



Bess Streeter Aldrich holding a copy of *A Lantern in Her Hand*.  
Photo courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society.

**WILLA CATHER AND BESS STREETER ALDRICH:  
CONTRASTING PORTRAYALS OF MONEY-GRUBBERS  
AND "OLAFARIANS"**

by  
**Daniel J. Holtz**

One of the lines I remember most from Willa Cather comes in the short story "The Bohemian Girl," when Nils Ericson imagines his brother Olaf sitting on the porch "weighing a thousand tons."<sup>1</sup> The line has little to do with Olaf's size, although Olaf does conjure up images of Garfield the Cat at an all-you-can-eat buffet, but rather indicates Cather's disdain for aesthetically unimaginative, narrow-minded money-grubbers, the sort of characters who show up in many of her early works.<sup>2</sup> Olaf-like characters, for example, appear in *O Pioneers!* in the form of Alexandra's brothers Lou and Oscar and most of the residents of Sand City, that little Kansas town, form a nearly "Olaf-esque" conglomerate in the short story "The Sculptor's Funeral."

These "Olafarians," as I'll call them, provide a central target for Cather's frontal attack on self-satisfied materialists, the kind of people who annoyed her in *Red Cloud*. They help, by contrast, to make such characters as Alexandra Bergson (in *O Pioneers!*), Anton Rosicky (in "Neighbour Rosicky"), and Harvey Merrick (in "The Sculptor's Funeral") look heroic. Moreover, they provide a vehicle for Cather to buck the social conventions of the small-town Nebraska from which she came. Cather was not the lone Nebraska writer to draw such characters. Their complacent, yet conniving, counterparts appear in the works of Bess Streeter Aldrich, who had ten bestsellers published from the mid-1920s to 1950.<sup>3</sup> Aldrich, however, fashioned these characters somewhat differently so that the result is a similar yet counteractive bottom line.

So salient are the Olafarians in Cather's work that a few examples should remind us of them. "The Sculptor's Funeral," first published in 1905, is replete with them. It involves the return of Harvey Merrick, a world-renowned sculptor, to his Kansas home town. Unfortunately for Merrick the homecoming is "short-lived." He is dead. As the story develops its central theme, that of the "gifted . . .

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artist in conflict with social prejudice or convention,"<sup>4</sup> it naturally reveals the source of the prejudice, the Sand City Olafarians. The people of Sand City had shunned Merrick when he was a child. Although Cather intimates their character throughout the story, they are most clearly revealed at the end by Jim Laird, Merrick's boyhood friend, now turned cynical, hard-drinking country lawyer. Laird says:

It's not for me to say why . . . a genius should ever have been called from this place of hatred and bitter waters; but I want this Boston man [Merrick's pupil who accompanied the body to Sand City] to know that the drivel he's been hearing here tonight is the only tribute any truly great man could have from such a lot of sick, side-tracked, burnt-dog, land-poor sharks as the here-present financiers of Sand City.<sup>5</sup>

In a somewhat similar, although markedly less didactic fashion, Cather develops the brothers Bergson in *O Pioneers!* She shows how the Bergson offspring have prospered after their father's death, largely because of the imagination and foresight of Alexandra. It is she who urged her brothers to buy more land and to adopt the farming practices, planting wheat and alfalfa when no one else was, that have made them all prosperous land owners, rather than struggling small-time farmers. Being the Olafarians her brothers are, though, they are able to put her contribution into proper perspective. As Lou says to Alexandra, "Everything you've made has come out of the original land that us boys worked for, hasn't it? The farms and all that comes out of them belongs to us as a family."<sup>6</sup> And not to be outdone, Oscar reminds Alexandra that "The property of a family belongs to the men . . ., because they are held responsible, and because they do the work."<sup>7</sup>

Like Alexandra's brothers, Christine Rinemueller, a prominent character and first-generation settler in Aldrich's companion novels *A Lantern in Her Hand* and *A White Bird Flying*, is a land-grabber. She pursues land ownership with such unabated obsession that Abbie Deal, her best friend and the protagonist of *A Lantern in Her Hand*, opines, ". . . one gets out of life largely what one puts in. Christine had put all her time and thought on the land and for her reward she had . . . land."<sup>8</sup> In similar, although more comic fashion, Aldrich chides materialists through the character of Eloise Deal, the wife of Abbie's second son, John. Eloise is an efficient, manipulative, socially-fixated creature who tries to order her life so as never to be taken by surprise. When Eloise had to prepare a meal following the unexpected death of a family friend, Aldrich writes that Eloise had "plenty of bread and two pounds of Mrs. Miller's nice fresh butter, some cold meat, and half a cake, a fruit salad and three dozen cookies. Eloise could take an inventory of her possessions even when far from them."<sup>9</sup>

Most clearly, though, Aldrich aims at materialism through Abbie Deal, the self-sacrificing pioneer woman and mother, who chooses to marry a young

farmer, instead of an up-and-coming New York doctor, and accompany him to the unsettled plains of Nebraska. So important is Abbie's example that she lives as a tangible presence in *A White Bird Flying*, particularly in the mind of Laura Deal (the main character there), even though she dies at the end of the first book. Like Alexandra Bergson, Abbie serves as a counterpoint and foil to the greedy characters around her.

On the other hand, there is an element of overt "Chamber of Commerce-ism" in Aldrich as well, a voice which takes pleasure in material progress and feels few qualms about acquisition. This voice appears in *A Lantern in Her Hand* in the character of Mackenzie Deal, Abbie's older son. Of him Aldrich writes:

[Mack] . . . went in for golf and rotary and the Commercial Club, freely paid his church and associated charity subscriptions . . . and altogether was so decent and clean and so respected . . . that he would have made an ideal target for the shots of any of the most weightily important and wordily devastating of the critics of our social structure.<sup>10</sup>

Aldrich would not target him, though, other than in a good-natured way.

Furthermore, she had already developed this sort of character in her first novel, *The Rim of the Prairie*, which appeared three years before the publication of *A Lantern in Her Hand*. In this earlier novel she presents O. J. Rineland, who, like Mackenzie Deal, is a banker. He is also a solid citizen "whose philosophy . . . [remained] fine and sane,"<sup>11</sup> even in his old age. Rineland remains this way even though his wife and daughter are social snobs, the kind of people Eloise Deal would like, but lacks the money, to be. Aldrich writes of Rineland and those like him:

It is a favorite indoor sport of fiction writers to picture him as a Shyloek, whetting his knife behind the grated window. The country banker is a high-type man, calm, level-headed, just. Where one goes wrong, a hundred stay right.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps more interestingly, though, Aldrich uses Rineland, a prairie prototype of material success, as a counter-voice to those who would accuse small towns of provincialism. She first shows his humble beginnings as one who came to Nebraska as a "stripling boy" and "worked here and there and everywhere to get a start . . . farm hand, husking jobs, one summer with a gang putting through the first railroad in [the] country."<sup>13</sup> Then she shows his mature, reflective side:

A great wrath rises in me when I read the stuff from onlookers telling their opinions of my midwest from the housetops. It makes me

angry all through. . . . And yet it ought not, I suppose . . . for the highest type of tolerance is that which is tolerant of intolerance. There was one of those articles in an old *Review* that I picked up the other day. It had that old time-worn theme: the grasping and the sordidness of the middle west, the country without ideals, the country destitute of artistry, the stolid old stigma that it existed without any sense of the finer things of life.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Aldrich and Cather examined the issue of self-satisfied materialism, but through characters such as O. J. Rineland and Mack Deal, Aldrich's portrayal leans in a different direction. That difference manifests itself in other ways as well. For one thing, Cather's portrayal of money-grubbers in the works being discussed consistently has a conspiratorial ring to it, as when Lou and Oscar Bergson band together against Alexandra, although that slant softens in each successive work. The low-lives of Sand City, although they may not participate in collusion, certainly have a single-minded purpose—to corrupt all who are corruptible. As Jim Laird says, "Why is it that reputable young men are as scarce as millionaires in Sand City?"<sup>15</sup>, to which he answers "because you [the Sand City Olafarians] drummed nothing but money and knavery into their ears from the time they wore knickerbockers."<sup>16</sup>

And Olaf Ericson, even though he is not as quick-witted or conniving as the Sand City crew, participates in a similar kind of corruption. He and his mother, who is portrayed somewhat as a benevolent and principled Gulla Slogun, "own most of the country now" and have "run over [it] like bindweed."<sup>17</sup> They manipulate the administration of a dead relative's estate to their own financial advantage, which means the disadvantage of the surviving children.

Furthermore, this conspiratorial materialism in Cather is consistently strong enough to drive strong-willed, creative people away. Just as Harvey Merrick escapes to the East to pursue his art, so must Nils Ericson and, eventually, Clara Vavrika (his brother's wife) escape (with Nils). That kind of escape, triggered by narrow-minded materialism, does not manifest itself in Aldrich, nor does the conspiratorial slant. Christine Rinemueller, Eloise Deal, and other Aldrich characters are money-grubbers, but largely they act alone. In fact the suggestion in Aldrich is that, if there is combined effort toward material gain, cooperation and its outcome are positive. That motif has already been noted in Aldrich's description of O. J. Rineland and is suggested in the words of Allen Rinemiller, the grandson of Christine Rinemueller and the eventual husband of Laura Deal. He says:

Farmers have always been a sort of incoherent mass,—their best leadership drained off into city life. A scad of sacrifice had been made for this state in its early years, and it ought not to go for nothing. A lot

of young fellows with vision and qualities of leadership have got to tackle the problem . . .<sup>18</sup>

What develops in these early Aldrich and Cather works, then, is a somewhat different portrayal of the material aspirations and accomplishments of small-town Nebraska people and the effects of them. That portrayal should come as no surprise, given the variant aspirations of the authors. Aldrich willingly remained an Elmwood, Nebraska, resident throughout most of her adult life, even when she had the financial freedom to live elsewhere. Cather escaped to the East—seeking its opportunities, tradition, culture—fleeing small-town Nebraska as soon as she could. What I find intriguing is how directly Aldrich's characters and their stories parallel but also counter the voices of Cather's. I have to imagine that Aldrich had Cather's portrayals in mind when she fashioned her stories and wrote words such as these:

But let no one say in the presence of the sons and daughters of these parents [the first-generation settlers], that the love of the finer things of life did not lie locked away in their hearts, with the hopes and ambitions for those sons and daughters.<sup>19</sup>

Those words echo yet resonate somewhat differently the strains of Cather's story lines. For Cather portrays a number of first-generation settlers—Mr. Schimerda, Anton Rosicky, and Joe Vavrika—who long for culture, Schimerda so much so that its absence crushes his spirit. A difference lies in the fact that Aldrich's characters could "lock away" the "love of the finer things," as Abbie Deal was able to do, because that love was only one aspect of their personalities. For Cather's characters, that love of culture was more often like the strawberry hand on the face of Georgianna in Hawthorne's "The Birthmark." If it were forcibly removed or, in the case of Cather's characters, systematically stifled, the soul of its possessor withered and/or died. Aldrich's money-grubbers do not wield the force, however, to stifle the souls of her more aesthetically sensitive characters.

Consequently, those Aldrich characters can more readily reconcile themselves to their often culturally barren surroundings. As Carol Petersen, an Aldrich scholar, has stated:

Aldrich often stressed that one who lives in the country can have the education and enjoyment of the arts as readily as one can who lives in the city . . . an individual's greatest personal growth comes from active interest and participation in one's world, regardless of place.<sup>20</sup>

This accommodation to place is a product of the ways in which Aldrich perceived differently than Cather did both her money-grubbers and her aesthetically sensitive characters.

Cather saw the money-grubbers as impediments to people with artistic temperament. She was an artist, and she resented them. Aldrich, however, referred to herself as a story-teller, and she never wrote a story she didn't sell. Consequently, with Cather's characters, the pursuit of money consistently correlates with provincialism, hypocrisy, and even conspiracy. With Aldrich's characters, though, that same pursuit may just as easily correlate with an aesthetic sensitivity, as it does with provincialism or, particularly, hypocrisy. For Aldrich's money-seekers are seldom single-sided, and they are even less likely to be devious and vindictive.

### NOTES

1. Willa Cather, "The Bohemian Girl," in *Great Short Works of Willa Cather*, ed. Robert K. Miller (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 151.
2. The three Cather works discussed in this paper were all first published by 1913: "The Sculptor's Funeral" in 1905, as part of *The Troll Garden*; "The Bohemian Girl" in 1912; and *O Pioneers!* in 1913. *The Rim of the Prairie* (1925), *A Lantern in Her Hand* (1928), and *A White Bird Flying* (1931) were three of Aldrich's first four novels.
3. Carol Miles Petersen, "Bess Streeter Aldrich," in *Resource Guide to Six Nebraska Authors*, eds. David McCleery and Kira Gale (Lincoln, Neb.: A Slow Tempo Press, 1991), 13.
4. Scutley Bradley, Richard Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long, eds., *The American Tradition in Literature*, 3rd ed., vol. 2, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), 1112.
5. Willa Cather, "The Sculptor's Funeral," in *The American Tradition in Literature*, eds. Scutley Bradley, Richard Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long, 3rd ed., vol. 2, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), 1123.
6. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, (1913; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 168.
7. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 169.
8. Bess Streeter Aldrich, *A Lantern in Her Hand*, (1928; reprint, New York: Appleton-Century, 1956), 276.
9. Bess Streeter Aldrich, *The Rim of the Prairie*, (1925; reprint, Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1966), 303.
10. Aldrich, *A Lantern in Her Hand*, 236-37.
11. Aldrich, *The Rim of the Prairie*, 348.
12. *Ibid.*, 155.
13. *Ibid.*, 77.
14. *Ibid.*, 76.
15. Cather, "The Sculptor's Funeral," 1121.
16. *Ibid.*, 1122.
17. Cather, "The Bohemian Girl," 107.
18. Bess Streeter Aldrich, *A White Bird Flying*, (1931; reprint, Leyden, Mass: Aeonian Press, 1975), 217.
19. Bess Streeter Aldrich, "Nebraska History in Nebraska Novels," Series 6, Box 9, Bess Streeter Aldrich Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society Archives, Lincoln.
20. Carol Miles Petersen, "Bess Streeter Aldrich: A Writer's Life" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 1992), 60.