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Willa Cather and the Anathema of Materialism

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As an integral part of her generally primitivistic attitude, Willa Cather throughout her career voiced strong criticism of the materialistic aspects of society. In so doing she repeatedly presents unattractive characters as materialistic, contrasting them with idealists. We think of Alexandra Bergson standing against her brothers Lou and Oscar; of old Mr. Burden in contrast to Wick Cutter; of Claude Wheeler in comparison with his brother Bayliss; of Tom Outland in juxtaposition to Louie Marseilus; and of Captain Daniel Forrester alongside Ivy Peters. Other pairings easily come to mind, for the use of antithetical characters was one of Miss Cather’s favorite devices. The burden of this essay is a demonstration of Willa Cather’s ardent anti-materialism.

In “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle”¹ Willa Cather speaks of the “ugly crest of materialism” that was the result of too much prosperity, and later in the same piece she uses the term “machine-made materialism.” This latter expression is significant, for it keys a large segment of Miss Cather’s attitude. She was particularly antagonistic toward technological developments; she felt that the new mechanized way of life was having a generally demoralizing effect on people in her beloved Nebraska and elsewhere. Her feeling against mechanized living, though a strong element in her anti-materialism, is only one aspect of her entire attitude. She also spoke out against land-grabbing and hogging, against money-getting, against standardization, against the cheapening of life, and against the disappearance of the creativeness that accompanied struggle.

Willa Cather’s most sustained attack on “man-made materialism” came in her 1922 novel, One of Ours. Bayliss Wheeler, Claude’s commercial-minded brother, is cast in the role of a farm-implement dealer, and the author makes his job seem almost indecent. Bayliss is described as being too slight for work about the farm, but, thin and dyspeptic as he is, his business acumen leads him to considerable financial success. He is a non-producer, thriving on the wealth created by others.

¹ Nation, CXVII (September 5, 1923), 230-238.
Ralph Wheeler, Claude's younger brother, is obsessed by every new mechanical contrivance for household or field.

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

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

Miss Elsie M. Cather, in a letter to me on February 10, 1953, wrote in part about her sister:

As far back as I can remember, she had the feeling that too many modern inventions were bad for the human race. I remember once about 1930, she sent me a newspaper clipping about an English bishop, the bishop of Ripon I believe, who had said that he wished we could call a halt on all inventions for the next twenty years, to give the human race time to catch up morally and spiritually with the inventions that we already had. And the glowing terms in which she expressed her own agreement with the good bishop.

She suffered more from the Second World War than most of us in this safe and comfortable land. It tore her spirit a thousand ways to
An early paragraph of "Two Friends" opens this way:

Long ago, before the invention of the motor-car (which has made more changes in the world than the war, which indeed produced the particular kind of war that happened just a hundred years after Waterloo), in a little town in a shallow Kansas river valley, there lived two friends.5

Willa Cather gives no explanation of this extravagant indictment, but the passage expresses quite clearly her bitterness about the machine age which had overtaken her. If this discussion of "machine-made materialism" has tended to focus on the automobile, it is because Miss Cather herself so often identified mechanization with the motor car. But one may safely generalize from the instances cited and conclude that the core of Miss Cather's anti-materialism is found in her attack on the machine. She deeply regretted that Americans lived with "the relentless mechanical gear which directs every modern life."3 "Machines . . . could not make pleasure, whatever else they could do."4

A second aspect of Willa Cather's anti-materialism is her attack on the grabbing, hogging, or misuse of the land. The "noisy push of the present," which she so strongly laments in "148 Charles Street," had as an accompanying feature the land speculations of small-minded men like Wick Cutter, Nat and Bayliss Wheeler, and Ivy Peters. Miss Cather makes a clear distinction between a person like Bayliss Wheeler, who could buy a beautiful old home and hold it simply as a piece of real estate because "It's too far to walk to my business, and the road . . . gets pretty muddy for a car in the spring," and a man like Claude Wheeler, who could feel so strongly about a plot of ground that he was impelled to bid it an emotional farewell.

Wick Cutter could amass a fortune of a hundred thousand dollars preying upon hard-pressed farmers and foreclosing

2 Obscure Destinies, 161-162. Brief passages from stories and novels named in the text are not footnoted. Longer quotations of fiction and those from the Nation essay are footnoted. All page references to Willa Cather's books are to the Houghton Mifflin "Library Edition," the first volumes of which appeared in 1937.
3 Literary Encounters, 287
4 Ibid., 52
mortgages on their land, but he could be punished by his literary creator by becoming a murderer and a suicide.

Again Miss Cather's heavy attack is seen in the novels of the middle period. In One of Ours she speaks through Claude Wheeler's consciousness: "The orchards, which had been nursed and tended so carefully twenty years ago, were now left to die of neglect. It was less trouble to run into town in an automobile and buy fruit than it was to raise it."\(^5\)

Willa Cather uses the epithet "land hog" to describe Nat Wheeler, and she again speaks through Claude who felt "that it was not right they [the Wheelers] should have so much land—to farm, to rent or leave idle, as they chose. It was strange that in all the centuries the world had been going, the question of property had not been better adjusted. The people who had it were slaves to it, and the people who didn't have it were slaves to them."

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

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

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

. . . . Now all the vast territory they [the pioneers] had won was to be at the mercy of men like Ivy Peters, who had never dared anything, never risked anything . . . . this generation of shrewd young men trained to petty economies by hard times, would do exactly what Ivy Peters had done when he drained the Forrester marsh.\(^6\)

\(^5\) One of Ours, 118
\(^6\) A Lost Lady, 102
The great irony of all pioneer sagas is that the dreamer-pioneer has always made possible the subsequent commercial exploitation of his victory by smaller-minded men than he. The dreamer too often sees a dream-come-true transformed by cunning, practical men into a garish nightmare. This is the tragedy Willa Cather found in the apposition of tall-walking Daniel Forrester and parasitical Ivy Peters.

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

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

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

Claude Wheeler of One of Ours is perceptive to the fact that “with prosperity came a kind of callousness.” Miss Cather has Claude deplore conditions in which farmers exchange things of real intrinsic value—“wheat and corn as good as could be grown anywhere in the world, hogs and cattle that were the best of their kind”—for money which bought only manufac-
tured articles of poor quality, shoddy furniture, and showy clownish clothing. Money, Claude concludes, would buy nothing one really wanted.

Miss Cather's exposition of World War I as the great degenerative influence on persons like Claude's father and on his brother Bayliss is set forth in terms of money getting. The manipulation of wheat as a commodity with the attendant disregard of wheat as the life-essential food is Miss Cather's target for scorn. The financial greatness which came to some little men is seen in sharp contrast to the idealistic greatness of a sensitive person like Claude. Mr. Wheeler acknowledges, "I don't have to explain the market, I've only got to take advantage of it." Such crassness, in Miss Cather's view, such prostitution of the beneficence of Nature, is nothing less than immorality. People who were always buying and selling, building and tearing down, are anathema to Claude Wheeler as they were to Willa Cather. The hero of *One of Ours* saw much ugliness in the shattered countryside of wartime France, but he saw nothing as ugly as the vision of a world controlled by men like his brother Bayliss.

Professor St. Peter and his colleague Robert Crane in *The Professor's House* are the only two on the faculty of Miss Cather's fictional midwestern university "who were doing research of an uncommercial nature." Indeed, one facet of Miss Cather's concern with materialism is its effect on education. Sufficient to say here that she was alarmed and angry at the commercialism which she saw undermining and vulgarizing education. More emphatic treatment of money-mindedness in *The Professor's House* is seen in the story of Tom Outland. Outland, in his diary, is made to tell the story of his futile effort to interest officials of the Smithsonian Institution in his truly remarkable excavations atop the Blue Mesa. The indifference of American clerks and officials who saw no "market value" in the Indian relics is emphasized in contrast to the appreciation and understanding which a young Frenchman demonstrates. The crushing effect of valuing money for its own sake is realized when Outland returns from his unsuccessful mission only to find that his trusted but shallow-minded partner, Roddy Blake, has sold the entire collection of relics to a German—and for the flimsiest of reasons.
Outland contends that the relics were not theirs to sell, that they belonged to this country, to all the people. Miss Cather has Outland in a burst of fury accuse Blake of betraying his country's secrets, "like Dreyfus." Outland refuses to touch his share of the money Blake received. Blake, in character to the end, epitomizes the attitude Miss Cather unhappily found in far too many of her contemporaries in her "middle period." He patiently explains that he had always thought the relics "would come to money in the end. 'Everything does,' he added."

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

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

Willa Cather's expressions against the *per se* value on money are many. Old Rosicky would rather put some color into his children's faces than put money in the bank, and in this statement is the kernel of Miss Cather's attitude. She castigated the idolatry of money for its own sake, but she was never one to advocate communistic philosophies nor to deprecate capitalistic free enterprise. She simply abhorred the materialistic slavery which overwhelms many people in their striving for financial gain. Miss Cather herself was anxious to secure financial independence and security; she earned handsome royalties from her writing, and she managed her financial affairs herself. But she never capitulated to the demands of wealth; she never wrote for less than the highest ideals of her art as she understood it.

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

When Willa Cather regarded the prosperity in her beloved Nebraska and elsewhere, she regretted another symptomatic evidence of the new materialism. This was the cult of standardization. "Too much prosperity, too many moving-picture shows, too much gaudy fiction have colored the tastes and manners of so many of these Nebraskans of the future,"7 she wrote in 1923. She lamented in the post-war years the general inclination "to buy everything ready-made: clothes, food, education, music pleasure."8 The tendency to think in typologies, to conform en masse to the dicta of manufacturers, slick-magazine editors, and the moguls of Hollywood represented to Willa Cather another facet of the loss of self-reliance and individual creativeness. Standardization of life and manners truly emphasized the fact that the splendid story of the pioneer was ended.

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

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

Much better in Miss Cather's mind were homes that could

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7 Nation, 238
8 Ibid.
be lived in. Claude Wheeler has an affection for the upstairs living-room—especially when his father is not there—with its "old carpet, the faded chairs, the secretary bookcase, the spotty engraving with the scenes from 'Pilgrim's Progress' that hung over the sofa—these things made Claude feel at home.” The charm of the Forrester home of *A Lost Lady* lay in the gracious manner of life there, not in the worn carpets, faded curtains, and clumsy, old-fashioned furniture. The Erlich home in *One of Ours* is another which the author painstakingly portrays for its comfort-giving quality rather than for its fashionable aspects.

Against newness, against ready-made, dictated, standardized style Willa Cather protested. One of her best bits of irony occurs in *The Professor's House* when the *nouveau riche* Louie Marsellus builds a Norwegian manor-house, designed by a Paris-trained architect, on a Lake Michigan headland. The house is to have everything—including the name “Outland”—except homeliness. The name might well have been “Outlandish”! Sensitive Father Latour could appreciate the primitive beauty in the figures of saints he found in even the poorest Mexican houses, for “they were more to his taste than the factory-made plaster images in his mission churches in Ohio—more like the homely stone carvings on the front of old parish churches in Auvergne.” Later, as Archbishop of Santa Fe, Latour plans his cathedral and says, “I had rather keep the old adobe church we have now than to help build one of those horrible structures they are putting up in the Ohio cities . . . I shall certainly never lift my hand to build a clumsy affair of red brick, like an English coach-house.”

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

Thus, from *O Pioneers!* through her final short stories, Willa Cather abhorred the cult of the standard in furniture, in dress, and in architecture. Again, the inclination to stereotyping she saw as a symptom of an illness rather than as the malady itself—standardization was another manifestation of the “ugly crest of materialism” that had settled on American life.
With standardization came a cheapening of life. Shoddiness in the manufacture of household articles and machinery, in the construction of homes and public buildings, as well as in the very behavior of people, was another lamentable evidence of hated materialism for Miss Cather. In *One of Ours* she editorials on farmers who have to pay out most of their money for machinery that soon goes to pieces. She notes that a steam thresher didn’t last long, and a horse outlived three automobiles. Manufactured articles of poor quality seem to be the lot of those who attained to the new prosperity; in fact Miss Cather seems to say that the new materialists largely got just what they deserved. She observes that “with prosperity came a kind of callousness,” and continues on the theme that in prairie communities where friendliness used to prevail the new prosperity had brought on lawsuits among folk who had become stingy and grasping or extravagant and lazy.

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

Not only were people content with shoddy buildings like the physics laboratory at Godfrey St. Peter’s university, or the apartment-hotel in *My Mortal Enemy*, wretchedly built and already falling to pieces although it was new; they were also content with shoddy behavior.

Jim Burden remarks that he had met a great many Mrs. Cutters all over the world. Young husbands who seldom addressed their wives by name but preferred “you” or “she” lacked the plain gentility of their fathers, and they earn Willa Cather’s scorn. She has Thea Kronborg worry about the Jessie Darcys in the world and “the successes of cheap people” just as later she has Claude Wheeler berate people who, when bored, “went to town and bought something new.” Professor
St. Peter can recall the early days of his marriage when “They hadn’t much, but they were never absurd. They never made shabby compromises. If they couldn’t get the right thing, they went without. Usually they had the right thing, and it got paid for, somehow.”

There is in Willa Cather’s writing an incremental indictment of people who worship at the shrine of materialism and who increasingly coarsen and cheapen their lives as they attain financial security only to lose spiritual dignity. Truly, “machine-made materialism,” the “ugly crest of materialism,” beset her with almost overwhelming force, but she did not lose hope. Her intense cultural pessimism was in no way a hopelessness for the future. For her, the strong impact of materialism on her own society was no sign that her contemporaries could not work out of their difficulties and back to the simple, natural open-heartedness of the days of struggle. Even in the dark lines of her Nebraska essay the light of optimism comes through in the closing paragraph.

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

Willa Cather as a child on the prairie had acquired a knowledge of the harsh struggles which the homesteader-pioneers faced on the table-land of the Divide. No doubt, in the great storehouse of her memory in later years, her recollections of the immigrant pioneers are tinged with a roseate nostalgia, an endearing inflation of pioneer virtue and idealism. But, to her, the great fact remained that the early settlers were dreamers who struggled valiantly to make their dreams realities. The creativeness of the pioneer was significant; in a compact with nature he strove to fulfill the promise of the land and the aspiration of his own spirit. To realize the highest dreams of youth through one’s own effort was to Willa Cather the noblest of accomplishments. Fulfillment of such a high order is seen in the early heroines, Alexandra, Thea, and Antonia; it is seen later in the heroic missions of Bishops Latour and Vaillant.

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

Materialism, then, in its attendant ramifications was to Willa Cather the blight of her own age. As a cultural and chronological primitivist, she indicted her own time and place in severe terms but with an underlying hopefulness of richer tomorrows.

THE SCULPTOR AND THE SPINSTER: JEWETT'S "INFLUENCE" ON CATHER

By Richard Cary

No informed biographer or critic of Willa Cather fails to mention the seminal encounter she had with Sarah Orne Jewett in February 1908 at the home of Annie Felds in Boston. Nor, in due course, does he fail to quote from Miss Jewett's sententious letter to Miss Cather on the art of writing, and from Miss Cather's preface to Alexander's Bridge (1922), her introduction to The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett (1925) or its extension in Not Under Forty (1936). An umbilical connection is usually established thereupon.

This tendency to ascribe one writer's artistic maturation to the "influence" of an acknowledged predecessor, in simpler times a parlor game of glib parallels, has more recently yielded to subtler psychologies and deeper ego-assessment. Thus in 1929 C. Hartley Grattan could hyperbolize "without fear of contradiction that [Jewett] exercised a profound influence on Willa Cather. Miss Cather's style undoubtedly stems from that of Miss Jewett"; whereas a quarter-century later A. M. Buchan cautiously propounds that "It is much more plausible that Miss