Outland, it is this real youth of the past which the professor brings to life. "Tom Outland had not come back again through the garden door (as he had so often done in dreams!), but another boy had: the boy the Professor had long ago left behind him in Kansas...."<sup>33</sup> The boy who comes back now is the only life that matters. "He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths... He was earth, and would return to earth."<sup>34</sup> This first nature seems to return to him now at what he considers the end of his life.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260-1.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

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All that came in between, his family and friends, his work and success, is nothing. This casting off of the intervening years and events and return to the uninhibited spirit of adolescence, is part of his attempt to be free of all those attachments, all of those Philistine habits which make up the unimportant part of life.

This attitude of the professor's is hard to understand. The other artists and pioneers were passionate in their dedication to their work. This dedication was part of St. Peter's life, too, but now he has rid himself of this final attachment. It is with life itself that he is concerned, with being, with existence. He is the artist who has gone past the limitations of his world. But the picture is not complete. In the final analysis he has found only himself. He wants to be alone. He has fallen out of love with the world and his work. "Falling out for him, seemed to mean falling out of all domestic and social relations, out of his place in the human family, indeed."<sup>35</sup> He has no need of the religion he saw in the life of Augusta and now he has no need of art: the two things which, he said, had brought men happiness in this life. He has neither. When he has recovered from his near-suffocation from the gas in his room he feels that he has changed. "He had let something go- and it was gone: something very precious, that he could not consciously have relinquished, probably."<sup>36</sup>

Godfrey St. Peter is a portrait of an artist. But he is one who is quite different from most that Cather created. He is given to introspection

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 282.

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to such a degree that none of the other characters could have dreamed of. And that consideration of himself and his life has led him to a desire to shed both. He still possesses the soul of the artist, but a defeated soul. Art has not satisfied his desires which is characteristic of one of Cather's principles that art is impersonal. It is for the world, not the artist.

St. Peter represents the artist who has outlived his art. He has nothing to become, nothing more to live for. Perhaps Cather had no solution other than permitting the professor to wait for the death which is the end of all things. However, the sense of religion which is so profound in this novel will take its full expression two years later in a story of a missionary who is artist and pioneer, who lives the lecture St. Peter had given in the classroom: all the events of life have importance, man is acting a part in the glorious drama of God.

Godfrey St. Peter has been both successful and a failure in his own life, but he acts as a link between the artists who appear after him almost as amateurs at living, and the saints who knew the reason that life was worth living.

Lucy Gayheart

This novel has much in common with The Song of the Lark. Lucy Gayheart comes from a small town in Colorado, Haverford. Like Thea Kronborg she goes to Chicago to study music with the intention of teaching in her home town. But unlike Thea her talent is not a great one; she has no

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struggle to come to the top of her profession. Lucy is one of those sensitive individuals inclined toward the artists. However, her story is not essentially one of an artist; it is the story of a girl in love.

Lucy falls in love with Clement Sebastian, a truly great singer. He is much older than she and is married. For a few months she lives in a dream world, accompanying him on the piano during his long hours of practice for coming concerts. During this period she rudely turns down an offer of marriage from Harry Gordon, a wealthy young man from her home town. Clement drowns while he is on a concert tour in Europe, and Lucy's world comes crashing down around her. She returns home to Haverford, broken, and with little hope for the future. From Harry, who married hastily when he was jilted by Lucy, the young girl seeks some consolation. He refuses to forgive her in a tragic moment before her sudden drowning in the river. In the last chapter of the book, twenty-five years after Lucy's death, her spirit is still alive in her home town and especially in the heart of Harry Gordon.

The study of Lucy is not the study of an artist. But her spirit is the same as that of Cather's artist with the exception that it is not the desire to live out the role of musician, singer, or painter which draws Lucy on, but it is her love for Sebastian whose brilliant talent and career represent a full and complete life of sorrow and success.

Her love for music is the first noticeable thing that sets her apart from the townspeople of Haverford. From her father she has gained this love, for Jacob Gayheart is the local watchmaker who leads the town band and gives

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lessons on the clarinet, flute, and violin. Lucy's father is intelligent but lazy; he is joked about by the people of the town but he is far ahead of them in his love of the meaningful things of life and in his understanding of human nature. He does not begrudge Lucy the expense of her study in Chicago and does not bother her with questions when she returns home so unexpectedly and with such an obvious sorrow.

The characteristics which make Lucy Gayhearth a "Cather artist" are evident in her life before her departure from the home town. She is one of the most popular girls in her group; she is pretty, and even her walk which is full of vigor and independence separates her from the others of her age. The most eligible boy in town, Harry Gordon, is considered properly hers but his attitude is slightly colored with the narrow provincialism which marks the attitude of the town boys towards the hired girls of My Antonia. However, his attention helps set her apart from the rest.

One other symbolic reminder of Lucy in Haverford is not revealed to the reader until the end of the book.<sup>37</sup> It is a set of footprints which she has made in the wet cement of the sidewalk when she was just thirteen years old. Harry is contemplating them and notices the suggestion of "quick motion" which gave them a "look of swiftness, mischief, and lightness." They are the prints of a little girl "running away."

When Lucy arrives in Chicago she is again like Thea Kronborg in her inexperience and her lack of knowledge about music. The first time

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<sup>37</sup> Willa Cather, Lucy Gayhearth, N. Y., Knopf, 1935, p. 227.

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she hears Clement Sebastian sing she begins to have a new understanding of art, a clearer revelation of the world of music:

It was a discovery about life, a revelation of love as a tragic force, not a melting mood, of passion that drowns like black water. As she sat listening to this man the outside world seemed to her dark and terrifying, full of fears and dangers that had never come close to her until now.<sup>38</sup>

In those words Cather reveals the story of Lucy and Sebastian.

It is a prophecy of the sad love that was to unite them through the world of music and perhaps a suggestion of the death by drowning that was to overcome them both.

During all of the months of Lucy's stay in Chicago her world is filled with music. Each day she spends an hour or so in Sebastian's studio practicing the songs that he sings most beautifully. Everything she plays and hears him sing seems to come as a natural expression of his personality. The sad, gentle lyrics are stories of his own life; they are things that he has lived and felt.

Another phase of Lucy's life of music is that connected with her teacher, Auerbach. He is a gentle, kind individual who recognizes that Lucy is his best pupil but realizes that she has not the talent for becoming a great artist. When the opportunity arises for her to become Sebastian's temporary accompanist he is quick to see that she gets the position. At Auerbach's studio, too, Lucy gives lessons to others and such work is to be her career rather than that of a public artist.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

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The reader is again brought into contact with the world of art during the week that Harry visits Lucy in Chicago. The two young people attend the opera every night and enjoy the richness and vitality of this world. However, it is the prelude to "Lohengrin" which moves the spirit of Lucy away from Harry and closer to Sebastian:

Before the first act was half over she was longing to be alone; this wasn't the kind of opera to be hearing with Harry... The music kept bringing back things she used to feel in Sebastian's studio; belief in an invisible, inviolable world.<sup>39</sup>

And the world she longs for is the one that Sebastian represents: the mature, sincere, all-embracing world of the artist, the gateway to the secret of life. And that is what Sebastian means to Lucy. She begins to realize it more and more as she begins to recover from the shock of Sebastian's death. She had been pursuing something she could not see, a feeling of wonder in the air, the same inexpressible desire that had moved her long ago when she had seen the first star of the evening and suddenly felt a continuity between herself and the star. It was Sebastian who taught her that she could make her life an art:

Clement Sebastian had made the fugitive gleam an actual possession. With him she had learned that those flashes of promise come true, that they could be the important things in one's life. He had never told her so; he was, in his own person, the door and the way to that knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

In Clement Sebastian Cather has drawn her portrait of the mature artist. Here is no picture of the struggle that was part of the life of Thea Kronborg. There is not such a talent that draws him on and demands of him

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 183-4.

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every ounce of his energy and personal happiness. Rather his art is a part of him that fits him as naturally as his clothes. It is not demanding and weakening, but gives him strength and is a quickening pleasure:

Art such as Sebastian's depends most of all neither on training nor on the quality of a voice, but on the personality of the performer and what that personality has made of experience.<sup>41</sup>

His art is comparable to that of Jacob Gayheart's, Lucy's father, though on a greater scale. It is part of his life and he enjoys it. It is for the pleasure of others, but for his own happiness, too.

When Lucy comes into his life Sebastian is feeling the weight of his years. He reflects that he has few memories worth living for. He is cut off from his family, country, and friends, and his art does not fill the need of companionship that Lucy can give him. In her he sees a kind of delicacy that he has not met with in any man or woman. In her eyes he reads devotion and "the fire of imagination," but she would make no claim on him or use his name for her own advantage. He turns to Lucy for consolation when he feels weighed down at the death of one of his fellow artists. And Lucy sees him as so many hundreds of his audience see him. She tells him what he means to her and to his admirers: "I am happy whenever I think about you, and so are lots of people. You have everything other people are struggling for. You don't value it enough, truly you don't."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> E.K. Brown, Op. Cit., p. 302.

<sup>42</sup> Cather, Lucy Gayheart, p. 85.

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In the portrait of this great artist the emphasis is not upon the workings of his talent but upon his personal life. That life, as depicted in the lives of all of Cather's artists, has its share of the Philistines. His accompanist, James Mockford, is the chief of these. He is a talented pianist who makes as much use of the great man as he possibly can. Mockford's lameness has aroused sympathy in Sebastian who overlooks many of his faults for a long time. However, at the beginning of his fatal tour of Europe, Sebastian is anticipating getting Mockford settled in some other position. The accompanist has been clinging to the artist for a long time and in union with the agent, Weisbourn, he has made a good financial thing of this association. These two Philistines are pictured together just previous to the trip to Europe. "The moment they sat down together they had been overtaken by the brotherly affection which beams from two schemers who have done each other a good turn."<sup>43</sup>

It is Mockford, in the symbolic role of the Philistine, who eventually causes the death of Sebastian. It happens on a lake in Europe when the boat, in which Sebastian and his accompanist are riding with another, overturns. The friend escapes and expects Sebastian, who is a good swimmer, to make it to shore, but the last view of the singer shows him struggling with Mockford who presumably pulls him under to his death.

Philistinism is particularly attached to the small Western town of Haverford. Most of the people here are concerned with their own little circle.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

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They are extremely afraid of not being in on the private lives of all of their neighbors or of being outdistanced by anyone in the race for success. When Lucy returns to her home town, heart-broken over the death of Sebastian, everyone is curious about her. They wonder why Harry Gordon married someone else and why Lucy is so changed upon her return from Chicago. Lucy's sister, Pauline, is the worst of the lot and is the most sharply drawn portrait of the Philistine in this novel.

Pauline believes in putting on a front for the sake of the townspeople. She is worried about what they will think of Lucy and Harry, of Lucy and Chicago, of Lucy and her sorrow. She is worried, too, about her father's life, for he is so different from the other business men of the town. She considers herself the only normal person in the family and the one "to keep up the family's standing in the community."

Lucy often comes into contact with Philistinism of the small town after her return. At the local opera house she watches a performer of a little road company and wonders how the really excellent soprano could have drifted into this particular phase of her art. "Singing this humdrum music to humdrum people, why was it worth while?" Lucy answers her own question by realizing that there is a world away from this town, "a world that strove after excellence-the world out of which this woman must have fallen."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

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And Lucy's last contact with the world is the snubbing she gets from Harry as she is on her way to skate on the frozen river. Within her there arises the feeling that the whole world is like this; these are the natural enemies that had lined the road to success of Thea Kronborg. Her reflections are those that often came to the heroine of The Song of the Lark:

She was young, she was strong, she would show them they couldn't crush her. She would get away from these people who were cruel and stupid-stupid as the frozen mud in the road.<sup>45</sup>

Lucy, like the artist, is in a world set apart. In the mature reflections of Harry Gordon, long after the deaths of the Gayheart family, the reader is given another picture of Lucy as one set apart from the world of the Philistines. Harry remembers how she appeared when she came back from Chicago. "She seemed gathered up and sustained by something that never let her drop into the common world."<sup>46</sup>

In Harry Gordon there is something of the Philistine, too. In his concern about what the community will think of him, in his reluctance to show his love for music as likely to make him appear sentimental, in his walking out of the restaurant and leaving Lucy alone, in his final attitude of unforgiveness when she returns to Haverford there are all the elements of the Philistine. However, he redeems himself in a number of ways. He has a desire for the better things of life which sets him apart from the townspeople. Lucy can see beneath the surface even better than others:

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

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He knew the world better than anyone else here, he had some imagination. He rose and fell, he was alive, he moved. He was not anchored, he was not lazy, he was not a sheep... There was a man underneath all those layers of caution; he wasn't tame at the core.<sup>47</sup>

But Harry is too late in discovering his true self to save the life of Lucy. Only after her death does he begin to take on the image that she had of him. He is not ashamed to be seen with Lucy's father and begins to spend his evenings in the back of Gayheart's store playing chess. He relaxes some of his caution in his business deals and is more generous in the treatment of his clients. He is not ashamed of his sentimentality and asks the new tenant of the Gayheart house to preserve the sidewalk in front which yet contains the impressions of Lucy's footprints. After Lucy's death Harry becomes a new man and takes on the proportions of Cather's hero characters.

In Lucy Gayheart the world of the artist which Cather has created grows with the addition of Clement Sebastian and Lucy, with the portraits of the Philistines. It differs from other stories of the artist in that it shows little of the struggles and triumphs by which a talent is made great. However, through the entire novel there is a theme of art and music which elevates the world which can lay claim to such a love. It raises the characters who are so touched by the muse to a level above that of the common people. It does more than nationality, riches, or social position can do to make a man something of importance in this world. It is not Lucy's musical talent which sets her apart, but it is her desire to make life an art, a beautiful thing. And that

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 175

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desire is intimately connected first with her love of music and then with the love of Sebastian who personifies the life she wants to live.

For Sebastian it is his art which sets him apart. He is so related to the expression of his talent that he can hardly be considered apart from it. This is what he was meant to be and he has fulfilled all of the promises that are made to those with such a talent. He is the great artist who is big enough to translate the desire in Lucy's spirit into a mode of living. The very fact that he is plagued by Philistines, that he has overcome those who have tried to pull him down, is enough to classify him among those of Cather's artistic characters who are considered great.

This novel lacks the sense of struggle and final triumph that characterizes most of Cather's works, but even when the circumstances are sad and the suffering deep there is yet the knowledge that Clement Sebastian and Lucy Gayheart are real inheritors of Cather's sense of "full living" that is an intimate part of her artist-characters.

It is not always the great artists who become Cather's heroes. She is interested in all of those who possess the qualifications for living a full life, who respond with a heroic instinct to the challenges that life gives them. Basically it is the temperament of the creative artist but the expression of that spirit is not always so tangible as a painting or musical composition. In the following story Cather's character is a successful artist only in learning how to die.

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My Mortal Enemy

This novel is not concerned primarily with artists and their world, but is a study of one of those sensitive individuals who have been designated as "artists" for this work. Myra Driscoll Henshawe is imaginative, forceful, courageous. She refuses to be defeated, and, if nothing else, this purpose classifies her as a typical Cather character.

The heroine is first viewed through the eyes of a gentle and talented girl of fifteen, Nellie Birdseye. Myra as a mature woman comes back to the small town from which she ran away in her youth with the man she loved. She gave up her Catholic faith to be married out of the Church. She also gave up a fortune, for her uncle had warned her that he would cut her out of his will if she ever married Henshawe. When she first comes within the orbit of Nellie Birdseye her story has taken on a legend of young and passionate love.

Myra invites Nellie and her Aunt Lydia to visit in New York and the description of life there is again characteristic of Cather's acquaintance with the world of the artist. The scenes are reminiscent of other descriptive passages in her short stories and novels about artists. She does not dwell upon their lives and activities but sets Myra down in the center of this world in order to bring out the qualities which make her so much like the talented people around her. Perhaps it is that the reader sees with the eyes of the young and impressive Nellie that this artists' world takes on such an aura of separateness. "For the salons of Myra Henshawe's group take on a more brilliant and exotic tone here, the musical and theatrical celebrities glitter ever more brightly."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials: The American Novel, 1915-1925. Boston, Houghton, 1947, p. 189.

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Myra is acquainted with many of these creative individuals. Each of them becomes something above and beyond the common man. One of them, Anne Aylward, is a poet who has won the admiration of men of letters but is now dying of tuberculosis in her early twenties. During a visit she talks with Myra about artistic things: "They seemed to speak together a kind of highly flavoured special language."<sup>49</sup> At another time a well-known writer passes in a crowd and it is understood that once he and Myra had been very good friends. But they are now enemies for he refused to help her husband when he could have. To her apartment come others of the world of artists: actors, singers, poets. But the one who is outstanding and of whom the most complete portrait is made is Helena Modjeska. She came to Henshawe's New Year's party early and stayed until the other guests had gone. Nellie had ample opportunity to study the beautiful face of the actress and to watch the beautifully modeled hands. "They were worldly, indeed, but fashioned for a nobler worldliness than ours."<sup>50</sup> At the end of the party she asks her Polish friend to sing and the lights are turned out in the living room:

She sat by the window, half draped in her cloak, the moonlight falling across her knees. Her friend went to the piano and commenced the *Casta Diva* aria, which begins so like the quivering of moonbeams on the water... I remember Oswald, standing like a statue behind Madame Modjeska's chair, and Myra, crouching low beside the singer, her head in both hands, while the song grew and blossomed like a great emotion.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Willa Cather, My Mortal Enemy, Toronto, Macmillan, 1926, p. 54.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

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This scene is well used to show the reader how intimately Myra is related to the artists and their grand passions. She is one of them. The songs they sing are her songs. The atmosphere they create is part of her doing. It is almost as if she had as much a part in the artistic productions of her friends as the artists themselves. Nellie felt that this particular evening and this particular song supplied the best explanation of Myra's character:

For many years I associated Mrs. Henshawe with that music, thought of that aria as being mysteriously related to something in her nature that one rarely saw, but nearly always felt; a compelling, passionate, overmastering something for which I had no name, but which was audible, visible in the air that night, as she sat crouching in the shadow.<sup>52</sup>

It is ten years later that Nellie again sees Myra and her husband. They now live in a decrepit hotel on the West coast and Myra is suffering from an illness which confines her to her room. Even in the old days she often grew strangely bitter on occasion, unreasonable in her attitude towards her husband, and now these qualities have grown more intense and the attacks come more frequently. She complains of their poverty, of the boorish couple inhabiting the apartment above them, of her husband who she feels has taken her away from her religion. She will not look back to the happy years they had together though her husband urges her to. She feels that she has always been a greedy, grasping woman. Though she never expresses the thought it appears that she has repented for leaving the Church and now considers that her youthful folly

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

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was not worth the sorrow it has brought her. She has gone to see a priest and in her last weeks he comes to see her daily. They talk together for hours and it is from these conversations that the reader can presume that she has turned that "compelling, passionate, overmastering something," towards her religion. Father Fay's remark to Nellie leads to this belief: "I wonder whether some of the saints of the early Church weren't a good deal like her. She's not at all modern in her make-up, is she?"<sup>53</sup>

When Nellie first discovers Myra at the hotel the invalid persuades her young friend to take her again and again to a high cliff that overlooks the sea. Nellie leaves her alone there for hours in her meditations. Myra remarks to Nellie how much she would love to see this place at dawn:

That is always such a forgiving time. When that first cold, bright streak comes over the water, it's as if all our sins were pardoned; as if the sky leaned over the earth and kissed it and gave it absolution. You know how the great sinners always came home to die in some religious house, and the abbot or the abbess went out and received them with a kiss.<sup>54</sup>

Certainly then this is the meaning of Myra's life. Those qualities of her nature which alined her with the great artists will lift her into the company of the great sinners seeking repentance. And she remarks to Father Fay that in religion "seeking is finding."<sup>55</sup> This is the point in religious life that Professor St. Peter approached and it is the way of life of the missionaries in Death Comes for the Archbishop. Myra Henshawe comes between

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

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these two studies. She goes farther than the Professor, for she has known all along, at least subconsciously, that she could only find the expression of herself which she desired in religion. From her husband she had demanded an almost complete submission and worship. She would not tolerate any attention he showed to others, and once separated from him because of a slight suspicion. She was often bitter and sarcastic in her conversations about others and in these scenes she appears more dissatisfied with herself and her own life. At the end of her life she refers to her husband as her "mortal enemy" for it was Henshawe whom she chose in preference to her religion.

Myra dies alone on the cliff overlooking the sea. She slipped away from her husband and Nellie and dies there at dawn. They find her there with her crucifix in her hands and the reader presumes that she at last has made her peace with God, and has begun to fulfil the promise of her talents.

My Mortal Enemy, for such a brief story, has its share of artists and scenes from their world. There are a few characters who can be classed as Philistines and a few remarks which indicate Cather's distaste for the crude and the coarse. The people who occupy the apartment above the Henshawe's at the close of the story are classified as "animals." They are Southerners of the worse sort, "a race without consonants and without delicacy."<sup>56</sup> Their tramping, talking, and running are heard quite clearly most of the day. These Philistines can be considered as comparable to those appearing in the lives

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

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of Cather's artists who help bring out the opposite qualities in the major characters. In Myra's life they act together with her physical sufferings as punishment for the sins of which she is so conscious.

One remark which clearly reflects Cather's attitude to the ugly in life is made by Myra in reference to some of the modern poets of the Twenties. She says to Nellie: "You don't really like this new verse that's going round, ugly lines about ugly people and common feelings-you don't really?"<sup>57</sup> This remark is only incidental to the larger meaning of the scene in which one of Heine's poems is read about "the poor-sinner's-flower" which is put on a suicide's grave. Myra claims it for her own.

My Mortal Enemy stands in a place of transition in the study of Cather's novels and the development of the artist character. Myra Henshawe has the soul of an artist which is at the very end concerned with sorrow for her sins and love of God. The novel is read and understood best in relation to The Professor's House and Death Comes for the Archbishop between which two novels it stands in point of time and growth of Cather's characters.

The artist prevails, in one way or another, in Cather's novels. If he is not one creating on canvas or with music he, at least, turns his talent to making living an art. Of such a nature are some of the characters in the following novel. Prominent here, too, is some of the evidence that the pioneer character is basically the same as that of the artist.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

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Shadows on the Rock

In tracing the spirit of the artist and the pioneer through the novels of Willa Cather one is at first disappointed coming upon this novel. There are no great artists here striving to express their passion in the most perfect way; there are no pioneers described in the process of creating a new civilization in the wilds of a frontier. Shadows on the Rock takes a year from the seventeenth century, a culture from France, and weaves the memories of things past into a novel about Quebec. The story is put together with such delicacy and perfection that any passionate creative outburst would be out of place; it would destroy the little world on the rock and cause the dream to vanish.

In spite of the different qualities of this novel there can still be discovered evidence of Cather's typical heroes. For the most part, however, the passion of these characters has burned itself out. Their heroism, the pioneer spirit, the desire to express themselves through the talents they have is a thing of the past or at a distance. It is not at the center of the story.

Bishop Laval and Count Frontenac are heroes at the end of their lives. The Bishop has years of work behind him and for all of his faults and qualities for which his people dislike him, they yet admit that he has been a shepherd to his sheep. The Count, too, has a record of achievement in his past. He has given his lifetime and fortune to the services of his country, in wars of conquest and defense. His spirit has been a great one. Even shortly before his death he appears great to his physician: "He seemed more like a man revolving plans for a new struggle with fortune than one looking back upon a life of brilliant failures."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Willa Cather, Shadows on the Rock, N.Y., Knopf, 1931.

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Perhaps in the past of these two men there is the story of the hero that Cather loved. But their struggles and triumphs are not to form the theme of this novel; the scars and marks of a lifetime of enthusiastic living give a clue to what their passion must have been.

In the life of the apothecary, Auclair, and his daughter, Cecile, is the heart of the story. In their little shop and living room behind, there is the spirit of Old France with its delicacy, fragrance, attention to details of living, the memories of home, love of the king, and honor of religion. The apothecary is not of the artist or pioneer stature. He is accomplished and independent in his own science, but he has lived his life in the shadow of the Count of his own spirit has never wandered into the realm of original creative achievement.

His daughter, Cecile, is not of the mold of Cather's usual heroines. Her virtue is her gentleness and the ease with which she fits into her background. She is everything that her mother was who told her: "We have learned to do all these things in the best way." Her duty is in the home where she cooks and cleans and preserves a gracious tradition in the new world.

The apothecary shop is the center of the story. All revolves around this replica of their home in France. But from the world outside of this home, from the visitors who come and go suddenly, from remarks of people who live on the periphery of the story comes a glimpse of Cather's creative characters.

One of the visitors is Pierre Charron, a fur trader. He is a pioneer of the new world and in moments of crisis his spirit of valor comes into this same shop to renew hope and happiness. He is courageous, intelligent, loyal:

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He had the good manners of the Old World, the dash and daring of the New. He was proud, he was vain, he was relentless when he hated, and quickly prejudiced; but he had the old ideals of clan-loyalty, and in friendship he never counted the cost.<sup>59</sup>

He is a character who would have done well on the prairies of the West, for he has all the talents that would have put him in the class of the great pioneers. To Cecile, who later becomes his wife, he takes on the stature of Cather's heroes: "... he had authority, and a power which came from knowledge of the country and its people; from knowledge, and from a kind of passion."<sup>60</sup> But the passion of Pierre is not the passion of Shadows on the Rock. In spite of his frequent appearances in the story his world exists outside of Quebec city and his greatness is not to be analysed.

Of the same make is another of the "pioneer" characters, Fr. Hector Saint-Cyr. He has brought to Canada with him all of the intellectual passions and pleasures for fine living that were part of his life as a teacher at home. But the force of his personality has been directed to the success of his missionary work in this new land. In a conversation with Auclair he reveals himself:

No man can give himself heart and soul to one thing while in the back of his mind he cherishes a desire, a secret hope, for something very different... nothing worth while is accomplished except by giving oneself altogether and finally.<sup>61</sup>

This is the type of character that Cather is best at creating. However, she does not dwell upon Father Hector's sacrifice or what might be considered his creative achievements in his priestly labors. He is one of

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

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the background figures whose story Cather has already written in her novels of artists and pioneers.

Shadows on the Rock is not the story of artists and pioneers. It is a history, "where the great matters are often as worthless as astronomical distances, and the trifles dear as the heart's blood."<sup>62</sup> It is in the trifles of the novel, in the brief glimpses of great characters that Shadows on the Rock is most like her other novels. While it offers no analysis of artistic achievement, the force of the artist is found on every page.

## Summary

The portrait of the artist and his world is complete with these novels. The short stories had given sketches and fragmentary principles. The novels fill in the sketches and work the principles into a way of life.

There are two important features found in these novels about artists: 1) Their relationship with the pioneers, and, 2) their relationship with religion. In the short stories it was all art and the artist. This world contained its own beginning and end. In The Song of the Lark this attitude is, for the most part, continued. But even in this novel something more is added, something not found in the short stories with the exception, perhaps, of "The Namesake." It is an interest in the artistic spirit in general which not only makes great singers, but also makes great people. It is an extension of this artistic spirit to include the pioneers. The artistic spirit becomes identified with noble, passionate, valiant living. It becomes a part of those who make living itself

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

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the art. This theme is expressed more fully in The Professor's House and in Shadows on the Rock.

In the art of noble living religion, too, begins to play a part. Art is placed on the same level with religion in The Professor's House. In My Mortal Enemy the artistic personality is compared, though hardly paralleled with, the early saints of the Church. And with these two novels it becomes evident that Cather is ready to write her greatest work Death Comes for the Archbishop, which was to combine the artist, pioneer, and saint.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## THE WORLD OF THE PIONEER

The pioneer character in Cather's writings is fundamentally an artist. He is filled with the same desire to create but his material is the unconquered land of the West. He reacts in the face of challenge with all of the vitality of Cather's great artists. If he fails it is for the same reason that the artists fail: his dedication to his task has been incomplete; he is drawn away from his ideal by the weaker forces which Cather associated with material progress.

The pioneer is creative and imaginative. He has put himself into his land and it reflects his characteristics. It is wild, noble, and fruitful. Only a character with all of the imagination and spirit of the artist would set himself to face and overcome the obstacles which confront the pioneer. He is a hero as Cather portrays him, and an artist.

However the age of heroes of the West was to pass under the domination of the spirit which stands for material progress. Cather witnessed and recorded the coming of a weaker breed to the frontier. To the heroic pioneer these people are what the Philistines are to the artist. They refuse to meet the challenge of the land; they lack delicacy; they corrupt all that they touch. They are creatures from that "common, common world" which Cather despised.

Apart from the pioneers who conquered the prairies are those heroes who came to the frontier as missionaries in the service of God. They are artists in the art of living and pioneers in a world that had all but forgotten Christianity. In her one novel about these men, Death Comes for the Arch-

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bishop, Cather summed up her whole thesis of life. The missionaries are her greatest heroes, possessing the best characteristics of both the artists and the pioneers. It is the final proof of the unity of theme which runs through her entire work.

The following stories include both short stories and novels. Only two uncollected stories have been used here for they are most exemplary of Cather's thesis. Of the published short stories two have been selected from each of the two volumes: Obscure Destinies and The Old Beauty and Others. The novels which have not been studied in the previous chapter are used here for they are primarily about pioneers. In all of them the synopsis has been limited to those portions of the story which emphasize the characteristics of the pioneer and illustrate his similarity to the artist. As each story is reported its incidents are integrated with Cather's concept of the artist-pioneer.

### "The Enchanted Bluff"<sup>1</sup>

This story sets the scene for the study of Cather's pioneers. Although it was never re-published in her collected stories it appears in other forms in three of Cather's novels: Alexander's Bridge, My Antonia, and Death Comes for the Archbishop. It is the story of six boys about a campfire one one of the sandbars in the Republican River. Their ideals are high and chief among their desires is one to visit the "Enchanted Bluff" somewhere

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<sup>1</sup> Willa Cather, "The Enchanted Bluff," Harper's Monthly Magazine, Vol. 118, No. 707, pp. 774-81.

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in the Southwest of which they have heard fascinating stories. Each of them swears to go. Some twenty years later when the narrator of the story returns to the small Nebraskan town he finds that not one of the six boys has visited the Bluff. All have followed other dreams and all but one seemed to have forgotten about it. Tip Smith, one of the unsuccessful of the group, has handed on the dream to his son who is now planning to visit the Bluff, someday.

The story is significant in throwing light on Cather's pioneer world. It is the story of a dream of youth which dies with the encroachment of age. Others on the Divide had their dreams and followed them: Thea Kronborg, Alexandria Bergson, Lucy Gayheart. Others of Cather's artists had their dreams in youth and succeeded: Clarissa Garnet, Don Hedger, and Kitty Aryshire. It is the difference which separates the Cather-hero from the Cather-Philistine. These six boys have settled into a colorless existence and the dream has been forgotten. In the following story two of the characters follow their dreams but one turns back.

### "The Bohemian Girl"<sup>2</sup>

Cather wrote this story during a leave of absence from McClure's. It is as though she had begun to find that "quiet center of life" which Sarah Ohne Jewett had cautioned her to search for. This is the first of her many complete pictures of life on the Divide, and though it is not so full of love

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<sup>2</sup> Willa Cather, "The Bohemian Girl," McClure's Magazine, Vol. 39, No. 4, August, 1912.

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for the people as O Pioneers! and My Antonia, its similarity to these other stories could easily incorporate it into any of Cather's novels of the West.

Nils Ericson is returning to the Divide after an absence of twelve years as the story opens. He has eight brothers working on farms in the area and his memories border on bitterness for the difficulties of the life there. His brother Olaf's wife had died and this brother whom Nils liked the least had married Clara Vavrika, a former sweetheart of Nils'.

Clara is energetic, lively, almost unsympathetic in her search for pleasure. She is like Nils in her rejection of the people of the Divide. She has only contempt for them with the exception of her father who is likewise set apart from the majority. Clara, though very self-willed, has up to now been uninterested in her own destiny. She has let her Aunt Johanna decide her marriage and manage the house. The more Nils talks to her about going away with him from the Divide the more she seems to hand over her will to him. Eventually, the two of them leave. Nils who has sent his youngest brother, Eric, money to join him awaits in vain for his coming. This youngster who seems to have the qualities that are apparently lacking in the rest of the clan decides at the last moment to return. His mother welcomes him with an understanding and sympathy that makes Nils appear as the one who used poor judgement in running away.

In writing this story of the Divide Cather has left the impress of her world of artists. Although Nils is antagonistic for the most part, he, nevertheless, appreciates the dedication and force of will which works in these pioneers. His family appears dull and his brothers greedy for land, but his

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mother's "vigor and force" is symbolic of the spirit of all of the real pioneers. It is more towards the second generation that Nils turns his scorn. For them the great work has been done and it remains only to gather the rewards as abundantly as possible.

But the older generation, the real pioneers, hold the place in his imagination as the creators of this land. At the barn-raising ceremony Nils views the old women with appreciation:

They were a fine company of old women, and a Dutch painter would have loved to find them there together.... They were fat, rosy old women who looked hot in their best black dresses; spare, alert old women with brown, dark veined hands.... Among all of these grandmothers there were more brown heads than white...<sup>3</sup>

Nils thinks of the work they have done and his liking for these hearty pioneers is tremendous. It matches any of the labors of the other pioneers and appears as a Herculean task beside the lassitude of the present generation.

Clara does not share Nils' attitude of praise for the older people and he tells her that she is losing her love for life. It appears that the dis-interest which affected her before Nils' return is taking complete control. The only thing that will save her for herself is a complete break with the present life on the Divide. Nils encourages her with words of Cather's heroes who will give themselves completely for what they believe in:

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Ibid., p. 438.

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You have to plunge. That's the way I've always done,  
and it's the right way for people like you and me.  
There's nothing so dangerous as sitting still. You've  
only got one life, one youth, and you can let it slip  
through your fingers if you want to; nothing easier.  
Most people do that.<sup>4</sup>

This familiar theme could have come from any of Cather's artists or pioneers. In order to gain the success that is possible in this life, it is necessary to live with all of one's ability. The worst thing that can happen is sitting still which is so characteristic of Cather's Philistines. This later generation on the Divide won't move out of the rut in which they find themselves. It is emphasized in the life of Olaf, Clara's husband, who is without joy as he plods about his daily tasks with no imagination. It is the fault of all of the present generation who are not working toward any goal, who are not creating as they go about their work.

In spite, however, of these themes of the creative pioneer who lives his life to the full and of the Philistine who sits still, "The Bohemian Girl" misses fire in the last few lines. Eric who has shown all of the promise of being different from the second generation now returns to it. And his mother who has appeared insensitive to life is aroused to heroic stature and takes her place beside the early pioneer women. The idealism of Nils still remains, but it is thrown in a shadow by this last episode. The reader has no other choice than to suppose that the pioneer spirit is not dead on the Divide. Certainly it is much alive in the following story which portrays one of these western heroes at the end of his life.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 441.

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"Neighbor Rosicky"<sup>5</sup>

This Czech farmer is typical of the great men who changed the face of the Western prairies. It was only through a life of hardship and suffering that he has come to be so noble. In his twenties Rosicky worked in a tailor shop in New York, having already spent two years in London where he learned to speak English. His sensitiveness is evident in the pleasure he got from going to the opera on Saturday nights during his stay in New York. It cost him a precious dollar for standing room but the experience gave him something to think about for the rest of the week. His poetic heart rejoiced in all of the splendor of the stage, the scenery, costumes, and colorful panorama. He soon tired, however, of the life of the city and set out for the West. His idea of farming was simple. All he asked of this new venture was "to see the sun rise and set and to plant things and watch them grow."<sup>6</sup> At heart he was an artist.

Rosicky worked hard in the West. He was not to be discouraged by the worst droughts and greatest misfortunes. He was above disappointments in his love of the life. He reared a family of strong boys but never worried too much about money:

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.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Willa Cather, Obscure Destinies, New York, Knopf, 1932.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

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Rosicky tried to give to his sons an understanding of the important things of life. However, one of the boys, Rudolf, doesn't believe that his father's way of looking at things is the best. He is too easy-going in the boy's mind. He isn't interested in making a million but merely in living. Rosicky worried about the son's difficulty in understanding:

He was sure of himself and of Mary; he knew that they could bear what they had to bear, that they would always pull through somehow. But he was not so sure about the young ones, and he felt troubled because Rudolph and Polly were having such a hard start.<sup>8</sup>

However, he has not much need to worry. It is his own kindness and gentle guiding which brings his son and daughter-in-law to understand the great heritage which he has given them through his life. Polly, the wife of Rudolph, finds in Rosicky's hand a symbol of the great pioneer:

After he dropped off to sleep, she sat holding his warm, broad, flexible brown hand. She had never seen anything like it.... it was so alive and quick and light in its communications, -very strange in a farmer.... It wasn't nervous, it wasn't a stupid lump; it was a warm brown human hand, with some cleverness in it, a great deal of generosity....<sup>9</sup>

It is the hand of a pioneer who has created beautiful things on the prairies and in his own life.

In a final scene as the doctor rides past the place where Rosicky is buried in a corner of his own farm it seems that the pioneer has found his right resting place in the colorful and fruitful country. To the doctor "Rosicky's life seemed... complete and beautiful."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

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This is the meaning of life for the pioneer. It must be complete in conquering the obstacles facing it; it must be beautiful in its appreciation of the finer things of life and not made ugly by the desire to be successful in the terms of money. Cather's sympathy for this old pioneer is similar to her appreciation of two other pioneers who are financially successful. In the following story the two friends are not less human because of their substantial position in the community.

"Two Friends"<sup>11</sup>

In the small towns of the pioneer West Cather found many mean things, but she also found characters whose courage and intelligence made them outstanding in the community. Such is the case of Dillon, the banker, and Trueman, the cattleman. The friendship of these two wealthy citizens is viewed through the eyes of a child. When they quarrel and separate it is a tragedy that threatens to destroy the equilibrium of the entire community.

These two belong to the pioneer era. They represent a world that is separated from the material progress of the East, but one that has a fine sense of the beautiful things in life. They both love the theatre and can sit for hours discussing the merits of plays and actors in an age when "the drama held a more dignified position in the world than it holds today."<sup>12</sup> They belong to the day of the pioneer not "to the time of efficiency and advertising and progressive methods."<sup>13</sup> In their characters there is the absence of anything mean or small.

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<sup>11</sup> Cather, Obscure Destinies,

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

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The cause of their quarrel is political and it is as though this foreign element in the quiet life of the small Western town is the beginning of the decay of the pioneer era. It marks the beginning of modern times and a change in the West. The banker dies and the cattleman moves to the coast. The story of this fine friendship ends with the sense that all such fine and gentle things will eventually be disrupted by the progress of the modern age.

"The Best Years"<sup>14</sup>

Cather re-creates many scenes of her own childhood in this story of a country school teacher in the West. Miss Knightly is the school superintendent who has come from Maine to work in the school system of Nebraska. As she drives through the western country on her periodical visit to the schools she comes upon many scenes familiar in this land of Cather's. The great blue sky, the perfect circle of the horizon embracing the yellow corn-fields, the grazing cattle, the barbed-wire fences, prepare the reader for the spirit of courage exemplified in the characters of this story.

Lesley Fergusson is a young school teacher who is Miss Knightly's favorite. The superintendent has permitted her to begin her teaching career in spite of the fact that she has not reached the required age. But the judgement is justified. Lesley has the courage and imagination that is typical of the feminine heroines of the West. Within a year her classroom has taken on an order and success that is unusual. In the love of her work she has transmitted

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<sup>14</sup> Willa Cather, The Old Beauty and Others, New York, Knopf, 1948.

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to her pupils her own gentle spirit. Her courage is finally exemplified during a blizzard when she protects her children and dies of pneumonia.

Lesley's father is a type of character that is familiar in Cather's stories. He is a well-read man who experiments with farming and politics. He is ridiculed by his neighbors but considers their taunts as forms of compliments. He is completely unconventional in his methods of farming but his independence and originality make him a sympathetic character and something of a pioneer in his own right. Especially does he reflect some of Cather's ideas about artists and pioneers when he explains to his wife the reason he named his farm the "Wide Awake Farm":

He explained to her that the important crop on that farm was an idea. His farm was like an observatory where one watched the signs of the times and saw the great change that was coming for the benefit of all mankind. He even quoted Tennyson about looking into the future "far as human eye could see."<sup>15</sup>

His prophetic vision does not lead him astray for he is on the right political side when the change in parties comes and as a result finds himself in a lucrative political position.

Mrs. Fergusson is the opposite of her husband. She is practical, socially active, and well-respected in the town. She is one of the pioneer women in spite of the fact that she is married to a dreamer of a man. The title of the story is taken from the comment she makes when all of the children are gone and she is comfortable in her husband's success. She says:

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

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Well, this I know; our best years are when we're working hardest and going right ahead when we can hardly see our way out.<sup>16</sup>

That is the spirit of the pioneer and although the struggle is certainly in the background of this story the atmosphere is pervaded by it. Those who work the hardest are the happiest and most successful in life. This philosophy is rewarding in the lives of all of Mrs. Fergusson's children. Two of the boys have great sheep ranches in Wyoming, one is a celebrated chemist and another a successful member of Marshall Field. Lesley is dead but her memory is still strong in the minds of all of the family.

In this story Cather has portrayed the second and third generation of the Western pioneers. There are many memories of the old days and signs of discontent with the progress of modern times. The spirit of the pioneer who has imagination, courage, and the desire to do his best is found not completely in any of these individuals but generally in all of them.

"Before Breakfast"<sup>17</sup>

Henry Grenfell, a successful lawyer, is taking his vacation on a lonely and small island in the North Atlantic. After rising on the first morning there he is set to musing on the age of the world and of man at the sight of a hare on the lawn and a star in the morning sky. Before breakfast he comes to the confident conclusion that "Plucky youth is more bracing than enduring age."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> Cather, The Old Beauty and Others.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

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Henry Grenfell is representative of the pioneers of Cather's fiction. He is from the West and has been working hard at life from his early youth. He is not ashamed of the work he did. "Those are the years, he often told the reformers, that make character, make proficiency."<sup>19</sup> He studied law at night and became successful. His two sons were also successful men but between Grenfell and the rest of the family there is a chasm. They belong to the modern world with all of its signs of progress; he belongs to the past, the hardy and full-living past.

Although Henry is physically weak he does not let his delicate condition interfere with his habit of hard living. The doctors had told him that he did everything too hard. He desired and achieved because he cared hard and worked hard. His physical condition led him to even greater efforts of hard living. He hunted in the roughest places and sought out the places where living was rough like this small island where he is vacationing.

As Henry takes a walk before breakfast he watches unobserved a young girl go for a swim in the icy waters of the ocean. He knows that the cold air of the early morning must have surprised her and she could have turned back from her swim without humiliation since she did not know that anyone was watching. But the important thing is that she knew she had to keep face with herself. She could not let herself give in to a moment of weakness.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

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Such is the spirit that sums up the life of this pioneer, Henry Grenfell. He knows that he has faced up to life and its trials, has overcome every obstacle in his way. He realizes that this is not the time to sit back and endure life but to keep tempting it, to accept the challenge day after day. Thus Henry fits comfortably into Cather's world of the pioneer.

That world has its fullest treatment in the novels of Willa Cather. The second novel she published, O Pioneers! was the first of the many which treat of the pioneer and portray him as a creator.

O Pioneers!

This is a novel of a woman's struggles and triumphs in the untamed land of the West. Alexandra Bergson spent the years of her life creating a new world in the wilderness and this is the tale of her indomitable spirit and the rewards it brought her.

Alexandra came as a child with her family to the wilds of Nebraska. It was a land where many of the unpracticed foreigners were to fail, where the farms resisted all the untutored efforts of these men to become anything like the dreams they had while still in the old country. It is a land that is cold above and below the ground. It refuses to act as if it had a heart and appears to be intent upon breaking the backs and spirits of all who come to live there. The anguish of it is seen even in the faces of the children and young people:

It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too

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weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness.<sup>20</sup>

Alexandra was only a few years older than her two brothers but she had always been a great help to her father. It was to her that he entrusted the farm, the boys and the future when it came time for him to die. "In his daughter, John Bergson recognized the strength of will, and the simple direct way of thinking things out, that had characterized his father in his better days."<sup>21</sup> This girl of twenty was to prove worth all of the faith her father had in her abilities. She could perform well all of the household duties of a pioneer woman, but better than that she could match and out-manuever most of the masculine pioneers. She was dedicated to the world that was before her. It was a challenge to the spirit which she had inherited and which she was to make an example for all of these foreign strugglers in the West. The task that lay before her was not only a matter of manual labor and waiting out the seasons; it was an invitation to her creative abilities to bring out of this land an image that awaited the touch of an artist. She could approach the problem intelligently and with imagination. "A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves."<sup>22</sup> These are her words and are important in indicating to what extent Cather intended for her pioneers to act and think like artists.

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<sup>20</sup> Willa Cather, O Pionners!, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1913, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

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To achieve her place among the great Cather-heroines and to justify her position as one with the artists, Alexandra had to face many trials. The first, of course, was the land itself. Shortly after the death of her father there began three years of drought on the Divide. Strong men broke under the pressure. Women feared for the future of their families. And gradually there began an exodus of those broken in spirit, defeated in all of their ambitions. They left the prairie to find other places where they could force enough out of the soil for survival. Among those who left the land were many of Alexandra's close friends. The chief of these was Carl Linstrum whose family had been intimate friends with the Bergsons.

Alexandra's decision to face the period of struggle was not made by intuition. She appraised her chance of starting afresh on other lands; she watched the bankers rapidly buying up the farms that the departing farmers left behind; she listened to those who had new ways of making the land produce. From these observations she made her decision, but it was also combined with a deep-rooted belief in her destiny and a love for this open, wild, and unpredictable land. After her tour of the river lands and on her way back to her own farm she was full of the joy that her new resolution gave her. She was going to hold on harder than ever:

Then the Genius of the Divide, the great free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

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Alexandra's heart was full of the desire to create. This was her country and upon it, upon this rugged Divide, she was to work her will. The challenge was to draw from her all of the wonderful talents that were part of her personality. She plotted, schemed, mortgaged, and invented new ways of improving the methods or the final product of farming. And in the end she won; she conquered the land and was blessed in abundance. Her land prospered and she acquired more. The signs of her success showed in the house: in the young Swedish girls who worked in the kitchen, in the sending of her younger brother, Emil, off the college. All about her lay the evidence that she had learned to use her talents well, to express her desire for creation in the rough materials which surrounded her. "You feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best."<sup>24</sup>

The land represented the greatest challenge to the talents of Alexandra and she expressed all of her creative instincts in subduing it and making it a monument to her work and life. But there were obstacles, other challenges. From the first moment of her position as head of the pioneer family she had to face the objections and rebuffs of her younger brothers. They represented in a fashion, the Philistines whose ignorance plagued the path of the artists. Alexandra had to meet their arguments when she wanted to try some new experiment that meant perhaps more work but promised great returns. Their lack of imagination cause her brothers to object. But her dogged determination conquered them.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

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Alexandra's brothers criticized her on all sides even after her wisdom and foresight had brought them wealth that they would never had had alone. In later years they would come from their own farms across the way and tell her what she ought to do about "Crazy" Ivar who worked for her, what she should do about her friend, Carl Linstrum, who had returned after many years. They argued, pouted, and threatened, but Alexandra won the case. Remarking upon this obstacle which was with her always, Carl said: "It is your fate to be always surrounded by little men. And I am no better than the rest."<sup>25</sup> But these little men play their part in the novel. Their smallness only helps show the greatness of Alexandra and the magnificence of her creative spirit.

Like the artists in other of Cather's novels who often had to exclude their personal interests in favor of their art, Alexandra had to forego the happiness and the comforts of an early marriage. Her destiny had given her the task of using all of her energies and interests on the land. In the life of Alexandra, Carl Linstrum is always in the background as a potential lover and husband. He returns to visit Alexandra after many years in which he has lived in the East but has accumulated nothing to give himself a sign of wealth or prosperity. Carl sees himself as Alexandra's brothers see him--an old friend who left the West when the going was too difficult and returning now to reap the harvest by marrying Alexandra. He cannot face the accusations

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

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even though his intentions are noble. But it is Alexandra who suffers most in this incident. It is another sacrifice she must make as a result of the way of life which has been thrust upon her. "Her training had all been toward the end of making her proficient in what she had undertaken to do."<sup>26</sup> She has had no time to realize the desires that would seem in her, as in the artists, to be almost selfish. Reflections upon her own personality, upon herself as apart from this work she had to do were not frequent in her life. She had neglected this phase only because she was so devoted to the work of creation that was in hand:

Nevertheless, the underground stream was there, and it was because she had so much personality to put into her enterprises and succeeded in putting it into them so completely, that her affairs prospered better than those of her neighbors.<sup>27</sup>

There is one other great trial which almost breaks the spirit of Alexandra. That is the loss of the neighbor she liked best, Marie Shabata, and Emil, the youngest of the Bergson boys. Alexandra had given the superabundance of her energy and devotion to Emil. She reared him, protected him, and was dedicated to seeing that he graduated from the university and became something of importance in this life. Emil was about to go to begin his law career when he was killed with Marie by the confused husband who discovers them together. No other affliction could have come so close to breaking the spirit of Alexandra: her dearest brother and her most trusted friend and dead in this ignoble circumstance. The days following this incident

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

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were terrible for Alexandra. Finally, she recovered from the major portion of her grief and visited the jailed husband with a promise to work for his early release.

In this instance Alexandra acted as the noble character she is expected to be. She has always been one of clear judgement, and indomitable will. In the days when there was only her resolution to set against the seemingly unconquerable forces of the West and the criticism of others, she had gone doggedly ahead without fear of the work, suffering, and struggle that awaited her. Now after bearing the trials of the land, the trials of criticism, the trial of Carl's departure, she must bear the burden that was to afflict her spirit more than all of the rest. But she is strong enough. She has suffered enough to suffer this. She can go on living as before. When she returns here after her visit to the prison she knows that she can feel free again here on the land. This is her passion, her life. Carl reminds her: "You belong to the land as you have always said. Now more than ever."<sup>28</sup>

Although Alexandra bore courageously all of the trials which afflicted her, she had the comfort of her triumphs. After she had begun the tremendous task of making something beautiful out of the land she was blessed to see that her ideas were right and that her efforts paid great rewards. Her greatest triumph was to see the land become abundantly fruitful, to enjoy the beauty of its bounty. It became her land, her masterpiece, the result of all

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 307.

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of her creative efforts. And she could rejoice in this triumph with the same enthusiasm, the same appreciation that any of Cather's artists could rejoice in their stage triumphs and their works of art. For this was her work of art, the work of her life. It was not a reward that was separate from her life; it was co-existent with her days of struggle; it gave her comfort when other failures afflicted her; it became her beckoning goal when the darkness closed around her.

One reason for Alexandra's success in her life was that she did not hold back in anything she had to do. She open-heartedly took the responsibilities of the head of the family after the death of her father. During those days of threatening disaster she purchased land when others were selling. Every method of improving the work or the result of the work was taken into consideration. Alexandra herself realized that this one side of her personality was an important factor in her life. She tells Carl: "You remember what you once said about the graveyard, and the old story writing itself over? Only it is we who write it, with the best we have."<sup>29</sup> This was the spirit which guided her through all of her miseries and all of her triumphs.

The best that Alexandra had to give was enough to fulfil all of the promises of her youth. And the best of Alexandra was her similarity to the artists of Cather's creation. These latter characters were of the same spirit. They, too, had given their best. Alexandra, one of the great pioneers, was of the spirit of the great artists. The tremendous tasks which faced her did not make her turn back.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 307.

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The great prairie and the rugged Divide provided a canvas upon which Alexandra was to create a work of art. Her inexperience did not deter her for she was one of Cather's heroines. The materials she had to work with were there in abundance. But the instruments to be used in shaping them were taken from Alexandra's inner spirit.

Alexandra has often been compared or bracketed with Thea Kronborg of The Song of the Lark. These two girls from the West of unconquerable wills have much in common. In the mind of at least one critic this similarity has taken on a significance that is of importance to this subject. Percy Boynton has made the following judgement:

Through these two Miss Cather identified the spirit of the pioneer with the spirit of the creative artist, ignoring the lesser figures in the epic of the frontier, just as she ignores orchestra, chorus, and stagehands in the triumph of the opera singer.<sup>30</sup>

This is the true picture of Alexandra. This is what she meant to Willa Cather: the creative artist in the person of a pioneer. Even to the point of her surroundings there is similarity between Alexandra and the creative artists. The pioneer woman has her small-minded enemies as the artists has the Philistines. The initial challenge of life facing Alexandra was as great as it was in the life of the artist. The struggles, defeats, and triumphs have their counterpoints in both lives. And the conclusion to be reached is this: Alexandra is as much of an artist as any of Cather's creative characters. In

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<sup>30</sup> Percy Boynton, America in Contemporary Fiction, Chicago, Univ. Press, 1940, p. 152.

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the final paragraph of O Pioneers! a theme is repeated: Alexandra has made this land hers, and the land has claimed Alexandra:

They went into the house together, leaving the Divide behind them, under the evening star. Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!<sup>31</sup>

My Antonia

H. L. Mencken is reported to have said of this novel: "My Antonia is not only the best novel done by Miss Cather, but also one of the best any American has ever done."<sup>32</sup> Such praise for this novel may seem exaggerated to most readers but the better critics have always been enthusiastic about the elusive beauty of this story of the pioneers.

In My Antonia Cather used a technique of narrative that raised the question as to whether the story was really a novel. There is no logical arrangement of incidents and scenes by which the story progresses to a denouement. There is no great love story. There is no tale of the struggling and gradual success of the pioneer woman as found in the life of Alexandra Bergson. Rather, this is a collection of pictures of the life on the prairie and in the small Western towns, with the portrait of Antonia from childhood to maturity fitted into this colorful framework.

The question to be answered is whether My Antonia has the qualities and corresponding incidents which have been found in Cather's stories about

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<sup>31</sup> Cather, O Pioneers! p. 309.

<sup>32</sup> Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living, N. Y., Knopf, 1953, p. 108.

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artists. Basically the principle is applicable here as it is in all of the pioneer stories. Antonia belongs to Cather's world. She has the same spirit, the same passion. However, there is a difference in story, a difference in the struggle. Because she is created from the same cloth the ending is the same: Antonia becomes representative of those dedicated to the land, of those belonging to the best of the pioneers. "Though Antonia has no spark of creative energy she feels the artist's desire to live a full, free life."<sup>33</sup> Before taking up the analysis of Antonia's life which puts her in the class of the artists it is necessary first to refer to other elements of this novel which contribute to Cather's fictional world.

Throughout My Antonia there are references to the world of art as it existed in the lives of these pioneers and city-dwellers of the West. Mr. Schimerda, who represents the delicate pioneer for whom the rugged life in the West was too much, is something of an artist. His long fragile hands, his clean-cut features show that he is not meant for this life, truly a foreigner in these wilds. In the old country he had a great devotion to his violin and of ten played for the weddings and dances. He has brought the violin as a reminder of what life was like back home, but as the burdens of this new adventure grow more strenuous the music goes out of him. The child, Antonia, whose father was to be an inspiration to her for the rest of her life comments upon his silence:

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<sup>33</sup> Boynton, Op. Cit., p. 156.

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'My papa sad for the old country. He not look good. He never make music any more. At home he play violin all the time; .... Here never... Some day he take his violin out of his box and make with his fingers on the strings, like this, but never he make music.'<sup>34</sup>

The day finally comes when his spirit is entirely crushed. He commits suicide and is buried at the crossroads. His sensitivity was too much injured by the transplanting into this wilderness. It took his music and took his life. He did not possess the hardiness that is characteristic of Cather's artists.

In another incident a strange form of music is brought into the lives of the people of the small prairie town of Black Hawk. The local hotel manager brings Blind d'Arnault, a negro pianist from the South to entertain his friends. The story of this child who was blind from birth and his discovery of the world of music is one of the most inspiring pictures Cather has written anywhere. And though he is one "who played barbarously and wonderfully" the entire episode is written with a fervor that makes of him one of the geniuses who come and go in this secluded world of the pioneer:

As piano-playing, it was perhaps abominable, but as music it was something real, vitalized by a sense of rhythm that was stronger than his other physical senses—that not only filled his dark mind, but worried his body incessantly.<sup>35</sup>

Cather again inspires the story with her own love for the theatre when she describes the production of "Camille" as it was done in Lincoln, Nebraska. Jim Burden and Lena Lingard attend this event and though it is

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<sup>34</sup> Willa Cather, My Antonia, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1918, p. 89.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

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shown through the eyes of these two, the tremendous impact that this emotional play had upon them seems to be more of a report of Cather's first experience with the play. As a qualified critic she comments upon the sets, the aging actress, the production in general, the music. But her report of the effect of this play upon Lena and Jim gives the entire episode a bitter-sweet quality which fits into the general pattern of the book.

In the portrait of Gaston Cleric, the professor who most influenced Jim Burden, Cather has created one of the artists of her fictional world. He was a "brilliant and inspiring young scholar." And he brought about a mental awakening in Jim which inspired the youth, if not to become a scholar, at least to have a greater appreciation of the ideas of things. The description given of him by Jim Burden is adequate in portraying the scholar as an artist and that is Jim's belief too;

I believe that Gaston Cleric narrowly missed being a great poet, and I have sometimes thought that his bursts of imaginative talk were fatal to his poetic gift. He squandered too much in the heat of personal communication.<sup>36</sup>

Gaston Cleric and his talk of the Latin poets sent Jim's mind wandering in his own past with a touch of sadness and loneliness. One evening as he is meditating upon the "Georgics" of Virgil and in particular upon the thought that in the lives of mortals the best days are the first to flee (this epigraph: "Optima dies... prima fugit" is given on the title page of Cather's novel) Lena Lingard first comes to visit him. She brings with her many

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

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memories of the past. He inquires about all of his old friends and in particular about Antonia. After her brief visit the joys and joyful people she has recalled remain in the room:

When I closed my eyes I could hear them all laughing....  
It came over me, as it had never done before, the  
relation between girls like those and the poetry of  
Virgil. If there were no girls like them in the world,  
there would be no poetry.<sup>37</sup>

It is to the past that he is recalled, to his home country of Black Hawk, to the gay times, and to the girls about whom there now hangs a mournful memory. In this incident with its air of poetry something of the whole theme of the book is given: the memory of the past. The beauty of those best days which are now gone shall never return. It is the spirit which emanates from Cleric who feels, as many artists feel, separated from this life and from these people. Lena and Jim and other characters in other episodes look back to the days and the land that are no more.

Scattered throughout the novel there are scenes and references to the world of art. Amateur and professional artists are involved. And this fact is typical of all of the novels of Cather's whether they are fundamentally concerned with the artist or with the pioneer:

Above all, she found artists everywhere, in her Bird City in Wyoming, in Black Hawk, in Sand City or Haverford on the Platte, in the bleak little towns, in the poor little houses like the shabby ranch-house in the plains to which Katherine Gaylord, the great singer, came back to die.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>38</sup> Van Wuck Brooks, The Confident Years: 1885-1915, N. Y., Dutton, 1952, p. 536.

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Antonia Schimerda is the pioneer woman with the artist's vibrating interest in living. From the time that her family moves to the prairie until the time when she goes to town to work as a hired girl, the pictures of her are glimpses of an active, restless, hard-working and hard-playing child. After the death of her father she begins to do a man's work on the farm and to work at the farms of others during the busy seasons. She gives herself to her work whole heartedly as though it were the one thing in the world she was meant to do. "Nowadays Tony could talk of nothing but the prices of things or how much she could live or endure."<sup>39</sup> She was full of the energy of living and of the enjoyment of living whether it meant work or play.

When Antonia leaves the farm to work in town she loses none of her fire and energy. She is a delight to the family she works for and seems to communicate the energy that welled up in her:

She was quick to anger, quick to laughter, and jolly from the depths of her soul... Her rapid footsteps shook her own floors, and she routed lassitude and indifference wherever she came. She could not be negative or perfunctory about anything, her enthusiasm, and her violent likes and dislikes, asserted themselves in all the everyday occupations of life.<sup>40</sup>

This personality certainly is one of Cather's favorites. There is all of the emotions of living, all of the eagerness to experience the laughter and tears of life, all of the sincerity in Antonia that Cather put into her creative artists. Perhaps, that spark of creativeness shows through Antonia's personality in the scenes when she becomes story teller for the children of

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<sup>39</sup> Cather, My Antonia, p. 126.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

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her employers. Even the mistress of the house is enthralled by her matter and method. "Everything she said seemed to come right out of her heart."<sup>41</sup> And that is true of everything she did and everything she was.

The attractiveness of Antonia and of all of the "foreign" hired girls is set in relief when compared to the girls of the town's leading families. Jim Burden can appreciate how much more the girls have to offer who learned so much from their life on the Divide, who were "brought out of themselves" at an early age by the poverty, the hard work, and the devotion demanded of them. There was a rigid social order in Black Hawk which prohibited any thought of marriage between these girls and the eligible young men. The weakness of the town dwellers and their unreasonable attitude is particularized in the life of Sylvester Lovett, a banker's son who shows everyone by his attentions to Lena Lingard that he is in love with her, but refuses to break the code of the city and eventually runs off with a wealthy widow six years older than himself.

Although these girls are considered a menace to the social order they are often at the mercy of the more degenerate males. Many of them are deceived, and it is only Antonia's cleverness which helps her escape the schemes of the most licentious of the townsmen. Unfortunately, Antonia does let herself fall in love with a railroader who refuses to keep his promise to marry her. She returns to the Divide to have her child.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

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At this point of the story Antonia proves herself one of Cather's heroines. She comes back to face the criticism of others and especially that of her brother. She takes up again the man's work on the farm that she had done before and is slaving away vigorously up until the very day on which she has her child. Her resolution and determination to go on living the best life is eventually rewarded when she marries a young Bohemian who is likeable but lazy enough to contrast with his hard working wife. Antonia's dedication to the task of being a wife and mother on the Divide channels her energy and love of living into a more fruitful and rewarding life.

When Jim Burden returns after many years he finds Antonia changed. She is no longer young; the work and time have taken their tolls. But she was still "in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not diminished." She had lost nothing that was given her. She was still full of that energy of living, that dedication to the life she had made her own. Jim recognizes the Antonia of his youth. "Whatever else was gone, Antonia had not lost the fire of life."<sup>42</sup>

She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things.<sup>43</sup>

Antonia has succeeded because of her passion for living, because of her dedication to the work she had to do. She was not the creative artist but she brought something beautiful and wonderful into her own life and the lives of others. Her husband found the strength he needed in Antonia's strength.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 336.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 353.

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Her children felt the force of her love of living and had inherited from her the same gayity and spirit that had filled her life. The farm, too, reflected the character of Antonia. It was flourishing and expanding. Off in one section there were two orchards. Antonia's tells Jim that she loved the trees as if they were people and describes the days and nights she spent tending them. The orchards represent some of the overflowing of the beauty of her personality.

The life of Antonia was successful. "Antonia's achievement rests on the completeness of her dedication to her task."<sup>44</sup> And it rests, too, on the task itself which is more fruitful and more important than the tasks of others on the Divide or in Black Hawk. Lena was successful; Tiny became wealthy; Jim Burden, too, becomes well known in his profession. But none of them had so much to show for their lives as Antonia. None of them are married; none of them can point to fruitful fields and blooming orchards and laughing children as evidence of what they have done. Antonia was successful in the things that matter; she had lived fully and completely with all of the vigor and earnestness of other great characters of Cather's novels.

In the following novel Cather has again written of a person searching for a dedication. There is a paradox in the solution which provides the hero with a place in life only by bringing him to his death.

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<sup>44</sup> Boynton, Op. Cit., p. 156.

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One of Ours

There is a question of Claude Wheeler's place in Cather's world of the artist and of the pioneer. Apparently he is neither. He has not the great imagination and drive of the creative artists and none of the dedication and force of will which is evident in the pioneers. However, he belongs to this fictional world of artists and pioneers that Cather was creating in her novels. He is the artist who is stifled in a materialistic age; the pioneer who is declining in a land where the spirit of adventure and self-sacrifice is no more. This is a story of the imaginative hero who discovers himself before he is completely destroyed by the corruption of his generation. But it takes a war and his death to make him realize the importance of his life.<sup>45</sup>

About Claude Wheeler, and all of Cather's artist and pioneers, there is something exceptional. It shows up in his excellent physique, his personal likes and dislikes, in his constant questioning of himself and his world. There is war within his soul, a restlessness, a dissatisfaction. "The storms that went on in his mind sometimes made him rise, or sit down, or lift something, more violently than there was any apparent reason for his doing."<sup>46</sup> He is surrounded by people whose ways of thinking are repugnant to him. He sees the fraud, hypocrisy, and lack of sincerity in those who are closest to him.

Claude is surrounded by a religion which becomes so distasteful to him that he eventually styles himself an "atheist." It is not the religion which

<sup>45</sup> David Daiches, Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, Oxford, Connell Univ., 1951, p. 61.

<sup>46</sup> Willa Cather, One of Ours, N. Y., Knopf, 1922, p. 17.

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meant so much in the lives of the pioneers and is so sympathetically treated in O Pioneers! and My Antonia. It is a shallow and sentimental evangelicalism represented by Brother Weldon. During his life in Nebraska, Claude meets this man and his ideas at every important turn in his life. Claude's mother is thoroughly impressed with the soft-spoken minister who spends many weeks in the guest room of the Wheeler home. Her attachment to him and to the platitudes he expresses creates something of a barrier between her and her son. Though Claude loves his mother deeply his own weakness of will prohibits him from reaching the heart of the matter through a discussion with her. He acquires an antipathy for religion in general as a result of this association. Through Weldon's influence Claude is sent to the religious college for which the minister is soliciting. At this point Claude begins to think that his life will be decided by the people and things he dislikes most.

In Weldon, Mrs. Wheeler, and the denominational college Claude finds reason enough to have contempt for these fanatic religious ideas but the climax of his disgust comes with his marriage to Enid Royce. Her lack of sympathy and understanding, her constant campaigning for the cause of Prohibition, her coldness and neglect of her husband, and her eventual departure to care for her missionary sister in China convinced Claude that religion in any form could not be good for him. He saw the insincerity, the mis-directed zeal, the holier-than-thou exponents, as representing a world that was foreign to the spirit within him. These things are not great enough to demand a dedication; they could not inspire him with a desire to live and make the best of all opportunities.

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Claude does not find in the life on the Nebraska prairie any reason for giving his life to the land. He can work hard and manage well, but there is no challenge, no adventure in the work. Mr. Wheeler is one of the wealthiest farmers and there is no need to fear the droughts or rains that had worried the earlier pioneers of the Divide. Claude's father considered this one son of his a visionary who could make trouble for the practical people of this world. Mr. Wheeler represents the successful farmer of the new West. There is now no individuality left among the people. They no longer have time to plant cottonwood groves or orange hedges on the borders of their fields. They pay their money for cheap machinery. There are many lawsuits between the once friendly families. The people are becoming greedy with the new prosperity and extravagant. And Claude can not fit into this kind of existence. He sees no reason for giving his life to the task of making and spending money. There is some other reason for living but what it is he cannot immediately understand.

Bayliss Wheeler, more than his father, represents the worst element in the post-pioneer period of the West. He is a Philistine of the first rank. He fights for Prohibition because constitutionally he cannot stand strong drink; he is successful in business for he has a passion to be powerful in some way or other; he thinks that the only failures in the world are the men who live for ideas. He envies Claude his fine physique and his "unreckoning, impulsive vitality. "In his thinking there is lacking any sense of values. When Claude tells him that one of his friends is going abroad to study in order

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to become a teacher, Bayliss replies: "What's the matter with him ? Does he have poor health "47 It is Bayliss who showers his attentions upon Gladys Farmer and thus turns Claude away from the one source of inspiration that could have helped him discover the reason for his life and the desires that lay behind his unusual energy. In France, years later, Claude reflects upon the character of his brother and of men of this kind. "No battlefield or shattered country he had seen was as ugly as this world would be if men like his brother Bayliss controlled it altogether." 48

During his life at home Claude is surrounded by people who cause the darkness within him to grow more dense. The final defeat is his marriage. Enid Royce had come to visit him daily while he was recovering from an injury. He fell in love and looked forward to his marriage as a time when he would be suddenly, wonderfully happy. Enid's father, a noble spirit subjected to his wife's personality, tries to warn Claude but can not find the words for it. The marriage takes place and from the first Claude begins to understand that he has made a mistake. He knows that his best solution is to make the most of it but he can not rid himself of the sense of defeat. Enid is not the person he thought her to be. Part of her reason for accepting his proposal was that she felt she could "convert" him as she suggested to Brother Weldon:

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47 Ibid., p. 90.

48 Ibid., p. 419.

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If his wife didn't love him, it was because love meant one thing to him and quite another thing to her. She was proud of him, was glad to see him when he came in from the fields.... She had been fonder of Claude before she married him than she was now; but she hoped for a readjustment.<sup>49</sup>

She cannot understand Claude's moods, silence, unapproachableness.

But she does not spend too much time brooding about the cause of his despondency. She has her work to do in circulating the Prohibitionist literature.

When the call eventually comes for someone to go to China to aid her stricken sister she accepts the invitation as her primary duty. Claude objects slightly but recognizes that this, too, is part of the burden fate has given.

Although the life of Claude Wheeler in the West is the story of "slow strangulation of intellect and feeling,"<sup>50</sup> there are some incidents showing his exceptional nature and in which he sees, for a brief moment, that life holds some promise for him. Most of these incidents take place away from home. While he is attending the denominational college in Lincoln he begins to take lectures in History at State University. There he finds an appeal to his intellect, a challenge that makes him feel like a man again.

"Claude usually came out from these lectures with the feeling that the world was full of stimulating things, and that one was fortunate to be alive and to be able to find out about them."<sup>51</sup> His many hours of reading in the university library and the work he does for his classes give him a new confidence and a sense of responsibility. He begins to know beautiful things.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>50</sup> E.K. Brown, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, N.Y., Knopf, 1953, p. 218.

<sup>51</sup> Cather, *One of Ours*, p. 37-8.

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Claude's acquaintance with the Erlich family of Lincoln helps both to stimulate his interest in the important things of life and to make him feel that he has missed something in his youth. The boys of the family are constantly concerned with new interests. They have a habit of thinking things out and will not let Claude go with just a comment; they want to know the reason behind his remarks, why he feels and thinks as he does. Their lively attitudes make him feel that he is from another world, a world where the people have not learned to think, where they are daily too tired to be concerned with any activity apart from their farm work. Their life is an unreal existence. Claude's acquaintance with the Erlich family who have so many stimulating interests in life seems to arouse him from a mental stupor. He decides that he has to settle down into something that is his own, take hold of it with both hands, no matter how grim it is. But he only returns to his home in the West and his brief married life with Enid,

Gladys Farmer is another of those exceptional people who cannot settle into the narrowing conventions of the West. If she had had more of an influence on Claude he, perhaps, would not have needed to leave the West to find himself. When Claude thinks that Gladys is interested in Bayliss he leaves her alone, ashamed that his confidence in her uniqueness has been misplaced. But even after he is married he cannot forget that Gladys is one whose heart is set high, who could never be satisfied with the unreal ways of this decaying society. It is only after Claude has joined the Army and is home on furlough before his departure overseas that their mutual interest is brought into the

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open. When Claude realizes that Gladys has cared for him he asks why she didn't keep him from making a fool of himself. She tells him:

'I think I tried-once. Anyhow, it's all turning out better than I thought. You didn't get stuck here. You've found your place. You're sailing away. You've just begun.'<sup>52</sup>

Gladys' words are prophecy. Claude is too good to be stuck in the West. He would have lost all interest in fulfilling the destiny that is meant to be his; he would no longer have cared about making the world a better place for his having lived.

The truth of Gladys' words and the correctness of Claude's choice in sailing with the army for France are seen in his change of attitudes while he is aboard ship. Men are sick and dying from an epidemic of influenza and Claude devotes his time to caring for them. Within him there is a new spirit; he feels that now he is free from the sense of failure which has haunted him; he is going forward into the life he was meant to lead. "... he had followed false leads and lost precious time and seen misery enough, but he was on the right road at last, and nothing could stop him."<sup>53</sup> He knows that now there is purpose in his life and direction.

As Claude's war days go by and in moments of quiet reflection he realizes more and more that after all his life is worth living. He believes that the youth he thought he had never had is being made up to him. "Life had after all turned out well for him, and everything had a noble significance... He was beginning over again."<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 411.

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In one of his comrades, David Gerhardt, Claude meets a young man who has all the qualities Claude has tried to find in himself. David is a violinist who has abandoned his career for the army. He is one of those who could still die for an idea; he is one of those living people among whom Claude had always wanted to live.

Claude finds a hero's death awaiting him in France. In a crucial moment of the battle he faces the enemy in full view in order to direct the firing to better advantage. He is just another of the casualties in the record books, but with his death he has fulfilled all of the dreams that haunted him on the farm in Nebraska. He knows that by his death the world will be better; he died for an idea and the idea has become more important because of his death.

In Claude Wheeler, Cather has created neither a great artist nor a great pioneer, but a man who was potentially both. In a time when it seemed that few people knew what life was all about and cared less, Cather drew a picture of this hero. Claude himself was nearly swamped by the world that lacked ideals but he found himself in a war which was idealistic. He has no creative ability and can find no definite reason to be dedicated to a prairie which offers no challenge. But still Claude belongs to the world of artists in so far as he is a character with ideas and ideals. He is a sensitive individual whose "differentness" sets him apart from those in his same environment. The qualities which make him different are those which qualify him for the world of Willa Cather. There are continual storms within his mind and soul;

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he is dissatisfied with the materialistic attitudes of the Philistines; he feels himself drawn to some great dedication; he has an artist's appreciation for the superiority of the world of ideas over the "practical" world represented by his father and brother. He is limited, however, by the lack of that indomitable drive which is characteristic of Cather's great artists and great pioneers.

In the following novel Cather again portrays the West in its dying days.

A Lost Lady

A Lost Lady is a story of the end of an era, of the breaking up of the spirit of the pioneer as it is reflected in the life of Mrs. Forrester. Marian Forrester has qualities which make her admired and loved but she is not a great woman with a past filled with struggles and success. She is, as Miss Sergeant has written, "a heroine who does not preserve the moralities, but clings to the amenities, and sometimes surprises us with the nobilities."<sup>55</sup> It is a surprise when she shows any signs of the spirit and noble passion which influenced Cather's artist and pioneer.

This story is filled with decay of the frontier. The Forresters have a summer home in Sweet Water, Nebraska which is visited by a stream of important friends of old Captain Forrester and of his young wife. They came from a world of business and finance, the magic world of the Burlington Rail-

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<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Sergeant, Willa Cather, A Memoir, N. Y. Lippincotte, 1953, p. 186.

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road between Omaha and Denver. But Sweet Water is changing, moving toward failure. There is failure in the crops, in the small businesses, in the spirit of the farmers. People are moving away; there are fewer visitors for the Forresters; a new, corrupt element is taking over the frontier.

Through the eyes of Niel Herbert the reader sees the decline of Mrs. Forrester and of Sweet Water generally. He is a sensitive, intelligent youth comparable to Jim Burden of My Antonia and Claude Wheeler of One of Ours. He is attracted from his youth to the excellent qualities of the lost lady:

Something about her took hold of one in a flash; one became acutely conscious of her, of her fragility and grace, of her mouth which could say so much without words; of her eyes, lively, laughing, intimate, nearly always a little mocking.<sup>56</sup>

Niel knows as the other people of the town know that she is from a different world than those in Sweet Water. Some of them think of her as a woman living among the common people. She made all the other women seem dull and even the pretty ones lost life when placed beside her.

Marian is the second wife of a husband past middle age. Neil soon learns through a gesture or a laugh that Mrs. Forrester is unfaithful to her husband. In the failures of the banks of the country the Forresters lose all of their money and their lives are now limited to Sweet Water the whole year. The old Captain suffers a stroke and his wife begins to drink heavily. Their house which has been set apart from the little Western community is now

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<sup>56</sup> Willa Cather, A Lost Lady, N. Y., Knopf, 1923, p. 35.

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overrun by the gossips and inquisitive old women. Ivy Peters, a shyster lawyer, begins to farm part of the beautiful acres of the Forrester land. When the Captain dies, Mrs. Forrester breaks the last tie she has had with that better world from which she came and turns her financial matters and herself over to Peters. Years later Neil hears that she left Sweet Water, married well a second time to some rich man in Brazil, and spent the last years of her life in comfort.

The important part of A Lost Lady in relation to the topic under discussion is the study of the decline of the West in reference to the great pioneers. Captain Forrester is one of the heroes of a heroic day. He successfully climbed to the heights of greatness because he possessed the spirit that moved the early pioneers.

In his own story of how he came to purchase the land in Sweet Water there is reflected the attitude of other pioneers who always went ahead when the going was the hardest. When his future looked most discouraging he came to Sweet Water and bought the land from the railroad. Most of all in his character there exists that imaginative, creative element which makes artists of Cather's pioneers. He relates to some of his guests his "philosophy of life" which makes him a great man;

' All of our great West has been developed from such dreams; the homesteader's and the prospector's and the contractor's... All of these things will be everyday facts to the coming generation, but to us-' Captain Forrester ended with a sort of grunt. Something forbidding had come into his voice, the lonely, defiant note that is so often heard in the voices of old indians. <sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

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It is Neil who repeats the same thought later as he rides back to the West from his studies at an Eastern school:

The Old West had been settled by dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood, strong in attack but weak in defence, who could conquer but could not hold.<sup>58</sup>

There is much of this grand weakness in the Captain. It is not his crippledness which breaks him, which causes him to give into the Western brand of Philistinism, but his chivalry, his attachment to his dreams brings about his downfall. Captain Forrester is president of a bank of Denver which is folding up with the financial crisis in the country. The depositors are many wage-earners, railroad employees and laborers who had once worked for the Captain and put their money in this particular bank because of the trust they had in his integrity. If he had listened to the advice of the younger and less scrupulous men on the board he could have come out of the crisis in sound financial condition. However, his honesty will not permit him to do anything but give up his entire fortune in order to save his depositors from losing any of their money. He comes back from Denver a poor man and shortly after suffers a stroke.

During his last years he is resigned to the life of an invalid and suffers silently under the insults of the Philistines of Sweet Water. He is attended in the last few months by Neil who comes to understand him better:

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

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The longer Neil was with Captain Forrester in those peaceful closing days of his life, the more he felt the Captain knew his wife better even than she knew herself; and that, knowing her, he-to use one of his own expressions, -valued her.<sup>59</sup>

With the death of the Captain there is nothing remaining in Sweet Water of the pioneer days. As Neil leaves for the last time he reflects that he has seen the end of an era, "the sunset of the pioneer." He was breaking with everything that was dear to him in his boyhood. But it was an age, and a race of men and women, that could not be recalled:

It was already gone, that age; nothing could ever bring it back. The taste and smell and song of it, the visions those men had seen in the air and followed, -these he had caught in a kind of afterglow in their faces, -and this would always be his.<sup>60</sup>

The men who have taken the place of those pioneers are the Philistines who respect nothing of the beautiful and the best, have no sense of courtesy and are interested only in dragging down the great to their own level. Such a spirit is represented in the novel by Ivy Peters. Neil has known him and disliked him from his youth. An incident early in the story in which Ivy tortures a bird gives the first clue to his evil spirit. After Ivy has become a shyster lawyer Neil pictures him as representing all of those Philistines who have come to tear down the things that the West once stood for:

They would drink up the mirage, dispel the morning freshness, root out the great brooding spirit of freedom, the generous easy life of the great land-holders.... All the way from the Missouri to the mountains this generation of shrewd young men, trained to petty economies by hard

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

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times, would do exactly what Ivy Peters had done when he drained the Forrester marsh.<sup>61</sup>

It is Ivy Peters who has destroyed the beauty of the Forrester land, who treats the Captain as an imbecile, and Mrs. Forrester as a milk-maid. He is all that the pioneers were not. He can scheme, plot, and destroy, but never create, dream or dare. And the men and women like him are getting the upper hand in Sweet Water. When the Captain is bed-ridden and Mrs. Forrester is broken with weariness and drink, the women of the town invade the precincts from which they had been excluded in better days. "They went over the house like ants, the house where they had never before got pat the parlour; and they found they had been fooled all these years. There was nothing remarkable about the place at all!"<sup>62</sup> In another scene Cather describes the parlor manners of some of the local young men who have been invited to dinner by Mrs. Forrester. They possess the characteristics of the Philistines which are so disturbing to Cather's more sensitive characters.

It is the end of an age. The spirit of the pioneer has deserted the land and the place is over-run with little people. In Mrs. Forrester there is a sensitivity and spirit which could have been developed into a great life but she gives in, for the time, to the general decay. That is Neil's complaint against her as he is leaving without a farewell:

It was what he most held against Mrs. Forrester; that she was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged....<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106-7.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

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It was the fatal flaw in her nature that caused her to go down with the rest, to turn from the great world to which she was attached through her husband and to become one with the world that belonged to Ivy Peters.

A Lost Lady has been considered by many critics to be Willa Cather's best novel up to this time. It exemplifies many of the techniques which make her one of the outstanding authors of American literature. The reader is made to concentrate on the decline in the character of Mrs. Forrester but there is a larger and more complex background that reveals all of the interests which Cather displayed in other works. There is the sensitive individual, Neil Herbert, who stands for the finer things of life and in his work and ambitions is closely akin to the artists and artist-like characters which Cather created. Similarly, the pioneers are represented by Captain Forrester who has lived with an ideal in mind, not afraid to take a chance, not afraid to live for a dream. Finally, there are the Philistines who are opposed to all that is fine, decent, and noble in this world.

In order to restore the ideal that Cather once found in the people of the West she had to return to the past beyond the age of decay. In the following novel she discovers all of her most respected virtues and ideals in the lives of two missionaries and in the land of the Southwest.

Death Comes for the Archbishop

During Willa Cather's writing career it was said of her that one never knew what she would write next but that every work of hers seemed to unveil a new facet of her talent. Each novel shows a variation in technique,

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a shift in locale, and apparently an original theme. The versatility of her writing is undeniable but an over-emphasis of this phase of her talent detracts from the more important fact that underlying the creation of all of her fictional characters there is a basis for unity. The artist and pioneer are at heart, alike. Their goals differ; their methods differ; the milieus differ, but the difference in their attitude toward life and their own vocations differ only in degree. The artists are pioneers and the pioneers, artists.

Death Comes for the Archbishop is the culmination point in Cather's creation of a world of artists. Two men have been trained for their roles by their years of study, their backgrounds, their dedication to their ideal, and the vastness of the problem which confronts them. They are pioneers in a land where hardships of every kind provide the challenges worthy of their natures. They are artists in a vocation which requires them to give themselves to the land and the people with whom they are working. And because they are great artists and great pioneers they become saints.

Willa Cather has written of her experiences in the formation of this novel and relates that from her very first visits to the Southwest she was interested in the history of the Catholic Church in that area. She had heard much of the story of the early missionaries there and knew that there was something to write about:

Meanwhile Archbishop Lamy, the first Bishop of New Mexico, had become a sort of invisible personal friend. I had heard a great many interesting stories about him from very old Mexicans and traders who still remembered

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him, and I never passed the life-size bronze of him which stands under a locust tree before the Cathedral in Santa Fe without wishing that I could learn more about a pioneer churchman who looked so well-bred and distinguished.<sup>64</sup>

And it was just these first impressions of a fearless, well-bred pioneer which Cather made alive in her story of the Bishop and his companion. Her description of him in the early pages of the novel reveals the faithfulness of her reproduction:

Everything showed him to be a man of gentle birth-brave, sensitive, courteous. His manners even when he was alone in the desert, were distinguished. He had a kind of courtesy toward himself, towards his beasts, toward the juniper tree, before which he knelt, and the God whom he was addressing.<sup>65</sup>

In the story of the Archbishop the tone of gentle courtesy persists. The Indians are attracted to this man whose face does not change expression when he speaks to the lowest or the highest of human creatures. He moves through the wild and untamed West with a delicacy that belongs to a cultivated artist. His judgement of men and affairs is unerring. Gradually his vocation to re-create the Church in the Southwest begins to take shape. The diocese is expanded, the defective priests among the native clergy are removed, schools are opened and new missionaries are brought into the territory. His courage is unshaken when he faces death from the weather or his enemies; his curiosity is controlled when he comes upon the secrets of the Indians and their religion; his zeal is channeled elegantly when a lesser man would have

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<sup>64</sup> Stephen Tennant, ed., Willa Cather on Writing, N. Y., Knopf, 1949, p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop, N. Y., Knopf, 1927, p. 15.

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rushed into confusion. He is indeed a strange figure in the Southwest but with the help of Cather's artistry, a very believable one:

The Archbishop is the great example in her fiction of a personality extraordinarily fine and cultivated finding on the Western plains the ideal circumstances for his life. . . . a life that was not torn but was a seamless unity.<sup>66</sup>

His most intimate friend, Father Vaillant, reflects how the Archbishop holds himself aloof from his activities. His courtesy extended to everyone but he was known to very few. Though his work as an administrator and as a laborer in the field was tremendous his personality seemed to set him apart from this wild land. It seems surprising that such a man of exceptionally fine qualities would have been picked for such a difficult task when a much "rougher" one would have done. But that is God's way. "And perhaps after all, something would remain through the years to come: some ideal, or memory, or legend."<sup>67</sup>

Throughout the story the Archbishop moves with the ease and appreciation of the beautiful which characterizes the fine artist. The reader sees the beauties of the West through the eyes of Father Latour. He is pictured often at the end of the day "while the declining sun poured its beautifying light" over the adobe houses, the trail, the mountains or the unusual landscape wherever he happened to be. Cather makes him become a part of that background. He appreciates all that is good and beautiful and turns away with repugnance

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<sup>66</sup> Brown, Op. Cit., p. 254.

<sup>67</sup> Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 249.

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from that which is evil in any form. He feels, for instance, that he cannot spend the night under the roof of the American highwayman at whose roadside cottage he and his companion have sought shelter for the night. His intuitive judgement is swift and unmistakable. "During the few words they exchanged with him Father Latour felt a growing reluctance to remain even for a few hours under the roof of this ugly, evil-looking fellow."<sup>68</sup> The Archbishop and his Vicar barely escape with their lives.

Parts of his missionary life are lightened with the scenes and pleasures which seem a world apart. There are the French wines that are sometimes provided by rich friends and the companionship of the interesting and cultivated guests at the ranch of Antonio Olivares.

Through his own efforts he helped beautify his surroundings with the things to gladden the eye and palate. After his retirement as Archbishop he had the consolation of the garden which he had so carefully tended. He grew fruits which were not known even in the oldest gardens of the Southwest. There were many delicate varieties and one of the principal instructions he gave to his young priests was to plant gardens and fruit trees wherever they went. To the Mexicans he gave encouragement to raise their own fruits in order to improve on the starchy diet they had been used to. Included in the plan of this form of recreation was the cultivation of native Mexican flowers. Under his delicate care they flourished and brightened the surroundings during the last years of life.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

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But if the Archbishop was attracted to the beautiful things of his diocese he was also impressed by the courageous. He admired the Indians who were so devoted to their own country that they gave their lives to defend it. He admired the men who had brought the Faith first to this wild land:

Those early missionaries threw themselves naked upon the hard heart of a country that was calculated to try the endurance of giants. They thirsted in its deserts, starved among its rocks, climbed up and down its terribly canyons on stone-bruised feet, broke long fasts by unclean and repugnant food.<sup>69</sup>

The Archbishop made friends with those whom he admired for their fearlessness and courage. Among these was Kit Carson, the early guide to the wagon trains and soldiers in the Southwest. Though he could not read or write, this American scout had a superior intelligence and natural courtesy which made him appealing to the Archbishop. In each other they recognized the qualities of dedication and honesty.

In Father Latour's reflection at a dinner party given at one of the ranches there is an interpretation of some of these great men of the West which can be applied also to the Archbishop himself. "Observing them thus in repose, in the act of reflection, Father Latour was thinking how each of these men not only had a story, but seemed to have become his story."<sup>70</sup> It is the character of the pioneer and of the artist as Cather creates them that the Archbishop sees in these men and that is reflected in his own life. He has a story and has become his story by making his inner and outer life conform

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

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to his ideals. That is what has happened to the heroes as he sees them.

The Archbishop becomes so much his own story that when the opportunity is given him to retire to his own country in France and to be again among the old, beautiful, and things dear to him, he decides to remain in the Southwest and await death there. He has become a part of the landscape as his cathedral became part of the golden hills.

In the life of the Archbishop there are opponents who, for the sake of cataloguing, can be called Philistines. There are few of these in the West as there are few in Cather's other stories of the pioneers. The principal reason for the lack of numbers or their lack of prominence is that the pioneer character is too concerned with other work, with his vocation, to be bothered by the small persons who try to hinder him. However, in this category there could be placed the anti-Catholic folk of Sante Fe who jeer at the people going to the Cathedral and shout blasphemies to the priests. In this class, too, belong the Smith family who have moved to the West from Georgia and keep their Mexican slave, Sada, away from her religion. The Archbishop does no battle with these nor with the false priest, Trinidad, who is under the protection of Padre Martinez. However, to the situation represented by Martinez, who lives in concubinage and rules his parishioners with his tyranny, the Archbishop does put a stop. He moves determinedly without excitement against this and other situation of that nature in his diocese and there is never any doubt about the outcome. His task is to correct and re-create and he has all of the qualities for success.

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Although, Death Comes for the Archbishop, is the story of Father Latour, his Vicar, Father Vaillant, is also a hero in this novel. His character is a complement to that of the Archbishop, producing in the combination a type of artist, pioneer and saint hard to match in fiction or real life. One critic has expressed this observation in another manner:

Taken together, Latour and Vaillant stand for that fusion of action and contemplation, of doing and being, of enterprise and art which was latent in My Antonia and emergent in The Professor's House.<sup>71</sup>

Willa Cather found the real life inspiration for Fr. Joseph Vaillant in a book whose title would have been enough to arouse her native interest in pioneers. It was written by Father W.J. Howlett: Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf, Pioneer Priest of Ohio, Pioneer Priest of New Mexico, Pioneer Priest of Colorado, Vicar Apostolic of Colorado and Utah, and First Bishop of Denver. While it is the spirit and character of the Archbishop which pervades the story, the life of his Vicar shows through in the incidents of greatest excitement and most emotion.

He differs from the Archbishop in almost every respect but is united to him by having the same complete dedication and love of his work. He has none of his superior's grace of figure and charm of manner. The Archbishop believes that God made few men uglier than Fr. Joseph:

There was certainly nothing in his outer case to suggest the fierceness and fortitude and fire of the man, and yet even the thick-blooded Mexican half-breeds knew his quality at once.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Harold Gardiner, ed., Fifty Years of the American Novel: A Christian Appraisal, N.Y., Scribner's, 1952, p. 84-5.

<sup>72</sup> Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 35.

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It is that fire, that passion for doing the work that is assigned to him which most characterizes him as one of Cather's heroines, one of her valiant pioneers. His work of creation is to restore this people to their God, and to bring back to them Christ's life. That is his dream and the passion which moves him. On one occasion when the Archbishop has recalled Fr. Joseph from his mission to help out in the work at Santa Fe the rugged missionary is disappointed and anxious to get back to his work. When he asks for permission to return he gives the best reason he can think of: "To hunt for lost Catholics, Jean! . . . I desire to be the man who restores these lost children to God. It will be the greatest happiness of my life."<sup>73</sup> It was the talent of this ugly, impetuous man to make himself part of those he loved, to become all things to them in order to lead them back to the Church. It was part of his nature, part of his art. He tells the Archbishop that he can get someone else to work at the Cathedral:

Anyone of our good French priests from Montferrand can serve you here. It is work that can be done by intelligence. But down there it is work for the heart, for a particular sympathy, and none of our new priests understand those poor natures as I do. I have almost become a Mexican.<sup>74</sup>

But that particular sympathy which Fr. Joseph insisted he had for the Mexican could easily be directed to others in need of his spiritual care. To whatever mission territory he was sent in the great Southwest he dedicated his complete self, all of his energy to his particular work of creation.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 201-2.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

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The Archbishop observed apparent contradictions in his nature but he could not reconcile them. Fr. Joseph was one of the most spiritual men the Archbishop had ever known but on the other hand, he was "passionately attached to many of the things of this world." He liked to eat and drink but he kept the fasts of the Church rigidly. He was not shy about begging for his missions and often embarrassed the Bishop by his insistence upon the things that were needed by his parish and his people.

When Fr. Joseph began his work in Colorado he continued to be more than an ordinary man or an ordinary missionary. He became a promoter in the interest of the Church, built schools and convents by the score, borrowed money and went into debt. He was even summoned to Rome to explain his financial difficulties when he was seventy years old. But his work changed the face of the Southwest from the viewpoint of the Church. It opened the territories to hundreds of missionary priests and nuns; it brought the Sacrament to the Catholics who were coming there in search of land and gold. He left the impression of his great spirit upon the country and the hearts of his people. At his death those who had felt the heat of his passion came to pay their last respects:

For two days before, the populations of villages and mining camps had been streaming down the mountains; they slept in wagons and tents and barns; they made a throng like a National Convention in the convent square.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 285-6.

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He had been faithful to the dedication he had made and achieved with a perfection of any of Cather's artist-pioneer characters the heights of success in fulfilling his dream. In his last meeting with the Archbishop he put into words the expression of what these two men meant to the Church and to themselves:

We have done the things we used to plan to do, long ago, when we were seminarians—at least some of them. To fulfill the dreams of one's youth—that is the best that can happen to a man. No worldly success can take the place of that.<sup>76</sup>

The lives of these two men form the theme of Death Comes for the Archbishop, but the dramatic method employed makes the novel different from any that Cather had done before. Although some critics had seen in it "a return to the simple, undramatic method, the pictorial method, used in My Antonia,"<sup>77</sup> it is a story even more undramatic than that novel. In spite of the fact that these two missionaries have the qualities and characteristics of the artists and pioneers of Cather's other work they move against a background that has a matchless past and into a future that has no visible end. They never reach a point where the reader feels that they have accomplished everything, for progress is not limited in the work they do. They are passing figures on the frontier, although the work that they have created will live on. Cather has achieved in this novel what she set out to do:

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>77</sup> Rene Rapin, Willa Cather, N.Y., McBride, 1930, p. 81.

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I had all my life wanted to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic technique... In the Golden Legend the martyrdoms of the saints are no more dwelt upon than are the trivial incidents of their lives; it is as though all human experiences... were of about the same importance... In this kind of writing the mood is the thing... <sup>78</sup>

And the mood that comes out of Death Comes for the Archbishop is one that comes chiefly from the figures of Father Latour and Father Vaillant. From these two heroic characters there is derived the sense of dedication, struggle, and accomplishment which has employed the qualities two great pioneers, great artists, and great saints.

The final novel of Willa Cather's, Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940), has nothing to contribute to the study of the artist or the pioneer. This story is set in Virginia in the pre-Civil War days and concentrates on the problem of slavery. E.K. Brown expertly places this novel in relation to Cather's other work:

Now she no longer wished to contemplate the heroic moments in American life—the moment when the French make a civilization in the Canadian wilderness, the moment when the Southwest was at its apex, the moment when the wild land of Nebraska took the first impress of the pioneer. Now it was enough to evoke quite ordinary moments from the past; and these too had vanished, taking with them a burden of beauty for which there was nothing to compensate. <sup>79</sup>

## Summary

The pioneers portrayed in these short stories and novels by Willa Cather follow in the tradition of Cather's artists. The pioneer is

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<sup>78</sup> Tennant, Op. Cit., p. 31.

<sup>79</sup> Brown, Op. Cit., p. 317.

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sensitive, imaginative, creative. The struggle of his life is not directed towards the creation of an artistic masterpiece but it has a more intimate connection with his survival. Where the artist could, in the final analysis, observe the product of his talent as something impersonal, something chiefly for the good of others, the pioneer must consider his work as his life. It is his personal challenge, his personal ideal that matters. However, it is seldom that the pioneer does not display all of the characteristics of the artistic character. There are several general themes in these stories where the similarity is most noticeable.

The Western prairies in the days of the pioneers appealed to the imagination of heroes. A man had to be a dreamer to go into this uncultivated world with the hope of making a living. It is the type of dreamer with the kind of imagination which makes the artist. That spirit is displayed in "The Enchanted Bluff" although the dreamers never realized their dream. The thought of that faraway place with a colorful and ancient history set their imaginations on fire. Such was the dream of the early pioneers looking toward the West. Lesley's father in "The Best Years" has the typical spirit of the dreamer. His ideas set him apart and leave him open to the ridicule of his neighbors. Claude Wheeler in One of Ours has a constant war in his soul. His father considered him a visionary. His dreams are rebuked by the changing scene in the West and he feels that he is realizing his ideals only when he goes to war. Captain Forrester in A Lost Lady, tells his friends that the old West

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was "settled by dreamers." And, finally, the Archbishop and his Vicar decide that they have accomplished the dreams of their youth. There could be no better description of the real pioneer which would so certainly class him with his fellow artists.

Although these dreamers might be considered impractical by the rest of the world they knew the value of an idea. Repeatedly, Cather separates her heroes from those persons who live only for material things. The pioneers, like the artists, live for the idea. Mr. Ferguson of "The Best Years" said that his most important crop was an idea. Alexandria Bergson tells her friend, Carl that a pioneer should have imagination, "should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves." This is another characteristic of Cather's pioneers which elevates them above the rest of mankind, makes their work distinctive and their lives of great importance. Antonia follows this inspiration when she refuses to run away after her misfortunes but returns home to face any criticism. Claude Wheeler begins to find himself intellectually strangled in the new West and only at the University and the home of the Erlichs does he re-discover the importance of the idea. Cather's famous Archbishop is above all a man of ideas. His exceptional qualities make him appear better suited for a more civilized world. This passion for things other than daily necessities, even in the midst of constant battle against drought and starvation, unites Cather's pioneers to her artistic characters. It is such a characteristic which led her artists to overcome the hardships of their environments, work, sufferings, and starvation to cling to their ideals.

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Environment, which was often so important in the life of the artist, has a part to play here too. In the life of the pioneer environment is often all. It involves the obstacles, sacrifices, and general opposition on the part of the rest of the world. It is comparable to all of the elements which go into the making of a work of art. Strictly speaking it is the land which is the chief obstacle to the early pioneer.

This is the major problem in the life of Alexandria Bergson who is to the pioneer world what Thea Kronborg is to the artistic world. The land embodies all of the challenges which are destined to bring out the great qualities in this character's personality. It is the land which humbled weaker individuals, which made them bitter, hopeless, and often caused them to leave the West entirely. It was too much for the sensitive father of Antonia and without the courage of "Neighbor" Rosicky, his sons would have fled to the city. It was tamed by the great pioneers like the women portrayed in "The Bohemian Girl".

In Death Comes for the Archbishop, the environment takes on a slightly different meaning. The obstacles involve not only the land, but the ignorance, superstitions and laxity of the people for whom the pioneer priests have given their lives.

In the lives of the other pioneers, environment often includes the people around them. And these people, of course, resemble through their attitudes and ideas the Philistines who afflict the artists. Alexandria must overcome the criticism of her younger brothers during most of her life. They are afraid to face new ventures, uneasy about accepting new burdens, and

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envious of their sister's eventual success. Carl Linstrum tells her that it is her fate "to be always surrounded by little men." These are the typical Philistines who are contrasted with her magnificent spirit and goad her to greater heights.

And example of the disastrous effects of environment takes place in the life of Claude Wheeler who has the misfortune to live in the West when the scene is changing from the heroic past to the mechanical and materialistic present. He can find no challenge. He too is surrounded by "little men." Weldon, the weakling minister, who is full of insincerity, Claude's wife whose religion makes her even more narrow-minded, his father, Bayliss, whose only goal is material prosperity, these form a world which Claude finds impossible to combat. His escape is to run away rather than stay and fight.

The Philistine world completely conquers Mrs. Forrester of A Lost Lady. Ivy Peters has ruinous results. His victim is sensitive and artistic, but the post-pioneer generation is too much for her. It is the "sunset of the pioneer."

And in speaking of environment it is impossible to avoid the two pictures of the West which Willa Cather has drawn. One is that of the pioneers; the other is of the West of the second and third generations. The first is a land of promise and struggle where the men and women with the courage and imagination can live with dignity. This is the West of the "Two Friends" and of O Pioneers!, of My Antonia, and Death Comes for the Archbishop. In these stories the pioneers are creators. Alexandria looked upon the land with a

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desire to create, to work her will on it. It gave her an opportunity to express herself. It challenged successfully those tremendous talents buried within her. She was as selfless as the great artists in the dedication to her task and even denied herself marriage until a late age in order to carry out her plans for the West. In "The Bohemian Girl" the women of the Divide could sit back and survey with pleasure the work they had accomplished during their fruitful years. "Neighbor Rosicky" was an artist at heart. He could hope for no more beautiful pleasure than to plant things and watch them grow. Although Antonia does not fit so successfully into the role of creator she let her "artistic temperament" be her guide eventually in making her own life take on some of the controlled energy and fruitfulness that is found in Alexandria's life. Both the Archbishop and his Vicar fit into this picture of the old West. Both are creative and they change things, re-make things, wherever they go. This is the pioneer West, the gallant and courageous West as Captain Forrester describes it. This was the land where the pioneers formed a "courteous brotherhood, strong in attack but weak in defense."

And the other picture Cather gives is of the West after it has slipped from the firm hold of the old pioneers. Some of the younger generation revolt against it when they see that on the prairie they cannot be true to their desire for a full life. The lovers in "The Bohemian Girl" revolt and leave. From the midst of this decaying land Claude Wheeler flies to the army. In the same story Claude sees the West as coming under the control of such men as his brother, Bayliss, and thinks that war could not devastate a country and a spirit

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as thoroughly as such Philistines could. The dreamers of "The Enchanted Bluff" resign themselves to the lethargy which is part of the new spirit.

The scene seldom changes from the progress of that decay in A Lost Lady. Here the picture is complete as the old era ends with the death of Captain Forrester.

This nearly complete destruction of the pioneer spirit is something which Cather never permitted to happen in her world of artists. The entire society which looked to mechanical progress and material prosperity as the end of life (The Professor's House) was not enough to kill all of the creative talent in the world. There would always be a few who could hold their heads above the destruction. However, Cather gives little hope of this in the picture of the later West. Her heroes either escape this world and become successful as artists in some other place ("Before Breakfast") or she changed the scene to an earlier age in order to permit her characters to develop naturally to their full power.

A final characteristic of these short stories and novels is the constant appearance of art on the Western scene. Some of the old people from Europe have brought with them a talent and interest in art. The opera house of the small Western town is often the scene of talented displays by outsiders or local artists. Into some of the novels comes a narrator who is himself of that group of sensitive individuals on the fringe of the world of art, and is, of course, a voice for Willa Cather. Lena Lingard, Jim Burden, Neil Herbert, Carl Linstrum are all of the artistic type, from which characterization Cather found it difficult to depart.

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From the synopsis of the stories and in these few comparisons it is evident that the pioneer character is an extenuation of the artist. They act, think, and live alike. In the opposition of their worlds there is the same narrow-minded Philistinism. Cather's world is complete with these stories and the unity, continuity of theme through all of her work becomes clear.

## CONCLUSION

It has been the purpose of this thesis to present a study of Willa Cather's treatment of the artist, to show that this character remained consistent throughout her craft and represented, even in the guise of the pioneer, an effort to break through the Philistinism of a materialistic society.

In these short stories and novels there has been presented the struggle of the artist against society. Though Cather's consistency in adhering to this theme may be unique, the theme itself has been common property for writers during the past century. A considerable number of heroes appear as artists in the literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries. The artist represents the exemplary force standing against the decaying influences thrust upon society. He becomes the judge of that society, and, even in defeat, he points the way towards a more successful way of life.

Cather's heroes, for the most part, exist in a society where cultural ignorance and other types of Philistinism oppose them constantly. In this study of environment her work is reminiscent of a phase of literature which is highlighted particularly in Matthew Arnold's classifying of society and Sinclair Lewis' ridiculing of American provincialism. Willa Cather is most like Arnold in her insistence upon making "the best" prevail in life, in her opposition to the Philistines who believe only in material prosperity, and in her efforts to bracket art with religion. Her stories evoke memories of Lewis' attack upon the society of the small mid-western towns, and of the effects of this society upon the disinterested, sensitive individual.

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The Twenties in American literature produced many novels, poems, plays, and essays in which a soul-searching and often destructive criticism was leveled against the small town and the smugness of society. The irony of Master's Spoon River Anthology (1915), the satire of H. L. Mencken, the social protest of Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, and Sinclair Lewis characterize the time of the literary career of Willa Cather as one of revolt in American literature. Although Cather was to a lesser degree sympathetic with this spirit she does not neglect to portray the rural virtues in their proper light and to permit her talented characters to find an escape from the oppression of their environment. Her work does not degenerate into pessimism; she never writes without a hero who is interested in living for the things of the spirit.

Cather's hero is the artist. In all of her novels and the majority of her short stories there is at least one character whose ideals separate him from the rest of the world. He lives vigorously and fully. He breaks away from the narrowing conventions of his society and seeks the expression of his personality in the pursuit of the good, true and beautiful. He will not submit to the forces which try to limit his freedom or the dictates of his talent. The creative artist moves toward his ideal at all costs. If his destiny has made him a pioneer he will be dedicated to making his land fruitful; if he is a missionary he will make his life and vocation his work of art.

This is the passion which Cather transmitted to her fictional characters. It is a passion for living creatively; but it is a passion "nobly inter-

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preted." Neither her matter nor her style shift into fanatic ravings or harsh denunciations which are typical of the American "naturalists." She saw the evil of the materialistic age but she found hope in the spiritual vitality of her artists. She wrote of what was closest to her own experience and portrayed her own personality in the character of her artists.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis was written with the intention of demonstrating the fact that Willa Cather in her novels and short stories used the creative artist and his world, 1) as background material for the major portion of her work, 2) as an expression of what is best in life in contrast with the world represented by the "Philistine," and, 3) as a fundamental element in the creation of her pioneer characters.

Chapter One of the thesis presents an exposition of the objective of the study and provides a definition of terms and a division of the material. This preliminary chapter gives a brief summary of the material and methods contained in the following chapters.

In Chapter Two the life and background of Willa Cather are briefly treated in order to demonstrate the elements which inspired her in her writing career. It was from her early associations with the struggling pioneers of the West that she drew the materials of much of her writing. Later in life her relationship with the world of the artist helped her to discover in the creative personality something of the same spirit which inspired the pioneers she had known. Her major characters, then, are combinations of the pioneer and the artist with the emphasis in favor of the creative personality.

Chapters Three and Four discuss the world of the artist in Cather's novels and short stories. She presents the artist and his world from all points of view. He is shown amid his temptations, struggles, and success. He is surrounded by a group of individuals who hamper his work in many ways. His environment often hinders him from reaching the climax of his wished-for

perfection, but, on the other hand, it often drives him to renewed energy in overcoming all obstacles to reach goal. That environment against which the artist most often has to struggle is represented as an age of materialism in which there are few ideals or idealists. However, the artist as found in Cather's writings is one who is set apart, a prophet sent with a definite mission into a world that is indifferent for the most part. He is one who is dedicated to the task given him and no obstacle is too great, no sacrifice too painful to distract him from his work.

The personality of the artist is brought into sharper focus in the fifth chapter in which the novels dealing with the pioneer are treated. These characters are filled with the same spirit, driven by the same desire to overcome the obstacles restraining them from the goals they have set themselves; they fall into the same periods of despondency, are halted by the same types of failures at the hands of fate, and all in all create for themselves a world that is at basis the same as that of the artist.

The pioneer is at heart an artist. He is a creator in a land which provides him with a challenge. He is filled with the same dedication to his task that faced the artist, with the same desire to live fully, completely, and perfectly the life that has been given to him.

As Willa Cather progressed in her own career and treated in more detail the artist-pioneer character with which she was so concerned, she began to dwell more and more upon the spirit of religion as a unifying influence in the art of living. This theme is briefly and vaguely treated in several of the novels of her later period and reaches a full flowering in her best known

work: Death Comes for the Archbishop.

Into this novel Cather put all of the experience she had gained from her life and writing. For this novel she used all of the effort, all of the searching, all of the striving and idealism she had put into the characters of the artists she had already portrayed, of the minor characters of the earlier novels and short stories, of the pioneers who fought and died for their ideals. She made the religion of her missionary characters the art of living. These men are as sensitive, as inspired, as rebuffed, as idealistic, as persevering as the greatest of her artistic characters. These individuals are the epitome of all that Cather attempted to create in her artists and pioneers. However, in the novels following this Cather did not return to this variation of her theme. She continued to treat of the sensitive individual with the creative spirit.

The conclusion to be drawn from this study is that Cather was concerned with one type of character in her writing: the artist. It is the spirit of her creative personality which gives direction to each of her major characters whether he is a creator in the artistic world, the world of the pioneer or the world of the missionary. She was completely interested in portraying this character as being most representative of the type of life she believed to be the best. Furthermore, in an age that seemed to want nothing to do with the spiritual side of human nature Cather offered a reminder of the greatness of this personality. She had one passion which she transmitted to her fictional creations, one ideal that could conquer any environment, one dedication to the belief that from the artist all men could learn the art of living.