

## ANALYSIS

*A Lost Lady*

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

“When *One of Ours* was published many critics went into sackcloth and wept for a talented writer who seemed to have given her allegiance to a vulgar ideal, but *A Lost Lady* will serve to set fears at rest.... She has constantly struggled to achieve that synthesis of qualities which alone can make a novel really fine, and in *A Lost Lady*, short and slight as it is, she has achieved it. There would be no excuse for calling it a great novel—it is not that; but there would be equally little excuse for not recognizing the face that it is that very rare thing in contemporary literature, a nearly perfect one.

Miss Cather has come to the point where she can do the two or three things at once which a novelist must do. She can evoke by a few characteristic touches and by subtle suggestion a scene and a society without producing merely a ‘document’; she can present a character without writing a psychological treatise; she can point a moral without writing a sermon; and hence she is a novelist....

To the romantic boy through whose eyes we see her she is simply the problem as old as the time when women first were fair and false, but to Miss Cather, I think, the guilt is not moral but aesthetic, and aesthetic in a very particular way. The lady, although she did not write nor paint nor act nor sing, was essentially an artist. She was consciously a lady, and she had devoted her vitality to the creation of a person who was more than a person, who was The Lady as a type and as a work of art, so that when she failed she failed as an artist....she failed because she was not artist enough to refuse to do at all what she could not do worthily....the artist must sacrifice himself for his work. The lost lady was guilty and lost because she put her own happiness before her art and betrayed her ideal to snatch at the joy of life.”

Joseph Wood Krutch

*Nation*

(28 November 1923)

“Willa Cather’s new novel—*A Lost Lady*—does something to atone for *One of Ours*. Miss Cather seems to suffer from a disability like that of Henry James: it is almost impossible for her to describe an emotion or an action except at secondhand.... In *A Lost Lady*...Miss Cather falls back on the indirect method of James—who was a great artist, as novelists go, for all his not infrequent incapacity to fill in with adequate color the beautiful line and composition of his pictures; and she achieves something of James’s success. Here her problem is to present the vicissitudes of a young and attractive woman, with a vigorous capacity for life, in the course of her marriage, during the pioneering period after the Civil War, with an elderly contractor of the ‘railroad aristocracy,’ who has brought her from California to live somewhere between Omaha and Denver. For this purpose, she invents another of those limpid and sensitive young men to whom she has always been rather addicted and makes him the Jamesian glass through which we are to look at her heroine....

*A Lost Lady* is a charming sketch performed with exceptional skill. Willa Cather is, in fact, one of the only writers who has been able to bring any real distinction to the life of the Middle West. Other writers have more enthusiasm or animation or color or humor, but Miss Cather is perhaps unique in her art of imposing a patina on that meager and sprawling scene. There are exquisite pages of landscape in *A Lost Lady*, and the portrait of the veteran railroad man is surely one of the most sensitive and accurate that has ever been put into a novel of the best type of old-fashioned American of the post-Civil War period—a type greatly preferable, I grant Miss Cather, in its straightness and simplicity and honor, for all its cultural limitations, to the sharpers who superceded it....

There run through Miss Cather's work two currents of profound feeling—one for the beauty of those lives lived out between sky and the prairie; and the other...for the pathos of the human spirit making the effort to send down its roots and to flower in that barren soil."

Edmund Wilson  
"Two Novels of Willa Cather"  
*The Shores of Light*  
(1924; New York 1952)

"*A Lost Lady* (1923), short and flawless, had no unnecessary furniture. It was again the story of an actual woman Willa Cather had known as she had known the original of Antonia. But Marian Forrester instead of being another simple farm girl belongs to the aristocracy of the frontier: its planners and rulers and beneficiaries. Married to a man much older than she, she is still too full of youth to be wholly satisfied after he has retired to his farm. She may honor him for giving up his fortune to save the depositors in a failing bank; she may show him loyalty and devotion and make his house charming. She cannot resist the impulses in her blood and nerves. The vitality which passed so soon once the frontier settled into the new order does not ebb in her. Nor after her husband's death can she fill her life with being his widow, and in a sense the frontier's. She must still live, she cannot help loving.

In a brighter world suitable to her age and instincts she would have been happy in the natural course of existence. In the fading frontier community she is misfit. Without the stoic heroism of the pioneer, she lacks also the severe passion of the artist. In living, the only art she has, she does not insist on perfection or nothing. She drifts into a shabby and then a shabbier love. Her failure as an artist in life brings her no formal, visible penalty. She dies the wife of a rich and kind Englishman in the Argentine. But she has lost the integrity which Antonia, a better artist, knew how to preserve. Marian Forrester's penalty is that loss. Her story might have been told in many ways: moralistically, edifyingly, ironically. Willa Cather told it with understanding and pity, setting forth all the essential facts of the lost lady's total character, so mixed, so often contradictory, and leaving them to be judged by whoever is wise enough to judge a bewildered, unhappy woman."

Carl Van Doren  
*The American Novel 1789-1939*, 23<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 288-89

"Neil Herbert, a boy in the Midwestern town of Sweet Water, tells the story of Marian Forrester, who brings a knowledge of gracious living to the new country as the youthful wife of old Captain Forrester, retired railroad builder and aristocrat of the pioneer generation. Mrs. Forrester's beauty and charm set her apart from her crass, commonplace neighbors, as do her husband's rugged strength, integrity, and love of fine possessions. The captain is devoted to his wife, but her passionate nature causes her to become the secret mistress of his bachelor friend Frank Ellinger. When Forrester loses his fortune by assuming responsibility in the failure of his bank, he suffers a paralytic stroke. His wife nurses him carefully, but after his death she is left in financial straits. Ivy Peters, a pushy businessman of the new generation, acquires her beautiful home and becomes her lover, to the bitter disillusionment of Neil, who regards her as a 'lost lady,' although he never ceases to admire her. She goes West to her childhood home when Peters marries and occupies the Forrester mansion, and for Neil this symbolizes the end of the great era of the pioneers. Years afterward, he learns that she married a wealthy Englishman in South America, and until her death won admiration for her gracefulness, charm, and taste."

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 446

"*A Lost Lady*, Miss Cather's most explicit treatment of the passing of the old order, is the central work of her career. Far from being the delicate minor book it is so often called, it is probably her most muscular story, for it derives its power from the grandeur of its theme. Miss Cather shares the American belief in the tonic moral quality of the pioneer's life; with the passing of the frontier she conceives that a great source of fortitude has been lost."

Lionel Trilling  
*After the Genteel Tradition*

Malcolm Cowley, ed.  
(Norton 1937) 55

“*A Lost Lady* reflects a curious ‘sunset of the pioneer’—a prismatic sunset, an almost mythical pioneer. Admirable as the story is with reference to its human relationships and emotional values, and remarkable for its creation of an atmosphere, it is still a kind of touching fairy tale of the more beneficent robber barons, or their second or third cousins. It is a reflection not of a society but of a point of view that, increasingly narrow, selective, and fanciful, is actually retreating further and further from society.”

Maxwell Geismar  
*The Last of the Provincials*  
(Houghton 1947) 183

Marian Forrester, the heroine of *A Lost Lady* (1923), is an artist who lived and wrought in terms of personal contacts. ‘Thirty or forty years ago, in one of those gray towns along the Burlington Railroad, which are so much grayer today than they were then,’ she was mistress of a house ‘well known from Omaha to Denver for its hospitality and a certain charm of atmosphere.’ But after the impoverishment, the illness, and at last the death of her husband—and after the nauseous Ivy Peters has replaced that generous man as the exemplar of ‘success’ in his country—poor Marian is like a ship without a rudder.

Unable either to ‘immolate herself...and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged,’ or to find a suitable object of devotion in the age of little things into which it has been her misfortune to survive, she descends to unworthiness. Willa Cather insisted that she did not try for a character study in Marian Forrester but only for an impression. But, as David Daiches has pointed out, the heroine’s personal deterioration ‘is artfully linked to the background theme of the decline of the pioneering West.’ The subtlety with which the process is traced, and its influence upon the boy, Neil Herbert, who has idealized Mrs. Forrester—and the wonderful largeness and charity of his—and, by implication, the author’s—attitude toward her make the brief novel a masterpiece of its kind.”

Edward Wagenknecht  
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:*  
*From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*  
(Holt 1952) 327-28

“*A Lost Lady* (1923) is one of the most ‘classic’ and economical of the novels of Miss Cather’s middle period. The setting is the railroad town of Sweet Water, Colorado, and the central character is Mrs. Forrester, a charming and vivacious young woman married to a railroad man and contractor many years her senior. The novel traces the decline of the heroine, which parallels the decline of the town after its future as a railroad center is blighted. The key incident in her life is her brief romance with the dashing bachelor Frank Ellinger. When Ellinger later marries, Mrs. Forrester turns her attention to the care of her now ailing husband; and when he dies she had an affair with the coarse and pushing business-man Ivy Peters.

Again her lover marries, this time taking over the old Forrester mansion (symbol of the decline of the pioneer race and its replacement by the business-man). Years later she marries a wealthy Englishman in South America and manages to achieve a dignified and respectable old age, even though her known affair with Ellinger had made her a ‘lost lady’ in her home town. This novel, like *My Antonia*, is related by a young man, Neil Herbert, who is slightly shocked at first by Mrs. Forrester’s gay ways but eventually comes to admire her charm and vitality.”

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature 4*  
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 197

“*A Lost Lady* received some compliments from the younger reviewers, but the note of condescension was already there. ‘A charming sketch,’ [Edmund] Wilson called this dark book.... Paperback editions, Viking Portables, radio readings, movie deals, play deals—she refused them all. (Actually, she allowed *A Lost Lady* to be filmed, twice. But after Warner Brothers’ 1934 version, in which the story was relocated to

Chicago and Barbara Stanwyck was given an affair with an aviator, she would never again listen to any mention of movies....

As for her men, they tend to be gentle, recessive types—not sexual. Or if they are sexual, they are evil. (Two of her most loathsome villains, Buck Scales in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and Ivy Peters in *A Lost Lady*, actually look like penises... In her books male-female passion generally doesn't work out—the marriages are often unhappy—or it doesn't even get to first base. The woman is unavailable; the man broods and pines. According to a number of critics, these men are feeling what Cather herself felt. This is her portrayal of lesbian love: silent, hopeless longing.... *A Lost Lady* (1923), in which a young man whose eyes seem to promise some 'wild delight' (163) at the heart of life...ends by dashing his ideals.... In *A Lost Lady* she finally wrote a novel of adultery, but is the woman punished for her dereliction? No. Her husband knows what she's up to, and doesn't mind.... By 1889 Silas Garber, the model for Captain Forrester, the complaisant husband of *A Lost Lady*, had erected his grand, four-story Farmers and Merchants Bank on the main street [of Red Cloud]."

Joan Acocella  
*Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*  
(U Nebraska 2000) 21, 22, 46, 62, 91

Michael Hollister (2015)