

WILLA CATHER

The Writer and Her World

IANIS P. STOUT

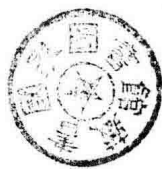


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Frontispiece: Willa Cather in Denver, while writing *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.
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to *Loren Daniel Lutes,*
Nebraskan

PREFACE

IN THE past two decades, Cather studies have assumed the proportions of a small industry. Despite the abundance of the scholarship, however, and despite the fact that much of that work has been of a very high order, we still lack, I believe, an adequate conception of the mind of this esteemed but nevertheless underestimated writer and thinker. That is, we lack an adequate understanding of the complexity of her sense of the world and her historic and cultural moment and a fully satisfying exposition of how that sense is manifest in her fiction and critical writing. It is that lack that I propose to address in the present study—though not without a sense of what a daunting task it is.

Willa Cather has all too often been seen as a writer of certitude and calm who made clear, confident distinctions between the moral and the immoral, the cultured and the vulgar, the savage and the civilized. Her popular audience—still a considerable one—seems to have valued her chiefly as a voice of reassurance, a writer who holds up in affirmation a sturdier, more wholesome America than our own. That kind of view of her is advanced, for example, in a recent newsletter of the Nebraska Alumni Association (the spring 1999 *GoodNUz*), which proclaims that “most” of her novels are about “hardy immigrant women on the prairies.” No serious scholar would so blatantly take the part for the whole. Yet much of even the most important and substantive work on Cather has tended to place her inside one or another conceptual box, with label firmly affixed.

I see Cather, instead, as a deeply conflicted writer who fits comfortably into no box, a person of profound ambivalence about many, if not most, of the important questions she faced, who *therefore* structured her writing in such ways as to control her uncertainty and project a serenity she did not, in fact, feel. A view of Willa Cather emphasizing conflict, evasion, and unresolved ambiguities governs everything that follows and shapes my conception of Cather's place in the great aesthetic and intellectual sea change that we call modernism.

Certainly I am not the first to argue that Cather is best seen as a modernist. Most arguments of her modernism, however, have been insistently formalist in nature. They have, in a sense, taken as a positive the negative critique brought by influential 1930s Marxists who accused her of aesthetic escapism, of turning aside from the social issues of her day. (She responded defiantly that all art was escapist.) In the wake of such critiques, which became for some years the standard view, Cather has at times been viewed as a figure preoccupied with the past, whose literary project had little to do with the intellectual currents of her own time. On the contrary, she was fully a participant in the uncertainties and conflicts of twentieth-century modernity. It was in recoil from their distresses that she turned to overt celebrations of the past and home pieties and constructed a retiring, crotchety persona. She can well be thought of as a modernist conservative much like T. S. Eliot. But for all her evasion and indirectness, she was, I believe, more fully responsive to her time than Eliot, as well as far less assured in her pronouncements.

In exploring Cather's sense of her world, I emphasize three main issues or clusters of issues: her sometimes puzzled performance of gender, including her relation to the emergence of the New Woman; her participation in, but also resistance to, pervasive cultural assumptions regarding ethnicity and American pluralism, including issues of social class; and her participation in both the ideology and (through her family's westering) the actual historic pursuit of Manifest Destiny. We see this participation especially clearly in her treatment of Native Americans (or its absence) and her relation to the phenomenon of romanticized popular interest in the Southwest, but we see it, too, in her lifelong sense of displacement from Virginia. Associated with that displacement was a conflict between impulses toward Europe and toward a kind of heartland Americanism—or to borrow her own words in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, a “desire to go and . . . necessity to stay.” In relation to all of these issues, the view of Cather that I seek to develop emphasizes fracture, doubt, and multiplicity of both visions and options. Merrill Skaggs and Hermione Lee, in particular, have observed Cather's intellectual and emotional dualities. Yet I believe that her dividedness of mind and the consequent indeterminacy of meaning in her work are more deeply pervasive than even these scholars have argued.¹ To borrow a phrase from Leo Bersani in a discussion of the painter Caravaggio, her work is “intractably enigmatic” (13).

With respect to the question of sexuality, my purpose here is not to offer a "normalized" Willa Cather. I agree with Elizabeth Ammons that there has already been quite enough effort to defend a traditional and sanitized (usually meaning nonlesbian) conception of her ("New Canon" 264), and I have no wish to participate in such a project of traditionalist veneration. If I at times question some of the interpretations related to readings of Cather as lesbian, it is because I believe that position, too, has now tended to harden into an absolute and to become itself a kind of orthodoxy, not always reflecting the complexity or even uncertainty of her experience and her thinking about the world.

A word about organization. I have taken an approach that attempts to combine the chronological with the thematic. Moving through the unfolding of Cather's career and the sequence of her books, I emphasize in each chapter what I discern as the particular emphases that emerge most clearly in that particular period or that particular book. Discussion of these emerging emphases, however, entails moving forward and backward in time. For example, the fourth chapter, centering on *O Pioneers!*, is concerned primarily with Cather's turn from the externally derived standards of appropriate novelistic material to the writing of what she knew best, the material that she sensed as being authentically her own. That discussion opens into a consideration of the autobiographical method in Cather's works generally—a topic that might be examined at any point in the study but is taken up here because it is at this point in Cather's career that the autobiographical method most clearly emerged and came to dominate her approach to fiction. Chapter 5, centering on *The Song of the Lark*, is concerned primarily with that book's exploration of issues of female departure from the domestic world to the world of public careers, a topic that entails recapitulation of much of the previous discussion of Cather's own early years and comparison with similar aspects of her later work. And so forth.

This book is not, in the strictest sense, a biography. Rather, it is a biographically based critical study that establishes, in as full a way as possible, a sense of the author's mind and personhood, of who she was and who she believed she was, of what she thought about major issues, how she saw and responded to her culture, and always how she realized, or failed to realize, all of this in her art. It might be called an intellectual biography, broadly defined, or, perhaps better, a cultural biography.

The methods of cultural studies have only recently been brought to

bear on the study of Willa Cather, mainly with the publication of Mike Fischer's challenging article "Pastoralism and Its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism" (1990), Joseph Urgo's *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* (1995), and Guy Reynolds's *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire* (1996). I am indebted to these scholars both for their demonstration of the value and importance of reading Cather from a cultural studies perspective and for their specific insights and discoveries. I am also particularly indebted to the work of Susan J. Rosowski and Ann Romines, both of whom I greatly esteem. But it is a mistake to begin to enumerate one's intellectual debts in this way, because the list is so extensive and the likelihood of omitting a name of absolutely crucial importance is so great.

Let me, then, simply thank the following persons, who have contributed in particular and personal ways to this project: Pat Phillips and Sue Fintel at the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial in Red Cloud, Nebraska, who smoothed the way for my research into the Cather letters there (as did librarians and photo archivists at many other institutions, especially Chad Wall at the Nebraska State Historical Society) and who also answered questions, extended to me their friendship, and in every way exceeded the demands of obligation; Ann Romines and Susan Rosowski, who said things I needed at the times I needed them; Susan Rosowski, again, and another reader for the University Press of Virginia, who read the entire manuscript and offered many valuable suggestions; Deborah Williams, who through our e-mail conversations kept enlightening me about Cather's connections with other modernists and many other matters; Robert K. Miller, who shared his insights, particularly into *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House*; Bob Thacker, who shared his work on S. S. McClure; Patricia Lee Yongue, who invited me into her home to use her collection of materials relating to Stephen Tennant; Marian Eide and Kate Kelly for sharing their time by reading and making suggestions on various parts of the work as it came along; David McWhirter, Mary Ann O'Farrell, and other members of the Interdisciplinary Group for Humanities Studies at Texas A&M University, who helped me with their encouragement and their astute questioning (and David suggested the phrase "modernist conservative"); my graduate students, especially Tomas Pollard, Jean Griffith, and Robin Cohen; and the Interdisciplinary Group, the College of Liberal Arts, and the Office of the Vice President for Research, Texas A&M University, for grants that assisted with the research and writing.

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Figure 15. Edward Steichen. *Willa Cather* (1926). Gelatin-silver print, 16 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 13 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (42.5 x 34 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the photographer. Photograph ©1999 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 20. John Singer Sargent, *Nonchaloir (Repose)*, 1911. Gift of Curt H. Reisinger. Photograph © 1999 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Figure 21. Jules Breton, French, 1827–1906. *The Song of the Lark*, oil on canvas, 1884, 110.6 x 85.8 cm. Henry Field Memorial Collection, 1894.1033. Photograph courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago.

Figure 25. Willa Cather in New Mexico. Courtesy of the University of Nebraska.

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used without first-reference notes:

AB	<i>Alexander's Bridge</i>
ALL	<i>A Lost Lady</i>
CSF	<i>Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912</i>
DCA	<i>Death Comes for the Archbishop</i>
KA	<i>The Kingdom of Art</i> , ed. Bernice Slote
LG	<i>Lucy Gayheart</i>
MA	<i>My Ántonia</i>
MME	<i>My Mortal Enemy</i>
OD	<i>Obscure Destinies</i>
OO	<i>One of Ours</i>
OP	<i>O Pioneers!</i>
OW	<i>Willa Cather on Writing</i>
PH	<i>The Professor's House</i>
SL	<i>The Song of the Lark</i>
SPO	<i>Stories, Poems, and Other Writings</i> (Library of America, 1992)
SR	<i>Shadows on the Rock</i>
SSG	<i>Sapphira and the Slave Girl</i>
TG	<i>The Troll Garden</i>
W&P	<i>The World and the Parish: Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902</i> , ed. William M. Curtin
WCIP	<i>Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters</i> , ed. L. Brent Bohlke
WCPM	The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, located in Red Cloud, Nebraska
YBM	<i>Youth and the Bright Medusa</i>

After first reference, the names of libraries will be given in easily recognizable short forms, e.g., Beinecke for the Beinecke Library, Yale University; Yale for holdings at Yale University other than the collections of the

Beinecke; Huntington for the Huntington Library; Virginia for Alderman Library, University of Virginia; HRC for Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas; TWU for Texas Woman's University; etc.

In annotations of letters, WC means, of course, Willa Cather.

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EAST / WEST, HOME'S BEST
Heritage and Disruption



Stricken, she left familiar earth behind her
—“Macon Prairie (Nebraska)”

A sudden sickness for the hills of home
—“Prairie Dawn”

WILLA CATHER has often been regarded as a writer of serenity and certainty who celebrated the pioneers, praised a symbol of fertility called *Ántonia* (“a rich mine of life,” “a founder of early races”), and turned back to America’s past in nostalgic escape. According to this traditional view, her books are easy to read, her values are wholesome, and we can all be glad that she knew who she was, a member not of any lost generation but of the hearty midwestern stock that by 1900 had come to represent bedrock national values, blessedly removed from an industrialized East and a retrograde South.

Behind the appearance of affirmation, however, stands a writer of conflict and ambivalence, doubtful of even the possibility of knowing truth, whose apparent nostalgia for a simpler pioneering time disguises a complex engagement with the present. Her celebration of the agricultural frontier was couched in a language that signaled her demurral, in many ways, from conventions of frontier heroics, and she could not entirely ignore the impoverishment of life that fertility and constricted opportunities meant for her frontier heroine *Ántonia*, as well as the ease with which her male narrator brushes those minor drawbacks aside. Cather’s books are easy to read only if we are content to take the smooth surface for the whole. If we read alertly, unlulled by a prose style of calculated