June 1968

Willa Cather: Individualism and Style

William M. Curtin

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 8, no.2, June 1968, p.35-55

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.
Homage

to

Willa Sibert Cather
1873 - 1947

“The exemplar of the pure artist.”
On a larger photograph, 8 x 10½, in the Colby collection, she has written: "To Robert Duer: / 'Where there is great love / there are always miracles. / One might almost say that / an apparition is human vision / corrected by divine love.'" Willa Cather.
WILLA CATHER: INDIVIDUALISM AND STYLE

By WILLIAM M. CURTIN

Like most of the writers who gained fame during the twenties, Willa Cather was marked by one outstanding characteristic—her individualism. From the beginning of her apprenticeship as an artist she recognized that quality. In her first important essay on Carlyle, written in 1891 for a class at the University of Nebraska, she put the problem quite succinctly: "Art of every kind is an exacting master, more so even than Jehovah. He says only, 'Thou shalt have no other God before me.' Art, science and letters cry, 'Thou shalt have no other Gods at all.' They accept only human sacrifices."1 Later as a dramatic critic for the Nebraska State Journal, she admired most those artists who seemed to be in the world but not of it, like the Italian tragedienne Eleanora Duse: "She has kept her personality utterly subdued and unseen and spoken only through her art. It is like the music one hears in a convent where the tones awaken and thrill, but the singer is hidden behind the veiled grating of the choir. No one knows what manner of woman it is that this music comes from."2

The religious rhetoric of these statements attests to the seriousness with which she held her ideas. Indeed her interest in the marital irregularities of actors, actresses, and writers about whom she wrote was based on her belief that domestic difficulties were the price an artist paid for trying to combine the dedicated individualism essential to art with the social affability essential to family life. Commenting on the divorce of the actress Marie Burroughs in the Journal, April 7, 1895, she wrote: "In her world at least, 'he travels fastest who rides alone...'. Liberty and solitude, they are the two wings of art."

1 Nebraska State Journal (March 1, 1891), 14.
2 Ibid. (November 4, 1894), 12.
Acceptance of individualism as a mark of the artist led to certain corollary ideas. Like Henry James, whose influence was to be so significant in her first novel, she was convinced that it was impossible for an artist (especially a woman) to support two passions adequately. And like him she was convinced that the high seriousness of the novelist's calling makes human sacrifices not only necessary but worthwhile. She respected that vocation so much she did not begin to write novels until she was thirty-seven years old. Until then she made her way in journalism, fighting at every turn the compromise between art and reporting, a compromise she felt did not do justice to either. In an interview in 1921 she said: "I took a salaried position . . . because I didn't want to write directly to sell. I didn't want to compromise. Not that magazine demands were wrong. But they were different." Her respect for journalism led her to condemn those who used the profession to gather materials for novels. She devoted herself to journalism with such integrity and persistence it is no surprise she was editor of McClure's for five years.

This same integrity she also had for her art. She was a journalist until she could completely devote herself to novel writing. To her, dedication to art meant that the process of writing was to be the center of her personal life. As she said of the artist Hedges in "Coming, Aphrodite!"—the artist had "more tempestuous adventures sitting in his dark studio" than any lady of society could have in all the capitals of Europe. For Willa Cather the achievement of the artist like Hedges required him to concentrate on his art in his own way, alone, unique, and fiercely aware that sex leads to distracting involvements. For her, the artist's only passion was his task.

Willa Cather's individualism kept her aloof from political and social causes, though she did sign a petition protesting the censorship of Dreiser's The Genius. Her only need of social concourse was with fellow artists and a few friends, fewer as she grew older. Witter Bynner who was associated with her on McClure's said this lack of concern with the social issues of the times and with life in the broadest sense led her to bitterness when she realized that she might have had more life in her art

3 In an interview with Latrobe Carroll, "Willa Sibert Cather," Bookman, LiII (May 1921), 215.
Colby Library Quarterly 39

if she had had less art in her life. There certainly was a relationship between Cather's life and her art, but it was not as facile as Bynner implied. From the very beginning of her career the central problem of her work was the relation between the creative individualist and his environment. At first she created a "morality" of her own, opposed to conventional morality, in which the good are the creative individuals and the bad are the mechanistic, rational people of a community. But by the time she wrote *The Professor's House*, a change took place. The triumph of this novel is that Cather was able to broaden her sympathies, to create the "exploiter" as a man of generous emotions. Though she still sympathized most with the creative individual, she had expanded her subjective sympathies to include a broader view of the world.

Three things accounted for this change. Cather saw more and more clearly the implications of her view of human nature. First of all, she realized that if the nature and temperament of an artist is a "given" thing, then the character of all other human beings is also a given thing. They are no more responsible for their natures than are creative individualists. In the early novels, characters like Oscar and Lou Bergson, Sylvester Lovett, Anna Kronborg and even Ivy Peters were accounted for in terms of their given character, but they were not treated sympathetically. In her later novels Cather rose above her subjective sympathy for the creative individual and embraced all mankind. Thus, "compassion" became a key term.

Willa Cather also qualified her early individualism by recognition of the interdependence of people. She gradually turned from a world in which human beings are each other's mortal enemies to one in which they are united by a ritual, a myth, a faith. This change came about because Cather, like Emerson, developed a theory of "compensation" about human nature. She wondered in *My Antonia* whether "the life that was right for one was ever right for two!" In *The Professor's House* the Indian people of the mesa are exterminated, she suggested, because the very quality that urges them to create a unified and esthetic civilization causes them to decline in the arts of war. Concentration of energy in one direction leaves them open to attack in another. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather

---

showed how two men of utterly different temperaments can compensate for each other's limitations. Their faith leads them to a unity of action and feeling that transcends their personalities.

Finally, Cather modified her individualism by recognizing that death is the universal end of man. Writing of her unfinished Avignon story, George Kates generalized: "All of Willa Cather's characters know suffering, know handicap, know the hardness of life. It was the only fundamental circumstance, apparently, that seemed real to her." The idea of limitations and disappointments in the lives of all people was part of her concept of compensation. It was related to the idea of death in an unusual way. Miss Cather saw that one of the dangers of life lies in the decline of the energy, power, and desire natural to middle age. For her, life had its source in a physical power or energy given to each living being. But she saw power as a thing that followed the laws of nature and declined inevitably. For the sensitive, creative individual middle age had a special terror. If he fulfilled the dreams of his youth, the individualist faced an old age of nostalgia and frustration. If he did not learn to express the dreams of his youth, the individualist lived out his age with regrets and bitterness. She often quoted with approval a statement made to her in 1894 by Helen Von Doenhoff, a visiting soprano: "Art does not come at sixteen and when a woman is young enough to look 'Elsa' she is not experienced enough to sing it; when she can sing it, youth and beauty have been spent in learning how." The paradox was that, as Cather saw life, it took age to teach a creative individual the art his youth needed. The best single statement of this idea is in Cather's review of Arnold Bennett's *Milestones*.

Mr. Bennett takes the biologist's rather than the poet's view of both youth and age. Youth is the only really valuable thing in the world, not because it is "youth," a pretty name, but because it is force, potency, a physiological fact. A kind of power can be extracted from youth that can be obtained nowhere else in the world—or in the stars; and this is the only power that will drive the world ahead. It makes the new machine, the new commerce, the new drama, the new generation; it is Fecundity. The individual possesses this power for only a little while, a few years. He is sent into the world charged with it, but he can't keep it a day beyond its allotted time. He has his hour when he can do, live, become.

---

6 In *Five Stories* by Willa Cather (New York, 1956), 211.
7 *Nebraska State Journal* (March 14, 1897), 13.
If he devotes those years to self-sacrifice, to caring for an aged parent, or helping to support his brother’s children, God may reward him, but Nature will not forgive him. The kind of self-sacrifice that has so long been accounted a virtue, which is the very cornerstone of the old family ideal, Nature punishes more cruelly than she does any mistake.8

For the individualist, the man outside the “old family ideal,” nature offers spiritual death. When his allotted time runs out, his future is either bitter or nostalgic. He exemplifies most tragically the inevitable decline of energy universal to man.

Death is a fate shared by all mankind, creative individualist and mechanistic exploiter alike. Paradoxically, however, this universal fate brings the individualist to an awareness of the most unique element in his nature. Myra Henshawe expresses this most aptly when she says that her nature is waiting for her “like her skeleton.” Whenever a major character faces the moment of his death there is a flashback or memory of youth. Bartley Alexander recalls his days as a young boy dreaming on a sand bar in the river. Alexandra does not die, but her death is symbolized in the recurrent dream of an earth god. The Archbishop remembers the most important act of his life, helping Vaillant to become a missionary. Count Frontenac dreams he is in the only house he loved in his youth, locking out some dangerous giant. Sapphira is said to have rejoined the gay society of her youth. Each of them returns to the most characteristic aspect of his individual nature, always something associated with youth.

This association of youth and death is best made in The Professor’s House. The Professor becomes indifferent about the present by contemplating his youth. St. Peter sees his real self as a primitive in communion with nature. His social self is a violation of this unique core of personality. He realizes that most of his life had been a social overlay on this original self. The irony is that the greatest social good that can happen between people—love—causes him to lose sight of his true self. Because he falls in love, he has to have a job, then a family, and then a social position. Love and sex distracted him from concentrating the pure power, the energy, the desire that was the generating force of his life. When he realizes this, he is tempted to commit suicide. Only when he accepts death as one accepts a rainy day or any other natural calamity, can he accept life, if

---

8 “New Types of Acting,” McClure’s, XL (March 1913), 72.
not the future. He shares with Augusta his natural condition, but he does not transform it from an individual predicament to a transcendental ritual. The inevitability of death makes him realize the limitation of his individual values. Without a culture to make his life significant beyond the decline of his energy, he can only live without delight.

Willa Cather's works all attest to her serious concern about the problem of individualism. As an artist she was most aware of the private, subjective nature of her "deepest feelings." But she recognized too that these sources of her art must be congruent with objective human experience. In 1925, she said in an interview that the artist is made of two things: "of a universal human impulse, and a very special and individual experience of it."9 The problem of her early work is that she was more concerned with her "very special and individual experience" than with the "universal human impulse," leading her to emphasize in her fiction those values that were true for her and for other artists. These were rooted in her deepest sympathies. Her growth as an artist was marked by her ability to broaden her sympathies to encompass all mankind. In her best work she achieved a unity of her subjective feelings and objective reality and expressed it in a structure organic to her ideas.

The structure of Cather's novels reveals her dialectical cast of mind. They are usually marked by an opposition of youth and age in one of two ways. In many of her novels there is a dramatic shift of time, usually about one generation, to give two views of the same character or problem. Frequently this opposition is made within a character, where another self, usually a younger self, is presented to show both the continuity of the character and the changes wrought by time. This opposition of youth and age often leads to sharp breaks in the narrative. Juxtapositions are the strength of this art. The meaning of the novels is in the interplay between the parts.

Though very much interested in individualism, Willa Cather did not frequently use a first person point of view to emphasize individual psychology. Strictly, only three of her novels are told by first person narrators. My Mortal Enemy is not successful because Nellie Birdseye was not a significant character though the novel depends for its success upon estimating the effect of

9 "Training for the Ballet," McClure's, XL1 (October 1913), 86.
the story of Myra and her cry, "my mortal enemy," upon the
young Nellie. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is peculiar in its
point of view. Most of the novel is presented by an omniscient
author. In the Epilogue we learn that the "author" was actually
a person who knew the story from personal experience. The
novel seems an example of the "germ" theory of composition.
The Epilogue shows that the imaginative person needs only a
slight, but telling, experience in order to imaginatively recon­
struct a whole culture and its problems. But as a first-person
narrative, the novel is not successful because the child of the
Epilogue is not at all important to the meaning of the novel.
The child is so shadowy a figure that critics are tempted to fill
out her background by identifying the narrator with Cather.
This criticism avoids the whole question of the internal con­
sistency of the novel. The failure of the novel is not that it is
autobiographical but that the narrative technique does not make
clear the relation of the narrator to the story.

*My Antonia* has Cather's most successful use of first-person
point of view. Yet even here the use of the narrator almost
fails because Cather attempted to have Jim Burden do two
things at once. As E. K. Brown pointed out: "Jim was to be
fascinated by Antonia as only a man could be, and yet he was
to remain a detached observer, appreciative but inactive, rather
than take part in her life." 10 Cather wanted to tell the story
from the viewpoint of a unique individual and yet tell it so that
his temperament would not distort the reality he perceives. To
do so she created a "romantic" character and made clear to the
reader the extent to which the novel was *his* Antonia. Thus
she fused a subjective point of view with an objective impression
of Antonia.

Cather solved her need to combine a subjective and objective
view of reality by using the omniscient point of view. Even in
the novels in which she followed a character's point of view
almost completely, as in *A Lost Lady*, she felt compelled by her
problem to present at least a few scenes outside the character's
experience. In earlier novels, like *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of
the Lark*, Cather abused the omniscient point of view by letting
her voice express an idea that she did not trust to the story.

Colby Library Quarterly

ter, but Cather used the omniscient point of view to give an objective impression of Claude and to go beyond his death for a commentary on his ideals. This same need to go beyond the death of a character to explain the meaning of his life led Cather to use the omniscient point of view in two widely separated novels, *Alexander's Bridge* and *Lucy Gayheart*. Finally, since the subject of *Shadows on the Rock* is a whole society and not any individual, the omniscient point of view was Cather's choice. In each novel she chose this point of view because it allowed her to balance the perspective of an individual with a mere objective point of view.

The two most successful uses of the omniscient point of view are in *The Professor's House* and *Death Comes to the Archbishop*. In each novel the central character is understood by contrast with another character. Most of the first novel follows the Professor's point of view, with only occasional shifts to the perspective of his family. Section one of the novel ends with the Professor remembering the day that Tom told him the long story of his discovery of the mesa. But the story is not colored by the Professor's memory. We get it just as he did, in Tom's voice. Thus the reader gets a dramatic picture of Tom to contrast with the Professor. The contrast in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is different. It is made continually as the novel progresses rather than with severe juxtaposition. Cather used the omniscient point of view to give the novel that quality of legend that makes all incidents, whatever their subjective value, a part of a larger objective ritual.

Willa Cather's attempt to combine her individual experience of reality with universal human experience affected not only her ideas and the structure of her novels, but her style. Her style has its roots in the same unconscious method of selection as had her theme. In July 1925, she told an interviewer for the *Century*, “I cannot produce my kind of work away from the American idiom. It touches the springs of memory, awakening past experience and knowledge necessary to my work.” She continued, “The American language works on my mind like light on a photographic plate, or a pack of them, creeping in at the edges.” The unconscious quality of her style filters through a sophisticated sense of language. She wrote with admiration for

the method that Stephen Crane described when he told her he needed to become so absorbed in his material that it was part of his blood. Thus his instinct helped him to write.

He simply knew from the beginning how to handle detail. He estimated it at its true worth—made it serve his purpose and felt no further responsibility about it. I doubt whether he ever spent a laborious half-hour in doing his duty by detail—in enumerating, like an honest grubby auctioneer. If he saw one thing that engaged him in a room he mentioned it. If he saw one thing in a landscape that thrilled him, he put it on paper.12

Given a "purpose" writing seemed effortless to her. But in fact Cather had long ago put herself to school to Flaubert and his "mot juste." She is said to have searched for months for the proper word to describe a wheat field at a certain season.13 As her friend Henry Seidel Canby pointed out, she was Gallic in the quality of her mind.14 She had read many nineteenth century French novels in the original when she was in Pittsburgh.15 It was to them that she went for her sense of precision in language.

In 1898, Miss Cather wrote an article on language for the Pittsburgh Leader. As she occasionally did, she wrote a critical review of an article that appeared in a national magazine, here the Atlantic Monthly. Prof. Henry D. Sedgwick had spoken a great truth, Cather reported,

a truth that cannot be too often told, viz., that no lasting good can come to English letters from the largely artificial taste for French literature that has sprung up throughout the English-speaking world: that a man of letters cannot be a cosmopolitan, that he must speak the message of his own people and his own country or he forever dumb; that truth, for him, is that which he reverenced in his childhood.16

Yet she defended French literature against the charge that it is inferior to English poetry merely because it is different. This defense involved a definition of the nature of both French and English. It is worth quoting at length.

12 Willa Cather: On Writing (New York, 1949), 69.
13 Mildred Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (Lincoln, Neb., 1961), 166.
14 Henry S. Canby, Saturday Review of Literature, XXX (May 10, 1947), 23.
16 The article is signed "Sibert," "Magazines of the Month," Pittsburgh Leader, LII (March 4, 1898), 8.
The Anglo-Saxon . . . came without an inherited classical sense of fitness and proportion, into a language as dark and unexplored as his own forests, unwieldy as his own giant battleax matched with the French rapier. It has never been perfected. Every English author has known the continual torment and stimulus of writing in an inexact tongue. The Anglo-Saxon could not make a literary language. He made a religious language. Unable to build a pyramid or a Parthenon, in his Titanic struggle, he cast up a mountain. Unable to fit his thought exactly to word, he made the most spiritually suggestive language ever written. He made it the tongue of prophecy, he gave it reverence, that element of which French is as barren as a desert of dew. He learned to mean more than he said, and to make his reader feel it. He learned to write a language apart from words. You feel it in Emerson, when his sentences seem sometimes to stand dumb before the awful majesty of the force he contemplates; it is in the pages of Carlyle, when those great, chaotic sentences reach out and never attain, and through them and above them rings something that they never say, like an inarticulate cry. That is the cry of the over-soul, present to a greater or less degree in all the English masters. Mr. Sedgwick calls it poetry. It is the highest of all poetry. It will never be spoken in the tripping dactyls of any Latin tongue. It is the Anglo-Saxon's heritage, and it has cost him dear.

But there is a poetry apart from spiritual frenzy, from religious fervor. That is a poetry wholly human, physical, if you will. That poetry that thunders in the resonant verse of Homer, that breathes still through the lips of Sappho as softly as a sigh; the poetry of arms and men, of love and maidens. And this has found in France its most perfect expression. It speaks through the virile romances of the elder Dumas, through the exquisite prose of Gautier, the palpitating verse of Alfred de Musset, the irresistible songs of Beranger.

In 1922, when Willa Cather discussed the relation of description and creation in "The Novel Démeublé," she expressed, in a style very different from the elaborate overstatement of her journalistic days, a similar sentiment. "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself."¹⁷ With these sentences Willa Cather put herself firmly in the tradition of English literature as she knew it. It is no surprise that she read the King James Bible before she sat down to write, not from piety but from an interest in its language.¹⁸ The style she tried to establish for herself had

¹⁷ Not Under Forty (New York, 1936), 50.
the suggestive, evocative quality of the old prophets and the Elizabethan divines.

The style Willa Cather so continually censored in her mature critical expression is that associated with Balzac and Zola and "the dazzling journalistic successes of twenty years ago." All of these writers selected their detail in the same fashion. They used a notebook. They could write equally well of all things. But to Cather they were failures because they did not organize their art around their "deepest feelings." On this basis she justified her distinction between Balzac and Tolstoi, whose descriptions were "always so much a part of the emotions of the people that they are perfectly synthesized." On the same basis she criticized Defoe's *Fortunate Mistress*. Like Defoe, Roxanna was seen by Cather as limited to a commercial mentality. She was not at all surprised that in the novel there are "no scenes," "no atmosphere," "no conversation," and "very little character." What especially annoyed Cather was that Roxanna was so shallow that "one is not conscious of the slightest change in her surroundings or way of living." She complained that the reader gets no sense of physical surroundings. Only clothes interest Roxanna, and Cather pointed out that Defoe's descriptions of them are more like those of the complete British tradesman than of a lovely woman. These values appalled Cather precisely because they revealed the limitations of Defoe's deepest sympathies.

For Willa Cather, Defoe was not only outside the tradition of prophecy that is a part of the English style, but also outside the "wholly human" French tradition. And though she associated herself with the English tradition, she apprenticed with the French novelists of the nineteenth century. Her love of Flaubert is amply testified in her essay, "A Chance Meeting," in which she discussed his power as distinguished from that of Balzac. She remembered how she "first began to sense the things which Flaubert stood for, to admire (almost against one's will) that peculiar integrity of language and vision, that coldness, which, in him, is somehow noble." This is not only a comment on "his flavour, his personality," but it also places him in the tra-

19 *On Writing*, 101.
20 Ibid., 40.
21 Ibid., 80.
dition of French letters at its best. His style is exact in producing its effects; it never means more than it says. As she wrote in 1898: “The French language, like Andrea del Sarto’s pictures, has the fatal attribute of perfection.”

Flaubert’s dictum, “mot justes,” is in this tradition.

At its best Willa Cather’s style combines the evocative quality of the English tradition and the precision of the French. The refinement of her style grew from the refinement of her ideas. In her earlier novels, when she was seeking some transcendental value in the land, in art, and in children, she also was seeking a unique style. In *The Song of the Lark* she had used a style that she called “the full-blooded method, which told everything about everybody.” For *My Antonia* she found herself using a style similar to that of *O Pioneers!*, a style with much less detail and a greater awareness of that “very satisfying element analogous to what painters call ‘composition.’”

The selection of detail she left to her “deepest feelings”; its expression she made with “mot juste.” She called this method of realism “démeublé.” It did not dominate her style until *A Lost Lady*.

The most effective parts of her early novels are those concerning the land. The style of the dialogue is not very distinguished, even when Cather records the peculiar dialect of immigrants. Perhaps *Alexander’s Bridge* is seldom remembered because the descriptions though sparse enough to be considered “démeublé” did not come from “the bottom of [her] consciousness.” In *O Pioneers!* the faulty handling of point of view and the awkward attempt to juxtapose two stories are almost overcome by the way the land becomes a symbol of the feelings of the people—the graveyard for Alexandra and the white mulberry tree for Emil and Marie. In *The Song of the Lark* the most memorable incidents are those in which the emotions of Thea are reflected in the scene, especially among the Indian ruins. The style of this section is “démeublé” in contrast to the “full-blooded” style of the rest of the novel.

*My Antonia* is the most successful of these early novels because Jim Burden was attracted in part to his memory of Antonia by her fertility, parallel to the land he always loved. In

---

23 “Magazines of the Month,” *Pittsburgh Leader*, LII (March 4, 1898), 8.
24 *On Writing*, 96.
26 *Alexander’s Bridge* (1922), vi.
fact the description of Antonia’s children running from the fruit cave into the light is a description of the land as well. Remembering it, Jim is moved to write, “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.” The success of the novel is partly because Cather established at the outset of the book that the deepest sympathies of the narrator were rooted in his love of the land.

One of Ours fails precisely because Willa Cather could not draw upon her deepest feelings for the positive element in the novel. The second half of the novel, the half set in France, is intended to show that the war was a “fortunate accident” for Claude because it took him from the Middle West of modern America to France where, for all its poverty and war, human values were still cherished. But this second half is not a success because the style, not the idea, is faulty. The descriptions of the first half of the novel vividly express the contempt for mechanized America which is a part of Claude’s emotion. But the descriptions in the second half have no adequate object to reflect his positive attitude toward France. The novel is a work of mere documentation, however well conceived.

Miss Cather wrote her credo, “The Novel Démeublé,” in the same year that One of Ours won her the Pulitzer Prize. Ironically, that novel was to be the last in which she used documentation apart from her deepest emotions. The importance of the essay is that it identifies description as the basis of her characteristic style. This description is to be distinguished from the “power of observation” and the “power of description” Cather scorned. To write from one’s deepest feelings is to simplify. The process is essentially subjective; the documentary process is objective. The problem, as Cather said, is to combine “a universal human impulse, and a very special and individual experience of it.” She translated her deep subjective feelings into objective human impulses through symbols that arise from the descriptions rather than from the drama. Occasionally the descriptions portray action, but mostly they depict static places. Part of the failure of One of Ours is Cather’s failure to find an adequate symbolic representation of Claude’s attitude toward France. She tried to make the violin playing of Gerhardt the
symbol of a traditional and skillful culture, but the attempt does not succeed. The novel lacks the focus of her other works because it lacks a sense of place.

*A Lost Lady* is weakened because Cather did not find a satisfactory symbol of the negative aspects of life. The positive power of the pioneer civilization is symbolized by mountains, by the sundial of Captain Forrester, and by his house. The negative character of modern civilization is symbolized only by Ivy Peters. He is a perfect picture of the modern dehumanized civilization Cather wanted to portray, but precisely because he is such a caricature, he fails as character. He does not fill the two functions Cather expected him to perform in the novel. His limitations as a character are emphasized when he is contrasted with Louie Marsellus in *The Professor's House*. In this novel Cather made brilliant use of her theory of the "novel démeuble." Marsellus is humanized in his dramatic personality but is demolished by the details that show his relation to the sense of place; as Scott MacGregor says in the novel, "It's outlandish." The pun is deliberate because Marsellus' house symbolizes everything Tom Outland had not been. The first part of the novel, developed through a mass of detail, fits the place and the people who are contrasted to Tom and his mesa. In a letter to *Commonweal* Cather explained her method, "In my book I tried to make Professor St. Peter's house rather overcrowded and stuffy with new things; American proprieties, clothes, furs, petty ambitions, quivering jealousies — until one got rather stifled. Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa, and the fine disregard of trivialities which was in Tom Outland's face and in his behavior." The differences are focused in the description of the mesa and of the Professor's house and the Marsellus' house. The houses become symbols of the ideas much more than of the people. The novel is more successful than *A Lost Lady* because Cather was able to symbolize the ideas for which Marsellus stood without oversimplifying him as a human being, as she did with Ivy Peters.

Because the theory of the novel "démeuble" is really a theory of the relationship of people to things it is not surprising to find Rebecca West fascinated by the sensuousness of *Death Comes*.

27 *On Writing*, 31-32.
Miss West was intrigued by the paradox that a novel that deals with spiritual values should approach them through recording sensuous experience. The paradox arose from Cather's belief that the emotions of people somehow affect the things that they use and the places where they live. In this novel the symbolism of the desert made into a garden is a reflection of the spiritual watering of old roots by the two missionaries. And for the Archbishop, the description of his "gold" cathedral is a symbol of both his temptation to worldliness and his triumph as a churchman. The same highly refined style is characteristic of *Shadows on the Rock*, but in this novel Cather separated things cultural from things religious. The rock is only a symbol of the Church; it never succeeds as a symbol of French culture though it provides a background for it.

In her last two novels, Cather's theory produced completely different results. In *Lucy Gayheart* the theme of the novel goes so far beyond any time and place that there is little objective reality to describe. No place is given significance. When Harry Gordon estimates the meaning of experience, he creates an aphorism, "What is a man's 'home town' anyway, but the place where he had had disappointments and had learned to bear them?" The comment is without any referent within the novel itself. There is so little description of the town it never becomes a symbol of the characters' emotions. The final attempt at symbolism in the novel (Lucy's footsteps in a concrete sidewalk) indicates the impossible nature of Cather's theme, given her method. In a novel—where only living matters—the things of this world have little meaning. Thus, in a sense, Cather had no place, no thing on which to exercise her art.

*Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is almost redeemed by its style. The book is unusual because it is so strongly plotted. This eliminates the need to tie the parts of the novel together by a leitmotif of descriptions as in her more loosely organized novels. The sense of place is certainly important in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, but no single place is a symbol. In this novel a particular society is described objectively. The theory of the novel "déméuable" allowed Cather to describe human relationships without making judgments about them. Thus, the institution of slavery, rather than any thing or place, emerges as a symbol.

But even that achievement does not redeem the novel from the awkward change of point of view in the Epilogue.

At first glance it seems surprising that a writer so interested in the individual should evolve a theory of style that deals with things and places rather than with psychology. Some of her critics suggest she repudiated that approach when she turned from James after her first novel. They suggested she could have learned much from the new techniques of fiction, especially from stream of consciousness. It seems presumptuous to ask such a thing of Cather. She had formed and matured her ideas on art before she wrote a novel. She had no more reason to follow Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, whose work she respected, than they did to follow her. Her style solves the problems in which she was interested. She wanted to stand midway between the journalists whose omniscient objectivity accumulate more fact than any character could notice and the psychological novelist whose use of subjective point of view stories distorts objective reality. She developed her theory on a middle ground, selecting facts from experience on the basis of feeling and then presenting the experience in a lucid, objective style. Cather's style is not the accumulative cataloguing of the journalists, nor the fragmentary atomism of psychological associations. It is written in relatively simple sentences, in a language concrete and direct. It is delusively simple. Katherine Anne Porter has expressed very well the problem this raises for the modern reader. “Reading her fine, pure direct prose in which you can almost hear a calm, well-tempered voice talking wonderful good sense without much emphasis on the points, you are likely to be thrown off if you have been trained too much on violence and tricks of doubling and crossing.”

Truman Capote called Cather a “styleless stylist.” This is an epithet Cather would have appreciated. It is exactly the thing she described in 1897 when she wrote: “An artist is most truly great when you can care so intensely for his characters themselves that you can forget to admire the rare craft with

32 Truman Capote in Writers at Work, 295.
which they are put together.” In her best novels there is little “doubling and crossing.” The English sentence is used as simply as possible. Cather’s symbolism is at times so subtle that those of us trained in violent and, in a sense, obvious symbolism almost overlook hers. Everything is subdued to her purpose. Her experiments are with plot or with time in the ordinary narrative sense. But the traditional English sentence is never violated. Nothing detracts from the subject. The art is so lucid that it is not conspicuous. The purpose of this method is to make the subject seem to be all that matters. But Miss Cather knew “only the practiced hand . . . can make the natural gesture.”

Some critics claim that Cather’s style is not all the objective, lucid style I would claim for her. They maintain that her work is dominated by a tone of nostalgia. They verify their position by pointing to two facts. First, Cather said she depended on memory as her source for her art. Second, there is an unmistakable resentment of modern civilization and a corresponding appreciation of the past in her work. Both of these facts are more complex than they have been usually interpreted. The relationship of memory to her “deepest feelings” is not. For Cather, mere nostalgia, but a complex psychological phenomenon. She resented modern civilization because it limits, if it does not destroy, the possibilities of human creativity. There is no denying that respect for the past led Cather into occasional nostalgia, especially in essays like “148 Charles Street” and in stories like “Neighbor Rosicky” and in novels, or parts of novels, like the first chapter of A Lost Lady where the editorial “we” intrudes. But generally Cather controlled this impulse and made it a part of the characters she created.

In only one of Cather’s three most successful novels is nostalgia a significant issue, in My Antonia. That mood, however, is valid because the romantic personality of the narrator is securely established in the “Introduction” of the novel. In The Professor’s House, the picture of the past is not at all nostalgic. The flashback in which Tom Outland tells the story of his discovery of the Blue Mesa generally correlates with the objectivity of a scientist such as Tom. Whatever nostalgia it contains enhances his character rather than directly reflects any attitude of

33 Home Monthly (February 1897), 19.
Cather. The rest of the novel, so different in tone, is testimony to Cather’s control of style. She became so objective that she could present Marsellus sympathetically even though she abominated the idea for which he stood.

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* is Cather’s triumph as an artist. It combines organically all those elements she used for so long. The documents she searched, the letter read, the stories listened to, all were not mere research, but became a part of her deepest sympathies. The story contains a study of the two opposing temperaments Cather admired. The theme of youth and age became a part of the structure of the novel in such a way that no harsh juxtapositions were necessary. But most of all, Cather brought to perfect harmony the two impulses that had always been part of her art. The style is in the English tradition as she understood it. It is evocative, if not prophetic. It suggests the oversoul, the ultimate spiritual reality. At the end of the novel, the Archbishop says as much, “He was soon to have done with calendared time, and it had already ceased to count for him. He sat in the middle of his own consciousness; none of his former states of mind were lost or overgrown. They were all within reach of his hand, and all comprehensible.” In a sense he sees his life in the light of eternity where all his acts are one. The episodic structure of the novel, without plot, contributes to his timelessness. The style adds to this effect because nothing is emphasized very much; all things are equal. The element of indirection in the style, the calm mood, derives from her love of the French language. For though the Archbishop sits in the “middle of his own consciousness,” his mind is not revealed through perception of its internal mechanism, but by description of its relation to the things around him. For this purpose the “novel démeublé” was admirably suited, since it records only those things connected with deep feeling. It creates both the consciousness of the character and a picture of the objective world that makes the mind universally comprehensible. The greatness of the novel is that it expresses an internal as well as a transcendental world by accepting the objective world as the natural symbol.

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* is the best among Willa Cather’s three most important novels. It is the just fruit of a lifetime of labor. Cather was dedicated to her art as were few
writers of the century. Few modern American novelists have had the temperament or discipline to create twelve novels (ten if *A Lost Lady* and *My Mortal Enemy* are considered "nouvelles") of fundamental serious nature and refined art. And few can claim three significant novels, one which aspires to greatness. Her precise understanding of the power and the limitations of the individualism necessary for the artist allowed her to achieve so much. In 1936, when social criticism branded much of the work of the preceding decade as "Escapism," Cather recognized the true basis of the judgment. "The revolt against individualism," she wrote, "naturally calls artists severely to account, because the artist is of all men the most individual: those who were not have been long forgotten."\(^34\) She knew, however, that individualism had its limitations. "Nearly all the Escapists in the long past have managed their own budgets and their social relations so unsuccessfully that I wouldn’t want them for my landlords, or my bankers, or my neighbors. They were valuable, like powerful stimulants, only when they were left out of the social and industrial routine which goes on every day all over the world."\(^35\) Willa Cather’s achievement as an artist lies in her recognition that the standards of individualism can not be applied to landlords, bankers, or neighbors. Though she never lost sight of the problem of the individualist, she came to see them as a part of a larger cultural pattern uniting the creative individualist with his fellow human beings.

\(^{34}\) *On Writing*, 26.

---

**O PIONEERS! IN THE LIGHT OF WILLA CATHER’S "LAND-PHILOSOPHY"**

*By Sister Lucy Schneider, C.S.J.*

I had searched,” Willa Cather says, “for books telling about the beauty of the country I loved, its romance, the heroism and strength of its people that had been plowed into the very furrow of its soil and did not find them. And so I wrote *O