

FEMINISTS ASSAULT CATHER

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

"Where no woman dominates the action, a novel by Willa Cather tends to fall into the hopelessness of *One of Ours* or of *The Professor's House*; or to become less a record of human conflict than a series of *insubstantial reveries* [?!], such as *Death Comes for the Archbishop*." (Italics added.)

Josephine Lurie Jessup
The Faith of Our Feminists (1965) 75

"[Willa Cather] must be approached as a lesbian writer...to validate and politically support lesbian and gay readers."

Frances Kaye
*Isolation and Masquerade:
Willa Cather's Women*, 1993

"An important job for feminist literary critics in the 1970s and 1980s was to assemble a 'female canon,' a list of first-rate woman-authored books that would demonstrate that women were the equal of men as writers and therefore that their under-representation in the approved catalogue of great literature—and in allied enterprises, such as publishing and the universities—was the result of politics...

'Male-identified' is a bad word in feminist circles. As one disgruntled feminist, Jean Elshtain, put it recently, 'One is either part of the group of those who have found their authentic voices as women or one is a "male-identified" dupe of the patriarchy....Cather, having once looked as though she might advance the cause of feminism, turned out to be a disaster. A number of feminists bit the bullet and condemned her as such....the traits that supposedly disqualified Cather's male narrators and protagonists as reliable witnesses were her traits as well. Romantic, elegiac, attached to ideal forms, besotted with Virgil, deeply read in classical literature and given to alluding to it...

She had no high opinion of women, at least as writers....'They usually make such an infernal mess of it,' she wrote in 1895....Female poets were so gushy—'emotional in the extreme, self-centered, self-absorbed.' As for female novelists... 'They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable'... She went on to attack various women's novels on this score—for example, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), a book sacred to feminists....And when women writers were not splashing about in their emotions, they were doing other inartistic things, like running after causes... 'If I see the announcement of a new book by a woman, I—well, I take one by a man instead...'

It was not a pleasure to see Cather so clearly take her inspiration from male writers....If anything, she is a rebuke to the feminists. All the things they say a woman can't do—learn to write from men, create a life centered on writing, with no intrusions—she did them, and with very little wear and tear. No alcoholism, no abortions, no nervous breakdowns....Something was needed, some stick of dynamite, to blow Cather's world open. As the feminists soon realized, the thing they needed was already there. In a 1975 book called *Lesbian Images*, Jane Rule, a Canadian novelist and critic, had matter-of-factly declared that Cather was homosexual....In the decade beginning in 1955, the average annual output of articles and books on Cather had been twenty-one. In the decade beginning in 1975, the year she was outed, it was fifty-four. In 1987 alone, seven new books were published about her, in 1989-90, another fifteen partially or wholly about her....

Her male identification—the William Cather period, the attacks on women writers—can thus be accounted for: she was fleeing her mother....According to Robert J. Nelson, in his 1988 book *Willa Cather and France*, Cather was torn between the 'phallogocentric hegemony' and a 'vaginocentric' one. (Hence her 'phallic' women. Thea Kronborg, standing 'in erectile sublimity' on a peak in Panther Canyon 'is,

symbolically...the linear and upright form of the male phallus.’)...Most writers who addressed themselves to the subject of Cather’s lesbianism agreed that she was conflicted over it, and to some of them any failure to recognize the conflict was an attack on homosexuals....In the words of Frances Kaye, Cather ‘must be approached as a lesbian writer---to validate and politically support the lesbian and gay readers....For many Cather critics...anything that is a little like a crotch is a crotch, and...they have since taken us on a long crawl through the female reproductive system....most of Cather’s main characters are shown to be ‘masked’ homosexuals....She broke out of jail, and now they are putting her—and all the other women writers—back in....

The Professor’s House, with its account of the friendship between the professor and his student Tom Outland, ‘could trouble a feminist reader....Why would Willa Cather celebrate male bonding?’...In *The Professor’s House* we hit pay dirt: according to various [Feminist] commentators, not just Professor St. Peter and Tom Outland and Roddy Blake, but also Louie Marcellus and Lillian, the professor’s son-in-law and wife, respectively, are homosexuals.’...*The Professor’s House*, Jean Schwind...argues in a 1993 article, is not a story about the professor’s despair, it is a criticism of the patriarchy. The professor is an ‘ungenerous and dishonest’ man, basically a sexist pig, who cares only about his work and who, under the cover of his hypocritical antimaterialism, abuses the excellent women around him. By exposing these facts, Cather is exploring ‘frame-ups of women in literature.’ The same goes for *My Antonia*, Schwind asserts in a 1985 article. Jim Burden is an utterly unreliable narrator—genteel, sexist, indeed racist and imperialist. Furthermore, he reads too much”...

In 1994, in the *New York Times Book Review*, Sharon O’Brien published an essay on how she came to write her biography of Cather [as a lesbian]....Cather began to haunt her dreams. In one dream, Cather invited her to tea and said to her, ‘I want you to know that I am not gay.’...O’Brien wrote another life of Cather, for high school students, as part of a...series called Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians. In this book, she says, she no longer had to take into account ‘scholarly (and seemingly parental) readers’ who might have intimidated her by asking for evidence. She was free to dispense with documentation; she could omit ‘almost all the literary analysis.’ In other words, she no longer had to prove her case. All she had to do was state it. She found this ‘liberating’...”

What the evidence suggests is that Cather was homosexual in her feelings and celibate in her actions. Nor does it necessarily follow that this left her with a permanent complex. Many of the notable woman writers of the nineteenth century were celibate...If Emily Bronte and Jane Austen managed without having sex, why not Cather? Because we think she was homosexual?”

Joan Acocella
Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism
(U Nebraska 2000) 39-43, 48, 51, 52, 55, 57-58, 63

SEXUAL PREFERENCE

“With no definitive evidence of Cather’s sexual preference available, biographer James Woodress sees her as conscientiously avoiding binding romantic entanglements with either the men or the women in her life in order to devote all her energies to her writing.”

Margaret Anne O’Connor
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1040

“QUEERING” CATHER

“In a 1989 essay Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, pioneer of ‘queer theory,’ writes that *The Professor’s House* might seem, on the surface, ‘heterosexist,’ but that its underlying rebellion against heterosexism can be discovered by deconstructing the last sentence of the book—specifically, one word in that sentence, ‘Berengaria,’ the name of the ship on which the professor’s wife and daughter are sailing home from Europe. Here is Sedgwick’s analysis of that word: ‘*Berengaria*, ship of women: the {green} {aria}, the {eager} {brain}, the {bearing} and the {bairn}, the {raring} {engine}, the {bargain} {binge}, the {ban}

and {bar}, the {garbage}, the {barrage} of {anger}, the {bare} {grin}, the {rage} to {err}, the {rare} {grab} for {being}, the {begin} and {rebegin} {again}.'

This list of anagrams, which must have taken a while to work out, supposedly reveals the maelstrom of lesbian energies churning beneath the surface of *The Professor's House*, energies that Cather was venting when she gave the ship that strange name. Yes, Sedgwick says, the name has a historical meaning—Berengaria was the wife of Richard the Lion-Hearted—but otherwise it is a 'nonsense word.' She apparently does not know that it was the name of a real ship, a famous Cunard ocean liner, on which Cather had returned from Europe immediately before starting work on *The Professor's House*."

Joan Acocella

Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism
(U Nebraska 2000) 55-56

CATHER DISLIKED FEMINISTS

"About her own sex Willa was inclined to be uncharitable, and her opinions regarding women writers could hardly have endeared her to the feminists of her day....She thought women--always 'they' never 'we'--were sentimental and 'horribly' subjective and that they let their adjectives run away with them. Only the 'great Georges,' George Eliot and George Sand, were spared her scorn, along with Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen....The trouble with women, Willa thought, was that they wrote exclusively about their feelings....[She] had no use for reformers when she met them in the flesh. They offended her by always seeming to press for the destruction of something....She never wrote about an attachment between two women."

Phyllis C. Robinson

Willa: The Life of Willa Cather
(Holt 1983) 158

"Cather had little patience with female moral reformers and took delight in savaging them in her fiction through such zealous and narrow-minded crusaders as Anna Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* and Enid Royce in *One of Ours*."

Marilee Lindemann

Introduction, *Alexander's Bridge*
(Oxford 1997) xix

CATHER CONFERENCE

"I went to Red Cloud in 1994 for the annual spring conference of the Cather Foundation, an event that includes lectures, tours, and dinners with menus taken from Cather's novels. The professors were there—they tended to congregate in the Palace Lounge, one of the few places in town where you can get a drink—and Cather fans had arrived from all over....There's a group of roommates from Vassar who meet at the Cather conference every year for a reunion.

The Cather Foundation is up to date. In its bookstore, together with the Cather trivets and the T-shirts, you can buy the books that say Cather was nostalgic for a phallogocentric hegemony. In its newsletter and at its conference, her views on race and sex are discussed. At the 1994 conference, a graduate student read a paper on the homoerotics of *One of Ours*. There was some mumbling at the back of the hall, but most of the audience sat quietly through the talk. 'You can now use the word "lesbian" at the conference without getting booted out of the room,' said Steven Shively, at that time a University of Nebraska graduate student writing a dissertation on Cather. This wasn't always the case, he added. And some of the locals I spoke to still don't care for the word. 'She loved Isabelle—does that make her perverted?' said Bev Cooper. 'These professors, they have to write things in order to get tenure. So they come up with these theories'...What most people objected to was not so much the idea of homosexuality as the invasion of privacy."

But for the most part, what the locals resented was simply the idea that Cather's novels were not really about Red Cloud. 'It bothers me when all these people come in and symbolize about Cather,' Doreen Sanders, a retired Red Cloud schoolteacher told me. 'Those books are about real life, the way life was.

Like the plough in *My Antonia*, with the plough handle where the farmer would hang on to it. We had a plough like that....' These are the immediate descendants of the people Cather portrayed in her books, and they sound like the people in her books—practical, stoical....'People always gave us the impression that everything important happened in the East,' another local, Darlene Ritter, told me on the Cather Country tour bus. 'It was nice to know that something important happened here'."

Joan Acocella
Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism
(U Nebraska 2000) 92-94

Michael Hollister (2015)