

WILLA CATHER: A STUDY IN VALUES

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CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

Sister M. Placide, C.S.F.N. (Irene Karczewska) was born March 1, 1916, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She received the Bachelor of Music degree from the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., in 1940. She received the Master of Arts degree in English Literature from the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1958. The title of her thesis was The Baroque Artistry of Richard Crashaw.

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INTRODUCTION

The eulogies which appeared soon after Willa Sibert Cather died on April 24, 1947, attested to the high place she held among the modern American writers. Miss Cather's active literary career spanned more than forty years, and she had enjoyed early success as a journalist, drama critic, and magazine writer and editor. Her first book was a slender volume of verse, April Twilights, published in 1903, and the final work from her pen was the posthumous book of short stories, The Old Beauty and Others, published in 1948. Willa Cather On Writing, a collection of her prefaces, letters, and essays, appeared in 1949, but the selections here were first published through the period 1920 to 1936 and hence do not represent the final phase of her work. Her works in book form include twelve novels, four volumes of short stories, two volumes of essays, and a book of verse.

But the recital of dates and titles reveals little. The significant fact is that Willa Cather is almost unanimously acknowledged as one of the really accomplished writers of her time, and, more important, is recognized as a writer who always looked upon literature as an art and who always employed her talent as an artist.

An English critic as early as 1932 had claimed there was "no reason to regard Willa Cather as less than the

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foremost American woman novelist of her generation."¹ Even earlier, in 1926, another Englishman, Alexander Porterfield, wrote, "Miss Cather succeeds just where so many of her contemporaries fall down, and that is in the task of writing beautifully and well."² Willa Cather had been lauded for "practicing fiction as one of the fine arts,"³ for "uncompromising standards of artistic distinction,"⁴ for being "pre-eminently an artist."⁵ Alfred Kazin called her "the consummate artist";⁶ Sinclair Lewis called her "the greatest American novelist."⁷

Not all critics, of course, are in agreement in placing Willa Cather in the forefront among modern writers. Granville Hicks in 1933 censured Miss Cather for what he claimed was her failure to see the realities of modern life. He

1 Alfred C. Ward, American Literature, 1880-1930, London, Dial Press, 1932, p. 146-147.

2 "Willa Cather," London Mercury, Vol. 13, March, 1926, p. 517.

3 Louise Bogan, "American Classic," New Yorker, Vol. 7, Aug. 18, 1931, p. 19.

4 Kenneth B. Murdock and others, The Literature of the American People, New York, Appleton-Century, 1951, p. 911.

5 Clifton Fadiman, "Willa Cather: The Past Recaptured," Nation, Vol. 135, Dec. 7, 1932, p. 564.

6 On Native Grounds, New York, Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942, p. 257.

7 "The Greatest American Novelist," Newsweek, Vol. 40, Jan. 3, 1938, p. 29.

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maintained that Willa Cather fled from the present and in doing so destroyed "the artistic virtues, which are rooted in integrity."⁸ Bernard Baum, in 1950, took Willa Cather to task because, as he put it, she shared with T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, and others

a profoundly disturbing sense of modern civilization as bankrupt morally and intellectually--a desert of the spirit inhabited by hollow men...a sense not only of desolation but of complete loss of meaningful living through secularization of the primary areas of human experience: love, art, and all the shared values that make for an integrated society.⁹

To show that both Hicks and Baum were wrong in their judgments is, at least in part, the burden of this study--though the dissertation is in no wise occasioned by the criticism of Granville Hicks or Bernard Baum. Most certainly Willa Cather saw ever more clearly the realities in her own time and never for an instant forsook "love, art, and all the shared values of an integrated society." In fact, Miss Cather's fiction is most strongly characterized by these two features: first, her awareness of but disenchantment with the mores, values, and ideals of the present; and, second, her constant and successful effort to produce writing which could meet her exacting standards of literary art. The first of

⁸ "The Case Against Willa Cather," English Journal, Vol. 22, May, 1933, p. 710.

⁹ "Willa Cather's Waste Land," South Atlantic Quarterly, Vol. 48, Oct., 1949, p. 590.

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these two features needs elaboration. Willa Cather, throughout her long career, found the present to be a decadent era in comparison with times past; likewise, she found the people of her own time less imposing in moral-aesthetic stature than those of earlier races and times.

Her praise of things past, however, is not a complete rejection of the present but a plea for its improvement as well. Her eulogy of men and women of earlier times shows a disenchantment with modern people--and "love, art, and shared values"--but it is also a highly-held goal toward which her contemporaries might strive. In this sense Willa Cather was a writer deeply concerned with her own time and with its moral and aesthetic values; she was, indeed, a reformer, inasmuch as the reader takes her message to heart and implements it by action, or the desire for action.

The novels and short stories--and critical essays--of Willa Cather are stories of man walking forward, face turned backward, nostalgically idealizing his own youth, the youth of his society, or the youth of his race. Finally, Willa Cather's fiction is the expression of her own intrepid attitudes, as they are embodied in ever recurrent themes of the supremacy of moral and spiritual over material values.

This dissertation, then, is a study of Willa Cather's values and attitudes as they are exemplified in her writings. Recognition of her artistry has been handsomely tendered,

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within the past decade, in book-length treatments by the late E.K. Brown¹⁰ and by Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant¹¹ and in 1950 by David Daiches.¹² Shorter essays have been written by Lionel Trilling,¹³ Stuart Sherman,¹⁴ Henry Seidel Canby,¹⁵ Maxwell Geismar,¹⁶ Edward Wagenknecht,¹⁷ and many others.

¹⁰ Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, New York, Knopf, 1953, completed by Leon Edel.

¹¹ Willa Cather: A Memoir, Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1953.

¹² Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1951.

¹³ "Willa Cather," New Republic, Vol. 90, Feb. 10, 1937, p. 10-13.

¹⁴ Critical Woodcuts, New York, Scribner's, 1927, p. 32-48.

¹⁵ "Willa Cather, 1876-1947," Saturday Review of Literature, Vol. 30, May 10, 1947, p. 22-24.

¹⁶ The Last of the Provincials, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1947, p. 153-220.

¹⁷ Cavalcade of the American Novel, New York, Holt, 1952, p. 319-338.

CHAPTER I

EXPOSITION OF THE OBJECTIVE AND CRITERIA

Willa Cather, whose writing career spanned nearly half a century, was pre-eminently a literary artist. But in her artistry are found recurrent and varied expressions of her values and attitudes, manifested in the following: 1) a tendency to regard the past with nostalgic fondness, finding in time past qualities and virtues which are sorely missed in the present; 2) a tendency to find admirable qualities in a level of society other than her own, often in a less sophisticated or "civilized" level of culture.

This study will undertake to explore the ramifications of these tendencies which, in all probability, helped to shape Willa Cather's values and attitudes. The exploration will encompass Miss Cather's 1) admiration of the classical Golden Age, her inclination to hark back to patriarchal epochs and to lost Arcadian innocence, her fond recollection of the glories of her own national past--as well as a concomitant disenchantment with the baseness of the present; 2) admiration for "natural" persons unaffected and unspoiled by the complexities of sophisticated society; 3) preference for rural living; and 4) belief in the innate superiority of persons of low station. Included in the study will be an examination of concepts closely related to the aforementioned

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tendencies, namely, pessimism and optimism, materialism, and idealism--all of which are strikingly present in Miss Cather's writings. Finally, this study will endeavor to show that the pattern of Miss Cather's literary career constitutes a corroboration of her values and attitudes.

"Internal evidence"--statements by Willa Cather herself--in the novels, stories, poems, and essays, will be cited to establish the author's concern for moral values and her uncompromising loyalty to ideals, and thus to encompass in one study as complete a picture as possible of Willa Cather's values and attitudes. In so far as possible, these statements will be buttressed or amplified with opinions of those who have studied her life and her work.

Consequently this dissertation will not be concerned with Willa Cather's artistry as such, nor with biographical data, except as events in Miss Cather's life bear upon the subject at hand.

CRITERIA

1. General Exposition

The concept of values and attitudes as it is envisioned in this study embodies the two aforementioned tendencies together with their subsidiary ideas, also presented above. The explication which follows will establish general criteria for both.

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The first tendency is the recurrent inclination in men to find favor with time past, to recall fondly or to consider admiringly their own youth or the earlier epochs of their society, their nation, their race, or their civilization. It is a nostalgic fondling of memories and an admiration of the aesthetic and moral values and ideals of earlier times and earlier peoples. It is the attitude which finds merit in the struggle towards a goal but little satisfaction in its attainment, especially if such attainment involves materialistic comfort. It is the expression of a conviction that man is best when least fettered by the complexities of society. It is the tendency to find giants in the past and pygmies in the present.

The second tendency is an equally recurrent proclivity in men to ask with Horace, "O rural retirement, when shall I behold thee?" and to admire in their own age and society the people and places which most strongly embody the virtues and ideals of early times and "natural" men. It is the urge to go "back to the farm" or to "a place in the country--to make the design for living less intricate and the locale for living more idyllic.

From these tendencies evolves a theory of values, moral or aesthetic or both, a theory which posits that man is best in an early society or in conditions which approximate those of an early society. Such values extol simplicity

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rather than complexity. Such values may, but do not always, embody a pessimism if the writer assumes that man's progress is a succession of advances and retrogressions in which no subsequent advance can reach as far as its predecessors and, hence, that the lot of man in a civilized society becomes progressively worse since he can never be as good as he was in the first stage of civilization. But such attitudes may also express an optimistic point of view if the writer feels that man can regain the way of life from which he departed in times past.

Hence, this outlook may contain the theory of a "fall," and it may be pessimistic or optimistic as the individual writer regards the aftermath of man's fall. If man paradoxically falls but to gain a way of life as good as or better than he lost, the attitude may be classified as optimism. But if man falls never again to rise to the same height, we have an attitude of pessimism. Thus the writer may be negative or positive, a prophet of doom and despair or a harbinger of promise and reform.

Such an outlook, then, most often bids men seek their standard of excellence in the stages before man had been corrupted by civilization, but this same outlook may contain standards of past excellence as a means of attaining possible perfection in the future.

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Having considered briefly and in general terms the two tendencies, it will be well to examine more fully their characteristics, to specify a few examples of each, and to note values and attitudes most likely to be extracted from each.

2. Exposition of First Tendency

For purposes of convenience the first tendency will be termed a "backward-looking habit of mind." Writers have expressed this looking backward in particular ways. One expression is the ever-present attitude of recalling the past with the appellation of "the good old days," and one common aspect of this is a glowing admiration of the classical Golden Age. The regret for the vanished Golden Age may be expressed also, as it was by the English poets in the first half of the eighteenth century, in ardent imitation and emulation of classical learning and arts. James Thomson may be considered as a characteristic example.¹

Thomson loved and valued the glories of the classical past, and he rued the loss of those halcyon times. The first part of Liberty is entitled "Ancient and Modern Italy Compared" in which the Goddess of Liberty bespeaks the magnificence of republican Rome, apostrophizing Horace, Tully, and

¹ See Alan D. McKillop, Background of Thomson's Seasons, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1942.

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Virgil and lamenting the melancholy changes in modern times.² Of course, Thomson makes a modern application of the account of the glory that was Greece--and Rome. Through his Goddess of Liberty the poet points out that materialistic luxury and spiritual degeneration spelled the end of classical glory and that his own England should heed the lesson lest the same ills befall her.

The imitations of classical poets by eighteenth century Englishmen give ample evidence of their backward-looking tendencies. One thinks immediately, of course, of Pope and his imitations of Horace and of his eulogies of Homer and Virgil in An Essay On Criticism.³ Nor can one forget Pope's blistering contrast of Aristotle, Horace, and others among the ancients with the critics of his own time.⁴

Still another characteristic of man's looking backward is the inclination to hark back to patriarchal epochs and to lost Arcadian innocence. Pope expressed this propensity when he wrote that "The State of Nature was the reign of God."⁵ Both Pope and Thomson depict the patriarchal age as a state of pastoral happiness. Joseph Warton descried

2 "Liberty," I, 268-272; 274; 280-285.

3 "Essay On Criticism," 124-129.

4 Ibid., 643-680.

5 "Essay On Man," III, 148.

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the sordidness and falsity of eighteenth-century city life and lauded the beauty of rural existence, praising "some pine-topp'd precipice abrupt and shaggy"⁶ in preference to a Versailles.⁷

One need not seek only in eighteenth-century literature for evidence of praise for the pastoral past. The idylls of shepherd swains and rural innocence are present in Longfellow, Izaak Walton, and Ovid; and the backward-looking writer may say with Thomson, "Such were those prime of days."

A third characteristic of this tendency is the admiration of the historically great and a devotion to the glories of one's own national past. Concomitant with this is the impulse to warn of impending disaster because of modern luxury and decay, to decry modern injustice, and to lament the baseness of contemporary politicians, soldiers, and others. Thomson, as does Warton, sounds the note for this strain in his satire "Newmarket."⁸ Jonathan Swift⁹ and Pope¹⁰ express similar comments.

6 "The Enthusiast," 26-30.

7 Ibid., 87-98.

8 Lines 201-204.

9 "Cadenus and Vanessa," 346-349.

10 "The First Epistle of the First Book of Horace," lines 98-100.

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One need ponder only a moment to recollect expressions of writers wishing for leaders like those departed or to recall their praises of early heroes. Wordsworth called upon the great blind poet Milton;¹¹ Addison in his coldly correct lays praised the British poets of earlier times from Chaucer to Dryden;¹² and Joseph Warton in "The Enthusiast" deplored the riot, excess, and feverish luxury of his own age, at the same time calling for poetry that could compare "to Shakespeare's warblings wild."

The laments for the degeneracy of the present are equally plentiful. Doctor Johnson lashed out at the evils of his beloved London;¹³ he saw the land of illustrious Edward, heroes, and saints "lost in thoughtless ease and empty show"¹⁴ lacking sense, freedom, and piety.

Patriotic Thomson saw Britannia saddened by the faded fame of her degenerate sons;¹⁵ and Pope in a note to his closing lines of the "Epilogue to the Satires" wrote that he had wanted to write "in the most plain and solemn manner he could, a sort of Protest against that insuperable corruption

11 "London, 1802," 1-8.

12 "An Account of the Greatest Poets."

13 "London: A Poem," 248-253.

14 Ibid., 103.

15 "Britannia," 2-3; and "To the Memory of Mr. Congreve," 20-24.

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and depravity of manners which he had been so unhappy as to live to see."¹⁶

To recapitulate, the backward-looking habit--the first tendency--is evidenced by the tendency to look fondly to the past, finding there the peace, virtue, ideals, and harmony lacking in one's own time. Writers have recurrently given expression to this feeling, probably most noticeably in concert in the first half of the eighteenth century in England. In this age we easily discern three major emphases of the tendency: admiration of the classical Golden Age and its serenity, its arts, and its great learning; admiration of a patriarchal past, lost Arcadian innocence and pastoral¹⁷ happiness; and admiration of the historically great and a devotion to the glories of one's own national past. The accompaniment to each of these variations on the backward-looking theme is an obligation of disenchantment and a disappointment in the luxury, degeneracy, and baseness of the present.

Men still have visions of past happiness--or what now seems past happiness--as a means of escaping the griefs of the trying present.

¹⁶ Works, Whitwell Elwin and William J. Courthope, eds., London, 1871, III, Pope's note.

¹⁷ In this study, "pastoral" is considered in the sense of rural superiority, not in the bucolic sense of the Theocritus tradition.

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3. Exposition of the Second Tendency

Again for purposes of convenience, the second tendency will be designated as the "desire for a less intricate design for living." Civilized man had continually rebelled against his own civilization. The apparatus of sophisticated groups, the burden of rules and regulations, the very complexity of the "civilized" life, all militate against the advancements and advantages of civilized man to the point where he "wants to get away from it all." This desire for less complexity in life, this weariness of material riches and responsibilities results in a search for values found in a less intricate design for living, which, in turn, can be defined as the looking for desirable qualities in life--peace, virtue, ideals, and harmony--not in a bygone age but in the different modes of life among simple, "natural" folk of one's own time. Men in a highly sophisticated cultural climate regard with envy the rural swain, the country gentleman, the hardy peasant, and the robust rustic. This, of course, is a modified expression of the Noble Savage admiration which played so large a part in the literature of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England.

The term Noble Savage may be defined as "any free and wild being who draws directly from nature virtues which raise doubts as to the value of civilization. The term may be applied metaphorically to romantic peasants and children when a

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comparison between their innocent greatness and that of the savage illumines the thought of the period."¹⁸ The modern application of this definition relates as well to all "natural" types who find the fullest expression of rich living, whether in wealth or in poverty, in the city or on the farm, in a lack of sophistication and complexity ordinarily encountered in relatively intricate cultural situations. Thus, as we shall see, Tom Outland, Spanish Johnny, Antonia Shimerda, Pierre Charron, and others in Willa Cather's fiction are embodiments of the recurrent "natural" type.¹⁹ This type need not be truly uncivilized, but will demonstrate an innate sincerity and kindness of heart.

Generally speaking, the desire for a less intricate design for living is exemplified in three ways: in some variation of the "natural" type, in the unfavorable comparison between urban and rural living, and in the claim for the innate superiority of persons of low station in life. Attendant on all three of these is a sort of pessimism which looks to a particular kind of existence as better than one's own or which looks to a different social level as better than one's own because it is more "natural."

¹⁸ Hoxie N. Fairchild, The Noble Savage, New York, Columbia University Press, 1928, p. 2.

¹⁹ In this study the term "natural" or "natural person" will be used in preference to the term Noble Savage.

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The student of literature is aware of the attention that has been given to the Noble Savage in eighteenth-century literature, and one is still tempted to relate the name of Jean Jacques Rousseau to the Noble Savage idea in the progenitive sense. But others besides Rousseau have utilized the Noble Savage or "natural person" ideal, and numerous instances of its use may be cited. We think of the Noble Savage expression in Mrs. Aphra Behn's Oroonoko, of Defoe's Friday, and of Crusoe himself as he established an economy in harmony with nature.

Sir Richard Steele's narrative in Spectator 11 draws a sharp contrast between the nature of Yarico, the Indian girl of "wild graces," and Mr. Thomas Inkle, the money-grubbing, "civilized" young Englishman. Thomson, too, has paid his tribute to the "natural person."²⁰

Pope's expression on the Noble Savage may be the best-known of numerous examples:

Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutor'd mind
Sees God in the clouds, or hears him in the wind;
His soul, proud science never taught to stray
Far as the solar walk or milky way;
Yet simple Nature to his hope has giv'n,
Behind the cloud-topp'd hill, an humbler heav'n.²¹

The second characteristic evolving from the desire for a less intricate design for living is the tendency to

²⁰ "Spring," 237-241.

²¹ "Essay on Man," I, 99-104.

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compare and contrast city and rural life to the distinct disadvantage of the former. Writers of this disposition frown on the town for its avarice, ambition, false pride, and dishonesty. The rural dweller is frequently endowed with the valued virtues of truthfulness, honesty, simplicity, and he enjoys the advantage of being close to and dependent upon nature. The city dweller works at meaningless tasks and depends upon someone else for his subsistence. The peasant works with life itself in his husbandry of crops and flocks and herds, and the productivity of his labors is more worthwhile than the crass activity of the city merchant and tradesman.

The country is shown as a refuge and a solace from the evils and artifice of the city. The pastoral tendency, of course, is traced back to Theocritus and is a recognized attribute of the classical age. As might be expected, then, it is of marked importance in the earlier eighteenth century. Richard Steel talks of rural retirement in Spectator 264. Even Doctor Johnson, the most confirmed city dweller of all, could lament the evils of the town in his verse and devote essays to the love of retirement from "constant residence amidst noise and pleasure" of city life.²² He recognized the good of "the society of solitude" and noted, "There is

22 Rambler, No. 7.

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scarcely any writer who has not celebrated the happiness of rural privacy...."²³

Thus, this aspect indicts the superficiality, the unnaturalness, the wickedness of the town which inhibits or stifles man's best feelings. Conversely, man is psychologically better attuned when he is close to nature where his good qualities are most likely to come forth. That Willa Cather valued the pastoral tendency and wrote in this strain is demonstrable, but we shall note that even in her strongest indictment of urban life she did not overlook certain advantages of town and city living--just as in her own life, though she loved Nebraska, the Southwest, the Maritime Provinces, and Quebec, she never wished to give up completely the advantages of the city.

A third subsequent characteristic of the desire for a less intricate design for living is the eulogizing of the poor and those in low station. Wealth is made to appear burdensome, luxury is denounced, and overweening ambition is condemned. Poverty is made to appear desirable and conducive to virtue, and spiritual wealth is deemed much more important than material success. The hard-working ploughman, the poor but honest factory hand, and the unlettered but noble kitchen helper are rich in spiritual treasure though poor in paper

23 Rambler, No. 135.

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money. The poor and lowly are often synonymous with simplicity.

Doctor Johnson regretted that poverty had become a "crime,"²⁴ and lauded the Briton who "safe in poverty defied his foes."²⁵ Pope's "An honest man's the noblest work of God"²⁶ is echoed in Robert Burns' lines concluding, "The cottage leaves the palace far behind."²⁷

Numerous examples may be cited of the "poor-but-honest" theme. Every occurrence of such an attitude does not, of course, slavishly constrain the writer; nevertheless, in the diligent worker, temperate, satisfied with simple pleasures, prideful in his work and hearth, the writer discerns values he cherishes. The happy, poor man may be a city or a farm dweller but is most likely to be a countryman of low estate.

4. Exposition of Related Ideas

For the writer attuned to the value potentialities of the tendencies discussed thus far, these tendencies are frequently accompanied by related ideas, three of which shall

24 "London: A Poem," 159.

25 Ibid., 48.

26 "Essay on Man," IV, 248.

27 "The Cotter's Saturday Night," XIX, 168.

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be considered briefly as subordinate criteria to apply in the study of values and attitudes in Willa Cather's writings. These three complementary ideas are pessimism and optimism, materialism, and idealism.

The first complementary quality is the attitude of pessimism or optimism expressed by the writer who looks for values to the past or to a less complex social climate. The pessimism is expressed in the writer's chagrin with the present, his despair for the future, and his inclination to view his own society as dedicated to Mammon and the glorification of the unworthy rather than to enduring principles and ideals. The writer's pessimism is likely to be most strongly demonstrated when his story deals with the present which he generally sees as unapologetic for its own ugliness and meanness; the present appears in most respects the defeat of a dream, and hence a disappointment. Like Willa Cather such a writer protests the "injustice that creatures so splendidly aspiring should be inexorably doomed to fail."²⁸ On the other hand, the optimistic attitude emphasizes the highly valued virtue of struggle, of determination to succeed genuinely.

Consequently, materialism is anathema to the writer possessing the tendencies under discussion. Little-minded men who scramble for riches and comfort and who gain

²⁸ Willa Cather On Writing, New York, Knopf, 1949, p. 22.

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spiritual poverty and frustration become the targets of scorn. Man's mania for ownership merely for the sake of owning is equated with sacrilege; and insatiable appetite for money, land, or social position is the mark of the insensitive person incapable of fulfilling any worthwhile destiny.

The materialist stands out boldly in all his sordidness when seen in contrast with the idealist. One of the strongest factors in the characterization of Ivy Peters in Willa Cather's A Lost Lady is the juxtaposition of his character with that of Captain Forrester, who had dreamed the railroads across the mountains.

One aspect of materialism is the cult of standardization--the stereotyping of education, of architecture, of clothing, of furniture, of books and art and music. A natural result is the dependence upon mechanized appliances. A Willa Cather character prefers renting a horse and buggy to driving in an automobile.²⁹ Miss Cather herself always liked an open grate or a hard-coal burner better than central heating. The writer sees the crushing weight of modernity forcing individuals into conformity, into patterns of living as uniform as the clothes they wear, the homes they live in, and the values they live by.

²⁹ Evangeline Knightly in "The Best Years," The Old Beauty and Others, New York, Knopf, 1948.

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Thus the writer with the two tendencies and their subsidiary ideas establishes a set of values and attitudes. Finding that he admires the characteristics of people of a past age or the characteristics of those in a more "natural" stage of civilization, he begins to hold up those characteristics as a measure of good in man and as desirable goals for his own society. Along with his regret for the loss of such characteristics is an advocacy of them. He idealizes those of his own age who are most natural and uncorrupted by the arts of civilization. He holds up for favorable view those unswayed by continual changes in fashion and unsapped by luxury. He esteems the man or woman of physical vigor and self reliance. He sets a premium on the person who establishes his worth and dignity as an individual, undeceived by artifice and material gain.

This idealism recognizes spiritual victory in material defeat; it values the dreamer who can hold onto, live by, and die for an ideal in the face of engulfing tides of compromise, concession, and surrender. Willa Cather, as we shall see, presented many characters who lived by ideals out of tune with the time. Some of her most memorable figures are the magnificent vanquished--Claude Wheeler, dying happy in an ideal he wished into being, is such a one. Antonia Shimerda, fulfilling the rich promise of her own nature,

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lending "herself to immemorial human attitudes,"³⁰ is another.

5. Willa Cather in Relation to the Criteria Considered

This introductory section now turns to a preview of the principal matter of this study--expressions of Willa Cather's values and attitudes as manifested in the backward-looking habit and in the desire for a less intricate design for living--in relation to the criteria considered above. In the main body of the dissertation will be cited evidence from Miss Cather's novels, stories, and essays which establishes these values and attitudes in her individual works and in the very trend of her writing career.

It seems particularly noteworthy that Willa Cather, writing as she did over a span of nearly fifty years and contemporaneously with such figures as Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, John Steinbeck, John DosPassos, and James T. Farrell--and, certainly, she was a major writer in this company--should produce fiction which is not only of consummate artistry but which also springs from a climate of opinion seemingly unlike that of her peers. She was never the expatriate writer; she eschewed the documentary quality of naturalism; she apparently held no belief in the supremacy of

³⁰ Willa Cather, My Antonia, "Library Edition," Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1937, p. 353.

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economic or environmental determinism. Willa Cather belonged to no school; she was a part of no trend. Her novels are not primarily sociological, political, economic; they are not problem, proletarian, or reform novels.

One thinks, too, of the lesser writers of Willa Cather's time, and realizes that she has little or nothing in common with the colorful fantasy of James Branch Cabell, the restricted mores of Edith Wharton, or the sharp satire of Ellen Glasgow. Miss Cather in her famous essay, "The Novel Demeublé," objected to the "cataloguing" of realistic writers--mere verisimilitude by enumeration--and to the literalness of naturalistic writers in the presenting of mental reactions and physical sensations. "Can one imagine anything more terrible than the story of Romeo and Juliet rewritten in prose by D.H. Lawrence?"³¹ she asks.

No, one cannot in any significant sense liken Willa Cather and her work to her contemporaries and their writing. Rather, Miss Cather belongs in the longer tradition of American writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and

³¹ Literary Encounters, "Library Edition," Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1938, p. 241.

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Twain.³² In Willa Cather's fiction there is praise of Emersonian self-reliance and a sympathy with the concept that man's soul can see the perfection which his eyes seek in vain.

Henry David Thoreau's retreat to Walden Pond and his chagrin with the materialism of his own society are clearly expressions of values and attitudes akin to those of Miss Cather. Thoreau praised the goodness of man in the simplicity of past ages or of different cultural levels. His strong interest in Indian life, his high estimate of Joe Polis, his Indian guide, and his eulogy of his Canadian woodsman friend all exemplify Thoreau's disposition toward the concept of the "natural" person and his leaning toward the cult of the lowly.

Who should come to my lodge this morning but a true...Canadian, a wood-chopper and post-maker, who can hole fifty posts in a day, who made his last supper on a woodchuck which his dog caught. He, too, has heard of Homer, and, 'if it were not for books,' would 'not know what to do on rainy days'....A more simple and natural man it would be hard to find. Vice and disease, which cast such a sombre moral hue over the world seemed to have hardly any existence for him!³³

32 In a preface written for the Mayflower Edition of The Best Short Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1925, Miss Cather wrote: "If I were asked to name three American books which have the possibility of a long, long life, I would say at once: The Scarlet Letter, Huckleberry Finn, and The Country of the Pointed Firs. I can think of no others that confront time and change so serenely."-- p. xviii.

33 Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau, Brooks Atkinson, ed., New York, 1937, p. 130-131.

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Melville's tendency to get away from the land with its materialism and sameness and to find man conjoined with nature at sea is also a view paralleling Miss Cather's. In the microcosm of the ship Melville finds the world, and in the conjunction of man and nature, he portrays the natural, elemental character as the highest type; consider, for example, Tashtego in Moby Dick, or handsome Billy Budd.

Mark Twain was most successful when he recalled the past, particularly the times he had known as a boy. In Huckleberry Finn, Twain creates a great "natural" person in Nigger Jim, the character lowest in the social stratification of the novel but highest in intrinsic human virtues and ideals. The repeated episodes in which Huck and Jim find on the broad Mississippi refuge and solace from the petty materialism of towns and custom constitute a glowing tribute to nature and a scathing indictment of the village mind.

Without citing further examples we may perhaps safely venture the opinion that Willa Cather wrote in the great tradition of the American Renaissance, with its anti-rationalism, from Hawthorne through Whitman and Twain.

What are, in general terms, the traits by means of which Willa Cather manifested the values she steadily upheld?

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Miss Cather's first concern, always, was her literary art;³⁴ from this concern she never deviated, and of her success in achieving literary artistry critical opinion is in almost unanimous agreement. But the subject matter of her writing consistently reveals set values and attitudes. Her greatest emphasis falls on the ideals, virtues, honesty, and heroism of artists, pioneers, and "natural" people as well as on the meanness, shallowness, and materialism of "late-comers," urban dwellers, and "civilized" folk. Her writing brings out in harsh relief the worth of the struggle over the worth of the goal attained.

Thea Kronborg's old piano teacher, one of Willa Cather's memorable "natural" folk, expressed the struggle ethic, "Nothing is far and nothing is near, if one desires."

³⁴ Still a college junior, Willa Cather wrote the following for the Nebraska State Journal of Sunday, August 23, 1894: "The further the world advances, the more it becomes evident that an author's only safe recourse 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 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."

In the preface to The Song of the Lark (1937), she is writing of Thea, but she might well be writing of herself: "The life of nearly every artist who succeeds in the true sense (succeeds in delivering himself completely to his art) is more or less like Wilde's story, 'The Portrait of Dorian Grey.' As Thea is more and more released into the dramatic and musical possibilities of her profession, as her artistic life grows fuller and richer, it becomes more interesting to her than her own life."

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The world is little, people are little, human life is little.
There is only one thing big--desire."³⁵

Miss Cather never consciously set out to posit a theory of values based on the backward-looking habit and on the desire for a less intricate design for living; but in these two tendencies, together with their related concepts, she found the theme of her art. The qualities inherent in these tendencies are qualities Miss Cather always admired: spontaneous energy, abundant vitality, self-confidence and self-reliance, deep passion, and rich desire. Willa Cather saw no tragedy in her characters who were frustrated if they had such traits, were true to ideals and to self. She did find tragedy in those characters who were false to ideals, who were more rational than feeling, and who were timid, indifferent, petty.

The values which mold the great Willa Cather characters, from Alexandra Bergson to Archbishop Latour, are "immortal human attitudes...universal and true," instincts developed out of the long experience of the human race: heroism of daily living (O Pioneers! and My Ántonia), struggle for self-fulfillment (The Song of the Lark), truth to one's ideal (One of Ours), making the best of a disappointing present (The Professor's House), scorn for the idol of materialism

³⁵ The Song of the Lark, "Library Edition," Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1937, p. 95.

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(A Lost Lady), establishing a great system of serving God and fellow-man (Death Comes for the Archbishop), and preserving the beauties and graces of a rich culture transplanted to a harsh environment (Shadows on the Rock). The profound and enduring values of "natural" persons are the themes of Willa Cather's art.

Further, Willa Cather dwells significantly not only on a particular stage of human development but also upon inward qualities which produce an ideal way of living. In this respect, she deals with innate, fundamental character in man, with his most intrinsic, elemental, inward attributes, and, thus, she does not deny that a person can be desirably adjusted psychologically in any society, even in a sophisticated one.

We might, then, think of the values in Willa Cather's writing as capable of developing in any type of social milieu, but most frequently occurring in the past or among "natural" types.

CHAPTER II

THE INCOMMUNICABLE PAST

Jim Burden, the narrator of My Antonia, remarks in the last sentence of his story that he and Antonia Shimerda had "possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past."¹ Though Willa Cather speaks, through her narrator, of the "incommunicable past," she never forsook the attempt to communicate not only the essence but also the values of earlier times--the past of her own culture, the past of her land, and her own past. The singular success of her attempts testifies eloquently to her great veneration for the past and to the great values she attached to all its aspects.

Willa Cather found much to admire and value in the past of her own culture, particularly as it manifested itself in the impact of the Old World upon the New:

The mellowness, the leisureliness, the distrust of mere material progress that the older immigrant brings are always seen by Miss Cather as necessary for a proper fertilization of the American soil. If these qualities do not come from Europe, they must come from south of the Border.²

¹ My Antonia, p. 372. All references to Willa Cather's works will be to the Houghton Mifflin "Library Edition," the first volumes of which appeared in 1937. When works not included in this edition are cited, the source will be stated in full.

² David Daiches, Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1951, p. 34.

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The older Cather characters, strangers in a new and harsh land, finding difficulty in adjusting to a different environment, are nearly always treated sympathetically. Whenever she contrasts the immigrants with their better-adjusted children, the second generation is shown in an unfavorable light. The author in these circumstances is recognizing the merits of a rich, lengthy past over a shortened, poorly established heritage.

Old Mr. Shinerda must be accounted a failure in his struggle with a new environment; he chose suicide during his first winter on the Nebraska prairie. But Willa Cather leaves no doubt about her admiration for his old-world ways--his gentleness, his love of music, his fondness for talk, beautiful talk unheard on the raw prairie "about music, and the woods, and about God, and when they were young."³

"The Swedish Mother," a poem first published in McClure's Magazine⁴ and added in the 1923 edition of April Twilights,⁵ is a tribute to the lengthened past which the immigrant brought to the new land. In this poem--one of Willa Cather's very few in dialect--the reader feels the regret for days lost and gone, the elegy for the "incommunicable past"

3 My Ántonia, p. 236.

4 Vol. 37, Sept., 1911, p. 541.

5 New York, Knopf, p. 52.

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of My Antonia. The little girl of the poem listening to the Swedish mother's oft-told story cannot understand her mother's sad smile:

Wonderingly she looks away
Where her mother's gazing;
Only sees the drifting herd,
In the sunset grazing.⁶

The sense of the precious past comes through in so many of Willa Cather's old-world characters that one is tempted to cite too many examples. One of the most memorable, however, is the principal character of the short story, "Neighbor Rosicky." Old Mr. Rosicky, a Bohemian tailor's apprentice in his youth, had arrived in Nebraska as a homesteader after extended stopovers in London and New York. He never succumbed to the "get-ahead" instincts of his neighbors --or his son. Rosicky had a talent for enjoying life. The day his corn crop was ruined by a continued drought and hot wind, Old Rosicky could suggest a family picnic. Mrs. Rosicky tells the story this way:

An' that's how your father behaved, when all the neighbors was so discouraged they couldn't look you in the face. An' we enjoyed ourselves that year, poor as we was, an' our neighbors wasn't a bit better off for bein' miserable. Some of 'em grieved till they got poor digestions and couldn't relish what they did have.⁷

6 April Twilights, p. 53.

7 Obscure Destinies, p. 44-45.

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Kindly, wise Rosicky could and did adjust satisfactorily to the challenge of the prairie. The double jeopardy of the homesteader, risking defeat by the land and chancing the loss of spiritual and cultural values in success, never frightened nor thwarted men like Rosicky. And Willa Cather gives us many such figures. There are the Rosens of "Old Mrs. Harris," the Kohlers and Spanish Johnny of The Song Of the Lark, the Erlich family⁸ or Ernest Havel of One of Ours who "lived in an atmosphere of mental liberty which he [Claude Wheeler] could never hope to attain."⁹

One thinks, too, of the German dressmaker of The Professor's House. Augusta, a devout German Catholic, eventually becomes the only living reality for Professor St. Peter:

Seasoned and sound and on the solid earth she surely was, and, for all her matter-of-factness and hard-handedness, kind and loyal. He even felt a sense of obligation toward her, instinctive, escaping definition, but real. And when you admitted that a thing was real, that was enough--now.¹⁰

8 Willa Cather gives Claude's impression of the family on p. 49: "Here there was none of the poisonous reticence he had always associated with family gatherings, nor the awkwardness of people sitting with their hands in their lap, facing each other, each one guarding his secret or his suspicion, while he hunted for a safe subject to talk about."

9 P. 16

10 P. 279.

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In Death Comes for the Archbishop Willa Cather gives more and more complicated expression to her feeling for Old World--and the old part of the New World--heritage. The novel is unfolded in "layers." The reader meets in the priests the charm of France, in Don Olivares and others the richness of Spain, in Manuel Lujon and in the Mexican women the warmth of New Spain, and in Jacinto, Eusabio, and others the ancient mysticism of the Indians. With the exception of the idealized Kit Carson and a few others, the Americans in Bishop Latour's diocese are less interesting, less imposing than characters of Old World or South-of-the-Border lineage.

Shadows on the Rock is an even more definite, and more narrowly centered, effort to heighten the values of the Old World past. In this quiet story of New France, Willa Cather places strong emphasis on the attempt to relocate an old civilization rather than gropingly to establish an entirely new mode of life. The house of Euclide Auclair is, as nearly as possible, his Ile Saint-Louis home in Paris reproduced on the rock of Quebec. Indeed, the seminary, the convents, the cathedral, the bishop's palace, the shops and streets and quais were but brave attempts of Frenchmen to recreate the age-old stability which they had known in Paris or Rouen or Saint-Malo or Dieppe. "Respectability stopped with the cobblestones,"¹¹ in Quebec at the turn of the seventeenth

¹¹ Shadows on the Rock, p. 73.

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century.

Willa Cather portrays Cecile Auclair intent on pre-serving things as they had been in Paris: the making of a salad, the mere closeting of clouts and dustcloths, the candlesticks and pewter cups and plants on the same rubbed tables and stands. The maintenance of life as it has been in the beloved past becomes for her not a means but a goal in itself:

...she really believed that everything in the house, the furniture, the china shepherd boy, the casseroles in the kitchen, knew that the herbarium had been restored to the high shelves and that the world was not going to be destroyed this winter.¹²

In clinging to the past lay security. In Willa Cather's last two significant novels, Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock, the role of Roman Catholicism is significant. Even as early as O Pioneers! Miss Cather had expressed a sympathetic attitude toward the Roman Catholic Church. Many of her "Old World" characters are Catholic, but these two novels are themselves Catholic. Death Comes for the Archbishop is Catholic in the sense that things Catholic have been developed into the main theme. It is the "vitae of two saints, a Peter and Paul of the desert, a record of their minds and hearts and souls."¹³ It is a Catholic

¹² Shadows on the Rock, p. 292.

¹³ Henry Seidel Canby, "Willa Cather," The Saturday Review, May 10, 1947, p. 23.

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"love story" which tells of "the love of two men, one for the other, of the devastating love of these two men for men, women, and children, of the all-embracing love of God for these two men and of other men, and of their love for Him."¹⁴

Shadows on the Rock is Catholic in the sense that it concentrates on a Catholic culture brought by a few Catholic-French families to Quebec, and on the fidelity and loyalty of these people to the preservation of that culture.

Willa Cather's admiration for the Rock of catholicism is akin to her love of the Rock of Acoma, the Rock of the Blue Mesa or the Enchanted Bluff, or the rock dwellings in Panther Canon. The Rock of Quebec could be for her, like the others, a symbol of the Rock of Faith, the stability of the Roman Catholic Church, something substantial and enduring and firmly anchored in the long past.¹⁵

The attachment for the richness, the values of the Old World and the land South of the Border--basically, for the ways of living with the place that a man makes with his God before he dies--is repeatedly expressed in Willa Cather's writing. Besides the examples cited here many more could be given. Another evidence, however, of Miss Cather's veneration

¹⁴ Francis Talbot, S.J., "Willa Cather Eulogizes the Archbishop," America, Sept. 24, 1927, p. 573.

¹⁵ Willa Cather was an Episcopalian. Some reviewers of Death Comes for the Archbishop said she was a Roman Catholic, even stated the novel could not have been written by a non-Catholic.

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for the past is her interest in the past glories of her own land. Miss Cather wrote no novels that can be strictly termed historical; hence, actual persons of the periods seldom appear. Nevertheless, upon occasion she does treat historical characters or groups, though few of her historical characters are of major significance.¹⁶

A slight thread of Bryanism runs through Willa Cather's writing. Bryan is the only major American political figure in her writing, but he does not appear as a character. Instead, Miss Cather presents in a favorable light the political philosophy of the Great Commoner. In O Pioneers! the Bergson brothers are Populist agitators, violent to the extent that Lou warns an Easterner, "You fellows back there must be a tame lot. If you had any nerve you'd get together and march down to Wall Street and blow it up. Dynamite it, I mean."¹⁷

Although high praise for Bryan is lacking, there is sympathy for Populism and Free Silver in Willa Cather's essay,

¹⁶ Henry Steele Commager remarks that "the sense of history was strong in Willa Cather, stronger by far than in most of those 'historical' novelists whose recreation of the past was so calculated and so artificial." The American Mind, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1950, p. 155.

¹⁷ P. 96.

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"Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,"¹⁸ and in her short stories "Two Friends"¹⁹ and "The Best Years."²⁰ Writing in a strongly autobiographical strain in "Two Friends," Willa Cather recalls listening to a political discussion which turned to Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech before the Democratic National convention in 1896--"I thought that magnificent; I thought the cornfields would show them a thing or two, back there!"²¹ A son of the family portrayed in "The Best Years" is named for William Jennings Bryan, the father's hero and the object of "profound veneration"²² by the entire family.

The Spanish explorers of the Southwest, epitomized in Coronado, are eulogized by Willa Cather in My Ántonia, The Professor's House, and "The Enchanted Bluff." Some Nebraskans in Willa Cather's youth argued that Coronado's men had penetrated as far as the valley of the Republican River. Jim Burden in My Ántonia tells the "hired girls" about the Spaniards' exploits and of their search for the Seven Golden

18 Nation, Vol. 117, Sept. 5, 1923, p. 236-238. Republished in These United States, 2nd series, Ernest Gruening ed., New York, 1924, p. 141-154.

19 First published in Woman's Home Companion, Vol. 59, July, 1932, p. 7-9. Included in Obscure Destinies.

20 Published in The Old Beauty and Others, New York, Knopf, 1948.

21 Obscure Destinies, p. 185.

22 The Old Beauty and Others, p. 100.

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Cities: he tells of a farmer in a northern Nebraska county finding a silver stirrup and a sword bearing a Spanish inscription and an abbreviation for the city of Cordova. The boy's story is told and received with glowing admiration. E.K. Brown calls this story of Coronado the "first link in the long chain that was to bind Willa Cather to the Southwestern country and the Spanish explorers and missionaries."²³ Just as Jim concludes his story of Coronado the setting sun is described in one of the most striking of Willa Cather's descriptions:

Presently we saw a curious thing; There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disk rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk, the handles, the tongue, the share--black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.²⁴

The heroic quality of the symbol matches the heroic stature of Coronado and his men--and the heroic past and present, for those who have a capacity for them.

²³ Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, completed by Leon Edel, New York, Knopf, 1953, p. 41.

²⁴ My Antonia, p. 245.

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Professor Godfrey St. Peter, in The Professor's House, had for years devoted his energies to the writing of a many-volumed, definitive history of Spanish exploration, Spanish Adventurers in North America. The completion of his work brings him a handsome stipend, a new house, material comforts. But he suffers losses as well: estrangements in his family, but more than that the loss of intimate interest in the heroic figures of Coronado and the soldiers and priests who won a great territory. The typical Catheresque investiture of the impact of the past on the present is strikingly shown in The Professor's House. And in this house the past is dear to the main character because he has found there the compelling story of Coronado and the other adventurers: he has found substance in the glorification of his country's past; he has lost security in being severed from the past. The romance of history had supplied the heroism the professor could not find in his own world.

Fifteen years before the novel opens, Professor St. Peter had told himself, "I will do this dazzling, this beautiful, this utterly impossible thing!"²⁵ At the end of the story he feels empty-handed with his goal attained and the struggle completed.

²⁵ The Professor's House, p. 18.

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The Professor's House provides the most extended example of Willa Cather's glorification of the past of her own country, but her first mention of the Coronado legend has occurred in the short story "The Enchanted Bluff." In this case some boys camping overnight on a sandbar in the Republican River recall the story as they swap tales around the campfire. Here as later the tone is admiring, but the treatment is brief.

Archbishop Jean Marie Latour and Father Joseph Vaillant are, of course, fictional characters. But the story of Death Comes for the Archbishop and the two principal characterizations are based upon real men: Archbishop Jean Lamy, first bishop of Santa Fe, and Father Joseph P. Machebeuf, first bishop of Denver.²⁶ Although strong parallels are discernible between reality and fiction in Death Comes for the Archbishop, one feels that the author is eulogizing the two principal figures less than the religious ideals which could bring strong-willed men to a harsh and barren land in the service of God. Willa Cather is here taking note of a laudable part of the history of her own land.

In a letter to the editor of The Commonweal, she told of her writing Death Comes for the Archbishop:

²⁶ In a letter to the editor of The Commonweal, [Vol. 7, Nov. 23, 1927, p. 713-14] Willa Cather revealed how she came to write Death Comes for the Archbishop. Her reading of The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf by the Rev. William J. Howlett [Pueblo, Colorado, 1908], was crucial in her preparation for writing the novel.

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As a writer I had the satisfaction of working in a special genre which I had long wished to try. As a human being, I had the pleasure of paying a debt of gratitude to the valiant men whose life and work had given me so many hours of pleasant reflection in far-away places where certain unavoidable accidents and physical discomforts gave me a feeling of close kinship with them.²⁷

Two actual personages appear in the story of the two priests. The first is Charles Bent, first civil governor of New Mexico and eldest son of the famous Silas Bent; the second is Kit Carson, renowned scout and soldier. Bent is mentioned only lightly, but Willa Cather shows Carson as an imposing and admirable figure. "Christobal," as Carson was called in the Southwest, generously offers his home as a refuge to the wife of the scoundrel Buck Sales. Carson becomes a well-loved friend of Bishop Latour, who is grieved at the scout's part in subduing the Navajos, but he muses that "Carson was a soldier under orders, and he did a soldier's brutal work."²⁸

Shadows on the Rock is Willa Cather's closest approach to the conventional historical novel. But even in this work, historical personages do not take leading roles, and Miss Cather manipulates actual relationships and personalities rather freely. Louis de Buade, Comte de Frontenac, Bishop François de Laval, and his successor, Bishop Jean

²⁷ Quoted in Willa Cather on Writing, New York, Knopf, 1949, p. 11-12.

²⁸ Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 341.

Baptiste Saint-Vallier, are all important names in the early history of Quebec and all are characters of some importance in the novel, although Miss Cather's characterizations of them are deliberately altered. Similarly, the setting of the novel is historically more accurate than in Miss Cather's other works. She prepared carefully and was able to recreate seventeenth-century Quebec by paring away the vestiges of the modern city which she came to know so well.

Willa Cather depended heavily upon Francis Parkman's Count Frontenac and New France Under Louis XIV, the Jesuit Relations, upon Canadian scholars, and upon her own acquaintance with the old city on the Rock. Miss Cather makes admirable characters of both Frontenac and Bishop Laval; she portrays them as aristocratic, proud, and sometimes difficult, but each in his own way working hard and faithfully in his high duty and calling. Both men are true to ideals; both have the qualities of true pioneers who can dream new empires into existence and who refuse to compromise a principle. The Quebec Willa Cather knew still bore the strong impression of Frontenac and Laval; in fact, she adds a rueful footnote in Shadows on the Rock²⁹ about the modern alterations on the little Lower Town church of Notre Dame de la Victoire.

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In Quebec Willa Cather found something similar to what she had discovered in the Southwest. Here was a lengthened local past. Here were past glories to recall. The trouble with a new country was its lack of a past; too much newness was rawness. One of Willa Cather's most delightful essays is that entitled "148 Charles Street."³⁰ There one gets a clear exposition of Miss Cather's attachment to the past, and the emphasis lies in her extreme liking for Mrs. James T. Fields, the aged widow of the famous nineteenth-century Boston publisher, and for the vicarious acquaintance of the literary greats of Boston and England which she made through the old lady. In the early months of 1908 Willa Cather was in Boston on a McClure's assignment, readying for publication the manuscript of Mary Baker Eddy: The Story of Her Life and the History of Christian Science by Georgine Milmine.³¹

Annie Adams as a girl of nineteen had married James T. Fields, a widower in middle age. Naturally, she survived

³⁰ First published in Not Under Forty, New York, Knopf, 1936, p. 52-75. Not Under Forty was renamed Literary Encounters in the Library Edition, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1938. References are to the later edition.

³¹ The biography had begun to appear serially in McClure's Magazine in January, 1907. Readers detected so many inaccuracies that McClure staffers had to undertake verification and authentication of the manuscript, always working to meet the deadline for the coming installment. The major responsibility for the heavy task fell to Willa Cather. The last of fourteen installments appeared in June, 1908.

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her husband by many years,³² and to Willa Cather she became a link with the past. The Fields home had been something of a gathering place for the great and near great of American and English letters. In the Fields drawing room, and in the company of her new friend, Sarah Orne Jewett, Miss Cather listened to Annie Fields recall conversations and anecdotes of such guests as Longfellow, Emerson, Hawthorne, Whittier, and Lowell. Here Harriet Beecher Stowe and Thomas Bailey Aldrich had visited. In the house Dickens had been a guest and Thackeray had written a part of Henry Esmond. Here Matthew Arnold had read aloud "The Scholar Gypsy" and "Tristan and Iseult." Edwin Booth and Joseph Jefferson and Madame Helena Modjeska³³ and others of the stage had shared Mrs. Fields' hospitality. As Miss Cather remarks in the essay, this house had "extended its hospitality to the aristocracy of letters and art,"³⁴ and for her this house became a shrine:

...in Mrs. Fields' house one came to believe that they had been very living people--to feel that they had not been long absent from the rooms so full of their thoughts, of their letters, their talk, their remembrances sent at Christmas to the hostess, or brought to her from foreign lands. Even in the garden flourished guelder roses which some of these

32 Mrs. Fields died in February, 1915.

33 Madame Modjeska is a minor character in Willa Cather's short novel, My Mortal Enemy.

34 Literary Encounters, p. 248.

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bearers of school-book names brought in from Cambridge or Concord and set out there. At 148 Charles Street an American of the Apache period and territory could come to inherit a Colonial past.³⁵

In "148 Charles Street" Willa Cather recalls fondly and happily the bright days when she had almost known the shades of Emerson and Thackeray and where she had been introduced to the measures of Dr. Donne. In "148 Charles Street" Miss Cather pays her homage to the glory of the literary past of her own language.

Willa Cather regarded with great fondness the past of her own country. Like Thea Kronborg, she found a lengthened past in the Southwest. She "discovered" the lands of the Cliff-Dwellers in 1912 while visiting her brother Douglas, a railroader in Winslow, Arizona. The historical fact of the Cliff-Dwellers plus the compelling fascination of remains of houses, utensils, weapons--even mummies--never lost their charm for Willa Cather. She returned again and again, really and fictionally, to the land of "The Ancient People."³⁶

The spiritual and physical rejuvenation which Thea Kronborg drew from her holiday in Panther Canon³⁷ is of paramount importance in the development of the narrative. Here amid the silent eloquence of the past Thea "finds" herself;

³⁵ Literary Encounters, p. 248-249.

³⁶ Title of Part IV of The Song of the Lark.

³⁷ Actually, Walnut Canon in Arizona.

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in Panther Canon she is able to think and plan her career and to reach the decision which led to her subsequent triumphs in Wagnerian opera.

She acknowledged her debt to the past when Fred Ottenburg asked her,

'You get effects--and not only with your voice. You're as much at home on the stage as you were down in Panther Canon. Didn't you get some of your ideas down there?'

She nodded. 'Oh, yes! Out of the rocks, out of the dead people....I don't know if I'd ever have got anywhere without Panther Canon.'³⁸

Ray Kennedy, Thea Kronborg's first "patron," had also expressed Willa Cather's admiration for the extended past and the Cliff-Dwellers of Canon de Chelly. Kennedy felt he had learned more history from the Ancient People than from all the books he had read:

You begin to feel what the human race had been up against from the beginning. There's something mighty elevating about those old habitations. You feel like it's up to you to do your best, on account of those fellows having it so hard. You feel like you owed them something.³⁹

Willa Cather came back to the Cliff-Dweller country in The Professor's House. Tom Outland's story is the account of his finding--and losing--many important relics of the Cliff-Dwellers on the Blue Mesa in New Mexico. The days in Panther Canon had been crucial ones for Thea Kronborg;

38 Song of the Lark, p. 554.

39 Ibid., p. 149.

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finding the remains atop the Blue Mesa was, similarly, the crucial episode in Tom Outland's life. Willa Cather has this sensitive, intelligent boy discover a deepened past in his own land, and Outland quickly develops a reverence for and pride in the ancient culture he finds. For he has found a proof that the Blue Mesa is one of the sacred sites where "humanity has made that hardest of all starts, and lifted itself out of mere brutality....with no incentive but some natural yearning for order and security. They built themselves into this mesa and humanized it."⁴⁰

Near the end of the Outland diary, Willa Cather expresses the youth's feeling this way:

For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion. I had read of filial piety in the Latin poets, and I knew that was what I felt for this place.⁴¹

Willa Cather again expresses her interest in the ancient Cliff-Dwellers in her superb work, Death Comes for the Archbishop, although in this novel she lays less stress on the real and symbolic meanings of the ancient civilization of the Southwest. By 1927, Miss Cather felt that the essential story of that vast territory "was neither that of its ancient civilization nor that of the Spanish explorers and martyrs: it was that of the French missionaries in the nineteenth

⁴⁰ The Professor's House, p. 219.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 249.

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century."⁴² Nevertheless, one of the excellent bits of history and legendry in Death Comes for the Archbishop is the tale of the Acoma Indians and their civilization atop the Enchanted Mesa, a great table of granite set down in an empty plain.

In this brief bit of narrative the author reveals more interest in than admiration for the ancient culture still persisting in the nineteenth century. The Archbishop atop the mesa at night feels that he is "in the stone age, a prey to homesickness for his own kind, his own epoch, for European man and his glorious history of desire and dreams. Through all the centuries that his own part of the world had been changing like the sky at daybreak, this people had been fixed, increasing neither in numbers nor desires, rook turtles on their rock."⁴³

The lack of obvious admiration is a departure from the attitude demonstrated in The Song of the Lark and The Professor's House, but, then, the situation is somewhat different. In the earlier novels Miss Cather was treating an ancient civilization long extinct. In Death Comes for the Archbishop she was concerned with an ancient culture persisting unchanged almost to her own era. There is open praise

⁴² Brown, 251.

⁴³ Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 118.

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for the departed dwellers of Panther Canon and the Blue Mesa; there is simply interest in the Acoma Indians of the Enchanted Mesa.

In "The Enchanted Bluff," a short story published in Harper's Monthly Magazine in 1909,⁴⁴ Willa Cather first treated the Cliff-Dwellers of the Southwest. This story, written three years before she actually visited the mesa country, is liberal in its praise of the tribe of peaceful weavers and potters who had lived atop the bluff. "The Enchanted Bluff" is in several ways a promise of the Tom Outland saga in The Professor's House.

The recurring references to Cliff-Dweller ruins and relics in the Southwest constitute the core of Willa Cather's veneration of the past. E.K. Brown writes that in the Cliff-Dweller villages "Willa Cather found something that was not only extremely simple and extremely beautiful, but extremely old. The discovery was a lengthening of one's past as an American, especially if one were a Western American, an enlarging of one's frame of reference."⁴⁵

But Willa Cather's interest in the past was not limited to the cultures of the Old World and to the ancient civilizations of her own land. She exhibited as well, a

⁴⁴ Vol. 118, Apr., 1909, p. 774-781.

⁴⁵ Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, p. 141.

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fondness for the classical age.

Miss Cather's early education was irregular; she attended school only after the Cather family moved from the farm to Red Cloud, Nebraska, in 1884. But her grandmothers had taught her to read, and as a high school girl she was introduced to the classics by William Ducker, a Red Cloud storekeeper with little formal education but a consuming interest in Greek and Latin literature. Willa Cather always kept her love for classical literature, and she wove her taste for the classical age into the very fabric of some of her novels.

She enrolled at the University of Nebraska preparatory school in 1890, matriculated as a college freshman the following year, and received her A.B. degree in 1895.⁴⁶ She took the Classical Course in the Academic College, and the records of the University, supplemented by the university catalogues of the period, reveal that she read extensively in Greek, Latin, and French, and to a lesser degree in German.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Miss Cather was awarded an honorary degree, Litt. D., in 1917. She later received honorary degrees from Michigan, Columbia, Yale, New York, Creighton, Princeton, and California universities, and from Smith College.

⁴⁷ E.K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, p. 52.

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On the title page of My Antonia Willa Cather inscribed the words from Virgil, "Optima dies...prima fugit."⁴⁸ Much of the digressive section of the novel dealing with Jim Burden's student days at the University of Nebraska is bathed in an aura of Virgilian devotion. The passage is clearly autobiographical in describing Willa Cather's college days, her instructors, and her room decorated with a picture of the Tragic Theater at Pompeii and a large map of ancient Rome. In this section we read of Burden's (Willa Cather's) introduction to the world of ideas. Here we learn of his finding "Dante's veneration for Virgil,"⁴⁹ and here the Georgics are described as the perfect utterance "where pen was fitted to the matter as the plough is to the furrow."⁵⁰ In this section of the novel--actually, a lengthy interruption in the progress of the principal narrative--we read of the late-at-night talks with Gaston Cleric, the young instructor in Latin who "could bring the drama of antique life before one out of the shadows--white figures against blue backgrounds."⁵¹ Jim Burden continues, "I shall never forget his face as it looked one night when he told me about the solitary day he spent

48 "Best days are first to flee."

49 My Antonia, p. 261.

50 Ibid., p. 264.

51 Ibid., p. 261.

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among the sea temples at Paestum."⁵²

There is a tone of near reverence in Jim Burden's recollection of days and nights spent at his green-topped study table, consuming the lines of the Georgics. There is also the remembrance of how his mind arranged in juxtaposition to the classical world the "places and people of my own infinitesimal past."⁵³ And one cannot miss the implication in this juxtaposition of pasts when from Jim's own memory the simple, natural figures emerge foremost--the farm hands Jake and Otto, and Russian Peter.

Tom Outland is one of Willa Cather's most engaging characters. Although he is the pivotal character of The Professor's House, Outland has been dead several years when the story opens, and the reader knows him only through St. Peter's recollections and through the long mid-section of the novel, purportedly a transcript of the young man's diary.

Outland came, unannounced and unknown, to Professor St. Peter, seeking the older man's help in gaining admission to the university. Though the boy had had no formal education, he had had the tutorial help of a French priest in New Mexico and had read Caesar and Virgil. The professor, recalling his first meeting with Outland, remembers how the boy

⁵² My Antonia, p. 261.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 262.

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recited from memory more than fifty lines of the Aeneid even before Godfrey St. Peter asked his name.⁵⁴ The professor's--and the reader's--introduction to Tom Outland in the role of an unschooled Latin scholar strikes the keynote for the characterization of this young inventor--self-reliant discoverer and venerator of the Blue Mesa remains.

Lake in the novel when Godfrey St. Peter is at work annotating Tom Outland's diary, he ruminates on the effect the young man had exercised in his [St. Peter's] life:

The Kansas boy who had come back to St. Peter this summer was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water He seemed to be at the root of all matter; Desire under all desires; Truth under all truths.⁵⁵

E.K. Brown noted Willa Cather's predilection for the classics and commented: "What she desired from the classics was the experience of great literature and the knowledge of great civilization."⁵⁶ Miss Cather seems to substantiate Brown's statement in her novel Shadows on the Rock, for much of this work is laced with Virgilian strands. H.C. Lipscomb has written on the Virgilian quality of this story of early

⁵⁴ The Professor's House, p. 106-109.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 262-263.

⁵⁶ Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, p. 52.

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eighteenth-century Quebec.⁵⁷ Shadows on the Rock is the narrative of the transplanting and maintenance of the rich culture of France in a harsh and lonely New World setting.

Willa Cather in narrating her story praises the efforts of the French settlers in establishing their familiar way of life. She writes: "Inferretque deos Latio. When an adventurer carries his gods with him into a remote and savage country, the colony he founds will, from the beginning, have graces, traditions, riches of the spirit and mind."⁵⁸ The Latin phrase and the thought are from the opening lines of the Aeneid about the safe transporting of the gods to Latium.

Father Hector Saint-Cyr, facing the terrors of a blizzard in the Canadian wilderness is observed, apparently praying, by his woodsman-companion Antoine Frichette, though the latter can distinguish no saints' names nor Ave Marias. When questioned about this seemingly unprayerlike devotion, the priest replies that he is saying not a prayer but a very long Latin poem, one he learned in school: "If I am uncomfortable it diverts my mind, and I remember my old school and

⁵⁷ "Virgil's Shadow on the Rock," Classical Journal, Vol. 25, Jan., 1940, p. 231-233. Lipscomb says that Willa Cather's Canadian Frenchmen were rich in graces and traditions, in mind and spirit. He writes: "Even richer will be the colony's intellectual and spiritual traditions if the adventurer brings with him Virgil's philosophy of life as well as his religious outlook, and this Euclide Auclair did." --p. 232.

⁵⁸ Shadows on the Rock, p. 114.

my comrades."⁵⁹

The Aeneid is referred to again when the apothecary, Euclide Auclair, addresses his twelve-year-old daughter Cecile on what is clearly a familiar subject to them: "You remember when Queen Dido offers Aeneas hospitality, she says, 'Having known misery, I have learned to pity the miserable.'"⁶⁰ Leaving the death chamber of his great patron, Count Frontenac, Monsieur Auclair again recalls lines from the Aeneid, bitterly remembering that "the Latin poets insisted that thrice and four times blessed were those to whom it befell to die in the land of their fathers."⁶¹ This, of course, is Miss Cather's recollection of Aeneas' cry:

O thrice and four times blest
Who won to die beneath Troy's lofty towers
Under their kinsmen's eyes.⁶²

Willa Cather's knowledge of and fondness for the classical past was by no means a dominant passion. Rather it was a component and contributory aspect of her total sense of

⁵⁹ Shadows on the Rock, p. 167.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 191. Cf. The Aeneid, I, 631-632, Non ignara mali miseris succurrere disco.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 305.

⁶² The Aeneid, I, 91-93, James Rhoades, tr., London, 1907, p. 4.

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values as it exhibited itself in her veneration for the past.⁶³

Evidences of this veneration in Miss Cather's works are many indeed. The nearly constant preoccupation with the past compels the attention of even a cursory reader of her novels, stories, and essays. This chapter has singled out recurrent manifestations of such a veneration for and preoccupation with the past. Willa Cather's recognition of values in the rich past to which the immigrant pioneers could look back, her tributes to past glories of her own nation and race, her interest in the past of her own land, her fondness for the classics--all testify to the great value she attached to the "precious, the incommunicable past."

⁶³ Further evidences of Willa Cather's admiration of the classical past are to be found in some of her verse, notably in these poems: "Antinous," "Winter at Delphi," "Paradox," "The Palatine," and "A Likeness."

CHAPTER III

THE SIMPLEST SPIRIT IN HUMAN KIND

The impulse to value a simple pattern of living more highly than a complex mode of life is a dominant quality in the writing of Willa Cather. Propelled by this impulse, Miss Cather looks to a particular way of life or to a different social level as more "natural" and hence better than her own; she often finds the most desirable attributes among the simple, natural folk of her own era.

In "The Room Beyond," his fine preface to Willa Cather On Writing, Stephen Tennant discerningly characterizes Miss Cather's attitude: "She is essentially...a eulogist of the simplest spirit in human kind."¹ Here, Tennant has captured the essence of Willa Cather's sense of values. Her work is in part a laudation of persons and manners she had known in her youth and which she saw disappearing from the scenes of her maturity. Her regret for the now-vanished security which she had found among the immigrant pioneers of the prairie, in some self-reliant figures on the Nebraska farms, in Red Cloud, and in Lincoln, and among the servants, hired hands, laborers, Mexicans, Indians, and others is largely an intense nostalgia.

¹ New York, Knopf, 1949, p. xiii. Stephen Tennant, an English artist and writer, enjoyed Willa Cather's friendship in her last years.

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Miss Cather was animated by her regret for lost values, for a world lost in her own lifetime--as she put it, a world which "broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts."

So in her writing there is a strong regard for the "simplest spirit in human kind" blended with the quiet elegiac tone of regret for departed friends. Miss Cather evokes from her own recent past, as well as from the lengthened past, commanding figures who are large in indomitable spirit if small by the materialistic dicta of her own thin present.

Willa Cather was especially artful in presenting simple, intrinsically warmhearted characters. The young men of Black Hawk,² sons of convention, cannot compare with the Bohemian and Scandinavian hired girls. The country girls in town were considered a menace to the social order; nevertheless, these girls, more than the townspeople, knew the meaning of family love and family loyalty. They had respect more for genuine human relationships than for respectability. Town girls "stayed inside in winter because of the cold, and in summer because of the heat. When one danced with them their bodies never moved inside their clothes; their muscles seemed to ask but one thing--not to be disturbed."³ The hired girls present an entirely different picture. They

2 In My Ántonia.

3 Ibid., p. 199.

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danced without exertion; their freshly ironed clothes smelled of rosemary leaves--"to dance 'Home Sweet Home' with Lena Lingard was like coming in with the tide."⁴

To present effectively the simplest spirit in human kind Miss Cather usually contrasts her simple characters with sophisticated types, just as she did the hired girls in My Antonia. In some instances this is exemplified by national or racial groups; occasionally as in O Pioneers! and One of Ours it occurs within a single family; frequently it is displayed by family groups.

A piquant scene in The Song of the Lark will serve as Miss Cather's implied praise of simplicity of spirit within national groups. Thea Kronborg, home on vacation from her musical studies, attends a dance in the Mexican quarter of Moonstone. During a respite from the dancing the Mexicans suggest a "serenata," and Thea is asked to sing. It is significant that Willa Cather has this girl, who is to become the Wagnerian star of her time, give her first real performance before an audience of Mexican laborers and their families. For the first time Thea knew listeners who could respond generously to her art.

⁴ My Antonia, p. 222.

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They turned themselves and all they had over to her....Their faces confronted her--open, eager, unprotected. She felt as if all these warm-blooded people debouched into her.⁵

One of the most interesting family groups in Willa Cather's fiction is the Erlich family⁶ of Lincoln, Nebraska. For the sensitive college boy, Claude Wheeler, the Erlich home becomes a refuge where he can find the cordiality, the agreeable manners, and the largeness of mind which are lacking in his own family. Mrs. Erlich, mother of a large family of boys, was one who was "always watching to see things turn out wonderfully well; always looking for some good German fairy in the cupboard or the cake-box, or in the steaming vapor of wash day."⁷

At the Erlich's Claude first met cookery made almost holy by tradition, cookies and cakes which practically called for memories and the fragrance of friendship as ingredients. The Erlich house itself seemed friendly to Claude. The many books, the bust of Byron, the engraving of Napoleon, the piano--much used--the rack of pipes on a table conspired to show the country boy a way of life he had only sensed existed elsewhere. Erlich conversations went racing from one exciting thought to another; arguments seemed like talk in a play

5 The Song of the Lark, p. 292.

6 In One of Ours.

7 Ibid., p. 48.

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without the poisonous reticence Claude associated with family gatherings at home. In this house he found a pleasure in language and a pride in rich vocabularies. Claude even found himself using new words and airing his opinions:

He had grown up with the conviction that it was beneath his dignity to explain himself....It wasn't American to explain yourself; you didn't have to! On the farm you said you would or you wouldn't; that Roosevelt was all right or that he was crazy. You weren't supposed to say more Since you never said anything, you didn't form the habit of thinking.⁸

The Erlichs, Claude discovered, merely knew how to live.

They showed him the art of living rather than the business of living.

Close neighbors and close friends of Claude and Enid Wheeler are the Leonard Dawsons. Willa Cather shows Enid in sharp contrast to the natural, earthy goodness of Susie Dawson. Leonard feels sorry for Claude whose wife seems bent on circumventing the natural, practicing prohibition against tobacco, liquor, or marital relations. She even keeps the lone rooster on the place isolated from the hens. This is beyond Leonard's comprehension: "'I never heard of such damned nonsense,' he blustered. 'I raise chickens on a natural basis, or I don't raise 'em at all.'"⁹

⁸ One of Ours, p. 53.

⁹ Ibid., p. 230.

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Also typical of Miss Cather's use of a family group are the Harlings. This Norwegian family, recently arrived in Black Hawk from a farm, maintains its place in town as a miniature farm with garden, barn, grazing lot, orchard, and even a windmill. Mrs. Harling, who "could not be negative or perfunctory about anything,"¹⁰ is charged with energy, quick to laugh or scold, vibrant with the exuberance of simple but rich living. She could, for example, make routine tasks exciting: "Wash day was interesting, never dreary....Preserving time was a prolonged festival, and house-cleaning was like a revolution."¹¹

In the Harling household one finds the things which Miss Cather admires: family unity and pride, a love of music, an appreciation for good food and drink, a lack of affectation, rich, stimulating conversation, and interest in and compassion for friends and neighbors. The Harling children are close friends of Jim Burden, and their house becomes for him almost a second home. The Harlings, with their warmth and easy gentility, stand out in bold contrast to the Cutters or even to the Burdens with their occasional narrowness.

10 My Antonia, p. 148.

11 Ibid.

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Willa Cather presents the Henry Nathanmeyers of Chicago as "the finest kind of Jews."¹² Thea Kronborg gets her first chance to sing professionally when she is engaged to sing for one of the Nathanmeyers' "musical evenings." Thinking of the Jewish family, Fred Ottenburg remarks, "We may have a musical public in this country someday, but as yet there are only the Germans and the Jews."¹³ A rare, rather unpleasant note of condescension creeps into this presentation; ultimately, however, Miss Cather portrays the wealthy Chicago banker and his wife as sensitive persons who appreciated musical talent, who counted their wealth largely in terms of the aesthetic pleasure they received from their Corots and Manets, and who accepted a gifted and naive girl with splendid grace. Mr. and Mrs. Nathanmeyer are typical of a number of Willa Cather characters who remain uncorrupted by wealth.¹⁴

Don Antonio Olivares and his wife, Dona Isabella, afford the priests of Death Comes for the Archbishop an oasis of Old World culture values in their home in Santa Fe:

¹² The Song of the Lark, p. 343.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Some others: Godfrey St. Peter of The Professor's House; Cressida Garnet of "The Diamond Mine"; Gabrielle Longstreet of "The Old Beauty."

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Certainly it was a great piece of luck for Father Latour and Father Vaillant, who lived so much among peons and Indians and rough frontiersmen, to be able to converse in their own tongue now and then with a cultivated woman; to sit by that hospitable fireside, in rooms enriched by old mirrors and engravings and upholstered chairs, where the windows had clean curtains, and the sideboard and cupboards were stacked with plate and Belgian glass. It was refreshing to spend an evening with a couple who were interested in what was going on in the outside world, to eat a good dinner, and drink good wine, and listen to music.¹⁵

Olivares cherished his friends and had a deep affection for his native town. One cannot miss the implied contrast between the Olivareses and most of the Americans of Santa Fe.

In "Old Mrs. Harris,"¹⁶ Willa Cather presents two families, the Rosens and the Templetons. Mr. Rosen is introduced, rather ironically, as "the only unsuccessful member of a large, rich Jewish family."¹⁷ He is content to keep a small store in a small community, and, more alarming, Mr. Rosen likes good paintings and engravings, has even done some water-colors himself, and is given to reflective thinking and philosophy. Mrs. Rosen manages to be the gracious mistress of any situation because she is "foreign," and Grandmother Harris "perfectly understood that their neighbor had a superior cultivation which made everything she did an exercise.

¹⁵ Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 205.

¹⁶ First published in Obscure Destinies, 1932.

¹⁷ Obscure Destinies, p. 88.

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of skill."¹⁸

The Templetons, as much as the Rosens, stood out from the flatness of the small Colorado town. But where the Rosens are "foreign," the Templetons are "southern." The gentility of the highest traditions of Willa Cather's Old South is in the Templeton clan:

There was something easy, cordial and carefree in the parlor that never smelled of being shut up, and the ugly furniture looked hospitable. One felt a pleasantness in the human relationships....There were houses that were kept better, certainly, but the housekeepers had no charm, no gentleness of manners, were like hard little machines, most of them; and some were grasping and narrow. The Templetons were not selfish or scheming.¹⁹

More family groups might be cited to illustrate this one Cather device for presenting the simplest spirit in human kind, which the author valued so highly. There are, for example, the Farmers and the Jouberts of One of Ours, the Kohlers and the Harsanyis of The Song of the Lark, Jacob and Lucy Gayheart, and the Auclairs of Shadows on the Rock. But there are more evidences of Willa Cather's values to consider, among them respect for the dignity of the individual.

In her story, "The Old Beauty," published posthumously, Miss Cather wrote of the code by which worthwhile persons lived, eulogizing "a society whose manners, dress, conventions

¹⁸ Obscure Destinies, p. 114.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 94-95.

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loyalties, codes of honor, were different from anything existing in the world today."²⁰ Actually Miss Cather had always been writing of such a society. Old Rosicky "had a special gift for loving people, something that was like an ear for music or an eye for color."²¹ She had always believed that there are certain unalterable realities--ideas, memories, faith--which anchor individuals against the winds and waves and tides and currents of false passion, shallow pride, materialism, and apostasy.

Willa Cather was alive to the Lena Lingards, could see "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."²² She felt the superiority of "a country Christmas without any help from town"²³ over a standardized, factory-made holiday. She injects into The Professor's House a persuasive essay on her belief in the importance of individual worth and dignity, using Godfrey St. Peter as spokesman:

20 The Old Beauty and Others, New York, Knopf, 1948, p. 5.

21 Obscure Destinies, p. 58.

22 My Antonia, p. 270.

23 Ibid., p. 81.

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...the fact is, the human mind, the human individual mind, has always been made more interesting by dwelling on the old riddles, even if it makes nothing of them. Science hasn't given us any new amazements except of the superficial kind we get from witnessing dexterity and sleight-of-hand. It hasn't given us any richer pleasures, as the Renaissance did, nor any new sins--not one! Indeed it takes our old ones away I don't think you help people by making their conduct of no importance--you impoverish them....And that's 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.

Moses learned the importance of that in the Egyptian court, and when he wanted to make a population of slaves into an independent people in the shortest time possible, he invented elaborate ceremonials to give them a feeling of dignity and purpose.²⁴

In her quiet²⁵ novel, Shadows on the Rock, Willa Cather wrote again of the importance of self-reliant dignity and stature in the individual. She had always admired the French for their great cultivation, and M. Auclair speaks the writer's mind when he owns that the French do their everyday tasks in the best way and that they "are called the most civilized people in Europe."²⁶ Mme. Auclair in her last illness wished most to leave to Cecile "the sense of our way,"

²⁴ The Professor's House, p. 62-63.

²⁵ Several critics have referred to Shadows on the Rock as a "quiet" novel because they consider it a fine example of Miss Cather's unobtrusive art: a kind of tour de force demonstrating the sustained magic of mood, the perfect fitting of style to content, the choice of incident proper to mood, and the carrying strength of a quiet voice.

²⁶ Shadows on the Rock, p. 28.

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a feeling for the proprieties and "all the little shades of feelings which make the common fine."²⁷ Cecile is faithful both to tradition and her mother's wish; she knew that

These coppers, big and little, the brooms and clouts and brushes, were tools; and with them one made, not shoes or cabinetwork, but life itself. One made a climate within a climate; one made the days--the complexion, the special flavor, the special happiness of each day as it passed; one made life.²⁸

In the presentation of national groups, such as the Mexicans; in the portrayal of family groups, usually of foreign extraction; in the expression of her canons of individual dignity--Willa Cather illustrated in general terms her regard for the "simplest spirit in human kind." More particular, however, and even more intense are her examples of the person of low station and of the unsophisticated "natural" person.

In her delineation of the poor and lowly Miss Cather attests to the idea that a poor man is an uncorrupted person or that a man low in the social order is a person of simple integrity. It is a concept evidenced repeatedly in her fiction in the characters of servants and farm hands, laborers, and unfortunates. Interestingly, Miss Cather's unpolished characters are "foreign" in that they are non-American or non-white.

27 Shadows on the Rock, p. 29.

28 Ibid., p. 230.

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Servants have a considerable part to play in Willa Cather's fiction. From Marie, the French maid of Alexander's Bridge, through Nancy, Till, and Sampson, Negro slaves in Sapphira and the Slave Girl, the author presents the servant as a loyal, honest person of intrinsic dignity.

The servants of the novels constitute a considerable list, but there is a significant pattern apparent in their characterizations, from beginning to end. Ivar of O Pioneers! sets the tone for Miss Cather's servant portraiture. He is deeply religious and many think him slightly unbalanced, but to Alexandra Bergson he is deeply devoted and a source of constant help. Ivar's fellow servant, Signa, states the case succinctly, "You and I are the only ones who have weight with her. She trusts us."²⁹

My Ántonia is rich in servant characters. Jake and Otto, the Burden farm hands, are idealized because they were "faithful to us through sun and storm, had given us things that cannot be bought in any market in the world."³⁰ Ántonia and the other hired girls become the subject of Book II of the novel. Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball, Mary Dusak, and the Danish laundry girls become, indeed, a point of major emphasis in the novel. The quality of these girls of immigrant

²⁹ O Pioneers!, p. 235.

³⁰ My Ántonia, p. 144.

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families serves as Miss Cather's foil for her thrusts at the smallness of the village mind. Later, Lena Lingard becomes the focal point of Book III, a disjunctive section of the novel which threatens to take over the story. In sum, more than half the novel centers in the hired girls. This is not to say that they become dominant in the novel; they do not. But the person of low station is more extensively in evidence in My Antonia than elsewhere in Willa Cather's writing.

Miss Cather's feeling for the country girls who "hired out" in Black Hawk is again expressed in her essay, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle."³¹ Here, she writes of the cultivation of Czechs, French, Norwegians, and other nationalities who overspread the bronze prairies, recalling that near the old Cather place there lived a cousin of Camille Saint-Saëns, that on a Dakota farm Knut Hamsun worked as a hired hand. They brought with them, she says,

something that this neutral world needed even more than the immigrants needed the land.

Unfortunately, their American neighbors were seldom open-minded enough to understand the Europeans, or to profit by their older traditions....I am quite sure that Knut Hamsun might have worked for a year for any one of our Southern farmers and his employer would never have discovered that there was anything unusual about the Norwegian. A New England settler might have noticed that this choreboy had a kind of intelligence, but he would have distrusted and stonily disregarded it.³²

31 Nation, Vol. 117, Sept. 5, 1923, p. 236-238.

32 Ibid., p. 237.

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E.K. Brown in his recent book³³ refers to Old Mahailey of One of Ours as the only character in the novel who might have stepped from the pages of O Pioneers! or My Ántonia.

Mahailey³⁴ is the servant in the Wheeler household and is akin to Crazy Ivar in her mental weakness. She, like Ivar, is queer, but she has a wisdom of her own and a fierce loyalty to Claude and his mother. The closing paragraph in One of Ours is a touching passage, if a rather sentimental one.

Again, as she had done in The Song of the Lark and as she was to do later in The Professor's House, Willa Cather uses a servant, or near-servant, to conclude the story; the narrative of the principal character is concluded through the consciousness or implication of Tillie, Mahailey, and Augusta respectively.

Mahailey is a warmly drawn character. Her instincts are, in fact, higher than those of any other figure in the novel, save Claude's:

³³ Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, New York, Knopf, 1953, p. 223.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 223. Brown states that Mahailey's characterization is based on Margie Anderson, a servant in the Cather household.

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Mahailey was shrewd in her estimate of people, and Claude thought her judgment sound in a good many things. He knew she sensed all the shades of personal feeling, and accords and antipathies in the household as keenly as he did, and he would have hated to lose her good opinion.³⁵

Augusta of The Professor's House cannot be strictly termed a servant; she is primarily a dressmaker, but in one way or another she works five days a week for the St. Peter family. She is one of the most engaging of the Cather servant types and one of the most important in terms of her role in the final part of the novel. Augusta is the thoroughly good person--the sort who gives generously of herself to help her friends in illness and bereavement, who faces life with plodding certainty founded in the bedrock of Catholicism, who is abashed neither by the sudden twists and turns of day-to-day living nor the prospect of sudden eternity:

Augusta, he [Godfrey St. Peter] reflected, had always been a corrective, a remedial influence She wasn't at all afraid to say things that were heavily, drearily true, and though he used to wince under them, he hurried off with the feeling that they were good for him, that he didn't have to hear such things half often enough. Augusta was like the taste of bitter herbs; she was the bloomless side of life that he had always run away from --yet when he had to face it, he found it wasn't altogether repugnant.³⁶

Augusta does, in fact, become for Professor St. Peter a symbol of a way of life he had lost, as she becomes a means

³⁵ One of Ours, p. 28.

³⁶ The Professor's House, p. 278.

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of his facing up with fortitude to the life he had gained.

Nancy, Till, and Sampson are the principals among the group of plantation slaves depicted in Sapphira and the Slave Girl. Willa Cather's presentation of the Negroes is extremely benign and without trace of condescension. Sampson, the mill hand, is the essence of patient understanding. He is in some ways reminiscent of Twain's Nigger Jim in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Like Jim, Sampson is at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, but no character in the novel exemplifies greater intellectual honesty or spiritual dignity than Sampson. Till, the body-servant of Sapphira, is really a memorable example of justly proud dignity. Nancy, the slave girl of the title, is a character of lesser stature, but one with whom the reader is deeply sympathetic. Willa Cather points out that Nancy had "presence."³⁷

The servants depicted in the short stories are of the same cut. Roxy, a mulatto serving woman in "The Sculptor's Funeral," is presented in striking contrast to her mistress. The white woman, mother of the sculptor Harvey Merrick, is made completely unattractive with harsh, bold strokes:

³⁷ Willa Cather undoubtedly equates "presence" with qualities she herself admired: natural delicacy of feeling, instinctive dignity, an inherent sense of decorum.

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There was a kind of power about her face--a kind of brutal handsomeness, even; but it was scarred and furrowed by violence, and so colored and coarsened by fiercer passions that grief seemed never to have laid a gentle finger there....and there were deep lines across her forehead, her teeth were large and square, and set far apart--teeth that could tear.³⁸

Just after this picture of ugliness of face and soul, Miss Cather shows "Roxy with a timid bearing and an emaciated face pitifully sad and gentle."³⁹

The unnamed Savoyard chauffeur of "The Old Beauty" is shown in contrast to two contemptible American girls, "creatures" in a "dirty little car." Miss Cather describes the girls as "worth nobody's consideration"; the chauffeur is praised for having a "code,"⁴⁰ a possession important to Willa Cather. The chauffeur's actions are definitely predicated by set principles which enable him to display an innate dignity, an amazing evenness of temper, and even chivalrous behavior towards the swaggering, impertinent tourists who were the cause of a near-fatal collision.

Miss Cather knew railroading and railroads. The Red Cloud of her youth was a division point on the Burlington and Missouri Railroad, the town was served by eight passenger trains daily, and the depot restaurant served hundreds of

38 Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 272.

39 Ibid., p. 273.

40 The Old Beauty and Others, p. 68.

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travellers during meal stops. Naturally, the depot was an exciting place to Red Cloud youth. There one saw the world pass by, and occasionally opera stars, stage luminaries, lecturers, and others dropped off for one-night appearances in the Red Cloud Opera House.

Willa Cather knew many of the railroaders, and she felt much of the romance--and the danger--attendant on shuttling the trains across the great prairie with only a single-track right-of-way. The railroad is an important part of the setting of The Song of the Lark, and a minor bit of the setting in One of Ours, A Lost Lady, and Lucy Gayheart.⁴¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that Miss Cather draws some warm characterizations of railroad workers. The outstanding example, of course, is Ray Kennedy,⁴² a sort of deus ex machina enabling Thea Kronborg to begin her musical studies in Chicago. Kennedy is a simple, good-natured fellow, a man of homely sentiment. The episode describing the trip Thea and her mother made to Denver in Ray Kennedy's caboose shows

⁴¹ Trains and railroad scenes also play some part in "A Death in the Desert," "The Sculptor's Funeral," "Paul's Case," "Going Home (Burlington Route)," "A Gold Slipper," Alexander's Bridge, and My Antonia.

⁴² Mildred R. Bennett in The World of Willa Cather, New York, Dodd, Mead, 1951, p. 37, states that Kennedy was patterned after a brakeman named Tooker whom Willa Cather met while visiting her brother Douglas in the Southwest. Douglas Cather was himself working for the Southern Pacific, had earlier worked as a station agent in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

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considerable respect for the knowledge and experience required to run a freight train.

Thea Kronborg is the beneficiary of Ray Kennedy's life insurance policy when Kennedy is fatally injured in a train wreck. As he lies dying by the smashed caboose, Thea realizes the greatness of spirit behind his broad, earnest face; she knows the simple, humble, faithful something in the Ray Kennedys of her world.

Rodney Blake, Tom Outland's partner, is Ray Kennedy again with slighter treatment. Henry Atkins, an itinerant worker who teams up with Blake and Outland, is another of Willa Cather's "working stiff's" made heroic.

Already mentioned was Miss Cather's kindly admiration of the Mexicans in The Song of the Lark. Her description of Mexican farmers deserves particular notice. When Bishop Latour stops over at Agua Secreta, he is struck by the air of peace he finds among the native herdsmen and croppers:

Their manners were gentle, their voices low and agreeable....They had all they needed to make them happy. They spun and wove from the fleece of their flocks, raised their own corn and wheat and tobacco, dried their plums and apricots for winter.⁴³

Along with the servants and laborers who illustrate the superiority of the lowly in Willa Cather's writing, belongs a third group: the unfortunates.

⁴³ Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 29-30.

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Herr Wunsch, the gifted but alcoholic music teacher in The Song of the Lark, is such a character. To him are given many of the speeches which typify Willa Cather's feeling toward art and artists. Wunsch insists that for an artist there must be something inside, something the artist feels, if only vaguely, even at the age of six. "That is the beginning of all things; der Geist, die Phantasie. It must be in the baby when it makes its first cry, like der Rhythmus, or it is not to be....in der Brust, in der Brust it is, und ohne dieses giebt es keine Kunst, giebt es keine Kunst."⁴⁴ Wunsch, a gifted musician and a good teacher, cannot overcome his feeling for drink, but he is keenly perceptive and is the first to recognize Thea's "nature voice" as a beautiful instrument. To Thea he expresses the philosophy which Willa Cather held for all art--and all artists:

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. It
brought Columbus across the sea in a little boat,
und so weiter.⁴⁵

Willa Cather expresses much the same thought in "Old Mrs. Harris," when Mr. Rosen quotes Michelet to Vickie: "Le but n'est rien; le chemin, c'est tout."⁴⁶ In a Preface to

⁴⁴ The Song of the Lark, p. 98-99.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴⁶ Obscure Destinies, p. 133.

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The Song of the Lark in the 1932 edition, the author wrote that "the life of a successful artist in the full tide of achievement is not so interesting as the life of a talented young girl 'fighting her way,' as we say. Success is never so interesting as struggle."⁴⁷ To Professor Wunsch, erratic, stormy, sodden as he is, is given the opportunity to express the author's philosophy.

Sada, the old Mexican slave of an American anti-Catholic family in Santa Fe, provides one of the few instances of wanton cruelty in Willa Cather's writing. The aged woman, a devout Catholic, has for years been kept from the Church and denied the offices of a priest by her American masters. On one occasion she manages to escape in the middle of a bitterly cold night and seeks entry to the church. The doors are locked so she kneels to pray in the doorway of the sacristy. Bishop Latour, for some reason unable to sleep, lies pondering the Catholicism of the Indians and Mexicans. The Indians hang on to old ideas, "battling with evil omens and ancient shadows. The Mexicans were children who played with their religion,"⁴⁸ he muses.

When he can lie abed no longer, the Bishop rises, throws on a fur-lined cloak, and makes his way across the snow-covered garden to the sacristy. There, crouching,

⁴⁷ The Song of the Lark, p. vii.

⁴⁸ Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 245-246.

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praying, weeping bitterly is Sada. Once inside the church and warmed by Latour's cloak, she tells the Bishop of her nineteen years of captivity and slavery and deprivation of religious rites. Her faith has never waned, and as Bishop Latour recounted it, "never....had it been permitted him to behold such deep experience of the holy joy of religion as on that pale December night."⁴⁹ Perhaps the Mexicans were children who played at their religion; it remained, Miss Cather seems to say, for the lowliest of them all to recall to Bishop Latour the injunction, "Suffer little children...." The vignette of Sada is one of the most touching episodes of a tender narrative. The Sada story reminds the Bishop that "Whosoever is least among you, the same shall be first in the Kingdom of Heaven."⁵⁰

There are other "unfortunates" who illustrate Willa Cather's regard for the innate superiority of the lowly; among them are Blinker of Shadows on the Rock, and Tansy Dave and Lawndis Ringer of Sapphira and the Slave Girl. But yet another aspect of Miss Cather's feeling for the simplest spirit in human kind remains to be discussed--an aspect as evidenced in her treatment of the unsophisticated "natural" person.

⁴⁹ Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 252.

⁵⁰ Ibid., quoted p. 253.

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Willa Cather herself subscribed to the tradition "that saw nature splendid and strong in all its manifestations and man virtuous only when he accommodated himself to nature."⁵¹ Her "natural" characters, therefore, draw directly from nature virtues which raise doubts about the value of civilization. They possess an innate kindness of heart and transparent superiority; they live richly despite a lack of sophistication and complexity.

The typical "natural" person in Willa Cather's fiction is a man (or woman) of "foreign" or Indian lineage who plays a secondary role in a novel but a more important part in a short story and who contributes much to the Catheresque quality of the story. In every case this "natural" person is rich in integrity, though he may be poor in terms of worldly goods, education, and social position. He is a free spirit, singularly unfettered by the taboos of modern civilization but devoted to the mores of his own folk.

One of Willa Cather's earliest stories is "Eric Hermannson's Soul,"⁵² the story of a self-reliant young Norse of a proud line of fishermen. Eric on the Nebraska prairie

⁵¹ Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1950, p. 152.

⁵² In Early Stories of Willa Cather, selected and with a commentary by Mildred R. Bennett, New York, Dodd, Mead, 1957, p. 187-215. First published in Cosmopolitan, April, 1900.

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is "eighteen...,handsome as a young Siegfried, a giant in stature, with a skin singularly pure and delicate, like a Swede's."⁵³ Miss Cather characterizes Eric as being in love with life, and she strikes the keynote of the "natural" concept by taking nature as the norm. She asks, "Can we ever rise above nature or sink below her? Does she not always cry in brutal triumph: 'I am here still, at the bottom of things, warming the roots of life; you cannot starve me nor tame me nor thwart me; I made the world, I rule it, and I am its destiny.'"⁵⁴ This cry comes--not in so many words--from Eric himself as he saves himself in healthy paganism from the narrowness of a Free Gospeller and evangelical, prairie religion. Eric is described in "savage exultation" in his victory over unnatural, constricting religion.

Eric Hermansson was drawn in 1903; he is not unlike Pierre Charron, the "natural" person of Shadows on the Rock, which was published in 1931. Between these two figures stand many of their own kind in the pages of Willa Cather's fiction.

Old "Crazy Ivar" of O Pioneers! is just another of Willa Cather's "natural" men. Ivar had lived in a clay-bank hut on the Nebraska prairie for three years "without defiling

53 In Early Stories of Willa Cather, p. 201.

54 Ibid., p. 212.

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the face of Nature any more than a coyote." He found contentment in solitude; he disliked the litter of human society, finding the wild sod more cleanly and tidy. Ivar found that even his Bible seemed truer in seclusion from men:

If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land, the smiling sky, the curly grass in the hot sunlight, if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against the vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant.⁵⁵

Interestingly, Ivar is the one who late in the story saves Alexandra Bergson from over-exposure. Similarly, other principal characters in Willa Cather's novels are dependent on these simple, "natural" types: Thea Kronborg on Spanish Johnny, Godfrey St. Peter on Augusta, Father Latour on Jacinto, and Henry Colbert on Black Sampson.

Johnny Tellamantez, the Spanish Johnny of The Song of the Lark, is another of Willa Cather's "natural" persons:

....very handsome, slender, gold-colored, with wavy black hair, a round, smooth throat, white teeth, and burning, black eyes. His profile was strong and severe, like an Indian's.⁵⁶

Spanish Johnny typifies the characteristic of heart predominant over mind. Wild and carefree by nature, he had a love for beauty--especially beautiful music--and was among the first to recognize that Thea Kronborg held the promise of

⁵⁵ O Pioneers!, p. 33.

⁵⁶ The Song of the Lark, p. 53.

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great artistic realization. It is certainly not without significance that Willa Cather has Thea give her first genuine performance before Johnny and his friends or that the novel proper ends with a long paragraph on an aging Johnny Tellamantez' great extasi in hearing Madame Kronborg at the peak of her career:

Then he walked down Broadway with his hands in his overcoat pockets, wearing a smile which embraced all the stream of life that passed him and the lighted towers that rose in the limpid blue of the evening sky. If the singer, going home in her car, was wondering what was the good of it all, that smile, could she have seen it, would have answered her. It is the only commensurate answer.⁵⁷

Willa Cather celebrated Johnny Tellamantez again in the book of poems April Twilights:

Spanish Johnny, you!
He'd sit beside the water ditch
When all his herd was in,
And never mind a child, but sing
To his mandolin.⁵⁸

The contrast between Spanish Johnny and the people of Moonstone is inescapable. The unsophisticated, "natural" persons are depicted free of petty jealousies and neighborly grudges, free of constraint and viciousness. Even the foibles of men like Spanish Johnny are given an attractive quality in Willa Cather's fiction.

57 The Song of the Lark, p. 573.

58 April Twilights and Other Poems, New York, Knopf, p. 195.

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Ántonia Shimerda is an example of a principal character who may be classified as an unsophisticated "natural" person: "Ántonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade--that grew stronger with time,"⁵⁹ and she certainly is an enduring character, "battered but not diminished,"⁶⁰ who fulfilled her special mission of motherhood. But Ántonia is less the "natural" person than two lesser characters in the novel.

One of these is Lena Lingard. Lena was warm and friendly, unrepressed, and talented mainly in being a person of easy, gentle manner. Even as a successful modiste, she lost none of her special, natural charm; she gained none of the sophistication of modern life. The other "natural" person of My Ántonia is the blind pianist d'Arnalt, of whom the author in a strongly biographical vein says, "It was the happiest face I had seen since I left Virginia."⁶¹ Miss Cather tells the touching story of D'Arnault, who had literally groped his way to a kind of virtuosity in which he "played barbarously and wonderfully. As piano playing it was abominable, but as music it was something real, vitalized by a sense of rhythm that was stronger than his other physical

59 My Ántonia, p. 353.

60 Ibid., p. 332.

61 Ibid., p. 184.

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senses--that not only filled his dark mind, but worried his body incessantly."⁶² Willa Cather likens d'Arnault in the passion of his music to an "African god of pleasure, full of strong, savage blood."⁶³

D'Arnault does not play any integral part in the story. The entire episode is an example of Willa Cather's ever-present penchant for interlacing her novels with legend and vignette.

Probably the most sustained presentation of the simple "natural" type in Willa Cather's fiction is that of Tom Outland in The Professor's House. Outland, whom we know only indirectly, is a young man of sumptuous generosity and Emersonian self-reliance but with a simple and straightforward personality. He felt a reverence for the Blue Mesa and for the remains he found in the Cliff City, for the "beauty of pure and noble design, unspoiled by clutter or comment, undistracted by cosiness"⁶⁴ which he found there. Too, he was a mechanical genius, inventor of the Outland vacuum for aircraft engines. In addition, Outland was a personality whose "vitality is too high to be clouded, too

⁶² My Antonia, p. 189.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 191.

⁶⁴ E.K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, p. 241.

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elastic to stay down."⁶⁵

As his well chosen name suggests, the young inventor was an outlander. He was a product of nature, uncultivated and unsought, but suddenly found in the early bloom of his promised beauty. And like a full-blossomed and short-lived flower he enriched the scene and suddenly was gone.

In Death Comes for the Archbishop Willa Cather found excellent opportunity for delineating the simple, "natural" person. Three characters stand out: Kit Carson, Jacinto, and Eusabio. Of Kit Carson, Miss Cather wrote that he held "standards, loyalties, a code which is not easily put into words, but which is instantly felt when two men who live by it come together by chance."⁶⁶

Jacinto is the guide for Bishop Latour on his long trips about his sprawling diocese. Between the two men, representing different traditions, there grew a deep if unspoken respect and comradeship. The Bishop recognized that in Jacinto were qualities no language could translate but which compelled admiration:

⁶⁵ The Professor's House, p. 251.

⁶⁶ Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 86.

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Jacinto was never, by any chance, naïf; he was never taken by surprise. One felt that his training, whatever it had been, had prepared him to meet any situation which might confront him. He was as much at home in the Bishop's study as in his own pueblo.... Father Latour felt he had gone a good way toward gaining his guide's friendship, though he did not know how.⁶⁷

The Bishop realized through Jacinto that the missionaries might accomplish conversions among the Indians, but would never alienate them from their own beliefs. And the Bishop respected this faithfulness to tradition in Jacinto and his tribe. Father Latour found that one of the qualities he liked best in the Indians was their veneration for old customs. He had the same quality in him; it played a great part in his own religion.

The Navajo leader Eusabio "was respected for his intelligence and authority, and admired for his fine presence."⁶⁸ Between Father Latour and Eusabio there grew a warm and lasting friendship. Miss Cather expresses much of the noble dignity of the Indian in her description of Eusabio welcoming the Bishop as his guest:

67 Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 86.

68 Ibid., p. 256.

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At first he did not open his lips, merely stood holding Father Latour's very fine white hand in his fine dark one, and looked into his face with a message of sorrow and resignation in his deep-set, eagle eyes. A wave of feeling passed over his bronze features, as he said slowly:

"My friend has come."

That was all, but it was everything;
welcome, confidence, appreciation.⁶⁹

Traveling with Eusabio was a thrilling experience for Father Latour. With the Indian, the Bishop felt the landscape was made human. The Navajo, like Jacinto, had unfailing good manners, frequently he stopped to gather wild flowers, always he accepted nature on its own terms, and never did he permit any alteration of nature:

When he left the rock, or tree or sand-dune that had sheltered them for the night, the Navajo was careful to obliterate every trace of remnants of food, unpiled any stones he had piled together, filled up the holes he had scooped in the sand.... Just as it was the white man's way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, make it over a little (at least leave some mark or memorial of his sojourn), it was the Indian's way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water, or birds through the air.⁷⁰

One more example of the unsophisticated "natural" type in Willa Cather's writing is Pierre Charron of Shadows on the Rock.

Pierre Charron is a man whom Willa Cather characterizes in part as the sort of person one would travel far to

69 Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 256-257.

70 Ibid., p. 271.

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find. He is a French-Canadian, most at home on the swift streams or on the hunters' trails in the great forests. Vain, relentless, yet gentle and kind, Charron is idealized as a man of nature with "sparkling, hazel eyes with a kind of living flash in them, like the sunbeams on the bright rapids upon which he was so skillful."⁷¹ This coureur de bois had soldiered under Count Frontenac in the Indian campaigns and was a son of a distinguished French soldier of fortune, but, most important, he was Canadian, proudly so. He disliked the "smell of Versailles" in sophisticated Frenchmen; he rejoiced in the freedom of the woods and the camaraderie of men facing adversity:

....he had the old ideals of clan loyalty, and in friendship he never counted the cost. His goods and his life were at the disposal of the man he loved or the leader he admired.⁷²

The list of such unsophisticated "natural" types in Willa Cather's fiction is long, sufficiently long to indicate that such types are not random characterizations but recurrent expressions of what the writer found desirable in human nature. Miss Cather's frequent use of man equated with nature cannot be a matter of coincidence; rather in such characters is seen her steady concern with ultimate man, man of basic human values and ideals--"of the simplest spirit in human kind."

71 Shadows on the Rock, p. 200.

72 Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

THE UGLY CREST OF MATERIALISM

In the practice of her art Willa Cather did not become a part of any school or join in any literary movements. She looked upon economics, sociology, and allied fields as strangers to art and did not believe that art should or could become a means to a political or sociological end.¹ Nevertheless, it would be foolish to think that Willa Cather was unperceptive to the conditions of her time and place or that she was completely unaffected by the pressures of contemporary living.

Willa Cather had come to the Nebraska prairie as a child of nine. In her early years there she witnessed the period of heroic struggle by immigrant pioneers. Gradually, she saw the face of the country change; she saw the unbroken raw prairie dotted with sod farm houses and dugouts; she witnessed the railroad lines fanning across the state, with towns mushrooming alongside the right of way; she saw the rapid industrial development of the latter eighties. Finally,

1 In her essay on "Escapism" Miss Cather wrote that "economics and art are strangers"; that "[artists] were valuable, like powerful stimulants, only when they were left out of the social and industrial routine which goes on everyday all over the world. Industrial life has to work out its own problems."--Willa Cather On Writing, New York, Knopf, 1949, p. 18-29.

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during her university years, Willa Cather saw the lean years of depression and crop failures which set in in 1893. She saw many homesteaders surrender in the struggle to tame the land, she knew about bank failures, and she realized that money lenders were driving hard bargains with men desperate with grief. The population of Nebraska dwindled, farm holdings were consolidated, a shift to urban living was beginning. Above all, Willa Cather discerned in the last years of the century--she had already gone East--what she termed "the ugly crest of materialism."²

And for Willa Cather the towns bore the crest of materialism and thus spelled out for her the loss of things she valued most highly. For her, the splendid story of the pioneers was finished. The noble immigrant farmers were too-frequent losers in their double jeopardy of the struggle with the land and the perils of success. It is not surprising that Willa Cather, upon her graduation from the University of Nebraska in 1895, wished desperately to go East to the centers of culture. She yearned for the advantages which she thought the Eastern cities offered: music, drama, art, cosmopolitan living, cultivation.

Thus, a strange combination of circumstances is apparent in Willa Cather's attitudes. She remembers with fond

² "Nebraska, the End of the First Cycle," Nation, Vol. 117, Sept. 5, 1923, p. 237.

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nostalgia the early days of struggle on the raw, bronze prairies, and she recalls with distaste the narrowness and often predatory motives of the small towns. But her dislike of the town does not carry over full force in her feeling for the city. Willa Cather loved living in Pittsburgh, New York, and Boston though she frequently fled to the country for vacations. She returned often for visits in Red Cloud, kept up warm friendships there, but she never considered returning there to live. Though not blind to the faults of the city, Willa Cather never cared to give it up. Some evils seemed necessary, apparently, and she could tolerate them for the sake of the advantages the city offered.

In summary, then, Willa Cather's strong and frequent criticism of the small town must be seen as a personal matter, closely linked with her personal sense of values, an attitude based on cumulative personal experience, not as an attack on a section of society nor on the town in a generic sense. Miss Cather's criticism ultimately falls on people, for her interest is always fundamentally based in concerns of mankind. It is true, however, that the people--individually or in groups--who are targets for Miss Cather's criticism are frequently townsmen, not manly farmers or urbane city dwellers. One thinks of typical groups and individuals: the watchers in "The Sculptor's Funeral," the Baptist clique in Moonstone, and the young people of Black Hawk; of Wick Cutter, Bayliss

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Wheeler, Ivy Peters, and, in some respects, Harry Gordon.

As early as 1896, in her short story "On the Divide," Willa Cather expressed contempt for the town. A Norwegian girl is depicted leaving the town to seek her fortune at the ironing board in town. Sarcastically, the author writes of "ten cent theaters, firemen's dances, and all the other es-
thetic delights of metropolitan life."³ Lena, the Norwegian laundry girl, is cautioned by her mother against marrying a town man, and the case of a misled neighbor girl is cited as proof.

"The Sculptor's Funeral"⁴ represents Miss Cather's harshest attack on the Philistinism of the town. The method of the attack is to single out representative townsmen who appear as watchers at the bier of Harvey Merrick, a famous sculptor and native son of Sand City, Kansas. A minister, a real estate agent, a G.A.R. representative, a lumber dealer, two bankers, and the sculptor's brutally insensitive mother are the "dead little Western town" in microcosm. Some relief is afforded in old Mr. Merrick, the mulatto servant Roxy, and

³ "On the Divide," Early Stories of Willa Cather, selected and with a commentary by Mildred R. Bennett, New York, Dodd, Mead, 1957, p. 67. First published in Overland Monthly Vol. 27, Jan., 1896, p. 65-74.

⁴ First published in McClure's Magazine, Vol. 24, Jan., 1905, p. 329-336. Included in The Troll Garden, New York, McClure, Phillips, 1905, and in Youth and the Bright Medusa, New York, Knopf, 1920.

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a sensitive but drink-worn lawyer.

Miss Cather almost allows her "sermon" against the village mind to consume the story. Not even in the long anti-urban section of My Antonia ("The Hired Girls") is the attack so caustic. David Daiches has recalled the watchers of "The Sculptor's Funeral" "conventional caricatures of bourgeois conservatives."⁵ But Willa Cather was interested in more than caricature; her sense of values compelled her to be concerned with human beings who lacked the sensibilities of cultivated folk, the natural amenities of natural beings. Harvey Merrick had had such sensibilities, but he had had to escape the town in which he was "cast ashore upon a desert of newness and ugliness and sordidness."⁶ And escape he did. As he lay near death, Merrick had talked to his pupil Henry Steavens, exacting a promise that he would be sent home for burial:

'It's not a pleasant place to be lying while the world is moving and doing and bettering,' he had said with a feeble smile, 'but it rather seems as though we ought to go back to the place we came from in the end. The townspeople will come in for a look at me, and after they have had their say, I shan't have much to fear from the judgment of God!'⁷

⁵ Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, Ithaca, Cornell University, 1951, p. 145.

⁶ Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 279.

⁷ Ibid., p. 284.

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Miss Cather opens O Pioneers! with a bit of description which immediately sets the key for her treatment of the town. Hanover is a "cluster of low, drab buildings huddled on the gray prairie, under a gray sky."⁸ The town houses are haphazardly set about, straying off by themselves, and having an air of impermanence; the town itself is a perplexing place, "where people wore fine clothes and had hard hearts."⁹

One of the praiseworthy qualities in Carl Linstrum when he returns from the East is that "he had not become a trim, self-satisfied city man. There was still something homely and wayward and definitely personal about him."¹⁰ One can hardly miss Willa Cather's meaning here. Country folk tend to be persons, but urban dwellers are simply people. A nice distinction, but a significant one. Carl Linstrum speaks for the author in explaining what one learns when he leaves the land:

Here you are an individual, you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody, we own nothing. When one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him. Our land-lady and the delicatessen man are our mourners, and we leave nothing behind us but a frock coat and a fiddle, or an easel, or a typewriter, or whatever tool we got our living by. All we have ever managed

⁸ O Pioneers!, p. 3.

⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 98.

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to do is to pay our rent, the exorbitant rent that one has to pay for a few square feet of space near the heart of things. We have no house, no place, no people of our own. We live in the streets, in the parks, in the theaters. We sit in restaurants and concert halls and look at hundreds of our kind and shudder.¹¹

In O Pioneers! Miss Cather stresses the superiority of rural life rather than the malevolence of town life. There is an epic quality in this novel, a sweeping grandeur that is not present in Willa Cather's later novels. This grandeur arises out of the greatness of the land and the author's recognition of its enduring value. The great fact in this novel is the land itself, the land in the great operation of nature giving to those who cherish it a sense of personal security, worth, and dignity. The tenderness with which Miss Cather can describe the bountiful--though treacherous--prairie country is in itself a rebuke to those who dwell apart from the soil. There is a pastoral lyricism in a passage such as this:

There are few scenes more gratifying than a spring plowing in that country where the furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length, and the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plough; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness.¹²

11 O Pioneers!, p. 105-106.

12 Ibid., p. 66.

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At the novel's end, Alexandra acknowledges her debt to the land, but observes that the land belongs to the future: "And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it--for a little while."¹³

One of the things Thea Kronborg has to conquer in her struggle for artistic success is the Philistinism of Moonstone, Colorado. A minister's daughter, Thea has more than the average "fear of the tongue, that terror of little towns."¹⁴ Much of the impact of The Song of the Lark lies in what Willa Cather described in her preface to the later edition as Thea's "floundering escape from a smug, domestic, self-satisfied world of utter ignorance."¹⁵ After she had broken away from Moonstone provincialism, Thea still looked back with hatred on "a world that had let her grow up so ignorant."¹⁶

The composite picture of Moonstone is not greatly unlike that of Gopher Prairie. Here is the narrowness of the Baptists who "had everything their way." Here are the artificial but implacable distinctions established by church membership, nationality, place of residence, and bank balance. Here are the mournful, meaningless prayer meetings, as well

¹³ O Pioneers!, p. 261.

¹⁴ The Song of the Lark, p. 159.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. viii.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 221.

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as the "semi-sacred concert of picked talent" at the opera house. Here are bared un-Christian enmities, petty jealousies, and insincerities. Here everybody reads the Moonstone Glean, and only one person in town subscribes to a New York paper, or has any intellectual reason for taking one. All in all, one of Thea Kronborg's greatest triumphs was an early one: she escaped from Moonstone.

The Black Hawk of My Antonia is similar to Hanover, Moonstone, and Sand City, Kansas, the town of "The Sculptor's Funeral":

Most Black Hawk fathers had no personal habits outside their domestic ones; they paid the bills, pushed the baby-carriage after office hours, moved the sprinkler about over the lawn, and took the family driving on Sunday.¹⁷

Late in the novel, when Jim Burden returns to Nebraska and sees Antonia, now the mother of a large family, he remarks, "You ought never to have gone to town, Tony."¹⁸ Burden identifies the town even more than the scapegrace Larry Donovan as the cause of Antonia's illegitimate first-born.

But the treatment of Black Hawk is less caustic than that of the towns of the earlier writing. Willa Cather finds some relieving graces in Black Hawk--the Harling family, for example--but she has by no means softened in her attitude.

17 My Antonia, p. 157.

18 Ibid., p. 343.

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Black Hawk is put in a bad light by Miss Cather's use of comparison. The Black Hawk townspeople, for the most part, simply cannot measure up in human dignity to the purposeful, free-spirited hired girls or their families on the farms surrounding the town. Speaking of the Black Hawk phase of the story, David Daiches writes:

The feeling that it is the imaginative immigrant and not the conventional American who is responsible for the country's greatness recurs again and again in Miss Cather's novels.¹⁹

And, of course, the native-born are generally identified with the town, the foreign born with the farm.

My Antonia introduces one new device in Miss Cather's treatment of the town. This is Wick Cutter, the Black Hawk money lender and all-round scoundrel. Cutter is one of the few thorough-going villains in Willa Cather's writing, but he is nonetheless a fully developed blackguard.

Wycliffe Cutter fleeces the farmers in the Black Hawk countryside; he is dissolute with women, despicable in his marital relations, and unctuous in his maxim-quoting piety. But most of all he is a town man. He produces nothing, and he offers no professional services. He symbolizes the prairie town existing by its scheming manipulation of the harvests of farmers' labor and by its voracious grasping of

19 Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, p. 51.

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dearly earned land--"Cutter was one of the 'fast set' of Black Hawk business men."²⁰ In proper context, such a simple indictment is unusually eloquent.

The small community of Sweet Water, Colorado, the setting of A Lost Lady, is a fading town, losing its position as a main stop on the Burlington and coming more and more under the domination of men like Ivy Peters. Willa Cather uses Sweet Water symbolically, for the shadow that is falling over this little town suggests the shadow then falling over the West. In the wake of droughts, crop failures, and land speculators, the pioneer age was declining; the glorious spirit of the homesteaders was gone, and in its place were the ugliness of materialism, the narrowness of self-satisfied natures of late-arriving Americans and second-generation immigrants. The early pioneers, Miss Cather often asserted and implied, had been concerned with more than material conquest and exploitation. They were "dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence."²¹ They had nurtured a special relationship to the soil and drew from the soil strength and courage. They came "not merely to make money but to live, and they built not merely an economy but a civilization, and there was integrity and dignity and piety

20 My Antonia, p. 209.

21 A Lost Lady, p. 106.

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in their work and their lives."²²

Sweet Water is symbolic, as Captain Forrester is symbolic, of the sunset of the pioneer struggle. As it appears in A Lost Lady, the town is an unattractive place of departed glory; Captain Forrester is one of those men who "dreamed the railroads across the mountains"²³ but who now is broken spiritually and physically. In Sweet Water and in Captain Forrester are seen the Western dream in reverse, and leading the new trend is Ivy Peters. This novel is Willa Cather's elegy for the West that is gone, for a dream that almost came true. Again the town is equated with the unattractive element, the Ivy Peterses of the new West:

The Old West had been settled by dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were impractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood, strong in attack, but weak in defence, who could conquer but could not hold. Now all the vast territory they had won was to be at the mercy of men like Ivy Peters, who never dared anything, never risked anything....The space, the color, the princely carelessness of the pioneer they would destroy and cut up into profitable bits, as the match factory splinters the primeval forest.²⁴

After A Lost Lady Willa Cather chose new scenes for her next four novels. The Professor's House is set in a

²² Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1950, p. 152.

²³ A Lost Lady, p. 51.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 102.

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Middle Western university town situated on the shore of one of the Great Lakes. My Mortal Enemy moves quickly from Parthia, Illinois, to New York City, and finally to San Francisco. Then Miss Cather chose the Southwest and the Rock of Quebec for her settings. In these novels in which she eschewed her own West, Willa Cather also shunned the criticism of the town. But in 1935 she returned to Nebraska to find the locale of a story, Lucy Gayheart, and in returning to the Nebraska small town she also reasserted her earlier attitude, though with considerable softening.

Lucy Gayheart is set primarily in Haverford, Nebraska, although much of the action of Book One takes place in Chicago. Nowhere in Lucy Gayheart is there the vindictive criticism of the town that one discerns in O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, and My Antonia. Haverford has its faults, but it is, after all, not such a bad place, certainly not a place symbolizing the forces which subdued the pioneer zeal. In this novel Haverford is a "home town" for the principal characters, not the town near their homes. It is the place where one "had had disappointments and had learned to bear them."²⁵

Lucy Gayheart does characterize small-town life as "deadly," does resist the "village pace," but she also "loved

²⁵ Lucy Gayheart, p. 234.

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her own little town, but it was a heart-breaking love, like loving the dead who cannot answer back."²⁶

In her treatment of the small town, therefore, Willa Cather does not always display a consistent attitude. The harsh criticism of the prairie towns softens to a mellow realization of small-town faults and a somewhat fond memory of small-town life. This is not to say that Willa Cather's love of country life lessened, for it did not. In her writing, as in her personal life, she continued to love the rural scene. In the last story she finished, "The Best Years,"²⁷ there is a feeling for the land that is much like that expressed in O Pioneers! . Evangeline Knightly of "The Best Years" loves the Nebraska country between the Platte River and the Kansas line, and she **prefers** the leisurely pace of the rural countryside. The story, indeed, has been characterized as "in the purest pastoral tradition, and as pastoral as it is successful."²⁸

Because it robbed her of her cherished values, Willa Cather was at times severe in treating the town; but she never was the inquisitor of the city. She could not have been so and remained consistent to her own beliefs. For

26 Lucy Gayheart, p. 139.

27 The Old Beauty and Others, New York, Knopf, 1948, p. 75-138.

28 Daiches, p. 170.

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Willa Cather, the large cities with all their faults were the centers of culture, the only place where she could find the opera, the concerts, the art treasures, the theater, and the cultivated people she valued and enjoyed so much. Some of her stories, in fact, have praise for the metropolis. "A Wagner Matinee," Alexander's Bridge, My Mortal Enemy, and Lucy Gayheart in decreasing volume sound praise for Boston, London, New York, and Chicago. Perhaps in addition to her liking for the cultural advantages of the city, Willa Cather had come to a point of view expressed by Professor Auerbach in reply to Lucy Gayheart's deprecation of small-town living: "You will learn that to live is the first thing."²⁹

Miss Cather's warmest feeling for the city is expressed in My Mortal Enemy, which is as much a "city book", as O Pioneers! and My Antonia are "farm novels." The New York society of My Mortal Enemy is reminiscent of the fashionable groups in Edith Wharton's New York novels, but without the criticism of society mores. Willa Cather writes glowingly of winter afternoon walks in Central Park, of drives in well-kept carriages, and of Sunday afternoon rounds of leaving cards and making calls. There are rich salons and drawing rooms, and handsome, beautifully dressed men and women. Conversation is as brilliant as the jewels displayed and over

²⁹ Lucy Gayheart, p. 137.

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all there is an air of refinement and gracious living. There are musicians, opera singers, playwrights, and actresses; there are loges at the opera and sherry in fashionable retreats.

Generally, in My Mortal Enemy Willa Cather expresses an admiring feeling for city living, though the segment of New York which she depicts is admittedly narrow:

Madison Square....seemed to me so neat, after the raggedness of our Western cities; so protected by good manners and courtesy--like an open-air drawing room....The trees and shrubbery seemed well-groomed and sociable, like pleasant people.... Here, I felt, Winter brought no desolation; it was tamed, like a polar bear led on a leash by a beautiful lady.³⁰

The treatment of urban life in Willa Cather's writing then, is not altogether consistent throughout her career. The early short stories and the novels before Death Comes for the Archbishop are decreasingly critical of the small town, that is, of the unappealing characters whom the town spawns. As Miss Cather progresses in her career, the criticism of the small town decreases in sharpness of tone as well as in volume until in Lucy Gayheart there is even a note of fondness for the "home town." The city, to Willa Cather, is much less ugly than the town, for in the metropolitan centers she found a way of cultivated living, and whatever vices the city holds are outranked by its own virtues.

30 My Mortal Enemy, p. 256-257.

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Willa Cather discerned the "ugly crest of materialism" not only on the town; she detected its stamp on the machine as well.

In her essay on Nebraska Miss Cather uses the term "machine-made materialism." This is significant expression for it keys a large segment of her attitudes and values. She was particularly antagonistic toward technological developments; she felt that the new mechanized way of life was having a generally demoralizing effect on people in her beloved Nebraska and elsewhere. But her feeling against mechanized living, though a strong element in her anti-materialism, is only one aspect of her entire attitude. She also spoke out against land-grabbing and hogging, against money-getting, against standardization, against the cheapening of life, and against the disappearance of the creativeness that accompanied struggle.

Willa Cather's most sustained attack on "machine-made materialism" came in One of Ours. Bayliss Wheeler, Claude's commercial-minded brother, is cast in the role of a farm-implement dealer, and the author makes his job seem almost indecent. Bayliss is described as being too slight for work about the farm, but, thin and dyspeptic as he is, his business acumen leads him to considerable financial success. He is a non-producer, thriving on the wealth created by others. Ralph Wheeler, Claude's younger brother, is obsessed

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by every new mechanical contrivance for household or field:

He was chief mechanic for the Wheeler farm, and when the farm implements and the automobiles did not give him enough to do, he went to town and bought machines for the house. As soon as Mahailey got used to a washing-machine or a churn, Ralph, to keep up with the bristling march of invention, brought home a still newer one. The mechanical dishwasher she had never been able to use, and patent flat-irons and oil stoves drove her wild.³¹

Claude accuses his brother of attempting to make machinists out of Mahailey and Mrs. Wheeler. But to assume that Willa Cather was against machinery per se would be to err; she clearly states her approval of devices which free women from drudgery, children from work, and which afford leisure for all. She does, however, scorn the quackery of gadgetism and the aesthetic cheapening which too often accompanied mechanization. Of what advantage was leisure time if it were ill-used or unused? In several instances, Miss Cather makes the machine the symbol of evil.³²

31 One of Ours, p. 24.

32 Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, "Willa Cather's novels of the Frontier: The Symbolic Function of Machine-Made Materialism," University of Toronto Quarterly, Vol. 20, Oct., 1950, p. 46. The Blooms put the matter this way: "The result of her vigorous examination of an encroaching degeneration was the angry conclusion that the basic deteriorating force was 'machine-made materialism.' Miss Cather was completely repelled by the resulting subservience to temporal, debilitating values and the divorce from permanent, ennobling aspirations. 'Machine-made materialism' became an epitome of evil, a sign of the renunciation of moral and aesthetic standards that she had earlier found to be the only valid principles of existence."

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Dr. Burleigh in "Neighbour Rosicky" is in a hurry to leave "a big-rich farm where there was plenty of stock and plenty of feed and a great deal of expensive machinery of the newest model, and no comfort whatever."³³ Two American girls, "tourists" in the worst connotation of the word, are cruelly depicted in "The Old Beauty." They and their "dirty little car"³⁴ are made at least indirectly responsible for the death of the old beauty, Madame de Coucy. An automobile which frightens Claude's team of horses is the cause of an accident which is the first in a chain of events eventually leading Claude Wheeler and Enid Royce into an unfortunate marriage. In the oft-cited Nebraska essay Miss Cather laments the modern generation which "wants to live and die in an automobile."³⁵ Evangeline Knightly, in "The Best Years," on returning to a small town where she had taught fifteen years earlier, eschews a car "to hire a buggy, if there is such a thing left in McAlpin, and drive out into the country alone."³⁶

An early paragraph of "Two Friends" opens this way:

33 Obscure Destinies, p. 11.

34 The Old Beauty and Others, p. 67.

35 "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," p. 238.

36 The Old Beauty and Others, p. 129.

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Long ago, before the invention of the motor-car (which has made more changes in the world than the war, which indeed produced the particular kind of war that happened just a hundred years after Waterloo), in a little town in a shallow Kansas river valley, there lived two friends.³⁷

Willa Cather gives no explanation of this extravagant indictment, but the passage expresses quite clearly her bitterness about the machine age which had overtaken her. If this discussion of "machine-made materialism" has tended to focus on the automobile, it is because Miss Cather herself so often identified mechanization with the motor car. But one may safely generalize from the instances cited and conclude that the core of Miss Cather's anti-materialism is found in her attack on the machine. She deeply regretted that Americans lived their lives with "the relentless mechanical gear which directs every modern life,"³⁸ that hers was an "age of blinding speed and shattering sound."³⁹ "Machines could not make pleasure, whatever else they could do."⁴⁰

A second aspect of Willa Cather's anti-materialism is her attack on the grabbing, hogging, or misuse of the land. The "noisy push of the present,"⁴¹ which she so strongly

37 Obscure Destinies, p. 161-162.

38 Literary Encounters, p. 287.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., p. 52.

41 Ibid., p. 252.

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laments in "148 Charles Street," had as an accompanying feature the land speculations of small-minded men like Wick Cutter, Nat and Bayliss Wheeler, and Ivy Peters. Miss Cather makes a clear distinction between a person like Bayliss Wheeler, who could buy a beautiful old home and hold it simply as a piece of real estate because "It's too far to walk to my business, and the road...gets pretty muddy for a car in the spring,"⁴² and a man like Claude Wheeler, who could feel so strongly about a plot of ground that he was impelled to bid it an emotional farewell.

Wick Cutter could amass a fortune of a hundred thousand dollars by preying upon hard-pressed farmers and foreclosing mortgages on their land, but he could be punished by his literary creator by becoming a murderer and a suicide.

Again Miss Cather's heavy attack is seen in the novels of the middle period. In One of Ours she speaks through Claude Wheeler's consciousness:

The orchard, which had been nursed and tended so carefully twenty years ago, was now left to die of neglect. It was less trouble to run into town in an automobile and buy fruit than it was to raise it.⁴³

Willa Cather uses the epithet "land hog" to describe Nat Wheeler, and she again speaks through Claude who felt

⁴² One of Ours, p. 128.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 118.

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"that it was not right they [the Wheelers] should have so much land--to farm, to rent, or to leave idle, as they chose. It was strange that in all the centuries the world had been going, the question of property had not been better adjusted. The people who had it were slaves to it, and the people who didn't have it were slaves to them."⁴⁴

Nat Wheeler is also castigated for his motives in raising and marketing wheat. Miss Cather implies a sacrilegious use of land in his turning wheat into a mere commodity for speculative purposes in the early years of the Great War. To him the war meant, more than anything else, seventy cents a bushel for wheat--and the chance of even higher prices.

But the arch-criminal in the matter of land grabbing is Ivy Peters of A Lost Lady. Peters is in every way a despicable person. Mean, cheating, small minded, and unmoral, he is the most thorough-going villain in the Cather canon. Peters it is who violates Captain Forrester's wish by draining a marshy section which lent considerable charm and beauty to the Forrester farm. Peters it is who outrages the aesthetic ideal, and he it is who violates morality in his unscrupulous land dealings with Indians in Wyoming. Peters operates on the theory that if rascality doesn't succeed better than anything else in business at least it succeeds faster:

⁴⁴ One of Ours, p. 93-94.

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By draining the Forrester marsh Ivy had obliterated a few scores of something he hated, though he could not name it....

....Now all the vast territory they [the pioneers] had won was to be at the mercy of men like Ivy Peters, who had never dared anything, never risked anything....This generation of shrewd young men, trained to petty economies by hard times, would do exactly what Ivy Peters had done when he drained the Forrester marsh.⁴⁵

The great irony of all pioneer sagas is that the dreamer-pioneer has always made possible the subsequent commercial exploitation of his victory by smaller-minded men than he. The dreamer too often sees a dream-come-true transformed by cunning, practical men into a garish nightmare. This is the tragedy Willa Cather found in the apposition of tall-walking Daniel Forrester and parasitical Ivy Peters.

Devotion to money making is the third component of Willa Cather's strong anti-materialism. She is in no way opposed to individual free enterprise or to the capitalistic system,⁴⁶ but she does denounce any surrender of aesthetic ideal or any compromise of moral scruple as a means to profit or wealth. The "money-makers" of her novels and stories are by no means a type for scornful treatment. Cressida Garnet, Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, Antonia Shimerda Cuzak (in her own way), Godfrey St. Peter, Tom Outland, Daniel

⁴⁵ A Lost Lady, p. 102.

⁴⁶ E.K. Brown recounts that Miss Cather strongly opposed the New Deal though she was generally indifferent to politics.

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Forrester, and others all achieve financial success. But their money-getting is in no way the result of any aesthetic or moral unscrupulousness.

One does, however, easily call to mind some Cather figures who demean their integrity for material, monetary gain: Oscar and Lou Bergson, Wick Cutter, Mrs. St. Peter, Louie Marsellus, Ivy Peters, Marian Forrester; more might be named. One aspect of Willa Cather's anti-materialism, then, is directed against those who seek money for its own sake and who have an insatiable appetite for it.

Wick Cutter of My Antonia scraped together a fortune of a hundred thousand dollars by "hard dealing." He ended a murderer and a suicide, but even in his last moments he managed through a carefully contrived plan to keep any of his money from going to his wife's people. Cutter, the utter materialist, kills his wife and commits suicide from sheer hateful spite, and Miss Cather closes the story of Wick Cutter and his fortune with the comment "that Cutter himself had died for it in the end."⁴⁷

Claude Wheeler of One of Ours is perceptive to the fact that "with prosperity came a kind of callousness; everyone wanted to destroy the old things they used to take pride

⁴⁷ My Antonia, p. 364.

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in."⁴⁸ Miss Cather has Claude deplore conditions in which farmers exchange things of real intrinsic value--"wheat and corn as good as could be grown anywhere in the world, hogs and cattle that were the best of their kind"⁴⁹--for money which brought only manufactured articles of poor quality, shoddy furniture, and showy, clowning clothing. Money, Claude concludes, would buy nothing one really wanted.

Miss Cather's exposition of World War I as the great degenerative influence on persons like Claude's father and on his brother Bayliss is set forth in terms of money getting. The manipulation of wheat as a commodity with the attendant disregard of wheat as the life-essential food is Miss Cather's target for scorn. The financial greatness which came to some little men is seen in sharp contrast to the idealistic greatness of a sensitive person like Claude. Mr. Wheeler acknowledges, "I don't have to explain the market, I've only got to take advantage of it."⁵⁰ Such crassness, in Miss Cather's view, such prostitution of the beneficence of Nature, is nothing less than immorality.⁵¹ People who were always buying

⁴⁸ One of Ours, p. 118.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 117.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 182.

⁵¹ The pioneers felt a sense of personal security in the land (nature); the very thought of the operations of nature fortified them. But modern man had ignored it or exploited it, as did Claude's father.

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and selling, building and tearing down are anathema to Claude Wheeler as they were to Willa Cather. The hero of One of Ours saw such ugliness in the shattered countryside of wartime France, but he saw nothing as ugly as the vision of a world controlled by men like his brother Bayliss.

Professor St. Peter and his colleague Robert Crane are the only two on the faculty of Miss Cather's fictional midwestern university "who were doing research of an uncommercial nature."⁵² Miss Cather was alarmed and angry at the commercialism which she saw undermining and vulgarizing education. More emphatic treatment of money-mindedness in The Professor's House is seen in the story of Tom Outland.

Outland, in his diary, is made to tell the story of his futile effort to interest officials of the Smithsonian Institution in his truly remarkable excavation atop the Blue Mesa. The indifference of American clerks and officials who saw no "market value" in the Indian relics is more pronounced in contrast to the appreciation and understanding which a young Frenchman demonstrates. The crushing effect of valuing money for its own sake is realized when Outland returns from his unsuccessful mission only to find that his trusted but shallow-minded partner has sold the entire collection of relics to a German.

⁵² The Professor's House, p. 136.

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Roddy Blake, trying to justify his action, has only the flimsiest of reasons:

It was a chance in a million, boy. There wasn't any time to consult you. There's only one man in thousands that wants to buy relics and pay real money for them. I could see how your Washington campaign was coming out. I knew you'd thought about big figures, so had I. But that was all a pipe-dream. Four thousand's not so bad, you don't pick it up everyday....Who else would have bought it, I want to know? We'd have had to pack it around Harvey Houses, selling it at a dollar a bowl, like the poor Indians do.⁵³

Outland retorts that the relics were not theirs to sell, that "They belonged to this country, to the State, and to all the people."⁵⁴ Miss Cather has Outland in a burst of fury accuse Blake of betraying his country's secrets, "like Dreyfus."⁵⁵ Outland refuses to touch his share of the money Blake received. Blake, in character to the end, patiently explains that he had always thought the relics "would come to money in the end. 'Everything does,' he added."⁵⁶

On a larger scale money becomes the crux of the tragedy of The Professor's House. The large cash prize which Godfrey St. Peter won for his scholarly work on the Spanish explorers is, in fact, the raison d'être of his surrender to

53 The Professor's House, p. 240.

54 Ibid., p. 241.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., p. 243.

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his age, of his estrangement from his family, and of his removal from the house he wanted.

The honorable action of Captain Daniel Forrester of A Lost Lady in redeeming bank deposits--from his own funds--at one hundred cents to the dollar, unlike his fellow directors in the bank, is set in sharp contrast to the machinations of Ivy Peters and his kind. Judge Pomeroy expounds to Niel Herbert on the wisdom of choosing architecture over law. "I can't see," he says, "any honorable career for a lawyer, in this new business world that's coming up. Leave the law to boys like Ivy Peters, and get into some clean profession."⁵⁷

Willa Cather's expressions against the per se value of money are many. Old Rosicky comments, "I had rather put some color into my children's faces than put money in the bank,"⁵⁸ and in this statement is the kernel of Miss Cather's attitude. She simply abhorred the materialistic slavery which overwhelms many people in their striving for financial gain. Miss Cather herself was anxious to secure financial independence and security; she earned handsome royalties from her writing, and she managed her financial affairs herself.⁵⁹ But she never capitulated to the demands of wealth; she never

⁵⁷ A Lost Lady, p. 88.

⁵⁸ Obscure Destinies, p. 25.

⁵⁹ Cf. E.K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography p. 238.

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wrote for less than the highest ideals of her art as she understood it.

Thus, to say that Willa Cather regarded wealth--or its acquisition--as the root of all evil is to miss her meaning. Money-mindedness was a symptom of materialism, but not the virus itself.

When Willa Cather regarded the prosperity in her beloved Nebraska and elsewhere, she regretted another symptomatic evidence of the new materialism. This was the cult of standardization. "Too much prosperity, too many moving-picture shows, too much gaudy fiction have colored the tastes and manners of so many of these Nebraskans of the future,"⁶⁰ she wrote in 1923. She lamented in the post-war years the general inclination "to buy everything ready-made: clothes, food, education, music, pleasure."⁶¹ The tendency to think in typologies, to conform en masse to the dicta of manufacturers, slick-magazine editors, and the moguls of Hollywood represented to Willa Cather another facet of the loss of self-reliance and individual creativeness. Standardization of life and manners truly emphasized the fact that the splendid story of the pioneer was ended.

60 "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," p. 238.

61 Ibid.

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As early as O Pioneers! Miss Cather scored the "highly varnished wood and colored glass and useless pieces of china ...conspicuous enough to satisfy the standards of the new prosperity,"⁶² and she noted that after Alexandra Bergson had attained financial security the only comfortable rooms in her house were the kitchen and the sitting room "in which Alexandra had brought together the old homely furniture that the Bergsons had used in their first log house."⁶³

In one of her editorial asides in her second prairie novel Willa Cather notes that in older countries "dress, opinion, and manners are not so standardized as in our own West;"⁶⁴ it is with the unstandardized people like Spanish Johnny and Herr Wunsch that the unconventional Thea Kronborg is most in sympathy. Standardization is one of the faults Miss Cather attacks in her assault on the small town of Black Hawk. Stereotyped young men who "looked forward to marrying Black Hawk girls, and living in a brand-new little house with best chairs that must not be sat upon, and hand-painted china that must not be used"⁶⁵ were subservient to shallow convention in her view.

62 O Pioneers!, p. 83.

63 Ibid., p. 72-73.

64 The Song of the Lark, p. 83.

65 My Antonia, p. 201.

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Much better in Miss Cather's mind were homes that could be lived in. Claude Wheeler has an affection for the upstairs living-room--especially when his father is not there --with its "old carpet, the faded chairs, the secretary book-case, the spotty engraving with the scenes from 'Pilgrim's Progress' that hung over the sofa--these things made Claude feel at home."⁶⁶ The charm of the Forrester home of A Lost Lady lay in the gracious manner of life there, not in the worn carpets, faded curtains, and clumsy, old-fashioned furniture. The Erlich home in One of Ours is another which the author painstakingly portrays for its comfort-giving quality rather than for its fashionable aspects.

Against newness, against ready-made, dictated, standardized style Willa Cather protested. One of her best bits of irony occurs in The Professor's House when the nouveau riche Louis Marsellus builds a Norwegian manor-house, designed by a Paris-trained architect, on a Lake Michigan headland. The house is to have everything--including the name "Outland"--except homeliness. The name might well have been "Outlandish"! Sensitive Father Latour could appreciate the primitive beauty in the figures of saints he found in even the poorest Mexican houses: "They were more to his taste than the factory-made plaster images in his mission churches in

66 One of Ours, p. 58.

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Ohio--more like the stone carvings on the front of old churches in Auvergne."⁶⁷ Later, as Archbishop of Santa Fe, Latour plans his cathedral and says,

I had rather keep the old adobe church we have now than to help build one of those horrible structures they are putting up in the Ohio cities....I shall certainly never lift my hand to build a clumsy affair of red brick, like an English coach-house.⁶⁸

In "The Old Beauty" Madame de Coucy and her companion have the graces of their times, are reserved in manner, conservative in dress: "They were neither painted nor plucked, their nails were neither red nor green."⁶⁹ Mrs. Fergusson of "The Best Years" laments people who "aren't real people--just poor put-ons, that try to be like the advertisements."⁷⁰

Thus, from O Pioneers! through her final short stories, Willa Cather abhorred the cult of the standard in furniture, in dress, and in architecture. Again, the inclination to stereotyping she saw as a symptom of an illness rather than as the malady itself. Standardization was another manifestation of the "ugly crest of materialism" that had settled on American life.

67 Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 32.

68 Ibid., p. 281.

69 The Old Beauty and Others, p. 8.

70 Ibid., p. 135.

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With standardization came a cheapening of life. Shoddiness in the manufacture of household articles and machinery, in the building of homes and public buildings, as well as in the very behavior of people was another lamentable evidence of hated materialism for Miss Cather.

Carl Lindstrom speaks for his author when he comments on what has happened among his fellow craftsmen in the engraving industry: "Everything's cheap metal work nowadays, touching up miserable photographs, forcing up poor drawings, and spoiling good ones. I'm absolutely sick of it all."⁷¹ In One of Ours Willa Cather editorializes on farmers who have to pay out most of their money for machinery that soon goes to pieces: "A steam thresher didn't last long; a horse outlived three automobiles."⁷² Manufactured articles of poor quality seem to be the lot of those who attained to the new prosperity; in fact Miss Cather seems to say that the new materialists largely got just what they deserved. "With prosperity came a kind of callousness,"⁷³ she observes, and continues on the theme that in prairie communities where friendliness used to prevail the new prosperity had brought on law-suits among folk that had become "stingy and grasping or extravagant and

⁷¹ O Pioneers!, p. 104.

⁷² One of Ours, p. 117.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 118.

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lazy."⁷⁴

Miss Cather saw life as meaningless "unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured,"⁷⁵ and in her view the enduring something could not be bought. The futile attempt of the new generations of the prairie to find happiness in material comforts and mechanical contrivances was a degrading spectacle to her. Eusabio, the old Navajo friend of the dying Archbishop Latour, could observe: "Men travel faster now, but I do not know if they go to better things."⁷⁶ This was the concern that beset Willa Cather as she saw her world turning ever more to materialism; men could perform new and awesome feats, could manufacture and build and do, but, to her, they had sacrificed creativeness to gain only mediocrity and complacency.

Not only were people content with shoddy buildings like the physics laboratory at Godfrey St. Peter's university:

...the State Legislature had defeated him [Professor St. Peter] by grinding down the contractor to cheap execution, but had spoiled everything, outside and in. Ever since it was finished, plumbers and masons and carpenters had been kept busy patching and repairing it. Crane and St. Peter, both young men then, had wasted weeks of time with the contractors, and

⁷⁴ One of Ours, p. 118.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 454.

⁷⁶ Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 338.

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had finally gone to plead for the integrity of that building. But nothing had come of all their pains. It was one of many lost causes.⁷⁷

Or, "...an apartment-hotel, wretchedly built and already falling to pieces, although it was new."⁷⁸ They were also content with shoddy behavior. Jim Burden remarks that he had met a great many Mrs. Cutters all over the world. Young husbands who seldom addressed their wives by name but preferred "you" or "she" lacked the plain gentility of their fathers and they earn Willa Cather's scorn. She has Thea Kronborg worry about the Jessie Darcys in the world and "the success of cheap people,"⁷⁹ just as later she has Claude Wheeler berate people who, when bored, "went to town and bought something new."⁸⁰ Professor St. Peter can recall the early days of his marriage when "They hadn't much, but they were never absurd. They never made shabby compromises. If they couldn't get the right thing, they went without. Usually they had the right thing, and it got paid for, somehow."⁸¹

There is in Willa Cather's writing an incremental indictment of people who worship at the shrine of materialism

77 The Professor's House, p. 138-139.

78 My Mortal Enemy, p. 287.

79 The Song of the Lark, p. 324.

80 One of Ours, p. 53.

81 The Professor's House, p. 156.

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and who increasingly coarsen and cheapen their lives as they attain financial security only to lose spiritual dignity. Truly, "machine-made materialism," the "ugly crest of materialism," beset her with almost overwhelming force, but she did not lose hope. For her, the strong impact of materialism on her own society was no sign that her contemporaries could not work out their difficulties and go back to the simple, natural open-heartedness of the days of struggle. Even in the dark lines of her Nebraska essay the light of optimism comes through in the closing paragraph.

It was, in fact, the ending of those days of struggle and the coming of comparative ease that she considered most responsible for the material-mindedness of people of her own maturity. To Willa Cather the passing of the age of struggle was synonymous with the passing of spiritual dignity and of

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the creative impulse in people.⁸²

Willa Cather as a child in the prairie had acquired a knowledge of the harsh struggles which the homesteader-pioneers faced on the table-land of the Divide. No doubt, in the great storehouse of her memory in later years, her recollections of the immigrant pioneers were tinged with a roseate nostalgia, an endearing inflation of pioneer virtue and idealism. But, to her, the great fact remained that the early settlers were dreamers who struggled valiantly to make their dreams realities. The creativeness of the pioneer was

⁸² For Miss Cather this creative impulse was, in a sense, a form of self-creation. She was concerned with what man can do to release in himself that mental and spiritual force, which offers the most good to his world. It makes no difference whether the individual is a painter, farmer, priest, musician, an unlabeled human: Thea, practicing out the middle break in her voice, or Alexandra, dispelling the spectre of land failure. In an essay entitled "Willa Cather" (Sewanee Review, Vol. 50, Jan.-Mar., 1942, p. 18-25), George L. White states that in the writings of Miss Cather self-creation implies "a passionate dissatisfaction with life, a desire to make it perfect, and permanent realization that man must establish and live up to a high standard of excellence if he would make it perfect."

Self-creation, in Miss Cather's sense, further implies self-understanding. Man must know himself. This art of discovery, this making sure of the reason for existence is more necessary than knowing about wars or social errors. Gerhardt, in One of Ours, speaks for Miss Cather when he says "life was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together." It is this spiritual background, this permanency, this spiritual responsibility to his Maker, to himself, and to his world that man must discover--and that responsibility is to create, regardless of cost, the greatest good he can.

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significant; in a compact with nature he strove to fulfill the promise of the land and the aspiration of his own spirit. To realize the highest dreams of youth through one's own effort was to Willa Cather the noblest of accomplishments. Fulfillment of such a high order is seen in the early heroines, Alexandra, Thea, and Antonia; it is seen later in the heroic missions of Bishops Latour and Vaillant.

But "Le but n'est rien; le chemin, c'est tout" was Willa Cather's philosophy. Reaching one's goal seemed less rewarding to her, less rich in personal, spiritual significance, than the struggle which preceded the victory. And, too often, Willa Cather observed the victories to be empty and meaningless to the victors, for with attainment came an attendant lack of creativeness, exploitation by hangers-on, and subsequent materialistic debilitation. Thus the regret which Miss Cather expressed that the pioneer's story should be finished, and thus, no doubt, her return after the disenchantment of the early 1920's to pioneer material for the important novels of her later years.⁸³

Materialism, then, and its attendant ramifications was to Willa Cather the blight of her own age. True to her own sense of values she indicted her own time and place in severe terms, but with an always underlying hopefulness of richer tomorrows.

83 Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock.

CHAPTER V

THE WORLD-BROKEN-IN-TWO

The university, his new house, his old house, everything around him, seemed insupportable, as the boat on which he is imprisoned seems to a seasick man. Yes, it was possible that the little world, on its voyage among all the stars, might become like that; a boat on which one could travel no longer, from which one could no longer look up and confront those bright rings of revolution.

--Godfrey St. Peter in The Professor's House

The great confrontation for Willa Cather came in the years immediately following World War I. The "pioneer" novels, O Pioneers! and My Ántonia, and the praise of the artist's struggle for self-revelation in The Song of the Lark had included notes of defiant optimism and of confidence in the future for spirits like Alexandra Bergson, Ántonia Shimerda, and Thea Kronborg. To Miss Cather the great war had at first seemed a struggle for the triumph of high ideals; but the aftermath of war, the fast development of a gadget civilization in her own land, and the ugly crest of materialism in America all served to bring her up short, in despair for a way of life she had cherished and now realized was ebbing away. Later she was to remark of this time that "the world broke in two in 1922, or thereabouts."¹

¹ Prefatory note in Not Under Forty, New York, Knopf, 1936, p. v.

In the middle period of her career, then,--from 1920 through 1926--Willa Cather's work is characterized by a marked pessimism.²

In what variations did Willa Cather express her pessimism? First may be traced the subdued theme of pessimism through her early stories until it becomes a dominant strain played crescendo in her "middle" novels. Finally may be cited examples of Miss Cather's occasional notes of optimism.

In assessing values or attitudes, or both, a writer may take a positive or negative approach in his work. He may find values in a way of life different from his own. This is a positive approach. The concomitant negative attitude may stress the evils of one's immediate mode of life. Of course, these two aspects are but the obverse and reverse sides of the same coin, and the writer may reflect one or the other. This Willa Cather did.

One of Ours, A Lost Lady, and The Professor's House are the novels of Willa Cather's middle career. In these she used the contemporary scene: in the first case, the story is laid in Nebraska in the years just before and during World

² The year 1922 also saw the appearance of T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land, E.E. Cummings' The Enormous Room, Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt--all of them assaults on modernism. Speaking for these and other writers of the time, Marcus Klein says: "In 1922, or thereabouts, some personal possibility of grace, of coherence of achievement, or personal heroism had been defeated in America."--Introduction to Willa Cather's My Mortal Enemy, First Vintage Edition, New York, Knopf, 1961, p. xi.--

War I--and partly in battle-torn France. The second of this group spans the last years of the nineteenth century and the pre-war years of the present century. The last of the trilogy is set in the early 1920's. These, with the novelette My Mortal Enemy and the closing pages of Lucy Gayheart, represent Miss Cather's only full-length attempts to deal with the predominantly contemporary panorama. That she should have fabricated some of her novels out of the milieu of her own maturity is not surprising; significant, however, are the tone of pessimism which prevails in her "modern" fiction and the fact that she soon retreated from the crushing weight of modernity. In her retreat to the past after 1926, Willa Cather turned to the history of the American Southwest, of French Quebec, and of pre-Civil War Virginia.³ In Lucy Gayheart she again used the Nebraska scene.

The precursor of the oft-mentioned Cather retreat is the pessimism with which Willa Cather was forced to regard the America which emerged as the era of the pioneer faded. The new present was thoroughly unattractive to Miss Cather; she found people of the new age unapologetic for the meanness and ugliness of their own lives. She saw increasing worship of Mammon.⁴ She regretted the lost heroics of those who

³ In Death Comes for the Archbishop, Shadows on the Rock, and Sapphira and the Slave Girl.

⁴ Cf. Chapter 4 below.

broke the stubborn prairie, who dreamed the railroads across the mountains, or who fought their wonderful battles for realization whether as artists on the stage of the Metropolitan or in the fulfilling a mission of motherhood.

Alexandra Bergson was always a "triumphant kind of person."⁵ Willa Cather had concluded Alexandra's story on an optimistic note: "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!"⁶ Thea Kronborg, wrote Willa Cather, in her success as artist "merely came into full possession of things she had been refining and perfecting for so long.... She entered into the inheritance that she herself had laid up, into the fulness of the faith she had kept before she knew its name or meaning."⁷ Thea too, had triumphed. Antonia Shimerda Miss Cather had characterized as "a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races."⁸ The Bohemian girl had been impelled by instincts universal and true to the accomplishment of her seemingly preordained purpose: mothering a large family.

⁵ O Pioneers! p. 256.

⁶ Ibid., p. 262.

⁷ The Song of the Lark, p. 571.

⁸ My Antonia, p. 353.

These women were heroines in the largest sense of the word. They were heroic in nature, struggling and winning through to conquer the land, the conventions of the village mind, or the opprobrium of social censure. Each had grappled with her environment and had won. Not so the leading figures in Willa Cather's middle novels. Each goes down in defeat. Claude Wheeler dies believing in an ideal in which he never doubted but which his world forsook even as he sacrificed himself. Godfrey St. Peter succumbed to the conviction that he could learn to live without delight "just as, in a Prohibition country, he supposed he would have to learn to live without sherry. He had let something go--and it was gone: something very precious, that he could not consciously have relinquished, probably."⁹

The imposing figure of Captain Daniel Forrester, in A Lost Lady, is reduced to impotence, and Marian Forrester compulsively follows an undeviating path of moral and social degradation. In this artistically contrived story all elements add up to a tragic loss--a lost life, or a way of life, which could not pit greatness of vision against crass practicality. A Lost Lady is the epitome of Willa Cather's pessimism; it is her valedictory to her own lost lady--the West of her youth. By the time she wrote The Professor's House, she

9 The Professor's House, p. 280-281.

had turned her back on her own beloved plains country, but not until Death Comes for the Archbishop did she desert the temporal range of her own experience.¹⁰

Thus, the pessimism in Willa Cather's writing, though discernible in some degree in her early short stories, becomes a major theme in the work of her maturity. Her pessimism is a developmental matter. Her reaction against the hollow pretense of the machine age was a revulsion against mercenary, routine-minded men who brought defeat to persons finer than themselves, writes E.K. Brown, and he adds,

She was now painfully disillusioned with the world about her, and for the first time she suffered from a sense of being severed from it....The 1920's seemed to her the period not of great creative men of business, but of their lackeys, their secretaries, managers, lawyers, vice-presidents: these men were wholly uncreative, they exacted huge sums merely for keeping the wheels turning, spent them grossly, and nevertheless were accepted as model products of the American way of life.¹¹

One who had herself lived intensely and heartily, and who admired the same capacity in others, could not but be pessimistic in the face of the uncreative new age. In possibly her strongest statement about writers of her own time Miss Cather

¹⁰ Thus, in one sense, Willa Cather's novels of her final period are most pessimistic in that they (except for Lucy Gayheart) are complete rejections of her own time and experience. That is, pessimism which refuses to deal with one's own culture might be construed as more complete than even a critical acknowledgement of one's culture.

¹¹ Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, New York, Knopf, p. xiv-xv.

wrote:

They were to bring about a renaissance within a decade or so. Failing in this, they made a career of destroying the past. The only thing they offered us was contempt for the old.¹²

Willa Cather's literary pessimism, then, was an evolved attitude, one which developed naturally and which reflected her outlook on her own age in most of its ramifications. She deplored the changes in manners, in the pace and mode of living, and in the arts which she held so dear. It is, therefore, not surprising that the expressions of pessimism in her work are rather clustered in a relatively short period, for once she had turned her back on the present, she could attribute to her characters in the lengthened past her own values and the very nobility of the spirit which her own compatriots had eschewed.

Willa Cather was extremely perceptive to her own time. Certainly, Claude Wheeler, Marian Forrester, and Godfrey St. Peter cannot rightly be termed marginal examples of modern life. Nor are Ivy Peters and Bayliss Wheeler and Louis Marsellus. Miss Cather saw these people exactly as they were: sensitive people doomed to failure and insensitive louts groomed for glory. That she ultimately turned her back on the treatment of her own time in no way vitiates the

¹² "Escapism: A Letter from Willa Cather," Commonweal Vol. 23, Apr. 17, 1936, p. 678.

strength with which she endowed the successful spirits of her final novels--Father Latour and Father Vaillant, Cecile Auclair and Pierre Charron, and Lucy Gayheart. In fact, her disillusion with the desolate present drove Willa Cather to the remote past, there to depict the types which would express her own values and attitudes and which she could hold up as models for her own age. And in this respect her pessimism became the means of showing a more promising future. This indeed is the essence of real pessimism, and the Shaftesburian "optimism" of granting that "whatever is, is right" is in truth the darkest sort of despair:

Even in American cities, which seem so much alike, where people seem all to be living the same lives, striving for the same things, thinking the same thoughts, there are still survivals of a past more loosely woven, there are disconcerting beginnings of a future yet unforeseen.¹³

The subdued pessimism in Willa Cather's early short stories can be termed "local" in nature. Miss Cather in her college years had witnessed a reversal of fortune for the homesteaders of her state. The years 1893-1897 were marked by crop failures and depression which produced the People's Party and the Free Silver movement. These lean years brought grief to many Nebraska farmers and disaster to some banks. Recalling this era in 1923, Miss Cather could observe:

¹³ Willa Cather, "Double Birthday," Forum, Vol. 81, Feb., 1929, p. 78.

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These years of trial, as everyone now realizes, had a salutary effect upon the new state. They winnowed out the settlers with a purpose from the drifting malcontents who are ever seeking a land where man does not live by the sweat of his brow....Those who weathered the storm came into their reward.¹⁴

But when she was more immediately concerned with the temporary decline of Nebraska, she evidenced a pessimism about the unrewarded labors of the homesteader families.

In 1900 Willa Cather could decry:

Poor exiles of all nations....Honest men for the most part, but men with whom the world had dealt hardly... who had been driven to fight for the dominion of an untoward soil, to sow where others should gather, the advance-guard of a mighty civilization to be.¹⁵

She could regret the shortened childhood of farm youngsters on the Divide. This sort of pessimism in the youthful Willa Cather is largely responsible for her desire to go East. She felt then that farm life in Nebraska demanded too much, that town life offered too little. In the East, in the cities, Willa Cather envisioned the genteel life which she wanted so dearly. In the years that followed, her struggles continued to express the gloom she felt for the hard-pressed pioneer, but gradually she began to see more clearly the heroics of the early Nebraska settlers. As this change evolved, her pessimism became subdued until, by the time she

¹⁴ "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," Nation, Vol. 117, Sept. 5, 1923, p. 238.

¹⁵ "Eric Hermannson's Soul," Cosmopolitan, Vol. 28, Apr., 1900, p. 633.

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wrote her three sagas of heroic western women, she could write the lyric of pioneer struggle.

In the developmental process Willa Cather voiced her "local" pessimism in such stories as "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional,"¹⁶ "A Wagner Matinee,"¹⁷ and "The Sculptor's Funeral."¹⁸ In the first of these three Miss Cather draws her most sympathetic picture of the plains country, in this case of Western Kansas. She calls it a country "flat and featureless, without tones or shadows, without emphasis of any kind to break its vast monotony."¹⁹ She speaks of corn only three feet high in late autumn, of farmers who had died in their own sweat battling the prairie. Over the whole story she plays a somber light of bitter discouragement. Colonel Josiah Bywaters, the principal character in this early story,

¹⁶ New England Magazine, n.s., Vol. 24, June, 1901, p. 357-369.

¹⁷ Everybody's Magazine, Vol. 10, Mar., 1904, p. 325-328. Included in The Troll Garden, New York, McClure, Phillips, 1905, and in Youth and the Bright Medusa, New York, Knopf, 1920. Reprinted in Scholastic (English Edition), Vol. 32, Apr. 30, 1938, p. 17-19, and in The Troll Garden (Signet Classics) New York, New American Library, 1961, p. 107-115.

¹⁸ McClure's Magazine, Vol. 24, Jan., 1905, p. 329-336. Included in The Troll Garden, New York, McClure, Phillips, 1905, and in Youth and the Bright Medusa, New York, Knopf, 1920. Reprinted in The Golden Book Magazine, Vol. 19, Feb., 1934, p. 162-172, and in The Troll Garden (Signet Classics) New York, New American Library, 1961, p. 35-49.

¹⁹ "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional," p. 357.

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wondered whether some day the whole grand delusion would not pass away, and this great West, with its cities built on borrowed capital, its temporary homes, its drifting, restless population, become panic stricken and disappear, vanish utterly and completely, as a bubble that bursts, as a dream that is done.²⁰

In "A Wagner Matinee" Willa Cather indicted the new West for depriving its settlers of the fine things which enriched life for those in the East. Aunt Georgiana of this story is Willa Cather's epitome of the sensitive soul who has sacrificed the treasure of music in order to homestead in Red Willow County on the Nebraska frontier. During a visit to Boston after thirty years without concerts, opera, or art exhibits, Aunt Georgiana attends an afternoon all-Wagner program by the Boston symphony orchestra. The experience is almost too much for her, and at the conclusion of the concert she is reluctant to leave the hall:

I understood. For her, just outside the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs; the tall unpainted house, the weather-curved boards, naked as a tower; the crooked-backed ash seedlings where the dishcloths hung to dry; the gaunt, moulting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door.²¹

Not pleasant pictures of pioneer life, these; certainly pictures unlike those in O Pioneers!, My Antonia, or The Song of the Lark. But this is the early, localized pessimism

20 "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional," p. 357.

21 Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 261.

of the young Willa Cather newly escaped from the harsh life on the bronze plains. Mellowing nostalgia had not yet set in. One needs reminding that Miss Cather was nearly forty when O Pioneers! was published.

Willa Cather's indictment of the sterile prairie life all but overwhelms the story in "The Sculptor's Funeral." She rages against the narrow village mind for failing to understand the greatness in its midst. Miss Cather's pessimism regarding small-minded Western towns is suggested in her use of "dungheap"²² to characterize the Kansas settlement. A harsh expression, indeed, from the usually genteel author! The story is unrelieved by any promise of improvement among the "lot of sick, side-tracked, burnt-dog, land-poor sharks"²³ of Harvey Merrick's birthplace. In fact, we learn that even Jim Laird, the honest and understanding lawyer, subsequently becomes one of the hollow men of the raw West.

22 Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 277.

23 Ibid., p. 289.

Willa Cather's other short stories about artists,²⁴ written in the second decade of the century and included in Youth and the Bright Medusa, are laid in cities of the East--New York and Pittsburgh in the main--and are as lacking in the pessimistic tone as the stories of the West are full of it. "A Gold Slipper" reveals the writer's slight pessimism about the failure of the bourgeoisie to accord to the artist the approval and understanding he merits. In some respects, "A Gold Slipper" repeats the pessimistic note of "The Sculptor's Funeral" but in more muted tones.

The long stories, "The Diamond Mine" and "Coming Aphrodite!" also point up the problems of artists in relation to society, but there is little evidence of a pessimistic point of view in either narrative. In the latter story Willa Cather once rather regretfully remarks on a "whole continent full of people who knew nothing about pictures,"²⁵ but she adds that such a failing is not to be held against them.

²⁴ These stories and their place of original publication are: "The Diamond Mine," McClure's Magazine, Vol. 45, Oct., 1916, p. 7-11; "A Gold Slipper," Harper's, Vol. 134, Jan. 1917, p. 166-174, reprinted in The Golden Book Magazine, Vol. 3, Mar., 1926, p. 359-366; and "Scandal," Century Magazine, Vol. 98, Aug., 1919, p. 433-445. "Coming Aphrodite!" was published first in Youth and the Bright Medusa, New York, Knopf, 1920, was reprinted in The Golden Book Magazine, Vol. 4, Nov. 1926, p. 591-609.

²⁵ Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 65.

Therefore, Willa Cather's early pessimism is seen to be local, directed against the prairie country--and folk--she was later to idealize and, later still, to reproach. The pessimistic strain was a diminishing accompaniment to her literary artistry and one that gave way almost completely--for a while--to a roudade of optimism. But the consideration of optimism in Miss Cather's work shall be reserved until the final section of this chapter.

The Great War contributed much to the deep pessimism of the middle years. The destruction it had wrought came as a personal tragedy to Willa Cather. She had a great love for France and was distraught at the desolation which had swept that country. She had suffered personal loss, too, in the battle-death of her sousin George P. Cather, Jr., in that of a young soldier-friend, violinist David Hochstein, and in the deaths of former students of hers. Late in 1918 Miss Cather set to work on a war novel and devoted nearly four years to the writing of One of Ours, which was published by Alfred A. Knopf²⁶ in the autumn of 1922 and for which the author was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

One of Ours is Willa Cather's first expression of the deep pessimism which was also to mark her work in the two novels which followed. This pessimism is unlike the localized

²⁶ Willa Cather's earlier novels had been published in the United States by Houghton Mifflin Company.

variety which was apparent in the early short stories. Her pessimism now was more inclusive as well as more pervasive. She felt more and more her estrangement from the modern world; she sensed that she was out of harmony with American life of the post-war years, but she certainly was convinced that the ideals she clung to were many times more important than the values of the new humdrum world.

Ernest Havel, the Bohemian friend of Claude Wheeler and a boy who Claude felt "lived in an atmosphere of mental liberty to which he himself could never hope to attain,"²⁷ once warned Claude, "You Americans are always looking for something outside yourselves to warm you up, and it is no way to do."²⁸ It was just this decline in self-reliance which Willa Cather deplored so much. In Claude Wheeler she depicted a young man of a prosperous, materialistic farm family, a sensitive person who yearned for something he could hardly identify, who felt a discontent with his life in pre-war Nebraska but who knew not how to remedy the ills of his time.

But Willa Cather diagnosed these ills:

27 One of Ours, p. 16.

28 Ibid., p. 63.

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The people themselves had changed. Their [farmers'] sons were either stingy and grasping, or extravagant and lazy Evidently it took more intelligence to spend money than to make it.

[Claude] could not see the use of working for money when money bought nothing one wanted. Mrs. Erlich said it brought security. Sometimes he felt this security was what was the matter with everybody; that only perfect safety was required to kill all the best qualities in people and develop the mean ones.

...To be assured, at his age, of three meals a day and plenty of sleep, was like being assured of a decent burial. Safety, security; if you followed that reasoning out, then the unborn, those who would never be born, were the safest of all; nothing could happen to them.²⁹

Miss Cather in this introspective, pessimistic analysis of Claude permits him only "the conviction that there was something splendid about life, if he could but find it."³⁰

Claude Wheeler does eventually find meaning in his life, but he finds it encompassed in the greatest of all social evils--war. Unperceptive to the over-all worthlessness of war, Claude finds his part in it a means of becoming worth something to society. His entry into the army came when he was in the deepest gloom about the irrelevance of his own life to any great ideal, at a time when

he could not help thinking how much better it would be if people could go to sleep like the fields, be blanketed down under the snow, to wake with their hurts healed and their defeats forgotten. He wondered how he was to go on through the years ahead of him, unless he could get rid of this sick feeling in his soul.³¹

29 One of Ours, p. 118-119.

30 Ibid., p. 120.

31 Ibid., p. 253.

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He did get rid of this humor when he found his mission in the war.

Claude felt that Americans had become a people of hollow pretense and shallow emotions. On the battlefields he changed his mind. He found "Life was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together."³²

But if Willa Cather permitted her soldier protagonist his illusion, she was not herself deceived about him and the millions like him. She saw war as a too-costly way of affording sensitive souls a feeling of validity. Though Claude admits he never knew anything worth living for until the war came on, Miss Cather sees the short-sightedness of his idealism, and she closes the novel on a note of deep pessimism--a pessimism which accounts death better than disillusionment with an ideal that best served the propagandists' purposes:

He died believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be. Perhaps it was well to see that vision, and then to see no more. One by one the heroes of that war, the men of dazzling soldiership, leave prematurely the world they have come back to. Airmen whose deeds were tales of wonder, officers whose names made the blood of youth beat faster, survivors of incredible dangers--one by one they quietly die by their own hand. Some do it in obscure lodging-houses, some in their offices. Some slip over a vessel's side and disappear into the sea....Those slayers of themselves were all so like

32 One of Ours, p. 454.

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him; they were the ones who had hoped extravagantly-- who in order to do what they did had to hope extravagantly, and to believe passionately. And they found they had hoped and believed too much. But one she knew who could ill bear disillusion...safe, safe.³³

The most elegiac of Willa Cather's novels of pessimism is A Lost Lady. The pessimism of this short novel is in some degree a combination of the author's early dejection and the chagrin of her post-war years: in A Lost Lady she again localizes her pessimism in the Western scene of her youth, but the dejection results not so much from the harshness of the land as from the malevolence of men. The story of Captain Daniel Forrester and his wife, Marian, is suggested in the line Willa Cather uses at the end of Chapter VII: "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds."³⁴ Miss Cather was beset by the disquieting realization that the West of the Alexandra Bergsons and Antonia Shimerdas was falling prey to other types of individuals--fester types:

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. The space, the color, the princely carelessness of the pioneer they would destroy and cut up into profitable bits, as the match factory splinters the primeval forest.³⁵

33 One of Ours, p. 513-514.

34 From Shakespeare's "Sonnet XCIV".

35 A Lost Lady, p. 102.

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Willa Cather seemed to take the decline of pioneer ideals as a personal loss, and she found nothing to replace the waning splendor of the pioneer inspiration; no worthy new story could be told of the later-generation men and women of the West. Her explication in the essay on Nebraska is, in part, a restatement of the meaning of A Lost Lady:

The generation that subdued the wild land and broke up the virgin prairie is passing....With these old men and women the attainment of material prosperity was a moral victory, because it was wrung from hard conditions, was the result of a struggle that tested character. The sons...were reared amid hardships, and it is perhaps natural that they should be very much interested in material comfort, in buying whatever is expensive and ugly....The generation now in the driver's seat hates to make anything, wants to live and die in an automobile, scudding past those acres where the old men used to follow the long corn-rows up and down. They want to buy everything ready-made: clothes, food, education, music, pleasure.³⁶

The tragedy of Marian Forrester is that, in spite of the disappearance of men who had harnessed prairies and mountains, "she preferred life on any terms."³⁷ Refusing to immolate herself, she passed through successive stages of degradation, ever sacrificing more of the ideals of that dreamer-pioneer, Captain Daniel Forrester. Mrs. Forrester became what Willa Cather could term a "common woman," and the memory of Captain Forrester became the only reality. Miss Cather

36 "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," p. 238.

37 A Lost Lady, p. 102.

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refused to take life on any terms, but she wisely refused also to immolate herself for the pioneer age. Instead, she soon discarded both the present and the past of her own epoch to rediscover high ideals in the lengthened past.

Godfrey St. Peter voices the pessimistic mood of The Professor's House in the early pages of the novel. He forecasts his later and more complete resignation to the forces of modernity when he warns against thinking too mournfully of life which "doesn't turn out for any of us as we plan."³⁸

The story of Professor St. Peter is Willa Cather's delineation of the post-war sensitive, cultivated adult who lives dispiritedly in the awareness that he is becoming more and more detached from life--even his own. St. Peter recognizes the sham and mockery in the commercial exploitation of Tom Outland's invention; he realizes that his own great history, The Spanish Adventurers in North America, has by its very success become the means of estrangement from a life he loved, a house he enjoyed, and even the family he adored. Professor St. Peter gives promise of the Michelet epigram used in the 1931 short story, "Old Mrs. Harris" ("Le but n'est rien; le chemin, c'est tout"). In many respects, Willa Cather was writing about herself in her treatment of the professor's character. The increasing reluctance to comply with new

³⁸ The Professor's House, p. 16.

social patterns, to adopt the changed system of values, produced an emotional turmoil in Godfrey St. Peter not unlike Miss Cather's own feelings expressed in her "world-broken-in-two" statement.³⁹

But St. Peter goes down in defeat. He almost embraces suicide; and, after a last-minute, instinctive escape from self-destruction, he faces the future with a fortitude grounded only in resignation. Willa Cather was not defeated; she simply retreated from the ugly present to seek a refuge in the past, preferring not to join directly in battle again with the corrosion of her own age.

It would be a mistake to leave the impression that Willa Cather's pessimism was unrelieved. Even in the depths of her post-war pessimism, Miss Cather found some occasion for optimism. The Nebraska essay, for the most part heavily pessimistic, actually concludes on a hopeful note. Willa Cather rises to the defense of the second generation she had castigated, asking, "Will the third generation--the full-

³⁹ Of the protagonist of this second of Miss Cather's novels of deep pessimism, E.K. Brown wrote: "Into Professor St. Peter Willa Cather poured her grief at the decline of so many of the values she cherished. The postwar students at the small Midwestern college where he teaches are now, he thinks, a common lot. The young professors are utilitarian, political, self-interested. The programs have suffered by the pressure of the will of the state legislature and the community, for whom the ideal in higher education is a trade school passing under the name of college."--Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, p. 239.

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blooded, generous one just coming over the hill--will it be fooled? Will it believe that to live easily is to live happily?"⁴⁰

And she answers forthrightly:

Surely the materialism and showy extravagance of this hour are a passing phase! They will mean no more in half a century from now than will the "hard times" of twenty-five years ago--which are already forgotten. The population is as clean and full of vigor as the soil; there are no old grudges, no heritages of disease or hate. The belief that smug success and easy money are the real sins of human life has settled down over our prairies, but it is not yet hardened into molds and crusts. The people are warm, mercurial, impressionable, restless, over-fond of novelty and change. These are not the qualities which make the dull chapters of history.⁴¹

The optimism in Willa Cather's writing is most pronounced and most sustained in the "pioneer" novels, O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, and My Antonia. That triumphant character, Alexandra Bergson, is a person "fit to cope with the world."⁴² She conquered the Divide in a battle whose outcome, at least for her and her creator, was never in doubt. The land was beneficent for souls like Alexandra who could tame it and own it for at least a little while. She, like her father before her, had hope; she believed in the land with an indomitable conviction that man had but to match the greatness of nature

⁴⁰ "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," p. 238.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² O Pioneers!, p. 181.

to be sure of victory. To Alexandra, Willa Cather gave the fierce enthusiasm of youth and the grave determination bred of a long tradition.

The story of Thea Kronborg is ultimately the account of a richly endowed girl who fulfills her own great capabilities through devoted concentration to her tasks. And Thea, even from childhood, advances toward her goal with an assurance--never a conceit--that a bitter and glorious struggle can have only one outcome. Again Miss Cather endows her character with the eagerness and optimistic faith of youth. As the writer revealed in the Preface written for the 1932 edition, Thea Kronborg was the sort for whom "Success is never so interesting as struggle,"⁴³ and "to persons of her vitality and honesty, fortunate accidents will always happen."⁴⁴

The easy optimism of the author of The Song of the Lark is poles away from the pessimism of the writer of "The Sculptor's Funeral" or A Lost Lady.

The third of Willa Cather's novels of fulfillment is My Ántonia. Where O Pioneers! has an epic quality, My Ántonia is lyrical in the account of the settlement of Nebraska. In that later novel Miss Cather sings the praises of the land

⁴³ The Song of the Lark, p. vii.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. ix.

and its promises and of the heroic souls who brought it under the plow. She does, of course, pay tribute to the men who were sacrificed on the prairie--old Mr. Shimerda, for example --but for the most part she makes the story of the land an account of an optimistic compact between man and nature:

The windy springs and the blazing summers, one after another, had enriched and mellowed that flat table-land; all the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or a great idea.⁴⁵

The most striking episode in My Antonia is presented in an optimistic scene. Jim Burden and the "hired girls" are enjoying a picnic near Black Hawk, and at sunset they see a plow silhouetted against the great red disk of the setting sun. The plough, standing at evening in an upland field appears "heroic in size, a picture writing in the sun."⁴⁶ Surely, Willa Cather meant that magnified figure to symbolize the promise of the morrow, the "picture writing" to urge on new Coronados in their new conquests.

⁴⁵ My Antonia, p. 306.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 245.

CHAPTER VI

THE DISSOLUTION INTO SOMETHING GREAT

Willa Cather's tombstone in Old Cemetery at Jeffrey Center, New Hampshire, bears this inscription: "That is happiness, to be dissolved into something complete and great." The line was taken from My Ántonia¹ and is spoken by Jim Burden early in the story of the Bohemian girl. The overtones of this statement sound the note of Willa Cather's idealism. Wherever she found the story of a person devoted to what she believed to be a noble endeavor, Miss Cather found universal verities and spiritual enrichment. A brave girl taming the stubborn prairie, Ántonia fulfilling her mission of motherhood, an ancient people who lived true to their aesthetic and moral principles, a girl motivated by the artistic capability latent within her, an untutored boy sensitive to the richness of his own land; a William Jennings Bryan, Count de Frontenac, or a cultivated missionary bishop: all these were protagonists of "success" stories--inward successes, the success of courage and self-giving; all these afforded Willa Cather a thrill of pleasure by their devotion to something complete and great. The finding of happiness and an unassailable "success" in complete dedication to a

1 P. 18.

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task--that to Miss Cather was as much reality as the ugly mud houses of the prairie or the provinciality of the small towns. The striving of the human spirit toward a goal, a goal even dimly realized or only felt, was the greatest of stories to her. The lack of such idealism in a person was enough to relegate him to a limbo of secondary spirits as far as Willa Cather was concerned.

Thus, her novels of idealism are those whose protagonists are committed to striving toward the accomplishment of a worthwhile objective: O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, My Antonia, One of Ours, Death Comes for the Archbishop, Shadows on the Rock, and Lucy Gayheart. Her novels in which principal characters are untrue to high ideals are Alexander's Bridge, The Professor's House, and A Lost Lady. Of course, in any one novel, one finds characters who are weak or strong in idealism, but the division of her stories on this basis is not unreasonable. In a preceding chapter of this study, it had been noted that Willa Cather's pessimism in mid-career and her concern with materialism were not of a hopeless sort. Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom describe as one of Miss Cather's tenets the belief that "anti-spiritual forces have always warred against pure idealism and that those forces have ultimately been destroyed."² Though she realized that

² "Willa Cather's Novels of the Frontier: The Symbolic Function of Machine-Made Materialism," University of Toronto Quarterly, Vol. 20, Oct., 1950, p. 45.

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materialism could defeat idealism, she also felt that a revitalized and strengthened idealism could rise in a later era--"...she was convinced that conflict of this nature has always been elemental in man's perpetual groping toward perfectibility."³ Willa Cather paradoxically idealizes individual man's constant high-minded search for truth and recognizes society's deliberate rejection of correspondent values, and so her idealism is personal and akin to Emersonian self-reliance.⁴ Though Miss Cather lost patience with the materialism of her own generation, and of the following generation, she refused to believe that any materialistic compulsion could subjugate for long man's higher ideals and his opportunity for happiness. Her idealism is both forward and backward looking: she reminds her own age of its lost nobility and hopes for a repossession of personal, moral, and aesthetic

3 "Willa Cather's Novels of the Frontier: The Symbolic Function of Machine-Made Materialism," University of Toronto Quarterly, Vol. 20, Oct., 1950, p. 45.

4 Lloyd Morris, as early as 1924, announced that Willa Cather was in the main stream of American literary tradition--epitomized by Emerson and Whitman--in its emphasis on the cult of the individual. Morris was responsive to her lauding of the pioneer virtues of independence, self-reliance, perseverance, hope and confidence.--"Willa Cather," North American Review, Vol. 219, May, 1924, p. 641-643.

Dayton Kohler, writing twenty-three years later, confirmed Morris' judgment: "Her concept of character was Emersonian in its awareness of man's potentialities and his greatness or smallness in living them out."--"Willa Cather: 1876-1947," College English, Vol. 9, Oct., 1949, p. 11.

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ideals in the future. Her idealism is based on a hopeful but realistic philosophy, partially grounded, no doubt, in her university experience in American literature, in the classics, and in the French idealists and romantics; but growing, also, out of her alertness to the climate of ideas of her own time.

Willa Cather was not, of course, a philosopher, and had had very little formal study in philosophy.⁵ If one discerns a paradoxical or ambivalent quality in her thinking, one must keep in mind that she did not explicitly express any system of thought--nor attempted to; she reveals only attitudes which are not, necessarily, in orderly arrangement or mutually exclusive. Specifically, as the product of her shaping forces she was imbued with one attitude; as an alert, sensitive observer of her own age she could not be unaffected by the intellectual climate.

Specifically, Willa Cather believed that, even though the pioneer spirit had been subdued, had succumbed to the encroachments of materialism, an equivalent impulse would rise again in men--in new pioneers, in artists, in all who were creative. She wrote:

⁵ She enrolled in one philosophy class at the University of Nebraska, a course in logic.

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I have always the hope that something went into the ground with those pioneers that will one day come out again. Something that will come out not only in sturdy traits of character, but in elasticity of mind, in an honest attitude toward the realities of life, and in certain qualities of feeling and imagination.⁶

And again:

The wave of serious idealism, of noble seriousness, which swept over the state of Nebraska in 1917 and 1918, demonstrated how fluid and flexible is any living, growing, expanding society. If such 'conversions' do not last, they at least show of what men and women are capable.⁷

For purposes of this discussion Willa Cather's idealism will be considered under five headings and, as in earlier chapters, passages from her writings which give expression to her beliefs will be cited. Miss Cather's idealism may be catalogued as follows: ethical striving, land and the beneficence of nature, self-reliance, personal dignity, and a miscellany of idealistic statements.

Willa Cather thought of desire as the equivalent of creation and, therefore, aesthetically important. The ethical striving which she idealized was the same in the pioneer as it was in the artist, and her best delineation of her idea is found in the early stories of pioneers and in the novel of the artist, The Song of the Lark. Of these, the last eulogizes desire more than do the others. Miss Cather

⁶ Willa Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," Nation, Vol. 117, Sept., 5, 1923, p. 237.

⁷ Ibid., p. 238.

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rhapsodizes, "O eagle of eagles! Endeavour, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art!"⁸ in equating the secret of the vanished race of Panther Canon with the inchoate motivation of Thea Kronborg. Old Professor Wunsch, clinging to art in the sterility of Moonstone, Colorado, warns Thea that without desire In der Brust there can be no art; he is the first to acquaint her with the potential greatness within her, to tell her of a mission to which she must be selflessly devoted. From that day on Thea drove unswervingly, in spite of family misunderstandings, an ill-starred love affair, and the hardships of long study, toward the achievement of a goal which only later became clearly defined.

The rising curve of the novel dealing with Thea's struggles for self-realization and for society's approval is the part of the story which most pleased the author. In the preface to the Library Edition, Willa Cather admits that she should have been content to end the novel before the "descending curve" began:

...the life of a successful artist in the full tide of achievement is not so interesting as the life of a talented young girl "fighting her way." Success is never so interesting as struggle--not even to the successful, not even to the most mercenary forms of ambition.⁹

8 The Song of the Lark, p. 399.

9 Ibid., p. vii.

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Thea Kronborg is the Willa Cather character who more than any other drives forward in her struggle for self-realization. She is impelled by a strong inner motivation. Her author referred to her as one of those persons to whom fortunate accidents will always happen, but one feels that Thea seized life in her hands and sought out these fortunate accidents. Dr. Archie of the story categorized Thea when he commented, "The people who forge ahead and do something, they really count."¹⁰ The ideal of struggle was a quality which Thea cherished and nourished within herself. It was a possession she could neither share nor explain, but she early realized its significance, and she never shirked its demands -- "As long as she lived that ecstasy was going to be hers. She would live for it, die for it; but she was going to have it...."¹¹

In her earlier novel of a strong heroine, Willa Cather had allowed the protagonist a clearer understanding of her desire to triumph in her great struggle. Alexandra Bergson had vision, vision sufficient to perceive her distant goal of success on the prairie. She was in the highest tradition of the pioneer ideal: "A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the

10 The Song of the Lark, p. 176.

11 Ibid., p. 254.

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things themselves."¹² This Alexandra could do. True to her name, she was a conqueror, but the high points of her life for her--for the reader--are those dealing with her years of contest with her prairie environment. As she did later in The Song of the Lark, Willa Cather in O Pioneers! wrote a story that lost some of its impact once the goal had been won. "There were always dreamers on the frontier,"¹³ and the dreamer pioneers of Willa Cather's Nebraska stories were the idealists she admired. Alexandra is the sort of person who could find reality in a dream and seize on it, but once she had it the beauty was diminished.

Antonia Shimerda knew her goal less than did either of the earlier Cather heroines, but she strove no less valiantly toward the fulfillment of her special mission. A great earth-character, Antonia finds spiritual enrichment in her closeness to the land and in motherhood. She was indeed dissolved into something complete and great. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant sees Antonia's role as "so primeval, and so much woman's whether she plowed for her brother or cooked for Mrs. Harling in Black Hawk, that a detached lonely boy could think of her in the confused terms of a youthful projection

¹² O Pioneers!, p. 42.

¹³ Ibid., p. 255.

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of love and nature blended."¹⁴ Antonia Shimerda Cuzak at the end of the story has lost none of the zeal and personal richness of the young Bohemian girl:

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 a gesture that somehow revealed the meaning of common things....All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions.¹⁵

Antonia Shimerda becomes the ideal wife and mother, at home only in the open vistas of the prairies which so completely suit her as she suits them. She has given her substance to her environment at the same time she drew her life-essential spirit from it. She and nature seemed to have reached perfect accord, and that had been the ideal toward which she had always unconsciously driven.

The Professor's House is not a novel in which Willa Cather dwelt extensively on her ideal of ethical striving, but in it she gives as clear a statement of her ideal as can be found anyplace in her writing. In the early pages of the novel Miss Cather presents Professor St. Peter upon the successful completion of his history:

¹⁴ Willa Cather: A Memoir, Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1953, p. 151.

¹⁵ My Antonia, p. 353.

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A man can do anything if he wishes to enough, St. Peter believed. Desire is creation, is the magical element in that process. If there were an instrument to measure desire, one could foretell achievement.¹⁶

Godfrey St. Peter is that rare Cather character, the inconstant man. He, after considerable soul searching and near suicide, compromises the ideal of ethical striving, which had led him to scholarly greatness, to live on terms imposed by his materialistic family and society. The professor could appreciate the idealism of a Tom Outland and he could understand that "Wherever humanity had made the hardest of all starts, and lifted itself out of mere brutality, is a sacred spot,"¹⁷ but he could not hold himself true to the ideal. He relinquished the spark which set apart figures like Alexandra, Thea, or Antonia. He could, at the end of the novel, face the future with fortitude, but a fortitude tempered by resignation.

Captain Daniel Forrester, the defeated idealist of A Lost Lady, never surrendered his beliefs. He is, therefore more closely akin to the heroines of the earlier novels although he plays out his part in a story in which negativism is victorious. Forrester elucidates his philosophy this way:

¹⁶ The Professor's House, p. 23.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 219.

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Well, then, my philosophy is that what you think of and plan for day by day, in spite of yourself, so to speak--you will get....you will accomplish what you dream of most....because a thing that is dreamed of in the way I mean is already an accomplished fact. All our great West has been developed from such dreams, the homesteader's and the prospector's and the contractor's.¹⁸

Willa Cather was enamoured of persons who, like Archbishop Latour, figuratively died not of illness but of having lived. She admired the person who worked and strove for his self-realization whenever such a realization was consistent with moral and aesthetic values. The constant high endeavor of an individual toward a worthwhile goal, whether in the view of society the goal was great or small, was the noblest of human aspirations. As one of her last-drawn characters stated it, "...this I know: our best years are when we can hardly see our way out."¹⁹ Thus this ideal was one which Miss Cather consistently and hopefully held throughout her novelistic career.

Another hopeful ideal which Willa Cather held high for her readers was the greatness of the land and the beneficence of nature. Though she lived for years in New York, she never lost her feeling for the bounteous land, and she felt impelled to make frequent trips, back to Red Cloud, to

18 A Lost Lady, p. 50-51.

19 "The Best Years," The Old Beauty and Others, New York, Knopf, 1948, p. 136.

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Wyoming, to the Southwest, or to her native Virginia county, always finding spiritual and aesthetic regeneration in nature. Miss Cather loved various regions. She always held dear the part of Frederick County where she had spent her early years. The land of the Divide became a part of her thinking and feeling. She surrendered herself wholeheartedly to the great Santa Fe region and the richness of its Indian past. Late in life she fell deeply in love with Quebec province, and from her post-college years on she held a special affection for France which she visited often. In her mature years Willa Cather enjoyed an island retreat in New Brunswick, and again she immersed herself in the beauty of the region.

One rightly thinks of Willa Cather as a regional writer, but it would be easy to think of her only as a Nebraska writer. She, unlike Sarah Orne Jewett or William Faulkner, wrote of several regions, and always with an idealistic appreciation of the land:

New Mexico, New Brunswick and Quebec were not places where fate had situated Willa Cather, or where professional interests had taken her. They were psychic homelands that her love and adventure had eagerly sought and embraced--almost fragments of her soul.²⁰

Nowhere does Willa Cather hold the land so close and so dear as in O Pioneers!. In this "first" novel Miss Cather makes the land almost the leading character. The sweep of

20 Sergeant, p. 243.

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the novel stems directly from the constant awareness of the great prairie. The reader can hardly lose himself in the beauty of the prairie summer because he is constantly aware of the awesomeness of the prairie winter. One can hardly surrender to the terror of a prairie blizzard, for one is always mindful of the promise of the prairie spring. Alexandra Bergson is great because she has hope, faith in the land, just as her pioneer father had. When she begins to achieve some domination of the wild prairie, she acknowledges:

We hadn't any of us much to do with it, Carl. The land did it. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich....²¹

To Alexandra Bergson, says Willa Cather, "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."²² Alexandra was one who had faith and found faith rewarded in the greatness of her land. The great fact to Alexandra and to her creator was the land itself, the swell of the prairie and the promise of the country that had received her into its bosom.

Jim Burden, arriving in Nebraska much as had Willa Cather herself, was first impressed by the land:

21 O Pioneers!, p. 99-100 (Italics mine).

22 Ibid., p. 56.

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There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material of which countries were made....I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction.²³

Jim and Antonia Shimerda had in common their love of the land. He, like Willa Cather, left it, returning to find regeneration; Antonia found greatness in remaining in and of the land, the earth-mother finding strength and substance in nature.

The crucial point in the life of Thea Kronborg is her discovery of Panther Canon. Here she found things which seemed destined for her, "a voice out of the past, not very loud, that went on saying a few simple things to the solitude eternally."²⁴ From the cliffs of Panther Canon "certain feelings were transmitted to her, suggestions that were simple, insistent, and monotonous, like the beating of Indian drums."²⁵ Willa Cather, in one of her most sustained lyrical passages, has Thea Kronborg "find herself" in near solitary communion with the strength of ages. The young singer seems, indeed, to take up strength from the cliffs and trails as the pinon trees did. The land in this novel is something of a deus ex machina for the heroine.

²³ My Antonia, p. 7.

²⁴ The Song of the Lark, p. 375.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 376.

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The land in Death Comes for the Archbishop is not a background against which the legends and tales are spun out; it is a vital part, a foreground, of the fabric of the novel, woven into the tapestry-like narratives of travels, mesas, Indians, renegades, and the two missionary priests. Both Father Latour and Father Vaillant miss their beloved France, but both are enamoured of the harsh beauty of the great Southwest. Both find spiritual enrichment and strength in the land; the sensitive Latour can even find the exact stone from which to build his Midi Romanesque cathedral.

There are only a few Willa Cather novels in which the overwhelming presence of the land is not a significant factor. Again and again she idealizes the beauty, the strength, and the awesomeness of nature--"For her the land is both end and test of an ethical striving."²⁶

Running through Willa Cather's novels is the bright skein of Emersonian self-reliance. Miss Cather gives frequent expression to an ideal which certainly guided her own life. She was fond of the "powerfully equipped nature"²⁷ she drew so well in her three great heroines and in men like Tom Outland, Daniel Forrester, the missionary priests, and Pierre Charron. Miss Cather always wrote stories of individuals,

²⁶ Bloom and Bloom, p. 46.

²⁷ Alexander's Bridge, p. 18.

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not of groups, movements, or eras. For her, "there was only one thing that had an absolute value for each individual, and it was just that original impulse, that internal heat, that feeling of one's self in one's own breast."²⁸ No one, she felt, could build his life on the nobleness of another person; ultimately every individual of any worth had to find within himself the qualities that made for greatness according to her criteria.

Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, who knew Willa Cather for many years, reveals Miss Cather's strong feeling for individual responsibility: "Willa believed in the early American virtues, courage, sturdiness, tough endeavor. Nobody, young people especially, should be helped, no artist or writer either."²⁹ This is, indeed, a creed of rugged individualism! It is the pattern of Willa Cather's own life and the pattern which she illuminated in her characters of greatest stature. She apostrophizes in O Pioneers! that "the history of every country begins in the heart of a man or woman."³⁰ This she believed: only individual creativeness could add up to greatness in a tribe, a state, or a nation.

28 Alexander's Bridge, p. 39.

29 Sergeant, p. 261.

30 P. 56-57.

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What was it that Willa Cather found so admirable in her "hired girl" characters who threaten to take over the story in My Ántonia? It was their individualness, their personal initiative and force. They were not, as were the "town girls," sheep-like figures. Rather, these girls were singular, working ahead in their own way (not always the best way), seeking to fulfill their own destiny. Why did Miss Cather seemingly fall in love with her creature, Tom Outland? He was an individual who found his own way, who found resources within himself to lift him above the common lot. And the tragedy of Marian Forrester? She was lost because she lacked the individual quality; she could not stand alone against adversity. She could only follow, always finding whatever savoir vivre she possessed in her relationships with others.

Professor St. Peter, himself a compromiser with life, is nevertheless a perceptive man. In a classroom lecture he could elucidate the ideal of self-reliance: "And that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives."³¹

Another of Willa Cather's idealistic concerns is her preoccupation with gentility. She was outspoken in her admiration of the person of inherent natural dignity, the man of manners, not in the sense of eighteenth century polish but

31 The Professor's House, p. 63.

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in the sense of intrinsic nobility of character. She found gentility in all classes of life: Eusabio the Indian and Kit Carson, the frontier scout, were gentlemen as much as aristocratic Bishop Latour or Don Olivares; Antonia Shimerda is a greater lady than Marian Forrester or Myra Henshawe. The person of natural dignity was one who afforded a glow of pleasure to his fellows, in whom one felt standards and loyalties, a code not easily put into words, but instantly felt when two men who live by it come together.

It is not by chance that Miss Cather presents so many characters like Crazy Ivar, Spanish Johnny, Old Mahaley, and Augusta. There is about these and about all her "great" characters a lack of constraint, petty jealousies, and meanness. They are open handed and open hearted, having "a kind of natural harmony about their movements, their greetings, their low conversations."³² She admired the man who like Pierre Charron "had the good manners of the Old World, the dash and daring of the New."³³ She rejoiced in those who had the old ideals of clan-loyalty and who never counted the cost of friendship.

Loyalty, especially family loyalty, was to Willa Cather a necessary quality in every worthwhile person--"the

32 The Song of the Lark, p. 289.

33 Shadows on the Rock, p. 200.

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family was the first and final thing in the human lot."³⁴ Miss Cather always clung to her family; her brothers Roscoe and Douglas were especially dear to her, and nieces and nephews were also much in her thoughts. Loyalties among friends were also important. One thinks of the bonds uniting Jim Burden and his Antonia, of Thea Kronborg and Ray Kennedy and Dr. Archie, of the two missionary priests, and of Euclide Auclair and his patron, Count de Frontenac. The eloquent simplicity of an Indian's greeting to Father Latour says much in its overtones, "'My friend has come.' That was all, but it was everything; welcome, confidence, appreciation."³⁵

Graciousness, warm enthusiasms, real personal dignity: these are qualities which Willa Cather idealizes. We find them repeatedly in the people of her creation. We find, also, a few who because they lack these same virtues are relegated to pettiness, to uncreativity, and to defeat.

Not all of Willa Cather's idealism falls within the general categories thus far discussed. Several of her novels are bathed in an aura of idealism. Most notable, perhaps, is One of Ours, especially in Books Four and Five, "The Voyage of the Anchises," and "Bidding the Eagles of the West Fly On." In these portions of the novel Miss Cather deals with the

³⁴ Shadows on the Rock, p. 203.

³⁵ Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 257.

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generous idealism which swept Claude Wheeler and his kind to the recruiting stations in the first days of the war. The essence of Claude's story after he joined the army is in his idealism, his finding a sine qua non in the mission of the Allies. The early work O Pioneers! and the later novel Shadows on the Rock are both characterized by a pervasive idealism. Religious idealism, of course, is in nearly every page of Death Comes for the Archbishop.

But Miss Cather sprinkled her pages with idealistic asides and apostrophes. Again and again she lauds the person who like Thea Kronborg "is uncommon, in a common, common world."³⁶ Earth owls typified some persons for her; winged things that would come home at sunset to disappear into a hole in the earth were, after all, degraded creatures. She knew and wrote of some people like that, people who scurried for security at the first shadow of trial rather than doing their best to fulfill a dream that "had been dreamed long ago, in the night of ages...when the wind had whispered some promise to the sadness of the savage."³⁷

The whole of Willa Cather's idealism is greater than the sum of its parts. As she herself wrote, the essence of it is difficult to put into words, but it is there for the

³⁶ The Song of the Lark, p. 268.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 380.

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reader to find and appreciate, like the brush strokes in a fine painting, integral, recognizable, but almost impossible to disengage from the artistic whole.

The passion of desire, the striving toward fulfillment is often elucidated. Old Wunsch early warned his pupil Thea Kronborg of this when he said that everything in life was little compared to desire. Myra Henshawe found desire as fulfillment in religion. Roman Catholicism rewarded the seeking itself "because in religion seeking is finding."³⁸ The Catholic faithful in Quebec believed in their miracles "because they are the actual flowering of desire....A lost ecstasy is made an actual possession and can be bequeathed to another."³⁹

The passion and brilliance of the virtues which Willa Cather memorializes are those which lend preemptive merit to persons of imagination and self-reliance. Finding ideals in reality and reality in a dream, she emphasizes the spirituality of man in his natural dignity. Her idealism is not reduceable to a pat statement, but she affirms repeatedly the importance of the intellectual and spiritual beauty in man above the physical and material attributes of man. A statement about her purest idealist, Claude Wheeler, may summarize

38 My Mortal Enemy, p. 320.

39 Shadows on the Rock, p. 160.

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her attitude:

Ideals were not archaic things, beautiful and impotent; they were real sources of power among men. As long as that was true, and now he knew it was true--he had come all this way to find out--he had no quarrel with destiny....He would give his own adventure for no man's.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ One of Ours, p. 470.

CHAPTER VII

SOME OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Thus far, this study has dealt with Willa Cather's values as revealed by her own expressions in her poetry, short stories, essays, and novels. This chapter, the last in this study to be based primarily upon "internal" evidence, is intended to elucidate Miss Cather's attitude as she expressed it about a miscellany of subjects: land, race, religion, art, and education.

The strong figures of Willa Cather's West were those who had an attachment to the land and who could use it beneficently. Men like Anton Rosicky, Claude Wheeler, Tom Outland, and Bishop Latour--and women like Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, and Antonia Shimerda--were in what Miss Cather considered a wholesome relationship to the land as a part of their environment. The happy conjunction of man and nature is a hallmark of Catheresque artistry whether it is expressed in dominant themes like the Kronborg-Panther Canon or Latour-New Mexico stories or in a subtle accompaniment like the Pierre Charron-Quebec tale. Those were large men who could tame the land and own it at least for a little while. Those were the Cather idealists who like Neighbor Rosicky felt that "to be a landless man was to be a wage-earner, a slave, all

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your life; to have nothing, to be nothing."¹

A person's relationship to a place could be the most important and decisive relationship of his life. In novels as late as Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock the landscape contributes immeasurably to characterizations. The Golden West is unceasingly significant to Bishop Latour, who has a feeling for the shape and color, and the history and legendry of places. "Living vegetation could not present more faithfully the form of the Cross"² than did the juniper tree before which the bishop prayed. Finding the stone of the exact color and kind necessary for his cathedral was a joy to Latour. The very air of Santa Fe had meaning to the dying bishop: "In New Mexico he always woke a young man."³ Even his native Clermont was less dear than the Southwest with "the high song the wind was singing in the straight striped pine trees up in the Navajo forests."⁴

To be at one with the land and nature was the simple good fortune of simple, good souls. Antonia Shimerda, Thea Kronborg, and Alexandra Bergson were like Bishop Latour in their response to the land. Miss Cather had them take their

1 Obscure Destinies, p. 37.

2 Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 21.

3 Ibid., p. 318.

4 Ibid.

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spiritual growth and conviction from the land. The artistic narration of Thea Kronborg's "finding herself" in Panther Canon is ultimately the account of the young artist discovering the meaning of her own talent and force in the silent eloquence of an ancient land. The sense of proper fulfillment in the story of Antonia is achieved largely because she is so rightly placed on the fertile land, and the heroic stature of Alexandra stands forth mainly in her boundless faith in the promise of nature. "The Wild Land"⁵ gave back full measure and more in reward for Alexandra's works and faith.

Of Alexandra Willa Cather wrote:

It fortified her to reflect on the great operations of Nature...she felt a sense of personal security.... She had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it....a feeling that had overwhelmed her when she drove back to the Divide that afternoon. She had never known before how much the country meant to her.⁶

Alexandra Bergson loves the land, gives herself wholly to it. The land is at once her great antagonist and her ally; she achieves her victory over the land only by her surrender to it. The victory then is one both sad and proud, sad for subduing nature, proud for successful alliance with it.

⁵ The title of Part One of O Pioneers!.

⁶ O Pioneers!, p. 61.

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To Alexandra "the great fact was the land itself,"⁷ and it is interesting to recall the significance of places and their relationship to characters in the entire Cather canon: Thea and Panther Canon, Antonia and the fertile prairie, Tom Outland and the Blue Mesa, Bishop Latour and the golden Southwest, and Cecile Auclair and the gray Rock of Quebec. Repeatedly, the imposing Cather characters are revealed in a close relationship with the land. The person with roots, with faith in the land, found the earth "young and fresh and kindly...a friendly soil...a generous country that gave one its joyous force, its large-hearted, child-like power to love, just as it gave one its coarse, brilliant flowers."⁸ Jim Burden, returning to the Nebraska table land, could feel at home again, could feel "the pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall."⁹ Bishop Latour was in such harmonious association with the land that for him the landscape was made human.

In sum, Willa Cather consistently reveals an attitude of love of the land and portrays her strongest and most admirable characters as those who were in the most wholesome relationship with the land--the raw, wild, but promising land.

7 O Pioneers!, p. 13.

8 The Song of the Lark, p. 276-277.

9 My Antonia, p. 322.

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Comments on Willa Cather's expressions on race shall be based on considering the term not in a strict or anthropological sense but in a looser sense, i.e., "a group of persons connected by common descent, blood, or heredity."¹⁰ It is important to notice, and acknowledge, that Miss Cather, over a span of approximately thirty years, demonstrated some contradictory attitudes toward persons of certain racial extraction or religious affiliation. And one must, in all fairness, admit that Miss Cather occasionally voiced some sentiments that were unfortunate or something less than admirable. In her treatment of the Indian she was consistent in her admiration for his qualities. Her attitude toward the Negro is generally friendly, though rather patronizing. In her treatment of immigrant groups one discerns occasional inconsistencies, but in her characterizations of and asides about Jews Willa Cather reveals some outright bad taste.

One has only to recall Part Four of Willa Cather's The Song of the Lark to find the key to her feelings about the Indian. In this section, entitled "The Ancient People," she reveals in some of her most compelling writing her appreciation for the civilization of the Indian tribe that once lived in Panther Canon. Her boundless admiration for the arts and husbandry of the ancient cliff dwellers and her

¹⁰ The American College Dictionary, Clarence L. Barnhart, ed., New York, 1947.

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feeling of kinship with them in their creative instincts are transmuted to her heroine, Thea. In Panther Canon in silent communication across the ages, Thea learned from the vanished Indians the real meaning of art:

...an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself--life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose. The Indian women had held it in their jars....In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals.¹¹

Again, in The Professor's House, Willa Cather eulogizes the Indian, and again the eulogy is for a vanished tribe whom Tom Outland and the reader come to venerate as the relics of Blue Mesa's Cliff City reveal the richness and dignity of the old civilization. The pottery, the delicately decorated clothing, the primitive but finely wrought surgical instruments, and the artful joinery of the cliff houses all contribute to an impression of fondness, indeed of reverence, for the Indian tribe. Where Thea Kronborg found the essence of art, Tom Outland discovered the richness of the country's ancient ages, and in both cases Willa Cather gives the reader a convincing demonstration of respect for what her own world would have called the "savage" past.

Through Father Duchene, the learned priest and friend of young Outland, Miss Cather summarizes the civilization of

¹¹ The Song of the Lark, p. 378.

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the Indians on the Blue Mesa:

I am inclined to think that your tribe were a superior people....In an orderly and secure life they developed considerably the arts of peace. There is evidence on every hand that they lived for something more than food and shelter....There is unquestionably a feeling for design in what you call the Cliff City.

I see your tribe as a provident, rather thoughtful people....

I see them here, isolated, cut off from other tribes, working out their destiny, making their mesa more and more worthy to be a home for man, purifying life by religious ceremonies and observances, caring respectfully for their dead, protecting their children, doubtless entertaining some feelings of affection and sentiment for this stronghold where they were at once so safe and comfortable, where they had practically overcome the worst hardships that primitive man had to fear. They were, perhaps, too far advanced for their time and environment.¹²

If The Song of the Lark and The Professor's House reveal Willa Cather's attitude toward the Indian of ancient ages, Death Comes for the Archbishop restates and reaffirms that attitude toward the Indian of a more recent time in the American Southwest. Into the story of the two missionaries Miss Cather wove a rich account of pueblo life, of Indian customs, beliefs, mysteries, and art. The figures of Jacinto and Eusabio are drawn on much the same lines as those of the two French priests, but, necessarily, the Indians play a subordinate role. One nevertheless feels the kinship, for example, between Bishop Latour and Eusabio. One cannot fail to grasp Miss Cather's feelings for the equally rich, though

12 The Professor's House, p. 216-218.

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different, heritages of the bishop and the tribal leader.

And Bishop Latour respects Jacinto, his Indian guide
--and friend:

The Bishop seldom questioned Jacinto about his thoughts or beliefs. He didn't think it polite, and he believed it to be useless. There was no way in which he could transfer his own memories of European civilization into the Indian mind, and he was quite willing to believe that behind Jacinto there was a long tradition, a story of experience, which no language could translate to him.¹³

The bishop liked the Indians' veneration for old customs; the same veneration was an important aspect of his own religion. He liked to stay in a Navajo hogan, found it favorable for prayer and reflection. He enjoyed traveling with Eusabio, liked the Indians' ability to pass through the countryside without imposing himself upon it as the white man did. Latour comes to know the Indian tribes of the great Santa Fe region, and he, a sophisticated Frenchman, finds much to admire among all the tribes--Navajos, Acomas, Hopis, and Zunis. Their fine weaving and their artistic work in silver, their openhandedness, unobtrusive hospitality, simple generosity, and innate dignity establish the Indians as men of importance to Bishop Latour.

Death Comes for the Archbishop owes much of its tonal beauty to Willa Cather's artful use of Indian character and legendry. The Indian motif in the novel is accented much more

13 Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 106.

than the Mexican or, except for the two major figures, than the American. The novel is an ardent and graceful salute to the red man.

Except in her final novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl Willa Cather seldom presents a Negro character. One brief but significant such characterization is, of course, that of Blind d'Arnault, the Negro pianist. Jim Burden speaks for Miss Cather when he remarks on "the soft, amiable Negro voice, like those I remembered from early childhood, with the note of subservience in it."¹⁴ Miss Cather is true to her Virginia origin in her apparent attitude toward the colored person. Subservience is noted and accepted as proper. Her description of d'Arnault is fond but condescending: "He would have been repulsive if his face had not been so kindly and happy."¹⁵ He is a gifted pianist but "always a Negro prodigy who played barbarously and wonderfully....a Negro enjoying himself as only a Negro can."¹⁶ The Negro seemed, appropriately to Miss Cather, "docile and happy."

Sapphira and the Slave Girl is Willa Cather's only use of her Virginia childhood scenes and recollections in her fiction. In this novel she treats the position of slaves in

¹⁴ My Antonia, p. 184.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 189.

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Virginia in the period immediately preceding the Civil War. The psychological narrative of the relationship of Henry and Sapphira Colbert and of both of them to the slave girl, Nancy, naturally includes many Negro characters. Again, in her only sustained story of Negroes, Miss Cather seems to reveal a patronizing attitude. Nancy is certainly a major figure in the novel; yet she is thinly drawn, and one feels that her creator might have been more openly sympathetic to her both as a slave and as a person being victimized by another.

There can be no doubt that Miss Cather is strongly partial to Henry Colbert and Rachel Blake in their plan to let Nancy escape by way of the underground railway; but there is also little doubt that the author considers Nancy a person of only slight sensibilities and meager intelligence. She seems to be much in the position of a Virginia aristocrat recalling a remarkable episode from her childhood.

Willa Cather's attitude toward minority groups is too often examined only in the light of her best-remembered works. She praises, sincerely, the Swedish and French settlers in O Pioneers!; she seems to feel she cannot say too much in praise of the groups depicted in My Ántonia--Bohemians and Norwegians. In her Nebraska essay she is lavish in her praise of the same groups, particularly the Norwegians, as she remembers them on the Nebraska prairie in her youth. Her observations do not imply that Miss Cather ever lost her

admiration for Old World peoples transplanted to America. One must, however, be cognizant of a minor defection in her admiration, a defection not disclosed in her depiction of individual characters--but disclosed in a broad, generic sense.

Willa Cather uses, for example, the term "Hun" with disappointing ease. One can accept the term rather easily in One of Ours, a war novel written hard upon the close of World War I, but the appellation used earlier for an inoffensive maid strikes one as being in rather poor taste. "Hun" is used in several passages in The Song of the Lark. In her poem, "Street in Packingtown," which was added in the 1923 edition of April Twilights, Miss Cather presents "a Polack's brat"¹⁷ who joylessly torments a cat. The contemptuous use of terms like "Hun" and "Polack" strikes a discordant note in the lines of a writer who so often gave herself so wholeheartedly to liking the foreigner. Consider Old Ivar, Spanish Johnny, Professor Wunsch, Antonia Shimerda, Lena Lingard, Anton Rosicky, and many others; they are Willa Cather's favored types. Her slight deviation is the more striking because of them.

17 P. 203.

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But the strongest exception to her customary attitude occurs in her essay, "Miss Jewett."¹⁸ One finds it difficult to admit that the writer of My Ántonia could have also penned these lines:

This hypothetical young man is perhaps of foreign descent: German, Jewish, Scandinavian. To him English is merely a means of making himself understood, of communicating his ideas. He may write and speak American English correctly, but only as an American may learn to speak French correctly. It is a surface speech: he clicks the words out as a bank clerk clicks out silver when you ask for change.¹⁹

The statement seems almost cruel coming from Willa Cather, who seven years earlier had written the touching scene in which Mr. Shimerda had earnestly entreated, "Te-e-ach, te-e-ach my Ántonia!"²⁰

Miss Cather's ill-chosen words and innuendos about Jews are the most disappointing of her expressions on race. Now, Willa Cather is not anti-Semitic in her thought, far from it. She does present some Jewish characters of considerable dignity, notably Mr. and Mrs. Rosen in the story "Old Mrs. Harris." Some other Jewish figures are treated quite fondly and sympathetically. She felt, for example, that Jews

18 Originally written as a preface to a two-volume collection of Sarah Orne Jewett's stories published by Houghton Mifflin in 1925, the essay, somewhat enlarged, was included in Literary Encounters in the Library Edition.

19 Literary Encounters, p. 280-281.

20 My Ántonia, p. 27.

and Germans in the Chicago of Thea Kronborg's student days constituted the only musical public of the city. Mr. and Mrs. Henry Nathanmeyer, a wealthy Jewish couple, provide Thea with her first opportunity to sing for profit, but Willa Cather injects the unfortunate comment that "the Nathanmeyers are the finest kind of Jews,"²¹ and that "the Jews always sense talent, and...admire certain qualities of feelings that are found only in the white-skinned races."²² There is a certain tendency for her to "write down" about Jews generically. One might almost conclude that Willa Cather employed "Jewishness" as a device to characterize a person unpleasant but not evil. Supporting this contention one could cite Miletus Poppas of "The Diamond Mine," Siegmund Stein of "Scandal," and Louie Marsellus of The Professor's House. Morris Weisbourn of Lucy Gayheart is an unpleasant person, but a character of such minor consequence that to cite him would be misleading.

Poppas is introduced as "the Greek Jew, Cressida's accompanist and shadow."²³ His conversation is introduced in dialect and characterized as "indescribably foreign;" "he aspirated his 'th's' with such conscientious thoroughness, there was always the thud of a 'd' in them."²⁴ Poppas is

21 The Song of the Lark, p. 343.

22 Ibid., p. 344.

23 Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 79.

24 Ibid., p. 80.

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described in harsh tones as "a vulture of the vulture race, and he had the beak of one."²⁵ He is not an evil character; he is simply unlikeable, and that seemingly because of his Jewishness.

The account of the masquerade of Siegmund Stein comprises a major portion of the story "Scandal," though the central figure of the narrative is Kitty Ayrshire, an opera star. In this story Stein is characterized as another unpleasant but less-than-evil person. We first hear of him as an "objectionable" figure; then we get a word picture of him as Pierce Tevis speaks:

He is one of the most hideous men in New York.... He isn't one of the fat horrors. He has one of those rigid, horselike faces that never tell anything; a long nose, flattened as if it had been tied down; a scornful chin; long, white teeth; flat cheeks, yellow as a Mongolian's; tiny, black eyes, with puffy lids and no lashes; dingy, dead-looking hair--looks as if it were glued on.²⁶

Stein is regarded as "a deep mysterious Jew who had the secret of gold."²⁷ After amassing wealth, he and his family "inhabit a great house on Fifth Avenue that used to belong to people of very different sort."²⁸ Stein is a person whom a chill of manner could not hold off, and,

²⁵ Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 87.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 192.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 194.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 198.

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ultimately, he is held in utmost auctorial scorn as Kitty Ayrshire concludes the story: "We are both the victims of circumstance, and in New York so many of the circumstances are Steins."²⁹ Miss Cather might as well have closed the quotation with the word "Jews"; the reader reads it thus.

Mr. and Mrs. Rosen of "Old Mrs. Harris" are depicted as generous, neighborly, and scholarly folk. They are also shown, in one brief and revealing passage, to be considerably out of place in a small Colorado town. Mr. Rosen didn't "mind keeping a clothing store in a small Western town, so long as he had a great deal of time to read philosophy. He was the only unsuccessful member of a large, rich Jewish family."³⁰ The irony is unmistakable here.

Louie Marsellus, son-in-law of Professor Godfrey St. Peter, is always out of grace with Willa Cather. We meet him first as "a mackerel-tinted man....There was nothing Semitic about him except his nose--that took the lead....It grew out of his face with masterful strength, well-rooted, like a vigorous oak tree growing out of a hillside."³¹

Willa Cather's comments on race must, on close analysis, leave the reader less than pleased. The foregoing

29 Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 205.

30 Obscure Destinies, p. 88 (*Italics mine*).

31 The Professor's House, p. 38.

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remarks are not meant to suggest that she entertained any sort of bigotry or prejudice. There is, nevertheless, disappointing, if minor, defection from a nature otherwise generous and noble in her attitude toward Negroes and Jews and in her momentary scorn of immigrant Americans.

Religion plays a secondary role in Willa Cather's fiction. This statement may at first seem debatable when one considers My Mortal Enemy, Death Comes for the Archbishop, and Shadows on the Rock, but Miss Cather employs religion in her stories of individuals; she advocates neither doctrine nor religion in general. Thus, religion in Death Comes for the Archbishop, and Shadows on the Rock, and to a minor degree in My Mortal Enemy, is a part of the backdrop against which individual lives are portrayed. Never does her fiction become a vehicle for religious motives or ends; still her stories of the missionary bishops and of early Quebec are bathed in an aura of religious spirit, and the story of Myra Henshawe turns on the protagonist's clinging to her religious faith.

When Death Comes for the Archbishop was published, many readers immediately assumed that Willa Cather was a Roman Catholic; one reviewer wrote that she had "soaked herself" in Catholic lore. But she was never a Catholic; and she denied having made any deep study of the Catholic

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faith.³² She was reared a Baptist; in 1922, together with her father and mother, she was confirmed in the Protestant Episcopal Church in Red Cloud, Nebraska. E.K. Brown attributes her joining the Episcopal Church to a desire to share her parents' participation in a faith which had won a following in Red Cloud and, in part, to an emotional response to a religion so rich historically. This same richness she, of course, appreciated in the Roman Catholic Church.³³

Miss Cather's attitudes toward religion might be summarized in this way. She disliked narrowness wherever she found it, and she occasionally found it in Protestantism. She loved beauty of art and ritual wherever she found it, and she seemed to find that in the Church of Rome.

On one of her earliest stories, Miss Cather, quite consonant with her other early reports of prairie life, scores evangelical religion and the way its practitioners preyed upon the spiritually hungry pioneers. Eric Hermannson, a vibrant young Norwegian, at first fights off but later succumbs to the "spiritual panic" of the Free Gospelers. By

³² Cf. "On Death Comes for the Archbishop," Willa Cather on Writing, Stephen Tennant, ed., New York, Knopf, 1949, p. 3-13.

³³ Michael Williams, editor of The Commonweal, in reviewing Death Comes for the Archbishop stated that Miss Cather had written with greater understanding of Catholic motives and more sympathetically of the beauty of Catholic mysteries than any Catholic American writer.

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the end of the story, and with the help of an Eastern girl, he throws off the sham of Free Gospelism. In "Eric Hermannson's Soul"³⁴ young Willa Cather launches a violent attack on religion, more particularly on evangelistic excesses in the name of religion. She regrets the effects of religion on people like Eric Hermannson; she abhors what she then called "gospel of maceration":

The pagan smile that had once hovered about his lips was gone, and he was one with sorrow. Religion heals a hundred hearts for one that it embitters, but when it destroys, its work is quick and deadly, and where the agony of the cross has been, joy will not come again.³⁵

Eric can revolt against the narrow sect, but in doing so "he believed he had delivered his soul to hell."³⁶

In "Scandal," published nineteen years after "Eric Hermannson's Soul," and after her first four novels, Willa Cather characterizes the Presbyterianism of a solid citizen of Pittsburgh thus:

His religion was not very spiritual, certainly, but it was substantial and concrete, made up of good, hard convictions and opinions. It had something to do with citizenship, with whom one ought to marry, with the coal business, with the Republican Party, and with all majorities and established precedents.³⁷

³⁴ Cosmopolitan, Vol. 28, Apr., 1900, p. 633-644.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 639.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 640.

³⁷ Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 153.

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One need recall only Miss Cather's pictures of Protestantism in The Song of the Lark, her identification of Wick Cutter of My Antonia as a regular contributor--for sentiment's sake--to Protestant churches, and her treatment of hard-shell Protestantism in One of Ours to realize that her feelings were never cordial toward colorless, artless sects.

Reverend Kronborg is drawn as a weak man, "too fond of his ease and too sensible to worry his children much about religion."³⁸ He was concerned with keeping up appearances; church and church work were matters of his business routine, and Sunday to him was like Saturday to the Main Street merchants. The characterization of Anna Kronborg presents a thoroughly disagreeable person, one who had "professed" religion at the mourner's bench and who thenceforth disseminated gloom throughout the household. The Reverend Lars Larsen, a friend of Mr. Kronborg's in the Swedish Reform Church, entered the ministry because he was lazy; "Larsen, like Peter Kronborg, got on well in the ministry, because he got on well with women."³⁹

Enid Royce of One of Ours is a cold person; her coldness is emphasized in her churchishness, her fondness for lackluster young preachers, her "missionary" zeal, her

³⁸ The Song of the Lark, p. 165.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 209.

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Anti-Saloon League endeavors, and her "good works" in general. Willa Cather pours a great deal of scorn into her treatment of Enid Royce, Brother Weldon, and Annabelle and Edward Chapin--Pharisees all in their abundant outward signs and their meager inward grace. Against the narrowness of his mother's and his wife's religious practice Claude Wheeler contends rather hopelessly:

He didn't want to be like the young men who said in prayer-meeting that they leaned on their Saviour. He hated their way of meekly accepting permitted pleasures....'Faith,' as he saw it exemplified in the faculty of the Temple school, was a substitute for most of the manly qualities he admired. Young men went into the ministry because they were timid or lazy and wanted society to take care of them; because they wanted to be pampered by trusting women like his mother.⁴⁰

As late as Death Comes for the Archbishop Willa Cather finds slight fault with the narrowness and lack of color in evangelical Protestantism, but this fault-finding is considerably muted after One of Ours. As early as O Pioneers! she had looked fondly at the Roman Catholic Church with its rich antiquity, its art, and its color. In her first Nebraska novel she treats very sympathetically the French and Bohemian Catholics. In My Ántonia even Grandfather Burden grudgingly admires the faith of the Shimerdas. In The Professor's House the learned Father Duchene and Augusta, the Catholic seamstress, are warmly treated.

⁴⁰ One of Ours, p. 59-60.

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But it is with Death Comes for the Archbishop that Willa Cather fully fashions the aura of Catholicism that surrounds her significant later work. In this novel she expresses strongly what she had hinted at in My Mortal Enemy, her admiration for the stability of the Roman Church. In Shadows on the Rock one finds the rock symbol used with layers of meaning, one of which is the Rock of Peter, Roman Catholicism. In Lucy Gayheart Miss Cather fondly watches Clement Sebastian in the practice of his religion.

Father Vaillant, in considering the work of the Church in the great diocese of Santa Fe, is moved to remark, "Not since the early days of Christianity has the Church been able to do what it can here."⁴¹ It was, in part, this fact which Willa Cather found compelling in Catholicism. The stability of ages was present in the Roman Church; furthermore, the program of the Church was dynamic, imaginative, and positive. In the work of the missionary priests in the Southwest and in the story of the Catholic-French civilization asserting itself on the bleak heights of Quebec, Miss Cather found the same grandeur that she had loved in the glorious story of pioneers on the Divide, a story now unhappily closed.

⁴¹ Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 244.

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Though she found much to admire in the Roman Catholic Church, Willa Cather stopped with admiration. She once remarked that she was an Episcopalian and, she hoped, a good one. Her "Catholic" novels do not attempt in any way to seek converts to that faith; they do not treat matters of faith and dogma. They do tell reverently the story of some Catholic individuals, some legends of Catholic mystics and saints. They do capture the art and color of Catholic ritual and devotion. One must note that Cecile Auclair is a near-perfect communicant in her faith, but never is there the bare suggestion of a religious vocation in her. That, one can venture to think, signalizes Willa Cather's attitude toward the faith of Rome. She wrote, in her later novels, about Catholics but not for Catholics or Catholicism. To have done so would have been as inconsistent, by her high standards of literary art, as to write for a political party, an economic policy, or a sociological reform.

First, last, and always, Willa Cather was an artist. She never conceived of her literary work as anything but the practice of her art. Early in her career she had written that an artist's only safe course was to commit himself entirely and wholeheartedly to his art, forsaking all other interests. This Willa Cather did, in much the same way Thea Kronborg gave herself utterly to the talent within her. As an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska, Miss Cather

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came under the cultivating influence of Mrs. James H. Canfield⁴² and of the Westermann family, and she eagerly turned to interests of literature, music, drama, painting, and sculpture. She always retained an avid interest in music, especially opera, and her own comments reveal a similar interest in painting. It is appropriate, therefore, to point out here her attitude toward art--the capital-letter Art that Dorothy Canfield Fisher knew Miss Cather loved so much. E.K. Brown writes:

She believed, she always had believed, that the artist is not amenable to the standards by which other folk may rightfully be judged. For mastery of an art, she thought, a fearful tax is levied on the entire personality of the artist. Artistic achievement means a constant bleeding of a person's strength. Imaginative understanding of the artistic process should bring, she thought, a deep compassion for what the personality of the artist undergoes, if not homage for his acceptance of his destiny.⁴³

The Song of the Lark is Willa Cather's most sustained treatment of an artist and her art. One reads this novel with greater perception and understanding when he is aware of Miss Cather's early statement about the artist's being irrevocably committed to his art and when one considers the revealing passage from her preface to the Kronborg story in the

⁴² Wife of the Chancellor of the University of Nebraska. A daughter was Dorothy Canfield, later to become a novelist. As students, she and Willa Cather collaborated in writing a short story for The Sombrero, the university yearbook.

⁴³ E.K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, New York, Knopf, 1953, p. 187.

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later edition: "...in an artist of the type I chose, personal life becomes paler as the imaginative life becomes richer."⁴⁴ Thea Kronborg's self-realization comes to her with stunning force; she early perceives that "there is no art so big or so beautiful that it was not once all contained in some youthful body....She learned the thing old Dumas meant when he told the Romanticists that to make a drama he needed but one passion and four walls."⁴⁵ Thea perceived that, given talent, the artist still faced a difficult task, that the artist "makes himself born" only through long, arduous, often comfortless work. How does she succeed? Only by renouncing home, family, love, marriage, even friendships in order to make herself emerge the dedicated artist.

This, then, was Willa Cather's feeling for art; a complete immersion in his vocation was, to her, the only faithful role for the artist. She has Professor St. Peter remark in a classroom lecture that theologians "might, without sacrilege, have changed the prayer a little and said, Thy will be done in art, as it is in heaven."⁴⁶

She occasionally finds opportunity in her pages to object to modern trends in education. At the University of

⁴⁴ The Song of the Lark, p. viii.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 177.

⁴⁶ The Professor's House, p. 64.

Nebraska Willa Cather pursued a classical course; in a sense she was always a classicist in the practice of her art, and, assuredly, in her expressions on education she lamented the decline in the study of the classics and the other humanities.

In 1936, writing to the editor of The Commonweal, Willa Cather finds reason to comment on the new approach to biography in which ambitious writers made a career of destroying the past. She scorns biographers who made educated dullards of Goethe, Rousseau, Spinoza, and Pascal, and who disposed of Shakespeare "because he was somebody else." She continues, "Able research work was done on the bodily diseases and physical imperfections of Beethoven, Schubert, Hugo Wolf, and all the German composers. Not even their teeth were overlooked."⁴⁷ This, she concludes, is a prejudicial approach to history, leading to nothing worthy and stemming from something less than worthy.

In her essay, "148 Charles Street," Miss Cather regrets what she considers a tendency for English classes to leave the past untroubled and to be interested only in contemporary writers. "When and where were the Arnolds overthrown and the Brownings devaluated?" she asks.⁴⁸ She sees the "masters" in England and America diminishing in stature,

⁴⁷ "Escapism," Willa Cather On Writing, p. 25.

⁴⁸ Literary Encounters, p. 262.

becoming remote and shadowy. In another essay, this time writing about Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather hyperbolizes the "new" university student as a young man, or woman, born in New York City, "educated at a New York university, violently inoculated with Freud, hurried into journalism, knowing no more about New England country people (or country folk anywhere) than he had caught from motor trips or observed from summer hotels."⁴⁹

Miss Cather saw the classics losing ground in American universities, she saw the de-emphasis of the past in literature,⁵⁰ she saw the lack of respect and lack of capacity for good English among teachers and students alike. The exaltation of technical and commercial education she abhorred. She despised education of the sort Claude Wheeler found at Temple College where "one should learn, not think; and above all, one must not enquire."⁵¹ The story of Professor Godfrey St. Peter gives her occasion to find fault with "padded" and "snap" courses, with "popular" professors, and with fraternity-sorority systems on university campuses. But most

⁴⁹ Literary Encounters, p. 280.

⁵⁰ One should not assume, however, that Willa Cather found no contemporary writers to admire. She admired Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Thornton Wilder as genuine artists. She valued W.C. Brownell, and H. L. Mencken as critics. Cf. E.K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, p. 291.

⁵¹ One of Ours, p. 31.

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of all in this novel--as well as in her Nebraska essay--she found opportunity to strike out at the materialism invading college curricula:

The State Legislature and the Board of Regents seemed determined to make a trade school of the university. Candidates for the degree of Bachelor of Arts were allowed credits for commercial studies: courses in book-keeping, experimental farming, domestic science, dressmaking, and what not. Every year the regents tried to diminish the number of credits required in science and the humanities. The liberal appropriations the promotions and increases in salary, all went to the professors who worked with the regents to abolish the purely cultural studies. Out of a faculty of sixty, there were perhaps twenty men who made any serious stand for scholarship....⁵²

Her statement in the Nebraska essay is a close parallel:

There is even danger that that fine institution, the University of Nebraska, may become a gigantic trade school. The men who control its destiny, the regents and the lawmakers, wish their sons and daughters to study machines, mercantile processes, 'the principles of business'; everything that has to do with the game of getting on in the world--and nothing else. The classics, the humanities, are having their dark hour. They are in eclipse. Studies that develop taste and enrich personality are not encouraged. But the 'Classics' have a way of revenging themselves. One generation that goes to a university to select only the most utilitarian subjects in the course of study--among them, salesmanship and dressmaking--will revolt against all the heaped-up, machine-made materialism about them. They will go back to the old sources of wisdom and culture--not as a duty, but with burning desire.⁵³

⁵² The Professor's House, p. 135.

⁵³ "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," Nation, Vol. 117, Sept. 5, 1923, p. 238.

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This chapter may seem to deal with odds and ends. It is important, however, to examine Willa Cather's views on the matters discussed herein, for they serve to buttress the considerations of the earlier chapters. Miss Cather has been accused of "turning her back" on the present. Her marked concern for her own time is demonstrated in the passages cited in the foregoing pages.

CHAPTER VIII

WILLA CATHER'S LITERARY CAREER:
A CORROBORATION OF HER VALUES AND ATTITUDES

Willa Cather's awareness of and reverence for the past characterizes much of her work and formulates most of her values and attitudes. Without doubt an apparent note in her career is her inclination to look backward and to find the most admirable qualities in men. She does, of course, as has been pointed out in earlier chapters of this study, also evidence the accompanying tendency toward the subsidiary and attendant attitudes which have been discussed.

This chapter shall trace in broad outline the pattern of Miss Cather's writing career. The writer of this study believes that the course of her career evinces traits which corroborate the internal evidence shown in earlier chapters.

When Willa Cather was nine years of age, her family moved from the stable, established, ordered environment of Frederick County, Virginia, to the new, raw, land-in-the-making of Webster County of Nebraska. The impact of this change and the new way of life she found on the prairie, and later in Red Cloud, Nebraska, she always remembered. She once remarked, "I think that most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen. That's the important period: when one's not

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writing."¹ Willa Cather's schooling was irregular, especially before the family moved to Red Cloud, but her grandmother introduced her to good books; she learned reading and writing at home and even studied Latin with a Red Cloud neighbor. In 1890 she entered the Latin School, the University preparatory school in Lincoln, and the following year she matriculated in the classical course at the University of Nebraska.

Early in her freshman year Willa Cather discovered the thrill of writing. She gave herself wholeheartedly to literary studies, especially in French and Latin, and in her last two years in college she was a regular contributor of dramatic criticism and other pieces to the Nebraska State Journal. She wrote for and edited the student fortnightly magazine, Hesperian, and she edited the Sombrero, the University yearbook published by the junior class. Upon her graduation in 1895, she became a staff writer on the Lincoln Courier and remained there until the end of the year.

We might consider that her literary career began in 1896, for in January of that year the Overland Monthly published her story, "On the Divide." Between 1896 and the magazine serialization of Alexander's Bridge² in 1912, Willa

¹ Latrobe Carroll, "Willa Sibert Cather," The Bookman Vol. 53, May, 1921, p. 214.

² This novel, under the title Alexander's Masquerade, appeared in McClure's Magazine from Feb. through Apr., 1912.

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Cather had eighteen short stories accepted for publication by national magazines, including Cosmopolitan, Ladies' Home Journal, Lippincott's Magazine, Scribner's Magazine, Century Magazine, and Harper's Monthly Magazine. In 1903 her book of verse, April Twilights, was published, and two years later The Troll Garden, a collection of short stories appeared. Thus, the years 1896-1912, constituting Miss Cather's early literary period, are marked primarily by magazine contributions, mainly short stories.

This early period, this point of departure in Willa Cather's career pattern, may be particularized as the period of emancipation. By the time Miss Cather finished her course at the University of Nebraska, she was eager to be free of what she considered then to be the harsh, sterile, unrewarding life on the prairie and in the little towns. Early stories such as "Eric Hermannson's Soul,"³ "A Death in the Desert,"⁴ "A Wagner Matinee,"⁵ and "The Sculptor's Funeral"⁶ were strong denunciations of the sacrifices demanded of homesteaders on the prairie farms and of the shallowness of life

3 Cosmopolitan, Vol. 28, Apr., 1900, p. 633-644.

121. 4 Scribner's Magazine, Vol. 33, Jan., 1903, p. 109-

328. 5 Everybody's Magazine, Vol. 10, Mar., 1904, p. 325-

336. 6 McClure's Magazine, Vol. 24, Jan., 1905, p. 329-

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in the prairie towns.

These narratives are sharp indictments of the poverty and indigence which Willa Cather had witnessed on the Divide during her childhood and adolescence. She had seen the toll among farm women, she had known the labors rewarded by failing crops and foreclosures, she had realized the lot of settlers at the mercy of whimsical weather, blight and plague, and land sharks. In her university years, especially, she gained a realization of the effects of economic depression, and in the same years she became aware of a different life to be found in the cities of the East. She learned of mannered ladies and gentlemen, of galleries and museums, of opera and concert halls, of graciousness and gentility. It was for these that the young Willa Cather hungered; and so she fled Nebraska as soon as she could. She went to Pittsburgh in 1896 where she worked on newspapers and magazines, taught English and Latin at Allegheny and Central High Schools, and continued her creative writing. Here she also made friends among musicians and patrons of the arts, notably the McClungs and Seibels. During these years she made summer trips back to Red Cloud, to Colorado and Wyoming. With Isabel McClung she travelled to Europe, and with the Seibel family she reveled in French literature.

Her stories--and poems--in these years were written largely from her own experiences and recollections, but they

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were laid in a recent and unmellowed past. The softening influence of nostalgia was not yet at work, and the narratives clung tenaciously to the malevolence of prairie life as she had observed it. She had escaped, and she was telling in most of her writing what she had escaped from. But toward the end of this earlier period her tone became less harsh, and her treatment of the prairie settlements began to change.

In "The Enchanted Bluff"⁷ there is none of the harshness of tales like "A Wagner Matinee" and "The Sculptor's Funeral." Neither is there any definite attitude of fondness for the pioneers. Not until the compelling story "The Bohemian Girl"⁸ do we detect a change in Willa Cather's feeling for the Middle West. "The Bohemian Girl" followed soon after Alexander's Bridge, and Willa Cather had by then given up her position as managing editor of McClure's Magazine to devote all her time to writing. She had taken Sarah Orne Jewett's advice "to find a quiet place near the best companions.... You must find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that to the world...in short you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make

⁷ Harper's Monthly Magazine, Vol. 117, Apr., 1909, p. 774-781; reprinted in Five Stories by Willa Cather, New York, Random House, Vintage Books, 1958, p. 3-15.

⁸ McClure's Magazine, Vol. 39, Aug., 1912, p. 421-443.

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up."⁹ "You must know the world before you can know the village,"¹⁰ Miss Jewett had once cautioned her. The years in Pittsburgh, Boston, and New York, the trips to Europe, the visits to Nebraska, Colorado, and the Southwest, the association with persons of cultivation, all had equipped Willa Cather to see and realize better what she had left in Nebraska. In "The Bohemian Girl" she wrote her first appreciative story of life on the prairie. Here is her first admiring piece about the sturdy Bohemians and Swedes who could devote their energies and their lives to the wild land.¹¹

"The Bohemian Girl," then, marks the beginning of the second period in Miss Cather's writing career; it also marks the end of her emphasis on the shorter form, for she was now to give herself increasingly to novels. But it should be noted that Willa Cather did not at this point return wholeheartedly to the Divide. Instead, she presents a peculiar ambivalence: she developed a nostalgic fondness for the unsophisticated Nebraska scene; at the same time she clung to a fondness for her sophisticated new world of artists. In the

⁹ Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett, Annie Fields, ed., Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1911, p. 249.

¹⁰ Literary Encounters, p. 278.

¹¹ There is a striking similarity between the plot of "The Bohemian Girl" and that of the Emil-Marie episode in O Pioneers!. In each case the non-conforming youngest son of Swedish pioneers falls in love with the volatile, young Bohemian woman married to an oafish man.

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latter years of this second period, 1912-18, she published the "artist stories," "The Diamond Mine,"¹² "A Gold Slipper,"¹³ "Scandal,"¹⁴ and "Coming Aphrodite!"¹⁵

Separation by time and space from the rigors and ills of young Nebraska, compounded with her learning to know the world, equipped Willa Cather to follow a new direction in the second stage of her career. This phase may be called the lyrical period; her novels and stories are lyrics celebrating the struggle of artists and pioneers. Writing in 1931, Miss Cather revealed of O Pioneers!:

...I began to write a book entirely for myself; a story about some Scandinavians and Bohemians who had been neighbors of ours when I lived on a ranch in Nebraska, when I was eight or nine years old. I found it a much more absorbing occupation than Alexander's Bridge; a different process altogether. Here there was no arranging or 'inventing'; everything was spontaneous and took its own place, right or wrong. This was like taking a ride through familiar country on a horse that knew the way, on a fine morning when you felt like riding....

O Pioneers! interested me tremendously, because it had to do with a country I loved, because it was about old neighbors, once very dear, whom I had almost forgotten in the hurry and excitement of growing up and finding out what the world was like.¹⁶

12 McClure's Magazine, Vol. 47, Oct. 1916, p. 7-11.

13 Harper's Magazine, Vol. 134, Jan. 1917, p. 166-179.

14 Century Magazine, Vol. 98, Aug. 1919, p. 433-445.

15 Youth and the Bright Medusa, New York, Knopf, 1920.

16 Willa Cather On Writing, Stephen Tennant, ed., New York, Knopf, 1949, p. 92-94.

O Pioneers! and the other lyrics of struggle, The Song of the Lark and My Ántonia, then, represent Miss Cather's first fond treatment of the past. At this stage in her career, the past she reveres is her own, the shortened past of times and places and people in her own youth. These years must have constituted a happy time for Willa Cather, for recalling the past then meant bright personal memories unheightened by a cloudy present. In these lyrical novels she was able to exult in the triumph of vigorous persons in a land which so often saw only defeat. In these narratives she seems almost to be atoning for her early bitterness against her land.

But by the time she was completing the writing of My Ántonia, the United States had entered the Great War. The impact of the war and the realization of the havoc wrought in her beloved France had a profound effect on Willa Cather. She gave herself completely to the American idealism of the war years, and she discerned in the final months of the war that such idealism had been wasted. The epigraph in My Ántonia clues the approaching, drastic shift in Miss Cather's attitude: "Optima dies....prima fugit," "the best days are the first to flee." And the concluding words of the novel hint at the onset of regret for the past which now can never be recaptured, "the precious, the incommunicable past." Memories which prompted O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, and

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My Ántonia were what Jim Burden called realities better than any that can be realized again.

Thus the second period of Willa Cather's career closed. It had been the period in which she discovered the past and in which she wrote so heartily of the glories of her own past. The third period, 1919-1924, may be titled as the age of disenchantment. In these years she added to her fondness for the past a rancor for the present. Her spirit had been devastated by the war and its futility; some of her relatives¹⁷ and friends had lost their lives in France. Following hard on the war was the "ugly crest of materialism" which settled on the land, and the machine-crazed pace of life left her aghast and embittered. The results are easily recognized: Willa Cather's fourth novel did not appear until four years after My Ántonia; her periodical writing ceased until the publication of her essay "The Novel Démeublé," in April, 1922;¹⁸ years later in her Not Under Forty "Prefatory Note" she admitted that about this time "the world broke in two." She admits she then became one of the "backward" people.

She looked over her shoulder to the past, but in the novels that did appear in this period, she chose a locale of

17 A cousin, G.P. Cather, was killed in World War I; he was the prototype of Claude Wheeler in One of Ours.

18 New Republic, Vol. 30, Apr., 1922, p. 5-6.

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the present or near-present. It is in this period that Miss Cather increasingly couples the praise of the past with the complaint against the present. If the novels of the second period can be called lyrics, the works of this third phase may be called elegies, elegies of regret.

The first of these elegies is One of Ours, in which Willa Cather through her hero, Claude Wheeler, tries desperately to find an ideal in the present. Claude believes he has found it and dies heroically in that belief, but his unhappy creator found no such beautiful beliefs. She knew that in that present many had hoped and believed too much and had borne much disillusion. Claude's early futile and pitiful struggle against materialism and money-making heighten the air of pessimism in the novel.

Even stronger in its pairing off of new and old is Willa Cather's delicate-structured story, A Lost Lady. In the story of Marian Forrester we have the confrontation of old and new in the characters of Captain Daniel Forrester and Ivy Peters. Everything that was noble and ideal in the pioneer-dreamer is personified in Forrester; everything that was crass and mean in the new life is personified in Peters. The "shrewd young men" of oncoming generations embody mechanization, prosperity, callousness, shoddiness, and lack of faith in their land. We see the degradation of the pioneer dream, and in Marian Forrester we observe the degeneration-

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in-process of a personality which lacks the stamina to live according to moral principles.

Finally, in The Professor's House Miss Cather makes a final effort to come to terms with the present and finds it impossible. Edith Lewis calls this "the most personal of Willa Cather's novels."¹⁹ In this work Miss Cather symbolically ranges the old against the new, the past against the present. The old and new houses represent the old and new ways of life in America; Cliff City atop the Blue Mesa parallels the attic-study of Godfrey St. Peter, the study soon to be abandoned as the Cliff Dwellers' village; the atrocious new house of Louie Marsellus represents the atrocities of contemporary life. In this never-never land between old and new Professor Godfrey St. Peter falters and fails. At the end of the story he is resigned to compromise with the ugly forces of the present. He turns his back on "the professor's house" to face "his wife's house"--"He had let something go--and it was gone: something very precious, that he could not consciously have relinquished, probably."²⁰ He had lost the past and had accepted the present--and spiritual defeat.

In this third phase, then, Willa Cather admired the past and examined the present. Her findings were disappointing

19 Willa Cather Living, New York, Knopf, 1953, p. 137.

20 The Professor's House, p. 281.

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and, hence, her pessimism is most marked in this period. She now had a beautiful past and an ugly present to deal with.

The last and longest segment of Miss Cather's literary career began with the composition of one of her less significant--and her shortest--novels, My Mortal Enemy. This segment of her career seems to take shape rather more gradually than earlier periods, but it was the most definite and most enduring aspect of her writing career--ending only with her death in 1947. The tenor of this part of her course is set by Death Comes for the Archbishop and reinforced by Shadows on the Rock. This period may perhaps be called her "age of the chosen past," and her two major novels in this era may perhaps be called "odes"--stately odes, each set in a deliberately chosen and much-revered past. This last phase is characterized, too, by Willa Cather's reduced literary production. The novels and her own last collection of short stories appeared at ever-lengthening intervals and, undeniably, with decreasing merit.

In My Mortal Enemy Willa Cather chose a relatively recent past and laid her story in late nineteenth-century Parthia, Illinois, in New York City of the early 1900's, and in an unnamed West Coast city, probably San Francisco. This novelette is somewhat like her very first, Alexander's Bridge. It, too, is a psychological study but with subtler tones and with heavy overtones of religion. Like her earliest novel,

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it is more purely fabricated than most of her work, and it is a more intense application of her démeublé dicta than any other work. But My Mortal Enemy is only slightly indicative of the prevailing trend of the final phase of her career. That slight indication comes, first, from the religious overtones of the novel and, second, from her rejection of the present in her choice of setting.

It was with Death Comes for the Archbishop that Willa Cather sounded the note that most exactly characterizes her final phase and which, in turn, dominates the pattern of her entire career. For in this stately ode-like narrative she chose her past, and for the first time it was a projected past, a past in an age beyond any possibility of her own experience or recollection. How unerringly, though, she works into the story what she can of her own experience! Miss Cather had come to know the Southwest and to love it; she had come to the belief that the most engaging part of the story of the area was that of the French Catholic missionaries, and in 1925 she found a book, The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf by Father W.J. Howlett. Bishop Machebeuf became, of course, the prototype of Father Vaillant. Bishop Latour's characterization is based in part on the life of Jean Lamy, first Archbishop of Santa Fe. Willa Cather had often seen the statue of Bishop Lamy before the Cathedral in Santa Fe, and she acknowledges he "had become a sort of

invisible personal friend."²¹ But, though she wrote about a place she knew, and though she based her principal characters on men of actuality, the novel lives through her fond and idyllic recreation of a time past. Here there is no story growing out of what she "acquired before the age of fifteen;" here the texture of the story does not evolve primarily from her rich memory. Death Comes for the Archbishop is an artistic creation laid in a rich past of her own choice and against the magnificent panoply of the Church of Rome.²²

Then, too, in Death Comes for the Archbishop Willa Cather uses several different pasts, and all of them are fondly treated. We see the past of the Indians, of the Mexicans and Spaniards, the culturally-rich past of France, the past of the land itself, and, overshadowing all else, the

21 Willa Cather On Writing, p. 7.

22 Apropos of Miss Cather's recreation of a past of her own choice, Marcus Klein makes the following observation: "The past was, simply, where she located greatness, and greatness was her constant subject, and not degeneration...[When] the frontier had in fact yielded to the obtrusive present, it must have been difficult for Willa Cather to locate again its greatness...And so she was put to the critical labor of finding a purer past, one that would stay past and not decay into the present, one that could propose images that would last for ever. Like Eliot, ironically enough, and at about the same time, she discovered an aesthetic proposed by Catholicism... It was not the doctrinal Church that attracted her. But there was a magnitude in Catholicism that was sufficient to her, and a tradition in it that had preserved itself whole through much change, and a tradition so ancient as to be effectively out of time." Introduction to My Mortal Enemy by Willa Cather, New York, Random House, Vintage Books, 1961, p. xiii-xiv.

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ages of the Catholic Church. In each of these pasts there is an orderliness tantamount to that of Bishop Latour's garden. In each there is a sense of regularity and stability and coherence. What a contrast this composite, preferential past permitted Willa Cather when set against the chaos of her own weltering present!²³

Miss Cather's brief comments on the composition of Death Comes for the Archbishop are revealing:

The writing of it took only a few months....It was like going back and playing the early composers after a surfeit of modern music.

Writing this was like a happy vacation from life, a return to childhood, to early memories. As a writer I had the satisfaction of working in a special genre I had long wished to try. As a human being, I had the pleasure of paying an old

23 "Death Comes for the Archbishop, the first of her two novels of Catholic inspiration, is a novel without plot, and...Shadows on the Rock is the merest sketch. Plots occur in time, depend on change, and it was precisely an image of changelessness that she wanted. And not that image that Eliot came to name 'the still point of the turning world,' but something that would clearly dominate the turning world--the aesthetic that Henry Adams had developed out of Catholicism was much closer to her own--something with landscape to it. And the vast landscape of Death Comes for the Archbishop, the deserts and mountains and mesas of the Southwest, is scarcely so much the setting of the novel as it is the condition of the two emissaries of the Church who are set to move through it. As there is in the priests, there is change, even fluidity within, a varying distribution of accents and light. But its aspect as a whole, as it is that of the priests, is of a largeness and solidity and serene fixity. The novel, indeed, isn't a novel at all, but a legend or a vision of a great, severe quietude, quite removed from and superior to all mortality." Marcus Klein, Introduction to My Mortal Enemy, p. xiv-xv.

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debt of gratitude to the valiant men and women whose life and work had given me so many hours of pleasant reflection.²⁴

Shadows on the Rock is, like its immediate predecessor, the writer's projection of a story into an age of her own choosing. Here the emphasis on order and stability is even greater than in Death Comes for the Archbishop. Shadows on the Rock, nevertheless, is a companionpiece to the story of the missionary bishops. In the later novel, Willa Cather, prompted by her discovery of France on this continent, lays her story in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries on the rugged rock of Quebec. Cap Diamant, towering over the people of Quebec, is in turn over-shadowed by the Rock of the Church, and again we find a richness of pasts: of the land, of the people, of their religion. Edith Lewis had written:

I think Willa Cather never got so much happiness from the writing of any book as from the Archbishop; and although Shadows on the Rock is of course altogether different in conception, in treatment, and in artistic purpose, it may have been in part a reluctance to leave the world of Catholic feeling and tradition in which she had lived so happily for so long that led her to embark on this new novel.²⁵

In this later ode greater emphasis falls on the mores of the people. Heavy stress is laid on the importance of order and regularity in one's life, in one's household, and

²⁴ Willa Cather On Writing, p. 10-12.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 155.

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in one's soul. The valiant effort to transplant orderly old French culture and to nourish it in the wilderness is applauded--even in its failures. The ageless recipes and carefully arranged clouts and brushes are a part of a well ordered maison; just as the certainties of life and eternity are a part of a man's being.

In Death Comes for the Archbishop and in Shadows on the Rock Willa Cather found serenity. In each novel she moved to a more remote age than she had ever treated before; in each deepening past she could find the qualities of life to praise for which she sought in vain in her own present. Her sense of the past in these two novels reached its climax. She was never to lose or surrender this sense, but she was never again to apply it so effectively.

As one might expect in this long-lasting final phase, Willa Cather is less regular in her attitude than in earlier and briefer periods. The year following the publication of Shadows on the Rock, she collected three short stories under the title Obscure Destinies.²⁶ These stories are akin to the stories of the second phase of her career. They emerge from her Nebraska childhood memories of Red Cloud and her family.

²⁶ "Neighbour Rosicky" was written in 1928 and published first in Woman's Home Companion, Vol. 57, Apr. and May 1930, p. 7-9, 13-14; "Old Mrs. Harris" was written in 1931 and appeared first in the book; "Two Friends" was written in 1931 and appeared first in Woman's Home Companion, Vol. 59, July, 1932, p. 7-9.

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Two of the stories, "Neighbour Rosicky" and "Old Mrs. Harris," are among the best from her pen, but none of them seems to evince a mood closely akin to that of Death Comes for the Archbishop or Shadows on the Rock.

The following year, 1933, Willa Cather began working on Lucy Gayheart.²⁷ Her work, however, was interrupted by an inflammation and soreness in her right hand. The condition improved, although it recurred throughout her remaining years, and she was able to complete the novel in 1934 and to see it through to publication the following year. Lucy Gayheart, like the short stories of Obscure Destinies, represents a return to the prairie scenes she favored in her second period (though much of the story is laid in Chicago). But in this novel she failed to recapture the spirit of O Pioneers! or of My Antonia; she did not have a heroine who could embody such a spirit. Nevertheless, in both Obscure Destinies and Lucy Gayheart Miss Cather is looking to the past, and E.K. Brown says of the short stories:

...they were the synthesis, after many years of old experiences; and they are filled with a humanity and gentleness and feeling which demonstrated that if Willa Cather had in her two preceding novels turned to a distant past, she could still confront her own past and draw great art from it.²⁸

²⁷ Her original title for this novel was Blue Eyes on the Platte.

²⁸ Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, New York, Knopf, 1953, p. 294.

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But Lucy Gayheart is set in the Nebraska of a more recent past than that of O Pioneers! or My Ántonia. Most of the narrative takes place in the years 1902 and 1903, and by that time the heroics of the pioneer era were only memories. There was little in the Gayheart era that Willa Cather could find to admire as she had in the Alexandra and Ántonia eras.

A lapse of five years intervened between the publication of Lucy Gayheart and the appearance of Sapphira and the Slave Girl. The story of Sapphira Colbert and her slave Nancy is Willa Cather's last novel; it is her only use of the scenes of her Virginia years as the setting of a story. But only the scenes of her early childhood are used; the story--except for a short epilogue--is rendered again in a past of her own choosing, this time in the years immediately preceding the Civil War.

Edith Lewis appropriately identifies Sapphira and the Slave Girl as an "uncharacteristic" novel; the reader does not find in it the qualities that identify Willa Cather's other work. This novel differs in tone and emphasis from her other stories; and yet in her deliberate turning to the past Miss Cather lends consistency to her final phase. The past of this last novel, however, is not the orderly past of Shadows on the Rock or of Death Comes for the Archbishop; it is, instead, a rather pathetic, confused past, not even relieved by any picturesque quality.

Finally, one should note that in Sapphira and the Slave Girl, as in Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock, there is a subdued optimism that replaces the deep pessimism of the novels in Willa Cather's third phase. The glow of achievement is easily discernible in the first of this trio, slightly perceptible in the last.

The final book from Willa Cather's pen was published posthumously. The Old Beauty and Others²⁹ includes the title story, "The Best Years," and "Before Breakfast." Again she treats the beautiful, lost past, but in both tales, and especially in the first, there is a note of asperity or scolding. Perhaps it is only reasonable to expect such a tone from the writer of My Antonia when she had attained to advanced years.

In "The Old Beauty" and "The Best Years" the writer used a different approach to the past than she had before. In each story the reader remains in the present and shares recollections from the past. There is no moving the story to the past for its enactment. The tenancy in the present, of course, provides the writer ample opportunity to draw comparisons of time past and time present--always to the detriment of modern life. Indeed, the two titles, as much as any

29 New York, Knopf, 1948. "The Old Beauty" was written in 1936 and submitted to Woman's Home Companion. The story was accepted but without enthusiasm and Miss Cather recalled it. "Before Breakfast" was written in 1944, "The Best Years" in 1945.

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specific element in the stories, divulge the writer's attitude: the old beauty is gone, the best years have passed.

"Before Breakfast," the final story of The Old Beauty and Others, is a thin, nostalgic piece which presents a wealthy, aging business man with a taste for Shakespeare, Scott, Dickens, and Fielding. He is a Catheresque figure who values old things, feels best in common with nature, and resents the "success" and modernity of his sons.

The long final phase of Willa Cather's career is at once strongly characterized by Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock and made slightly deviational by narratives such as those in Obscure Destinies and Lucy Gayheart. Her entire career seems to follow, roughly, a parabolic pattern. She started with a feeling of discontent with prairie and town life in the Middle West, then advanced to a point where she had a past of her own and a mellowing perspective of it. From what seemed to be a wholesome vantage point for recreating an heroic, recent past she was distracted by the crushing weight of modernity and the ugliness of the new materialism. After a brief and harrowing scrutiny of her own present, Miss Cather, in effect, fled to pasts of her own choosing. From these new and deliberately chosen pasts she wrote admiringly of lost virtues and suggestively of repossession of such virtues by people of her own time. In this final phase we see her occasionally deviating from a

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norm to use again a past within her own measure of time and experience; but, finally, in her last novel she again seeks a past to suit her.

To reduce the writing career of a gifted artist to a pattern, especially when that career spans nearly half a century, can be at best only an effort involving oversimplification. In this chapter such a pattern has been deliberately drawn to serve as a means of citing recurring or developmental traits which constitute supplementary evidence of the values and attitudes inherent in Willa Cather's artistry.

Her sense of and feeling for the past helped her face both the present and the future. In her last year, Edith Lewis relates, "...she turned almost entirely to Shakespeare and Chaucer..., as if in their company she found her greatest content, best preferred to confront the future."³⁰

30 Willa Cather Living, p. 196.

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Willa Cather is an extremely rewarding writer to both the casual reader and the student of literature. Among writers in the modern American period, Miss Cather is more and more definitely assuming her rightful position in the first rank.¹ The intensified interest in her work in the years since her death has shown that serious students are according her deep consideration and high praise.

The burden of this study has not been to examine the literary artistry of Miss Cather. Essays and recent books have tendered generous appreciations of her masterful command of narrative, her classical correctness, and her felicitous descriptions. Neither has this study been concerned with biographical data except as events in Miss Cather's life have borne on the subject at hand. In 1953 alone, three books appeared in which biographical treatment is significant.

¹ A critic recently noted Miss Cather's literary stature: "In the Nineteen Twenties Willa Cather's sober fiction was overwhelmed by the showmanship of Sinclair Lewis and Ernest Hemingway. In the Sixties her novels are more readable than theirs. Main Street and Babbitt...suffer today from the wordiness and flatness of Lewis' prose style. Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, which electrified the world in 1926, now looks sophomoric....Today Willa Cather is very much the major American writer....Her spare and supple writing has a classical simplicity. But her signature is bold on every page. It is the signature of a dedicated professional, a woman of conscience and insight. Although her novels were always admired, they increase in stature with the years." Brooks Atkinson, "Critic at Large," column in the New York Times, issue of Nov. 24, 1961, Section C, p. 28, col. 1-2.

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This study has not attempted to locate Willa Cather among any literary coterie, to show her as part of any movement or trend, or to find in her work evidence of any type or classification of novel or story. It has been pointed out that she never "lent" her art explicitly to the promulgation of any doctrine, to the advancement of any cause, or to the attainment of any political, social, or economic goal.

Willa Cather was, in her literary career, always and only the artist at work. She committed herself early in life to be the handmaid of her art; from this role she never sought to escape. In fact, it was in this devoted-artist capacity that she found her satisfaction. This study has demonstrated that within the framework of her acknowledged literary artistry are frequently recurring and varied expressions of her values and attitudes in a tendency to regard the past with nostalgic fondness, finding in time past qualities and virtues which are sorely missed in the present; and in a tendency to find admirable qualities in a level of society other than her own, often in a less sophisticated or "civilized" level of culture. To establish these tendencies, with their ramifications and evolving values, this study has cited "internal evidence"--statements by the author herself--in the novels, stories, poems, and essays. Occasionally, these statements have been buttressed or amplified with opinions of those who have studied Miss Cather's life and work.

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Chapter One of this study has stated the criteria for the concept of values and attitudes as it is embodied in the two tendencies and their subsidiary ideas. For the first tendency (the backward-looking habit of mind) these criteria are an admiration for the classical past, a liking for patriarchal, pastoral eras, and a fondness for the historically great figures and the glories of one's national past. Now, Miss Cather had a strong feeling for the past, especially for the cultural past of her own land. To a lesser degree, she also expressed a kinship for the ideals of the classical age. But she shows remarkably little evidence of the third criteria, that is, the eulogy of figures and glories of her own national past. To be sure, there is praise of William Jennings Bryan, of Kit Carson, of Coronado and his conquerors, but the tall men and the significant events of American history assume minor and infrequent places in her pages.

Much more striking is the evidence of the second tendency (the desire for a less intricate design for living) in Willa Cather's work. Her pronounced discontent with her own age is repeatedly stated--and in very definite terms. Her constant portrayal of "natural" types and variations is a major phase in the expression of her values. Over and over again, she gives us these natural persons unaffected and unspoiled by the complexities of a sophisticated society. She eulogizes the "simplest spirit in human kind" and demonstrates

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genuine love for people of low estate--slaves, servants, farm hands, struggling homesteaders, "hired girls." This liking for the natural person is one of the strongest and most persistent evidences of Miss Cather's values stemming from the second tendency.

Two more phases in the expression of her values have been titled in this study as the "ugly crest of materialism." These include her preference for the rural scene over the town or city and her sustained attack on materialism. Willa Cather, in a sense, belied her writing in that she preferred to live in New York City, but she made frequent trips to the West, the Southwest, the Maritime provinces, and Quebec, always finding that her long stays in the country had a regenerative effect upon her. In her writing she often equates villainy with town and city life, the generous spirit with rural life.

Miss Cather saw the "ugly crest of materialism" crowning nearly every aspect of American life in her own era. One of her most vigorous and unified assaults on materialism is her essay, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle." In this piece we get an epitome of her many expressions, and we get in clear statement her abhorrence of the machine-age which engulfed America.

Willa Cather saw "machine-made materialism" as a force separating Americans from their old landmarks. She

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found it difficult, for example, to see any merit--much less beauty--in the garage which replaced the old Fields house in Boston where she had known the spirits of Emerson, Longfellow, Thackeray, and Dickens. She felt that many evils were perpetrated in the name of progress, materialistic progress. She could not justify change at the expense of permanence in the order of the world. She saw Americans becoming crass and rootless.

Willa Cather gives striking evidence of other factors closely related to her concept of values: pessimism and optimism and idealism. Miss Cather's pessimism is persistent, but as has been pointed out, it is the sort of pessimism which examines the ills of the present and the virtues of the past in the hope of securing improvement in the future. Her pessimism is, in its ultimate application, a hope for the future. This sort of pessimism is actually more promising than the easy optimism promulgated by the apostles of progress. This is a demanding pessimism which holds that individual man improves, not in spite of himself, but only as he increases his own moral and spiritual stature.

Willa Cather had no distinct philosophical pattern. Instead she reveals a feeling for the values which were a part of the cultural climate of her own formative years. She held high the ideal of struggle, finding more virtue in the fight to achieve a worthwhile goal than in the goal itself.

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She found in Emersonian self-reliance an ideal which she never forsook. She believed in the dignity of the dreamer; dreams, desires, wishes if great enough could become realities. She found reality in a dream again and again. That part of The Song of the Lark in which Thea Kronborg discovers the worth of a people of an ancient civilization bears many careful readings. In these pages Miss Cather reveals in moving prose the beauty of dreams dreamed long ago in the first light of ages. The ideals of those dreams were timeless, could speak across the centuries to the persons who could hear. And Miss Cather drew many characters who had the ability to hear: Thea Kronborg, Tom Outland, Bishop Latour, are among them.

The very pattern of Willa Cather's literary career is a corroboration of her values. Idealizing the past of her early years, castigating the present of her mature years, and, finally, seeking the values she most admired in a chosen lengthened past, she personifies the love of the past and the rejection of the present. Her personal dislike for "modern conveniences," her rejection of all that was shoddy, cheap, or standardized, and her final interest in the old writers in her own language are overt expressions of her standard of values.

From the angle of vision of the Nineteen Sixties, from the electronic age, we might say that Willa Cather doubtless made too much of a virtue out of the farmer's sweat of

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his brow, that she emphasized too much the values of a past age. Yet no less a writer than William Faulkner has reiterated her meaning when, in one of his rare letters to the press, he expressed a fear that fliers who fly by instruments alone are abdicating their human role.² As C.P. Snow, the English scientist-novelist has so often pointed out, this is the age of science, a time of great scientific wonder and adventure. But if C.P. Snow pointed out to Miss Cather that man's new discoveries necessitate new ways of seeing the world, in all probability she would say, as she made the Indian say in Death Comes for the Archbishop: "Men travel faster now, but I do not know if they go to better things."³

The "better things," as even the casual reader soon perceives, signified for Willa Cather more than those found only in the American past. Europe exerted upon her an increasing and finally a dominant pull "without ever degenerating into the simple and vulgar pursuit of an older culture."⁴ As she neared the end of her life she turned more and more toward a Christian past, toward a Christian culture emanating

² As quoted by Leon Edel in "Willa Cather: The Paradox of Success," a lecture delivered in the Coolidge Auditorium, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Oct. 12, 1959.

³ Ibid.

⁴ David Daiches, Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1951, p. 124.

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from the faith and charity of the Middle Ages. In fact, Miss Cather once told her friend and companion, Edith Lewis, that she wanted to live in the Middle Ages, so far as it was possible, but for the values she would find in that epoch not because of an antiquarian interest. A mood not unlike Henry Adams'! Miss Lewis herself saw nothing of the merely antiquarian in her friends. She writes that Miss Cather cared for old things "only as they expressed the human spirit and the human lot on earth."⁵

One of the most interesting results of this development in Miss Cather came in the last years of her life, a project never completed: to place the setting of a story straight across the world, quite far into the past, in medieval Avignon.⁶

Very little comment has been made in print about the significance of this radical departure. Culture, for Willa Cather, had provided standards of value and intellectual and

⁵ Willa Cather Living, New York, Knopf, 1953, p. 120.

⁶ The title of Willa Cather's unfinished and unpublished story was Hard Punishments, its setting fourteenth century Avignon, at the time of the papal residence of Benedict XII. The central characters were two youths, whom she tentatively called Pierre and Andre--the first intelligent, well-born; the second simple, rather stupid. The story was of their friendship. The manuscript, by Miss Cather's direction, was destroyed after her death. George N. Kates reproduces Edith Lewis' account of the story and of the circumstances of its composition.--"Willa Cather's Unfinished Avignon Story," in Five Stories by Willa Cather, New York, Random House, 1958, p. 177-214.

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aesthetic appreciation. But, as Christopher Dawson clearly states, "the fact is that culture by itself--even a humanist culture that is intellectually aware of the spiritual values of Christianity--does not possess the power of restoring or transforming the life of society."⁷

Yet Willa Cather appears to have been moving in the direction of a true Christian culture in Death Comes for the Archbishop, wherein she is a declared seeker for a faith that will console her for the perishability of life. Her treatment of Catholics in this book, as well as later in Shadows on the Rock, became so sympathetic as she went along that many readers quite unconsciously must have thought her speaking for her own faith. Death Comes for the Archbishop constantly takes one backward and forward, on missions of religion, between the Old World and the New; "it is as if Willa Cather were intent upon weaving a cable of many strands between them."⁸

In Shadows on the Rock Miss Cather seems to have moved still farther away, both in time and in space, and "religion also is very near the heart of this book."⁹ The

⁷ Understanding Europe, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1953, p. 261.

⁸ Kates, "Willa Cather's Unfinished Avignon Story," p. 192.

⁹ Ibid., p. 193.

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characters are American in the sense that they come to live permanently in the New World; but they continuously strive to keep alive, under hard and adverse conditions, old values emanating from a Christian culture which Christopher Dawson defines as "an organized way of life which is based on a common tradition and conditioned by a common environment...a spiritual community which owes its unity to common beliefs and common ways of thought far more than to any uniformity of physical type."¹⁰ Willa Cather must have sensed the roots of such a culture at the very outset of her career, because

from the earliest time her German musicians, her young men from Prague--or Bergen or Upsala-- even arriving as poor immigrants...had brought to the outlying farms about Red Cloud values that the young girl who was also Willa Cather sensed by every worthy measurement as far transcending what they found in possession about them. Excellence does not change, whatever the circumstances, the fluctuations in its appreciation.¹¹

Implicitly, Miss Cather's missionaries, her "natural" people, especially those who were immigrants from the Old World, demonstrate some of the qualities implied in the folk culture of the Christian past: a grasp of fundamental truth and interest in fundamental things; a continuous and keen interest in the most important problems and issues of human

¹⁰ Religion and Culture, London, Sheed and Ward, 1949, p. 47.

¹¹ Kates, "Willa Cather's Unfinished Avignon Story," p. 194.

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life, human nature, and human conduct; and a well-rounded development of mind producing penetration, agility, flexibility, alertness and concentration. In novels as different as My Antonia and Death Comes for the Archbishop, David Daiches discerns "a sense of power held in reserve, of the visible part of the story being only that part of the iceberg which is above the surface."¹² In the depths of that hidden power may we not, perhaps, discover in Willa Cather a latent desire and propensity for the Christian culture of the medieval past?

Consequently, the unfinished story about Avignon takes on added interest. Undertaken at a time when her physical energies were almost gone and her creative powers failing, she may still have wanted the companionship and solace of a piece of work in the making. In the richer years of her life, to work, also, was to pray--a concept derived from the Christian culture of the Christian past. "This may explain," notes George Kates, "what was going on in Willa Cather's mind when we see her as Edith Lewis describes her, pacing the 'open roof garden, walking to and fro and reading' Okey's little guidebook [The Story of Avignon by Thomas Okey] becomes a breviary."¹³

¹² Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, p. 123.

¹³ "Willa Cather's Unfinished Avignon Story," p. 196.

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It is also easy to see why a French palace like that at Avignon rather than the one at Versailles should have seized Willa Cather's imagination. Her firmly expressed distastes would normally find the latter artificial and flimsy, just where the noble pile beside the Rhone was the reverse-- "the surprise and splendor of the conception, the wonderful sparseness of the lofty architecture, these broad halls set high above rich farming-land, this capital of popes in exile, across the mountains and beside a broad, rushing Provencal river: all would have spoken clarion words."¹⁴

The move toward Avignon, then, following the thoroughly Catholic themes of Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock, demonstrates, however dimly, Willa Cather's sympathy for the manifestations of Christian culture as well as her nostalgia for a Christian past. Her very revolt against American secularist culture points in that direction. She had reached first

for the stars over the pure air of Nebraska, and then, when their light became obscured, would accept nothing less beautiful in their place simply because it was American...Her stubborn loyalty to excellence and the tenderness of her love, refused to alter because they had come upon alteration."¹⁵

¹⁴ Kates, "Willa Cather's Unfinished Avignon Story," p. 196.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 199.

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Thus the Avignon story, incomplete and vanished as it is, remains the last great testimony not only of what Willa Cather believed in and of what she lived for, but also of her vision of a future thoroughly imbued with the Christian culture of a Christian past. However this aspect of Miss Cather's work--particularly as it would affect her standard of values--must remain the burden of a future study.

While the present study envisions Willa Cather as moving implicitly in the direction of a distinctly Christian culture, it does not construct a thesis of this implication. Rather, it proposes and concludes that in the writings of Miss Cather, the past, with its connotation of the backward-looking habit and the desire for a less intricate design for living, emerged as a hallmark of values. Henry Steele Commager perhaps best summarizes Miss Cather's convictions--and supports most aptly the evidence presented in this study--when he says of her that, throughout her long literary life, "she was engaged in an elaborate remembrance of things past," and that all her novels and short stories "were animated by a single great theme: the supremacy of moral and spiritual over material values, the ever inexhaustible theme of gaining the whole world and losing one's soul."¹⁶

¹⁶ The American Mind, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1950, p. 150.

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- 7 A Lost Lady - 1938.
- 8 The Professor's House - 1938.
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ABSTRACT OF

Willa Cather: A Study in Values¹

This thesis is a study of Willa Cather's values and attitudes as they are exemplified in her writings. The study attempts to demonstrate that within the framework of Willa Cather's literary artistry are frequently recurring and varied expressions of her values and attitudes, manifested in the following: 1) a backward-looking habit of mind--a tendency to regard the past with nostalgic fondness, finding in time past qualities and virtues which are sorely missed in the present; 2) a desire for a less intricate design for living--a tendency to find admirable qualities in a level of society other than her own, often in a less sophisticated culture.

The study undertakes to explore the ramifications of these tendencies which, in all probability, helped to shape Willa Cather's values and attitudes. The exploration encompasses Miss Cather's 1) admiration of the classics, her inclination to hark back to patriarchal epochs, her fond recollection of the glories of her own national past--as well as a concomitant disenchantment with the baseness of the present; 2) admiration for "natural" persons unaffected and unspoiled by the complexities of sophisticated society; 3) preference

¹ Sister M. Placide, C.S.F.N. (Irene Karczewska), doctoral thesis presented to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ottawa, Ontario, September 1962, ix-254 p.

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for rural living; and 4) belief in the innate superiority of persons of low station.

Included in the study is an examination of concepts closely related to the aforementioned tendencies, namely, pessimism and optimism, materialism, and idealism--all of which are strikingly present in Miss Cather's writings. The study also endeavors to show that the pattern of Miss Cather's literary career constitutes a corroboration of her values and attitudes.

Finally, the study envisions Willa Cather as moving implicitly in the direction of a distinctly Christian past, toward a Christian culture emanating from the faith and charity of the Middle Ages. However, it does not construct a thesis of this implication. Rather it proposes and concludes that in the writings of Miss Cather, the past, with its connotation of the backward-looking habit and the desire for a less intricate design for living, emerged as a hallmark of values.