WILLA CATHER'S SYMBOLIC USE OF THE LAND

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND THE GRADUATE COUNCIL OF THE KANSAS STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE OF EMPORIA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

MARJORIE H. DOUTHIT

August, 1965

Approved for the Major Department

Approved for the Graduate Council

PREFACE

Willa Cather is considered one of America's best known female novelists. I, first, became interested in Miss Cather because of her mid-Western portrayal of character. Each of her characters is an artist in conflict with his limitations. To portray these types of characters, Miss Cather uses the land as a basic symbol. I chose, therefore, to investigate Miss Cather's land symbolism, because I had discovered that her symbolism in this category had not been thoroughly investigated. I soon found that she had employed the land symbol differently in four major areas of her works.

In her early period of short stories and a first novel, Miss Cather used the land as a character. She was, at this time, working under the influence of Henry James, and a direct correlation can be shown between the techniques of these two authors. In her post-James period, Miss Cather presented her pioneer novels of Nebraska with a feministic viewpoint designed to show the conquering of an untamed wilderness. In her third area, developed after World War I, she used the land as a symbol of man's creative ability in contrast with the maching age that had brought disillusionment to man. In her last period, she employed the land as a symbol in her search for an identity, one that centers around the topic of religion.

I would like to thank Dr. Green D. Wyrick and Dr. Charles E. Walton for their patient assistance and encouragement during

the preparation of the study and Dr. Theodore C. Owen and Dr. June Morgan for their assistance.

August, 1965 M. H. D.

Emporia, Kansas

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

WILLA CATHER'S DEBT TO HENRY JAMES

Willa Cather's first published fictions includes her early short stories and her first novel, Alexander's Bridge, works which show the strong influence of Henry James upon the young writer. She herself said of Henry James, "In those days, no one seemed so wonderful as Henry James: for me he was the perfect writer."[1] She found James's fiction both exciting and exemplary. In her college fiction writing, he had seemed indispensible to her; and by means of imitating his work, she had tried to achieve a sophisticated art. From him, she learned the structure and form of fiction, and she borrowed his stream of consciousness technique.[2]

Cather's search for art may be traced to her schooling in Red Cloud, Nebraska, where her teacher, Mrs. Eva. J. Chase (Miss Knight of "The Best Years"), introduced her to the reading of the English classics.[3] Later, some Jewish neighbors of the Cathers (the Rosens of "Old Mrs. Harris"), gave her many books which, otherwise, she would not have had access to, and caused her to become interested in the French Classics. At the

---

[1]John P. Hinz, "The Real Alexander's Bridge," American Literature, XXI (January, 1950), 473.

[2]Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America 1900-1950, p. 52.

[3]E. K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, p. 32.

same time, because of the educational limitations in Red Cloud, Willa felt that the conventionalism in the town would deny her the opportunity for an artistic life.[4] Consequently, at the age of sixteen, she went to the University of Nebraska. While there, she published nineteen of her stories in the Hesperian, the University literary magazine.[5] Cather, however, found artistic sterility and pedantry in Lincoln.[6] After graduation, she went East to discover the concerts and other art forms which she desired.[7] In New York, she worked on the staff of a minor magazine and taught school before becoming managing editor of McClure's Magazine, at which time her interest in James was at its greatest. She explained "Henry James and Mrs. Wharton were our most interesting novelists, and most of the younger writers followed their manner, without having their qualifications."[8]

These students of Henry James were devoted to his major theme of individuals who pursue romantic dreams and absolutes only to be destroyed by them. At this stage of her career,

---

[4] Ibid., p. 47.

[5] John H. Randall, The Landscape and the Looking Glass, p. 22.

[6] H. Wayne Morgan, Writers in Transition: Seven Americans, p. 61.

[7] Irene and Allen Cleaton, Books and Battles: American Literature, pp. 248-249.

[8] Willa Cather, Willa Cather on Writing, p. 93.

Willa Cather was less ironic than she later became, for she had come to understand the pain and pleasure of a hard life.[9] She patterned her early works after James in an attempt to express an aesthetic self-realization,[10] following his lead long before she had realized that his world and methods were far from the world of her own limited experiences or the reach of her imagination.[11] Even in this early period her fictional techniques differ greatly from those of James in that she prevents her characters from becoming involved in society;[12] indeed, she felt character development more important than social analysis.[13]

The structure in these early works is excellent but of a negative quality, one that she would never master as well as Henry James.[14] Her characters, in conflict with their environment, have a mysterious quality about them and are vibrantly alive.[15] Cather can be critical of frontier life, and she

---

[9]Allan Angoff, American Writing Today, pp. 210-211.

[10]Percy Boynton, Some Contemporary Americans, p. 164.

[11]Van Wyck Brooks, The Confident Years: 1885-1915, p. 535.

[12]Leon Howard, Literature and the American Tradition, p. 270.

[13]Percy Boynton, Literature and American Life, p. 787.

[14]Rene Rapin, Willa Cather, p. 20.

[15]Edward Wagsknecht, "Willa Cather," Swanee Review, XXXVIII, (April, 1921), 224.

rejects the hard labor the immigrants had to suffer.[16] Critics also found it surprising that a girl in her early twenties could write of alcohol, delirium tremens, and rape and handle these subjects in such an expert manner that it was clear these events were a part of pioneer life.[17] One of the earliest stories called "Peter" (1892) is the narrative of a sensitive man, at odds with his environment, who kills himself. "Lou the Prophet" deals with a homesick Dane who spends his time with children, his audience, to whom he gives his own form of religion. Miss Cather is not contemptuous of simple-hearted worship, and she treats the Dane as the Catholic missionaries treated their audiences--as childlike people.

"On the Divide" is the story of Canute, a strong Norwegian, and vigorous earth symbol. In this tale, Miss Cather uses the Divide as a place of discouragement, for a protagonist who has reached his fortieth birthday. Here, for the first time, she employs a mountain symbol which she will continue to use as the image of faith and aspiration.

"A Night at Greenway Court" (1896) shows many Jamesian influences, primary of which is the portrait of a lady who holds in her hand a white lily; yet a heavy instrument has been thrust through the canvas, marring the woman's face beyond all

---

[16] Curtis Bradford, "Willa Cather's Uncollected Short Stories," American Literature, XXVI (January, 1955), 538-539.

[17] Ibid., p. 539.

recognition. Cather has borrowed both the lady and the portrait from James' Portrait of a Lady.

"Nanette: An Aside" (1896) is her first treatment of an opera star. Here, Miss Cather asserts her idea that an artist cannot be happily married to anyone, a concept which echoes James' theme of the frustrated artist.

In "The Count of the Crow's Nest," Cather borrows heavily from James. It is the story of a disillusioned artist who lives with dignity in a boarding house. One may trace a statement in this story to James' Altar of the Dead: "It is a mistake not to be content with perfection and not find its sermon sufficient. As opposed to chaos, harmony was the original good, the first created virtue."[18] The second-rate people who live in the Crow's Nest include an old European with his family, and many proud people who are secretive and fearful of publicity, all very much the characters of Henry James, who serve as studies of decayed aristocracy.

Both "The Prodigies" (1897) and "The Sentimentality of William Tavener" deal with women in the James tradition. "The Prodigies" shows a devouring woman; "The Sentimentality of William Tavener" presents a dominating woman. Cather's women are not unlike James' depiction of May Bartram in "The Beast in the Jungle," and his Kate Cory in The Wings of the Dove.

---

[18]Willa Cather, Early Stories of Willa Cather, p. 121.

In 1905 a group of Miss Cather's stories were collected into a book entitled The Troll Garden,[19] four stories of which were never republished, namely, "Flavia and Her Artists," "The Garden Lodge," "A Death in the Desert," and "The Marriage of Phaedra."[20] They center around the experiences of artists who battle the middle class but who lose their battles to keep art alive. All deal with the narrative milieu with which James had been successful, stories from the world of wealth, of cosmopolitans, of upper class people who loved the arts, and of the artists themselves.[21] However, all these stories are watered-down versions of James, the best example of the Jamesian influence being Cather's "The Marriage of Phaedra," which resembles James' The Author of Beltraffio. In The Author of Beltraffio, Mr. Ambient, the author in the title, is visited by a young American man who is an ardent admirer of Ambient's work, and in whose point of view the story is related. When interviewed by the young man, Ambient's wife says of her husband and his work, "I'm afraid you think I know much more about my

---

[19]Bradford, op. cit., p. 548.

[20]Henry James was sent a copy of The Troll Garden and wrote a letter to Witter Bynnder about it. He did not read it. He said that he was almost 100 years old, and he found it hard to read any novel. He continued, saying that it was the hardest to read of novels by innocent hands of young females, young American females above all (Elizabeth Sergeant, Willa Cather: A Memoir, p. 68).

[21]Randall, op. cit., p. 34.

husband's work than I do. I haven't the least idea what he's doing."[22] Later, after the death of her only child and before her own early death, Mrs. Ambient does read some of her husband's novels to explore his thoughts.

In "The Marriage of Phaedra" an artist dies, and his devoted servant, James, hides his unfinished masterpiece to keep the artist's wife from selling it to finance her second marriage. The greatest Jamesian effect, here, is Cather's obvious attempt at his point of view: i.e., the story is conceived of through the eyes of an American painter named MacMaster. However, Cather does not remain consistent in her use of the method as would James have done.[23]

In The Troll Garden Cather also permitted three of the stories to be republished in Youth and the Bright Medusa: "A Wagner Matinee," (1903), "The Sculptor's Funeral," (1903), and "Paul's Case," (1904). Her stories in Youth and the Bright Medusa are arranged like those in James' The Two Magics in which the narratives alternate in tone between the baleful and the bright.[24]

"A Wagner Matinee" is the most Jamesian of all of Miss Cather's early fiction. It is the story of an old woman's

---

[22]Henry James, The Author of Beltraffio, p. 19.

[23]Randall, op. cit., p. 34.

[24]Brown, op. cit., p. 114.

reaction to her return to a long-lost musical world. Although it is little more than a sketch, Cather shows the plight of a woman who gave up her life of a musician to elope to Nebraska and who lived to regret it.[25] The scene and theme of "A Wagner Matinee" resemble James' theme in The Wings of the Dove, in which the heroine's tragedy is compared to a Wagnerian overture.[26] Aunt Georgiana, the heroine of the story, has not been fifty miles from her homestead in Nebraska for many years. She returns to New York to visit a nephew who takes her to a Wagner concert and the high climax occurs when the nephew realizes:

> It never really died, then--the soul which can suffer so excruciatingly and so interminably; it withers to the outward eye only; like that strange moss which can lie on a dusty shelf half a century and yet, if placed in water, grows green again.[27]

In the Wagner opera, "Tristan und Isolde," James found ". . . the dedicated love, the frustration, and the poetic symbolism which he desired for his novel"[28] Furthermore, The Wings of the Dove is a novel which also shows faith in the human will,[29]

---

[25]Randall, op. cit., p. 26.

[26]Oscar Cargill, The Novels of Henry James, p. 338.

[27]Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 258.

[28]Cargill, op. cit., p. 339.

[29]Ibid., p. 375.

a theme Cather advances in "A Wagner Matinee."

"The Sculptor's Funeral" is a direct expression of Cather's concept of art.[30] Here is the story of a boy from Kansas who becomes a famous sculptor. Dying young, he is brought home for burial, and the townspeople come into the home to defame the artist and sneer at his skill. They assert that his parents had wasted money on him. Even the parents themselves do not seem to have understood nor to have loved their son. The only person who has understood him is his old friend, Jim Laird, a lawyer who has returned to his home town to practice law and who similarly has been victimized by the people of the small town. In turn, these same people detest one another and are themselves not happy.[31] They can not see beyond the superficial financial worth of a person. The climax occurs in the speech which Jim Laird utters to the mourners in which he describes the extent of their petty and mean behavior. In this speech, Cather bitterly denounces the values of Small Town America, and, as Randall notes ". . . it is equal to anything to be found in the literature of the revolt of the village."[32] The best example of her statement of this attitude is expressed by the dying sculptor to his student: "The townspeople will

---

[30]David Daiches, Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, pp. 97-98.

[31]Brooks, op. cit., p. 98.

[32]Randall, op. cit., p. 24.

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!"[33] Cather's theme for "The Sculptor's Funeral" is to found in a series of James' novels, The Sacred Fount, The Spoils of Poynton, What Maisie Knew, The Awkward Age, dealing with "current greed, indifference to the young, licentiousness, destructive gossip, and the depraved tone of society."[34]

The last story to be considered in this category is one of rejection. "Paul's Case" is Cather's tale about a high school boy who rejects life and tries to escape from it in his job at a theatre. Paul has a great desire for beauty, but he lives in an atmosphere of ugliness that has no aesthetic growth.[35] Later, when he is expelled from school and forced to forsake his position at the theatre, he realizes his roots are severed. He, then, takes a job in a bank, steals a thousand dollars, and goes to New York City, where he lives in great luxury. When he reads in the paper that his father has repaid the money to the bank and that the bank is not going to prosecute, he feels no emotion. Indeed, he does not become anxious until he reads that his father is coming to New York City to find him and take him home--back to the world that he

---

[33] Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 284.

[34] Cargill, op. cit., p. 296.

[35] Daiches, op. cit., p. 99.

cannot bear. To avoid this problem, Paul retreats into the country and waits beside a railroad track for a train. Cather describes this event in the following manner:

> He stood watching the approaching locomotive, his teeth chattering, his lips drawn away from them in a frightened smile; once or twice he glanced nervously sidewise, as though he were being watched. When the right moment came, he jumped.[36]

Paul is not depicted as a neurotic teen-ager. Rather, one realizes that he is a criminal who kills himself to expiate the guilt of his crime.[37] As Cather shows, Paul is searching for his soul, but he does not have the strength of will necessary to find it. She uses the event of his suicide effectively to dramatize the human condition. Here, then, in Paul is the Jamesian individual who also does not fit into his society, a society that makes no effort to understand the individual because it is too busy with itself. Even if it did take time to understand people like Paul, it would not have the ability to see past the mere physical traits of the person. In addition, Cather takes James' theme of the American in Europe and changes it around in writing of the European in America. James puts his characters into a broader expanse of life by having them sojourn among Europeans; on the other hand, Cather felt that

---

[36] Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 245.

[37] Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, p. 175.

the European could experience a broader life in America ". . . where the search for beauty with the moral virtues inherent in the idyl of the garden, the cultivated sensibility with the ethical integrity of the agrarian dream was his reward."[38]

Miss Cather's most Jamesian material, perhaps, is found in her first novel, Alexander's Bridge. (Many of her critics could not see past an influence of Edith Wharton, but Cather went back to Mrs. Wharton's master, Henry James.)[39] She had been working on the staff of McClure's Magazine when the Quebec Bridge collapsed in 1907. When she wrote Alexander's Bridge, she used this episode and drew upon the experiences of her trips to London for her material.[40] When visiting London, she had been impressed by a young actress who was performing with the Irish players, and this actress became Hilda Burgoyne in the novel.[41] The hero, Bartley Alexander, was a combination of two real men, Mr. Cooper, a great engineer, and Mr. Bicks, his chief engineer, who had lost their lives when the bridge which they were building had collapsed.[42] One sees, then, that Cather's

---

[38]Randall, op. cit., p. 99.

[39]Wagsnknecht, op. cit., p. 237.

[40]Hinz, op. cit., p. 473.

[41]Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living, p. 68.

[42]Hinz, op. cit., p. 474.

Alexander's Bridge must be read for its aesthetic value,[43] for Cather's aim, as was James' in The Ambassadors, is to portray the mind of her hero.

Both Alexander's Bridge, and The Ambassadors have an international setting, and both are studies of character.[44] They are artistically alike inasmuch as the reader has to fill out the emotional implications.[45] Both are great portraits of men. Cather's Bartley Alexander (there is also a character names Alexandrians in The Ambassadors) is a distinguished bridge engineer, a happily married man, who, upon a trip to London from his home in Boston, meets Hilda Burgoyne, his lover of many years ago. She is now a well-known stage acress, and they resume their liaison, and Alexander's trips to London become more frequent. Alexander has the problem of not accpeting the limitations that life imposes upon all men. He wants everything that he desires, and he cannot be content with anything.[46] In the midst of building his masterpiece, Alexander is forced to cut costs, and, as a consequence, his bridge is weakened. His personality also is weakened because of his double life, and as he reaches the age of forty, he loses all sense of reality.[47]

---

[43]Grant Overton, The Women Who Make Our Novels, p. 254.

[44]Hinz, op. cit., p. 473.

[45]Lewis, op. cit., p. 41.

[46]Josephine Jessup, The Faith of Our Feminists, p. 55.

[47]Tasker Witham, Panorama of American Literature, p. 18.

When Alexander attends to an emergency inspection of his weakened bridge, it collapses and he is drowned. With his death, both his wife and his lover are given the satisfaction that he loved each of them.

It is obvious that the story has direct connection to The Ambassadors, in which Lambert Strether is an observer who tries to influence Chad Newsome.[48] His counterpart in Alexander's Bridge is Professor Wilson, whose purpose is to provide Cather with a point from which to watch Alexander.[49] Furthermore, in James' The Ambassadors, Paris, the city itself, is an actor with a range of emotion grand enough to measure all sensibility.[50] In Cather's Alexander's Bridge, London is the living character. One observes that both novels also deal with small groups; and the novels have no stupid or poor people.[51] Similarly, as James' men and women have a strong sense of truth and conduct,[52] so does Cather's Alexander. Furthermore, both novels are often hard to understand and at times are confusing. James himself said, "The muddled state too is one of the very

---

[48]Leon Edel (ed.), Henry James: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 73.

[49]Daiches, op. cit., p. 17.

[50]Edel, op. cit., p. 74.

[51]Ibid., p. 77.

[52]Ibid., p. 14.

sharpest of the realities, that it also has colour and form and character . . . many of the signs and values of the appreciable."[53] Alexander's Bridge lacks, however, what James had called the sense of "felt life."[54] In The Ambassadors, he had explained:

> Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't matter what you do in particular so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what have you had?[55]

It is significant that in 1922, Miss Cather prepared a new introduction to Alexander's Bridge, in which she had this comment to make upon James' influence:

> . . . but I think usually the young writer must have his affair with the external material he covets; must imitate and strive to follow the masters he most admires, until he finds he is starving for reality and cannot make this go any longer. Then he learns that it is not the adventure he sought, but the adventure that sought him, which has made the enduring mark upon him.[56]

In going to James and learning how to use words and how to place them correctly, Miss Cather learned the basis for her fiction. She had this following statement to make about her art:

---

[53]Henry James, The Novels and Tales of Henry James, XI, 11.

[54]Daiches, op. cit., p. 18.

[55]James, op. cit., XIII, v.

[56]Alexander's Bridge, p. vii.

> The further the world advances the more it becomes evident that an author's only safe course is to cling to the skirts of his art, forsaking all others, and keep unto her as long as they two shall live. An artist should not be vexed by human hobbies or human follies; he should be able to lift himself into the clean firmament of creation where the world is not. He should be among men but not of them in the world. Other men may think and believe and argue, but he must create.[57]

It is important to recall that, later, when Cather had turned away from her master, she had an unexpected pleasure. She was walking the streets of London and had caught a glimpse of James, standing in the square in front of Westminster Abbey, oblivious of people, gazing at the towers of the cathedral. She said at once to herself, "You'll never make it." She was right, because James had his ashes brought back to America to be among his people.[58]

By 1913, Cather's lady-like Jamesian writing of the elite in a sophisticated setting was over. With the publication of O Pioneers, she started her great feministic novels. She said of O Pioneers, "In this one I hit home pasture and found that I was Yance Sorgeson and not Henry James."[59]

---

[57] Brown, op. cit., p. vii.

[58] Elizabeth Moorhead, These Too Were Here, pp. 53-54.

[59] Ibid., p. 197.

CHAPTER II

WILLA CATHER AND THE FEMINISTIC NOVEL

With the publication of O Pioneers, Willa Cather had finally escaped from her obsession with James and had emerged in her own style. In this, the major phase of her writing, she used the pioneer novel with a feministic viewpoint. She used the land, the oldest and most enduring force, as a source of survival and birth. She chose immigrants as her main characters. They had not, before coming to America, had the freedom of will to exercise their inate pioneer spirit.[60]

Although she had arrived at a stage of artistic maturity with the publication of O Pioneers, she was not to be recognized by the critics until she had written My Antonia, and her third novel in her so-called post-James period is The Song of the Lark. All three novels deal with uprooted Europeans of vast sensitivity. The older pioneer characters who had appeared in her early fiction are now passed by. Instead, she gives her emphasis to their children in order to show the merging of cultures and background.[61] Of the three heroines in these three novels, two remain childless, and the other becomes the symbol of mother earth. Each succeeds in her life and becomes a triumphant woman, emphasizing Cather's feministic theme.

---

[60] Morgan, op. cit., p. 67.

[61] Daiches, op. cit., p. 21.

Cather's feminism can be traced to the early years before the start of her literary career. As a small child in Virginia, she was independent, determined to accomplish tasks alone. When she was fifteen and her family was living in Red Cloud, Nebraska, she had her hair cut; short hair for girls was, at that time, a mark of a rebel.[62] Nor was she content just to have her hair shingled, but, stressing her rebellious spirit, she dressed like her brothers.[63] In high school, with her short hair and boyish clothes, she preferred to be called Willie, Bill or Will. She also preferred the companionship of older men.[64] Her mother objected to the way in which Willa dressed, especially to her penchant for violent color combinations, but to little purpose, for Will did not heed her mother's advice on clothes or on matters of social behavior.[65]

When Willa entered school in Lincoln, her college acquaintances thought her to be lofty and mannish.[66] During her first years in Lincoln, she still dressed as a boy, wearing a jacket, a derby hat or cap, and a white shirt, and she carried a cane.[67]

---

[62] Mildred Bennett, The World of Willa Cather, p. 45.

[63] Lewis, op. cit., p. 27.

[64] Brown, op. cit., p. 47.

[65] Bennett, op. cit., pp. 30-31.

[66] Don M. Wolfe, The Image of Man in America, p. 22.

[67] Bennett, op. cit., p. 179.

She even once horrified the city of Lincoln by acting the role of a man in a play.[68]

In her later years, Willa Cather was to be classified as one of America's three most usccessful feministic novelists, in league with Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow.[69] Oddly enough, all three of these women were, at least, third generation Americans, members of the Anglican Church, and ladies who breathed the spirit of Athena (only Edith Wharton married, but was later divorced).[70] These female writers acknowledge feminism to be of a deeper importance than economic or political opportunity. Jessup describes their type of feminism as "... an expression of woman's desire to be herself; that is, to measure attainment irrespective of sexual function."[71]

In Cather's feministic novels, male characters are usually depicted as being sensitive souls, out of place and sympathy with the hard demands of the land.[72] Her masculine characters are also dwarfed, either because of Cather's desire to glorify women or because she lacked the ability in fiction to project a male character.[73] Certainly, she did have the ability to know

---

[68] Loc. cit.

[69] Jessup, op. cit., p. 11.

[70] Ibid., p. 10.

[71] Loc. cit.

[72] Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America 1900-1950, p. 57.

[73] Jessup, op. cit., p. 76.

the world of men, for she demonstrates an interest in the labors of men as if she herself had held some of these jobs. This fact is especially pertinent to the occupations of bridge-building, farming, and railroading.[74] Although she can record the exact descriptions of male occupations and can probe somewhat into the minds of her men, she fails, nevertheless, to depict a complete male character.[75]

With her feministic point of view, seeking an artistic truth, Cather uses the character of the pioneer American as her spy. Even though she approaches her characters as a friend, she always sees masculinity through the eyes of the elder sister or of an older helper, except in her first novel, Alexander's Bridge, her only non-feminist work; indeed, she almost disavowed the book in later years.[76]

In O Pioneers, The Song of the Lark, and My Antonia, then, the female protagonists are all strong personalities. For example, Alexandra (O Pioneers) gives her love to the land and, in doing so, watches it become fertile. Thea Kronborg (The Song of the Lark) gives attention to her love of music, but her determination and will are strong because of her family background, and because she is able to refresh herself with the land

---

[74] Ibid., p. 78.

[75] Ibid., p. 79.

[76] Ibid., p. 74.

of the Southwest. Antonia, furthermore, gives her love to a husband and children, thus becoming a mother earth symbol. The men in these three novels, on the other hand, are likeable and individualized. Had they been matched against women of the same level, they would show force; but they cannot be matched with the female protagonists, and, therefore, they appear emasculated.[77]

The heroine of O Pioneers, Alexandra Borgson, is recognized to have been conceived of in Cather's feministic light, almost immediately. For example, when a man innocently praises her beautiful hair, Cather writes that Alexandra ". . . stabbed him with a glance of Amazonian fierceness."[78] One recalls that Alexandra was ". . . a tall, strong girl, and she walked rapidly and resolutely, as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next."[79] It is this daughter that John Borgson makes head of his family when he knows he is going to die. He makes this decision because Alexandra has the intelligence and good sense needed by a farmer. In the family, the brothers, Lou and Oscar, have strength; and their father has imagination, but Alexandra has a combination of both qualities and, so, is the best pioneer.[80] The brothers accept

---

[77] Ibid., p. 56.

[78] O Pioneers, p. 7.

[79] Ibid., pp. 5-6.

[80] Randall, op. cit., p. 70.

their father's decision, but Cather shows that they are vulgarized by Americanization and are dull.[81] Alexandra's power, therefore, becomes complete when she convinces her brothers to put back the dreaded mortgage on the farm in order to buy more land when a depression causes many of their neighbors to go back to the city. Of the three brothers, only the youngest, Emil, seems to know of Alexandra's inner strength. It is difficult for him to remember the hard times, yet, he knows of the frontier country and ". . . the struggle in which his sister was destined to succeed while so many men broke their hearts and died."[82] Obviously, then, Cather uses Emil to show American opportunity,[83] and proves that Alexandra is above her neighbors, because she has made this intelligent younger brother ". . . a personality apart from the soil."[84]

Here is the woman in a man's world, able to do a better job of farming than most of the men around her. She excells in a man's world, not because of her sex, but because her abilities make her the best qualified.

When prosperity comes to the Divide, the Borgson place is described as follows:

---

[81] Vernon Parrington, The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, p. 383.

[82] O Pioneers, p. 67.

[83] Parrington, op. cit., p. 383.

[84] Malcom Cowley, After the Genteel Tradition, p. 56.

> A stranger, approaching [illegible], could not help noticing the beauty and fruitfulness of the surrounding fields. There was something individual about the great farm, a most unusual trimness and care for detail . . . . Anyone thereabouts would have told you that this was one of the richest farms on the Divide, and that the farmer was a woman, Alexandra Borgson.[85]

Part of the general feeling of the land comes to one because Cather clearly invests the land with a personality and this personification lets her think of the land as a fellow human being. In a human sense, the earth is capable of all of the feelings the human heart can achieve; thus, the land is responsive to love; Alexandra gives her love to this land, and, as a result of giving herself to the land, she finds the materials for creation:[86]

> For the first time, perhaps, since the land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human race was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.[87]

Alexandra tames the land, because she is able to love the earth. Cather shows, therefore, that love is necessary in order for

---

[85] O Pioneers, p. 73.

[86] Randall, op. cit., p. 67.

[87] O Pioneers, p. 56.

man to build a civilization.[88] Thus, Alexandra becomes the symbol of mother earth--full breasted, strong, and placid with deep roots.[89] Here, then, is a mother symbol, fertile and permanent, giving her body and soul to the land and, in return, receiving harvest without physical love.

Although Alexandra makes the land fertile, she herself is not. Cather's other major female character, Marie Shabata, the beautiful young married woman, love of Emil Borgson, is also childless.[90] While the older Borgson brothers have families, Emil, who loves a married woman, has only frustration. Emil Borgson is the first male character who shows the design of Cather's future men of fiction.[91] The illicit love of Emil and Marie ends when they are killed by Marie's jealous husband. It is most evident, here, that Cather, as a feminist disapproves of sexuality. Feminists think that women are the bestowers of sex: "The fact that man and woman come together for life--and not alone for the life of the unborn--is implicitly denied by Cather."[92] Cather employs the sexual image to unite her themes of land and human love. It is used to show the relation

---

[88] Randall, op. cit., p. 67.

[89] Dondore, op. cit., p. 328.

[90] Rapin, op. cit., p. 22.

[91] Jessup, op. cit., pp. 56-57.

[92] Ibid., p. 83.

of the soil and those who till it.[93]

At the end of the novel, there is no talk of a proposed family, when at the age of forty, Alexandra is going to marry Carl Linstrum, an old friend and neighbor from the early hardship years. Rather, she talks of willing the land to her neices and nephews. Alexandra and Linstrum do not have sex as the motive for marriage. She remains the older sister.[94] In fact, she has this to say of her proposed marriage when she and Carl are out walking:

> How many times we have walked this path together, Carl! How many times we will walk it again! Does it seem to you like coming back to your own place? Do you feel at peace with the world here? I think we shall be very happy. I haven't any fears. I think that when friends marry, they are safe. We don't suffer like--those young ones.[95]

This is a marriage not for convenience but for companionship between two friends who have known the early hardship years and now with prosperity stay with the land because they love it. Alexandra has found romance in the possession of abandoned farms. Her husband is only incidental to her fulfillment.[96]

It is with Alexandra that Cather found her medium of

---

[93]Randall, op. cit., p. 76.

[94]Jessup, op. cit., p. 58.

[95]O Pioneers, p. 262.

[96]Ernest Leisy, American Literature: An Interpretative Survey, p. 213.

expression.[97] This artistic impression of lives close to the soil provided Cather with a story of union which filled the need of rapture in Alexandra's life.[98] Alexandra is established as an Earth Mother or Ceres who rules over the land. It is Cather's sensitivity combined with mythological fertility symbolism that makes the novel effective.[99] The country is the hero in O Pioneers, and Cather did not interfere with its role. She said that the novel "came out of the long grasses."[100] She also said that the book did not have sculptured lines simply because the earth has no lines or features. Her novel is always soft and black, as she says, because it is made of this grass.[101]

Her second great feministic novel is The Song of the Lark, published in 1915. It has the most conventional structure of any of Miss Cather's novels.[102] It has scenes and incidents that show the development of potentialities, the significance of railroading, the desire for musical achievement, the high set of standards that are required of an artist, and those who

---

[97] Lucy Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature, p. 270.

[98] Ibid., p. 271.

[99] Daiches, op. cit., p. 27.

[100] Sergeant, op. cit., pp. 92-97.

[101] Loc. cit.

[102] Brown, op. cit., p. 188.

do not understand nor appreciate the calling of an artist.[103]

Miss Cather's great love of the opera and her admiration of Mme. Fremstad give her the central character for The Song of the Lark. Although much of Willa Cather is in the young Thea, when Thea starts her opera career, she becomes Mme. Fremstad.[104]

Thea Kronborg, the heroine, as a child is described by Dr. Archie as:

> . . . a little Swede through and through . . . her hands, so little, so hot, so clever . . . no, he couldn't say that it was different from any other child's head, though he believed that there was something very different about her . . . freckled nose, fierce little mouth, brows usually drawn together defiantly.[105]

Thea is the oldest of seven children (as was Miss Cather), and her father is a Methodist minister who is an easy going man. The mother is the dominant figure in the family. This mother is a source of wonder to her neighbors because she is so

---

[103] Daiches, op. cit., p. 26.

[104] Lewis, op. cit., p. 92.

[105] The Song of the Lark, p. 12. Until Miss Cather's novels started to appear, the Swede had been used as a comic character in American Writing (William Thorp, American Writing in the Twentieth Century, p. 57). This was appreciated by the Swedish people, and the press in Sweden gave Miss Cather good reviews. They said that she did not have skyscrapers in her books or bigness; neither did she allow her characters to feel happily superior. They liked her narrative art and psychological understanding that contemporary literature can offer. She was one of the group of Americans who glorified both faults and virtues (Carl L. Anderson, The Swedish Acceptance of American Literature, pp. 70-92).

efficient as a housewife [illegible] mother. When told that her child had talent, it is this mother who understands:

> That word Talent, which no one else in Moonstone, not even Doctor Archie, would have understood, she comprehended perfectly. To any other woman there, it would have meant that a child must have her hair curled every day and must play in public. Mrs. Kronborg knew it meant that Thea must practice four hours a day.[106]

Thea's first teacher is Old Wunsch, a German musician. He has never been able to adjust and has taken to liquor, but he could sense in his student the power of her strong will. He was thrilled with her, because he had lived for so long among people who wanted something for nothing. Thea was ready to pay the price for success even at an early age. At thirteen she knew that Moonstone would not be her home when she was an adult. When asked if she wanted ot marry someone from the home town, she answered in a laughing way, "No, I don't want to do that."[107] Here is a young female who has so much talent and perspective that she already knows that there is no one in Moonstone who would be an ideal marriage partner for her. Marriage would not be important enough. She senses that her art will be her main interest in life.

There were three men that made possible the career and personality of Thea. They were Dr. Archie, Ray Kennedy, and

---

[106] Ibid., p. 14.

[107] Ibid., p. 95.

Fred Ottenbur, whom she later married.[108] Dr. Archie was the victim of an unhappy and childless marriage. He could see in Thea, the daughter that he had never had. He said, "If I had a daughter like Thea to watch, I wouldn't mind anything."[109] Ray Kennedy, a workman on the railroad, falls in love with Thea and watches her grow up. He dreams of marriage with her, but he has always realized that she is destined for greater heights than can be offered in Colorado. Ray is killed in a train wreck and leaves Thea his insurance money. With this help, she is able to go to Chicago for a winter's study. The third man is Fred Ottenburg, whom she meets in Chicago. He is a wealthy man and is interested in many young artists. He helps some of them to attract attention of the music critics in the city. When Thea meets him, a new feeling comes to her. She thinks about him, thus:

> . . . he was young; and her friends had always been old. Her mind went back over them. They had all been teachers . . . Ray Kennedy, she knew, had wanted to marry her, but he was the most protective and teacher-like of them all. She moved impatiently in her cot and threw her braids away from her hot neck, over her pillow. I don't want him for a teacher, she thought, frowning petulantly out of the window. I've had such a string of them. I want him for a sweet heart.[110]

With these three men influencing Thea's life, The Song of the

---

[108] Jessup, op. cit., p. 59.

[109] The Song of the Lark, p. 106.

[110] Ibid., p. 358.

Lark contains ". . . as [illegible] of subsidiary males as can be found even in a feministic novel."[111]

The small town comes back into focus when Thea returns to Moonstone for the summer. Here, she finds indifference not only in the town but also in her family. She is gossiped about because she goes down to sing and dance with the Mexicans and because she does not attend church meetings with her family. Soon, it becomes clear to her that nothing she ever would do would be important to her family. (Even her home, that she had felt so kindly toward, she now feels had been nourishing a grudge against her.)

Thea returns to Chicago and begins to study and becomes influenced by Mr. Bowers. The city has also given her new ideas, and she thinks now that money and prestige are the consolations of prominence. She says, "Fortune turns kind to such solid people and lets them suck their bone in peace."[112] From Bowers she learns the reasons for his dry contempt, and she admires his treatment of the dull students. She decides that the stupid deserve all they get. This is not a motherly type of woman speaking--a mother who sees only good in the world's children--but, rather, here is the childless woman who thinks only of herself, her art, and the society in which she lives.

---

[111] Jessup, op. cit., p. 59.

[112] The Song of the Lark, p. 335.

To escape the city in the hot months and to give Thea an opportunity for some soul-searching, Fred Ottenburg sends her to his ranch near the ruins of an ancient Indian civilization in New Mexico. Back to close contact with the earth, Thea begins to find herself again. Fred begins to see all of the depths in Thea and describes her as:

> . . . one of those people who emerge, unexpectedly, larger than we are accustomed to see them. Even at this distance one got the impression of muscular energy and audacity--a kind of brilliance of motion--of a personality that carried across big spaces and expanded among big things.[113]

Here, at the ranch, Thea finds peace, and she also finds love for Fred. She says to him:

> I want you for everything. I don't know whether I'm what people call in love with you or not. In Moonstone that meant sitting in a hammock with somebody. I don't want to sit in a hammock with you, but I want to do almost everything else. Oh, hundreds of things![114]

Fred, once he had found her so real, could not stay away from her:

> . . . he did not pretend to be anything more or less than a reasonably well-intentioned young man. A lovesick girl or a flirtatious woman he could handle easily enough. But a personality like that, unconsciously revealing itself for the first time under the exaltation of a personal feeling--what could one do but watch it?[115]

---

[113] Ibid., p. 397.

[114] Ibid., p. 403.

[115] Ibid., pp. 422-423.

There was only one problem. Fred Ottenburg was already married and had been since he was twenty. Therefore, the relationship of Thea and Fred had to remain Platonic. They could not marry, and they both had high morals that prevent an affair. Here is the feministic view of sex. Sex could not be used except for the propagation of the race.

When Thea finds out that Fred is married, she borrows money from her friend, Dr. Archie, and goes to Europe for advanced study in opera. Dr. Archie is able to help her, for he, too, has been able to escape from Moonstone after his wife's death and has gone to Denver and become wealthy.

Ten years later, Thea is an opera star and is performing in New York City. Ottenburg is still with her, in so far as he can be, and his strong feelings are still answered by Thea. Not until the Epilogue does the reader see Thea and Fred married. Fred had always known that marriage to Thea would be ". . . an incident, not an end with her."[116] Cather gives no description of the wedding; in fact, it is barely mentioned. One of the reasons is that she still is under the influence of James.[117] Another reason is that, as a feminist, she leaves out sexuality. Lord David Cecil says that Thea's mating is "about as thrilling as the loves of the plants."[118]

---

116 Ibid., p. 423.

117 Sergeant, op. cit., p. 139.

118 Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 321.

Nevertheless, [illegible] is the only full-length portrait of an artist that Miss Cather ever gave. It is a story of the success of a woman who is able to keep most of her relationship casual with men.[119] Here, is Miss Cather's view that ". . . art could and should be used as a substitute for a continued physical relationship."[120] There is also the fact that the realization of the Old World background in Moonstone is necessary for the growth of American culture.[121]

As Thea has the feeling for music, the next feminist heroine, Antonia Cuzak, has the same feeling for the land.[122] My Antonia is a mosaic of character sketches.[123] Even though Antonia has no creative artistry, the novel is excellent, because she has the artist's desire to live.[124]

"My Antonia is the best American novel written by a woman," said H. L. Mencken.[125] Mencken was impressed by the genuine realism in the book. The heroine of this novel was taken from the life of a real woman, Annie Sadilek, who worked

---

[119]Randall, op. cit., pp. 42-45.

[120]Ibid., p. 45.

[121]Daiches, op. cit., p. 31.

[122]Kazin, op. cit., p. 252.

[123]Grant Overton, The Women Who Make Our Novels, p. 265.

[124]Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America 1900-1950, p. 169.

[125]Grant Knight, The New Freedom in American Literature, p. 423.

for some neighbors of the Cather's in New Glead.[126] The chief subject in the book is the building of a family.[127] Cather wanter Antonia to be "a rare object in the middle of a table, which one may examine from all sides."[128] She also said that My Antonia was the best book that she had written: "I feel I've made a contribution to American letters with that book."[129]

Antonia is a character who is frequently talked about, observed, discussed, and remembered by other characters in the novel, so that the reader can decide for himself what she is like. In this manner, she is not just Antonia, but "My Antonia."[130] In addition, in the novel Cather effectively uses a male narrator, Jim Burden, who is so much Willa Cather that he loses credibility as a character. When this happens, My Antonia becomes a sentimentalized novel.[131] Although the novel is basically about Antonia, there are several important women characters who help give the novel a feminist viewpoint. The first such woman is Grandmother Burden, the narrator's grandmother. She has lived on the prairie for quite a few years,

---

[126]Lewis, op. cit., p. 24.

[127]Randall, op. cit., p. 106.

[128]Sergeant, op. cit., p. 140.

[129]Brown, op. cit., p. 203.

[130]Daiches, op. cit., p. 37.

[131]Edwin Bowden, The Dungeon of the Heart, p. 52.

but she is described thus:

> She was quick-footed and energetic in all her movements. Her voice was high and rather shrill, and she often spoke with an anxious inflection, for she was exceedingly desirous that everything should go with due order and decorum . . . She was then fifty-five years old, a strong woman of unusual endurance.[32]

This woman feels that it is part of her duty to call upon the Shimerdas and to help them through the winter when they are at the point of starvation. The Shimerdas came over from Bohemia and are totally unsuited for farming. They had also been swindled out of part of their money, and they had none to last through the winter. Antonia is the oldest daughter of this family. No matter how hard the work is or how hungry she becomes, she does not complain. She has a strength even in youth, a strength of character that is seen in her large expressive eyes.

The early years are hard on Antonia, and among her many problems on the farm, she is confronted with her father's suicide. When the hard work comes in the spring, Antonia does a man's work on the homestead. Later, when the farm has begun to bring in some money, she likes the hard work of the farm, saying to Jim:

> 'Oh, better I like to work out-of-doors than in a house!' she used to sing joyfully. 'I not care that your grandmother

---

[32] My Antonia, p. 11.

> say it makes me like [illegible] to be like a man.' She would toss her head and ask me to feel the muscles swell in her brown arm.[133]

Here is a woman in a man's world, doing the work of a man and enjoying doing it. Sex is not used as an excuse to keep from doing hard work; it is used as a challenge to see if the weaker sex can excel in a man's world.

The hard work continues until Antonia is in her teens, and she, like so many other poor country girls, moves into town and becomes a hired girl. She finds the ways of the town to be nice, and she learns to make clothes, cook, keep house with style, and finds a social life that helps to forget the farm. Still, she is the same person beneath, and she and her mistress get along beautifully:

> There was a basic harmony between Antonia and her mistress. They had strong, independent natures, both of them. They knew what they liked, and were not always trying to imitate other people. They loved children and animals and music, and rough play and digging in the earth. They liked to prepare rich, hearty food and to see people eat it; to make up soft white beds and to see youngsters asleep in them. They ridiculed conceited people and were quick to help unfortunate ones. Down deep in each of them there was a kind of hearty joviality, a relish of life, not over-delicate, but very invigorating.[134]

Here is the mother symbol whose only concern is the building of a family. The building materials will be pain and

---

[133] Ibid., p. 138.

[134] Ibid., p. 180.

hard work, but the [illegible]

Here, in town [illegible] about the pointlessness of rootless city marriages.[135] When Antonia is fired from her job because she refuses to stop going to dances, she works for the Cutters They are the typical fighting couple about whom the small town loves to gossip. Antonia, now, has the opportunity to go to more dances and to meet more men. She is different from some of the hired girls. Some of them, although they liked boys and dances, were determined that they should make something of themselves. To them, this concept means acquiring money, not only for themselves but for their brothers and sisters at home.

Antonia decides to marry a railroader. She goes to Denver to be with him, but he deserts her. Humbly, she returns and softly tells a neighbor, "I'm not married, Mrs. Steavens, and I ought to be."[136] She goes back into the fields until her child is born. She is not ashamed of her love child. Miss Cather describes none of the suffering that the unwed mother has to bear--not even at the birth of the child--but only the pride that Antonia feels in becoming a mother.

A few years later Antonia marries a Bohemian named Cuzak. He is a poor man who has been reared in the city. Antonia

---

[135] Randall, op. cit., p. 109.

[136] My Antonia, p. 312.

manages to keep them only [illegible] of the loneliest parts of the country and keeps him happy.[137] They work hard to buy their land, and they become the parents of a very large family. O Pioneers deals with human sterility against the fertility of the soil, but My Antonia deals with the fertility of both human beings and the soil.[138] When Jim Burden, the narrator, goes to see her twenty years later, he finds her physical body has changed but not her soul.

> A stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled . . . . The eyes that peered anxiously at me were--simply Antonia's eyes. I had seen no others like them since I looked into them last. As I confronted her, the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger. She was there, in the full vigor of her personality, battered but not diminished.[139]

It is, now, that Antonia assumed the mother earth image. "She pulled them [children] out of corners and came bringing them like a mother cat bringing in her kittens."[140] All had been born during the time in which the action in the novel was centered elsewhere, and Cather does not give details of the births, because, Randall thinks that Cather ". . . was bent on devaluing some of the devastating conflict that occurs in life,

---

[137] Randall, op. cit., p. 106.

[138] Ibid., p. 149.

[139] My Antonia, pp. 331-332.

[140] Ibid., p. 332.

particularly those [illegible] could accept the idea of the fertility of land better than she could in people. Never does she deal with human pregnancy or birth. She will speak only of the sowing and harvesting of wheat or corn.[142] As Antonia sits in her garden surrounded by children, she becomes the mother of the world, her children encompassing her. Her farm becomes the earth's garden, and her duty as a mother is to feed all who are hungry. Just as she has carried water to the trees, she also refreshes her talent--that of being a mother. In fact, she is so much the mother that she regards Jim Burden's childlessness as a sign of his failure.[143]

Even in the account of the marriage of the Cuzaks, Cather hints about female domination and suggests a slight aura of frustration. In using Antonia as a mother symbol, she, as a feminist, does not make her assume the characteristics of an elder sister. Instead, she shows her as the mother of her husband's amazing brood of youngsters. Her old friend describes her in this manner:

> I was thinking, as I watched her, how little it all mattered--about her teeth, for instance, I know so many women who have kept all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, Antonia had not lost the fire of life. Her skin, so brown and hardened,

---

[141] Randall, op. cit., p. 122.

[142] Ibid., p. 149.

[143] Ibid., p. 140.

> had not that look of [illegible], as if the sap beneath it had been secretly drunk away . . . She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her heart come out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions. It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.[144]

This passage proves that, although many people saw her as only a hired girl and as an unwed mother, they did not bother to look for the inner strength of the woman or the talent in which she excelled, i.e., the role of motherhood.

In 1920, Cather collected some of her old and recent short stories for publication under the title, Youth and the Bright Medusa. The collection contained four new stories, "Coming, Aphrodite!," "The Diamond Mine," "A Gold Slipper," and "Scandal," all of which show her strong view of feminism. "Coming, Aphrodite!," for example, points out the necessity of rejecting human relations.[145] Cather revives an old James' theme with a story of two lovers, one an aspiring artist, the other a struggling painter, who live in an apartment house in Washington Square. The following quotation dramatizes their union:

---

[144] My Antonia, p. 376.

[145] Randall, op. cit., p. 69.

> But the [illegible] that was their whole [illegible] was the rhythm in which the [illegible], at last, along the roof and down into the [illegible], at first, drawing her gently after him . . . she twined her arms about his neck and after a long separation, she turned her face to his and her lips, with their perfume of youth and passion.[146]

They quarrel over their different arts, and, years later, when the girl, a famous opera star, returns to New York from Europe, she finds that her old lover has also achieved fame. Her last words, then, are typical of the female as Cather understands her: "One doesn't like to have been an utter fool, even at twenty."[147]

Cather's "The Diamond Mine" features another opera star, Cressida Garnet. Cressida is surrounded by indigent relatives who expect her support. The story deals with the concept that money brings misery.[148] From Cather's feministic point of view, it shows that Cressida's only happy marriage was the fruitful one, *i.e.*, she has a child. Probably Cather's best description of Cressida's family is the following:

> The Garnets, and particularly her two sisters, were consumed by an habitual bilious, unenterprising envy of Cressy. They never forgot that, no matter what she did for them or how far she dragged them about the world with her, she would never take one of them to live with her in her Tenth Street house in New York.[149]

---

[146] *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, pp. 57-58.

[147] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

[148] Randall, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

[149] *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, p. 88.

The final [illegible] death, when her son, her manager, and her family are seen fighting for her wealth. Here, the feminist, Cather, again states her view that marriage for artists will probably prove to be unhappy, showing Cressida's failures in three marriages. Cather also suggests that Cressida should have taken lovers instead of husbands, as Cressida says, "I might have had lovers, of course, I suppose you will say it would have been better if I had."[150]

Cather's "A Gold Slipper" and "Scandal" are stories about an opera star, Kitty Lyrshire. "A Gold Slipper" is the story of Kitty who plays a trick upon a man, putting one of her golden slippers into his pullman berth while he is asleep. Cather's narrative lacks verisimilitude, however, because the man is supposed, then, to pine away on account of his romantic obsession for Kitty's slipper. In "Scandal," Cather is primarily interested in telling the story of the large cities and the human victims of economic greed.[151]

These works from 1913 to 1920, show Cather's use of the land as a symbol of fertility, strongly revealing her feministic viewpoint. Because of her point of view of feminism, Cather was not able to achieve a fully developed portrait of a woman.[152]

---

[150] Ibid., p. 92.

[151] Randall, op. cit., p. 55.

[152] Jessup, op. cit., p. 64.

However, her [illegible] are somewhat different, although because of her added views concerning World War I.

CHAPTER III

WILLA CATHER AND THE LOST GENERATION

Willa Cather belongs to the generation that reached maturity before World War I.[153] She says of this generation:

> If only we had been born in the year 1850 we would have had all the best things of four civilizations, and none of the horrors. We would never have known of, or dreamed of the horrors.[154]

She feels that most of the trouble came with the advent of the machine, which she hates, because she feels that it threatened her pioneer land and its simple challenges. She also believes that the war brought about a decay in social, moral, and religious values.

Indeed, World War I had a great effect upon her feministic ideas. It had also brought about a recognition of the fact that regionalism in literature was gone. Increased communication, a machine age that produced skyscrapers, a city that reached into the country and tied the farmer closer to the town show to her that the frontier was gone. She realized that there were now common customs, thoughts, prosperity, and a single language. She felt, therefore, that this was a time not to write

---

[153]Floyd Stovall, American Idealism, p. 147.

[154]Moorhead, op. cit., p. 62.

of the prairie, but rather one in which to record the making of the Central United States.[155]

Morgan states that "Miss Cather had always favored the rebel in society and those with the strongest will, but after 1920 she could not accept rebellion and change."[156] She does not turn from life, but from the world. Yet, her sources of art are still the land and the people.[157] She is able to strive more toward this art, now, with the publication of her post-war novels, One of Ours, The Professor's House and A Lost Lady. In these works, her characters are baffled, frustrated, and defeated people.[158]

One of Ours is a story, not so much about the war, but about the effect which the war had upon the people living in Nebraska. After the war, Cather had returned to Nebraska for a visit. When she later went to New York, she talked to many soldiers and was given the diary of a local doctor who had served as a medical officer on a troop ship during a bad influenza epidemic.[159] But war is not the theme of Cather's One of Ours; instead, she is more interested in capturing the tone

---

[155]Dorothy Dondore, The Prairie and the Making of the Middle America: Four Centuries of Description, pp. 430-432.

[156]Morgan, op. cit., p. 79.

[157]Ibid., p. 80.

[158]Lewis, op. cit., p. 118.

[159]Loc. cit.

of the society of the Mid=West in the character of the misunderstood Claude Wheeler and his brother, Bayless, a symbol of the new generation who buys and sells and who does not create.[160]

Cather also shows the small college town in its conflict between high-minded honest people and their shallow associates. Even though she exposes the dullness of the village life, Cather, nevertheless, demonstrates whan can happen to some of its characters, explaining how they lived in or were associated with the village. She also tells how they realized a self-fulfillment in their lives. She also compares the bleakness of the town with the vastness of the prairies and the beauty of the farm country.[161]

One of Ours, a Pulitzer prize novel,[162] is developed around the hero, Claude Wheeler, who was, in reality, a relative of Willa Cather. In actual life, he was called G. P. and was the son of Mrs. George Cather, who had come to the prairie and had pitched a tent with her husband. Mrs. George Cather had five children, and became the woman in Cather's "A Wagner Matinee."

---

[160] Randall, op. cit., p. 162.

[161] Ima Honaker Herron, The Small Town in American Literature, pp. 402-404.

[162] Sergeant, op. cit., p. 140. One of the reasons that she received the Pulitzer prize is because she knew the War in France. Americans saw the harvest of sacrifices that our boys gave in World War I.

She gave Willa the letters which she had received from her son before his death in which he had revealed his thoughts. These letters form the central idea of Cather's novel.[163] The characters in this novel are the small town inhabitants or farmers of South-Central Nebraska. Bitterly attacking them as money-grabbing people, Cather is still the feminist, and she combines this anti-materialistic viewpoint with little character analysis but with enough action and dialogue to produce a credible book.[164] Claude Wheeler is the youngest of three sons. He is a sensitive boy who keeps his ideas to himself:

> He knew exactly the sort of looking boy he didn't want to be. He especially hated his head--so big that he had trouble in buying his hats, and uncompromisingly square in shape; a perfect block-head . . . The storms that went on in his mind sometimes made him rise, or sit down, or like something, more violently than there was any apparent reason for his doing.[165]

This sensitive youth is loved but not completely understood either by the men or the women in his household. His mother is a woman who has resigned herself to the men whom the Lord had given her. The mother is able to sense that Claude is not happy, but she does not know what to do about it.

As a foil for Claude, Cather uses his oldest brother,

---

[163] Bennett, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

[164] Rapin, op. cit., p. 56.

[165] One of Ours, p. 22.

Bayless, as the figure of the money-minded, smalltown merchant. Bayless is a thin, dyspeptic man who is a rabid Prohibitionist. When at school, he is described by Cather in this way:

> . . . he kept his arithmetic papers buttoned up in the inside pocket of his little jacket until he modestly handed them to the teacher, never giving a neighbor the benefit of his cleverness. From the day he went to work, he managed to live on his small salary. He kept in his vest pocket a little day-book wherein he noted down all his expenditures--like the millionaire about whom the Baptist preachers were never tired of talking--and his offering to the contribution box stood out conspicuous in his weekly account.[166]

This is one method in which Miss Cather shows the post-war loss of respect for religion. Another way was for her to depict the representative of religion as an unattractive character, a preacher who becomes a preacher simply because it is the easiest occupation he can find. In <u>One of Ours</u>, Brother Weldon is such a character. Here is Miss Cather's picture of Brother Weldon from Claude's view:

> These little pinheaded preachers like Weldon do a lot of harm, running about the country talking. He's sent around to pull in students for his own school If he didn't get them he'd lose his job. I wish he'd never got me. Most of the fellows who flunked out at the State come to us, just as he did.[167]

Brother Weldon has convinced Mrs. Wheeler to send Claude to

---

[166] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 102.

[167] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 30.

Temple College. Because Mrs. Wheeler feels that a preacher is to be trusted, she sends Claude to Temple. Claude feels that he is made to accept everything that he dislikes. Cather, therefore, uses Claude to show an example of a person who is subjected to a life which he is unable to understand.

Claude does have one ray of happiness at Temple. While playing football, he meets some State players with whom he becomes friends. His association with the Erlich boys, and their mother is a great help to him. Of Mrs. Erlich he said, "Every time he went away from her he felt happy and full of kindness, and thought about beech woods and walled towns or about Carl Schurz and the Romantic revolution."[168] With this family there is always happiness, discussions about everything, and a general freedom of thought. (The Erlichs were in truth the Westermanns of Lincoln, where the six boys of the family were very popular.)[169]

When Claude is taken from this atmosphere and returns to the farm, he becomes very ill. An old friend, Enid Royce, comes to see him and Claude reaches this conclusion about her:

> Enid was meant for him and she had come for him; he would never let her go. She should never know how much he longed for her. She would be slow to feel even a little of what he was feeling, he knew that. It would take a long while. But he would be infinitely patient, infinitely

---

[168] Ibid., p. 44.

[169] Lewis, op. cit., p. 38.

> tender of her. It should be he who suffered, not she . . . . He would shed love upon her until she warmed and changed without knowing why.[170]

When Claude asks Enid to marry him, she says, "I don't believe it would be for the best, Claude . . . . My mind is full of other plans. Marriage is for most girls, but not for all."[171] Later, she changes her mind, and they start planning for the wedding and the building of their home. Claude notices that Enid seemed more interested in the house than in him, but he thinks that everything will be all right once they are married. He thinks she will change into a loving and generous woman. Here, Claude shows his weakness and his inability to judge human nature in a world which he does not understand.

One woman, Gladys Farmer, who dates Claude's brother (Bayless), realizes the dangers that are in store for Claude if he marries Enid. She could see him as

> . . . one of those dead people that moved about the streets of Frankfort; everything that was Claude would perish and the shell of him would come and go and eat and sleep for fifty years . . . . If he married Enid, that would be the end. He would go about strong and heavy . . . a big machine with the springs broken inside.[172]

Claude and Enid, then, are married. After the wedding, they

---

[170] *One of Ours*, p. 166.

[171] *Ibid.*, p. 174.

[172] *Ibid.*, p. 176.

board a train for their honeymoon, and Enid asks Claude:

> 'Claude, would you mind getting a berth somewhere out in the car to-night? The porter says they are not all taken. I'm not feeling very well. I think the dressing on the chicken salad must have been too rich . . .' She closed the door and he heard the lock slip.[173]

Here, then, is the greatest humiliation that he has ever received.[174] Enid is a woman who thinks everything about a man's embrace is distasteful. It is "something inflicted upon women like the pain of childbirth--for Eve's transgression, perhaps."[175] Claude has looked forward to being happy in love. Even Miss Cather is sorry for him. He could never do anything right and, now, his wife has robbed him of sexual love.[176] By depicting a sexless marriage, therefore, Cather shows the sterility of the post-war times. She also presents Claude as an example of the emasculated male.

Claude's salvation comes with his enlistment into the army to crusade for democracy.[177] Claude sees the war as a purifying fire.[178] On the battlefields of France, he is helped

---

[173] Ibid., p. 220.

[174] Jessup, op. cit., p. 62.

[175] One of Ours, p. 237.

[176] Jessup, op. cit., p. 63.

[177] Boynton, op. cit., p. 173.

[178] Loc. cit.

to rediscover a spiritual exaltation that he once had known in the prairies of Nebraska.[179]

Before Claude leaves for the war, Gladys Farmer says to him, "It's turning out better than I thought. You didn't get stuck here. You've found your place. You're sailing away. You've just begun."[180] When Claude arrives in France, he educates himself in the ways of its culture and arts. He knows, now, what Nebraska lacks.[181] With the Jouberts in France, he finds perfect peace. He has, at last, found his soul.[182] However, he knows that it would be better to die in the war than to return to Nebraska and be destroyed by its society.[183] In interpreting Claude's death, Frederick J. Hoffman feels that it is justified and adds that Claude is ". . . one of the last pure heroes of American fiction."[184]

In One of Ours, Cather magnified the limitations of a feminist writer.[185] She saves the unhappy Claude Wheeler in that he does not have to return to a cold woman and to people

---

[179]Hazard, op. cit., p. 272.

[180]One of Ours, p. 292.

[181]Hoffman, op. cit., p. 49.

[182]Randall, op. cit., p. 160.

[183]Parrington, op. cit., p. 384.

[184]Hoffman, op. cit., p. 49.

[185]Jessup, op. cit., p. 64.

who do not understand him. He died, ". . . believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be. And those were beautiful beliefs to die with."[186]

When Claude's mother reflects upon his death, she decides that perhaps it was better for him to have died on the battlefield than to have come back and not be able to adjust to the ways of peace. Many ex-soldiers had not been able to adjust and ". . . 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."[187] Here, Mrs. Wheeler expressed the idea of the hopelessness of the present; i.e., it was better for Claude to have died with his illusions.[188]

In A Lost Lady (1925), Willa Cather came very close to her idea of art. This novel is her portrait of a woman who belongs to the era of the past, but who refuses to live in it. In this work, Cather dedicated her art to the exploration of failure, and in doing so, she gained strength and craftsmanship.[189]

In A Lost Lady Miss Cather is able, with just a few

---

[186] One of Ours, p. 513.

[187] Loc. cit.

[188] Randall, op. cit., p. 173.

[189] Kazin, op. cit., p. 254.

details, to bring Marrian Forrester to life.[190] Mrs. Forrester had been in real life Mrs. Garber, the wife of ex-Governor Garber.[191] Silas Garber was the governor of Nebraska in 1875, the finest personality that Willa Cather could remember from her childhood.[192] The subject of A Lost Lady, however, is outside of Miss Cather's direct experience and understanding.[193] She had trouble with this novel, because Mrs. Forrester is drawn from a direct portrait.[194] When Miss Cather read the notice of Mrs. Garber's death, she decided to write a novel about her.[195] She thought the novel would harm no one, because there were no children that could be hurt, but she forgot the relatives.[196]

A Lost Lady is not only a portrait of a woman but also the picture of the end of an era, an era wherein men went out to build railroads where only dreams had been before, an age in which gentlemen thought more of their honor than of money. Cather's A Lost Lady is, perhaps, a drama in two acts. The

---

[190]Moorhead, op. cit., p. 55.

[191]Lewis, op. cit., p. 25.

[192]Brown, op. cit., pp. 36-37.

[193]Parrington, op. cit., p. 384.

[194]Lewis, op. cit., p. 124.

[195]Ibid., p. 26.

[196]Ibid., p. 124.

first is the glory that had been; the second is of catastrophe.[197] The novel shows the dissolution of a society, and the Forresters in it represent a dying aristocracy.[198]

The Forresters live in Sweet Water, Nebraska, on a hill about a mile out of town. The house is not remarkable; rather, it is the people in it who made it seem grand. Mrs. Forrester is the perfect hostess:

> She was always there, just outside the front door, to welcome their visitors, having been warned of their approach by the sound of hoofs and the rumble of the wheels on the wooden bridge. If she happened to be in the kitchen, helping the Bohemian cook, she came out in her apron, waving a buttery iron spoon, or shook cherry-stained fingers at the new arrival. She never stopped to pin up a lock; she was attractive in dishabille and she knew it. She had been known to rush to the door in her dressing-gown, brush in hand and her long black hair rippling over her shoulders . . . whatever Mrs. Forrester chose to do was 'ladylike' because she did it.[199]

She is the type of woman who took cookies to boys when they lunched down by the stream, and who bought fish and game from the same boys, out of season, and did not report them. But there is something else about her, too:

> Mrs. Forrester looked at one, and one knew that she was bewitching. It was instantaneous, and it pierced the thickest hide . . . . Something about her took hold of

---

[197] Rapin, op. cit., p. 69.

[198] Geismann, op. cit., p. 180.

[199] A Lost Lady, pp. 6-7..

> one in a flash; one became acutely conscious of her . . . her fragility and grace, of her mouth which could say so much without words; of her eyes, lively, laughing intimate, nearly always a little mocking.[200]

Here, again, Miss Cather uses a male narrator, whose name is Neil, a friend of the family. Although his opinion of Mrs. Forrester is favorable, he realizes that Mrs. Forrester always makes fun of the charms of other women. However, compared to Mrs. Forrester, other women appear dull. Even the pretty ones seem lifeless compared with Mrs. Forrester.

Her husband is Captain Forrester. He is twenty-five years older than his wife, and their relationship resembles Cather's feminist's viewpoint of marriage friendship. She describes Captain Forrester as follows:

> His clumsy dignity covered a deep nature, and a conscience that had never been juggled with. His repose was like that of a mountain. When he laid his fleshy, thick-fingered hand upon a frantic horse, an hysterical woman, an Irish workman out for blood, he brought them peace; something they could not resist. That had been the secret of his management of men.[201]

Marrian Forrester does have a sexual relationship with a man, not her husband. The reader is soon introduced to Frank Ellinger. Frank is vital--so much so that his muscular energy resembled that of a wild animal. He is a person whom many know;

---

[200] Ibid., p. 31.

[201] Ibid., pp. 44-45.

and although they know nothing bad about him, there is an atmosphere of evil about him. Cather describes this relationship with Marian in this manner:

> As she turned quickly away, the train of her velvet dress caught the leg of his broadcloth trousers and dragged with a friction that crackled and threw sparks. Both started. They stood looking at each other for a moment before she actually slipped through the door. Ellinger remained by the hearth, his arms folded tight over his chest, his lips compressed, frowning into the fire.[202]

This passage illustrates Cather's concept of the moral decay that came to people in the post-war years. That Marian Forrester does not have the strength to sustain her marriage vows illustrates post-war morals.

When Mrs. Forrester and Frank Ellinger go to the woods to gather pine, they are spied upon by one of the small boys of the town. Even he has realized what has taken place, but he, like so many others, is fond of Mrs. Forrester, and he keeps her secret to himself. Mrs. Forrester, however, is not so lucky when the narrator surprises her with Ellinger when the Captain is gone. Neil does not tell, but his respect for her is gone. It happened like this:

> As he [Neil] bent to place the flowers on the sill, he heard from within a woman's soft laughter; impatient, indulgent, teasing, eager. Then another laugh, very different, a man's. And it was fat and lazy--ended in

---

[202] Ibid., p. 56.

> something like a yawn . . . . "Lillies that fester," he muttered, "Lillies that fester, smell far worse than weeds."[203]

When Captain Forrester loses his money in the bank of which he is president, he insists upon paying the investors one hundred cents upon the dollar, much to the horror of the younger board members, who do not want anything to do with honor if they have to pay for it with their own money. Many of the people who have put their money into the bank know only a few words of English, and one of these words is "Forrester." They are Poles and Mexicans, who had, at one time, worked under Forrester on the railroad. In order to pay these people, Forrester sacrifices his own security, but he gains the respect of all honorable men. Soon after the bank failure, Captain Forrester has a stroke, and he and Mrs. Forrester have to remain for a year in the small town where there is little social life.

Neil often helps run errands for the Forresters, and, one day, he asks if there is any mail to be taken in to town. He is embarrassed when he discovers that there is a letter for Frank Ellinger from Mrs. Forrester. To relieve his sense of embarrassment, the Captain says, "Mrs. Forrester is a fine

---

[203] Ibid., p. 81.

penman; have you ever noticed? Always was . . . ."[204] Neil has also often wondered how much the Captain knows: "Now as he went down the hill, he felt sure that he knew everything; more than anyone else; all there was to know about Marian Forrester."[205] It is clear that Cather's Mrs. Forrester could have been another Madame de Vionnet in James' The Ambassadors,[206] but, in fact, one realizes that she is also the eternal courtesan. Yet, Forrester keeps her, even though he knows what she is.[207]

The Captain's health gradually grows worse, as his wealth decreases. Marian Forrester continues to see Ellinger until, one night, when Neil is working late in his uncle's law office, she comes in. She smells strongly of liquor. Neil contacts Ellinger by telephone and, then, realizes that the call concerns Ellinger's recent marriage. When the ". . . passion of hatred and wrong leaped into her voice, he had taken the big shears left by the tinner and cut the insulated wire . . . ."[208] In this way, he has kept Mrs. Beasley, the telephone operator, from hearing the outrage. This event shows that Marian Forrester

---

[204] Ibid., p. 111.

[205] Ibid., p. 112.

[206] Sergeant, op. cit., p. 186.

[207] Quinn, op. cit., p. 689.

[208] A Lost Lady, p. 130.

is not able to cope with defeat. Instead of putting her energy into creative activities, she turns to liquor. She is Cather's post-war character, frustrated and defeated.

It is with the help of Mrs. Beasley, the gossip, that Marian Forrester descends to the village level.[209] The morning after the call, Mrs. Beasley has been up early in order to go next door to tell her neighbor, Molly Tucker, the story of her exciting night. (Gossip is the only thing that saves these small town people from stagnation.)

Cather is now depicting a small town that is more hideous than the one in her early work "A Sculptor's Funeral." In "A Sculptor's Funeral," she had been trying to improve society. She had thought, then, that there was still hope. Now, however, there is only despair. She now knows that the way of the world is not going to change, because the people of the town know nothing of honor or dignity--the real qualities that make a gentleman; and, worse yet, they do not care. They are the shysters and the speculators who take the land of the pioneer.[210] The pioneers have tamed the land, and this is the end of an era. The age of Captain Forrester is gone, and, soon, even he is gone. With his death occurs ". . . the very end of the road-making West: the men who had put plains and mountains under the iron

---

[209]Blankenship, op. cit., p. 678.

[210]Rapin, op. cit., p. 70.

harness . . . . It was already gone, that age . . . ."[211]

After her husband's death, Mrs. Forrester would not let herself act the role of the widow of a great man--she would not submit to the code of pioneer to which she belonged. She wanted life. Even though they had talked about her for years, the people in Sweet Water, nevertheless, liked Marian Forrester.[212] However, for Neil, she has become a symbol of degradation. He has stopped to say good-bye to her, and he hesitates a moment by the window. This is what he saw:

> The dining-room window was open into the kitchen, and there Mrs. Forrester stood at a table, making pastry. Ivy Peters came in at the kitchen door, walked up behind her, his hands meeting over her breast. She did not move, did not look up, but went on rolling out pastry.[213]

Here is Cather's depiction of the degradation of a woman who has used sex for self-fulfillment and not for the propagation of the race. Marian Forrester has received her strength from her husband, and upon his death she is a lost lady. She has not only lost her strength but her virtue and honor.

With the publishing of A Lost Lady, Willa Cather became the toast of New York.[214] The novel is enriched with the

---

[211] A Lost Lady, p. 168.

[212] Bennett, op. cit., p. 75.

[213] A Lost Lady, pp. 168-169.

[214] Sergeant, op. cit., p. 184.

". . . poetry and wisdom of her imagination."[215] A Lost Lady is also Cather's best treatment of the theme of the passing of the old, and for the first time she deals with the problems of old age.[216]

American literature during the post-war-era was in the hands of powerful writers like Dreiser, Lewis, O'Neill, Frost, and Willa Cather, and each of whom presented his own life in his own language.[217] Because America was becoming industrialized and the frontier was disappearing, its literature was also changing from romanticism to realism. Realism was influenced by science, democracy, and the European writers who had stressed the ordinary.[218] Her characters are not Gods, nor are they animals controlled by nature.[219] Miss Cather was not afraid of reality, and among realistic novelists, she ranks high.

In her post-war feministic novels, Cather's strongest criticism of the Mid-West holds that the prairie could not appreciate the artist and his skill. She felt that the small

---

[215]Leisy, op. cit., p. 214.

[216]Boynton, op. cit., p. 789.

[217]Malcom Cowley, The Exile's Return, p. 296.

[218]Blankenship, op. cit., pp. 477-478.

[219]Witham Tasker, Panorama of American Literature, pp. 236-237.

town had second-rate feelings and experiences.[220] Her bitterness of the village is revealed in her attacks upon people who do not work with the soil or with their talents. This post-war society did not offer Cather the ideas that she sought, and so she turned backward.[221] In doing so, she started upon a search for an identity that eventually centers upon religion.

The Professor's House (1925) is the least feministic novel in the post-war era because the story has no great female protagonist.[222] However, this novel is Cather's most personal book because of her use of symbolism.[223] This imagery is evident in her employment of such symbols as rocks, plains,

---

[220]Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America 1900-1950, pp. 58-59.

[221]Rapin, op. cit., p. 7. Miss Cather sold the film rights of A Lost Lady to Warner Brothers for $10,000. Red Cloud had the premier of this movie on January 6, 1925. It was thought to be a good movie by the people who saw it (Bennett, op. cit., p. 75). In the 1930's another version was filmed and released with the same title. It distressed Willa so much that she never again sold a book to the movies. Her will states that her books may never be dramatized, filmed, broadcast or televised or used in any other medium then in existence or any invented in the future (Ibid., p. 76). In later years she refused all commercial attempts to buy her works, and she hired a lawyer to help her prevent the use of any of her books or parts of them from the screen. Hollywood tried to get the screen rights to Death Comes for the Archbishop, and she was afraid she would be circumvented. Money did not tempt her (Moorhead, op. cit., p. 573). Her only exception was that she allowed five of her books to be recorded for the blind (Sergeant, op. cit., p. 272).

[222]Jessup, op. cit., p. 68.

[223]Lewis, op. cit., p. 137.

mesa-gardens and deserts.[224] In The Professor's House Cather represents clash between the old and new order with which her generation was torn by the use of the professor's old and new homes.[225] It is her novel of death and rebirth.[226]

Cather conceived of the idea of The Professor's House from a Dutch painting, saying that the house on canvas had a rich warm interior, and that through a window the sea was blue and much alive. In her novel, she tried to employ the Blue Mesa in a similar manner.[227] By this time, she had turned from her interest in the pioneer age to write of the stupidity, gossip, and ambition of the small town.[228]

In The Professor's House, she epitomizes the disgust with life which many Americans feel and which contributes to life without happiness. She sympathizes with the professor, who would not leave the home in which he had written his masterpiece, the work being entitled The History of the Spanish Adventures in North America. With its publication, the professor had acquired financial security for the first time. His wife

---

[224]Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade, p. 162.

[225]Morgan, op. cit., p. 73.

[226]Geismar, op. cit., p. 187.

[227]Moorhead, op. cit., p. 60.

[228]Hazard, op. cit., p. 273.

insists that they move into a new home which they have built, but he prefers to remain in the old home where, he feels, his happiness exists. Consequently, he continues to rent the old house and does his work in the same study in which his creative inspiration has always come. For him, the old house is one of memories and happiness, and the new house belongs to the smart, new world. In other words, the professor cannot adjust to the new society following World War I, and the only place he feels secure is with his memories in familiar surroundings.

Tom Outland had been the professor's student who had investigated the remains of the ancient Indian civilization in New Mexico. Tom, who had passed away quite a while before the opening of the book, had left his money to the professor's elder daughter to whom he had been engaged. In turn, the professor had revered Tom Outland, because he was the son of the West.[229] The professor, therefore, likes to remain around the surroundings in the old house, because it keeps him near to his memory of Tom. He and Outland had both been fond of the past, and their research into history had made them close friends.[330] Consequently, a great part of Cather's book is concerned with her telling of Tom Outland's story.

The professor's longing for death and spiritual rebirth

---

[229] Ibid., p. 273.

[230] Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade, pp. 158-162.

occurs at the end of the book when he discovers that his family is returning after a long vacation. He decides, here, that he can no longer live with his family. Up in his study when a draft has blown out the fire in his dangerous gas stove, he contemplates his situation:

> The long-anticipated coincidence had happened, he realized. The storm had blown the stove out and the window shut. The thing to do was to get up and open the window. But suppose he did not get up--?[231]

He does not get up; but his housekeeper, Augusta, saves him because in an unconscious move he attempts to get close to the window and his subsequent fall brings her to his study. He tries to understand why he has been brought close to suicide and decides, "Perhaps the mistake was merely an attitude of mind."[232] Cather shows that the professor is a man defeated by the new order after World War I, who attempts suicide but finds that he is not strong enough even to accept death by his own hand. Therefore, he will endure in a society that has ruined his ideals.

From this point on, Miss Cather is not the feminist viewing the land as an economic untamed wilderness. Rather, she now uses the land as a symbol for her search for an identity,

---

[231] The Professor's House, p. 274.

[232] Ibid., p. 280.

a search that will lead her Eastward toward Rome and, then, back home again.

CHAPTER IV

WILLA CATHER'S RELIGIOUS NOVELS

Willa Cather's life is the "passionate struggle of a tenacious will."[233] In her last novels and short stories, this struggle turns into her search for an identity. Her search, now, is no longer for land, but man's search for God. In her quest Cather turns toward religion and discovers that both Catholicism and Protestantism are linked with the land. Her paternal grandfather was a devout Baptist who had read the Bible to his grandchildren.[234] When the family had moved into Red Cloud, all had attended the Baptist Church until it burned. After this episode, the Cather family attended the Episcopal Church. From these early years, Willa Cather grew to dislike some of the beliefs of Protestantism. For example, she protested against the "Brother Weldon type of preacher" and disapproved of the missionaries who came home with many works of art from their missionary stations. In fact, she reports her best example of this disgust in One of Ours.

Although Cather had always made use of Catholic characters, she did not become greatly interested in Catholicism until she observed some Italians celebrating the feast of Our

---

[233] Brown, op. cit., p. 335.

[234] Bennett, op. cit., p. 10.

Lady of Mount Carmel in London.[235] In her late period, her first three novels are concerned with Roman Catholics; i.e., My Mortal Enemy, Death Comes for the Archbishop, and Shadows on the Rock are studies of transplanted Catholic culture in the new North American frontier.[236] She now was attracted to the faith and the consolation of the Roman Chruch.[237] She was well versed in Catholicism and her books were praised by Roman Catholic critics.[238] She wrote convincingly about both Europe and America--from Rome to New Mexico--and was at home with the people everywhere.[239] Since the French and Spanish towns had the repose which she had sought,[240] she turned toward Catholicism for its culture, not for its doctrine. She liked the mystical significance of the ritual as it was reflected in life.[241] However, by not accepting the doctrine of the Church, her characters visit the Mass as they would inspect a museum.[242]

Cather has been classed by some critics as a Catholic

---

[235] Ibid., p. 124.

[236] Stovall, op. cit., p. 139.

[237] Sergeant, op. cit., p. 238.

[238] Lewis, op. cit., p. 147.

[239] Geismar, op. cit., p. 199.

[240] Brooks, op. cit., p. 534.

[241] Malcom Cowley, After the Genteel Tradition, p. 58.

[242] Jessup, op. cit., p. 115.

writer.[243] However, this is not true, for she took instruction and joined the Red Cloud Episcopal Church on December 27, 1922, and remained a member of that church until her death. She was drawn toward the Episcoapl Chruch, because in its doctrine she had found no strain between religion and art or between religion and civilization. She thought it one of America's historic churches, and felt that it set a high value upon the past. It was natural, therefore, that she should turn to the Episcopal Church.[244]

After the death of her parents, she turned from her Roman Catholic novels and started again to write of her Protestant past. She did not return to the Catholic Church, again. In her Portestant novels and short stories, she deals with the themes of old age, maladjustment, and despair.

In all of the religious writings of her late period, Cather felt that the problems were more aesthetic than religious.[245] She combines art and religion because she believed that both are spiritual.[246] She says in her essay, "Escapism," that "Religion and art spring from the same root and are close kin."[247] Alfred Kazin wrote that Willa Cather was ". . . a

---

[243] Ibid., p. 112.

[244] Brown, op. cit., p. xvi.

[245] Jessup, op. cit., p. 115.

[246] Morgan, op. cit., p. 65.

[247] Willa Cather, Willa Cather on Writing, p. 27.

pioneer in mind, Catholic by instinct, and French by inclination. She was a spiritual aristocrat with democratic manners."[248]

My Mortal Enemy is Miss Cather's first book in her late period in which she uses the Roman Catholic Church as her major theme. This novelle is her farewell to the earlier stories of wealth.[249] It is the story of Myra Henshawe, who leaves the wealth of her uncle's home and her Roman Catholic religion to elope with a Protestant, but she lives to regret her action.

John Driscoll, Myra Henshawe's uncle, is a wealthy man, who strongly supports the Roman Catholic faith. His niece is reared in the Church, but she falls in love with the Portestant, Oswald Henshawe. John Driscoll warns his neice that, if she goes with the young man, he will disinherit her. Myra elopes, and her uncle leaves his wealth to the church at the time of his death. Cather's concept of the importance of John Driscoll to the Church can be seen in the following passage in which she describes his funeral:

> The bishop was there, and a flock of priests in gorgeous vestiments. When the pallbearers arrived, Driscoll did not come to the church; the church went to him. The bishop and clergy went down the nave and met that great black coffin at the door, preceded by the cross and boys swinging cloudy censers, followed by the choir chanting to the organ.

---

[248]Kazin, op. cit., p. 146.

[249]Geismar, op. cit., p. 191.

> They surrounded, they received, they seemed to assimilate into the body of the church, the body of old John Driscoll. They bore it up to the high altar on a river of colour and incense and organ-tone; they claimed it and enclosed it.[250]

Here, is her Catholic background and her depiction of the faithful member whose life is centered around the Church.

The Henshawes are living in New York, and Myra Henshawe is the type of graceful woman that young girls like to respect.[251] Her home is filled with artists, stimulating conversation, and good food. When old age comes to the couple, Oswald is short of money, and Myra is in poor health. In her illness, Myra has assumed the arbitrary ways of her uncle, and she makes her husband's life miserable. She becomes convinced that she has made a mistake by marrying for love instead of money.[252] She complains because she has to die with her "mortal enemy," her husband, because he was the idol that drew her away from money and the life she could have led.[253] She also feels that her marriage has separated her from the Catholic Church.[254]

When the final illness is over-taking her, Myra likes to go out by the seashore. She says of this place:

---

[250] My Mortal Enemy, p. 251.

[251] Brooks, op. cit., p. 536.

[252] Randall, op. cit., p. 234.

[253] Brown, op. cit., p. 249.

[254] Ibid., p. 250.

> When the first cold, bright streak comes over the water, it's as if all our sins were pardoned; as if the sky leaned over the earth and kissed it and gave it absolution. You know how the great sinners always came home to die in some religious house, and the abbot or abbess went out and received them with a kiss.[255]

The religious symbols used above are Catholic enough: Water is the life giving substance and the purifying agent that will help to absolve sins as holy water.

Myra establishes a close friendship with Father Fay from Saint Joseph's Church, and it is not long before he comes to see her nearly every day. He says of her, "I wonder whether some of the saints of the early Church weren't a good like her. She's not at all modern in her make-up is she?"[256] In one of their discussions, Myra answere Father Fay's questions in this way, "Ah, Father Fay, that isn't the reason! Religion is different from everything else; because in religion seeking is finding."[257] Cather uses this example to tell the reader that, in religion, desire is fulfillment. A person is only rewarded by seeking.

Myra Henshaw is near death when she asks to be given the Sacrament, and after receiving the last rites, she seems to be relaxed in body and mind. Weak as she is, she manages to get

---

[255] My Mortal Enemy, p. 300.

[256] Ibid., p. 319.

[257] Ibid., p. 320.

out of her hotel and to the cliff overlooking the sea. There, she is found dead, ". . . wrapped in her blanket, leaning against the cedar trunk, facing the sea. Her head had falled forward; the ebony crucifix was in her hands."[258] Myra, therefore, is an example of a person who thought for years that she did not need her church or its symbols. When death is near, she returns to its folds and dies with her crucifix upon a rock cliff, a symbol of the Church and a symbol of hope for the future.

In 1926, Cather reached the pinnacle of her career with Death Comes for the Archbishop.[259] This novel is a masterpiece of construction, a succession of interesting episodes bound together by a unity of time, place, and action.[260] There is no history, no climax, and no suspense in Death Comes for the Archbishop.[261] It is a triumph of a simple faith over the hardships of the land. Here, Cather thought that the modern world had lost its perception of death, and that death was a solemn entrance of the soul into a new world.[262]

The title of the book came from Holbein's Dance of Death.[263]

---

[258] Ibid., p. 326.

[259] Sergeant, op. cit., p. 226.

[260] Rapin, op. cit., p. 81.

[261] Leisy, op. cit., p. 196.

[262] Blankenship, op. cit., p. 67.

[263] Willa Cather, Willa Cather on Writing, p. 11.

Cather conceived of the idea of the book while visiting in Santa Fe in 1925, at which time she encountered a superior Indian civilization in the Southwest whose art had endured.[264] She became convinced that the story of the Catholic Church was the Southwest's most interesting, and that the old church ruins and the churches that remained had something lovely about them. She knew exactly what she wanted and only occasionally took down facts or dates. She remembered.[265]

Her chief source for the book is The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf, by William Josephe Howlett, a priest who had worked with Father Machebeuf in Denver. She also received help from some letters which Father Howlett had received from Father Machebeuf's sister in France, telling of early details of the Archbishop's life in New Mexico. She got the mood of the book from these letters, and to convey this mood, she was not afraid to use language that is now considered to be a little stiff and formal. She uses the phraseology of the frontier.[266] Cather also called the book a narrative instead of a novel,[267] and the style she uses is direct and simple, and her characters are unadorned heroes.[268]

---

[264]Morgan, op. cit., p. 76.

[265]Lewis, op. cit., p. 140.

[266]Willa Cather, Willa Cather on Writing, pp. 5-10.

[267]Ibid., p. 12.

[268]Witham, op. cit., p. 239.

Death Comes for the Archbishop is the story of two French missionaries, Father Latour and Father Vaillant, who are sent down to New Mexico to restore order and devotion in the Roman Catholic Churches. The land around Albuquerque is a country of dry ashes with little vegetation. In some of the country around Laguna there are high sand dunes and water:

> As they approached, Father Latour found these were petrified sand dunes; long waves of soft, gritty yellow rock, shining and bare except for a few lines of dark juniper that grew out of the weather cracks--little trees, and very, very old. At the foot of this sweep or rock waves was the blue lake, a stone basin full of water, from which the pueblo took its name.[269]

Here is the first presentation of the symbol or rock and water in this novel. The rock is, again, the church, and the water is contained in a basin signifying holy water that is found in the basins of churches.

Upon another journey, the Bishop becomes lost when he and his mule have been without water for over a day, and there is no hope of finding any; just as hope is passing, the mule smells water and hurries toward its scent. They come upon a beautiful stream which has made an oasis in the desert. This is a prime example of Cather's water symbol, in which the water is the life giving stream of religion when one has given up hope of the future. Here, Cather's search has not been unfruitful.

---

[269] Death Comes for the Archbishop, pp. 102-103.

On a later journey, the Bishop has the following thought about the mesa plain:

> This mesa plain had an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator has desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together, on the eve of being arranged into mountain, plain, plateau. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape.[270]

In this passage, Cather combines her use of various land symbols, and there is in it something of a waste land theme. This waste land theme uses the desert. When the desert is given a spiritual force, it becomes a garden and links together the historical sketches, the Indians, and the saint legends.[271] It also suggests that the land is still searching for its identity.

One church in the Bishop's diocese is at Acoma, located at the top of naked rock hundreds of feet in the air. Cather says of this rock:

> The rock, when one came to think of it, was the utmost expression of human need; even mere feeling yearned for it; it was the highest comparison of loyalty in love and friendship. Christ himself had used that comparison for the disciple to whom He gave the keys of His Church. And the Hebrews of the Old Testament always being carried captive into foreign lands--their rock was an idea of God, the only thing their conquerors could not take from them.[272]

---

[270] Ibid., p. 109.

[271] Bernard Baum, "Willa Cather's Waste Land," South Atlantic Quarterly, XLVIII (October, 1949), 594.

[272] Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 112.

Here, again, is the rock symbol and showing how enduring it is. Even those who are separated from it can recall it in their hearts.

Upon this rock there are the remains of a fantastic garden that one of the Fathers had created. The water for this garden had to be carried a great distance in order for fruit trees and vegetables to survive. The Father who had made this garden had the misfortune to kill one of his helpers in a fit of anger, and he was executed by his congregation by being thrown off the rock. After his death, his people gladly watched his garden wither and die. Here, Cather uses the garden symbol well. Because of sin, the occupant of the garden is removed from it, as Adam was removed from the Garden of Eden. When the blessing, or water, is removed, there is only decay.

One of the few women characters in Death Comes for the Archbishop gives reverence to the story. This woman is Sada, a childlike bonded woman, who is kept away from the Catholic Church by her Portestant keepers. In telling the story of how Sada steals out to come to the church one night, Cather uses a poetic prose so light that the passage lingers in one's memory.[273] This passage shows the devotion which Roman Catholics have for their church.

---

[273]Moorhead, op. cit., p. 56.

The Bishop, along with his friend and helper, Father Viallant, discharges corrupt priests, helps restore ruined churches, and brings to the people a more personal feeling toward their religion. As the years pass, the two priests come to have a different attitude toward the land. Now, they see it as:

> The plain was there, under one's feet, but what one saw when one looked about was that brilliant blue world of stiring air and moving cloud. Even the mountains were mere anthills under it. Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world; but here the earth was the floor of the sky.[274]

They also think of the pebbly earth merely as rock that was pulverized by weather. The rock is, again, Cather's symbol of the Church, and since there is little else but rock in this region, it is easier for her to connect this region with the Church.

Later, the Archbishop finds that his years of reflection are enjoyable. He believes that happiest days come after years of action. He has bought a few acres in the hills near his cathedral, and in his retirement, he sets out an orchard. He has found his garden spot by following a stream to a point wherein vegetation would grow beautifully. Although he is busy training new priests, his recreation is his garden. Father Latour shows spiritual force which creates an Eden in the

---

[274] Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 270.

desert.[275] Here, is Cather's view of spiritual force given to the land in order that it may produce. She shows that this land is made fertile by the water of life.

When his last illness is upon him, Father Latour remembers that he has seen the days of the buffalo and the railroading pass into a new era. Now that he is old, the Archbishop has ". . . a curiosity about dying; about the changes that took place in a man's beliefs and scale of values."[276] One of the things that the Archbishop decides is that no one must try to know the future. It is better that way. When the bells toll the news of the Archbishop's death, all Catholics fall upon their knees and pray. Many other people, who do not kneel, pray in their own way. Because of this outlook upon life, his great faith in the Church, and his acceptance of immortality, death does not come to the Archbishop but for him.[277]

Shadows on the Rock (1931) is the last Roman Catholic novel that Cather wrote.[278] It is a story of the French who settled in Canada. She got her initial idea from the diary of

---

[275]Baum, op. cit., p. 595.

[276]Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 336.

[277]Footman, op. cit., p. 127.

[278]Miss Cather received the Prix Femine Americain in 1933 for Shadows on the Rock from the French (Sergeant, op. cit., p. 246).

an apothecary who had served under Count Frontenac in Quebec.[279] Her second principal source was the Jesuit Relations.[280] Cather also obtained information by reading Francis Parkman and his history of the French in Quebec, and by making visits to the town, where she roamed through the street, churches, and convents.[281] Among the nuns and the country people, she found a life that she could not accept, but one that she had to admire.[282]

The novel has seven episodes, and Mr. Maxwell Geismar feels that it may be viewed as a children's story--as a fairy tale of the Church and the new world.[283] Shadows on the Rock is quiet in tone and action,[284] and there is a tinge of unreality in the book. There is a fog between heaven and earth and between the sun and Quebec. This is one of the reasons for the use of the word, "shadows," in the title.[285]

The town of Quebec is situated upon a grey rock in the Canadian wilderness. Its inhabitants are from France, and

---

[279]Bennett, op. cit., p. 132.

[280]Brown, op. cit., p. 271.

[281]Lewis, op. cit., pp. 151-154.

[282]Footman, op. cit., p. 125.

[283]Geismar, op. cit., p. 197.

[284]Knight, op. cit., p. 424.

[285]Randall, op. cit., p. 315.

they have made the town as nearly like their homeland as is possible. Like the cliff dwellers in Death Comes for the Archbishop, these people have built a civilization upon a rock.[286] Cather describes Quebec as:

> . . . a mountain rock, cunningly built over with churches, convents, fortifications, gardens, following the natural irregularities of the headland on which they stood; some high, some low, some thrust upon a spur, some nestling in a hollow, some sprawling unevenly along a declivity.[287]

Below the rock is the St. Lawrence River. It is

> The only avenue of escape . . . . The river was the one thing that lived, moved, glittered, changed--a highway along which men could travel, taste the sun and open air, feel freedom, join their fellows, reach the open sea . . . . reach the world, even![288]

Here is an example of Cather's rock symbol with its might and power matched with the water symbol of the river. It is the river of life: the holy water on which mankind can sail toward the Church and eternity.

There are also gardens in Quebec, the best ones kept within the convent walls and behind the stone walls of the monastery where the sun's heat lingers in order that purple clusters of grapes are produced. These are Cather's symbols of productivity upon the rock.

---

[286] Bloom, op. cit., p. 76.

[287] Shadows on the Rock, p. 5.

[288] Ibid., p. 7.

Cather also uses the history of the French Canadians and their faith in the Roman Catholic Church to show how the people came to think of themselves as Canadians. She said of the book:

> I tried . . . to state the mood and viewpoint in the title. To me the rock of Quebec is not only a stronghold on which many strange figures have for a little time cast a shadow in the sun; it is the curious endurance of a kind of culture, narrow but definite . . . I tried to develop it into a prose composition not too conclusive, not too definite: a series of pictures remembered rather than experienced; a kind of thinking, a mental complexion inherited, left over from the past, lacking in robustness and full of pious resignation.[289]

To achieve this aim, she uses the home of Euclide Auclair and his daughter Cecile. It is through the customs of this family and their neighbors on the rock that she reveals the Church's history.[290] During the long winter when no ships can come to the rock, this family observes all of the religious holidays and hears strange religious stories. The strangest story is of a religious recluse, Jeanne LeBer, who was the only daughter of a wealthy family and was adored by them. Much to her family's distress, Jeanne takes a religious vow and, after some years of seclusion in her own home, has some small rooms in the church fixed up for her living quarters. Years later, one of her old suitors slips into the church and hears her when she is

---

[289] Randall, op. cit., pp. 310-311.

[290] Ibid., p. 312.

praying. He reports this about her:

> When she prayed in silence, such sighs broke from her. And once a groan, such as I have never heard, such despair--such resignation and despair: It froze everything in men.[291]

Once again, Cather portrays a person who suffers for her church and for her faith. The novelist both admires and pities her.

After a cold winter, a thaw opens up the river, and the ships come again. These ships Cather describes as

> . . . little wooden boats matched against the immensity and brutality of the sea; the strength that came out of flesh and blood and good will, doing its uttermost against cold, unspending eternity . . . inside: food, wine, cloth, medicines, tools, firearems prayerbooks, vestaments, altars for the missions, everything to comfort the body and the soul.[292]

In this passage Cather sees the water of life fighting against death; however, the souls win and give the body peace. These Frenchmen will have the Church as their rock and the water of the St. Lawrence as the holy water that gives blessing and life.

There were two main reasons Cather turned away from her Roman Catholic novels. One is because she was tired of searching for exotic locales for settings; and the other is that she had lost both of her parents during this time, and she seems to have been shocked out of her preoccupation with the Catholic

---

[291] Shadows on the Rock, p. 213.

[292] Ibid., pp. 241-242.

Church.[293] From this time on, she is not concerned with the subject of the Roman Church.

In 1932, Cather published three short stories in a book entitled Obscure Destinies. These stories came from her need to relive in her imagination her early years in Nebraska.[294] Significantly, all of these stories have a Protestant background. In the first story, "Neighbor Rosicky," Cather underlines the harshness of the city and exaggerates the security of the farm.[295] Rosicky is the type of man who does not worry when told that he has a bad heart and cannot do hard work on his farm. He is a man who has come from the life of a poor tailor in London and a workman in New York City to become a farmer. He was one of the people who had bought a ticket to the end of the railroad and had planted his roots deep into the soil.[296] He is a soft-spoken, easy-mannered city man, married to a rough Nebraska farm girl.

Mr. and Mrs. Rosicky have a happy home even though they are not wealthy. They manage to succeed, but they never get far ahead. Rosicky and his sons are industrious, but they are also free and easy. As Doctor Burleigh reflects, "People as

---

[293]Randall, op. cit., p. 358.

[294]Brown, op. cit., p. 294.

[295]Granville Hicks, "The Cast Against Willa Cather," English Journal, XXII (November, 1933), 709.

[296]Brooks, op. cit., p. 101.

generous and warm-hearted and affectionate as the Rosickys never get ahead much; maybe you could not enjoy your life and put it into the bank, too."[297]

Rosicky and his wife have been through rough times and do not wreck themselves to scrimp and save. To illustrate their sense of values, Cather tells of how a creamery agent was trying to get them to sell their cream by explaining how much money their neighbors, the Fasslers, had made. Mrs. Rosicky answered him, saying, "Yes, and look at them Fassler Children! Pale, pinched little things, they look like skimmed milk. I had rather put some colour into my children's cheeks than put money in the bank."[298]

In his retirement Rosicky thinks about the time when he was in the city and remembers it in this way:

> The emptiness was intense, like the stillness in a great factory when the machinery stops and the belts and bands cease running . . . . Those blank buildings, without the stream of life pouring through them, were like empty jails. It struck young Rosicky that this was the trouble with big cities; they built you in from the earth itself, cemented you away from any contact with the ground.[299]

Here, then, is the land idealized over the city, and Cather's theme deals with the reflections of old age and bitterness

---

[297] Obscure Destinies, p. 16.

[298] Ibid., p. 25.

[299] Ibid., p. 29.

toward the city. This old man's life is pondered upon by the doctor when Rosicky is sleeping in the graveyard:

> Nothing could be more undeathlike than this place; nothing could be more right for a man who had helped to do the work of great cities and had always longed for the open country and had got to it at last. Rosicky's life seemed . . . complete and beautiful.[300]

In this passage, Rosicky is shown close to an agrarian idyll.[301] He has the qualities that make a happy man. Cather returned to her Protestant past to pick up the feeling needed for Rosicky.

The second story in Obscure Destinies is "Old Mrs. Harris" in which Cather attempts to show an old displaced person who cannot adjust to a different way of life. Mrs. Harris represents the Southerner who praises independence but who serves her daughter, Victoria, as a house-keeper.[302] There are quite a number of children in the family, and the oldest child, Vicky, is a self-portrait of Cather when she had lived in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Vicky is an intelligent child who is not understood by her family. Her potential, however, is realized by some Jewish neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Rosen.[303]

---

[300] Ibid., p. 62.

[301] Geismar, op. cit., p. 203.

[302] Arthur Quinn, American Fiction, p. 694.

[303] In some of Cather's early works there is definite anti-semetic feeling. One example is in the "Diamond Mine," where one man is described as: ". . . a vulture of the vulture race,

Nevertheless, though Vicky's story is interesting, the story concerns old age and the inability of Mrs. Harris to adjust.

Mrs. Harris is confused by the way people act in Nebraska. She longs for her home in Tennessee where life had been easier. Mrs. Harris, however, has had to go where she is needed.[304] Her position is described as one like ". . . the other women of her age who managed their daughter's house, kept in the background; but it was their background, and they ruled in jealousy."[305]

In Nebraska, Mrs. Harris's position is misunderstood. She and her daughter are both hurt by the views of the society

---

(continued) and he had the beak of one." (Baum, op. cit., p. 599). Jews also figure in two of the stories that were not allowed to be reprinted in later years (Wagenknecht, op. cit., p. 333). Jews had been discussed in American literature since 1640 and most major writers had expressed their reactions to the Jew. Usually, these authors had a little bit of prejudice and this was true of Willa Cather, who would present generalized traits of the Jew which displeased her (Joseph Mersand, Traditions in American Literature: A Study of Jewish Characters and Authors, p. 159). However, Cather was a woman who could put a marble wall between herself and whomever or whatever she wanted. This wall could be raised just as easily (Sergeant, op. cit., p. 111). She seems to have changed her idea of Jews, and there are two good examples of the change. In The Song of the Lark, Thea is told if she wanted anything of Mrs. Henry Nathanmeyer, she must put herself into her hands. She is told that whatever Mrs. Nathanmeyer says about music, about clothes, and about life will be correct (The Song of the Lark, p. 343). In "Old Mrs. Harris" Mr. and Mrs. Rosen are the first to appreciate the mind of Willa and to urge her to work hard.

[304]Brooks, op. cit., p. 535.

[305]Obscure Destinies, p. 111.

in which ". . . every man was as good as his neighbor and out to prove it."[306] Mrs. Harris, now, has become very old, and the family's wealth keeps on decreasing. On many mornings, the old lady feels low, but Cather explains, the moment she hears her grandchildren, ". . . she ceased to be an individual, an old woman with aching feet; she became part of a group, became a relationship."[307]

Sickness comes upon the old lady, and she has to suffer as everyone does. When she dies, the narrator reflects that

> When they [Victoria and Vicky] are old, they will come closer and closer to Grandma Harris. They will think a great deal about her, and remember things they never noticed; and their lot will be more or less like hers . . . . They will say to themselves: 'I was heartless, because I was young and strong and wanted things so much. But now I know."[308]

Lucy Gayheart (1931) best shows Cather's point of view. Here, she managed to have the bare stage, and the characters are only attached to their dreams. She said of her novel, "The characters and situations in this work are wholly fictional and imaginary."[309] However, artistically, it suffers too much from the bareness.[310] Cather had thought of the novel earlier,

---

[306] Ibid., p. 113.

[307] Ibid., p. 115.

[308] Ibid., p. 158.

[309] Ibid., p. 204.

[310] Malcom Cowley, After the Genteel Tradition, p. 63.

but when her association with some musicians had reviewed her musical background, she commenced once again upon the idea. She originally called the book Blue Eyes on the Platte.[311]

Lucy is a girl much like Thea Kronborg in The Song of the Lark. Unlike Thea, Lucy is not sure if she wants to become an opera star or not. When she goes to Chicago to study, Lucy falls in love with Clement Sebastian, whose accompanist she has become. They fall in love with one another, although Sebastian is married. Their physical love comes only to embraces and kisses. Nevertheless, the love of Lucy and Sebastian is the most complete love relationship in Miss Cather's work.[312]

Sebastian's accidental death is the center of the novel.[313] After his death, Lucy goes home for a visit. A local man, Harry Gordon, who has wanted to marry Lucy, and who has become bitter against her when she tells him a lie about her relationship with Sebastian, refuses to give her a lift in his buggy when he meets her going out to ice skate. Lucy proceeds to the river and is drowned in the icy water when the ice breaks beneath her.

The rest of the book is taken up with the remorse of Harry,

---

[311] Lewis, op. cit., pp. 173-174.

[312] Geismar, op. cit., p. 212.

[313] Ibid., p. 204.

and it also shows a discouragement of the times. Both Lucy and Sebastian go down in defeat and death unfulfilled.[314] Harry Gordon is left with a sterile marriage.

Cather has gone back to the emotions of the childhood, and they lead to the emptiness and frustration.[315] Whereas in the earlier prairie novels, the protagonists were heroic, now in the later period, they are only pathetic.[316] This theme shows that Miss Cather had lost her hope shown in the earlier work, and now she sees only despair.

Cather began to work on Sapphira and the Slave Girl in 1937. It is her most ambitious book, and she tries to come to grips with a social environment. There is also the theme of an underlying sexual corruption and debasement of human feeling that is shown to be part of slavery.[317] The novel is set in pre-Civil War times and is strongly abolitionist, a Protestant movement. There is no heroine in the book and nothing is stressed, not even the warmth and expansion of feeling; yet, it has an imperishable quality.[318]

The story centers around Sapphira Colbert, a woman who

---

[314] Randall, op. cit., p. 354.

[315] Ibid., p. 356.

[316] Ibid., p. 357.

[317] Geismar, op. cit., p. 215.

[318] Lewis, op. cit., p. 185.

really belongs in the Eighteenth Century.[319] Her husband is a miller, and he has to bear the evil that comes from his materialistic wife.[320] Sapphira as a young woman is afraid that she will become a spinster and so she marries below her and goes with her husband across the mountains to some land that they own. Here, in the new land, they each keep their occupation. Henry is a miller, and Sapphira is a practicing aristocrat. After twenty-five years, Henry and Sapphira are somewhat estranged, and she believes that he is having an affair with a mulatto slave girl that she owns. She invites a wild nephew of hers to come and live with them, in hopes that he will become interested in the girl from a sexual point of view. With the help of Henry's money, Sapphira's daughter, Rachel Blake, helps the young girl to escape to Canada via the underground railroad. After the Civil War the girl returns home for a visit. Sapphira and the Slave Girl gives Miss Cather a chance to use her Virginia heritage. It helps to fill out the pattern of American life in her works. She has the chance to bring the old and new together.[321]

The conflict is found between Sapphira and her husband and daughter. The wife is a slaveholding Episcopalian of the

---

[319]Leisy, op. cit., p. 194.

[320]Jessup, op. cit., p. 60.

[321]Stovall, op. cit., p. 142.

hierarchy of Virginia. Henry and the daughter are radical Protestant egalitarianists.[322] In showing the differences, Cather gives an allegory of her whole life, from the young adolescent's departure from the home of her parents to the frustrated elderly lady's defeat.[323]

As Cather's life came to its close, she had already been recognized as one of America's finest woman novelists. She had a vivid love of the land in America, and this land was her passion.[324] Her novels were called sagas of the soil and the protagonists were in conflict with the forces of nature.[325] She had the power to portray the mood of the prairie, and she used her art to express humanity.[326]

Cather used the land as a controlling theme in the four writing periods of her life. In her early writings, when she was a student of Henry James, she used the land as a person to help paint the portrait of man's mind. In the post-James period, she used the land as a challenge in the fight for survival. She did this in support of her fiminist doctrine where female protagonists conquer the man's world or become a

---

[322]Randall, op. cit., p. 36.

[323]Ibid., p. 367.

[324]Hazard, op. cit., p. 269.

[325]Knight, op. cit., p. 356.

[326]Dondore, op. cit., p. 426.

mother earth symbol. Her third period of writing came after World War I and shows the effect of the war upon commercialism and human creativity. The land is used in comparison with the machine--the good, happy life with the soil versus the confusion and frustration of the machine age. The late period shows that the land was used not as land but as a symbol for a search for identity, a search that centered upon religion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Carl. The Swedish Acceptance of American Literature. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957.

Angoff, Alan (ed.). American Writing Today. New York: New York University Press, 1957.

Baum, Bernard. "Willa Cather's Waste Land," South Atlantic Quarterly, XLVIII (October, 1949), 589-601.

Bennett, Mildred R. The World of Willa Cather. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1951.

Blankenship, Russell. American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931.

Bloom, Edward A. and Lillian P. Bloom. "Willa Cather's Novels of the Frontier," American Literature, XXI (March, 1949), 71-93.

Brooks, Van Wyck. The Confident Years: 1885-1915. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1952.

Bowden, Edwin T. The Dungeon of the Heart. New York: Macmillan Company, 1961.

Boynton, Percy H. Literature and American Life. Boston: Ginn and Company, 1936.

_____. Some Contemporary Americans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1924.

Brown, E. K. Willa Cather: A Critical Biography. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.

Cargill, Oscar. The Novels of Henry James. New York: Macmillan Company, 1961.

Cather, Willa. The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather. In III Vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937.

_____. Early Stories of Willa Cather. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1957.

_____. The Old Beauty and Others. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948.

_____. Willa Cather on Writing. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949.

Cleaton, Irene and Allen Cleaton. Books and Battles: American Literature, 1920-1930. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937.

Cowley, Malcom. The Exile's Return. New York: The Viking Press, 1959.

_____. After the Genteel Tradition. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1937.

Daiches, David. Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction. New York: Collier Books, 1962.

Dondore, Dorothy Anne. The Prairie and the Making of Middle America: Four Centuries of Description. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The Torch Press, 1926.

Edel, Leon (ed.). Henry James: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Incorporated, 1963.

Footman, Robert H. "The Genius of Willa Cather," American Literature, X (May, 1938), 123-141.

Geismar, Maxwell. The Last of the Provincials. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947.

Hazard, Lucy Lockwood. The Frontier in American Literature. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1941.

Herron, Ima Honaker. The Small Town in American Literature. New York: Pageant Books, 1959.

Hicks, Granville. The Great Tradition. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935.

_____. "The Case Against Willa Cather," English Journal, XXII (November, 1933), 703-710.

Hoffman, Frederick J. The Modern Novel in America 1900-1950. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951.

_____. The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade. New York: Viking Press, 1955.

Howard, Leon. Literature and the American Tradition. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1960.

James, Henry. The Novels and Tales of Henry James. In XXVI Vols. New York: Scribners and Sons, 1935.

Jessup, Josephine Lurie. The Faith of Our Feminists. New York: Richard R. Smith, 1950.

Kazin, Alfred. On Native Grounds. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942.

Knight, Grant C. American Literature and Culture. New York: Ray Long and Richard R. Smith, Incorporated, 1932.

_____. The New Freedom in American Literature. Lexington, Kentucky: Mrs. Grant C. Knight, 1961.

Leisy, Ernest Erwin. American Literature: An Interpretive Survey. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1929.

Lewis, Edith. Willa Cather Living. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.

Lewisohn, Ludwig. The Story of American Literature. New York: Modern Library, 1939.

Mersand, Joseph. Tradition in American Literature: A Study of Jewish Characters and Authors. New York: The Modern Chapbooks, 1939.

Moorhead, Elizabeth. These Too Were Here. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1950.

Morgan, H. Wayne. Writers in Transition: Seven Americans. American Century Series. New York: Hill and Wang, 1963.

Overton, Grant M. The Women Who Make Our Novels. New York: Moffat, Yard, and Company, 1919.

Parrington, Vernon Louis. The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America. In III Vols. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1930.

Quinn, Arthur Hobson. American Fiction. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Incorporated, 1936.

Randall, John H. The Landscape and the Looking Glass. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960.

Rapin, Rene. Willa Cather. New York: Robert McBride and Company, 1930.

Sergeant, Elizabeth Shepley. Willa Cather: A Memoir. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1953.

Stovall, Floyd. American Idealism. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943.

Thorp, Willard. American Writing in the Twentieth Century. Cambridge, Massachusetts; Harvard University Press, 1960.

Wagenknecht, Edward. Cavalcade of the American Novel. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1952.

_____. "Willa Cather," Swanee Review, XXXVIII (April, 1921), 221-239.

Witham, W. Tasker. Panorama of American Literature. New York: Stephen Daye Press, 1947.

Wolfe, Don M. The Image of Man in America. Dallas; Southern Methodist University Press, 1959.

Central Kansas

Relation of thickness of Mississippian linestones in Central and Eastern Kansas to oil and gas deposits; bulletin 26 of the Geological Survey, University of Kansas. 1939. KD E54.3:26

~~Also available a. K557.81-K43b-V.-26~~

Trees, shrubs, and accual crops for wind barriers in Central and Western Kansas, an interim report on growth, survival and shelter effect; technical bulletin 153 of the Agricultural Experiment Station, Manhattan. 1969. KM3.6:153